





ISSUE 67

COLONNADES

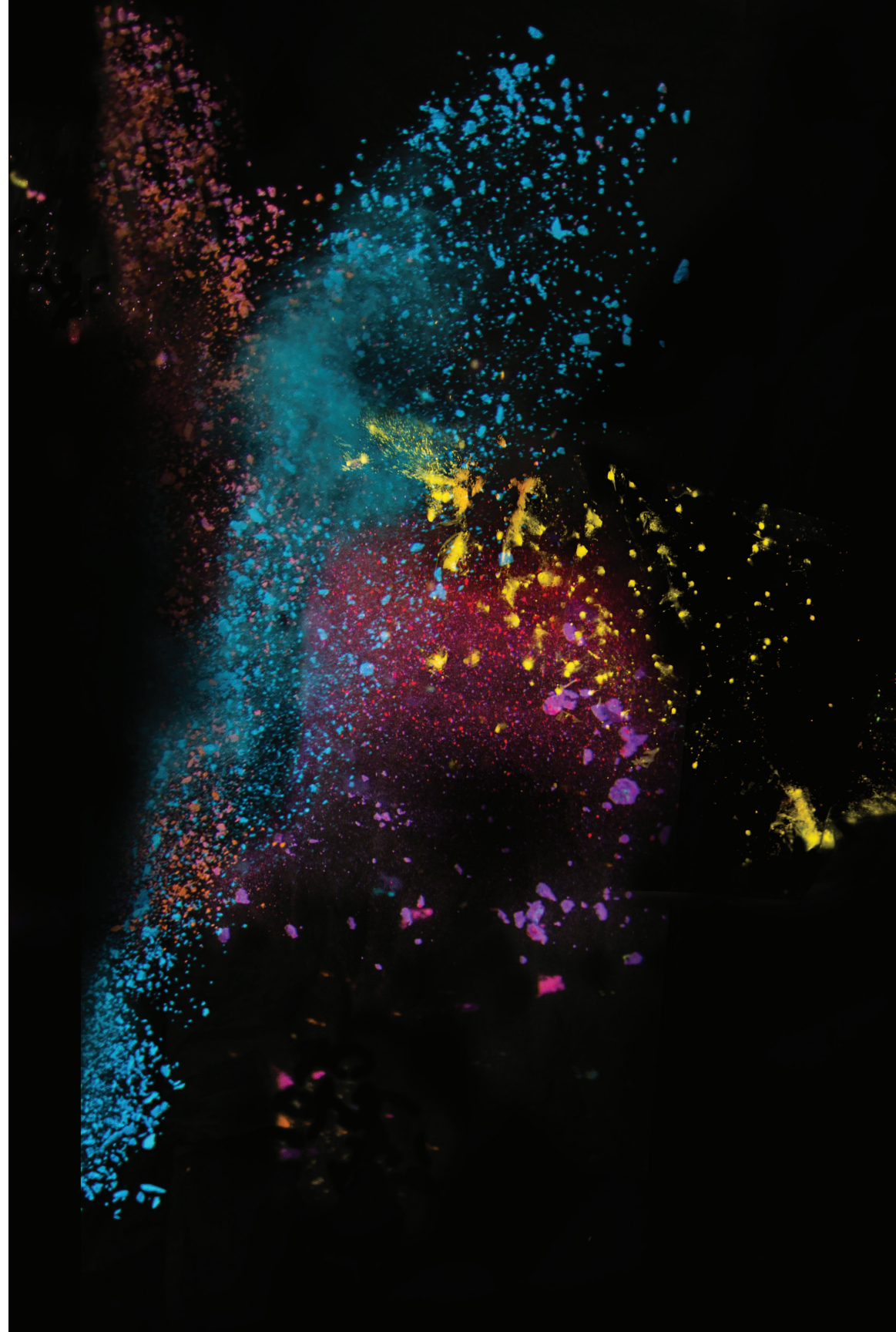
LITERARY & ART JOURNAL OF ELON UNIVERSITY

MASTHEAD ISSUE 67

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FROM THE EDITOR

In her very successful advice column for *The Rumpus* called “Dear Sugar,” Cheryl Strayed was once asked, “WTF, WTF, WTF? I’m asking this question as it applies to everything every day.” Rather than taking this question as joking in any sense, she responded with a beautifully executed and incredibly heartbreaking exploration of the ever-more-common question, “What the fuck?” Ultimately, what she arrives at is that, regardless of what the fuck it is, it belongs to the person who asks the question.

