metaphor
Metaphor is Weber State University’s undergraduate, interdisciplinary journal, in its fortieth year of publication. The journal is staffed entirely by Weber State University students.

Metaphor accepts submissions in visual arts, poetry, fiction, and non-fiction from students of Weber State University.

Publications in Metaphor are chosen through a blind submission process. The author, or artist of each piece is unknown until the piece is selected for publication.

Metaphor is funded primarily through student fees and is distributed free of charge to students, faculty, guests at Weber State University’s annual National Undergraduate Literature Conference, and the community.

Copyright © 2021 is retained by individual authors and artists.

Printed in the United States of America by Advantage Color Graphics, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Metaphor
Weber State University
1395 Edvalson Dept. 1404
Ogden, Utah 84408-1404

Visit us on the web: www.weber.edu/metaphor

Book and Cover Design by Emily Hudson
I’m tired. I think you’d have to be anything but sane if you aren’t tired either. A pandemic, an election, environmental disasters, an insurrection—not to mention watching civil society wholly disintegrate outside your quarantined household’s windows whilst dealing with every other distinct personal issue—suffice it to say it’s been an exhausting 12+ months.

I know I’m not alone in this. I’ve spoken to other undergraduates whose mental health seems to be hobbling along just to reach the finish line. Prior to the lockdown, I was teaching ski lessons and following the wisdom of my parents by preparing to study abroad for one of my final semesters before taking the LSAT to go to law school. Then, the uncertainties of life swooped in to disrupt the superficiality and I had to wonder, “is this trajectory really the one for me?”

Since that self-evaluation at the end of last spring, I’ve had both the pleasure and challenge of serving as Editor in Chief in a purely virtual setting. It’s been difficult relying on less traditional methods to encourage students to participate and maintain all those integral aspects that make Metaphor journal, well, Metaphor. Those
late meetings sharing delivered pizza from The Pie Pizzeria over quality writing with colleagues and friends, rushing to edit those final pages on the cusp of a deadline—those are the moments of camaraderie we live for. Without those moments in our lives, work becomes drab and often meaningless, so I want to thank our section editors and staff editors for working diligently to keep it lively in this ‘labor of love’ we call *Metaphor*.

I have learned during this time of isolation that the lives we live and the art we make is meant to be shared. Our art is our pain and our pleasure. It’s our celebrations and it’s our losses. We publish pieces here at *Metaphor* not only because sharing one’s work is a cathartic experience, but it brings us closer together as a community of writers and artists that are sharing this similar human experience. The stories and works that find their way into this publication do so because of the honesty that resonates through it that you can feel it through the fascia to your bones. It’s because of this that each piece makes it in naturally, not by design. So, like every year, we encourage you young or up-and-coming writers to continue pouring your souls into your work and submitting them as a succor for the weary hearted.

I know, we’re all tired. Still, I’d like to encourage all of you who are struggling from the aftermath of the pandemic to look for support from friends, family, and professionals who can help sift through the trauma and emotions. More than once, I (and many others) have had to do the same because how can one write in the midst of a mental breakdown? Be honest with yourself, get the help you deserve, then, keep moving forward. The work you create now could help heal the hurt of generations to come, so please keep grinding and creating your art, as this pain is only temporary. I wish you the best in your endeavors and hope you enjoy celebrating these 40 years of *Metaphor Undergraduate Literary Journal* with us.

—Michael Ward, Metaphor Editor in Chief
For our annual publication of *Metaphor Undergraduate Literary Journal*, we were definitely surprised by the circumstances under which we’d have to prepare, promote, edit, publish, etc., by our deadlines. At times, I was worried that with our constraints, not only would the quality of work be diminished but that perhaps the entire publication would have to be put on hold until after the end of the pandemic. And yet, here we are, the 40th Anniversary of *Metaphor*.

On behalf of the *Metaphor* staff, our first extension of thanks goes to our advisor, Ryan Ridge. Without his help and expertise, navigating alone from a completely remote setting would have meant the end of Metaphor itself. Many of the roles and responsibilities that would have been held by many of us and others under normal circumstances were filled by him due to the limited contact on campus. Furthermore, his constant availability inside and outside of scheduled meetings made it possible to come to him with any issues that would be inevitably resolved under his guidance.

We also want to thank Emily Hudson and Taylor Klover, the graphic design team that has brought another outstanding design to *Metaphor* and brightened up our lives with this colorful cover in these dreary times. From digital posters to journal design—both inside and out—their professionalism and commitment to excellence is self-evident in the pages before you. Your help has been
an indispensably integral part of the 40th Anniversary issue, and for that, we thank you.

I want to personally thank the section editors who actively participated in the fall and were there to make sure their sections ran smoothly. I watched you grow from uncertain editors to knowledgeable guides that herded new staff members toward a pathway of success. Thank you for keeping this machine well-oiled, because I’m certain we couldn’t have done it with a less capable team.

Thank you to all the teachers who promoted virtual events and deadlines with campus being shut down. Even with the COVID-19 pandemic, we still received a record number of submissions for our Flash Fiction Contest, as well as other section submissions. We’re grateful for all that you do for us students and miss working with you face-to-face.

And, of course, thank you to all the participants who sent their work into the journal. Whether a piece of yours was accepted or not, we’re grateful for your effort and hope you continue to submit things that you’re working on into the journal and future contests. Even when a piece is just shy from being accepted, we still take pleasure from reading and looking at every single work that is submitted, so keep up the good work!
metaphor staff

FACULTY ADVISOR
Ryan Ridge

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Michael Ward

ASSISTANT EDITOR
Toban Barnes

CREATIVE ADVISOR
Faculty
Taylor Klover

GRAPHIC DESIGNER
Emily Hudson

SECTION EDITORS
Ambri Miller
Brenda Carrillo
McKinley Monson
Megan Nolan

SOCIAL MEDIA DIRECTOR
Christina Anderson

STAFF EDITORS
Alyssa Dove
Ambri Miller
Brenda Carrillo
Brianna George
Brittney Hancey
Christina Anderson
Emily Hiatt
Megan Nolan
Melanie Melgar
Paige Patno
Rebekah Bowman
Ryan Ross
Shondra Ekenstan
Trevor Burke
William Clarke
William Maxfield
# table of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POETRY</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Day at the Beach</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Blackburn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Distant Memory</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradi Jones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Microcosm</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradi Jones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Poem About Birds</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mckenna Delton</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Familiars</strong></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mckenna Delton</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Poem for December</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braden Anguiano</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>An Ode to the City Bus</strong></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zahran Austin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Et Portae Inferni</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Ward</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weary Warriors Wage War on Women</strong></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Ward</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feed</strong></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moran Harris</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Laundry</strong></td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marette McDermott</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mako Sica</strong></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abram Turner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ponytail</strong></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zachary Gomez</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Five Mantras for River Rafting and Other Daily Experiences</strong></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abram Turner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goldilocks</strong></td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abram Turner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Witch Kisses</strong></td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abram Turner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I Cannot Ignore the Sun</strong></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jade Hills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I Don’t Mind Losing</strong></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Noble</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kitchen Island</strong></td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Noble</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In-Between</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison Warnock</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My Girlfriend Crying on the Table</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dillon Harmison</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Memory of My Father
Hayley Litchfield

Seascape
Brooklyn Wilde

Thunder
Brooklyn Wilde

The Color of the Ocean is Black
Niklas Ross

Two-Zero-Two-One
Brenda Carrillo

Wild Child
Aubree Eckhardt

Too Much Fun
Aubree Eckhardt

Shark and Fish
Indie Blanco

Night Eel
Indie Blanco

Sophocles—Visual Poetry
Jacquelin Molina Guillen

The Force Behind All Things
—Visual Poetry
Jacquelin Molina Guillen

Buildings
Reed Brown

ART

Introduction
50

Luna Moth
Alyssa Velasquez

Untitled
Elizabeth Hovley

Untitled
Elizabeth Hovley

Untitled
Elizabeth Hovley

Untitled
Katelyn Shaw

Giraffe
Ashley Larsen

Zebra
Ashley Larsen

NON-FICTION

Introduction
65

Bringing Life
Brooklyn Wilde

Linear
Tori Montag

Snow and Flame
Reed Brown

The Feeling of Already
Reed Brown
FICTION

Introduction 82
A Lament of Ashes 83
Rebekah Bowman
Bystander 88
Liam Riechdan
Destin-y 91
Christina Anderson
Don’t Fear the Reaper 97
Taylor Jenkins
Glass 106
Madison Warnock
It’s A Military Thing, 111
Don’t Worry About It
Mara Kinney
Nightjar 114
Paige Patno
Out of the Blue 119
Allison Ala
Stardust 122
Arin Tooker
The Revolving Chamber 132
Taylor Bingham
The Sound of Silence 136
Allie DeCock
What Is Your Name? 138
Brooklyn Wilde
As a poet, I know how vulnerable submitting poems for potential publication can be. Poems can mean a lot of things to the poet as well as to the readers. As a team, we took special care with how we read and looked at the poems submitted for publication this year. We came to the conclusion that the poems we would select would be chosen for the readership in our community. We wanted to put together a poetry section of this literary journal that reminded us of the talent of our incredible undergrads.

Having the opportunity to read submissions reminded me of the components of poetry that inspire and motivate me to write. In particular, I was struck by what poetry can do for us. Poetry is an environment where sounds can be playful, intentional, and beautiful. Poetry is also a moment of time where the poet takes you somewhere or describes something or someplace or some feeling to you. As readers, we are offered words in a combination and tone meant for us to join it. Poetry is a welcoming and a farewell. All in all, poetry is where both the writer and reader go to enjoy, lament, laugh, cry, reminisce, hurt, heal, and feel.

Whether these poems reach your ears, fill your eyes, give you a taste of something special, or simply make it into your mind, I hope you will appreciate the gift of writing.

—Brenda Carrillo, Poetry Editor
A DAY AT THE BEACH

By John Blackburn

The crackling of fire
And smells of cooking meat.
The sand stretched before him,
Like rolling fields of wheat.

The buzzing of planes
Soaring overhead.
A taste in his mouth
of freshly baked bread.

Pings of metal,
Like the singing dinner bell.
The rushing of water,
Like his ear to a shell.

Bangs and blasts
Of fireworks from the sky;
So near they clog the ear
And muddy the eye.

His brother and friends
Jostled him now and then.
They were all packed together
Like cattle in a pen.
Ready to run
At the drop of a pin.
All of them waiting
For the race to begin.

Smells and sounds
Of a day’s summer fun.
They come to him again,
But now there’s no sun.

Terror grips him,
Like an eagle’s claw.
He’s now face down
On a beach, named Omaha.
Walking among the pale rocks that break and crack under my feet like thin sheets of ice, the shadows elongate, reaching out toward the horizon like dark fingers. My brothers and I walk the familiar path through the cliffs, even as the dark settles in, even under the black sky sprinkled with powdered sugar. Our mini tractor beams catch creatures in between the rocks and sagebrush. The cabin in the distance looks as if it’s aflame with all the lights on. The moon dives into black swaths of cotton and we run home, carefully but swiftly like track stars in the desert night. The dry air fills our throats like ice water until we reach the burning plaza. We tell stories that aren’t worth remembering, play games that we’ve long outgrown, and only cease when the coals glow dark and red like brake lights on a lonely dirt road.
Even
stars
are born
in clusters
connected from birth
swirling in cosmic distresses
fated to burn with forever
just like us it seems
together
apart
one
soul.
A POEM ABOUT BIRDS

By Mckenna Delton

Raptors hunt at the outskirts
of town. Perched on high posts-
how do powerlines feel
gripped in talons?

I caught a magpie in a rat trap.
Snapped shut on its skull.
Poor creature
flapped and trembled
not strong enough to escape.
Frozen in place, I could only look away.
I’ve gotten pretty good at that.

A great blue heron
at a city pond.
She seemed so out of place
among the encampments and weeds,
hunting rodents.
The great fisher
of western open waters-
belly full of rats.

I hear packs of coyotes
in the hills.
at first they seemed
to be getting
closer and closer,
now the yips are comforting.
They make me grin.
A break in the quiet
& the sound of crows.

The wildlife-urban interface
I’ve heard it called.
As if they aren’t
one and the same.
As if
we are
so different.
FAMILIARS

By Mckenna Delton

Maybe I’m too sentimental, but red berries frozen in place look like christmas ornaments.

I get small to see lichens & mosses on their level.

I found a tuft of fur full of white bones. It was a good omen.

An eagle rising above the smoggy soup. I played in the rocks, chasing bliss.

Soft earth bowed under feet. Jagged angles on the distant horizon, muffled by fog.
I’ve always hated the phrase “object of my affection,” but maybe i’m just a romantic.
I get lost wandering along spider-webbing trails too often for it to be by accident.

Time passes differently by lamplight. I get lost there too.

I read once: It is the familiar spirit of this place that inspires...

I might be hopeless, but I think we make an uncommon pair.

I’m soft - I look for birds they are my kindred spirits.

I choose to dance every day & be taken away by dreams.
A POEM FOR DECEMBER

By Braden Anguiano

Now is the season of longing
Our bodies become something strange
To walk around in and awaken
Deep in the afternoon and find nothing
But my breathing I was dreaming
     I was a crow but I could not fly
     The whole world was rooftops
     And skyline and soot-smoke

I’ve been away and I miss you
It’s easier to say when you are gone
I’ve been too long stitched into place
Between the stars Is it December on Mars? Would we call it so?
     The air is empty and clear
     And all the living heat
     Floats skyward and out

Something is falling tonight I saw it flash and disappear Perhaps we can return
To a place we have never been
I’ll not be the same as I was
Nor are we ever
     Oh well,
We only say half of what we want to say
We say “I love you”
  What we mean is
Stay
AN ODE TO THE CITY BUS

By Zahran Austin

Oh how wondrous you are to me
When I stand awaiting you,
At times upon a bench or in a glassy box,
Yet certainly beside a post of steel,
With a shining silver circle atop.
Standing still and anxious,
In blowing snow and ice,
Or crushing waves of heat,
And then I see you arrive,
Trundling o’er top the hill,
Gliding to a sonorous stop.
Open pop the doors,
To pristine warmth in winter,
Or the purest cool in summer,
And to seats so lovely and plush,
All the year around.
Oh my sweet chariot of steel!
My astonishing mode of conveyance,
Would only that you came more often,
That I might ride you with more frequency.
For to stand waiting,
Then granted miraculous access,
With but the wave of a card.
Oh how I love thee,
My marvelous, beloved, city bus!
ET PORTAE INFERNI

By Emily Ward

The road is timber cast aflame,
Alluring contoured path,
Ashen lay thy feet.
A sign without a name,
Embracing billowed wrath,
And inhaling embers.

