

**THE WATERMARK**  
**UMass Boston's Arts Journal**

Editor-in-Chief  
**Joy O'Halloran**

Associate Editor  
**Isabelle Racette**

Cover  
**Rixy Fernandez**

volume xxviii  
2018-2019

# Acknowledgments

## **Volunteers**

Alex Gonzalez  
Kaitlyn Mendez  
Julia Schlosser  
Taleisha Tomaso

## **Administration**

Charles Henriques

# Editor's Note

In addition to the official acknowledgments made directly to the left, I would like to thank Daniel Remein for his assistance in tracking down the winners of the Six Word Story Contest. Thank you as well to Zachary Horn for his help in reaching out to the Art Department, and to all the professors who allowed us to visit their classrooms to advertise for submissions: Julie Baer, Erik Levine, Joetta Maue, Joe Ramsey, and Natalia Scarpetti.

Thank you to the writers who revised and resubmitted their work over the course of the past year. My predecessor warned me that providing feedback was a thankless endeavor—that my suggestions would be met with radio silence nine times out of ten. He was wrong. So many of this year's writers have improved their pieces by incorporating feedback.

My personal thanks—and apologies for any overlooked typos—go to Jeffrey Mitchell, whose Professional Editing course provided many of the tools I found myself needing this year.

And thank *you*, dear reader, for giving us an excuse to keep doing this.

Joy O'Halloran  
Editor-in-Chief

# Table of Contents

## FEATURED

Various Artists

<b>Six Word Story Contest</b>	8
-------------------------------	---

## POETRY

Elaine Happnie

<b>Norma Jeans Reconstuction</b>	10
----------------------------------	----

Ellis Hampton

<b>The Death of a Songbird</b>	23
--------------------------------	----

<b>On Borrowed Times</b>	24
--------------------------	----

<b>Insomnia</b>	25
-----------------	----

Kate Flaherty

<b>Justice Resgined</b>	32
-------------------------	----

Yasmin Araujo

<b>Shortened Life</b>	34
-----------------------	----

Tayla Bennett

<b>Ode to the Victims of Mass Shootings</b>	36
---	----

Mia Bunker

<b>Schizophrenia</b>	43
----------------------	----

Ann Doyle

<b>Ode to a Green Mantle Clock</b>	44
------------------------------------	----

<b>The Old Man Who Lives Downstairs</b>	45
---	----

<b>Praying</b>	47
----------------	----

<b>Red Bricks</b>	50
-------------------	----

Grace Furtado

<b>Abuelita</b>	53
-----------------	----

Sarah DeNardo

<b>Baptism</b>	55
----------------	----

Anonymous

<b>Marlboro</b>	56
-----------------	----

Michaela McMillan

<b>Untitled</b>	57
-----------------	----

Sarah Duncan	
<b>post script for a break up, or, i hate how formal yr</b>	
<b>emails are</b>	68
<b>Sorry I Left Your Birthday Party</b>	69
Anonymous	
<b>My Own Worst Enemy</b>	70
Savitha Rajamani	
<b>I Wish I Were a Tumbleweed</b>	71
Eli Kramer	
<b>The Opening</b>	77
<b>What I'll Do With My Life Now</b>	78
<b>yin</b>	79

## PROSE

Bobby Aarons	
<b>A History of Decay</b>	15
<b>Mercy</b>	20
<b>The Patriot</b>	22
Charlotte Burlingame	
<b>The Detour</b>	26
Markisha Aristide	
<b>A Stone Cold Past</b>	37
Ashley Torres	
<b>My Legs Were Exposed</b>	40
Tayla Bennett	
<b>Ode to the President of Gin and Tonic</b>	42
Briana Henriquez	
<b>E.) None of the Above</b>	54
Sarah Duncan	
<b>It Never Stops: Buffy the Vampire Slayer as a</b>	
<b>(Personal) Allegory for Living with Mental</b>	
<b>Illness</b>	59
Mia Bunker	
<b>The Breakup</b>	63

<b>Halloween '84 Nonlinear</b>	66
Taleisha Tomaso	
<b>Hence Those Tears</b>	74
Colleen O'Connor	
<b>7 Houses of Hell</b>	81
Faith Speredelozzi	
<b>Satan Writes All of His Documents in Comic Sans</b>	84
<b>Elder Care</b>	85
Ann Doyle	
<b>Lions and Bears and Tics...Oh My!</b>	87
<b>Makeup Maddness</b>	89
Ogadimma Ebele	
<b>On a Date, Kinda Nervous</b>	92
Redmond Woodward	
<b>Musical Bingo Night</b>	96

## **VISUALS**

Elaine Happnie	
<b>Heart Marilyn</b>	11
Marc Occil	
<b>Promised Departure</b>	12
<b>Urban Morning Surf</b>	13
<b>Unreached</b>	14
Elaine Happnie	
<b>Shower on the Beach</b>	33
<b>Young Girl with Scarf</b>	41
Savitha Rajamani	
<b>ಅದಿಮ: Lifelong</b>	52
Michaela McMillan	
<b>Girlhood</b>	58
Islam Turyatunga	
<b>Peace in the World for All</b>	64
Savitha Rajamani	
<b>ಅಜೀವಕ: The Beginning</b>	73

Elaine Happnie	
<b>Top Hat in Front of First Parish Church Dorchester</b>	80
Michaela McMillan	
<b>American Summer</b>	86
Elaine Happnie	
<b>Little Girl in Madrid Spain</b>	91

## Six Word Story Contest Winners

### First Place

He thought the goldfish wanted air.  
Kate Lynch

### Finalists

“UMass Amherst?” “No, UMass Boston.” “Oh.”  
Satomi Nishimiya

Joannie Brown\*

### Honorable Mentions

Church? Sorry, I work on Sundays.  
Satomi Nishimiya

Your shirt, now mine, smells nice.  
Satomi Nishimiya

We met, loved, and said goodbye.  
Avi Lorenzo

I screamed stop, but he persisted.  
Catherine Nguyen

“We don’t accept returns on rings.”  
William Reney

Tears flooded her cheeks. Fucking onions.  
Ashley Gos

Update! Aliens have landed. Stay inside.  
Ivana Mendez Juliano

Tyrannical pterodactyls takeover superlative stegosaurus society.  
Jared Henkel



to all the people I've hurt:  
Quinn Fleming

Failed brakes. Red light. New orphans.  
David Carrillo

Hours later, the page was blank.  
Rosalie Groleau

A Muslim. Some gunshots. A terrorist.  
Sadaf Tauhid

He called me my sister's name.  
Emma Lutjen

Text message unfinished: "Driving to you..."  
Alison Beucler

Sorry, soldier. Shoes sold in pairs.  
Alison Beucler

Bruised. Did I fall last night?  
Dominique Counos

Dorchester. Roxbury. Mattapan. Not For Sale!  
Nathaniel McLean-Nichols

Step one, win tomorrow's lottery jackpot.  
Shaelah Belger

The stakes are high for witches.  
Angela Pangan

Both are dead: the golden rule.  
Angela Pangan

Meri Petollari\*

\*Did not grant permission to be published.

## **Norma Jeans Reconstruction**

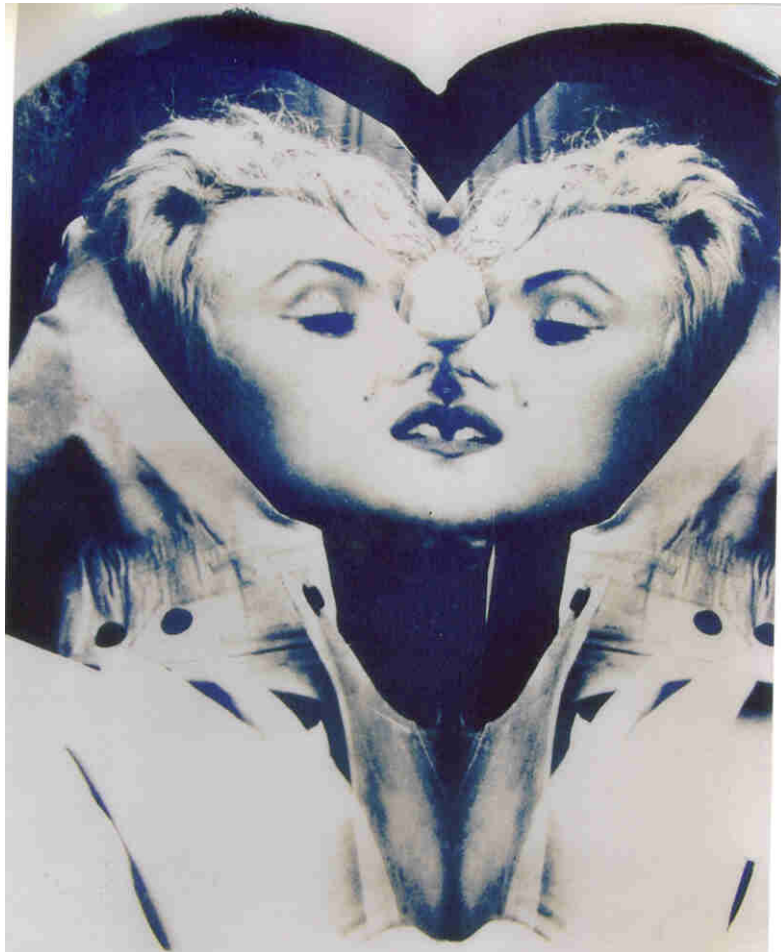
Elaine Happnie

Built from desertion, chaos and sorrow. / Marilyn Monroe a name borrowed.  
Schizophrenic mother. / Orphanage / frightened damaged child.  
Quiet, demure / her privacy raped from her.  
Sex object, dumb blonde persona / hides savvy business woman  
Gazing at her phosphorescent skin / no one bothers looking in  
Knowing from her past that love will never last.  
Nembutal and Champagne to numb pain.  
Parma of Seconal, Amytal, Dexedrine, Morphine.  
Heavy depression, delirium, insomnia

I will look inside and try to fix, exhausted I split.  
“Died in bed at 36.”

## Heart Marilyn

Elaine Happpnie



The Watermark

# Promised Departure

Marc Occil



# Urban Morning Surf

Marc Occil



The Watermark

# Unreached

Marc Occil





## A History of Decay

Bobby Aarons

The rainfall battered a coastal town. Week after week. Unlike anything, the locals said. As if the sky was trying to drown them.

Emily Grant, stifling a yawn, watched the rain fall through the rope-dressed window, enjoying the glass cold against her side, seeing her reflection in the glass like a phantom admiring her own beauty. There had not been a customer in a while. And although the sea was hidden behind a thick fog, she seemed to prefer it that way, gazing languidly into its gray mass and at the rain's chaotic curtain. No doubt the waves were mad below, striking at the cliff, pulling it into itself gradually. "Soon to go crashing into the sea," her grandfather would say, glumly, who had operated the little shack since youth, constructed it of his own wooden hands, resigned and childlike again, sadly amused with the novelty of the fact: that his property should face the same fate, ripe with purple spots and congestion of the lungs. "I want you to cremate me," he said, because they spoke openly about such matters, being each other's only family; her father, the lout he was, and her mother following after him into that drugged twilight. "Don't even think of putting me in a box," he said, "left for wormfood."

Ashes to ashes. What lovely phrases those drunken mystics come up with, drunk off wine and self-indulgence. But what happens in the meanwhile? So many waves crashing against one's knees, in the wet dark, seeing the curve of the earth engirth the sea, the trees afire with the moon's silver light, feeling her move against him and the waves move around them both, like a magnetic field, her body almost as chill as the water itself and her salty lips sticking to his: a single moment for the rest of his life to wonder at.

He sighed, smiling, thoughtlessly watching the lobsters squirm in their tank.

"It's not so awful," he said, slapping the wooden hull. "She's done great things with the time given her. And that is all you can ask of anything. Is that it entertains you while it lasts."

Emily looked up from the window. He stood feeble in the open doorway, silhouetted by the rain outside.

"I only wish it could last for you," he said. "A steady source of income in this troubling age."

"I'll be alright."

"Yes," he said. I only wish I could be certain. I only wish you could meet a man like your grandmother met me: a man who could love you with nobility, share with you such moments as that one, moon-bathing night, with which you might be assured of the worthiness of life—that it does have its upsides, sublimely flavoring even the darkest with hints of hope—to look back on and say, at least *that* happened.

But he worried.

There was something wrong with the present. He knew it was arrogant to say, and so he did not outright; but the notion disturbed him, like a strip of leather tied around his neck, chafing. It all seemed so perverse: the damage done to the sky, the clowns in office, technology come alive in their pockets, reaping their attention with sinister exactitude; like it had all gone to hell, and that the end of man would not happen in some blazing, Commi-provoked, final, as it should have, but rather in an instant of exhausted stupidity, God would watch the ruin of his favorite child, pounding at his knee, in

hysterics, on a torn lazy boy.

The old man knew he was being dramatic, like the doctors said. Still, the leather strained him, made him sigh when he meant not to.

She looked up again.

"You can close tonight," he said, trying to regain composure. "I'm going down to Brewster to say hello to some ole friends."

To say goodbye, she said as the bell above the door rang over his huddled back, once strong, under a blue raincoat.

She turned back to the fog, outside, forgetting tragedy in an instant. The gray mass, a shroud covering the horizon, offered her nothing, and that was exactly what she wanted; in the finality of the fog she could think, she could let her thoughts meet and embrace like naked limbs. The same was true of the silence. The refrigerator's humming and the tank that the lobsters watched her from, had their orgies in, static enough to be silence.

But the door rung, and Mr. Collins came in asking for a pound of trout, saying good evening Emily, a happy sunday.

Where was Able?

The beloved man, beloved by all the town for his supreme industriousness, having raised that little shack to such heights—and then for God to come along and return him such tragedy, in biblical like—there was an element of relish to it.

"Gone to meet some friends."

"Letting you close shop, now?" Mr. Collins said, dog-eyed under the frayed brim of a baseball cap. "How they grow."

His own son was a blank-eyed one they called Spudz, who spoke without rhyme, but merely for the getting it done. Some said he'd taken too many blows to the head on the football field, laughing as they did, and Spudz simply saying they were probably right. Emily liked to talk with him for the same reasons she liked to look at fog.

"Careful up here," Mr. Collins warned, taking his change and the fish in paper wrap. "There are sinister folk about. Especially after dark."

"I should be alright," she said.

He left, and she was alone again. The fog had turned indigo with the sun's setting. Bathed in such a mysterious vapor, the night would be dark especially: it already was. A foghorn sounded at hand. The infinite raindrops continued their assault.

She turned on another light, stifling a shiver. The inside of the shack went more orange in the wood. The bulbs were not fluorescent, for she had let Able know, frankly, that she would not stand for it. Those stark, cadaverous lights often used in school, for economic purposes, gave her terrible migraines; and if she was to work in such a den, already smelling of the rank demise of fish, he had at least let her some discretion over the lighting. And he agreed. In another age he might have put his foot down, but he was too weak now, ever since the death of his son.

She leaned back on the wooden mantle, having thrown a sweater on. The indigo was turning blue. She felt it on her flesh like velvet, on her breath, on her chest as it moved and the soft stirrings of her sweater. Letting the ends of her sleeves fall past her fingers, she reached and took her bottom lip and pressed it against the window. Then she shook her head, remembering the germs, brushed her hair behind her ear where she felt the three studs in the cartilage, abject metal: a strange fact, touching flesh



that was hers, at the same time feeling her flesh touched. She wondered whether she should get her tongue pierced like Sable had done.

Sable, who had texted her not an hour ago, asking if she had heard the news about so and so, and so having been worth reporting, even though Emily obviously knew, and so had only been asked because of the particulars involved, the obvious reason *why* she should care, because it was *him*, and so, for her to have really been asking: Is your heart broken?

Emily could imagine her slobbering at the gums, ready to report to her cronies that there was indeed, something to be harked over. What would they be doing without drama? A disgrace to mob around shouting, still burning witches at the stake, still embarking on pogroms... Still going to *church*...

She sighed, reminding herself it was ignorant to think that way. Why let the actions of the meek press her to negativity?

The color was drawn entirely from the fog. All that was left outside was darkness, as if that little shack was afloat in a void, and she looking out from her window, none the wiser, fretting over insipidness, the reactionary things unoriginal people have to say.

But then, it was *him*... She knew she cared, and that to lie to herself meant nothing, because she was in herself knowing... The dreadful knowing... And she couldn't stop.

Rubbing her forehead, her fingers made swirling circles to calm her brain, the feel of them soaking beneath her skin like ink dying in a sponge. Then she was absorbed in the swirling shapes. She felt a bit dizzy, so she ran her hands over the wooden ledge, the wood which felt like it might splinter, but did not. There were stains in it, like the bulbous beginnings of a flame, a jellyfish in propulsion, but not itself, the underwater moving through it in a borderless way, the world and she at its center, as much a part of it for the air going in her lungs, then it seemed to melt, whether it was moving or not and if not, then to melt, stretched at the ends long and shapeless, so much so that she became plasma, haunting the material world which was its cage, its duty and charge to spend an eternity censored in.

The rain continued on the wooden hull. Around the inside of the shack were so many nautical decorations: remnants of Abel's seafaring past—rope sculptures, the severed limbs of leviathans, lobster traps and buoys, hung with relish, as if they were Rembrandts. Why shouldn't they be? They set the room better than any painting... Although she liked the ones that were empty—often squares in different shades of yellow or blue, because in the fact of their being hung up like that next to some vivid portrait or landscape, and yet so much more pleasurable to look at, there was proof of the fragility of so many millennia of institutions, that for all their elaboration, it did not amount to much more than a more elegant subjectivity—and so what if it was *elegant*? So what if anything was? If she wanted to pierce every inch of her body with metal hooks—if she wanted to make a mockery of the snare which for thousands of years had upheld that an act of intimacy, an act of pleasure, was a crime—like looking at a work of art and being told you were looking at it wrong.

She felt indignant, and was thrilled about it; as if she were onto something important.

In the fog, she could see two spots of red approaching. The rays they made were like bloody travelers, stumbling along over the rain bogged earth. Bouncing, the car went around back. Emily went after it, into the back room where Able's desk was, and without turning the lights on she peered through the blinds at the car which had stopped near the edge of the cliff, between two dead lamp posts.

It was a battered thing, dented in the back. She could just make out two silhouettes inside. There was a trail of smoke sneaking out from the cracked window, like a snake unravelling, as if all the

fog that night had been born from inside that one car.