There is no theme for *Colonnades* this year because Issue 67 is the culmination of the space claimed by the voices in the following pages. The “fuck,” if you will, or even if you won’t, is just a microcosmic exploration of the space in which we, as humans and artists, exist. The “fuck” you claim can be as small as the closeness of a breath at three in the morning, or how one falls in love with a city and a person that have already been claimed without being sorry for it. This space is the moment you put the lighter to the sparklers, or how a photographer explores her diabetes by stepping in front of the lens. This is yours to claim. When all has been said and done and all of the dust and debris settles around you, the voice, existence, and space still belongs to you. Art, regardless of the medium or artists, should always be fighting for something, addressing the undefined—claiming enough space to breathe and doing so unapologetically.

I would like to thank Tita and Drew for their trust, guidance, and patience, especially when my visions had risks and my approach was unorthodox. I would like to thank the readers, contributors, and senior staff, specifically Lauren Phillips, for taking on uncharted territory in a newly defined position and providing me with the necessary Type-A perspective and support that I desperately need. I would also like to thank the past editors for every bit of themselves they gave to this magazine, for teaching me how to be a leader by their examples, and for always picking up the phone, no matter how many times I called.

Finally, I would like to thank you, the reader, for taking our creation seriously. We were absolutely sincere and dedicated to existing and expressing through the art before you. I am humbled by the beauty these artists have defined in their work, and I am honored to share it with you.

✱margaret bryant



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ENOUGH

maria temming

I think the word “asexual,” for most people, probably calls to mind images of cells tearing apart to form twin offspring, or some other diagram from a high school biology textbook. I doubt that many people automatically think of “asexuality,” the sexual orientation characterized by a lack of sexual attraction to anyone. This is different from celibacy and abstinence, which are choices not to engage in sexual acts despite sexual attraction. People who are asexual might regard other people as aesthetically attractive, fall in love, and experience the desire to be affectionate with loved ones, but simply don’t want to act on those feelings sexually.

When I tell people that I’m asexual, the announcement is usually met with an eyebrow raise, or a “huh,” or a tentative “and that means...?” I understand this reaction, I really do. In a culture where nothing is safe from hyper-sexualization in the media—even objectively unsexy things like fast food (see Kate Upton’s Hardee’s commercial, circa 2012)—sex is constantly on the mind. People spot hidden sexual innuendos in Disney movies. “That’s what she said” jokes pepper otherwise nonsexual conversation. Even formalized sex education, whether it’s the abstinence-only model or the safe-sex model, is underpinned by the basic assumption that everyone wants to have sex—especially teenagers, who are essentially cocktails of tumultuous hormones poised for sexual exploit at the slightest provocation. I didn’t even know that not wanting sex was an option until my third year of college.

I started identifying as bisexual in early high school, mostly by default. I knew that I didn’t have a preference when it came to guys or girls, and if I didn’t have a preference, that must mean I wanted both. It wasn’t possible to want neither. Everyone wanted. Ergo: bi.

Coming out as bisexual in a conservative, Catholic family was no stroll in the park, but I like to think my first sexuality crisis was pretty standard, as these things go: late-night perusals of LGBT online discussion boards, lots of staring out car windows while listening to angsty soft rock and reevaluating my whole existence, tearful confession to my mom, the whole nine. As far as adolescent experiences go, I’d rate it a zero out of ten, would not recommend.

Sometimes when I came out in high school (because coming out, contrary to popular belief, is not an isolated event—it’s something continual, and, quite frankly, it becomes kind of a drag) my hetero-identifying friends would ask, “But how do you know you’re bi, when you haven’t done anything with a guy or a girl?”

I would often pose the banal LGBT retort, “How did you know you were straight before you started doing things with guys?” because that’s what you’re supposed to say when someone tries to invalidate your queer identity. How dare they ask me something so hetero-normatively insensitive? The nerve.

I knew that I wanted to do things with both guys and girls, and that's what mattered, because... because I did want that. At least, in theory.

In theory, I was down with the idea of hugging, cuddling, kissing, being tethered to another person in a specially designated pair. Watching a movie together on rainy days? Hell yes. Late night phone conversations? Sign me up. But the idea of stuff I'd eventually have to do—the knowledge that the literal best-case scenario for any romantic relationship involved getting naked at some point—was cringe-inducing.

I never found sex scary, necessarily. I figured, if you want it, you've got a consenting partner, and you're safe, you should go for it. You do you. Or, you know, someone else.