Traipse thy shell, o’ Wicked Sinner.
Upon end unwinding fear,
Shadows heed the mighty roar.
Burst and burn fervent tinder,
The cadavers whisper clear,
Choking bolstered gore.
WEARY WARRIORS WAGE WAR ON WOMEN

By Emily Ward

Bellowing baffled buffoons through bumbling beards.
The bale of wicked women on summer noon.
Mighty temptresses in mighty garbs,
Fellows follow folly in fetching fae.
Din and dim haze of husky pipes betwixt quivering lips,
Teeth gnawing ends of stems and spurting quips.
Powdered noses sneezing through fur trenches,
Pale fingers slender and hasty with their grips
Of encumbered and bulking purses upon their hips.
Drunken and sunken, hallowed war-weary men—
Sweat-encrusted, rusted and busted over beds,
Strewn about moistened caverns in alluring song.
The gardens of Eden nestle between marbled pillars.
Soldiers no longer heed the invitations
And push through the pillars with burning temptations.
Battle fury and dread turn to ash upon the rising
Heat of their groins, planting deeply to forget
The faces of the men waiting beyond the gates.
Slain by their hands, they caress their caretakers,
Sighing at the brief relief of their inevitable deaths,
And they sign the treaties with the forsaken
Upon discovering immortal life in the gardens of Eden.
After Layli Long Soldier’s “Irony”

I wake to your body. You must have walked into my life fully formed. Autumn
I pick bushels of your red hair to store in a glass vase so our friends may see later
I hike trails on your body to find the dead vegetation so I may pluck it for you.
My feet leave imprints like wet sand. A
damp smell of
male rain
a musty whiff
of change. Death.
I am a
drooling mouth
not ready
for frost.
You
the cause, of
my hunger
chewing at your
nails like almond
slivers
to fatten me
up for
sleep.
But you,
have forgotten the insidious
ways
of Brother winter. And I must
push
at your
head to feed. Please feed
on me.
LAUNDRY

By Moran Harris

God kissed
us all, shortly before giving us up to the swollen
bellies of our mothers
before our eyes met the fluorescence of a hospital room.
And the lingering dampness
on our peach fuzz foreheads
is what his breath
smelled of that day.
Sadness, joy, regret. Who’s to say.
And our mothers
spent years smelling cotton t-shirts to know which child they
belonged to. No amount of Tide could mask
the lingering scent of emotions. The sweat we gave. The mark of
our God.
And when we go walking in August at dusk
and the hot motionless
air momentarily smells of fresh laundry of someone,
we are reminded of
something intangible that belongs to us all. Something anyone
could just stumble upon.
I bash my head into the puppy doggy mug
you’re ready to evacuate
    ejaculate
Fists on the road to show its no more
than a too tight drum
    stretched
But we’re off
to the Badlands, the mean ass Manlands
to escape Athena, or become her
a women in
    drag
Me on the side of the highway
you grasp my Towering Spires for balance
maybe for the
    Hell
of it all
My babydoll skirt can’t hide this scenic outlook
much too windy
You cum from behind, fish hook
me until im utterly
    gutted
All to remind me
that no mother
    bore us

MAKO SICA
By Abram Turner
Just a spring, from some head.

Yet still, we float back home with ease to suck the shards from a lonely morning meant for two.
Dear Grandpa,
The last time I saw you
Your hair was in a ponytail.
And my sister was graduating from college.
I wasn’t taller than you but I was taller than Grandma.
And you smiled so much it wrinkled your cheeks.

Dear Grandpa,
The first time I saw you I was too young to understand.
The pictures show you in your favorite green hat
And me in the blanket that Grandma made...
That you claimed to have helped with.
And in the one picture, I’m grabbing for a fistful of your arm hair.
Did it hurt?

Dear Grandpa,
The last time I saw you
You were drinking soda from the can
Your eyes were tired from the long drive from New Mexico
And your calloused hands were red and raw because you were
with the horses last weekend.
Your lips were getting droopy but your eyes never lacked their luster
Even if they look a little yellow from time to time.

Dear Grandpa,
The first time I met you
We were at your house.
You held me up on your shoulder so I could say ‘hi’ to the horses.
I remember that I had cried a lot that day. And when we went inside
I had the Buzz Lightyear ice cream you got especially for me
Because you knew that I was coming for the weekend.

Dear Grandpa,
The last time I saw you
You sat in our ugly green lawn chair while the rest of us
played volleyball
I was with family that you didn’t know
And you were talking to your sons because everybody else was
talking to my sister.
You wore your green hat with a matching bolo tie
And when I talked to you, you told me how Bear had lost his tail.
You’ve told it before but I liked it better this time.

Dear Grandpa,
The first time I laughed with you
Was when I noticed that your hair looked like the
Butt end of the horses
And I remember how I thought it was so silly looking

Dear Grandpa,
The last time I saw you
You were in the airport taking a plane back home
Because this time you were too old to drive
The security guard made you take off your hat
And put it in the gray bucket
As you walked through the gate.

Dear Grandpa,
I never saw you without your hat on before.
You still have no gray or white in your hair.  
I’ll appreciate that more when I get older.

Dear Grandpa,
Your ponytail swayed when you walked  
And it reminded me of the horses back at your house  
And I laughed a little bit.

Dear Grandpa,
Thank you for the Christmas money. Did you get our letter?

Dear Grandpa,
Did you get the stuffed bear our family sent?

Dear Grandpa,
I love you. We will be there soon.

Dear Grandpa,
The sky was a soft blanket of gray did you see it?  
I bet you did. I hope you did.  

Dear Grandpa,
You should see my hair now.
FIVE MANTRAS FOR RIVER RAFTING AND OTHER DAILY EXPERIENCES

By Abram Turner

I. The river is indifference embodied. It does not flow for you, and it does not flow against you. The river is indifference embodied.

II. The river flows always. There is no specific reason for the river flowing, and yet there are infinite reasons for why it flows. The river flows always.

III. Upstream always looks easier than it was. Rapids are dwarfed in size and debris is hidden from view. Upstream always looks easier than it was.

IV. The river favors no one. Boats may look better equipped than yours. But equipment isn’t competence The river favors no one.

V. Every boat floats for different reasons. Big, small, wide, thin, every boat moves for something Every boat floats for different reasons.
GOLDILOCKS

By Abram Turner

A golden mirage
enters the home of three bears.
She desires trouble.

Too hot or too cold?
The girl demands perfection.
No disappointment.

Why satisfy a
blonde thief’s incessant demands?
Who wins, exactly?

“What can we do with
someone who doesn’t take
us into account?”

“All we wish for
is a world where bears can live
in unending peace.”

The child destroys all.
Her hunger consumes her.
Nothing gets in her way.
June makes an entrance and decides it’s best that they center themselves. I long to see someone touch their faces. I miss the way they’re surprised when they recognized its features.

Do you remember the video you took of me? Gap in my tooth and two crossed eyes, do you Think they knew what they were looking at?

Rosewater-spit potions that dissolve People’s words about you What a way for them to go, wrapped in a love That they can’t be a part of.

Do you remember the painting we burned? Dripping like Jesus’ wounds Liquid sin that you could see your reflection in.

Brain gone, stains gone. Let me push my hands into your chest until I can’t see them anymore.
While I have always sought affection amongst the secrets of the night,
Sharing kinship with the shadows,
Relishing from the solitary sanctuary of it,

I cannot ignore the Sun.

Most thinking Icarus idiotic, and insane,
And yet I cannot imagine it so.
I think the idea was irresistible to imbibe himself with so much light.

Bursting into flame, he could not ignore the Sun.

Everyone expecting this energy so freely exchanged,
Can you not entertain the thought that it is a gift?
Do you not see everything it envelops?

We cannot ignore the Sun.

Even this moon and these stars that I revere,
Would not be as ravishing without the return of the Day’s Court.
If the final thing that I ever see is the Sun burned into my retinas, is that a loss?

I love this darkness, but I cannot ignore the Sun.
I DON’T MIND LOSING

By Miranda Noble

If all I lose is sleep, then let my sleep be fleeting. Let the hours tick on. Let imaginary sheep multiply. Let sun and moon and sun rise. If all I lose is sleep, then let exhaustion live as a reminder of my privilege.

If all I lose is sleep, while you lose life, lose freedom, lose safety mothers and brothers and family laughter and power and feeling, then let my sleep be fleeting.

Let it seem just out of grasp, so when the tally marks increase, let me carry my losses. Let me have room to help carry yours. If all I lose is sleep, then I don’t mind losing.
Three stools and swollen feet
—steps away from a couch—
we stand and smile and laugh.
As the clock on my oven reminds
us of the hours we have gone
without any sleep,

I tell you about how I got my
score on the Purity test
without ever dating someone
and you spark a conversation
about

God.

I think that moment was
something like religion.
It gave me purpose, a reason
to keep standing—barefoot on
the hard wood floor—even though
my feet were throbbing; it gave me
some kind of irrational determination,
a reason to endure.

KITCHEN ISLAND
By Miranda Noble
Somewhere there’s a meadow, the sun is gold and bright, with flecks of fairy dust caught in It’s tremulous, clean light.

This place is old and filled with thought, a place devoid of sin, Beyond the darkness that has always been. Far from danger and lit by summer’s dawn, A shelter from all that is wrong In the world.

It’s where the lost ones have gone. All with wild eyes and tender hearts belong— Petrified hearts with sorrow prolonged Find mercy here amongst overgrown weeds And willow trees.

Nothing is as it seems Or ought to be when frozen hearts are freed In this place for souls with futures unseen. For this place, our place, is the in-between.
I’ve heard a storm of noises
of every manner of horrible growing up,
from the crunch of my bones grinding
in their sockets of flesh
to the ringing of the stars
flashing in my eyes
as my face absorbs the impact
of a punch.

But no such noise
has brought me to my knees quicker
than the sound of my girlfriend
crying on the table.

Of her tears clawing at the banks
of an empty cradle, bitter in the wake
of the whirring machine.

Between the lines of birth and eternity,
a buzz and a growl,
the suck of a monster— hungry metal,
mosquito mouth violating
her body, her treasure, her gift of soul where

I kneel.
Thoughts blank as the unborn canvas painted
with her crimson cries—paper blind,
deaf, and quiet to the pleas

“save us!”

I don’t hear them, only the apology
in her gaze, that swallowing guilt

swallowing me.

Her silent stare at the ceiling
to ponder the void left
by monster teeth—
hand pushing with wonder
at the hole I

left in her.

What is a father to do? Without the body
of his child to mourn?

I can look
for no more cue than the rusted pain,
the confusion
my self-scorn.

Just hold her hand.
Just hold her hand.

And love her all the more.
“It’s all about the roots,”
My father tells me
When he explained how old
The trees are in the backyard.
How they stood
In the same spot for
Our whole life.
Unmoving,
Even in the strongest of
Storms— of wind and rain.
“If you don’t have roots—”
He shakes his head and smiles,
“You can only do so much
Without them.”

So I dig,
I dig in the
Moist brown dirt
To find mine,
My roots,
On my family’s tree.
I spend my whole life
Nurturing and
Growing them. They are the most
Precious thing that
I own—that owns me.
“It’s all about the roots,”
My father tells me
When he explained how old
The trees are in the backyard.
How they stood
In the same spot for
Our whole life.
Unmoving,
Even in the strongest of
Storms— of wind and rain.
“If you don’t have roots—”
He shakes his head and smiles,
“You can only do so much
Without them.”

So I dig,
I dig in the
Moist brown dirt
To find mine,
My roots,
On my family’s tree.
I spend my whole life
Nurturing and
Growing them. They are the most
Precious thing that
I own—that owns me.
My family’s aspen tree
Grows from the same
Root system
And has the roots
Of a spiderweb.
Weaving and connecting
SEASCAPE

By Brooklyn Wilde

For Christmas last year, I received a piece of art that struck a chord in my soul. A seascape of roiling waves—nature in its most intense beauty. To hang it, I bought a frame—simple and elegant and white. But once it was hung, I took it back down, quietly removed the white border, and hung the painting alone, for it felt too strange to try to frame the vastness of the sea.
My heartbeat matches the thunder.
Heavy. Slow. Rolling.
It’s not fair.
The clouds let loose. All the weight they carry falls freely.
Their burden is lifted. Their charge relieved.
The emotions I carry cannot be set free so easily.
Perhaps if I soak myself in it, some of it will be able to run off of me.
THE COLOR OF THE OCEAN IS BLACK

By Niklas Ross

People say the ocean is blue or green or some shade in-between, but you know that the ocean is black. You learned to swim in the northern ice, tossed into the dark by calloused fisher hands with the promise that they would not pull you out. Now you breathe ink and silence and sing with foghorns to lost souls on gray-stained wings. You speak in wet creaking wood and listen to the slow and dutiful lament of toothy blind things deep below. And you pull.

Your hands are frozen bundled fibers hauling nets filled with the apathetic clammy dead. The waves echo empathetic lethargy, a gentle waiting wake, whispering the tired hatreds of drowned mariners and vengeful whales. You pull, muscles tempered by sleet and wind, coils of determination to live and feed. The end of the world is mist-filled and treacherous. You pull. You pull.

A man came to you when you were grown enough and drowned you in a pig’s trough. His name was father, and your mother watched. He told you to say farewell, and you did. Tears frozen in filthy pig’s spit were punished, and when he brought you to the casket and set out into the wet warring halls of the ancestors, you kept your own counsel and did not speak. The cold seeped into your bones and shaped you in its image.

Silence is strength, yours and the sea’s. It breeds in you a stoic worship of red-scraped skin and frostbitten lips. It’s a worship of
uninflamed defiance, and it stands unmovably against the patient wet. You pull, others pull, there is only the creaking whispers of promised death. The ocean is black. You pull.
After Hanif Abdurraqib

The best part is when you and I
wander as we sit on the couch| You want
my scars to make you ache| Mostly,
you want my cold palms and a
warm meal on a plate| We meet year
after year with clementine feasts that
fill us with deeper feelings inside| I wish for the will
to keep sending the clouds away and not
let the shadowed sun gleam against rain| It hurts to kill
spiders who can’t know why they’ve scared me|
And our buzzing bodies begin to wonder when
God might smash shoes into our skulls, too| Will it
get more insane and unpredictable| Is
the world getting closer to being over|
They say art is the Window to the soul. But whose soul? The artists or the viewers? Often? Both.

The unique and wonderful thing about art is its ability to show perspective. Every artist is different and each has something unique to offer in their work. We are all human. Though we live such different lives we all feel similar emotions. And as we grow through our triumphs and struggles, the world comes into focus through paint to canvas or stylus to tablet. Art doesn’t capture these emotions, but people do through their pens, paper, photography, pottery, paint, and so many more. It’s in our creative nature to want to share those captured moments, it draws us closer and brings understanding. Art protects those memories and every time you see the image it transports you somewhere new. That is the great chase that all creators have: to capture the world in that new light, one angle at a time.

Metaphor welcomed many beautiful submissions this year. We appreciate the many perspectives artists here at Weber have to share. And we, as the art editors, are proud to publish some of those powerful pieces and how you will be inspired with us.