Grabbing her jacket and putting on her boots, she ran outside, feeling the earth sink beneath her feet joyously, the wet suctioning sound as she lifted her boots, leaving holes in the earth from which hordes of petty skeletons begged her to stop. The wind shrieking against her hood. She felt it breach the inadequate make, demand with shrill concern she return to her post, behind the counter. But it was like she knew not the shrill language anymore.

Going up to the driver side window, she knocked. The glass rolled down, and from inside two red-eyed creatures looked out, like convicts inside a hollow.

"Hello, Willard," she greeted.

The fellow in the passenger seat leaned over, saying hello, and she asked them if they had known she'd be working that night.

"Didn't think of it," Willard admitted, rubbing his chin. "There was a cop skulking at Rupert's field, so we figured we'd come here."

"Did you?"

"Thought it'd be a sight, but we didn't account on the fog."

"It's thick tonight."

"You should'a seen driving here," Willard said, shaking his head. "We thought 'e'd have ridden off the road. Especially back there. Nearly fallen in."

Their eyelids were swollen, like slabs of meat, and their eyes themselves, little brimstones emitting a hellish glow; and if not, then reflected by the yellow light from the console.

"You look stoned," Emily said, laughing.

"Ay," Willard nodded. "I guess we should."

"Have you got any left?"

Willard looked at his friend, who until then had only rigidly held his hands prostrate in his lap. Too stoned to fathom the sublimity of depth, let alone the inquiring gaze of this beautiful girl, he had reverted, not unlike an armadillo, into a shell.

"Sure thing," he croaked.

So she stumbled in the backseat, in the middle of it leaning forward, and resting her elbows on their shoulders to look at what they were doing. Nothing. They had their hands in their laps. The music was at a whisper.

"Don't you want to hear that?" she asked.

"Oh," Willard piped, and his friend, in a hurry, turned it so loud the car bounced. It was bad music though, and while Emily did not mind bad music, it was just too loud, and anyway, she had decided not to be a slave to pleasantries any more.

"Could you turn it down?" she asked, and the one who was too stoned to say yes simply did, then he kept his hand over the dial as if to ask if it was alright.

"That's fine," she laughed. "How are you smoking?"

"We've been rolling bones," Willard gloated.

"All of my friends smoke pipes," Emily said.

"We smoke out of pipes too," Willard assured her, quickly. She had meant to compliment him on a more fashionable way of smoking.

"I can't figure out how to roll them," she persisted.

"Oh!—It's not so hard, once you get the hang of it."

"I'm sure."

She knew them somewhat. They were in her grade. Seniors. Or maybe the nameless one was older. Either way, they were both indifferent about school. Never having done a piece of homework, she often wondered how bodies like theirs even managed graduation: but then again, schools are all too ready to rid themselves of a bad statistic. That's all anything is—datums.

Willard was rolling the joint in his lap; his jeans were pulled low, so that the inseam made a plate, like a tray, on which he let the weed sit. His long, deft fingers picked them out, dropped them in the folded paper, keeping the inner chamber fixed while he brought the sticky bit up sealed it tender. Then he showed it off.

"You like that one?"

"It's perfect," she said.

"She's a pearl alright." Willard laid it flat in his open palm, gazing at it, proud.

Then they sat still a moment. A foreboding stillness, the likes of which only boded a great journey. The flick of the lighter's toothed metal lingered in the quiet, and in the shape of the flame in Willard's lap, he roasted the end.

She watched him smoke, and then his friend who coughed terribly, and then it was her turn, handed back to her and without delay she drank it down. Purple feathers in her throat. Releasing the draught, she watched it pour beneath her eyes a thick swirling vapor. She could see herself in it, and she didn't cough.

Willard smoked again, and he coughed like he had phlegm. The other held it in, looking forward to the extreme, like a statue.

Then she smoked again, let it go down and was gone, her head running away from her in a thousand directions. Over grass. Over sand. She had to focus on something.

By the edge of the cliff there was a path between two stones, where people used to go down and walk by the water, before the storms came and plunged them all into waste. A sign near its entrance read, with great urgency, *proceed with caution*. She couldn't help but smile. As if it were anything new, as if that phrase was not everything anyone ever had to say, sometimes honestly, but more often, for deception. *Carefully now, there is a leopard around the bend...* when there is no such leopard, but a stream; and many years later, *Careful now, there is a God...*

And why? What are the chances they should have all had such similar things to say? For authority's sake? Perhaps the act of opening one's mouth implies a sordid desire. *Listen to me, hear me, and rejoice, for I have spoken*. But she never wanted anything like that. She just wanted what everything was only useful for: entertainment.

To death with romance, her heart screamed. People are never worth it. They disappoint you because they are barely even real, just a desire in the heart.

"Are you alright?" Willard asked her, tilting his head back. Beneath the cotton hood tightly drawn around his head, out of which his greasy hair shot, he looked like a palm tree.

"I'm alright," she said, feeling the world move. Indeed, she was fine, calculating in her head the sensations involved, whether they were or were not worth it. Of course, the car was filthy...and there were the two of them. But it had been such a boring night, and what did it matter? It all involved the same flesh.

## **Mercy**

Bobby Aarons

Huddled cross-legged, on top of a stone, the boy watched the waves approach. Tears dried on his placid cheeks, salt stained. His grief expired, humming like the broken tempo of an adolescent heart in a fixed world saying, you cannot beat like that. But it does! It screamed back. It does beat, and I am here.

The surf arrived, roaring. He sat aching, afraid of what his mother would say should he go home. Not for fear of being scolded. She didn't like to yell at him. So she grieved instead, saying, almost pleading, come on, son.

It was the futility that hurt him most, like a dream where you punch at something that's not there.

There was School: an affront on his savagery, and his savagery simply existing. A lack of discipline was not the problem, like they said it was, inferring he had been raised wrong, but the substance forgotten in their theories, algebraic models saying, that with enough pressure, the soul would give, like a diamond. It was all chemical. They were not Calvinists; they believed in diamonds.

So he sat before the plastic-haired woman, watching her lips purse as she wrote on a pink slip what he had done. He would be suspended a week, she said, flicking the paper deftly. May God have mercy.

And on the bus ride home, when he told his friends he would be gone on vacation a while, they commended his audacity. Fear and shame throbbed in his throat, kept him from saying, ha. The frost outside strangled him. His laughter was like gargling knives. They turned away, forgetful, talking about matters that did not concern him—homework.

Stepping off the bus, the grief arrested him. He looked up from the frostbitten road at the chimney smoke in an overcast sky, like ash against wool. It would be warm inside. His mother, having gotten the call, would have wanted something nice for him to come home to. She was always commiserating.

The rest of them were too exhausted to: his brothers thought he was tarnishing their good name, his father said he needed medication.

But it was not worth losing her son to, she said, the criminal he was. It is how some people are. Where are those who will love them?

He turned and skulked across the road, into the woods and down a sharp cliff stumbling, scratching himself on briars, falling out onto a broken beachfront, where the surf merely crashed, unseen and endless, for eons and ages, where amphibians first walked and God was born, on a sliver of rock.

Putting his bag down safe away from the water, he turned, and breathing in the salty deep, screamed a sublime sound: his voice echoing along the coast. Birds decongregating. The surf roaring longer, when the echoes had left him.

In a rage, he struck at the boulder; merely sitting there, obstinate, it was a personification of his hatred: for brick buildings and paperwork, and the words that are not meant to be spoken lest he tempt the divine hand—but mostly himself; he hit it because it hurt him to, and he hated his dumb spirit most; the one that merely existed. And then his hand broke, and he stopped.

He lifted himself onto the boulder, rubbing his knuckles into place, and then he sobbed, long and burning. He knew it was wrong what he had done. But his soul was dumb, and the world was strange. And the sound of the surf crashing was like a tender hand saying, I understand.

## The Patriot

Aaron Bobby

My father laughed over a plate of eggs, bacon, and a cup of coffee still steaming, not as if there was anything funny, just in general, a sort of sad joke. So gradually had the time gone, and then the day looming over the horizon, the earth turning forever in its favor, dizzying, as if it were turning faster with each new year—and then it was: a bleak realization of the finality of things.

My mother sat beside me, unimpressed. It was all a disgrace to her, that there should be any celebration at all and not just a collective sigh saying, so it must happen, like the degradation of the body, people drink poison to feel fake joy, and now my youngest son is among them.

I ached silently, not knowing what to say. I could remember being a child. How she had said almost in daily requiem, it will destroy your brain; and less literally, you don't need any of their snake oil anyway. The beauty of life is self-evident. Take a walk along the beach. Hear the waves crash in sublime intent. What else is there?

Probably nothing...

But of course I would drink. I had to. It was in my mind and I had drunk since I was fifteen, and especially would I that night, to celebrate my legality. It was as if I had a responsibility. There are reasons for these traditions obviously superficial, and they are the same as for all those bloated institutions, like patriotism or decency, the obsessive pursuit of a fine job, as ingrained in our psyches as are words when the eye passes over objects—the proof of other people—and the reason is, we are not animals anymore. It is not enough to say a walk along the beach *ought* to quell my anxiety. Sometimes a drink is required.

But she knew all this. She had heard it a million times and it would have meant nothing to say, and so I lied, saying of course I wouldn't.

And sitting drunk by the water that night, seeing the moon dance on its choppy surface, having escaped the party, I thought of them that morning, in the café—my father laughing, utterly aware; and my mother mournful, done arguing for a life because it was legal now, regardless of the reluctance in her heart, there were judicial ranks saying it was time to pass on authority, that I, her son, could poison my brain to my heart's content, because I was more American than human. Another datum.

A troupe of rats scurried past, into a hole in a rock, free and doused in oil. The night was blue and yellow, foaming, and away somewhere, a woman sobbed over an affair. I could feel the wind heavy against my head.

I laughed, and fell sideways. The ethanol flooded my brain. Neurons on fire. An utterly chemical process is happiness, in any context, whether it be love or madness. What does it matter if it is poison making it happen? To be drunk or sober? Either or. We are in this machine, already. Like animals made to wear suits.

I smiled at the last, feeling the bile erupt in my throat, stuck there by gravity, like the pride of a patriot—insurmountable, and suffocating.

# **The Death of a Songbird**

Ellis Hampton

Sing you Bird of Paradise  
Sing on, and through your flight  
Sing until the sunlight fades  
And darkness turns to night

Set flight from the lowest rock  
Sing onto your branch  
Your wings illuminate the night  
Freedom calls for you to dance

Sing and fly still higher more  
With Freedom at your reigns  
This your highest flight so far  
'til soon the song refrains—

The earth starts pulling down again  
Though your duty's to the skies  
Still the heavens got a glimpse  
Of their Bird of Paradise

## On Borrowed Times

Ellis Hampton

Stunted in youth, the new century must  
Learn to carry on in search of self alone  
Left choosing the best of past Decade's  
Truths, while the worst lose all conviction,  
And in time become forgotten, or made  
New, transformed into the best again—Soon  
The fine lines fade, like freeway lane dividings.  
All directions point true north, chaos mimics  
Compass needles, repetition is mistaken for an  
Echo. Simply a harmless echo, the closer  
You listen the more it fades away, why  
Listen, if soon it will be gone, polluted by  
Other noise, and why write it, it has been  
Written before, and read, and misread, and read—



## **Insomnia**

Ellis Hampton

At night I write in darkness, when muses  
Sing more sweetly, and the world of my room  
Is silhouetted by silver moonlight's  
Glow. I reach for the shape of pencils, and  
Feel for paper's fresh textured touch, yet I  
Persist blind, without light to guide my hand—  
The words slant up and down unrestricted  
By the horizontal lines, so I pour  
A day's frustrations onto unseen land  
Through divine thought, as though dictated by  
Some bodiless voice—words without form.  
These are words meant for reading in darkness,  
Words that cannot be viewed, and when light shines  
Again these words dissolve like morning thoughts—

## The Detour

Charlotte Burlingame

I still don't know what to make of what happened.

I left work later than usual, which should have been an indication that something was awry. My commute home is not long but is always lonely; the rest of the city had already been tucked away by the time I locked the office doors. Last night, my train stop felt eternally ahead of me. The car I chose was desolate except for the flickering lights, an empty beer can, and me. When the can rolled towards my foot I kicked it, thought about my work day, and how much I wanted a drink. Nothing I had said in that meeting made any difference.

I felt odd when I finally stepped onto the street. The lack of life or any sort of presence distorted the houses, sidewalks, and streets, transforming the scene into a different space, which gave me the feeling that I was not supposed to be there. On my street is an abandoned building that looks like it might have been a restaurant or a store at one point. I had never paid it much thought before; it fit in with the rest of the old apartments, all huddled together on the street as if in fear. Last night, I think the light made me stop.

Every house, apartment, and store on the street was dark, which is in part why I had felt so uneasy. Behind boarded-up windows, a faint but assertive light shined in the old building. The way it glowed a fluorescent white against the black and blues of the night made my legs freeze.

I still don't know what made me go inside.

I even had to give the door a bit of a shove to open it. But the door was unlocked and any signs that would have pointed me away were left unheeded. When I stepped inside I saw that the building had been an old diner. The breakfast bar and stools, although caked in dust, stood intact, waiting for the next person to walk through the door. The floor was a cracked black and white tile and the walls were covered in replicas of famous artwork that hung crookedly from their frames. Behind the bar the light glowed underneath a long, black curtain.

I moved through to the other side.

The building opened up to a large room which had once been an arcade. All the old machines and games were there, some covered in sheets like ghosts while others were just black-screened, standing ruins. A wave of nostalgia flooded my brain as I walked through the aisles and saw Space Invaders and Pac Man.

I was jolted out of my memories when I heard the sounds of one of the games being played. Although the boarded windows made the room stuffy, I felt a shiver possess me. It was easy to pinpoint the game that had been turned on amid the darkness and my feet, somewhat against my will and better judgement, followed the sickly blue light that washed over everything in the room. Against the back wall were a row of pinball machines, an old bar, and a few games. A dark silhouette had been playing Street Fighter, the light illuminating the space around it. I stood a few feet away in a trance before I realized that whoever it was, they were only human. So I approached.

As I got closer to whoever stood in front of the game, I saw that he was a boy of maybe seventeen, far younger than I, with dark, curly hair. I stood beside his shoulder and watched him play,

unsure of whether or not he had noticed me. His face was pointed, bony, and had a look of fierce concentration. Despite the yellows and oranges of the game reflecting on his face, I noticed his dark complexion and that his eyes were almost black.

"You can jump in and play Ken if you want," he said to me without taking his eyes off the screen. "But I'll warn you: I'm really good."

I stood beside him, dumbfounded, watching the fighter on screen display an impressive combination of yellow kicks. The opponent flickered and crumpled to the ground. A big, black and red light flashed on the top of the screen. K.O.

The boy didn't look away. "I told you."

Like the game, my brain finally switched on.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.

He started a new match and smashed the little red buttons with his left hand. He laughed a little. "I could ask you the same thing, amigo."

I didn't know.

"When I came inside the building I saw the light from the game and I followed it."

"So you broke into the building."

"That's not really the point," I said, and noticed my hands had become sweaty. "Besides, I asked you first."

The kid smiled a goofy grin. "Fair enough." He entered the initials A.G.L. into the top score slot. "I had to come by and defend my legacy." He laughed quietly to himself and shook his head before he grabbed a jacket from the top of Donkey Kong. "Let's go."

"What do you mean 'let's go'?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes as he put on his jacket. Although the thick leather hid much of his lanky figure, the sleeves came down just a little too long past his wrists, making him look like a little kid trying on his father's coat. "Look, unless you want to stand here all night trying to beat my score, which I don't think you could do, there's no reason to be here."

I couldn't argue with that.

As he led me down the aisle, screens lit up as we passed, inviting us to save the world or save the princess or save ourselves. The games covered in sheets projected a blue light from underneath their veils. When we reached the black curtain that led into the diner, the kid tore it down and walked by. I looked back at the arcade and saw all the games that were now animated, filling my head with buzzing and beeps. I dismissed the shiver that ran through me.

"How did you get in?" I asked the boy as we left the building. "I had to really try to get that door open."

"There are doorways where we least expect them, amigo."

That didn't answer my question. He was quite a bit in front of me and when he stopped to light a cigarette, I ran to catch up with him. A cloud of smoke hit me in the face and I coughed.

"If that's making *me* cough I can't imagine what it must be doing to *you*," I teased.

"Let me ask you something: you drink, right?"

"Of course."

"And what about food? Do you eat meat?"

"I do," I admitted.

"And what's not to like about it, right?"

"Where's this going?"

"*Right?*"

I rolled my eyes. "I guess."

"Except that one day, they'll both kill you." He smiled. "Everything will."

"I don't think that's quite the same thing."

The kid flicked the butt of his cigarette into a trash can on the sidewalk. An impressive shot.

"Maybe," he said. "But who's to say?"

"Don't tell me you think eating a hamburger every once in a while is the same thing as smoking."

The kid grinned at me and lit another one. "Like I said, who's to say? I spend my own money and buy my own cigarettes. I don't ask anyone for anything. I'm not killing anyone but myself. And I like it. So who cares, nothing matters anyway."

This kid obviously had more passionate feelings than I did about the subject, so I dropped it.

We walked a little farther down the street in silence. I watched the houses and shops and waited to see if any of the lights were on, if I could catch a glimpse of any other life through the windows. Everything was dark. The kid looked up at the sky the whole time; he didn't pay attention to anything in front of him. I never remembered being like that. When I was a teenager, I had only been concerned with what was in front of me; I never looked ahead. But that was almost ten years ago now. I watched the last of his cigarette smoke drift into the sky, mixing and mingling with the other poisons of the city. I couldn't see anything else beyond it.

"Have you ever seen the stars before, amigo?" the boy suddenly asked me.

I stared at him for a while before I told him no, I'd lived in the city my whole life.

"Hm." He looked thoughtful for a moment and I thought he was going to say something, but he didn't.

I didn't realize how long we had been walking until we reached the underpass near the train stop after mine. I stiffened. I didn't even like to walk under there during the day. Although the eyes living behind the fence never bothered me, the rancid smell of urine and garbage always forced me through. We approached an old woman who sat on the sidewalk about halfway through the pathway. As we passed her, a tall man in a hooded sweatshirt moved past us. I thought we were about to bump into each other, but as our shoulders connected, he passed through me. I whirled around. I saw the man kneel down, put money in the woman's cup, stand up, and move on.

The boy turned around and raised an eyebrow. "Are you coming?"

He led me farther down the street through a concrete desert, nothing but the sidewalk, an abandoned gas station, and empty parking lots in our view. We stopped at an old park, which was hardly more than a small patch of badly-watered grass next to a swingset. The kid jumped up onto one of the swings. I had come this far: what choice did I have but to join him? The streetlight above us winked.