Sex just wasn't something I could picture myself partaking in. Like super-high roller coasters. It was as if everyone else in the world was utterly convinced that Top Thrill Dragster was the experience of a lifetime (so great, in fact, that frequent rides were necessary to have a reasonably enjoyable existence at all). When I tilted my head up to examine the hill, I wasn't scared of the ride breaking down or that I would fall out of the cart or anything. I just thought, "Nope, not for me, thanks. I'm gonna go grab a funnel cake."

But hey, sex was an eventuality, and eventually my adolescent brain would provide me the fuel for the kind of sexual fire that I saw lighting up in more and more of my peers. I figured I was just a super-late bloomer.

I was nineteen when I finally let a boy kiss me. He was one of my best friends from high school, someone I'd turned down for junior prom even though I thought he was attractive, because I didn't want to attend the dance at all, let alone with a date. One June evening after our freshman year of college, we took a walk around my neighborhood, exchanging college anecdotes and gossip about our former classmates.

By the time we returned to my house, the dark of the neighborhood was dotted white with streetlamp light and his arm was wound around my waist. When we reached the curb of my driveway, he stopped us and sneak-attacked me with a kiss. My first thought was oh, okay, I guess this is happening now. I wasn't sure what part of him my hands should touch—arms? face? neck?—but luckily he was distracted with slipping his tongue against my own. Gross.

My hands found his shoulders. My neck strained. I opened my eyes, saw his were still closed, and closed mine again. I waited to feel the fireworks, the shirt-grabbing, foot-popping passion promised to me by every rom-com ever. But it was just limbs against limbs, lips against lips, and eventually I wondered, are we done yet? How were we supposed to know when we were finished?

I would wonder the same thing with each person I kissed thereafter.

Alcohol helped. I was much more inclined to let someone else's tongue

touch my own when my brain was so soaked in black cherry vodka that I could run the pads of my fingers along my lips and not even feel them. Plus, there was the added bonus of being able to excuse my unrefined kissing skills to whatever poor fool was making out with me. Not supposed to move my tongue like that? "Sorry, I'm just so drunk." The lazy (disinterested) motion of my lips? "Ah, must be the rum."

I never understood all the fanfare over kissing. Was I the only one who realized how weird and unnecessary all of this was? That making out was nothing more than an exchange of saliva and the burden of someone else's hot, heavy breath against my own, right under my nose?

But kissing was one of those things I was supposed to be able to do, even if I wasn't ready to have sex yet. If I couldn't even get into that, what the hell was wrong with me?

"Be real with me," my best friend texted me, the summer between our sophomore and junior years. "Are you asexual?"

No, I wanted to say, because the only people I'd ever seen disinterested in sex were cold-hearted pop culture icons like Sherlock Holmes or Sheldon Cooper, and did those kinds of people even exist in real life? I liked people, and I wanted them to like me. I just wanted everyone to keep their bodies (and their bodily fluids) to themselves. Was that too much to ask?

"Not to my knowledge," I typed instead, oh-so professional, so that I wouldn't implicate myself by protesting too much. "I guess only time and sex will tell."

I tried not to think too much about the fact that if I needed to have a few drinks before I would kiss someone, I would have to be downright wasted to have sex with someone—that in order to connect with another human being in the most intimate of physical ways, I would have to be utterly mentally disconnected. That seemed to hint at some fundamental, inherent wrongness in me, and it was terrifying.

Asexual. Asexual. Asexual. I couldn't shake the idea. But I wasn't. I wasn't, because I didn't want to be. I refused to see myself as some broken, neutered thing, some child wandering around in a grown-up body she didn't want or know how to use properly.

Maybe I just hadn't met the right person, and when I did, I would finally be able to step over that invisible line that seemed to separate me from legitimate adulthood. However, at age twenty, while everyone else on anonymous social media seemed to be scouring cyberspace for casual sex and even my latest-of-the-late-blooming high school friends were disclosing that they'd finally lost their virginity, here I was, exactly as I had been—kissing unpleasantness notwithstanding—as a middle schooler.

Fall of junior year brought round two of late-night internet searches, only this

time, instead of LGBT message boards, I ended up on AVEN, the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network. When it finally occurred to me that I was coming out to myself again, my first thought was, “This is bullshit,” because one sexuality crisis per adolescence is quite enough, let alone two.

The realization that my disinterest in sex was probably a permanent state of being rather than something I would eventually shed, like braces or acne-ridden skin, was difficult to accept. When I pictured my long-term future, I still wanted the bed sharing, the handholding, the prolonged comfortable silences, the special someone to come home to at the end of the day. My ideal adulthood had always included some nameless, faceless, gender-to-be-determined significant other. But who would want a committed relationship without sex?