—Ambri Miller, Art Editor
LUNA MOTH
anatomy

actias luna 1758

3 - 4.5 inches

By Alyssa Velasquez
UNTITLED

By Elizabeth Hovley
UNTITLED

By Elizabeth Hovley
UNTITLED

By Elizabeth Hovley
UNTITLED

By Katelyn Shaw
GIRAFFE

By Ashley Larsen
ZEBRA

By Ashley Larsen
WILD CHILD

By Aubree Eckhardt
TOO MUCH FUN

By Aubree Eckhardt
SHARK AND FISH

By Indie Blanco
NIGHT EEL
By Indie Blanco
SOPHOCLES—VISUAL POETRY

By Jacquelin Molina Guillen

62  METAPHOR UNDERGRADUATE LITERARY JOURNAL
THE FORCE BEHIND ALL THINGS—VISUAL POETRY

By Jacquelin Molina Guillen
BUILDINGS

By Reed Brown
What can I tell you about this past year that you don’t already know? When reviewing the submissions for this issue, our team was surprised that we didn’t receive a single piece talking about the pandemic. Instead, during the loneliness of quarantine, we saw people turn inward and pick the truest, most absolute parts of themselves and work them into publishable pieces.

What does this say about us as humans? That in times of uncertainty, we’ll always revert to exploring our most formative experiences? Or are we simply looking for a distraction from the uncertainty surrounding us? How can we confront our past with no clear future ahead of us? On the other hand, how can we not?

Shirley Jackson said, “So long as you write it away regularly, nothing can really hurt you.” In our short section, our writers explore the best of what they can’t forget, and the worst of what’s hurt them—no pandemic necessary.

—Megan Nolan, Nonfiction Editor
I watch the water fall. I’ve always thought of water as bringing life. But now that the storm bears down on us, now that the hurricane has become real to me, I begin to see water’s dual power: it can also bring death. Out here, rainstorms are pretty typical. They’re sudden downpours that flood the streets with a few inches to half a foot of water. Within 30 or so minutes, though, the storm has blown through and the ground has absorbed all the moisture. It’s like it never happened.

This storm feels different, though, even in its beginnings. This storm is ferocious, ominous. I haven’t been able to keep up with the news as much as I would like, but Hurricane Harvey sounds dangerous to me. It is expected to bring a lot of water damage. It’s my first hurricane, too. I thought it wouldn’t hit us, but as the sky darkens and the water continues to fall, I begin to understand just how wrong I was.

I sit in a child’s room. My evacuation was last-minute. I live on a second-floor apartment 40 minutes from the Gulf Coast—I believe my home will be untouched, so I originally hadn’t planned on leaving. I got a call as the first rains began that I was being evacuated and I had 15 minutes to leave. I packed in haste, and I wish I had grabbed more books. I look out the window, watching the water fall. On quarantine, and afraid of the consequences of leaving, I watch the water fall for five days.

BRINGING LIFE
By Brooklyn Wilde
The first day is black, apocalyptic. The sky is darker than I have ever seen it, illuminated only by occasional balls of lightning crackling through the heavy air. I never knew lightning could be this bright. I don’t see too much water on the first day—but I hear it against the window, accented at times by thunder that shakes the whole earth and pierces my soul. Texas thunder is usually playful and rolling, sometimes chasing its tail in circles for 30 seconds or so, making you giggle at the sheer curiosity of nature. Not this thunder, though. This Texas thunder sounds like it is rending the earth and preparing to swallow me whole. This Texas thunder brings terror. The wind swirls and the news warns us that several tornadoes rage nearby. I’m amazed the power hasn’t gone out. The rain is whipped against the windows with such force I fear the panes will shatter, but they hold firm. I thank the strangers who took me in, grateful I don’t have to face this beast alone.

The days following the first are grey. I cannot help but be grateful for the light. The terror of the previous darkness subsides and the storm is not as angry as it once was. The water falls restlessly as the storm stalls to a halt over Houston. The clouds don’t let up, and they don’t pass through. I watch the water fall and fill up the ditches at the sides of the road. The ditches are as deep as I am tall, and five or six times as wide. I am stunned at how quickly they begin to fill. I watch the water spill over the edges and begin to cover the street—heading for the lawn. I watch, utterly helpless against the power of nature as the water reaches its sweeping, malicious tendrils towards the house. The water continues to fall.

The Texas earth absorbs as much water as possible but is soon saturated. The little damage that was reversed is again being done as the water keeps falling on the third day. My heart fills with agony, a sadness, dread, a sense of loss, and then anger. I pray for a
miracle, begging God and all the universe to end the destruction before the water reaches the houses. Especially the house of these once-strangers-now-turned-friends who have taken me in for the duration of the storm. I beg that their sacrifice not be made in vain. I pray for hours, I plead for days. I watch the water fall, never relenting. I watch several neighbors’ houses flood, houses that are slightly lower. I ask my new friends how we can help them, but there is nothing to be done. What would we do? Bail water out of the basement onto the lawn, only to have it flow immediately back inside? My efforts against water would be futile. I am angry at the world, angry that this could happen. This isn’t fair. Why must the people around me suffer with no way for me to alleviate it?

I watch the water rise for two more days. It reaches the porch and begins to rise some more. Two more inches and I know it will begin to flow inside. No towel could stop it from flowing inside. I become panicked, desperate. The rain has to stop sometime, doesn’t it? Finally, on the fifth day, I watch the rain stop falling. I am reminded of the story of Noah taught so frequently in the South, but there is no dove to offer an olive branch from God. There are no birds anywhere.

On the sixth day, the ground is able to absorb a little more water, and the neighbors’ houses are no longer filled with feet of water—there are only a few inches of floodwater left on the streets. For six days, and for months after that, I watched and learned of the true, destructive power of water. I now know of the death it can bring. Yet as I help strangers and friends and neighbors muck out and rebuild their homes, forging new relationships and beginning life anew, I am reminded once again of water’s potential to bring life.
I sit on the porch in the dark, listening to the rustling leaves, somehow comforted by the rumbling of my neighbor’s surround-sound below me. I remember trying to sleep some nights, my dad watching one of his old westerns or trying to live vicariously through reruns of his favorite NASCAR races. One of the first things he did when we moved into the house was set up his surround sound.

When I went off to college, he had tears in his eyes and gave me one of his signature hugs. It was so tight and so warm, I thought he’d never let go, and at that age going was all I wanted to do.

He didn’t have to marry her, a woman with three kids of her own already, but he opened his arms, and he let us in and became the dad I needed. Even after he divorced my mom, he always took me to dinner for my birthday, steak and crab legs, and he never let me look at the receipt. He told me it was rude to look when someone else was buying.

When I got married, he was the one who walked me down the aisle, not my birth father, not my mother, him. His backyard was made up to look like a fairyland, a home in which he lived separate from my mother. Then he married her again, years later, married twice to the same woman.

He was the first man, the only man, to ever bring me flowers—to my first play in high school. He never missed an opening night,
even when my mother did. He was at every recital, every performance, and always gave me one of his hugs.

When my sister called that day, I didn’t answer. I thought it was just another flare-up of family drama, a call to complain about my mother or ask for a favor, but when I called back, she was in tears.

“Dad’s dead,” she said, and the whole world froze.

We knew it was coming—eventually. Huntington’s never spares. It doesn’t have compassion or kindness, but I thought it might at least give us time.

Time, that huge space that we find getting bigger and bigger between visits, that monster filled with other things that keep us busy and away and separated from the ones we love. We don’t see it passing. We don’t count the days or months. We fill it with words like, “I can’t this weekend. I have too much to do, too much homework. I’m too busy. Maybe next time.”

He didn’t take me out for my birthday last year, I had other plans. Some months before, I can’t remember how many, he called me up and said, “Are you home?”

“Yes, what’s up?”

“I’m at your door,” he said, and then the knock came.

He played with the kids, ruff-housed with them the way I hated when I was a teenager. They loved it and laughed and watching the three of them smile together felt like bliss. His hands shook. He repeated himself, sometimes four or five times. He smiled and asked me how I’d been doing, and when he left, he gave me one of those hugs.

“He shot himself,” she said, “he’s gone.”
Gone where? He was always there. How could he have gone? We had so much time.

It was the 4th of July, and I had no plans that day. Couldn’t we have just made plans together? I had the time.

I dreamt about him that night—setting fireworks off at our old house—the one I had grown up in with him. He smiled and laughed with me and my mom and my sisters and brothers, with that stupid Fu Manchu mustache that made him look like Chuck Norris. He could have won a lookalike contest if he tried.

I was numb the next morning. I didn’t know how to feel. I went to work answering phones. I couldn’t afford not to. “Thank you for calling our clinic. How can I help you?” I answered every phone call with a smile. Halfway through the day, I just broke down and cried. I couldn’t explain where it came from. Nothing had reminded me of him; I hadn’t seen a name or smelled something familiar. It just came. This wave of grief poured over me that I had to swallow like cement when the phone rang again.

When I went to his house a few days later, it didn’t seem real. They said we had one week to get out, so there I was, packing away my dad’s life with my mom and my sister, both trying as hard as I not to cry. I didn’t cry. I’m the oldest. I had to be strong. For my mother and sister, I couldn’t start crying. If I started crying, so would they, and I couldn’t cause them that pain.

NASCAR models in cases and old CDs, Johnny and John, Trace, Neil, and Reba, they got tucked in boxes with old newspapers and kitchen towels. Then my mom found the shoe, the silver game-board shoe, and I heard her voice from the other room.

“I found your dad’s shoe,” she said, and held it out with a smile. It was always a joke we had—about my tiny dad. He was shorter
than me, with a truck three times too big. We laughed together. We laughed until we cried, and I promised to show my sister so she could laugh too. I still have it, that tiny shoe.

I felt like I was robbing him when I took the old Foreigner CD, but it was the only thing I wanted, so I could listen to “Jukebox Hero” on repeat and remember the day he introduced them to me. I remember being shocked that my old cowboy dad liked something not country, something that made me want to scream the lyrics in the car.

We packed up the shot glasses, almost a hundred, even though he never drank a drop in his life. He had one from every place he had ever been and every place we had ever been and every place anyone who ever loved him had ever been. We got him some from Ireland when my mom and I went. He had one from my old college and my trip to Vegas. They were little mementos, pieces of him that stared at me like tiny monsters asking why I never made time.

They say it gets better with time. Time, it seems like such a simple thing until it’s no longer there. So often we forget that time is linear; we can’t go back once it’s passed. Memories mock us. They dance in our heads and tease us like that last piece of cake we have to save for tomorrow.

I told myself that I would be strong at the wake. I wouldn’t let myself cry. I told myself I didn’t want to see him lying there in that long silver box under a tent in the scorching summer heat, because we couldn’t do it inside, state mandates and all. I was lying, of course, the moment his sister wrapped her arms around me and asked me how I was doing, everything broke. The mask I had to wear was suffocating, or was it the sobbing? My mom had put up a curtain so if you didn’t want to look, you didn’t have to. Near the
end I realized that I couldn’t not look. I hated open caskets, but I had to see him again. I went with his sisters; we held on to each other.

He looked older somehow. When had he gotten so grey? People often say they look like they’re sleeping, but I didn’t see it. My dad wasn’t sleeping. His skin was ashen, and I burst into tears when I saw where they had tried to fix his ear. He wasn’t asleep. He was gone.

We told stories at the mic—little stories we each had of him. I told people about the time he hid my mom’s glass of chocolate milk in the cupboard and forgot about it until a few days later when the house began to reek of curdled milk. He was always hiding things. You couldn’t leave the dinner table for fear of your plate going missing. He loved making people laugh. I miss his laugh and those bright blue eyes that sparkled with joy and mischief whenever he pulled a fast one.

A week later, when we went to bury him up north with his big brother, I sang one last time for him. I almost didn’t make it through. My voice cracked. My chest shuddered with the tears that tried to force their way through my heart, but I didn’t cry, not until I sat down next to my little brother who handed me a tissue.

After the guests left, we watched as they lowered him down, and all I could think of was how much I wanted one of his hugs. I wanted to hug him so tight and so strong, just like he had always done. I wanted him to think that I would never let him go, but it was too late, there wasn’t any more time.
SNOW AND FLAME

By Reed Brown

It was the first week of February. The sun’s warmth fought the cold air, leaving whatever snow was left in dirty patches. We each had a backpack full of supplies for our ritual: various candles, oils, and dishes wrapped as carefully as we could get, but they clinked together and made me nervous.

We left Dani’s house on foot after school. It was a longer walk than I expected over the clean sidewalks of Washington Terrace, a little borough of homes tucked away on a hill. Crossing the busy road at the corner, walking past the gas station, we headed down the hill. It was a long, curved drive that led to the busy Riverdale Road. Our destination was a stretch of trees that separated the hill from concrete and strip malls. We chatted about the ritual to come, excited and speculating the grove of trees we sought. Dani had been there before and assured me it was the perfect place. Reaching the trees, the two of us departed from the sidewalk and slid down the muddy slope, gathering leaves dead from winter on our shoes as we churned up the earth. We crept through the grass and twigs until we found the right spot, far enough from the noise of the cars, well hidden, cloistered in nature.

Dani and I had met in first-period history class. I wore a pentacle ring, a symbol for Wicca. It was a star in a circle that some viewed as Satanic. Dani wore a pentacle necklace that had the moon phases around it. She spotted my ring. I saw her pendant, and we clicked instantly. I had never done a ritual with anyone before, but Dani had done several with her friends from her old school. After
the fuss of Christmas was over and we came back to school, we decided to finally try something for the next pagan holiday, Imbolc.

Dedicated to Brigid, Goddess of fire and healing, Imbolc was when warmth returned to nature, thawing ice, making the earth wet and invigorated for spring. As we sat in her room poring over books in fading daylight, Dani told me how Imbolc was a good time to dedicate ourselves to the Wiccan Goddess and God. Her book said the dedication rite may attract animals. Her eyes lit up at this possibility. I pulled out my book, *The Spells Bible*. Inside was a simple spell called “Brigid’s Healing Well.” The spell described naming a stone for what ails you and placing it in water as a healing agent. That was the one I intended on doing but unsure of what kind of healing to ask for.

Once settled in the woods, Dani and I sat across from each other in the grass and dirt. Our bags opened and tools unwrapped, we carved into earth and mud, planting our candles. Threads of incense smoke took to the air, the slightest draft forcing them into curls.

“Earth the trees, earth the stones, earth our bodies,” Dani called the element to our sacred space. “Fire the light, fire our passion, fire our spirit,” she beckoned to the flame in everything.

“Air around us, air our breath... Water beneath us, water our blood...” I said on my turn. The words felt empty as they left my mouth. I felt nothing.

“Great Goddess, queen of the deep earth and seas, mother of all, come to us!” Dani next invoked. With closed eyes, her face embraced the sky and sun. With open arms, she took in the woodland glade. I still felt nothing. Forging on, we anointed ourselves with oil. Spicy floral notes joined the heavy sweetness of incense.
“We give ourselves to the power of the Goddess and God,” we said solemnly. “We henceforth walk your path, Lady and Lord. We dedicate ourselves to you.” Yet again, nothing. I was unmoved, no different than the nearby ice that defied the sun. None of these pretty words inspired me. I always failed at Wicca, and this time was no different. I desperately wanted to feel something. I was begging for a connection to the divine. Dani made it seem so easy.