"You haven't even told me your name," I said.

The boy pushed himself back and forth on the swing with the tip of his shoe. "You never told me yours either. Or even why you joined me in the first place."

"That's fair."

He smiled and looked up at the swing's chains above him, stretching towards the sky. Another

moment passed where he looked thoughtful, but didn't speak. "I'm Angel," he finally said.

"That's a nice name," I told him.

He shrugged. "It's very appropriate." Instead of elaborating, he asked, "What brought you into the arcade tonight?"

"I don't really know," I admitted.

"Doesn't seem like you know much of anything."

"That's not a lie, I really don't know why I went in there," I protested. "I pass by that old building every single day on my way home from work. I've never even looked at it twice. I don't know how to explain it, but I felt *compelled* to go in there tonight. It's like something drew me in." I shook my head. "I think it was just the light."

Angel laughed. "Like a moth drawn to light."

I kicked the dirt and felt my cheeks burn. "Yeah, I guess like that."

"Hey, I'm not making fun of you," he said. "You can do whatever you want. It only makes sense that you would follow your instincts. You're only human. And besides, who really cares anyway that you break into some building, nothing matters anyway."

"You keep saying that."

"What?"

"That nothing matters."

Angel stared at me blankly. "Is that not the truth?"

"I hope not. My entire field of work is based on the idea that I can change something." I pushed myself on the swing a little. "I'm trying to save what's left of the world, hopefully reverse some of the damage we've done."

"We're all eventually going to be swallowed up by the sun so if you really think about it, nothing you do is going to matter in the long run."

I didn't know whether or not to feel frustrated or defeated. Ultimately, he was right. "So does this mean we shouldn't even try, then?" I pouted.

"Amigo, listen: nothing you do is going to matter in the long run. It's true. What are you going to do about it? But you should do what you do anyway. You have to do whatever you want, because what else *can* you do? Eventually nothing matters but we don't have to be miserable in the meantime. We can at least pretend, at least make ourselves feel better by thinking we're making a difference." When I didn't respond he shrugged. "I'm just saying."

"A cynical little fuck aren't you." I tried to laugh. "How'd you get like that?"

"It's just the truth."

"I was never like that when I was your age."

That prompted a loud laugh. "You say that like you're some old person. Can't have been *that* long ago."

I shrugged. "Maybe, but still. It's a weird position to have about the world when you've hardly experienced it."

Something in Angel's eyes changed. "What would you know about what I've experienced, amigo?"

"I didn't mean to assume anything. I just feel like it's not fair of you to say that. I'm *trying* to make something matter." With that, I grew more frustrated and knew it, but I didn't stop. "And what about you? You're spending all your time in an abandoned building, playing video games that no one

even cares about anymore. Who are you to say what counts and what doesn't?"

"Who am I?" he repeated. "Amigo, who are *you*? I didn't ask you to follow me out here, so why did you come?"

I started to say something, but in my frustration I couldn't. "I don't know," I finally said.

"No one does."

Angel didn't say anything else. Instead, he took out another cigarette and I was left to feel the hot embarrassment of my outburst. When he lit it, the orange of the flame illuminated his face, softening his features and transforming him into a light against the blackness behind us. He took a long drag, held onto the swing's chains, and bent backwards so that he was horizontal, facing the sky. Angel closed his eyes and exhaled a cloud. The kid sure had a flair for the dramatic.

"Look at that."

He still had his eyes closed, but he held one of his hands up and swatted the smoke that lingered in the air above him. My eyes followed it up into the atmosphere, but when I looked at the sky I saw that the clouds were parting. There was a patch of sky directly above us that was cloudless, smogless, and without light. It looked darker than the night that surrounded us, darker than anything I'd ever seen before. But there were stars, bright white against the abyss. Millions of them. It reminded me of when I was a little kid and I would hide under the big, wool blanket when my brother and I played hide and seek. I remembered trying to control my breathing so he wouldn't hear me and concentrating on the little white dots of light that seeped through the blanket.

"Pretty, aren't they?"

I turned my attention to Angel, who swayed back and forth, still laid horizontal on the swing, eyes closed, one arm dangled. He looked like he was in a trance and I felt like the constellations would crash down on top of us through the opening in the clouds. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end when I glanced up again; the sky looked like it was spinning.

"Hey."

Angel opened his eyes and raised his head a little to look at me.

"Can we go? I'm sorry."

He blew the last of the cigarette smoke out into the sky, watched it drift up and disappear, and pushed the filter into the dirt. He sat up and looked at me.

"Yeah. You better go home." Angel pushed himself off the swing and started walking. "Before you forget how."

As I trailed behind him, I tried to steal one last glance at the stars. But the sky had returned to a gray wash.

What I remember most about that walk home was the old woman, sitting on the underpass sidewalk. She held a cup of coffee with both hands, and had the lip of the styrofoam right up against her face. I saw a happy inhale of the smell as she settled into the blanket around her. It was probably shitty gas station coffee, watery and flavorless, but she looked content.

For the most part, we didn't speak on our walk. I spent it reflecting on our conversation at the park and although Angel didn't seem upset or bothered, I thought I should say something.

"I didn't mean to sound like I was...I didn't mean what I said about you wasting your time," I offered.

"Amigo, it's fine. We're all wasting our time."

“You really don’t think there’s a point?”

“I don’t. But you do. And I think that’s important. I think you can do whatever you want. And what you want to do is care. That’s not nothing.”

When I tried to take a right at the big four-way intersection that would’ve brought me home, Angel made me walk back to the arcade with him. I told him it was late, I had work the next day, I was tired, but he insisted. Told me it was important. So I went. The building was still illuminated when we approached it, and I thought I could hear the games from outside. We walked through the dusty kitchen and back into the arcade. Angel tacked the black curtain back onto the door frame.

“I’m going home now,” I told him.

“That’s fine, I’m going to play around here for a bit.” He stretched and then smiled. “Can’t have anyone taking my place on that high score board.”

I was going to ask if he had school tomorrow, but I didn’t. It didn’t matter, I knew that.

“Thanks for coming out, amigo.” Angel winked. “Just leave the way you came.”

I just nodded.

As I left, the games blinked off behind me. I could still hear Angel playing Street Fighter, but I didn’t look back. I stopped at the black curtain, then moved through to the other side. I could see my shadow in front of me, projected by the soft light from Angel’s game. I didn’t turn around until I left the building entirely. And when I did everything was dark.

I checked my watch to see how late I’d be getting home, but it had stopped hours ago.

## Justice Resigned

Kate Flaherty

**June 27, 2018**

It's not:

the breakfast of champions  
a wailing harmonica voice  
children dancing in the street  
in bathing suits in the rain

It's not:

orderly rows of emerald  
girls twirling batons  
the thrumming of the big drum  
shuddering the tummies of children

It's not:

stoic crowds  
in the subway trains  
going wherever they go

Nor a peach as orange as the setting sun—  
smell of dusty sunshine—  
taste sticky on the chin—  
tongue slurping to capture the juice

Someone stole it or  
at least changed it so  
it's not itself.

Bald eagle morphs to  
Cardboard bucket of original recipe.  
Food truck parks at Tomb of the Unknown—  
Tacos, pizza, falafel—  
You want fries with that?



## Shower on the Beach

Elaine Happnie



## Shortened Life

Yasmin Araujo

Young,  
innocent,  
Just a 16 year-old boy  
Black hair as dark as night,  
Trying to get home to his mother  
Didn't think his life would come to an end so soon.  
1:35AM Sunday, January 10, 2016

BANG!?! BANG!?! BANG!?!  
Upstairs,  
Mother is at the window,  
Flowing tears that turned into rivers

We hear the sirens blaring in our ears, shaking the house as  
The red and blue lights began to approach  
as fast as the bullets

Rain would wash  
Blood, blood, blood  
Its scent seemed to linger of death  
Which seemed to also linger around the crime scene

Our house represented  
Warmth and safety,  
A boundary they won't dare to cross  
The street seemed to be dangerous,  
As if we were to risk our lives by doing so,  
We head out.

Pulling at our memories,  
We walk past the accident.  
His hair laid on the street  
It stayed there just like the blood,  
As if it were the glue to the hair and concrete  
The street lamps seemed to have eyes on everything  
Just as when they witnessed the event.

Why couldn't they clean this up?  
Why didn't they have mercy?  
Why waste a life as if meant nothing?  
Why not try to find an end to all of this?

Life went on,  
as a precious life was taken to God,  
Instead of trying to go back home  
To hide from the MS-13 gang,  
That got to him first.

## Tayla Bennett

### Ode to the Victims of Mass Shootings

I would like to write a poem  
for the music lovers of Las Vegas.  
Fifty eight lives lost,  
Fifty eight.  
Fifty eight lives and souls and kids and lovers and parents.  
Fifty eight listeners—listening to screams instead of music.  
Fifty eight innocent people.

I would like to write a poem  
for the partiers of Orlando.  
Surrounded by hate for just trying to love,  
shot down by a semi-automatic rifle.  
Forty nine.

I would like to write a poem  
for the educators and educated.  
The babies of Sandy Hook elementary,  
traumatized for their lives.  
Twenty six.  
The children of Parkland,  
the generation whose voices just wanted to be heard.  
Seventeen.  
The adults of Virginia Tech,  
Who still years later do not have the answer to this problem.  
Thirty two.

I would like to write a poem  
for the victims of every other mass shooting.  
Sutherland Springs and Columbine.  
I would like to write a poem  
for every mass shooting I missed because  
the list is too damn long.

I would like to write a poem  
for every person who wonders if they're next,  
for every student practicing to stay safe—  
and for every grieving community, I'm sorry.

## Markisha Aristide

### A Stone Cold Past

“Rae, can you tell us how women during the Civil Right Movement played their part alongside their male peers?”

Of course, she would call on me, I thought. Mrs. Jackson, our history teacher, always called on me. I was the token black girl in an all-white class. I responded, “I don’t know, Mrs. Jackson, wasn’t you like born at that time? Shouldn’t you know the answer to that question?”

The whole class laughed hysterically at my comment, but Mrs. Jackson was anything but entertained. “Rae, I’m tired of your smart remarks. You can take a trip down to the principal’s office.”

“Sure, no problem,” I said. Did she really think I was going to the Principal’s office? I slipped through the back entrance’s doors and walked to Matt’s apartment and didn’t look back.

As I was walking I could smell the usual greasy hot dogs that Sal sells near the train station. The stampede of tourists knocking my yellow Jansport backpack slowly off my shoulders. I finally arrived at my good friend Matt’s place and he opened the door with a joint in one hand. “You pissed or something? Here, you need it more than I do.” I grabbed the nearly finished joint as Matt followed me inside his dingy apartment.

“Mrs. Jackson is such a bitch, that women can’t a joke to save her life!”

“Oh I remember Mrs. Jackson, she was always so uptight.”

“Yeah, she thinks I know all things black as if we have been through the struggle together ya know.”

“That’s hilarious, it’s 2008 and we have a black president now, times are changing. And look at your dad he’s black married to a white woman, the struggle is over!” Matt said.

“I’m done talking about this let’s just drop it,” I said instantly. As we listened to Pandora, 2:55 quickly approached and it was time for me to go home before my parents realized I missed half of school. “Hey Matt, drop me off my house. I don’t think I’ll be able to get there in time if I walk.”

“Let’s go then,” Matt replied. We pulled at the corner of my house, so my dad wouldn’t see Matt. My dad hates Matt, like despises the kid. I walked up the corner and noticed my gigantic father hovered over the hood of his car, as he turned around and made eye contact with me.

“So what are you doing with Matt again?” my father said sharply.

“Oh, he just saw me walking—”

I couldn’t even finish my lie before he bombarded me with a next question. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out you weren’t in school today either? I thought I told you not to get into with Mrs. Jackson.” My dad slammed the hood of his car and walked inside before I could even muster up another lie that wouldn’t work. My mother was inside and the look of disappointment was all over her face, she didn’t say one word to me. My dad, on the other hand, had a lot to say. “Do you what Mrs. Jackson had to do teach at your school?” I knew where this conversation was headed and I slowly tuned out as my father spoke. “If this was years ago, she wouldn’t even be allowed to attend the school, nonetheless teach there. Rae, are you even listening?”

“Yeah sure dad, I get it, you love being black, I don’t see color why do we even have to talk

about this?” That’s when I noticed the same look that Mrs. Jackson had on my father’s face. Usually, my mom saves me from these types of arguments with my dad, but I can tell she didn’t want to butt in this time.

“Rae, you have to understand your history, and where ancestors came from and how it affects you.”

“How does it affect me, dad, since you’ve got me all figured out!” I screamed as I stormed upstairs into my room.

I lay on my queen sized bed, dozed off, and suddenly I felt a falling sensation through an everlasting pit...

I suddenly jerked up as my head pounded with pain. I looked around me and shattered glass was everywhere including a small sliver on the side of my neck. I looked up in distress as this girl about my age yelled, “Get down!” I quickly crawled myself under the green seat of the rapidly moving bus. I heard a crowd chanting “Hell no, we won’t go!” over and over again. They sounded furious and more and more rocks entered the moving bus. As the bus came to a screeching stop it was like the Queen of England had arrived, and everyone parted ways for her extravagant entrance. Except we were greeted with death threats and angry faces. We were at some school and I suddenly noticed I was wearing a khaki uniform skirt and a white dress shirt with a tie. Three cops frantically escorted me and the girl I saw on the bus to the front of the school doors. I looked at her as if she was the only person I could depend on, I was afraid and wanted to go back home to DC.

“I didn’t get your to name,” I said desperately to this girl.

“I told you when we got on the bus, its Denise Jackson,” she said with a grin.

“Sorry, I forgot,” but the truth was I didn’t forget I simply didn’t know, I didn’t know anything that was going on. The front of the school read “Welcome to Hamilton High,” as the crowd got angrier the shouts seemed to get louder.

“Go back to Africa, you nigger!” some guy screamed.

*Is he serious?* I thought. I never felt so out of place for being half black let alone black. Denise quickly pulled me away from all the commotion and we walked alongside the nearby street where no one was at. “So what school are you coming from?” said Denise as she ran out of breath.

“Simmons Prep,” I replied as I caught my breath too.

“Is that in Roxbury?”

“No, it’s in DC.”

“So you aren’t from Boston, why are you even here?”

I quickly lied and said, “I’m joking with you, it’s this new school in Jamaica Plain the built about three years ago.”

“Never heard of it, but whatever,” Denise replied. I was relieved she didn’t question me again.

“Once I graduate Hamilton, I’m going to get my degree in education and a minor in writing,” said Denise. “All this racial tension will soon be over with, I’m hopeful.”

“Aren’t you scared?” I said.

“Scared? Not as scared as you were walking through that crowd.” We both laughed.

“I mean did you see the size of that rock? I never have seen my life flash before my eyes so fast,” I said while laughing even more.

“Here take one of my lucky stones, I collect near the pond near my house to keep me safe. We can walk bright and early in that school together tomorrow.” As we both walked and talked our way to who knew where I suddenly felt that same sensation of falling again.

“Rae, are you okay? Rae!”

I jolted up from sleep, and was sweating buckets. Clenched in my fist I noticed the stone Denise gave me, how could this be possible? The scar from the shattered piece of glass left a mark on my neck, resembling a hickey.

“Get down for breakfast, Rae!” my mom yelled from downstairs. I never ran so fast, I nearly busted my ass as I went down the stairs. I was so disoriented from the dream, I couldn’t think straight.

“Long nap huh?” my dad said jokingly.

“Yeah sure,” I said.

“Are you okay, Rae?” my mother said in a soothing voice.

“Yes! I’m fine, why is everyone asking me that?”

“I’m the only one who asked. What’s gotten into you, Rae?”

“Nothing,” I replied, “I’m sorry.”

My dad and mom looked at each other as if they knew all my secrets. Or maybe I was overanalyzing everything, I don’t know but I quickly made my way over to school. I walked into History feeling like I’d awoken from a coma.

“Today in class we will be learning about the Busing Riots in Boston,” Mrs. Jackson said eagerly. My dream had started to become a reality. Is this what my dream had been about? I guess this was me getting a taste of my own medicine, and it took a traumatic dream to wake me up...literally.

The bell rung for lunch, and Mrs. Jackson finished her lecture and pulled me aside as everyone left. “Are you feeling okay, Rae? You seem out of it.”

“Oh it’s nothing, just some weird dream I had earlier,” I said nervously. It was as if Mrs. Jackson knew about my dream; why’d she pull me aside?

“Tell me about it,” Mrs. Jackson said. Ten minutes later I found myself and Mrs. Jackson actually getting along for a moment. We spoke about the Bus Boycotts in Boston and how she was glad she went through that tragic time in her life. How she learned integrity and through work ethic anyone can follow their dreams and goals, no matter what color you were. As I listened to Mrs. Jackson talk about her past, I couldn’t help but be appreciative of her and also those before me. I noticed a pearly white object in the right corner of my eye as I spoke with Mrs. Jackson—could it be? It was the lucky stone Denise gave me in my dream.

“Mrs. Jackson is Denise!” I blurted out, and Mrs. Jackson with a smile on her face looked puzzled. “You were in my dream and you gave me that exact stone! You helped me through the Bus Boycotts in Boston and we bonded over a rock being thrown straight at me.”

Mrs. Jackson’s grin grew bigger and she laughed hysterically she simply said to me, “Wow, what a dream. I hope you learned just a snippet of your history.”

Mrs. Jackson said, “Everything always comes in a full circle and everything good comes from a stone cold past.”

## My Legs Were Exposed

Ashley Torres

It was a soothing night, cool breeze, and my ears are warm as always, my legs are exposed, it is the middle of October and during the day it is hot! I live on the third floor, each floor has a porch— isn't that nice! We get together on the porch, it is like our second living room. The porch is bigger than a king-sized bed! We fit, all of us fit! This is true, once we blew up a mattress in there. We wanted to look at the stars, or so we thought! In that same porch we play with our dolls; the dolls that are blonde with silky hair, blue eyes, tall and slim. The dolls that are not like ourselves, we are *prieta, pelo malo*, bodies of little women, *mucho cuerpo, culona* we are too much.