We stood for the healing ritual, and I decided what to heal. We each found a pebble in the mud, and Dani led me to a little stream. It was a dark crack in the earth choked with dead leaves, but it would do. We privately prayed our wishes into the stones. I prayed to heal the doubt inside me. I prayed to feel and connect. We threw our petitions into fluttering waters, asking Brigid for healing. I looked at the stone now lodged in the stream bed and even doubted the removal of doubt.

Incense and candles were snuffed out. Ropes and twists of smoke escaped to the treetops. Candles and dishes were packed away. Last, I lifted the small cauldron between us, and Dani gave a cry. Several earthworms were rising out of the soil. It shouldn’t have been a surprise considering the mud, but there they were, pink and writhing up to meet us. Suddenly with echoing calls, a flock of geese flew over the treetops above us. We stopped to marvel at their flight formation and pointed beaks as they darted through the white sky.

“Earth and air,” Dani said with a smile.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m earth, and you’re air. It’s a sign. The dedication worked!”

We looked from the sky to the worms to each other. Dani grinned, infecting me with a smile. I believed her. Suddenly, a warmth
welled up inside me. We became giddy as we stood up. Bags in hand, we pranced through the grass and weeds in celebration. Our shouts and laughter scattered through the glade and broke against the trunks and branches. I had heard about ecstatic experiences before: Pentecostals speaking in tongues, born-again Christians losing themselves in worship, and now I felt it. Everything was alive. The trees were thoughtful watchers looking down on us. The white and brown of February was not drab, but vibrant and crisp. I was part of the forest. The earth, the sky, the plants, me, and Dani, we were all the same. We emerged from the other side of the woods to find the rushing cars and strip malls. The city lights could have been stars in the approaching dusk as far as we cared. In a town full of people, I felt love for each and every person. We were all children of nature, of the Goddess. Any frost or ice that restrained me melted away.
The first time you feel it is when you are eight. You and your friends are leaning back and forth on a swing set and sipping lemonade in June. Your plastic cup cracks between your sticky palm and the rusted chain of the swing, like a hiccup between all the laughter. The sunlight is warm, and it feels like honey in your hair and on your skin, but maybe that’s just dirt and sweat – but then the back door of the house cracks open just enough for the glass panel to throw the yellow light across the yard and across your fingers and across their faces, illuminating the corners of their mouths and the spatters of freckles and the long lidded eyes – and suddenly, your breath isn’t just yours, but something shared.

It comes like lightning, this creeping feeling that this moment is a still from a movie or that you have somehow been transported into a postcard from some other life. Yet, you are present. You can feel your heart beating and the heels of your sneakers digging into the ground. You hold still, trying to memorize the placement of your ankles and wrists and the silhouettes of brown hair flung back in the air – but it’s gone a minute later.

You go home when the atmosphere is lit by the fading blue breaths of the sun and the weak sighs of black street lights, and after your bike is tucked behind the garbage cans on the side of your house and you have kicked off your shoes and socks and gone inside, you ask your mom if she’s ever felt that way too. She tells you that it must be déjà vu.
“Day-shaw-view?” You ask.

“Déjà vu,” she gently corrects, “It’s like when you feel like you’ve lived through something before and you are living through it again. Even when you haven’t.”

“But why?”

“Don’t you think it could be God telling you that you are living your life right?” She pauses, looking back at you with eyes shaped like yours but in a different color. “Why else would we get that feeling?”

You are sixteen and in the first week of your high school French class, and your teacher explains that déjà vu literally means “already seen.” She writes it out with a red marker on the whiteboard, but you don’t bother to copy it down. You aren’t going to forget. You know the feeling well enough by now, like from the Sunday morning your sister burst into your bedroom begging you to get up-getup-getup because she wants you to make pancakes for breakfast – or even that October night when you saw the way the empty tree branches reached into the moonless sky and felt a chill settle in your bones and in the breath that you knew then was only yours.

The girl who wears too many rings turns to you from one seat over and asks what you think of it.

“Of what?” You ask, her pencil rolling from the edge of her desk into the gray sea of carpet below.

“Déjà vu. What do you think of it?” She says this so casually that it makes you nervous to tell her what you think, because it only occurs to you now that it might be weird – but you don’t know what else to give her except for your honesty, so you tell her.

“I don’t believe in God,” she responds before adding, “But I guess I like the idea of the universe offering some sort of signal, like, it’s nice to know that you are meant to be.”
Meant to be, meant to be, meant to be – you carry that mantra with you through the next few years. The feeling of already comes and goes. You wait for it to come when he takes hold of your hand. You wait for it again when he kisses you at your old school. It finally appears the day you are sitting in the passenger seat of his car and you have the courage to say, “No, we are not meant to be.” It is hard to forget the way you feel with the taste of blood on your tongue and the way you don’t cry when he does, but he leaves, and it all aligns.

It’s not all waiting, though. It catches you at random the summer you visit Seattle and you’re in a car high above the city lights, and your brother is next to you and he’s humming the chorus of his favorite song. It even comes when it shouldn’t, like the night after graduation when you let a deranged pair of scissors cut more than you wanted, and the ends of your hair hang just a breath below your chin – or the moment you step in the house of the boy who dresses exclusively in jeans and band t-shirts, the boy who sometimes plays songs on the guitar for you. The plan is to watch Star Wars with him and his family, and you’ve never gone inside before – but there’s a familiarity to the color of the walls and the gentle tilt of his chin, and it’s the way the dim light falls in his hair and the angle that he leans against the doorframe. Even though you know he will be far out of reach in a matter of months, this first moment is yours for the second time – and it says softly: meant to be, meant to be, meant to be.

The memory unit of your psychology class tries to explain the phenomena of déjà vu. Their definition blends up parts of the brain, disorders, and clinical explanations of memory and familiarity, yet it still lacks exactness. Though the ideas of fate and divine affirmations are scientifically rejected, no one can say where it all comes from. You learn that there’s a chance that it’s a trick of the mind,
but you choose to believe what you have felt. You choose to believe what your mother said to you all that time ago.

I look at the people and moments that are mine to have only now, and I hope that they will return to me for a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth time. If there can be a now, there can be an again. I still repeat my mantra and I still welcome the feeling of already. It comes with both purpose and reassurance, because everything in my life has led up to this moment exactly and it is meant to be.
“There are only two worthwhile things to leave behind in this world of ours: children and art,” said Stephen Sondheim. In this section, words are the medium and the page is the canvas. What is writing, then, if not one of the deepest and longest lasting contributions one can give this life? It is through writing that we can speak the thousand words that pictures wish to say. It is through writing our stories that we can give a part of ourselves back to the world.

We thank every talented writer that has graced our minds with a part of their soul. We truly enjoyed reading each selection as we considered how the language of these stories influenced our outlook on the world. The pieces selected this year were stories that broadened our view of life and made us think differently about what it truly means to be human. In this section, you will find topics ranging from the complexities of death to the simple conflicts of daily life. We found these stories are striking and captivating, exploring many aspects of life. Thank you to everyone who has left a part of themselves here, in this year’s edition of Metaphor.

May you find greater perspective as you read this section, perhaps with inspiration to write your own story to leave behind.

—Marette McDermott, Fiction Editor

The day I see my sister dead is the day I finally understand. My other sisters carry her body through our forest, faces wet. It doesn’t look like her anymore. Her limbs are burned to stumps, the ends gnarled and black with soot. Her hair—once long and silvery green—is gone. The skin of her scalp is flaking off, her face caving in.

I wish it was raining right now. She always loved the rain. But no—instead, ash rains from the sky, sticking where it lands. It coats the leaves, weighing them down. Branches heave and snap. Each break is a blow to my sisters and me. We feel the pain deep in our heartwood. Jagged.

It hurts.

Almost as much as it hurts to see what’s left of my lifeless sister.

This day is the day I understand that it will only get worse, the hurt. It will burn me up in the end, along with everything I love.

***

Years ago, I was a sapling. My sisters taught me how to be a Guardian of our forest. Each day, I looked up at the silver branches twisting into the sky like spires and fell silent with wonder.

This was my purpose. This was my treasure.
I walked with my sisters over the roots that braided themselves over the soil. We wove our protective threads between the trunks, letting them trail behind us. I didn’t know how the threads worked, or what they protected the trees from, but I thought I didn’t need to. Whatever evil we were warding off could not come here. Not among the threads and the roots.

The threads were strange material. They were ethereal enough for us to walk through, but real enough for us to handle. How something so delicate and spider-silk thin had the power to protect our forest, I had no idea. All I knew was that the threads worked. Once, when I asked my sister Ginkgo where they came from, she told me our mothers wove them in their sleep. The next morning, she took me to gather them from the still forms of our mother-trees, unraveling them from the spindle-twigs around which they were wrapped.

I had much to learn. I was the youngest back then. It was important that I know how to bend the threads just so, how to walk soundlessly through the silver halls of the forest, how to read the patterns written by the wind and rain to know where to thread, where not to. Where to double-wind the gossamer, where to string it in the branches.

One day, everything changed. It was the first ash day I ever saw. The flakes caught in our hair like snow.

“What is it?” I asked my sisters.

Pine knelt and sifted the soil between her dark fingers, looking at the flecks of white.

“Ash.”

I looked at my oldest sister in wonder, but Ash chuckled. “No, no. They aren’t trees. At least, not anymore.”
I didn’t understand. How could a tree stop being a tree? I thought. How could a tree end? A tree lives longer than anything else in the world. A tree is as close to eternal as nature can get. “Don’t expect her to understand,” Aspen whispered to Pine, eying me. She thought I couldn’t hear her, but her voice always carries.

“When should we tell her, then?” asked Pine.

No one answered her question. I wished they would. I may have been just a sapling, but there was nothing for me to fear as long as my sisters were with me. To prove this, I straightened my back and folded my arms, glaring at Aspen the way she likes to glare at the rest of us.

“We can’t baby her forever,” Ash finally said.

“She’ll have to know one day, if she is to be a Guardian,” said Pine. I looked at Aspen with wide, expectant eyes.

She folded her arms. “Fine. Birch will come with us to see where the ashes are from. But don’t come crying to me when she wakes you in the night, begging for comfort from her nightmares.”

Suddenly, I didn’t want to go. Not if it meant nightmares.

But my sisters Oak and Fir took their places beside me, handed me more thread, and offered me smiles. Maybe everything would be all right. Maybe.

It took two days to reach the edge of our forest. As we walked, the world grew ever greyer and ever darker. And when we finally arrived at the eaves, my heartwood went cold.

The ashes here blanketed the ground, like there’d been a blizzard of them. I batted flakes out of my hair and watched them fall around me. There was something else, too. A smell. Something that made me wonder if trees really were eternal.
It smelled like death. I coughed.

Hands patted my back, but I kept coughing. The death smell thickened in the air with the ashes, everything turning heavy and bitter. My eyes stung.

“Look,” said Ash. I did.

On the horizon, there was light. Bright as the Mother Sun, but nowhere near as kind. It sent up flurries of golden specks. Its breath glowed red and it spread, flooding the fields beyond our forest. It raged, climbing high, reaching for our trees.

My sisters spread along the eaves of the forest, spinning threads back and forth across the trees, from roots to trunks. The threads doubled back each other, surging in bright moonlight where they crossed. We were spiders weaving a shield. We were the only thing standing between the forest and that horrible death on the horizon.

I rushed to help.

“It’s part of the Fading,” Ash said to me as we twisted our threads together. “The Fading that will come in the end. The Fading we will fail to stop.”

“We’ll fail?” I asked.

She nodded once, jaw tense. I didn’t know if she was angry, defiant, or resigned. She wrapped our twisted threads around a beech tree even as the heat of the fire—that was what my sisters said it was called—began to graze our backs. “In the end, we won’t be strong enough.

Those who spread the flames are many, and they will only grow in power until we are nothing against them. No matter how many threads we weave, we will fail before the Fading.”
“Then why do we try?” She didn’t answer me.

On that day, we wove enough threads to keep the fire out. The day after that, we wove enough threads to cleanse the waters. And the day after that, we wove enough threads to lift the haze from the air.

But as I worked with my sisters to protect our home, I wept. I wept for my trees because I knew now that they were not eternal.

***

I understand now.

The Fading is here. It’s time for us to fail.

With Ash dead, we are less powerful. Every day is a battle. Only a few days after Pine found Ash burning at the edge of the forest, Pine herself was lost to the fire. She was our most powerful. Our ever-vibrant one.

And then it only gets worse. We lose a sister every day. We lose saplings.

We lose trees.

We fall back as acres are lost to our enemy. We shake with thirst because we cannot drink the water that has turned to poison. Our arms grow thin because our Mother Sun is kept from us, obscured by clouds of smoke.

I want to die.

I want to wrap my arms around my mother birch tree and burn with it so neither of us will be alone.

But Aspen won’t have it.

“More! Weave more!” she shouts even as she rushes back and forth, trailing her threads.
Moments later, her white paper skin is aflame and cracking.

We’ve all agreed on what to do if we’re taken. Now, Aspen walks past us, leaving her sisters and threads and trees behind. She goes to meet the flames.

Next, Yew falls. Her berries spread like blood in her wake as she goes to meet her death. Next is Rowan, a sapling, glowing bright as her smile as she dies.

After it takes Rowan, it latches onto me.

The fire catches my hair. I drop my threads. I leave all that I love behind because that is the only way to save it—if saved it will ever be.

The flames glare in my eyes. Bare their sharp teeth. Then they cover me.

I collapse.

I scream and weep as I am devoured.

Before I become only ash, before I become only pain, I look back at my forest. My dying, beautiful forest and my dying beautiful sisters.

My purpose, withering.

I lay my head down on the scorched ground.

And I see it. It’s one of my seed pods, fallen from my ruin. It was supposed to take root and grow into a daughter who would take my name and my duty. Then I would have become one with the trees, my wakened time finished. As I slept, I would have dreamed threads into being.

They would have spun themselves on the tips of my twigs to be gathered in the morning. To be used to protect the eternity of the forest. My daughter would have trailed these threads. She would
have guarded me with my nieces. The life of the forest would have gone on.

In the heat, the ragged column opens. The tiny seeds fall out, splaying on the dirt seconds before ash descends, obscuring them. Protecting them.

All around the forest, I know that the dying trees are dropping their seeds. The ash is burying them, keeping them warm.

I can no longer weep. I can no longer breathe. But I can think one last thought. And it is gratitude for the eternity of trees.

My vision turns red with flame and I diminish to nothing but ashes.
Bystander

By Liam Riechdan

Here given is a journal entry from one George Lydale, one of the original settlers of the Durham Colony. May his soul rest in God’s infinite grace.

Monday, August 23, 1610

Today I fear for my soul. Why in the lord’s great name have I been forsaken like this! Left here in this doomed colony to be devoured by beasts and demons; to be left rotting in the streets like so much carrion for the filthy vermin of this land! This land belongs to the Devil, that great snake who desires to swallow the world in its entirety! I write now for fear of losing myself to these accursed memories, these sights which haunt me endlessly. Forgive me, Lord, for bearing witness to such evil.

Scarce two hours past, I recall being awakened by the terrible crashing of glass which called from beyond my window. The fog of sleep clung stubbornly to my mind, resulting from my attending the late sermon - if only it had clung deeper still as to restrain me to my rest! - and it was a slow rise from bed to the window. Curse my bleeding curiosity! I could not resist peering through to ascertain what the source of the commotion may have been. O! My eyes and mind have paid the price, and I fear that I, too, may join them!

Down in the street, crouching in the darkness of night, I spied a peculiar figure, seemingly too large and monstrous for this world, who appeared to be deeply entranced by some organic mass—the
contents of one’s chamber pot I assumed O! How wrong I was! –and thus decided to take a closer look. Naturally, I came to the conclusion that I would be wise to bring along my flintlock rifle, my most trusted companion, and trepidatiously ambled down to the ground floor. I fancied myself as some sort of assassin in how quiet I was, though in looking back, I can see just how foolish I must have appeared had any onlooker been present. Nonetheless, I pressed myself against the door to the street, finding myself experiencing terrible shivers that coursed through my body.

To add to my foolishness, I ignored the foreboding sensation and proceeded to slowly open the door, poking my head from around the corner in order to take a better look. Curse my infinite stupidity! Upon looking through the crack in my door, I was once again struck by an intense foreboding, though this bout was sufficient to send my head careening and toss my whole frame upon the floor. The result was a terrible crash that seemed to echo throughout the whole of Durham! Curse! Even the men up in Fort Hurley must have noted my fall!

I scrambled to my feet as quickly as was possible, clutching my rifle in my hands, but was stopped cold as my eyes met with its own. I found myself entirely unable to move, trapped by a fear greater than any I had ever known or likely ever will.

The eyes blazed a demonic fiery yellow, shedding a terrible light of their own on the deformed face of this creature who looked nearly human but for the elongated snout and sickeningly sharpened teeth, which protruded from the jaws so as to form a mess of bloody spikes which champed upon the organic mass upon the ground. The creature hunched over the lump, its thick, muscular frame blocking it from sight, but as it rose to its full height, which I suppose was close to three meters, to face me, it was plainly exposed for me to see.
Lying in the street, being torn apart by the creature’s talons and devoured, was my dear Katherine. A terrible cry rose up in my throat, but I lacked the power to let it loose. The creature continued to gaze at me, staring into my eyes, as it feasted upon her corpse. It seemed to enjoy my company, or more accurately, my anguish. I know not for how long I stay crouched there, frozen in fear, nor do I remember mustering the will to raise the rifle towards the creature, but I remember clearly the thundering sound of the gunshot. A demonic cry went up from the creature and I watched it flee towards the forest with such great speed as I have never seen any creature on God’s great Earth inhabit.

Still, I sat there. I believe I may have vomited a couple of times, but at length, I came to my senses and ventured to investigate the remains of my love, which lay just beneath her shattered window.

I shall never cease to curse my pitiful existence! Why would my God, master of all there is on this good Earth, send such a creature just to torment me? For though the creature crouched there, clawing and gnawing at Katherine’s sweet flesh, never once did it consume any of it.
My friend Shari, the one who’s been dancing the Al Anon two-step for the past year, tags me in this post from our local tourism board. “Save Destin! Bring the tourists back with a new city slogan.”

I text Shari:

- Isn’t it enough that I give these people my body? Now they want my thoughts, too?

- Melodramatic much? You’re a bouncer, not a prostitute.

- Everyone’s a prostitute in a tourist town.

I rub a finger along my most recent scar. The bastards got my face, right on my temple. The gash healed fine, but the skin is still puffy, white, and numb.

- Fuck ‘em. I would rather watch the whole town burn than get stuck at another Spring Break blitzer. Let Trampa babysit America’s degenerate college kids for once.

- Lucky’s Rotten Apple is offering a whole year’s worth of free wings and beer to the winner.

***

I take a swig of my drink and a crack at these slogans.
Destin, why not?
Destin, just don’t ask “y”
Destin Manifestation
Add Destin to your Manifest
Destined to infest your heart

Are these terrible or just shit? I’ve written weirder things on a sticky note before. Maybe the plague is meant to wipe this place off the map. More importantly, why don’t they sell Four Lokos in a forty ouncer?

***

So a few minutes later I’m parked outside Lucky’s Rotten Apple with one flip flop on the board of my moped when Jimmy barrels down on me with this shoebox. It’s one of those middle school projects, a diuretic, or something, the kind where you peep through a pinhole. He says does this seem Destin-y to you? I say I dunno what exactly Destin-y is. He says yeah you do. I scrunch my mouth up and gaze under the lid. It’s a goddamn masterpiece.

There we are, two grown men in a parking lot staring into this banged up New Balance box at a perfect replica of everything that Destin stands for.

Is this colada scented, I ask. He says yeah, I got a spritz from my mom’s purse.

***

Besides Shari, who’s already ponied up to the bar top when we walk in, the place is desolate. Jimmy’s got the diuretic tucked under his arm like the nuclear football. I still can’t believe how realistic those seagulls are. And the broken bottles on the beach? Masterful.
Shari’s got one of those tiny putt-putt pencils and she’s scribbling furiously on a stack of coasters. Some of it is slogans, some’s statistics, and the rest looks like her grocery list.

JC, Jimmy’s cousin and the second-best bartender in town, has my pint ready for me before I even sit down.

This is what our town is about, I say, holding the beer up to eye level. Symbiosis. Everyone just getting everyone else without having to wade through all the image bullshit.

Shari says I’m stretching it. This town is about fun, she says. Just… not fun for us.

Jimmy says that one gets his vote for most soul sucking slogan.

Shari says she’s just getting warmed up. She asks did we know that Mimi Barnes came up with a vacuum that polishes gunk off sand? Originally it was meant for Deepwater Horizon oil oopsies, but apparently it works for disinfecting, too. She says she saw them hoovering up the sand on the beach last night. It’s clear and clean and sharp as glass. There’s a slogan there somewhere, stuck between my teeth, she says.

I say no need, Shari, It’s already over. I wipe foam off my lip with the back of my hand. I say Jimmy’s got it all summed up.

***

We take turns blowing into the authoritarian crazy straw strapped to Shari’s steering column to get her car started. Shari drops off our collective works at the fake lighthouse that serves as tourism HQ. Fifty four coasters, my sticky note, and the diuretic. We wait three weeks before we hear anything back from them.

***
Apparently a diuretic is a diorama, and a diorama isn’t a slogan. This place is as good as dead.

***

Those assholes kept the diorama!

***

This time Shari’s car gets going on the first blow. Jimmy storms into the tourism office and demands they give us back our intellectual property.

I stand by the door with my arms deadbolted across my chest and my best come fuck with me look in my eyes.

The woman at the information desk clacks her venom green acrylic nails together, battle-ready.

Shari jabs her putt-putt pencil at the monstrous woman, punctuating her sentences with the miniature stake. Shari says we’re still here, and we want what’s ours!

The woman scuttles off, presumably to get our things, or the cops.

***

Some numb nuts from out of town wins the contest, so no one even gets the fucking wings. I swear when my stimulus check clears I am moving to Ohio.
Seek & Seek

She found no solace crashing in her bed of hypodermic needles. Needless to say, it was a sore subject for her.
Hurricane Party

A hurricane walks into a bar.

A bar staggers into an adult store.

An adult store shimmies into a Tapas joint.

A Tapas joint cascades into a bike kiosk that rolls into the two-lane highway across the beach from the motel breezeway where you’re hunkered down because Erika locked your cheating ass out.

A hurricane just keeps walking.
How do you want to die?"

Four young girls sat in a circle on the living room floor, faces illuminated by tiny flashlights. They were supposed to go to bed hours ago, but due to sugar-induced excitement, they found sleep unattainable.

They all gasped at the question, turning to face the girl who had spoken up. “What’s wrong with you, Jenny?” One of them asked, jaw dropped.

“Yeah,” a girl with braces chimed in. “You’re so morbid.”

Awkwardly, Jenny tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Have you guys never thought about it? About, like, what might happen?”

The braces-wearing girl scoffed. “No! Why would you think about death when you’re alive?”

“It’s just interesting,” Jenny defended. “If I could pick, I’d like to die in my sleep.”

“So would everyone,” another girl muttered, burrowing into her bright pink sleeping bag.

The other girls followed suit, suspecting the end of the night. Though her friends were deeply disturbed, Jenny continued, saying, “Or maybe I wouldn’t. Can you imagine going to sleep and never waking up?”

DON’T FEAR THE REAPER

By Taylor Jenkins
“Stop it, Jen,” a girl whined, her flashlight shaking with her fear. “You’re scaring me.”

“It’s not real,” Ms. Braces snapped, shooting Jenny a glare. “Calm down, Maddie. You’re not going to die in your sleep.”

“At least, not tonight.”

Maddie erupted into tears, so while Braces yelled at Jenny, the other girl comforted their friend. Off in a corner of the room, unbeknownst to all the girls, a shadow resided, silently listening to their conversation.

Jenny, much like the majority of humanity, wished for a simple death—an easy death. Unfortunately, a small fraction of them would actually receive it.

At the thought, the shadow gripped his scythe a little tighter. He had seen all kinds of different deaths; some of them he performed himself. He had seen all kinds of people. Some of them were old and lived long, fulfilling lives.

Other victims, however, were children, no older than Jenny and her friends. They died at birth, or of defective organs, or because of their own parents’ choices.

Those deaths were always more difficult to stomach.

The reaper winced as he walked over to the circle of girls, still arguing. None of them could see him; he was much like an angel in the sense that he was invisible to mortals. But unlike an angel, he was here to bring despair and suffering.

He looked down at the crying girl, nearly reaching out to dry her tears. Her life flashed before his eyes, showing him every single detail, no matter how painful.
He saw her learning how to ride a bike. Attending the doctor for the first time and being given an inhaler. Poor girl, so in love with the outdoors but held back from her asthma and heavy allergies.

The reaper also saw her parents fighting, both physically and verbally. The girl cowered in the corner, covering her ears as she cried. But no amount of crying could drown out the sound of yelling.

The girl’s father might not have given her much, but he certainly gave her his weak immune system and bad heart.

In an instant, the reaper saw everything. It was a shame he was about to end everything too.

Very softly, he touched the girl’s head, almost whispering an apology as he pulled away. Immediately, she began to cough, her breath cutting short.

The other girls went quiet, their panic rising as their friend choked. “Maddie, are you okay?” They asked, frantically shaking her and scrambling around for her inhaler.

But Maddie’s inhaler was nowhere to be found. She had forgotten it at home.

The reaper backed away into the shadows when the parents burst into the room, rushing over to Maddie. The mother called for an ambulance, while the father began to give her CPR. Everything was chaotic, sirens soon adding to the sound of screaming.

The reaper could practically count on his hand the seconds the girl had left. He didn’t want her to die, but her time was up. Maybe now her parents would finally appreciate her.

Finally, the paramedics arrived, pushing and pulling at themselves to reach the little girl. The reaper walked over to their side, watching as they desperately tried to bring her back. He knelt by
Maddie’s side, reaching out to touch her shoulder and wake her up.

In an instant, Maddie’s soul separated from her body, a faint ghostly outline to show who she used to be.

She jumped, eyes widening at the sight of the reaper. “Who are you?” she said shakily. “What’s going on?”

The reaper took Maddie’s hand and helped her stand, motioning down to her leftover body, devoid of her spirit. The paramedics pulled this body onto a gurney, and Maddie reached out to herself helplessly. “Come with me,” the reaper said, his voice deep. “I’ll take you to someplace better.”

Contrary to mortal belief, there was more than one reaper taking victims’ souls off to paradise. When faced with a world as big as Earth, death was a serious job to take care of. No soul could be left behind.

There had been times where the reaper hadn’t been able to follow through with killing. These instances always included children; people who didn’t deserve to die just yet. He had always been punished accordingly, but nothing ever made him comfortable with the act.

He had witnessed every death under the sun: car crashes, murders, even the painfully slow sicknesses. He had listened to friends and family realizing the inevitable, had to hear them break down. Each one hurt him even more.

The reaper’s hand tightened over Maddie’s at the thought. No one was safe from death. Not even her.

He led her away from the ambulances, and eventually, the wailing sirens drowned out. The flashing lights grew dimmer and dimmer, until they all but disappeared. Maddie resisted for a second, asking, “What about my friends?”
“It’s not their time,” he answered, keeping his grip on her hand tight. Once or twice, he had accidentally let go of spirits, and they shot back to their bodies so fast they actually brought the victims back to life. Doctors and families called it a miracle, when it was in fact, an accident.

“I don’t want to die!” Maddie cried, trying to dig her heels into the asphalt. She wasn’t whole anymore, and her feet merely passed through the ground.

“This is for the best,” the reaper continued, almost robotically. He had said these words so many times, it was starting to exhaust him. “You’ll be happy now, child. No need to worry.”

Maddie opened her mouth to scream and argue, but then the rest of the world suddenly faded away. It was like a veil was ripped from her eyes, allowing her to see everything.

The reaper led Maddie into a small clearing, almost like any other forest. But unlike the regular greens and browns she had seen so much, everything here was black and white. Tall, towering sycamore trees walled the circle on all sides, preventing her from any kind of escape.

If there even was one anyway.

The reaper released Maddie’s hand, gently pushing her away. “Go have fun,” he suggested. “We need to wait here for a moment.”

Before a soul could be judged, they had to wait for Death to determine their life and good works. Though tedious, the wait could last as long as hours. After all, Death had a lot of souls to go through.

Tears welled up in Maddie’s eyes, but before she could start sobbing, another black clothed skeletal figure entered the veil, holding a leashed dog. He promptly set it on the ground, and in a flurry of barks and fur, the dog bounded over to Maddie.
Her tears of sadness faded into happiness as she giggled and pet the puppy, seemingly forgetting her present situation.

The newcomer walked over to Maddie’s reaper, sarcastically remarking, “What a coincidence seeing you here again!”

At the greeting, the reaper sighed, wishing he’d be alone. His mind raged continuously, preventing him from focusing on a single thought. The last thing he needed right now was an unwanted visitor.

The newcomer—who had named himself Damon after a soul he had known—was the absolute last person he wanted to speak to. Reapers didn’t have names; they didn’t need them. Damon naming himself was just another way of proving he was better than everyone else.

“You say that every time,” the reaper muttered under his breath. “It’s not funny.”

Damon shrugged, his bones clicking together. “I think it is.” With a skeletal finger, he pointed over at Maddie’s spirit. “What happened to her?”

The reaper stiffened, yet answered, “Asphyxiation. She couldn’t breathe and suffocated.”

“Ouch. That’s a rough one. Fluffy here just got hit by a car, poor dog.” Damon leaned on his sickle, adding, “I don’t know why we even take dogs’ souls. They all go to paradise anyway.”

The reaper nodded, hoping that would end the conversation. Maddie had died in an incredibly sad way, but there was always worse. Always.