The bodies we are born with, the ones that make the neighbor from the second-floor porch watch us, the ones that receive constant unwanted stares. My friends and I are just playing with our dolls, but we feel that uncomfortable stare, ogling, the tall brown man that lived with the *blanquita*. The *blanquita* that look like our dolls, she has the blonde hair, the tall body. Unlike my body, I did not understand why it was being looked at, *prieta, pelo malo, mucho cuerpo, culona*. The dolls that were brought to this chains of islands made up first of Tainos, Negros, and then mulatos—they were not part of us! But hatred became a part of us, and we were made to feel the hatred. My mother hated her brown skin! But it is so smooth! Her beautiful curls, I wanted to play with her hair all day! Her body, I wanted to look like her! She is the most gorgeous person in my life, and I do look like her! But she hated that, she hated herself, she was worried you see! She worried because of the stares. The stares that were given by the neighbor, by the teacher, by my uncle, by my grandfather. Those stares that made her feel uncomfortable, they made us exist in constant distress. She knew that I would not be safe on that king-sized porch! The neighbor was next door, the teacher and uncles were too close...and my grandfather, he was evil. He, him, they, them, evil.

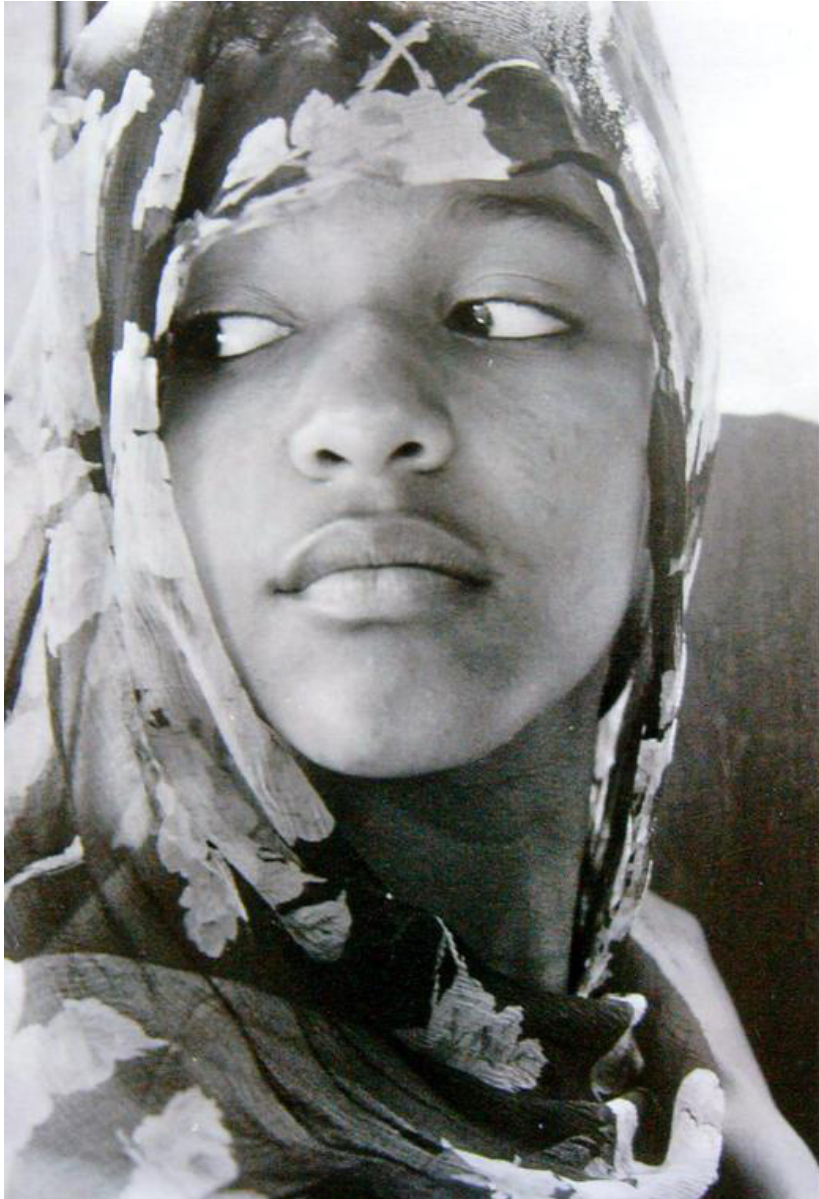
They were all evil in my mother's eyes, and I was distracted playing with the blonde silky hair, blue eyed, tall and slim dolls. While evil was distracted staring at me, a child, *prieta, pelo malo, mucho cuerpo, culona*...looking for stars. It was the middle of October, cool breeze, and my legs were exposed.

You see it was never my fault, nor my mother's or even my grandfather's, but the ones who brought those dolls with them and the ones before them, the ones that coercively brought us here, evil.



## Young Girl with Scarf

Elaine Happpie



## Ode to the President of Gin and Tonic

Tayla Bennett

Tanqueray and tonic he was drinking, a lot of them too, one in each hand as he let out a groan that he actually was, drunk. He stumbled around and somehow, somehow formed the sentence that sent shivers down my spine as his hot breath burnt me over and over, “Hey sweetie, can I have another?” he touched my lower back as i walked by with a tray of drinks for his buddies and a sweet smile that i have absolutely perfected, and i’ve been touched like this before by random guys in this bar because maybe i was overly flirty looking for my next tip to be bigger than the last, or maybe because these men left their ignorant wives at home, or maybe i invited them to do so by the way i was dressed in my long sleeve button up shirt and long pants and sneakers that had day old sauce caked on to them, or maybe because they took their rings off and thought maybe just maybe this would work on a young girl like me, but he whispered in my ear like he was telling me the access code to the oval office.

You Tanqueray and tonic secret service white guy, you drunk at a company christmas party, you beer belly whisperer ready to take her virginity, you already cut off dude at a bar, you don’t know when to check your privilege old man.

But i smiled and i bought you another—and another—and another—and i let you drive home, in hopes that some old man in a fast car had the chance to pull you over, in hopes that you had the chance to be violated against your will, in hopes that when he reads you your rights, his words turn your stomach like the key to the door of the white house. i hope that when he reads you your rights you remember reading that little black book and telling me gin, gin I want, squeeze a lime in there and make it strong, and i did just that. Strong enough to make a grown man like you stumble out of the front doors of this bar, strong enough to make you forget your taking up space, i’m strong enough to know you’re just another loud mouth, stain on your white collared shirt, left your wife at home, over-drinking gin and tonic hardass.

Oh, Tanqueray and tonic white guy, i hope you smile, and i really hope you think of me.

# Schizophrenia

Mia Bunker

Are you laughing at me or at the blank walls?  
I'm jealous that your voices get to accompany you  
I love our walks in the sanctuary, people stare and we laugh together.  
It's sad, you don't get much sleep, screams in your ear drums until they bleed  
you're crying and I have to clock out  
"What would you do if I offed myself?"  
that question replays like a broken record player in my brain all night  
lets go get some caffeine  
"WHY WONT YOU EVER LISTEN TO ME?!"  
she screamed down the hall  
you googled the word 'why' so many times  
how many voices can you hear, what do you see?  
Do you see me at all?  
You asked about my scars and I came to a blank  
I wish I could take your pain away  
I wonder what kinds of questions you're going to ask today,  
but I will never forget this one,  
"Will my voices ever go away?"

## Ode to a Green Mantle Clock

Ann Doyle

Do you dream of the days  
surrounded by framed photos,  
crystal candle holders,  
and porcelain statues of fancy ladies?

Today you sit atop a bookcase  
stuffed with poetry and novels.  
Are you disgusted by the dust?  
Do you long for lemon polish?

## The Old Man Who Lives Downstairs

Ann Doyle

He sits  
beside his pile of dusty dreams,  
losing lottery tickets  
and lousy ideas  
in a musty, airless room

Suicidal strips  
of crispy wallpaper  
curl up, then float  
to the floor  
they cause crunchy sounds  
under the old man's slippers

Wife number two  
called herself Crystal  
and danced for dollar bills  
in a dirty downtown dive  
she said the thinness of his lips  
was a certain sign of stinginess

But her eyes were always  
larger than his wallet  
She swore he had no blood  
because his veins were full of venom

She left him for a circus clown  
who thought he was an astronaut  
she lunches on regret,  
ceaseless sorrow  
and long, sad cigarettes

Under the big brass bed  
in a room he never enters  
lies an old duffel bag  
bulging with bad decisions  
and broken promises

Sometimes, in the dead of night,  
the bag twitches  
and hazy harebrained schemes  
hold hands with long dead relatives  
and creep across the room  
to shake and startle the old man  
who swallows a soundless scream

He has two children  
born to wife number one  
whose middle name was Alice  
He keeps a cup of sarcasm  
next to his telephone  
just in case they call

He dines on carbohydrates  
with several long, loose teeth  
A stomach full of acid  
keeps him from lying flat  
And so he sits up  
all night long  
in his Lazy-Boy recliner

Millie, who lives across the hall  
thinks he needs a hug  
but she can never  
get her skinny arms  
around his heavy coat of anger

Convinced that she can fix him,  
she finds his rudeness charming  
She brings him heaping plates of food,  
bright hopeful smiles  
and tiny nips of whiskey

The old man sneers at her  
and gobbles up her dinners

## Praying

Ann Doyle

Mother marched me off to Mass  
every Sunday morning  
She was single-minded  
in her pursuit  
to make me holy  
...it didn't take

I studied stain glass windows  
checked out church ladies  
hats, hair, and shirtwaist dresses  
And then  
I would pretend  
I owned the church

And decide to put my chef's kitchen  
in the front and  
use the altar as a workstation  
My room would be up  
in the balcony  
with a canopy bed  
and my office space  
in the sacristy

When Mother peeked at me  
I'd put my fake praying face on  
and study pastel saints  
painted on the ceiling

I bowed my head  
I folded my hands  
I read about miracles  
but I couldn't conjure up  
this being called god

I pleaded for a sign  
sent messages to saints  
and angels  
...but there was no reply

I knelt in church and  
thought about Jesus and his parents and all the saints  
And martyrs  
but the jelly donut waiting  
in the pantry  
was heavy on my mind

And to be perfectly honest,  
the idea of  
two men plus a ghost  
in one body  
scared the crap  
out of me

When I learned  
there were thousands  
of gods  
I tried a few others  
I prayed to YHWH,  
the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob  
I prayed to Aengus, the god  
of love, and poetic inspiration  
I prayed to Apollo,  
and Caerus  
the god of opportunity, luck,  
and favorable moments  
Still...no answers

That's not to say  
I do not pray today  
I pray to the  
stark loneliness  
of brown tree branches  
reaching up  
to touch  
a white winter sky



I pray to birds,  
chubby babies  
and senile ladies  
I pray to  
the fierce love  
of silver-haired  
grandmothers and  
golden dogs  
with fat brown eyes

Sometimes I pray for  
supermarket eggnog,  
or for a long train trip  
with a window seat and  
a glass of good red wine

listening to lazy, bluesy jazz  
is my favorite kind of prayer

## Red Bricks

Ann Doyle

B Street South Boston - 1956

I lie belly down  
on a hot summer sidewalk  
to study black ants  
who go about their busy lives  
oblivious to careless shoes  
black bicycle wheels  
and bouncing balls

Like Roy Rogers  
and the Lone Ranger  
we wave toy guns  
and tear through miles  
of red brick courtyards

We spread green army blankets  
on gray cement steps  
to play with plastic dolls  
with pink painted cheeks  
and empty glass eyes

Penny candy, popsicles  
and salty pickle juice  
stain our stubby fingers  
and coat our sticky chins

I pause to stare  
at fat pink worms  
who float in filthy puddles

No trace of green survives  
in this red brick world  
where crows keep watch  
upon the roof  
and pigeons coo  
on narrow window sills

We pray for crisp new coloring books  
and brand new crayons  
for one more chance  
to stay between the lines

The Watermark

**ಅದಿಮ: Lifelong**  
Savitha Rajamani



## Abuelita

Grace Furtado

The woman that taught me  
Cómo hablar el espanol  
Como ponerle velas y frutas a los santos  
Como freir un huevo a los cuatro años  
Como crecer plantas en la cocina  
Cómo mantener una casa llena de abundancia  
The woman that was  
Llena de amor hacia mi  
Llena de remedios cuando me enfermaba  
Llena de advertencias para evitar desgracias  
Llena de tristeza y un silencio guardado  
Llena de luz  
The woman that showed me  
Que no hay otra opción solo seguir adelante  
Que la mujer es vencedora  
Que hasta el más cercano ser querido es un traicionero  
Que ser realista suaviza los golpes de la vida  
Que la muerte es solo un transporte temporario  
Aprendi—  
I learned—  
Me transforme—  
I became—  
Su espíritu lo llevo adentro—  
I continue her legacy.

## E.) None of the Above

Briana Henriquez

Let's say I give you Twizzlers all the time. You're not really sure why I'm giving you Twizzlers but I seem so glad to give them to you, you feel like it would be rude to refuse them. Anyway, it's not like you particularly hate Twizzlers, so you eat them, or maybe sometimes you throw them away. But I just keep giving you Twizzlers, and it's starting to feel like I want some Twizzlers too.

Maybe one day I ask you for a Twizzler. You don't know what to say, you don't have any Twizzlers! You don't carry them; you weren't aware you were supposed to. In fact, you don't even like them so why would you buy them? You tell me so, maybe jokingly, but I'm totally shocked.

"What do you mean you don't have any Twizzlers? Everyone has Twizzlers! How can you not like Twizzlers?"

My response bewilders you; you didn't know people actually liked Twizzlers! Is that why I was giving them to you? Were you supposed to be enjoying those Twizzlers? Was this supposed to be some kind of exchange? But you still don't have any Twizzlers and you still don't like them very much, so what can you do? I seem upset that you don't like Twizzlers but you can't understand what there is to be upset about; they're just Twizzlers, right?

"Listen," your mom says, patting your hand soothingly. "Are you sure you're alright? People *need* Twizzlers. I'm just worried you won't be happy if you don't get some Twizzlers soon."

Sometimes you get side-eyed and people say, "Look, this isn't the Regency Era. You don't have to pretend to hate Twizzlers anymore. Own your love for Twizzlers!"

"Don't you mean you just don't like strawberry Twizzlers? It's okay to like other kinds of Twizzlers."

Or maybe, with a wink and a nudge, "What about *this* Twizzler? I bet you're ready to gobble that one up right? Huh? Huh?"

Others are more demanding. "How can you say that? You haven't even tried any Twizzlers. Your opinion isn't valid."

"I bet *I* could make you like Twizzlers."

"What are you afraid of?"

But alas, all Twizzlers are just Twizzlers to you. You can choke them down all you want but you'll never love or even like Twizzlers.

"That's *unnatural*," they finally pronounce. And it makes you feel a little less than human.

# Baptism

Sarah DeNardo

needle,  
past the rain-cloud  
a Christmas miracle  
for a body at war

She kisses the skin with another  
bruises trickling down her sides  
with itself.

You will be her savior  
always

until

you refuse that tea party

she says no  
to HotWheels.

You, are the crack splitting her wall.

She is the hand around  
your throat.

You were

pushing your pieces together

once

twice

too often  
you question

You ache  
you hide  
your sin

```

for
hide

```

for being saved  
by you.

she does not answer.  
her refuge, rescue  
hide  
she bears

## Marlboro

Anonymous

*Inspired by "Cigarettes" by Noah Gundersen.*

I watch her use you like a crutch  
She takes a drag when she needs it  
You look so good  
Your smoke encases her like a warm blanket  
And then she quits you  
Slow but then all at once  
She leaves you in the ashtray  
Hoping that no one ever picks you up the way she did

*But honey you're smooth...*

I pick you up, still a fire inside you  
She can't see the life still inside you  
I breathe into you, igniting you again  
You consume me all at once

*The way you kiss me, with your filter breath*

I find my fire in you  
Your tobacco flavored love pulls me in  
But you're just a stub with nothing left to give  
So I have to let you go

*And I can carry on fine without you*

I was alive before you  
You are an ever present thought, that I cannot hold forever  
Craving you kills me almost as much as you do  
I want more than this

*There's something after you...*



# Untitled

Michaela McMillan

*Inspired by "The Body" by Stephen King*

That summer was a kind of angry hot  
The kind that leaves sweat stains of t shirts and melts bubblegum on asphalt and makes it stick to  
your shoes  
That summer stole innocences mixed with girlhoods that ended too soon  
It was a terrible, beautiful one.

The kind that leaves sweat stains of t shirts and melts bubblegum on asphalt and makes it stick to  
your shoes  
But it still beats wooden desks covered in arithmetic  
It was a terrible, beautiful one  
That summer was the one you could never forget, even if you wanted to.

That summer still beat wooden desks covered in arithmetic  
Still, it kissed goodbye things we never knew we could lose.  
That summer was the one you could never forget, even if you wanted to.  
That was the heat that made us them.

The Watermark

## Girlhood

Michaela McMillan



# It Never Stops: Buffy the Vampire Slayer as a (Personal) Allegory for Living with Mental Illness

Sarah Duncan

I have never saved the world. I have never dated a vampire. Never lived on a literal Hellmouth, never blown up giant snakes or blue-tinged judges, never been turned into a rat, never battled giant praying mantises, evil Halloween costumes, ghosts, zombies, secret government initiatives (well, yet...), hellgods and minions, or even the evil nerdy trio of white men playing at power (well, yet...). I've never been literally invisible. I don't have prophetic dreams. I am not chosen, out of the whole world, to fight demons until I die. I think I'd be pretty bad at roundhouse kicks.

But I do know about battle.

When I was eleven or twelve years old, I had my first intrusive thoughts, a symptom associated with many mental illnesses but predominantly (in my understanding) associated with obsessive compulsive disorder.

I was at a Christian summer camp. I began, out of what felt like nowhere, to have ping-pong thoughts regarding whether or not...I loved the devil. Yeah, red creature, horns, feeds apples to people? That guy. I became *sincerely afraid* that I *loved* him.

I don't, in fact, love the devil. Mostly because I don't *believe* in the literal devil. But reality doesn't matter to OCD-Intrusive Thoughts. And at eleven or twelve years old, I believed in pretty much most things, ranging from the big bad evil devil to heaven to tiny tiny fairies to Santa Claus to the Easter Bunny.

I couldn't get rid of these thoughts.

But I tried, diligently. I fought with every thought that repetitively hijacked my mind and my ability to be present in my experiences and with those who loved me. And I would fight those thoughts the only way I knew how at the time—by arguing with them, emphatically, in my adolescent brain. *I do not love the devil*, I would hissingly insist back at myself. *Oh yeah?* my intrusive thoughts would counter, ever the professional debater. *Yeah!* I'd shoot back. *How do you KNOW?* It was like throwing a tennis ball at a wall. Bounce back. Thought, react.

Years later, I would learn that this method is the exact opposite of what is taught in the therapy (usually exposure therapy) geared towards treating OCD-Intrusive Thoughts. In my own personal experience, the best thing I can do to live with my intrusive thoughts is a combination of medication and ignoring them as much as feasibly possible. And how much this is feasibly possible, and how much the medicine works, varies day by day, month by month, year by year.