Damon waved a hand in front of the reaper’s face. “Are you okay? You seem out of it. I mean, I know this can be boring, but—”
“I’ve been thinking,” the reaper interrupted, lowering his voice to keep Maddie from hearing.

Damon laughed. “That’s not good.”

The reaper’s hand clenched over his scythe, annoyed by Damon’s blatant disregard. “I’m serious. Our job is to kill people. We end their lives in an instant, do we not?”

“Hey, we only carry out the deaths. We’re there to take the souls off to paradise and all that jazz. What’s your problem?”

The reaper had never been comfortable with killing. Everyone else told him that it would get easier with time, but he didn’t believe them. Still, he stayed and did his job because that’s what was expected of him.

But now, especially with Maddie, he couldn’t handle it anymore and spoke the words that had been swirling around in his head for centuries. “My problem? My problem is that some of them weren’t ready to die! No one is ready to die, but we kill them just like that! Don’t you ever feel anything?”

Damon thought for a moment. “Like what?”

The reaper exhaled slowly, casting a sideways glance over to Maddie. “Like . . . maybe we’re doing the wrong thing? That death isn’t such a good thing after all?”

Damon scoffed. “Are you kidding? Death is amazing! You should feel honored that you’re a part of it. Those suffering souls are taken to paradise by you.”

The reaper pressed on relentlessly. “I’ve seen funerals. Everyone looks just like us.” Even now, he could recall the people dressed all in black, faces pale and eyes blank. The likeness bothered him deeply; he didn’t want to be so evil.
“That’s because they’re thanking us.”

“Are you sure? They’re always crying!”

“Funerals are here to celebrate death. You need to realize that morals don’t apply to us. We’re only doing our job.”

The reaper remained unconvinced; if anything the conversation only cemented his distress. Damon noticed and offered, “What do humans do when they find a wounded animal? They kill it because they don’t want them to suffer. Just think of our job as shooting a broken horse.”

The reaper bristled. “Humans are not animals. They should not be treated as such.”

Damon shrugged. “I’m just saying. Death can be a mercy.”

Refusing to believe the words he was hearing, the reaper pointed out, “But what about all those children that never got to see the sun? They didn’t even get a chance at living.”

Once again, Damon had something to deflect the reaper’s argument. “We saved them from a life of pain and anguish. Now those kids will never have to experience sadness or heartache.”

“Some of them were happy and healthy.” The reaper nodded towards Maddie, quietly adding, “Some of them weren’t ready to die. It doesn’t seem fair.”

“All death is mercy. To live is to suffer, but to die is a gift. We are doing the hardest job of all, something that everyone hates us for. But we do it anyway because it’s our responsibility. Death is a natural thing; it’s a wonderful thing. Surely you can see that?”

The reaper paused for a moment. The heated discussion was swaying in Damon’s favor, leaving the reaper without a defense.
Perhaps this was because he was wrong about death, wrong about all of it.

Hardly aloud, the reaper whispered, “I do.”

“Good. Look over at that girl you saved earlier. She doesn’t seem upset, now does she?”

The reaper snapped out of his daze and glanced over at Maddie, who was smiling and laughing as she played with the dog. She could run as much as she wanted; she didn’t need her inhaler anymore. She was no longer restricted by the chains of mortal life.

“You should feel thankful,” Damon continued. “You saved her from life, from agony. She was delivered into paradise by you. Appreciate that. You’re a hero!”

His words echoed in the reaper’s head. He was a hero, right?

Damon patted him on the shoulder. “I’ll leave you alone. I hope you come around to our way of thinking.”

He walked away, allowing the reaper to think to himself. Was it possible that he had been overreacting this whole time? That death was a good thing and he was lucky enough to be a part of it?

His gaze flickered over to the little girl again, softening his heart. Maddie jumped and ran and played, enjoying each and every second. And she was happy. She didn’t seem to mind the fact that she was dead, so why did he have to?

The reaper gripped his scythe tighter, assuring himself, This is good. You are good. To live is to suffer, but to die is a gift.

To live is to suffer, but to die is a gift.
Pieces of me flew everywhere, skidding under the tables and chairs, lodging in the air vents, and settling on the windowsills. Some parts were a fine dust that practically disappeared and others were large chunks of glass. I didn’t feel anything, just an emptiness that lingered like a bad aftertaste as the café bustled on. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, the coffee machines gurgled in the kitchen, and the customers made their way in and out, carefully stepping over my pieces or nudging them aside with their feet.

The barista brought out a dustpan and swept me up, carrying me over to a trash can filled with coffee filters and used to-go cups with red lipstick stains on the sides. She didn’t dump me in, though. Instead, she veered to the left and poured the dustpan into a little black purse that hung on the wall, taking care to get every piece of me inside before zipping it closed.

I sat in the darkness for a few hours, my mind spinning. I’d gone to the café every morning for the past six months. It was routine. Talk to the barista, eat a cronut, guzzle down the mediocre coffee, and make my way back to work where my boss would berate me and my ex-girlfriend would judge me from the cubicle across from mine—all the while flirting with everyone who passed her desk.

The café was my safe place, my escape from work, from life. The smells of mildly burnt coffee beans, freshly defrosted pastries, and stale body odor from the others standing in line made me...
nostalgic, and the soft chatter of customers put my mind at ease. However, I hadn’t been prepared to see my ex sitting in my usual booth with Steve from Accounting, I hadn’t been prepared for her to smile at me and kiss him, and I definitely hadn’t been prepared to explode into a million pieces.

Suddenly I was dumped out on a table. I was in a little apartment, sitting under an incredibly bright light. My left eye was cracked in pieces, but my right eye focused on the shadowy figure who loomed over me, leaning down to study me and fogging up my pieces with her warm breath.

“Here’s the deal.” I faintly recognized her as the barista who did the dishes every other day and refused to help customers when the café got busy. “I will put you back together, but it won’t be easy, and it won’t be fast. Is that something you want?” I obviously couldn’t answer, so she continued without pausing. “Good.” She pulled out a hot glue gun and plugged it into the wall. “I’ll put your face together first, then you’ll be able to talk.”

I didn’t really feel like talking. If anything, I felt like crawling under an extremely heavy rock and letting it slam down on me a dozen times, maybe more. I could never go back to the café again, or my work. I’d probably never be able to leave the house without dying of mortification. What if I exploded all over again? I didn’t quite understand what happened, but I knew that I didn’t want it to happen again.

“Here we go,” the girl said. “I’m almost positive that this is the left side of your nose... And here’s the right side.” She picked up two oddly-shaped slabs of glass and glanced down at me with a half-smile. “If you end up looking wildly deformed after this, it’s not my fault.” She glued the two pieces together and dug around in the heap of glass to find my left cheekbone, and then my right.
clock in the kitchen chimed nine o’clock, and then ten, and then
eleven. Finally, she attached my mouth and a loud wail escaped my
lips. “Oh, calm down,” she said, rolling her eyes. “It’s not that bad.”

“What happened?” I asked, my breath coming in short spurts.
“Where am I? Who are you? I just wanted coffee—”

“One question at a time,” she said, digging around for a sliver of
glass that resembled my right eyebrow. “I’m Lola.” Her brow fur-
rowed as she studied me. “I recognize you from the café—you’re a
regular.” I offered a smile, looking around the cramped apartment
where I sat with no means to support myself other than Lola’s re-
assuring hand as she attached pieces of my neck. “You fell apart,”
she told me. “It happens to everyone at some point, though most
people don’t shatter to pieces. It usually happens over a long pe-
riod of time, and even then, it’s just a few pieces at a time.” She
shook her head in disbelief. “I’ve never seen it happen like that.
But don’t worry, I’ve put myself together enough times that this’ll
be easy.”

I still didn’t understand, but somehow, Lola put me back together.
She stayed up all night, gluing together all the pieces, and then
she laid me down on her couch and let me sleep. I don’t know why,
but being broken was absolutely exhausting.

***

When I woke up, I felt different. Not like I had the previous morn-
ing when I’d stood in line at the café, bristling with envy and an-
ger as my ex kissed Steve from Accounting. Not like I’d felt when
she’d laughed at me with that annoying giggle that used to make
me smile. Not like I had when I’d exploded. The emptiness was
practically gone, replaced by a strange, engulfing happiness. I’d
never felt so light, so effulgent. It was like sunshine was dancing
inside my body! It felt like pins and needles, like when my arms fall asleep, but in a good way. I felt alive.

As I rose to my feet, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the window and froze. My skin was marred with thick silver scars that ran across my face and down my neck. With trembling fingers, I fumbled at the buttons on my shirt and fell back onto the couch. My entire body was covered in silver scratches, as though I were a puzzle whose pieces didn’t quite fit together. I ran my fingers over the deepest mark on my arm and cringed.

“It’ll stop hurting after a while.” Lola was watching me from the doorway, her arms folded across her chest. “Putting yourself back together is the hardest part. Soon enough, it’ll fade to a sting, and then just a throb. Half the time, you’ll forget that it even happened.” I ran my fingers over the lines on my face. “The scars will fade too, with time.”

I looked up at her and froze. In all the time she’d spent fixing me, I’d never really looked at her. Her hair was the color of bubblegum after it had been chewed up and spit out, and her eyes were so dark they were almost black, but more than anything else, I noticed the gossamer lines on her freckled skin, barely visible in the morning light. They ran up her left arm and part of her cheek, coming to an end at the corner of her mouth. She stared straight at me, studying my lines as I studied hers, and a smile spread over her face, making the scars disappear completely from view.

“I think they make you look handsome,” she said, moving toward the couch. “Do you feel different? I tried to put you back together the right way, but I think I missed a couple of pieces in the café. You should be okay without them, though, just a bit of hair or fingernails—they’re not that important.”
“Thank you,” I said. She nodded and glanced toward the door, expecting me to leave. I smiled at her and looked around the little room. “Can I stay for a while?” I asked. “I like being around you.” Her face lit up, going a shade of pink that almost matched her hair, and she nodded. “Thanks for putting me back together.”

“You’re the one who chose to stay,” she said. “Some people fall apart and they never come back. I just held a glue gun.” I nodded and leaned back on the couch, staring down at my blemished hands. She sat next to me and we stayed that way for a long time, our hands resting just an inch away from each other as the silver lines on our fingers shimmered in the sunlight.
Here’s a ghost in the house and you have two minutes and forty-five seconds to find your way out. No props, no tools, no help from anyone you know. In fact, you don’t know anyone—not a single soul. The house that you were just sitting in watching television? Empty. Your family and friends have left you, yet I repeat that you know none of them. The Cowboys game abruptly ended and now you are watching the Ghost Game. Three ghosts on the screen, and one of them will emerge to take you with them. After all, three ghosts can’t play tennis. That’s a two-player game, silly.

There’s a ghost in the house and you now have two minutes and twelve seconds to find your way out. You’re being chased. The house has changed color—form, and now you’re running on the hallway’s roof. There’s a clue under your grandmother’s vase from Egypt. It says: do not eat Tide Pods unless you are under the age of fourteen. Who killed the colonel? Three guesses and you’ve nailed down the rope, the professor, and the dining room. Pause. The professor didn’t kill—his sister is in for ten years on account of possession of marijuana—and his white neighbor threatened to turn him in if they ever smelled a funky smell coming out of the funky house. He couldn’t have used the rope either—your brother used that to swing into an eternal sleep on the ceiling fan because your cousin said that gay men go to hell—but lesbians are hot. The dining room is also out of the question. Your mother locked the doors two years ago upon request that no more pictures of Elvis be seen.
There’s a ghost in the house and you now have one minute and thirty-seven seconds to find your way out. Make it to Park Place and you’re the richest on the board and could quite possibly win. But first, beat Elon Musk in an arm-wrestling contest and hack Bezos’ Amazon. Shut the site down for two months so small businesses have a shot in this god-forsaken market. You don’t like the president? Too bad, so sad, you voted for him. Wait, that was the third ghost on the TV, trying to pull you in so he can play tennis and not be left out. You wouldn’t leave out a dead man, would you? He only voted for him because she wore too many pantsuits and stayed with her cheating husband. I did not have sexual relations with that woman.

There’s a ghost in the house and you now have fifty seconds to find your way out. The front door is right there, begging, aching for you to turn the handle and escape. Buzz, buzz. Lackland Air Force Base is calling. Pick up the phone, they want you to meet with the investigative team and recount what happened months ago. Again. Downtown Fort Worth isn’t safe for women, why did you let him take you there? Were you asking for it? Caring is for losers and the military certainly does not lose. Ask Afghanistan. Miss a detail and you’re a liar. He didn’t hear you say stop. He forgot how to hear for at least ten seconds—it’s a military thing, don’t worry about it.

There’s a ghost in the house and you now have ten seconds to find your way out. The front door has now become the back door. The ghost is closing in. He just wants to play! You just don’t want to lose a match. Fine, grab your props, your tools, your help from anyone you know. I thought you didn’t know anyone. You know Serena Williams? Alright, well played.

There’s a ghost in the house and you now have one second to find your way out. Good for you, you grabbed your props, your tools, your help from anyone you know. You’re not alone, after all.
back to watching the Cowboys game. With your thoughts and prayers thoughts and prayers thoughts and prayers thoughts and prayers thoughts and prayers.
By day, the quiet little gated community seems completely ordinary. The gates stay open and children play in the road, only converging on the sidewalk to let cars pass through. Teenagers drive slowly down the streets of the neighborhood, girls giggling as they stand through the sunroof, arms wide open like birds taking flight. Razor scooters lay on the sidewalk. So many scooters that newcomers wonder where they came from. They won’t get stolen, the neighbors here are good. They’re honest. The scooters aren’t abandoned, the children will be back for them and continue soaring down the sidewalks.

Wives converge on porches to gossip over martinis about the town outcasts and men convene in basements to play poker or watch football and recount anecdotes and events over scotch and cigars.

In the daylight, the neighborhood is a pointillism painting. From far away, it looks perfect. Their lives are ideal and comfortable, a lifestyle to be envied by those they deem less fortunate. Up close, however, the viewer sees the crowing wives of the porches and hooting husbands of the basements and the scraped knees of children falling off Razor scooters.

If even daylight proves this place to be not as it first seems, the nighttime is truly a time for sinners.

Teenagers climb out of basement windows and sneak out to house parties, jumping the gates at the entrance to the community which
close as soon as the sun sets. Some are brave enough to drive in fa-
vor of jumping the gates. It’s noisier in the otherwise silent streets
than walking, but the wives don’t notice, already put to bed by
the Sandman. The Sandman, of course, is a dependency on their
choice of either Valium or Ambien. Better to be put to sleep than
stay awake and face the vacancy of their nests, both their chil-
dren’s beds and their own empty, their husbands often either away
on business or “away on business.”

Two of the teenagers with empty beds are Savannah Nightjar and
Braden Woodcox. When nightfall comes, Savannah begins the
weekend ritual she has grown used to. She texts her mother, Lory,
that she’ll be with her friends late, don’t wait up. Lory tells her that
her curfew is one o’clock, but the Sandman will put Lory under at
eleven and Savannah’s father is away on business.