The content of *my* intrusive thoughts (and many other people's) ranges all over the map, but the core of their content is an obsession with ways in which I might be inherently bad as a person. Ultimately, there is a part of me that, like a dog with a bone, must always be chewing on a worry about my inherent badness. This is a constant presence in my life, even when it's on the back burner.

In addition to always chewing on potentials for badness, early on in my OCD years, I obsessively (and compulsively) verbally confessed what I feared were my sins, defects, or ways in which

I was bad or unlovable. I couldn't just sit and worry on my own. Oh, no. I had to share the fears aloud.

*Mom, I'd say, I'm afraid that I love the devil. Mom, I'm afraid that I might have stolen something from Pastor Such & Such's office and then forgotten I did it. Mom, I'm afraid that because I ripped my hot lunch ticket in half so that my friend could get a lunch too that I am a terrible, horrible thief. [Baby Sarah didn't understand capitalist bullshit yet.] And I had to hear back, You're okay. And I love you. And I forgive you.*

Over my thirty-one years of life, I have been in and out of therapy. I have been off and on medicine. In addition to my OCD-Intrusive Thoughts, I also live with depression, CPTSD, fibromyalgia, and a chronic stomach illness. Sometimes, my intrusive thoughts are extremely disturbing. Sometimes, I become panicked, afraid that I'm going to hurt someone I love—or worse, that I hurt someone in the past and that I've forgotten about it. Sometimes I even stay home from events or away from people I care about because of these fears. Sometimes, when I'm physically intimate with someone, I have so many intrusive thoughts that I have to leave. Sometimes, I have such bad shame spirals that I cry all of my energy out all over the floor. Sometimes, my physical illnesses are so debilitating I can eat no more than rice, white meat, and water. Sometimes my legs hurt when I walk, or when I rest, with no explanation. Sometimes I can't think or remember things, until I can. Sometimes I'm so exhausted movement is a triumph. I'm sick.

A lot.

However, in many ways, I am much better, and far more equipped with tools, than I was at ages eleven and twelve, even at age twenty-two. I embrace my multitudes (heyyy Walt Whitman). I fight internal and external stigma. I fight sexist doctors (remind me to tell you about the time I yelled at an anesthesiologist). I make kickass mad pride playlists.

And still, on many days, I am still that same small girl, sitting at the edge of her large bed, asking herself over and over and over, “What if it's my fault? What if it's because I am bad? What if I am unforgivably bad?”

And yeah. It's a total bummer.

But I am not alone in this.

Simply googling OCD and intrusive thoughts brings up countless message boards, counselors, groups, and books. I have the most supportive platonic life partner in this world, and I have incredible friends and connections, offline and on. I am grateful for all of the community that has found me, that I have built with others and vice versa. I am grateful for my family. I am grateful that my Mom wasn't upset that I thought I might love the devil (thanks Mom).

Despite all of this, at my sickest, I still feel painfully, even confusingly, alone. I feel a bone-deep exhaustion from constant fighting. This mental illness feels like a job I didn't apply for, but now, I can't quit.

Fighting, in my situation, doesn't look like patrolling cemeteries or doing cool flying kicks like Buffy does every, single, episode. Fighting, in my situation, means endless doctors' appointments, often with new doctors whom I have to explain my whole history to, who have at times reacted with stigmatizing and/or dismissive questions or statements. Fighting means multiple payment plans for medical bills, and working to find therapists in my insurance network (when I have insurance) that specialize in OCD and trauma. It means dealing with a feeling of perpetual fear and hypervigilance, balancing days of self-sabotage, shame, and self-hatred with days of thriving and balance. Fighting looks like wanting to isolate but knowing I need others, and trying to figure out the balance of alone time with people time. Fighting looks like finding good ways to distract myself that don't depress me

(or bankrupt me—sadly, thrift store shopping isn’t a sustainable distraction). Fighting looks like trying to figure out how to navigate my illnesses in relationships of all kinds. How to navigate the toxic shame I feel around my needs for affirmation, attention, understanding. Fighting looks like navigating restrictive diets and medication regimens. Fighting looks like shooing away thoughts. Staking them, even. Turning them to dust.

Like Buffy Summers.

Hear me out: Mine are *Intrusive Thought Vampires*. *Shame Vampires*. *Medical-Industrial Complex Vampires*. *Mental Illness Stigma Vampires*. They also suck. Maybe they even suck more, because they’re actually real.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a show with a seemingly “normal” girl who is thrust into a life where she has to deal, every minute of every day, with extraordinary circumstances. And here’s the thing: a lot of time, she hates it. She tries to quit in season 1. In season 2, she runs away. In season 5, she goes catatonic. In season 6, she spends most of the season in a serious depression. In season 7, in a moment of feeling profound failure, she quits one more time.

*It never stops*, Buffy tells her Mom once she’s “come out” as a vampire slayer. *Do—do you think I chose to be like this? Do you have any idea how lonely it is?* She wants to be normal—she tells anyone who will listen. A normal girl with a normal life.

I want that too. *If only I could be normal*, I’ve thought before. Regardless of how much I know that “normal” is a constructed and often violent lie that robs people of their humanity, I feel the ache for the serenity other people seem to have, even if they don’t.

And Buffy aches. But she also acts. When Buffy isn’t giving up, or lamenting her situation, she manages to find attachment to, and strength in, her identity as the slayer despite the pain, misery, detachment, and literal psychological and physical harm it brings. She moves forward.

Because she has to.

Because this battle, this job, will be part of her whole life. She can’t wish it away. Quitting, and even dying, doesn’t get her out of anything, either.

*Have you tried not being the slayer?* her mother, Joyce, asks her in the same coming out episode of season 2, titled “Becoming: Part II.” She has tried. She didn’t succeed. She can’t be anything but the slayer. She has to reckon with it.

It’s not a perfect allegory. But it works.

When I first watched *Buffy*, I was figuring out my queer identity, and I became fixated with Willow and Tara. The next few times I watched the series, I began to identify with Buffy herself.

For now, when I watch the show twenty years after it aired, I see my experiences in Buffy’s experiences. I see her, someone exhausted by both the pain of the world and her own pain. I see someone who never gets to rest, even when she really, really wants to or really, really needs it. I see someone who fights demons in order to save other people, to maintain a certain equilibrium in little old Sunnydale, while also trying to manage her relationships, chores and roles, and schoolwork. I see someone who struggles to “have her life” and to also do what has been designated as her work that she cannot escape, which in her case is vampire fighting. I see someone who struggles to let her friends help her, even when they clearly should, even when they’re smarter or more talented than she is, even when they only want to stand by her side. Often, Buffy swings between desperately needing support and keeping her friends at bay because she tells them they don’t understand. She wants to connect, and she wants to isolate. She’s scared. Often, Buffy becomes self-absorbed in the struggle of her identity, in her

daily battle to (literally) exist and to work hard not to hurt people she loves either herself or through letting something (or, like, a literal monster) slip. Buffy's life is the definition of constant vigilance, but that doesn't mean she is always successful. She fails...a lot. She hurts people she loves. She loses people she loves. She might be self-absorbed (which is often the criticism lobbied against her) but she also knows it, fights it, loves profoundly, if imperfectly. She wants to do better. She has a lot of pain. She doubts herself. She has surges of confidence and ferocity and righteousness. She can feel utterly worthless. She can feel judged and misunderstood. She fiercely advocates for others. She gets lost in herself. She tries to make right. She tries to make good. She grows, and falters, and grows more. She literally dies twice, and she literally keeps coming back, to continue to grapple with her life and the world alongside the people she loves most.

It bears repeating: she never gets to rest.

And that, ultimately, is my experience of my mental and chronic illnesses.

I never get to rest. Even if I distract myself from my intrusive thoughts, even if I have a stretch of good days or weeks after a terrible bout of depression, the downslides are always around the corner. And behind them are the upswings. It's a circle. Something is always coming, often from within me; and something is always going, often from within me.

And so I stay alert. And so I stay appreciative of watching Buffy circle, too. I watch her persevere, and I watch her fail. Her growth isn't guaranteed or linear. And yet, she always picks up her sword, her stake, her rocket launchers...digs her way out of a coffin...finds her way to her friends.

No matter what, no matter her flaws or her situations, Buffy simply...continues.

It doesn't matter that it was a TV show, literally scripted to continue. It doesn't matter that she's a fictional character. Symbols are symbols. Like Paulo Freire tells us in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, we name our world, and we must name it for this is how we find connection and make meaning.

And here's mine: watching Buffy *simply continue* is the best manual I have ever been given to do the same.

Buffy continues, ultimately, because she wants her life, even with its hardship, even with its anomaly, even with its pain and exhaustion. Even at her worst, even when she thinks she doesn't, she does.

And I want mine.

Hell, I want to help "save the world," too. I want to be well enough to enjoy drinking good iced coffee with cinnamon in it. To write letters to loved ones. To get through my master's at UMass. To teach classes to students I care about. To watch videos of my friend-niece sing funny songs to herself. To put on glitter eyeliner and read my poetry at open mics. To kiss people, soft and slow. To feel clearheaded enough to do community organizing.

I want my life.

So if you need me, I'll be over here.

Continuing.

## **The Breakup**

Mia Bunker

I tore up the dirty carpet in a manic rage. When I moved back home, change. Plywood was the new change, a blue book case, a pop summer playlist. My outbursts of tears dried up as the hot days went by; I was content when I could safely accept a passing moment of clarity. Before I went to sleep, I smiled knowing I got through another day of heartache sober.

Blueberries warmed by the July sun spread across the field, I ate them. I didn't care if they were poisonous or not, I just wanted a taste of nature's candy. I ran through the tall wheat grass as fast as the bees chased me—I am the only one here. Twilight skies hovered above, finally I am content with being alone. Once you reach this stage, you will find peace and comfort. Don't be afraid of the darkness, as it turns to light faster than expected.



The Watermark

## Peace in the World for All

Islam Turyatunga







## Halloween '84 Nonlinear

Mia Bunker

July, 1984

I decided to move here when things got too out of control with my mother. I grew up in Oslo. Their education system drilled English into our heads since we could make coherent sentences. I thought it was bullshit, since I never planned on moving here in the first place. I always had an interest in the arts; all of my art teachers had a gift. They pushed me in every creative direction possible, continuously spilling out my imagination on canvas and mixed media papers. The most repulsive drawing I ever produced was a red headed woman, naked, with octopus tentacles struggling to come out of her. No idea where that idea came from, it just happened. My friends adored it, the adults hated it. After I graduated from high school I knew I wanted to become an art teacher. I had a strong desire to help young artists channel their passions and rages into various art forms.

I lived at home with my mother all through college; it was cheaper that way. I always anticipated on finding crushed-up wine boxes and Parliament packs in the most random spots throughout the house. Under the couch, between the couch cushions, even the bathroom door hanger that holds seven of the same shampoo bottles with varying portions inside. Mom was like that. The woman couldn't handle her liquor—she knew it too. Her husband also knew it, but kept his mouth shut. It was a silent-elephant-in-the-room kind of situation. We all knew she had a problem, but no one confronted it anymore. She would go down these dark spells when we tried to intervene, but it only made the nightmare worse. Sometimes her husband would play mind tricks with her and move the bottle around the room. When she couldn't find it, she would scream and demand him to go out and get more. Moments of painful silence would pass by, standing in the doorway saying nothing. She'd get more angry. Eventually she would fall asleep.

After I graduated, I knew I had to leave. It was harder for me to stay and watch her dig her own grave. She's her husband's problem now. We were never that close to begin with; after all it's only a blood relationship. Just because she's my biological mother doesn't mean I have to be loyal to her. I had been stirring up this fantasy in my head to move to the States. I already spoke English fairly well; what's the worst that could happen? I pulled out an old map from the attic, closed my eyes and lightly dragged my index finger in swirl-like motions along the map. It felt like my hand's compass started to develop a mind of its own, similar to a Ouija board. My hand stopped abruptly, I opened my eyes and my finger was resting on the state of Oregon.

I didn't know too much about Oregon, except for the fact that it was a coastal state and there was lush greenery in every direction. I was more than okay with both of these, I always dreamed of living in a place like that. After I got everything figured out in terms of passports, citizenship, how to actually move your shit on a plane, I was ready to begin my next chapter. I tried to lighten the load as much as possible, keep it to the bare minimum. Oil paints, old brushes, shoes, my record collection, art therapy books, and my little pouch of worry dolls. I stood in the doorway of my hollowed-out bedroom. So much heartache, brilliant creations, and one-night stands had happened in this room. A

quick teardrop splashed on the hardwood floor. I knew my flight was in a few hours; I stepped into my mother's room and she was asleep. It was half past two in the afternoon. I didn't bother to wake her; she knew I was leaving.

I had a layover in Boston. Cyndi Lauper had been on tour, and all of her fans were gathered at Logan airport. What a spunky young woman; it warmed my heart to know we were in the same city. Fangirls screamed. There were so many hairspray fumes I could hardly breathe. I had about four hours until my flight to Portland. I decided to stop at an airport bar and treat myself to a drink. This was a time to celebrate, of course—I was starting my new life! I ordered a cosmopolitan. My cherry-red lipstick imprinted perfectly on the martini glass. I pulled out my copy of *The Scarlet Letter*; I had a thing for old British novels. I sat there for about fifteen minutes, and then a young man sat next to me. He looked about my age, dark hair, the bluest eyes you ever saw. We looked at each other, and that was it. The attraction could be cut in the air with a knife. For a while we didn't even say anything; we didn't want to ruin this silent attraction we knew we were both feeling. Finally he asked me where I was heading. "Portland. I'm from Oslo originally—I decided to start a new life here in the States."

"That's a wise choice, my lady. Staying in one spot for too long can torment the soul."

"I'm glad someone else sees it that way. Gives me confidence in my decision."

"I'm heading back to my hometown, Santa Barbara."

"California, right? I hear it's gorgeous there!"

"Not as gorgeous as you, miss, uh I'm sorry I didn't catch your name?"

"Elise, and you?"

"Name's Jeff. I hate to leave you but my flight is boarding in about twenty minutes."

We finished up our drinks and ran around the airport trying to find a family stall bathroom. We laughed and locked fingers the whole way. As soon as he locked the door, he lifted me up on the marble sink and I locked my legs around his waist. I'd chosen the perfect day to wear my sundress. Spontaneous quickies in airport bathrooms with devilishly handsome strangers only come by once in a while. Take advantage of the opportunity when you have it, if you want it that is.

I stepped onto the plane a bit tipsy, happier than I'd ever been in years. The stewardess greeted me with a bright smile. As soon as I found my seat, she served me a sparkling water with a bag of pretzels. I opened my book, a few minutes later I was fast asleep.

I woke up with my head resting on an older woman who was asleep. We were landing; I could feel the sharp pains in my ears. I was jumping out of my skin excited. I was imagining what my first day would be like teaching at Blackwood High School. I don't know why, but I had a strange feeling when I woke up. All I could remember was dreaming about a train ride, and I had been on it for years. I couldn't decide whether or not to get on or off, or if it was even an option. I saw these teenage girls with twisted looks of confusion and sorrow. One of them had a black figure hovering over her, like it was waiting to take her soul.

**post script for a break up, or, i hate how  
formal yr emails are**

Sarah Duncan

because they're like plastic flowers on a gravestone:  
aesthetics, nothing else! the petals don't even smell  
or  
because it's like a shish kabobing puncture of my organs  
on a sunny day in my sunday best, dyke vest  
now stained  
and your hand previously held the skewer  
points one finger at my mouth and orders me to Smile!  
woe  
to those email niceties, stiff as a corpse  
between once-lovers:  
oh former dearest, don't.  
i would so rather we scream at each other

## Sorry I Left Your Birthday Party

Sarah Duncan

I had to leave the room  
full of over pixelated faces, mouths mouthing  
that I would never see them again. Look. What makes a stranger?  
Different than a lover? A friend? When they leave and don't return,  
pocketing all the shared hours? Look, I don't want to miss them.  
Look, I don't want to miss you. So, let me plug time like a drain,  
watch the water still, triumphant. Nothing  
moves, but then, nothing moves. Look,  
I had to leave the room.  
I was feeling my body decay underneath itself, the earth  
stroking the bottom of my feet with soft reminders. Clocks shouting,  
as anyone would to someone  
walking on train tracks with their headphones in,  
*Look!* which is to say,  
*Stop!*, which is to say, *run!*

## **My Own Worst Enemy**

Anonymous

She speaks and screams and points to all my faults  
And when she's done she looks with hateful eyes  
I try my best to combat these assaults  
But all the words I speak to her are lies.  
I tell her that she's beautiful and smart  
I tell her that I will not leave again  
I tell her that she lives within my heart  
I tell her that I want to be her friend.  
But then I go and sabotage my vows,  
Betray my words and give myself away  
The fears and insecurities of now  
The painful realizations of today.  
    She wants for me to put away the shame  
    She wants for me to call her by my name.

## I Wish I Were a Tumbleweed

ನಾನು ಅಲುಗಾಗಿದ್ದರೆ ಎಷ್ಟು ಚೆನ್ನ!

Savitha Rajamani

I wish I were a Tumbleweed

With no attachments to stick onto.  
To spread the seeds elsewhere.  
Anywhere.  
To spread—  
The seeds of love  
The seeds of freedom  
The seeds of resistance...

I wish I were a Tumbleweed

With no emotions to give and take  
To find myself in all those  
Who are not me  
Who were not born with me  
Who do not share my genes  
But in all those who share  
My thoughts  
My feelings  
My presence

I wish I were a Tumbleweed

Call me an opportunist  
It doesn't matter.  
What matters is—  
The world inside Me  
Me inside the world,

I wish I were a Tumbleweed

Detaching myself from the stem I grew up in.  
Finding roots of my roots...

ನಾನು ಅಲುಗಾಗಿದ್ದರೆ ಎಷ್ಟು ಚೆನ್ನ!

ಬಂಧಮುಕ್ತಳಾಗಿ  
ನನ್ನ ಬಿತ್ತಗಳನ್ನು ಬೇರೆಡೆಯಲ್ಲಿ,  
ಎಲ್ಲಿಯಾದರೂ ಸರಿ,  
ಹಂಚಲು...  
ಪ್ರೀತಿಯ ಬಿತ್ತಗಳು  
ಸ್ವಾತಂತ್ರ್ಯದ ಬಿತ್ತಗಳು  
ಸ್ವಾಭಿಮಾನದ ಬಿತ್ತಗಳು  
ಪ್ರತಿರೋಧದ ಬಿತ್ತಗಳು

ನಾನು ಅಲುಗಾಗಿದ್ದರೆ ಎಷ್ಟು ಚೆನ್ನ!

ನನ್ನನ್ನು ನಾನು ಕಂಡುಕೊಳ್ಳಲು  
ನಾನಲ್ಲದವರಲ್ಲಿ  
ನನ್ನವರಲ್ಲದವರಲ್ಲಿ  
ಕೊಟ್ಟು ಕೊಳ್ಳಲು ಯಾವುದೇ ಭಾವನೆಗಳಿಲ್ಲದವರಲ್ಲಿ  
ನನ್ನ ಒಡಹುಟ್ಟಿದವರಲ್ಲಿ  
ನನ್ನ ಬಂಧುಗಳಿಲ್ಲದವರಲ್ಲಿ  
ಅದರೆ...  
ನನ್ನ ಆಲೋಚನೆಗಳನ್ನು  
ನನ್ನ ಸ್ವಾಭಿಮಾನದ ಕಿಚ್ಚನ್ನು

ನನ್ನ ಉಪಸ್ಥಿತಿಯನ್ನು  
ಹಂಚಿಕೊಳ್ಳುವವರಲ್ಲಿ, ನನ್ನನ್ನು ನಾನು ಕಂಡುಕೊಳ್ಳಲು.

ನಾನು ಅಲುಗಾಗಿದ್ದರೆ ಎಷ್ಟು ಚೆನ್ನ!

ಅವಕಾಶವಾದಿಯೆಂದೆನ್ನಿ,  
ಚಿಂತೆಯಿಲ್ಲ.  
ನಾನು ಚಿಂತಿಸುವುದು,  
ನನ್ನ ಒಳಹೊರಗಿನ ಜಗತ್ತನ್ನು ಕುರಿತು.  
ಅಷ್ಟೇ!

I wish I were a Tumbleweed  
To be carried away by the wind  
The wind of struggle  
The wind of fight  
The wind of liberation

I wish I were a Tumbleweed  
To disappear from this world  
Disappear  
As my seeds are deep-rooted  
In the soil of one's mind  
To grow and spread more  
Tumbleweeds  
Like me...

I wish I were a Tumbleweed...

ನಾನು ಅಲುಗಾಗಿದ್ದರೆ ಎಷ್ಟು ಚೆನ್ನ!  
ಬೆಳೆದ ಕಾಂಡದಿಂದ ಕಿಂಚಿತ್ತೂ ನೋವಿಲ್ಲದೆ,  
ಬೇರ್ಪಟ್ಟು,  
ನನ್ನ ಬೇರುಗಳ ಬೇರುಗಳನ್ನು ಹುಡುಕಲು.

ನಾನು ಅಲುಗಾಗಿದ್ದರೆ ಎಷ್ಟು ಚೆನ್ನ!  
ಕೊಂಡೊಯ್ಯುತ್ತಿತ್ತು ನನ್ನನ್ನು  
ಗಾಳಿ!  
ಹೋರಾಟದ ಗಾಳಿ  
ಕದನದ ಗಾಳಿ  
ವಿಮೋಚನೆಯ ಗಾಳಿ

ನಾನು ಅಲುಗಾಗಿದ್ದರೆ ಎಷ್ಟು ಚೆನ್ನ!  
ಈ ಪ್ರಪಂಚದಿಂದ ಕಾಣದಂತೆ  
ಕಣ್ಮರೆಯಾಗಲು...  
ನನ್ನ ಬಿತ್ತಿಗಳು ಆಳವಾಗಿ  
ಯಾರದೋ ಅರಿವಿನ ಮಣ್ಣಿನಲ್ಲಿ  
ಹೂತು,  
ಬೇರೂರಿ, ಬೆಳೆದು,  
ನನ್ನಂತೆಯೇ ಅಲುಗಾಗಲು...

ನಾನು ಅಲುಗಾಗಿದ್ದರೆ ಎಷ್ಟು ಚೆನ್ನ!

-ಸವಿತಾ



## ಅಜೀವಕ: The Beginning

Savitha Rajamani



## Hence Those Tears

Taleisha Tomaso

Maybe tomorrow I will figure out how she left and stayed in my heart, both at once. I have a thousand words for her to hear, but I don't feel like saying them anymore. I loved her, more than I have ever loved another human being. But no, I still love her—I will always love her, but I know she won't be coming back. Hence those tears that continue to fall off my face into the cold pillow where her head used to lie.

She knew, but I didn't. She cried for joy, but then I for sorrow. She sometimes believed that she could stick it out with me. Sometimes I believed it too. I thought she would always be in my life. She knew if she didn't leave now, she might never have the chance again. She took that chance, and now I sit here in silence. I cry in silence, I miss her in silence. The memories of her are all I have. These token moments, that is all she left me with.

She left me alone. She chose to take my heart, my heart that I gave all for her, and throw it back at me. She didn't want it anymore, and she ran away with her heart in her hands, but with mine on the ground, bleeding out and left to die.

We had just left the hospital a few hours earlier. I was driving home, trying to focus through the whipping of the wipers washing away the downpouring rain; I could barely see. The only noise was the pit-pattering of the rain, and the wipers sloshing back and forth. I tried to keep my eyes on the road, but I kept sneaking glances at my wife. She hadn't really responded at the emergency room, and I honestly thought she was just waiting to get home to break down.

She just looked so...oddly blank. There wasn't any emotion in her eyes. She just, well, she just sat there, staring straight ahead. Her whole body screamed that she was uncomfortable. She had her arms crossed against her, almost clutching at her ribs. Her knees were bent, and her toes were curled up on the edge of the seat. She seemed as if she were trying to cover her torso, almost in what I thought was shame. I could see a faint twitch of her eye, and I drew my gaze down to her clenched jaw. She noticed I was watching her, and her eyes met mine, and then I could see everything. I saw the pain in her eyes, the edges brimming with tears. I got a sad smile, a shake of the head, and she leaned against the window. With a quiet *sigh* all the tension she was holding was released. Her breath ghosted onto the glass. I directed my eyes back to the road; it would be best to just let her be. A sense of optimism still echoed somewhere inside of me, the future still held opportunities for us. With time she would heal. I knew it would be emotionally difficult for her to move past this incident. I thought we were going to make it through this.

Slowly I pulled into our driveway and crept the car into the garage, shielding us from the storm. I got out of the car and went around to open her door. I offered her my hand and she grasped onto it. She carefully stepped out of the car.

I grabbed the bag from the hospital on the floor, not forgetting the folder, trying my best to hide the bag from her gaze. I didn't want to look in it any more than I had to, but I promised her I would put them in the laundry. That was just so her, not wanting to throw anything away that couldn't

be fixed. She was just that type of person, didn't ever believe in the phrase "lost cause." I heard her mention she was going to go take a long shower and I decided to go take care of the clothing. I knew she needed to be left alone; I thought she would be okay.

I could hear the water running through the pipes as soon as I entered the laundry room. I tossed the plastic bag on top of the dryer. Steadying myself on the washer, I bent down my head and tried to prepare myself.

*Inhale, exhale. Imnahle, exxxhale. Inhale, exhale.*

The plastic wasn't transparent, but it still wasn't opaque to cover the stains inside. They looked ugly, they weren't the right color, but I didn't really know if it would make any difference. I knew what was waiting inside. Holding my breath in anticipation of the smell, I ripped the knotted handles apart.

The dull, pungent smell of fresh blood flooded my nose. It was just as bad as it was when we got to the hospital, and leaving it to sit and cure hadn't helped at all. The worst garment was her pants. They were completely soaked in blood. I didn't even know if cleaning would help or if they were too stained to save. Disgusted, I disposed of them in the washer; she would at least want me to try. I emptied the bag, dumping the rest of the clothes on top of the pants. Pouring in the detergent and closing the top, I set the wash on cold, and with a final click the water began to rush into the machine. Looking back at the mess I had left from the damp clothes, I grabbed the paper towels from the top shelf and wiped the blood off. I grabbed a few more sheets to try and clean off my hands, covered in the blood of my wife. The smell of her blood and the thought of it brought it all back.

*Screaming, she was screaming. All I could hear were the heart-wrenching wails from the other room, and I ran. I came in on my wife bent over on the bathroom floor, grabbing at her protruding stomach, gasping for air. "Hospital" was all she could say, gasping for air in between the waves of pain. I picked her up and got her to the car as fast as I could. I placed her down in the backseat and sped to the nearest hospital, ignoring the red of the traffic lights wherever I could. We got to the hospital, and all I can remember is screaming for help, for someone to help my wife, that she was bleeding, and she hadn't stopped. I knew there was too much blood. All I could see on her was red, I was red, the floor was red. She was rushed upstairs away from me, and all I was allowed to do was wait. I didn't know what the hell was happening and I had to sit and wait, wait to hear if they had survived, or she survived. I prayed that both of them were going to be okay, but I knew I was wrong. I was left to hear the beeps of the machines in the hall, echoing straight into my heart. I remember the doctor calling me in, into the room. I remember his face, nothing else but his face, and he looked pained. I needed to know who I lost. Then he handed me a wrapped bundle, but shook his head. I stared at him, and I stared back at the bundle in my hands. I think he asked me something, but I could only focus on the bundle, and I let the tears flow free.*

The pain cut into my stomach, and it rippled through the rest of my chest. How can such emotions cause the body to hurt just so? I let tears roll down my cheeks, my nose, my chin. I rubbed them away, and got out of that room. Away from the blood. Away from the memories. I knew I wasn't going to be ready for that, not for a while. I would not do that on my own; I needed her there. I wanted her with me.

Opening the cabinet once I got into the kitchen, I searched for the half-used can of hot chocolate. I had no appetite, and I assumed she would be in the same state. Then again, maybe tea would be better. Hot chocolate was good, but I believed it was for good times. Tea meant seriousness. It would be better, wouldn't it? I placed the can back into the cabinet and searched under the counter

for our favorite teas, echinacea and camomile. As I prepared the tea, I put a dollop of honey in hers; she liked it sweet. After a few minutes of letting the tea cool, I turned around intending to bring the mug up to her, but I met the sad eyes of my wife.

Something seemed different, something in her eyes. The gray overlay in her blue eyes only added to the strange emotion resting there. It wasn't just the sadness, it was more than that. It passed too quickly, as did her silence. Later...later I would know that it was disappointment. She went to open her mouth, but closed it instead. Finally, the harsh words filled the room.

"I want a divorce."

I lost hold of the two mugs, and they crashed to the floor, shattering into hundreds of pieces. They lay there in front of me, the tea seeping into the wood.

She'd probably been in the shower when she had decided. Actually, the thought had originated on the drive home. Or maybe, it had been in her mind for a while now. I could imagine her just sitting in the shower, crying her eyes out until there were no tears left. She would have sat there and let her heart hurt until she could think clearly. She would have a chance to leave, an actual reason that made sense. She wouldn't have hurt me on purpose, I just knew she wouldn't. She had waited days, weeks, and months. How could I have not noticed? I could see her eyes last April; they had started to become less and less reliable for emotional cues. Again, in June when we went on vacation, her smiles had grown less and less genuine. I could remember all the movie nights where she would sit away from me, claiming she had to stretch out because of the pressure of the little one on her back. All the recent idiosyncrasies began to paint the picture that I had been ignorant to.

I didn't hear all the words she said to me. All I got was that she was leaving me, she wasn't in love with me, and our loss was just too much for her. I don't even remember really seeing her; focusing was far from me at that time. She threw something on the counter between us, what I realized later were the divorce papers. The damn papers had been sitting in her drawer for months, and all I had to do was sign and mail them. I just stood there, watching her pick up her backpack and a few mismatched bags. She didn't even look back at me as she walked out the door.

I did not get any sleep that night. I packed up my things, and I knew I would be leaving in the morning. I would go somewhere, far from here. I barely remember anything else about that night. I ended up in the car and I just drove into the distance, racing the rise of the sun.

## **The Opening**

Eli Kramer

She invites me in and turns the room  
into one where the drink she offers  
is a thing I can't refuse The drink  
makes me who I was when I was younger  
with a divine sense of what to say and when  
She asks a question and I answer it perfectly  
but she does not speak when I am done  
I want to say more so I do until I've said it all  
I open my eyes and realize I've fallen from my chair  
I look up at her to see if I'm done and I'm not  
I go on forever

## **What I'll Do With My Life Now**

Eli Kramer

I will cut to the core  
of what it is to be human  
using a complex and precise  
series of relief cuts.  
I will soothe my demons  
through talk therapy.  
I will run for president  
and do the same thing  
for the United States of America.  
Once recognized as prophet,  
I will become the world's King.  
Then, I will call you.

**yin**

Eli Kramer

not the stars but the space

between stars the overwhelming

blackness that awards its

tiniest pokes of light

the whole entire sky



# Top Hat in Front of First Parish Church Dorchester

Elaine Happnie





## 7 Houses of Hell

Colleen O'Connor

Welcome! Hi, nice to meet you. I'm Leviathan—I'll be your guide. This is heaven, after all; of course someone needs to show you how this works. You humans never really understood the afterlife. It's crazy but hey, the time of death is something that isn't easy for everyone. Hey, hey, no crying! I know it's scary to realize you're dead, but welcome to eternal paradise! Stop crying—you're dead, but it's going to be amazing. Just learn that the afterlife is something phenomenal, so congrats! Welcome to your paradise, dear. Now, now, pull yourself together and on with the tour; I won't have you crying in the happiest place in the universe. At the time of death, the sin that has been most dominant in the life of the deceased is where they end up spending the end of eternity. God exists. Well, he did, at least once upon a time. Then the war between Satan and God began except, unlike the humans believe, God lost epically. Satan won and he took over heaven and completely remodeled the entire thing. Heaven was split into seven houses, for each one of the seven deadly sins. They would allow those who had been morally ambiguous throughout their entire lives and those who had been exceptionally good to enjoy in the things that God forbade. Satan decided he would not allow those who were truly cruel and despicable to live in one of the houses, though. They had their own special house, but that we can cover later. Come, we have much to cover; it's your first day as it is mine. See, we demons introduce people like you, the recently dead, to our paradise; we give you a tour of the place and then put you in the house you belong in. Well, usually the house is already decided but for you, well, it's something a little different. Oh no, no, you look scared; is it because I'm a demon? It usually is. I'm a demon but not that kind of demon; I won't torture you unless you're one of them. The vile people: those ones are the ones we put in the last house. Now please understand you are a completely unusual case; you have dabbled in all of the sins. One was never truly dominant, so you get to decide, which is why you get a tour from me, your lovely demon friend. Now let's get started.

Sloth, yes, the first house we will be covering. Sloth is one of the easiest houses to deal with. It's covered in couches and it has access to all of the TV that you could want. When you live there, you never have to do anything. You can lounge around all day and lay there forever. The true glory of this place is that nothing ever needs to be done; it's a procrastinator's heaven. You never have to do anything ever again. You look unhappy with this choice. Well, you know, being lazy for all of eternity is not everyone's cup of tea. The smooth life that you could live in this house is something that you might not be totally interested in. Sleeping as much as you want, and never being required to do literally anything—but hey, not for everyone, right. So let's move on with our lovely tour.

The next house is Gluttony: a buffet all of the time. I know, right? Every ounce of food that you could ever desire—all you have to do is think of it and boom, it's right in front of you. You can eat and eat; you'll never get sick, just able to enjoy the delicious food. It can literally be anything. Now I know I said food—that's usually something that people want—but for our drug addicts out there, yes, you can have all the drugs you want and never overdose, and for our alcoholics it's a completely open bar forever. This room allows you to binge on anything that you could desire and not have to deal with any repercussions from doing anything. No hangovers, no stomach aches, no overdosing, and, well,

no repercussions period. It's truly divine and—oh, you don't seem enthusiastic about this either. Well, shoot. I thought this one would be something to die for, haha literally but fine fine moving on.

Now how much do you love shopping? Or hoarding money? Or, you know, wanting jewels or lavish things? Yep, this is Greed: you can get anything designer that you could ever want. Your money supply never runs out. It's shopping all the time or accumulating wealth or whatever else tickles your fancy. It has a shopping mall that is legendary: Prada, Gucci, Givenchy, Halston—yes, I'm aware that on earth his house is dying, but trust me, in here we have all the good pieces—Dolce and Gabbana, Dior, McQueen, Westwood. It's all the high fashion from the glorious fashion world. If jewels are more your thing, it could be anything, Cartier, Tiffany, Swarovski, the list truly is endless. This house truly has it all; you can collect anything, or you can watch the market and watch your money grow. The stock only ever goes up and insider trading is legal always because, come on, it's heaven; of course the law doesn't apply up here. Don't look so shocked. Really?? Wow, okay, I pegged you wrong; this isn't anything you want?? Alright alright, I get it, next house.

This house is Lust. It's exactly what you think it is. Mostly. Well, the thing is, some portions of it are exactly what you think: basically, you can have anyone you want. You seem shocked, but here's the thing. Anyone you lusted after in life? They can be here. Well, not actually them, but heaven is pretty magical. You seem surprised. It's literally anyone and everyone. You can pick one person or multiple people, doesn't matter. Heaven doesn't judge. You just do what you want to do and we just let you have fun. I mean, I never really go in much; us demons don't get to indulge in any of the houses. I hear good things from our residents, but I just got promoted from assistant to the houses to tour guide—honestly, it's a major lift for me. You don't seem interested in this house? Hmm, I'm not judging, just wondering why? Well all right, no need to judge so much; let's move on then, shall we?

Wrath, the most dangerous house to enter. You see, here everyone gets to enact on the source of the rage that lies deep within. It could be anything: angry at an ex, angry at the government, angry at your parents or your children. Any type of rage you have, we can dissolve it here or let you act on it. Totally your choice. It's full of violence and torment. Some people prefer to play the long game with letting out the rage they have; others prefer to play the short game and just get the rage out over and over again—sometimes on the same victim, sometimes on different ones. Truly, it's fascinating. I've never understood the human rage but, hey, to each their own. Sometimes the way they take out the rage they have is quite beautiful—now I'm drifting. Many apologies. So does this appeal? Would you want this to be your eternal life? No? Then onto the next house we shall go.

This was the most difficult house to fabricate, till it wasn't. We figured out how to form a way that everyone would get what they envied. If they envied someone for the spouse they had, they got that spouse till they wanted something else. Whatever they envied we bring it forth to them over and over again for the end of time. It's just a repetitive cycle of satiating the envy that lies within these people. I don't believe that this is what you want. I can see it all over your face. Aha, I was right, you don't want this. Well, onto the next house. I always found envy to be the most useless of humans sins. Who has time for envy when instead you can just do better? Only the pitiful envy those that they don't believe they can be better than.