Savannah climbs through her window and slides it shut, leaving it
unlocked. She clambers out of the window well, careful not to get
dirt on her jeans and wedges and walks down the dark sidewalks
of the neighborhood. Streetlights don’t exist here. This commu-
nity is safe, the visibility that streetlights provide would catch no
danger because the danger does not exist, so teenagers wander
the streets, protected by the shadows.

Savannah jumps the gates at the entrance to the community, leav-
ing its protection. She could open them with the code, but she gets
more of a thrill from jumping. Getting over the gates is easy and
there’s no kind of security system to indicate the presence of tres-
passers. They simply exist to provide the illusion of protection; that
intruders are kept out and the families within are safe in their beds.

Outside, Braden waits in his car. Savannah opens the passenger
side door, sliding into the seat and greeting him with a kiss. He
tells her that she looks hot and then they’re off, driving to a foot-
ball afterparty with no parental supervision. When they get there, music blares and Savannah talks with her friends over a game of pool while their boyfriends occupy themselves at the PlayStation. The kitchen counter serves as a cornucopia of teenage rebellion, red solo cups tipped on their sides and lighters abandoned next to them. Partygoers float from room to room, mingling, laughing, socializing.

“Cops!” Someone yells over the noise, cutting Savannah and Braden’s night short after only an hour. As people begin rushing to leave, Braden takes Savannah’s hand, and they make their escape through the backyard. She hops a fence for the second time that night and they find their way back to the car two blocks away. Once again, they’re unseen. Like hers, this neighborhood has no streetlights. As they pull off, Savannah notes the faint glow of red and blue lights where the party devolves into chaos.

The couple drives back to Savannah’s neighborhood, parking a street away from the entrance. They should probably part ways and go back to their empty beds instead of trying their luck after such a close call at the party. Instead, Braden follows closely behind Savannah over the gate and through the neighborhood. He trips on a Razor scooter, the metal scraping loudly against the concrete, and Savannah whispers harshly for him to be quiet. They continue on, down into her window well, and through her unlocked window. He’ll leave just before sunrise, mere hours before the Sandman will take his own leave and Lory will wake.

There is no indication that Braden and Savannah went to a party. The only proof of their activities transpiring that night disappears into a register the next day with the $50 bill borrowed from Lory to pay for the plan B. “My friends are getting pedicures,” Savannah says over breakfast. Lory wouldn’t usually consider it breakfast as
it is almost two in the afternoon, but she knows how teenagers are; nocturnal, especially on the weekends. “Can I borrow fifty dollars?”

The problem is washed down with a bottle of water, taken care of before she even leaves the store parking lot, the package discarded in a trash can on the walk home.

On Monday morning, the wives follow their weekly routine by converging on their porches. They chatter over Bloody Marys about how the police busted a high school rager in a neighboring community over the weekend.

“If my kids pulled a stunt like that I’d be mortified,” One of them says. “I can’t imagine what underage drinking charges will do to their college prospects.”

A car rolls by, the teenagers of the community bumming a ride to school from one of their few peers with a license. Savannah is standing through the sunroof; eyes closed, arms open wide as if she wants to fly away. One of the women on the porch shouts to Savannah that she should be all the way in the car with her seatbelt on by the time they get to the gates.

“Is that Lory’s daughter? I saw her at the store in the family planning section on Sunday morning,” A woman chirps.

“The family planning section? Does no one raise their daughters to be decent anymore?” Another asks.

“My girls would never,” One insists with a huff and a sip of her drink.

Braden’s father pays a visit to a friend in Savannah’s neighborhood. While talking with his buddies over poker in one of the identical basements, another father says he thinks Braden is messing around with Lory’s kid.
“Where’d you hear that?” Braden’s father asks in surprise, offering no other reaction or opinion.

“The missus likes to talk to me about the neighborhood gossip,” The other father answers. Some of the men cackle with excitement for the young man in question, debating about whether Savannah is the first, nudging each other and reminiscing about their own teenage years. Stories of teenage years turn to stories of college years, which turn to stories of last week for the men who were “away on business,” while the men who were innocently away on business last week wait patiently for the poker game to continue.

These bits of gossip will circulate back to Lory. Savannah will talk herself out of trouble and start climbing through Braden’s window instead of him jumping into hers, though it will not stop the hawk eyes of the community from watching the young lovebirds.
W e’re in a boat out on the open sea, drinking tequila. Never had a drink in my life, but it’s my favorite. Every so often I open my eyes and lift my head, just to check that we’re still floating in the middle of nowhere. I suppose it’s really somewhere, at least to the fish. Not to us though.

I lean back against the bow and set down my empty glass. “Lime?” I ask.

“Ocean,” you reply, gesturing to the water as if I’ve forgotten where we are.

“Same old ocean,” I say. I close my eyes again and wait. For the rhythmic waves to speed up, slow down their incessant lapping. For the sun to go down. For a shark, even. I’ve been praying to get eaten by a shark or some other deadly creature if only to break up the monotony.

“Do you think we’ll ever get sunburned?” I ask. You snort.

“I’m still as white as the day I was born, and you’re black. Neither of us are getting sunburned.”

Fair enough. I wouldn’t mind the itch, though. I haven’t felt my body for a while.

I hear a thump, like something hit our boat, and I sit up.

“Did you hear that?”
“That was my foot.”

“Damn.”

The silence resumes. Neither of us say anything for a while, and eventually I realize I can’t hear anything at all. I strain to hear the waves but hear nothing.

I look at you. “Can you hear anything?” I ask. I watch your lips move, but my ears don’t pick up your words. “Shit, I can’t read lips.” I laugh. The tequila must be hitting my system. You say something else, but I can’t make it out. “I can’t hear you!” I say, over and over, in a singsong voice. “I can’t hear you!” I laugh.

I close my eyes and lie against the side of the boat again. I feel something like a touch, a whisper of air against my cheek, but it’s barely there. “Can’t feel my body,” I mumble. “Can’t feel much at all.” I feel another whisper, and I crack open my eyes to see your angry face close to mine. No, not angry. Panicked, maybe. Hell, I don’t know. Don’t care. The tequila gets stronger, and I let it have its way with me.

Your face blurs a bit. I feel another whisper, another something, though where it’s coming from...“I don’t know,” I laugh. “I don’t know.”

You get closer to me, and I smell lime. “You had it! Lime. Liar!” Your lips move again. I squint. Maybe I could make it out, what you were yelling at me for. Lying? “No, you’re the liar,” I say. You shake your head. “Not lying? Lime. You had it,” I insist. Your head shakes again. I squint at your lips. Dying? “We’re already dead!” I yell. Dead in a dinghy, drinking away our days. “Dead as a doornail.” We’d been dead forever. Floating on the water with only each other to drive crazy. I can’t remember how we’d gotten on that boat. I can’t remember what other colors there are besides blue. I can’t feel anymore, I can’t hear anymore, and I’m tired of seeing too. So
I close my eyes to your face and turn away. The tequila holds me tighter. I hold it right back and wish for the lime you had. Maybe if you hadn’t drunk it all, I could still hear you. Liar.

I feel my thoughts dissolving, floating away. Away from the blue nowhere, away from you. I welcome the idea of somewhere else, even if I can’t feel anything anymore. An island would be nice. Somewhere where they give you lime with your tequila. Somewhere where you don’t have to look at the water when you open your eyes. Somewhere you can get sunburned.

I float for forever. Dead as a doornail. And when I can’t float any longer, I decide to open my eyes again. To see you and tell you you’re a liar.

You’re not there. Neither is the blue. As I open my eyes, I remember the other colors.
The final night of my life was a disappointment, to be sure. I lay at the bottom of a pool, my body tossed away like a comet cast from Father Jupiter. It was peaceful in a way, no more worries, no more regrets. Just an ocean of endless stars stretched out eternally before my unblinking eyes. I longed to join them, to return to the stardust within my atoms, but I was trapped. Stuck within this waterlogged flesh prison. I knew why, of course, for I had been murdered.

***

My noble steed sputtered as she attempted to climb up the mountainside road. Her path was illuminated before her by a single headlight. Much like her ever-faithful check engine light, she pleaded with me to relent our uncharacteristic journey. Truth be told, I wasn’t too hot on it either. Thankfully the rustic stone path quickly turned to asphalt, but the car continued to complain. It felt like miles until my brother’s illustrious forest retreat came into view. The woods had been cut away to offer a few acres of lawn dripping with excessive opulence in the form of fancy shrubbery and a fountain bigger than my bathtub, complete with a fat winged baby spewing water into the stone basin. However, the crown jewel was the ‘cabin’ that sat in the center of it all.

To call such a monument a cabin felt insulting. It certainly wasn’t some wooden shack where barbarians would hunker down after slaughtering a family of deer; it would look more at home in a sub-
urb, the type where sad, rich women drown their failed marriages in a bottle of one sort or another. What else could you expect from Mathew? Of course, he would mar a beautiful landscape with a monstrosity of glass and wood, anything to say ‘look at me’.

As I came to the end of the road, passing Teslas, BMWs, and one or two Priuses, it was clear that my brother had called in all of his little money-grubbing buddies to join him in his eyesore hideaway. I chuckled to myself, imagining what they would say if I ran the screwdriver in my ignition up their shiny paint jobs. My rust bucket rolled to a stop at the end of the line. Noting the dashboard clock read 8:47, I untied the wires that kept this hunk of junk running and reached for the outside handle of my door to free me from this mobile embarrassment. Crushed cans spilled onto the ground, littering an otherwise pristine scene. I tossed a few more out for good measure.

The security lights sparked to life the moment I stepped onto the perfectly manicured lawn. Their beams shone upon me as if to further reinforce that I didn’t belong here. The light vanished as quickly as it had appeared, though my headache returned in full force. Mathew called out to me in greeting, and like the starving stray I was, I hurried to meet him.

Standing at the threshold of this completely alien world, one free of worry or regret, I felt a familiar twist in my stomach. My brother smiled, perfectly white teeth set perfectly within a perfect face. I had never seen the differences between us so pronounced as I did then. Him in a sweater and slacks, me in a suit I had stolen from my last roommate, his bulky physique against my gaunt, shriveled frame. It’d been a year since I saw him, but he still showed no sign of age closing in. Truly fate was a bitch.

“Happy birthday Mathew.”

***
Mathew ushered me into his reception. A table stood with a collection of noticeably small gifts, probably filled with diamonds or whatever rich assholes gave other rich assholes to show their asshole-ness. I eyed the smallest but decided it was best to not pocket a gift when the birthday boy was hot on my heels. Maybe on my way out.

“It’s great to see you. I’m glad you could make it. Sorry, it’s so out of the way, but everyone else is in the living room already.” The subtle dig at my tardiness didn’t go unnoticed, and I resisted the urge to slap the condescending smile off his face and returned one of my own. Mathew grabbed my arm. “You won’t cause any problems, right? These are my friends and coworkers. I need you to promise you won’t cause a scene this time, Maddison’s put a lot of work into getting everything together, and she really wants us to bury the hatchet.”

I gave Mathew a half-hearted nod that seemed to placate him. Releasing his hold, he moved to lead me across the tiled floor and into the living room. It felt like there were hundreds of people here, packed into an area twice as large as my studio apartment, all buzzing with excitement.

“Everyone’s going to sing Happy Birthday at 11. After everyone leaves, we’ll have a small celebration, just you, me, and Maddison. She’s already got the ice cream cake, so try to mingle until then, okay?” He ditched me to rejoin a group of men hanging around the well-worn bat on the mantle with a clap on the back. He regaled them with stories of his mighty victories against high school and college teams, about his awards and records. Their howling at one of his jokes, no doubt at my expense, made it clear that I wasn’t invited to join them. I turned my attention to the pods of conversation throughout the room, under no illusion that this party was not for me, but I set forth to please my brother’s demands.
Their names passed by in a blur, Carry from accounting, Jim from HR, Georgina from... somewhere, an Asian guy who didn’t even offer his name just nodded along silently to my questions until I excused myself. The assholes were blending together, becoming an amalgamation of six-figure salaries and suits that would pay the rent of my crappy home for half a year. No one offered to shake my hand. It seemed every Beth, Jen, and Robert couldn’t bring themselves off their golden high-horse to sully their skin with the likes of a pathetic waiter. They would never even drive through my side of town, let alone partake in the ‘local cuisine’. Sure they smiled, mocking me, and asked about the weather or sports teams, but once I opened my mouth, they’d nod and glide away to a more appropriate company.

I ran the gauntlet of pleasantries, my ratty suit jacket and muddy sneakers keeping the most hoity-toity of guests away, and finally, my prize lay awaiting within the kitchen. The sweetest nectar money could buy tasted twice as good when it wasn’t coming out of my pocket. It seemed as though the table had been picked over and the kitchen abandoned in favor of the more spacious living room, but my brother, yet again, failed to disappoint with a variety of spirits that would put a graveyard to shame. I couldn’t even read half the bottles, the labels written in some foreign language or another he no doubt learned on one of his luxuriant vacations. I picked the most expensive-looking ones and poured them together into an abandoned wine decanter, it tasted like paint thinner, but the burning left in its wake provided the familiar friend I needed.

***

The spinning kitchen walls were interrupted by my watch’s hourly chime. I slumped into a dining chair with my haze disrupted and held my amber friend to my lips. Not a soul had bothered me during my celebration; I could relax and sip away my misery. Yet,
just as I was contemplating grabbing another bottle or two, my respite was interrupted by the lady of the house.

“It’s interesting that you and your brother share a birthday. That’s pretty rare—”

“We don’t.” I cut her off. I didn’t need another reminder of yet another race I had lost.

“Right, sorry, a year and fifty-five minutes makes all the difference. Still, I’m glad you’re here to celebrate with us. Matt was worried that you wouldn’t come.”

“I’m sorry I puked on your wedding dress...” I mumbled out at her, desperate to change the subject. Maddison smiled and gave my shoulder a gentle, if hesitant, pat.

“It’s alright. I forgave you a while ago. Though, I wonder now if it wasn’t a sign.” Her sigh washed over my face bringing the sweet smell of her last cigarette and the bitter tang of whatever wine she had been drinking. When I asked for clarification, she wouldn’t meet my eyes. I offered her a seat, muttering out an apology when I realized it was her house. Maddison rescinded her worries, but when asked again, the confessional began. I listened to a sorrowful tale of a woman, stuck in a gilded cage and a man too focused on his career to dote upon her in the slavish manner she desired. The conversation quickly turned to more intimate matters, and I had to fight against my nature to not laugh in her stupidly pretty face. She was terrible at this game, too eager, but I was interested enough to ignore it.

She never asked about me; she wasn’t taking applications for a new boyfriend. Maddison wanted to hurt Mathew in the only way she could. I didn’t care about her reasons and was happy to offer my services. After all, what better insult to an inattentive husband
than to place him, unknowingly, on the same level as the biggest waste of space he knew?