The last house is Pride. This one allows the person to accomplish whatever will make them feel the most proud of themselves and will allow them to be the best version of themselves. The fabrication allows them to be showered with praise and admiration which they have been desiring for their entire lives. It gives them everything that they've wanted. It allows them to form rooms to the glory that they

feel like they've deserved. It also gives them something that they wanted desperately: approval and fame and glory, in whatever form that may be—we don't judge. It's completely the choice of the one that is in need of living there.

That is the end of the tour. It's all of your options. We can give you some time to decide. Whatever you need—you choose the house that you want, and you can live in it for eternity. I mean, we do check in every century or so to allow you to switch if you so desire. This is after all the afterlife, and it can be anything amazing and beautiful. Whatever house you want, your choice. You want to see what we do to the really bad people? Oh no, no, I can't show you that. It's not part of the tour. It doesn't matter if you want to see it. It's not really supposed to be involved. Well, I suppose...if you really want to, I can show you.

This is it! It's the place where we torture all of the worst kinds of people. You name it, we got it. Pedophiles, murderers, rapists, government officials who abuse power. The list can go on forever, but this is what we have. What do you mean you want to stay here? This isn't a place for humans. You have to understand this isn't a room people choose to go—it's a lifetime and eternity of torment, and it's literally a prison. It's the worst kind of eternal life.

Oh, you want to work here?? As one of us? You want to torture those who need to be...well, that changes things. I'll see what I can do. I mean, I don't know what the big boss will say. Lucifer is particular, but I can see if he can be persuaded. Let me go talk to him. You just stay here and wait; I'll be back.

He said yes! This is a place where everyone is supposed to get what they want for eternity. So you can have what you want but the problem is, you need to give up your soul and become a demon. Will that pose any issue for you? No? Wonderful! I'll get started on the transfer paperwork. Please have a seat in the lobby, and we will be with you for the transition shortly.

## Satan Writes All of His Documents in Comic Sans

Faith Speredelozzi

He had been a graphic designer before the heart attack. He knew that he hadn't been kind to others when he was alive. In fact, he had been a real jerk. Even so, he didn't think that this was a reasonable punishment.

It was cruel and unusual, even for Hell's standards.

Still, it was *his* punishment and there was no way he could talk his way out of it.

Every day a pretty demon in a tight skirt and a lovely blouse handed him a memo or some other form of official paperwork. These documents had horrible kerning, terrible type setting, copious amounts of attitude fonts, more colors than a Pride parade, little to no white space (or too much white space), more spelling and grammar errors than you could shake a stick at, and so many other atrocities.

Then he had to look the lovely little demon directly in the eye and say, "This looks great."

Every. Single. Time.

This was his eternal punishment and he wanted to claw his eyes out. Unfortunately with a snap of her fingers, the demon fixed his eyes whenever he *did* claw them out.

He never realized Hell would have so many important documents.

Who would have thought that Hell was a bureaucracy?

And who would have thought that Satan would write all of his documents in Comic Sans?

## Elder Care

Faith Speredelozzi

If Dementia were a person, she would be a bitch. At least, that's how Elizabeth thought about it.

She had been sent up to her grandmother's hot and stuffy attic for what felt like the millionth time that week. Her grandmother insisted that she get some stupid vase that a.) probably didn't even exist or b.) had been thrown out decades ago. Still, Elizabeth being the good grandchild that she was went up to the attic like she had so many times before. Besides, if she didn't her grandmother would become agitated and no one wanted *that*.

To her surprise, it wasn't a fool's errand. Elizabeth actually found the cracked china vase. It was sitting in the corner of the attic, amongst some broken pieces of porcelain. She picked up the vase and sighed. If her grandmother still remembered she wanted the vase, Elizabeth had just avoided a full-blown temper tantrum that even a two-year-old would be appalled at.

Elizabeth started to head towards the stairs when she glanced over to the opposite corner. She wasn't sure why she did this, but she did. In the corner, amongst the cobwebs, dust, and deteriorating cardboard boxes was a wooden box. It was partially covered by a moth-eaten red blanket. Elizabeth frowned. She placed the cracked vase on a nearby table and went over to the wooden box. She didn't want to. Every fiber of her being was screaming not to. But it was as if something had lassoed her and pulled her gently towards the corner.

Elizabeth slowly pulled back the blanket. She pried the cover off the box. She gasped and took several steps back. Resting comfortably inside was her grandmother's mummified head.

A cold feeling washed over Elizabeth as she realized the old woman she had been taking care of for the last six months was *not* her grandmother.

The Watermark

## **American Summer**

Michaela McMillan



## Lions and Bears and Tics...Oh My!

Ann Doyle

Twenty years of trying to find Mr. Right was enough. Kendra decided to surrender and quit dating altogether. Instead of feeling depressed, she felt exhilarated and energized. She didn't need a man to give her life meaning. Who needs a man? Kendra had four delicious weeks of vacation coming up and so it was time to fulfill her dream and visit Italy.

She spent her rainy Saturday morning surfing the web in order to map out an itinerary to include some of the charming little Italian villages she wanted to see before checking out her options at the travel agency downtown. She had all day and all night to herself; she didn't have to get her toes done, or wonder what to wear to impress some dopey guy. Her well-meaning friends and relatives were always on the lookout for eligible bachelors, but she was done with being fixed up. She realized that she preferred to stay home and read or watch movies. Hell, she didn't have to wash her hair or apply her makeup today. She made an appointment to sit down with a travel agent that same afternoon.

She sat across from the travel agent whose name was Scott but had a difficult time concentrating on his words. She was instantly and wildly attracted to his curly brown hair and the laugh lines around his steely blue eyes. She checked out his hand for a wedding ring. No ring...so far, so good. Scott wondered why this gorgeous woman was planning to vacation alone. It was love at first sight. After discussing several options for her vacation, he threw caution to the wind and suggested that they continue their conversation over dinner at a nearby restaurant. Two glasses of wine later, they began to make plans for the following weekend. So much for her resolution to stop dating.

After six months of dinners, museum trips and movies, Kendra was beginning to entertain the idea of her and Scott living together. Scott was attentive without being possessive. He was attractive, but not conceited. He had a job and his family seemed normal enough. Not like her last boyfriend, whose mother showed up on Kendra's doorstep with all of her worldly belongings stuffed into a shabby brown suitcase, and asked if she could move in because she needed to hide out for a while. Six months later the boyfriend was long gone and Kendra had to move out of the apartment just to get away from the crazy woman. Or the boyfriend before that, who allowed his four ferrets to run loose in his apartment. She'd had enough of crazy and was looking for a sane human being to settle down with.

Scott fit the bill, so far. In June he asked her if he could take her away on a week's vacation for her birthday in August. He wanted to surprise her by making all of the arrangements himself. She tried to guess which romantic island he was planning to take her to, or maybe it was somewhere in Europe...Paris? The anticipation was glorious. She shopped for comfortable outfits for sightseeing, dresses for romantic evenings and bathing suits for Caribbean Islands or indoor pools in fancy hotels.

When Scott handed her a card on her birthday containing a gift certificate for LL Bean, one of the only stores she'd never set foot in, she was confused. When he announced that the much-dreamed-of vacation would take place in Maine, she was definitely disappointed, but managed to look thrilled. She cheered up a bit when she imagined sunning herself on one of the beautiful beaches along the rugged coast of Maine, spending afternoons sipping white wine, dining on succulent lobster

and shopping for jewelry and toss pillows in quaint little village shops.

Panic set in when she learned that the vacation involved a cabin in the middle of nowhere. He talked about building fires and cooking outdoors! She tried not to scream as she imagined hungry mountain lions lurking around the cabin waiting to get a bite of her tender white flesh and poisonous snakes lurking in the bushes. The final and unacceptable blow was the fact that there were no cell phone towers! No phone, no stores, no restaurants, no room service! Madness!

Yes, there were red flags, but she chose to ignore them. She knew that Scott enjoyed fishing with his buddies, but she always imagined a bunch of guys on a yacht in the ocean wearing polo shirts and fancy Sperry boat shoes and not in the middle of a mosquito-infested pond. Then there was the photo of an old girlfriend, dressed like a lumberjack...Kendra thought it was some kind of Halloween costume. Scott had done a lot of traveling and did mention that as a boy, he loved camping and had spent a few weeks on a dude ranch but she assumed that he'd grown up and lost interest in those things. Kendra considered any place outside of New York City the wilderness. He did ask her if she liked to fish one time, early into the relationship. She said she'd never actually gone fishing, but she did love fish, especially swordfish and salmon. She grimaced at the thought of worms on hooks; even fish with heads with eyes in the supermarket made her queasy.

She didn't have the heart to tell him that she hated nature. Where he saw serenity and beauty, she saw deranged serial killers hiding in trees and nobody near enough to hear her scream. She was afraid of bears, deer, squirrels, snakes and ticks. How could she tell him that she felt so much safer in the city, where the sound of gunfire, traffic accidents, fire engines, and screeching ambulances were as soothing as a lullaby.

Kendra confided in her best friend, and they concluded that the only way out of this hellish trip was to be honest with Scott. She brought him out to dinner and confessed that she was terrified of the woods. She said she was afraid that some strange bacteria might be brewing in a stagnant pool of water and she would most likely die from it. She also thought that a new super-bacteria was hibernating somewhere in a rotting tree trunk. She might inhale it and it could settle itself in a tiny nook in her lungs until it grew strong enough to crawl through her body and take over her life. She told him to go and enjoy himself without her, because she hated insects and animals and any places without outlet stores.

He said, "If you care so much about me, then why are you willing to let me risk catching this super-bacteria?" She thought for a few seconds and then said that since he had camped in those woods before, he probably had built up an immunity against the deadly diseases.

They gazed at each other from opposite ends of their personalities. She lowered her head and glanced up at him through her long lashes. Each time he looked into her eyes it was like looking through infinity. He felt a stirring deep in his chest and knew he wanted to spend the rest of his days beside her. She wondered why the sound of his voice soothed her and something stirred and melted in her chest each time he looked at her. She knew that she wanted to wake up in his arms for all the mornings of her life. He took her hand and asked if she'd marry him. She said, yes, of course I'll marry you. And they lived, if not happily ever after, at least interestingly ever after.



## Makeup Madness

Ann Doyle

My real friends know enough not to call me until after my second cup of coffee. So, when my phone rang at 8AM this morning, I knew that it was either a wrong number or someone blissfully unaware of my morning persona. It was Shirley Hart, queen of bad news and sad stories. Logically, I know, I should hang up as soon as I hear her obnoxious chirping voice, but curiosity always wins. We met in high school and I've been trying to avoid her ever since. Shirley likes to dish out unwanted dieting advice and keep tabs on everyone's financial and romantic states of affairs. Her much-embellished, dreamlike memories of our shared high school years make me wonder if we went to the same school or even lived on the same planet.

"Hey! How's it going?"

I was silent while deciding whether to hang up quietly or suffer the sound of her voice.

"I know you're there."

"What's up? I'm on my way out the door." (As I stood by the sink in my red plaid pajamas.)

She got right down to the nitty-gritty and said that she'd just gotten a disturbing call from Marie Taylor.

"Marie said that you waltzed right by her yesterday in the parking lot of the South Shore Plaza. She said she called your name, but you ignored her."

"High school was a long time ago, even if I was there, I probably wouldn't recognize Marie." (Okay...that was a bold-faced lie.)

The truth is that, recently, after a late night glass of Pinot Noir (okay, two glasses), out of sheer boredom, I happened to glance at Marie's Facebook page to see what was up. (No, I wasn't stalking her; that's a harsh term.) I examined photos of her homes in Hawaii and Cape Cod, her handsome millionaire husband and her brilliant and beautiful children. Her life was an open book, grinning at me, on Facebook.

"Where you at the South Shore Plaza?"

"No, nowhere near there," I lied, in hopes of ending the interrogation.

"Marie said that the woman was driving a silver Nissan Versa."

"Really...the woman looked like me AND drove the same car! How weird it that?"

I know she didn't believe me. Okay, I did ignore Marie, even after she called my name. Not because I am bitter, jealous, antisocial or a few pounds over my desired weight. I'm not that fragile or superficial!

While wandering, aimlessly, through the South Shore Plaza, when I should have been signing up for spinning classes, I found myself thinking of Marie as I passed a deliciously scented store with photos of skeletal blond models in the window. One of the skeletal blond models reminded me of Marie. The scent drew me in.

Gliding into the doorway (yes, sometimes I glide), I was greeted by a scary Barbie-dollish young woman who offered to help me.

"No thank you. I'm just looking."

She glanced at my face with a worried expression and offered to set me up with a makeup consultant, who happened to have an opening. Before I could protest, the expert was summoned to my side. She studied me with her bright blue eyes, which were hidden behind excessively long, very distracting eyelashes. I had to step back for fear of being assaulted by the black, glossy weapons. She said nothing for about twenty seconds while she studied my face.

“What kind of cleanser do you use?”

I was afraid to reveal that I used soap and water, so I replied, “Cold cream,” feeling smug. This didn’t have the desired effect. She said I needed to use a three-step cleansing program because my pores were large! Well, I knew that my thighs were on the large side, but my pores? She said I needed a good toner. I lied and said I already had toner at home. She wanted to know if my face was always “puffy.” She asked about my primer and I must have looked blank at this point because she said, “You don’t wear a primer?”

“No,” I confessed, feeling as if I had just committed a murder in aisle four. She introduced me to the primer, cleaned my face with a round, white cotton pad which was dipped into what I can only assume was a magic cleansing potion. Then she proceeded to spread a layer of pink goop all over my big-pored puffy face. Both she and the salesgirl seemed impressed with the results. It was decided that I was in dire need of this pink goop and I should use it every morning. I figured it must be expensive, but I didn’t want to ask, so I smiled and dropped the tiny bottle into the cute pink basket that was handed to me. I was lectured on the dangers of dead skin cells and the perils of using the “wrong” moisturizer.

Next thing you know, I was whisked over to the foundation department. A very special foundation was selected, which, if it failed to change my life, it would certainly change my financial status. I plopped it into my little pink basket. Next, it was a bronzer, which promised to give me a healthy glow. By then my confidence was destroyed...I would have purchased a jar of dead worms if these make-up Madonnas thought it might help stem the tide of destruction.

My eyes were scrutinized and it turned out, I had been using the wrong products for my entire life! I silently cursed my so-called friends, who never mentioned this sad fact. I rationalized the purchases and decided to throw them on my Visa card and worry later. I wanted, desperately, to look like one of those freakishly thin girls with perfect skin, smoky eyes, and full, pouty lips.

When I glanced into a mirror on my way to the cashier, I saw a face that resembled a broken down carnival ride. It looked like a gang of angry monkeys with a box of magic markers had had their way with my face. Scary sage eyeshadow clashed with sparkly pink cheeks. This was badly accented by blue mascara and two oddly shaped eyebrows, making me look both confused and insane at the same time.

I put my little pink basket down and made a mad dash for the exit, hoping I wouldn’t run into anyone I knew. I made it as far as the parking lot before I spotted the fabulous Marie, who looked fit, trim and stylish while stepping out of her shiny, gold Lexus. I looked right through her, slid into my car and nearly left rubber. Besides the makeup mishap, I was at least twenty pounds overweight...all right thirty pounds. Instead of mindless shopping, I should have been working out at a gym. Dismissing these depressing thoughts, I decided to stop and visit my two best friends, who never failed to cheer me up. Ben and Jerry have always been there for me. Double chocolate peanut butter was what I really needed.

## Little Girl in Madrid Spain

Elaine Happnie



## On a Date, Kinda Nervous

Ogadinma Ebele

I was finally ready. I found an outfit. After tearing my closet apart, trying on and taking off. Keeping the pants that accentuated my lower half and tossing the shirts that made me look fat. I made sure my outfit was perfectly coordinated so he would think I was put together. But not too coordinated of course. Or else he would think I'm pushy.

I pulled down my blouse revealing some cleavage. The magazines said so get in touch with my "flirty side." But then I pulled it back up. I mean, I don't want him to think I'm too sexy. Ehhh, I pulled it down once more. Only a little though. Happy medium—I was going on a date after all. I strapped on my pretty pink shoes—*or should I wear the black ones? No, no the pink shoes, the pink shoes are better.* I sprayed my most expensive perfume, fixed my hair for the sixth time and triple-checked in the mirror for the gazillionth time. I had my phone, keys, wallet, first aid kit—in case he or I got hurt (going to a restaurant, you never know), knife (in case he turned out to be a serial killer) and blotting sheets (my nose tends to get oily). "I'm ready," I told myself. I was ready.

I checked the time and it was 6:54. Our reservation was for 7:30. But the restaurant was only fifteen minutes away so I decided to wait a little bit to call the cab and be a few minutes late. Keep him guessing. But then I figured I should probably get there a few minutes early. To save our seats. (We'd made reservations, but what if the hostess didn't adhere to the seating arrangements?) I called the cab and made my way to the restaurant.

"Good evening, sir," I greeted the cab driver with a smile.

"Hello miss. How are you?"

"Very well," I responded. And I meant it. I was excited actually. Ecstatic. Elated. My first real date, with an actual guy! I played out the entire night in my head. I would be at the table, waiting for him, oh so casually. He would arrive moments later, unable to take his eyes off me. Then he would smile at me, and I would smile at him. Finally, he would take a seat, drowning in my beauty. And from then on I would entice him with my charming personality and charismatic disposition.

Of course, that was the best case scenario. Worst case scenario, well, I get stood up again. Wait. *What if I do get stood up again?* Okay, *technically* I didn't get stood up. The guy showed, but pretended to get a call from his friend saying that it was an emergency so he could leave. Okay, technically I don't exactly know that he was pretending. But hey, I tell you that I used to castrate farm animals growing up and now all of a sudden your grandmother had a stroke? Whatever.

What if he did show, and he didn't like me—just like last time.

I was no longer ready. I was no longer "very well." I wanted to turn around and go home, call the whole operation off.

"Alright, have a nice night," the driver said. *I hope so.*

I checked the time and it was 7:21. Nervous, very nervous, I made my way inside; the hostess escorted me to the table and poured me a glass of water.

7:24—*He should be arriving soon.* I took a peek at the menu, so when it came time to order I wouldn't be that annoying, still-don't-know-what-they-want customer.

7:28—*Where is he?* The cup of water that had once been full was now empty. So I was just twiddling my thumbs praying that this night wouldn't end in humiliation.

7:31—he was late. *He's not gonna show. I know he's not. I should just leave now. Spare myself the embarrassment.* But I didn't. I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

7:35—still not her—oh wait there he is!

Oh wait. There he is.

You know when there's butterflies in your stomach? Like when you have to give a presentation or when you're at a party or when the teacher tells you to work in groups or when you have to meet new people or when the server asks "Anything else?" I had so many butterflies you would've thought I had caterpillars for breakfast. Corroborated research from several magazines conferred that while on romantic engagements one should "Just be yourself!" At first, this seemed easy. But now that I was currently in the situation, I was now confused as to what that even meant. What if "myself" wasn't up to par? What if "myself" wasn't compatible with his "self"? And in the event that I decided to embody an alter ego—would that still qualify as "myself"? *I knew I should've done more resear—*

"Sorry I'm kinda late, there was traffic," he said. I hadn't even realized he'd made his way to the table.

"No problem" I replied, flashing a shy smile. Then he smiled back at me, but his was a lot more enthusiastic. So I turned my shy smile into an even bigger one. But not too big. Didn't want to seem desperate.

He gave me sort of a puzzled look.

"What's so funny?" He laughed. *Okay, enough smiling. Maybe he thinks it's strange.*

"Oh, nothing," I said with a fake laugh. I diverted my eye contact. It was getting too awkward. A few seconds later I looked up to see if he was still looking at me. He was. So I smiled again. Because what else do you do when there is an awkward silence? Smile? Right?

"What is *so* funny?" He laughed again. I couldn't tell if he was laughing at me or if he was laughing with me. But I wasn't laughing. So must've been laughing at me. Right?

"So...do you know what you're gonna order?" I had to change the subject.

"Not yet." *Slow down he just sat down.*

"Oh, right. I'll give you a couple more moments."

"Moments?" He laughed.

"I mean secon—minu—"

"It's okay." He laughed some more. "I'm just kidding."

Then he proceeded to continue his search for his supper on the menu.

In the meantime, I patiently waited while he took exceptionally long to figure his order. He took so long that I briefly reconsidered if he was a compatible match for me, as he seemed to be a rather indecisive person. It's not that I don't have tolerance for indecisiveness. It's just that I am also very indecisive. So we can't *both* be indecisive. Research demonstrates that couples need to balance each other, and make up for what the other is lacking.

But then I took a second look at him and immediately reconsidered my reconsidering because he was an exceptionally attractive person.

“You guys ready to order?” the waiter asked. *When did she get here?*

“Yes, actually, can I have the steak tip dinner with...” His large green eyes paid attention to the meal description. “No onions.”

“And for you?”

“I would like...umm.” I started fiddling with the menu. Wait. What do I want? I just had it.

“Pass,” I said, trying to buy myself more time.

“Pass? You can’t pass!” He and the waiter both chuckled—still couldn’t tell if they were laughing at me or with me. I quickly scanned the menu, desperately trying to remember what I wanted, but my sweaty hands kept sliding off the plastic.

“Oh, sorry!” I accidentally dropped the menu on the waiter’s foot.

“It’s okay!” she said as I crawled under my seat and grabbed the pamphlet. *Jesus Christ, now he thinks I’m clumsy.*

I crawled back up and sat in my chair. The waiter looked at me. *Why is she still looking at me?* I said sorry. I turned, and saw he was looking at me too. *Why is everyone looking at me?*

“Are you ready to order?” she repeated. *Oh right.*

“Oh, right. I’ll have the spaghetti and meatballs.” I wasn’t even sure if that was on the menu. It was an Italian restaurant, so it must’ve been. Pasta with marinara sauce seems to be a staple in Italian cuisine.

“Okay, twenty minutes.” She walked off.

Now it was just me and him. And an awkward silence. So I smiled. He simply laughed and smiled back.

“How old are you again? I know it was between twenty-one and twenty-three,” he broke the ice.

“Two hundred and fifty two months,” I said. And he laughed, even more this time, and for longer too. *Okay joke thirteen, cross that off the list. Wow, a success! At least some of my research was valuable.*

I was going to ask him how old he was. But I already knew. I already knew a lot about him actually, from his profile. I didn’t stalk him or anything, I just memorized all the basic information, like where he works, his alma mater, family member names, his golden retriever—Reily, neighborhood—couldn’t find his address though. Whatever. *Keep the conversation going. He just asked you a question so now it’s your turn.*

“How long did it take to grow your beard?” *No! That’s such a weird question.*

“About...two hundred months and fifty two months,” he replied. I laughed, genuinely. And so did he. *That wasn’t too bad, I guess.* After that he began to ask me trivial questions about my life—to which I answered exactly half with jokes and half with honesty. The situation forced me to ask him questions that I already knew the answers to, just to pass the time, and avoid those dreadful awkward silences.

Finally after 75% enjoyable conversation, 25% annoying small talk, I spotted the waiter approaching us in my peripheral. *Thank God. Something to change the subject.* None of my other jokes were pertinent to the situation.

“Okay, that’s for you, miss...and that’s for you, sir.”

“Thank you!” we both said.

“You’re welcome!” and she made her way to the next table.

*Should I start eating now or later? Is he religious? Does he wanna pray first?* I looked up and saw that he had already picked up his fork and begun to work on his steak tips. *He's eating, so I'll eat too.* I picked up a meatball with my fork and started to put it in my mouth. As soon my hand reached my face, the meatball had rolled off the fork...onto my pants...onto the floor. I just sat there with my hand—still holding the meatball-less fork up to my face. With my mouth still wide open. I stared at the plate because I didn't want to make eye contact. Suddenly, I began to hear him chuckle so I slowly rose my head. I gave a shy smile as I spotted the twinkle in his eyes as he giggled. I started to laugh at myself too. Finally, I could see that he was laughing with me, not at me—for now at least.



## Musical Bingo Night

Redmond Woodward

Ray pulled up to the bar, just a few minutes early. No spots were open at first glance, so he circled right to the back and saw one behind a truck. He whipped around to pull in, but stopped short and grimaced as he saw the motorcycle sitting in the space like a giant middle finger. He backed up, then came around to see an open spot, but a BMW coming the other way sped up and promptly snagged it. Sighing, Ray circled the lot three more times before finally catching someone leaving and taking their space. After parking at last, he opened his phone and shot a “here” text to Christian, following up with “might need to park next door place is packed”, then put it back down and stared out the window.

It was a cloudy and windy day, a cool sixty degrees out, which was sweatshirt and jeans weather for August. Ray’s phone buzzed, snapping him out of his gaze. A simple “K thanks” text from Christian lit up his screen. He opened his messages, deciding to scroll up on their conversation from that morning. He began to reread and refresh his mind about why they were having an impromptu Wednesday meeting, taking a deep breath as he still couldn’t quite believe he was seeing the words staring back at him. Ray looked up and saw Christian round the corner near the front entrance, the first time he’d seen him in weeks. The first thing he noticed was the immense bags under his eyes, along with the way his feet were sluggishly dragging the rest of his body towards the door as he inhaled a cigarette. Ray opened the door and stepped out of the car, walking over to the entrance. “You think if you inhale those things harder they’ll kill you faster?” Ray asked with a kidding smile.

“That’ll be the day,” Christian chuckled sadly. “Why is it so fucking packed right now on a Wednesday?”

“Who knows, probably karaoke or game night or some shit.” As Christian grasped the cigarette and tossed it aside, Ray focused on his fingers, one of which featured a shining circular tan line that wrapped around the entire finger. He threw Christian a significant look as he opened the door for him, which Christian noticed but avoided. Expectedly, there was a long line and a wait. The hostess asked how many, and Christian walked right past without looking at her. Ray told her they’d check the bar, and it was unsurprisingly full. The pair stood leaning against the wall, giving themselves a view of the bar, waiting for someone to get up and leave.

“How’s the new job?” Ray asked suddenly.

“There’s a legit crackhead on staff and he’s not even remotely the worst guy we have.” Ray nodded understandingly and didn’t say anything else, looking off anywhere that wasn’t at Christian. He felt a tap on his chest as Ray motioned towards the bar. A pair of college girls had gotten up and were leaving. Christian and Ray walked in, and after the girls passed, Christian threw a quick glance over his shoulder before facing forward once more and shaking his head in disappointment, muttering, “Should’ve gone to college.”

“What’ll it be, guys?” the cute bartender asked once the pair sat down.

Ray flashed her a smile and said, “Couple Budweiser’s plea—”

“Actually, make mine a jack and coke,” Christian said aggressively, nearly making the



bartender jump.

"Sure thing," she replied, tossing a raised eyebrow look over to Ray, who just shrugged back at her.

"That kinda night, huh?" Ray asked Christian.

"Sure is." There was a long pause as they waited for their drinks. "Oh, how's your classes and shit going?"

Ray shrugged. "Eh, you know, same old. 'Taking it one week at a time' and all that old bullshit."

"Mm," Christian mumbled, disinterested.

The bartender came back over with their drinks and smiled at the guys, giving a lingering look towards Christian, who simply took his drink and neutrally nodded as if to say thanks. Ray smiled back and said thank you before his grin vanished and his eyes darted to see Christian guzzling down half his drink and avoiding eye contact.

A certain infamous strum of a guitar started over the loudspeakers, followed shortly by the dropping of a beat and Miley Cyrus starting in: "*I hopped off the plane at LAX, With a Dream and my cardigan, Welcome to the land of fame excess (woah), Am I gonna fit in.*" Ray looked over at Christian with a huge smile on his face, but it evaporated quickly upon seeing Christian's unchanged frown staring down at his drink. He knew Christian must really be fucked mentally if he wasn't getting animated by "Party in the USA."

Ray decided to let him be for a few minutes, nervously sipping his beer and staring intently at the golf tournament the TV was showing, pretending to be interested in it. Before long, he firmly put his drink down, kept his eyes ahead and above on the television, sighing as he asked, "Well I suppose we can't just sit here making small talk all night, can we?" Another short silence filled the air before he continued. "Your—"

"Alriiiiiight, welcome to musical bingo night ladies and gentlemen!" the nearby DJ shouted into the speakers. "For those of you playing tonight, please remember our main two rules: please no cell phones and no shouting out answers! I'll play one minute of each song and if you recognize it please cross it off your board. I'll send some people around with boards and we will begin shortly!" He hit a button and "Heaven and Hell" by Black Sabbath started playing. *Sing me a song, you're a singer, Do me wrong, you're a bringer of evil, The devil is never a maker, The less that you give, you're a taker.*

"Jesus tap dancing Christ," Christian muttered angrily. *So it's on and on and on, It's Heaven and Hell, Oh, well.*

Taking advantage of the momentary lull in shouting, Ray continued. "Your finger looks a bit bare," he said evenly.

Christian took a long sip before replying, "I don't know what I'm gonna do man, I literally can't take this shit anymore."

"So you're leaving?"

"I think that's what's best. We just literally don't work. I've done everything right by her and she treats me like shit." Pause, drink. "Like, I get her hormones are way out of whack right now but this shit is ridiculous."

"Hormones aren't an excuse for abuse, Christian."

"No, they're not. But either way, I'm damned if I leave and damned if I stay. How's it gonna look if I bail now?"

“Fuck how it looks, you need to do what makes you happy. I haven’t seen you happy in what, five, six months?”

Christian stared forward at the TV. “My happiness isn’t the main concern anymore.”

“Fine, but riddle me this: you two are clearly toxic together. What do you think is best: one toxic environment or two peaceful ones?” Christian didn’t answer. “I mean, was she like this beforehand anyway? I only met her those couple of times at the beginning.”

That drew a laugh. “This ‘beforehand’ period you refer to was only the first two or three months. Everything’s been so wild since then I don’t even remember, and even if she wasn’t, it could’ve been that she wasn’t comfortable enough with me yet.”

“Has it ever gotten like actually physical?”

“Only the once. I think it was probably isolated but still awful.”

“Yeah and that doesn’t leave you with any good options in that scenario, either.”

“Right, I do nothing I’m fucked, and if I defend myself I’m probably even more fucked.”

Ray took a long sip and shook his head. “Well, is it where y’all are living right now?” Ray thought for a second and paused. “Wait, where are you two living right now? I see you on SnapMaps in Taunton all the damn time now instead of Brockton.”

“Yeah, we’re back with my parents.”

“What happened to the setup you had at her parents’ new place?”

“I saw...” Christian trailed off as he saw the bartender approaching once more with her friendly smile.

“Another round, gentlemen?” she asked enthusiastically.

“Yeah, thanks,” Christian replied. They sat in silence until their drinks were brought over.

“I saw her dad’s dick one too many times,” Christian blurted out. Ray nearly choked on his drink. “Guy never has pants on, wears strictly old briefs that are way too tight and always has a nut hanging out. Last week he went through our place in the basement to get something in the garage wearing just a fuckin wife beater, thing’s just swinging in the wind like it’s nothin’. Dude has the nerve to just look over at me and go ‘Oh, hey Christian.’” Ray could barely contain his laughter at this point and was borderline in tears. “Florida was the last straw,” Christian continued. “He wore a robe the entire two weeks but never closed it.”

“And I know your old man Gary don’t have that issue, huh?”

“Hell no, he comes home and just plays PlayStation half the day and leaves us alone. Worst thing about being there is my nephews being over constantly and causing terror, but it’s good training at least.”

Ray took a long sip before turning to face Christian. “Here’s the main question you need to ask yourself: if—”

“Will you guys be joining us for musical bingo?” a random man asked, obviously working with the DJ.

“No!” Christian replied firmly, his eyes like daggers trying to pierce the poor man’s soul. The man nodded with a smile and moved onto the next pair. Silence took over the boys once more before Ray regained the courage to continue. *They say that life’s a carousel, Spinning fast, you’ve got to ride it well.*

“If you weren’t in the situation you’re in, would you still be with her right now? Forget the ring cause we both know the answer to that one,” Ray said firmly. “I mean, would you be with her in any capacity at all?” The question hung in the air like an atomic bomb. Christian chugged the last

couple sips of his drink and motioned the bartender over for another.

*Fool, fool.*

*Look for the answer.*

*Fool, fool, fool.*

The song faded out at last.

“You just want me single again don’t you?” Christian asked accusingly.

Ray scoffed. “The fuck? No? You got shit in your ears? I just said you need to do whatever makes you happy, whatever that is, whatever that means. If it means stay with her, then stay. If it means fuck off, then do it. But if you want me to sit here and tell you directly to stay or go, that’s not gonna happen. I don’t know her at all, so I have no idea how she is normally. It’s gotta be your call.”

“Well yeah, no fucking shit. I’m just asking for some advice, Jesus.”

*Run to the hills, run for your lives.*

*Run to the hills, run for your lives.*

The guys had failed to notice that the game had started and that the first song up was the classic Iron Maiden song. “Well I guess the DJ’s made his thoughts on the matter clear, huh?” Ray asked chuckling. Christian couldn’t help but give a genuine laugh at that one, and Ray’s smile grew wider at his reaction. He laughed and said, “Wasn’t sure you still had the ability to laugh.”

Christian’s smile faded considerably as he said, “Aaaaaand you killed it.” They both went back to their drinks. They sat in an awkward silence until the next song forced their way out of it. The unmistakable keys of a piano started, fast paced with small pauses, the same as it always was. The guys looked at each other and couldn’t help but smile as they started to sing along to the ensuing words they knew were coming.

“*Making my way downtown, Walking fast, faces pass and I’m homebound.*” Pause, sip. “Staring blankly ahead, Just making my way, Making a way through the crowwww-ow-owwwd.” They started dancing in their seats and getting more and more animated with each passing line as the next verse started.

“*And I need you, And I miss you. And now I wonnnnnnnnder, If I could fall into the sky Do you think time would pass me byyyyy?* Cause you know I’d walk a thousand miles, *If I could just see you toniiiiiiiiight.*” They emphatically clinked glasses and chugged what was left as the song continued. The bartender came over clapping and laughing. “Ten outta ten, guys, bravo. You want another?”

Christian looked over at Ray and shrugged. “Sure, one more round, then check please.” The bartender took his card and went to handle it.

Ray went back on subject but backed down slightly after she delivered the drinks. “Look, if I *am* coming off like I just want you back being single so we can go back to having fun, I’m sorry. I know things will never go back to how they were before, your responsibilities are gonna be multiplied regardless of whether you stay or go. I’ll support you with whatever you do, you know that.” He paused and drank his beer. “Hell, my last actual girlfriend was in middle school, who am I to give relationship advice?” Ray smiled as he paused and thought out loud, “I’ll say one thing, this is the most vicious trap job since the Red Wedding.”

That managed to draw another laugh, albeit a cynical one at that. “Don’t let her ever hear you say that, otherwise she’ll wring the remaining parts of my neck she hasn’t already.”

“Oh okay, sorry,” Ray sarcastically apologized. “You make ‘trapped’ jokes for two months and I make one and it’s ‘hey shut up Ray.’ Dickhead,” he said with a smile.

*You woke up this morningggg, Got yourself a gun, Your mama always said you’d be the, Chosen one, She*

*said you're, you're one in a million, You got to burn to shine, But you were born under a bad sign, babe, With a blue moon in your eyes.*

"Hell yeah, what a fuckin beat to send us out," Christian said with a smile. "I miss this damn show."

"Yeah I'm about to rewatch it for the like the third or fourth time, honestly," Ray added. A few minutes passed and the bartender came back over with their cards and receipts. They signed and got up to leave, heading out in their separate directions as "1979" by The Smashing Punpkins began to play.

"Hey...thanks, I really needed this," Christian said genuinely. They shook hands firmly. "Now, I'm gonna go home and watch The Sopranos and hope that makes me grow the balls to get the McFuck outta there."

Ray laughed sadly. "Alrighty, good luck with that. Be well my friend, I'll be talking to you." He walked off, shaking his head in disappointment. He hopped in his car and hit shuffle on his music playlist. Dean Martin's voice came over the speakers. *Returrrrrn to meeeeee, Oh my dear I'm so lonely, Hurry back, hurry back...* Ray backed out and left, waiting a solid minute or so for both sides of the street to clear. He drove past the lot next door. *Retorna me, Cara Mia ti amor, Solo tu, solo tu, solo tu, solo tu, Mio cuore.* The song faded out. As he drove past, he spotted Christian's car backed halfway out of his space as numerous cars were waiting in line to go as well, leaving Christian trapped in his spot and unable to pull out.





# GET INVOLVED

The *Watermark* is UMass Boston's arts journal. We accept all kinds of creative works from poetry to prose to photography to visual art.

Check out our website,  
[thewatermarkjournal.com](http://thewatermarkjournal.com)

or send us an email at  
[thewatermarkjournal@gmail.com](mailto:thewatermarkjournal@gmail.com)

We're waiting.