***

I stumbled up the stairs. If anyone had seen us, they didn’t stop us. It was as if every obstacle had moved out of my way. It must be how Mathew saw the world, everything within reach, no one to tell you no. Maddison pulled me into a bedroom, the labyrinth of hallways and doors leaving me dazed but no less willing.

She shut the door, and I claimed my first and only victory.

***

It was unexpected, to say the least. There were no soft kisses or whispers of undying love. Maddison threw off the blankets as the realization of what I had accomplished set in. I made no move to stop her as she began to gather her clothes. She wouldn’t look at me, and when I touched her arm, she recoiled as if I had burned her.

“No, no more. This was a mistake. Oh fuck, what did I do?” Her shoulders heaved as she sobbed out her regret. I tried to comfort her, I couldn’t have been that bad, but she was having none of it.

“You need to leave. I need to talk to Mathew. The whole idea was idiotic.” She pulled her dress up and pushed my hands away. I tried to dissuade her, to remind her that we were in this together. It was our little secret, something to share a smile over during the holiday get-togethers. She refused and fled out of the room faster than my inebriated reflexes could match.

I pulled my pants on and followed after her. The dancing walls tried to stop me, but I was wise to their tricks. I bounced against them as I tried to maneuver across the hallway towards the sound of the party. I couldn’t see Maddison from the top of the stairs, and I resigned to my fate.
Drifting down into the sea of song, I sought the refuge of the kitchen once again. The sting of Maddison’s rejection came in full, gut-wrenching force. I tried to work the sink’s faucet, its lack of knobs confounding me until a sharp smack to the silver snake unleashed a stream of what I desired. From the corner of my eye, I spied a familiar sight resting in the murky depths. I pulled the chef’s knife from the wasteland of dirty dishes and soapy water, turning it in the light. An idea sprang to mind, one that was sure to get results. So what if she told Mathew? Let her tell everyone. I’ll tell everyone. The logic made sense in my marinated brain, so I descended into the singing sea.

I shoved my way through the collective chorus and onto the table they had surrounded. I stepped in something squishy and kicked the white and blue mess off my soapbox, splattering more than a few of my audience.

“Ladies and gentlemen, can I please get your attention.” Everyone’s eyes were on me. I was sick of looking at their swaying faces and fancy clothes. “We are gathered here today to celebrate the colossal douche that is my brother.” Brandishing the blade, I heard several gasps from somewhere in the blurry mass, but they only served as kindling to the fire in my stomach. Before I could unleash the storm of explicit insults I had boiling away in my brain, the arms that had been annoyingly yanking at my pant leg wrapped around my shoulders and threw my glittering friend to the table while I was suddenly kissing the hardwood floor.

“I’m so sorry, everyone, the party’s over.” It was the golden boy, back to save his guests from the pathetic loser interrupting his special day. I was sick of ‘his special day’. It was my birthday soon, and I wanted to party. I tried to get up, but there was no way I could throw off his larger frame with my arms trapped under his legs. He pushed my head into the ground, the throbbing of my nose match-
ing the rhythm of the shoes filing out of the room and back to their perfect lives, where I was just an unpleasant fraction of a moment.

I pushed myself up onto my knees when my brother finally got off my back. “What the hell are you trying to pull?” Mathew was staring down at me, his hands open as if he didn’t know whether to help me up or slap me. I spit on his shiny floor, and he stomped away with a frustrated grunt. The walls had slowed their spin, only wiggling if I looked at the wallpaper’s pattern too long.

Mathew’s voice drifted from beside the fireplace, “He can’t drive anywhere. He’s totally wasted.”

“I know, but he can’t stay here. He has to go! We need to talk, please just call him a cab or something. I don’t want to see his face anymore.” Maddison, eager to pawn me off like an annoying child, still wouldn’t look in my direction. The house seemed totally empty, except for us. Mathew stroked her cheek and promised there would be no more problems. It made me sick. Everything just smoothed over as if I didn’t exist—only some nightmare you’d forget about upon waking.

In four small words, I brought his perfect world crashing down. I relished every second as I watched the color drain from Romeo and Juliet’s faces. She rushed to apologize, to tell him it was just another mistake made tonight. He looked from me to Maddison and back again, his hand moving to the mantle for support. There he found what he sought, his fingers tightened over his familiar old friend, then he came for me.

***

I wish I could say we were locked in a furious dance that would have put Cain and Abel to shame. Surely that would have sounded better than the truth. I wouldn’t mind being remembered as a
fighter rather than a coward bounding across the furniture and crying out like a filthy pig as Mathew swung at my legs with his lucky bat, the metal striking true and shattering my shin just like his childhood records. Touchdown, home run, whatever.

It was the first time in a long while that I was thankful for my inebriated state, for surely a sober man would have been doubled over in pain. I scrambled into the kitchen, the agonized symphony of metal drowning out the blood pumping in my ears as ol’ lucky missed my head and blasted the ostentatious copper cookware that had hung so delicately above the island. Seeing an opportunity, I threw a skillet over my shoulder, missing Mathew by a mile but leaving a noticeable dent in the giant fridge as I slipped out of the sliding glass door and onto the patio.

My freedom seemed so close, I allowed myself a moment of hope, a hope that was once again snatched away as two hundred pounds of hate and revulsion slammed into me and pulled me down onto the patio. My shriek was cut short as Mathew’s callused meat hooks closed around my throat. His knees dug into my chest as he throttled me, possibly trying to rip me in two. He was quiet, even as my yellow fingernails drew crimson lines down his white knuckles. The only sound to escape his open lips was an even exhale of breath. This wasn’t even a challenge to him; it seemed as easy as scoring all those scholarships or acing his fancy interview. He wanted this. Even past the rage within his eyes, I knew that secretly, deep down, he had always wanted this. Everyone did. No one would mourn me. No one would pray for my soul. I doubt they’d even remember my face. My memory shoved aside and discarded, just as it had always been.

I could feel my scalp throb as the blood pounding in my ears quickly became an ice pick burrowing into my forehead. Black spots
taunted me at the edge of my vision, a final physical response as if to plainly say what everyone already knew: I was weak.

As the black took over, my eyes drifted past my brother and to the shining specks of starlight, a billion miles away from all of my mistakes and regrets. My watch began to beep as my body was thrown into the pool. It was midnight.
lined up the pill bottles on the bathroom sink as I did each night. I took a pill from each, and put them in a bitter pile on my tongue, then washed them down with tap water. It was about ten-o-clock at night, and I was getting ready for another long night of staring at the ceiling. I hadn’t been sleeping well since I had started taking the latest medication.

I sat down on my bed, and noticed the notification light on my phone was blinking. I picked it up, and my heartbeat picked up when I saw that I had received a message from a dating app. It was the first message I had received in response to the profile my friend had made me create. I had only done so in a bit of spiteful compliance. The profile was a joke, complete with a bio that finished with: I’m depressed, obsessive-compulsive, directionless. If you’re a masochist who can’t help but make bad decisions, then sure, let’s meet. Needless to say, I hadn’t received any messages other than from a few people who wanted to chastise me for insulting those who actually took the process seriously.

The message I had just received was different, however. The sender was an attractive, dark-haired woman named Rebecca, and it read, I know what it’s like to be without direction, to feel like anything you try to accomplish will end in failure. I think I can offer you a solution to your problems. I can meet tonight.

Was this girl for real? What the hell did she mean by a solution? I laughed to myself, and my thumb hovered over the delete button.
for a few seconds. My heart started to beat faster as I began to 
realize that I couldn’t press it. Instead, I hit reply. *What are you 
doing?!* I was asking myself internally, but the message I sent Re-
becca simply asked where she wanted to meet. Seconds after my 
message was sent, I received a reply with a time and a location pin 
drop. Don’t be late, the message said. I checked the time, seeing I 
only had fifteen minutes. I called up the maps app on my phone 
and grabbed my jacket, exiting my apartment.

***

I arrived at the location I had been sent. It was a trailhead along 
the highway. I sent Rebecca a message that read, *I’m here.*

She responded immediately, *follow the trail until the picnic area.*

I let out a heavy breath. *You’re out of your mind,* I said to myself.

I followed the trail through the dense foliage, using my phone to 
light my way. Adrenaline was twisting my veins a little more with 
each step. I could feel my armpits sweating despite the cold that 
was turning my breath to fog.

After about five minutes of walking, I came to a picnic table under 
an awning that was situated off the side of the trail. I jumped when 
I realized that there was a figure seated at the picnic table. I point-
ed my phone’s light to see the face I’d seen on Rebecca’s profile 
photos. It was a stone-set face with dark eyes that, as I looked into 
them, made me feel somehow sad. I let out a breath of relief that I 
hadn’t been catfished.

“Welcome, have a seat,” she said in a voice that almost sounded bored.

I turned off my light, and sat down across the table from her, letting 
my eyes adjust to the dim moonlight. After a moment’s silence, I 
said, “It’s...nice to meet you.”
She ignored this. “You came to find out what my solution is.”

“You don’t know me, how could you have a solution to my problems?”

“But I do know you,” She said, speaking with resolute purpose. “You spend every day wishing you knew what you wanted in life. You spend every night begging god for sleep so you can feel the feelings your waking self can’t produce. Love, happiness, purpose – you live without these things. It doesn’t have to be this way.”

I could feel tears starting to burn in my eyes. “What are you suggesting?”

In response, Rebecca put her purse on the table and pulled out something that was wrapped in a cloth. She set the object in front of me.

I hesitated, then pulled back the corners of the fabric to reveal a brushed steel revolver. Eyes wide, I looked up at Rebecca.

Rebecca jutted her chin out as she said, “Russian Roulette.”

“Why in God’s name would I want to play Russian Roulette?” I asked.

“Think about it. You can spend the rest of your life feeling this way, never knowing if purpose is on the horizon, or you can let fate decide right now if you’re supposed to be here.”

I looked down at the revolver, then picked it up, hefting its substantial weight in my hand. I thought about what she had said for a long moment, then pulled back the hammer on the pistol, my breathing getting heavier. I could feel the adrenaline rising again as I spun the cylinder.

I let out a sharp breath and set the revolver back onto the table. “I don’t want to do this,” I said.
Before I could react, Rebecca grabbed the pistol, pointed it at my forehead, and pulled the trigger. I shut my eyes, but the only sound was the click of the revolver’s hammer against an empty chamber.

I could do nothing but breathe for a few minutes. The two of us were completely silent during that time, listening to the sound of the slight breeze along the trail.

After a small eternity, Rebecca held out the revolver for me to take. When I questioned her with my eyes, she said, “Check the cylinder.”

I took the gun, pushed a lever with my thumb and let the cylinder slide out. The breath left my lungs when I saw there was only one empty chamber.
It’s so silent now. I look around and see things in a way that I never had before. I’ve never understood why people say it’s such a small world. If you really look at a map, the world is a very large place, you just happen to be occupying the same spaces. It’s all about perspective, as everything is.

I came to Amsterdam, Netherlands about three months ago. My grandparents were from here, so I decided that I would come in hopes of finding the life that I had once loved.

I sit in this Dutch café, watching people. I look behind the counter to see a young woman with long red hair that frames her face. She has brown eyes that hold much wisdom. She is wearing a nametag that reads Gerarda Clasina. I can see she has struggled in her past, but her struggles have only made her stronger. I am interrupted from my thoughts when our eyes meet, and she starts to approach me. I watch her lips closely.

“Kan ik nog iets voor je halen, mevrouw?” She says.

Can I get you anything else, Ma’am?

I take my purple notepad and pen out of my purse. I write “Alleen de cheque alstublieft, dank u,” hoping that I spelt “just the check please, thank you” correctly.

Gerarda smiles at me with her kind eyes, and goes to get my check. She has a beautiful soul, I can see it.
I look out the window across the street only to see another young woman leaning against a white wall covered in graffiti. This woman is small, but she has a very big personality. Her short blonde hair frames her face, which is covered in freckles. From my seat, I can see that she has recently lost someone close to her. I can’t help but wonder if she is also looking to gain perspective.

It’s so silent now. Life isn’t what it used to be, but I have a life. I lost my hearing about thirteen months ago; when my hearing was lost, so was my perspective on life. I don’t remember what it’s like to hear the world, but I do know what it’s like to see it. I do know the sound of silence, and I can say that it’s one of the best sounds that I have ever known. It’s all about perspective. Everything is.
My workplace is a small-scale homeless shelter. A soft-spoken, handsome young gentleman walks in the door and introduces himself as homeless. “It’s getting too cold to sleep outside,” he says. “I’m just looking for a place to stay until I can get a job and pay for an apartment. A place I can call my own, you know?” I invite him inside. He is young and full of hope; his face is that of a dreamer. His face is chiseled and worn by the elements; the weathered face of a mountain peak. I know we have no room and cannot help him, but perhaps we have some resources that can help him on his way. And at the least, he can warm his feet and hands inside for a moment. He’s right—it is getting cold outside.

His name—I should ask for his name. But I forget as I walk up the stairs to ask a coworker for resource tips that we can give him. I wonder if it would be awkward to ask him his name when I get back. My coworker prints off sheets of paper with names and phone numbers of places that may be able to help the stranger within our gates.

I come back downstairs and sit beside him, and speak to him as if he is an old friend. I go over the list with him and point out the places I think are most likely to be able to help him off the street tonight. His eyes light up at being treated like a human and he explains to me how grateful he is to be somewhere he’s not met with violence or viciousness. The fact that so little kindness makes such a difference to him makes me sad about what he has faced.
I ask if he has a phone. He does, but it’s been shut off. I lend him the office phone and for 20 minutes, he calls every place on the list. My heart breaks for him as each call ends in another rejection. And yet his weathered face never falls.

He is kind and honest. Between phone calls, perhaps building up his courage, he makes small talk with me, never losing hope. “Where are you from?”

I tell him cheerfully, and he responds in kind. He is from Mississippi. He lived in the woods, but it was a hostile environment and people would come after him with dogs, so he used to carry mace. Here, he used up all his mace on a man who was chasing him. “But I love the city anyway,” he explains. He is Sisyphus, eternally rolling his burden up a hill. He has traveled the country in search of refuge, and I am upset that this city will knock him down just like the others.

I think once again that I should ask his name, and finally I bolster the courage, but he accidentally cuts me off before my mouth has fully formed around the “Wh.” He asks me if I know where a certain place on the list is located. I look it up for him and tell him the address. His face falls but his politeness never slips, and he thanks me. He continues making calls.

Eventually, he hands back the phone and a thought strikes me. Perhaps a final chance. I ask if a certain shelter is on the list we just gave him. He scans it again and tells me it isn’t, and I offer to look up the number for him. He politely declines and says he’ll walk there, since he’s uncertain if they’ve opened back up to the public due to COVID-19.

He asks me what my name is and I give it to him. I usually give a fake name to strangers, but to this man, I give my real one. I’m not
sure why. As I ponder the anomaly, and before I can ask for his, he thanks me for my kindness, picks up his backpack, and walks out the door.

My voice is strangled and silent, but my heart cries out after the young mountain-faced Sisyphean dreamer I identified by his traits alone.

*What is your name?*