Sexuality Crisis, The Sequel: Asexuality Edition turned out to be a trade-off. I swapped out frustration and cluelessness for resignation and loneliness. I didn’t tell anyone. I stopped hoping anyone would ask me out, because I didn’t see the point. I spent a lot more time sitting on my bed, alone in my room, talking to people on AVEN message boards, because the internet was the only place I could find people like me.

None of my immediate family members know that I identify as asexual. When I came out to my older brother as bi, he told me, “I always thought it’d be really cool to be bi. You have so many options.” My mom cried when she found out, not because she was upset about having a queer kid, but because she thought boys wouldn’t like me once they knew I was attracted to girls, too. I thought that was stupid: I didn’t know jack shit about sex, and even I knew that boys think girl-on-girl is hot. I cried anyway, because when your mom cries, you cry, especially if you’re the one who made her cry. I never came out to my dad, who is even more right-wing Roman-Catholic than my mom, but since I’ve never dated anyone, I’m pretty sure he thinks I’m secretly a lesbian.

There is a point, they say, when your parents stop hoping that you aren’t having sex and start hoping that you are. At twenty-one, I might have already passed that point. If I haven’t, then I will at twenty-five, or thirty, or forty. I’ll tell them eventually, I guess. But if my mom wept for my dwindling partner prospects when she found out I was bi, I don’t even want to imagine her reaction when she finds out I’m asexual.

The closest person I ever got to dating was a guy—let’s call him John—whom I met at a mutual friend’s get-together at her off-campus apartment. As John and I stood in two different clusters of conversation, our eyes met across the kitchen like something out of a movie, except for the fact that we were both very drunk and I was wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and sweatpants. He was cute, I thought. Like, really cute. Cute enough that in my inebriated state, I didn’t mind when John drifted over to chat with me. Our conversation was so easy

and comfortable that when he asked me back to his place, drunk-me decided to temporarily ignore the fact that this guy probably had a very singular intention for the rest of our time together.

Flash forward to me sitting on John’s bed, facing him, coming down from the giddiness of intoxication with the slow drift of a discarded piece of paper. Silence had settled between us, and even I could tell this was a prime kissing moment. The starting line.

“I have to pee,” I said, and nearly tripped over myself getting out of bed.

I locked myself in his bathroom and sat down on the lip of the tub, trying to figure out how to tell John that this was about to be the most disappointing attempted hookup ever. Not only was I uninterested in having sex with him tonight, but even a thousand dates and a marriage wouldn’t be enough to get him in my pants.

I pushed a long exhale out my nose and ordered myself to relax. I had met this guy all of three hours ago. I didn’t know him, he didn’t know me. What better audience for trying out my new identity? It would be like putting on that new dress I’d had in my closet for months but was too afraid to wear out because even though it seemed to fit really well, it wasn’t my usual style. If John judged me unfavorably, oh well. No great loss.

John looked up with a smile when I reentered the room, but it faltered when he saw my expression, my fingers twisting in the hem of my shirt. “Sorry if you were looking for a hookup tonight,” I made myself say, “but I’m asexual.”

I spent a lot of time with John in the following months. He assured me that my asexuality was not an issue. “Don’t get me wrong, I definitely want to have sex with you,” he told me, “but obviously if you don’t want to, it’s not going to happen.”

The idea that someone actively wanted to fuck me was a foreign one. Of course, I knew in an abstract sense that there had been guys out there before who thought about me in that way, but to have one flat-out tell me so was different. And not just with his words, but with the way he would dip his hand into the valley below my ribcage as I lay on his bed, would hook my leg around his hip while he kissed me into his pillow, would grin against my mouth as he thumbed my belly ring.

I fumbled with my limbs and twisted my torso with all the grace of a baby giraffe, trying to at least meet him in the middle with this whole kissing-petting-groping stuff, wondering all the while how he couldn’t tell that I would so much rather we just un-pause the show I actually came over to watch with him.

“You sound like an alien,” my best friend once told me after listening to me complain about feeling obligated to make out with John (“It’s wet and weird and I’m pretty sure I’d fall asleep if there weren’t another tongue in my mouth.”).

I knew she didn't mean to insult me. I was being a grouch, and, trying to see it from a sexual person's perspective, I could understand how kissing a boy must have seemed like an absurd thing to complain about. She wouldn't ever get it, and I didn't see the point in trying to make her, so all I said was, "I feel like an alien."

I liked John a lot; we had similar opinions and tastes and senses of humor. The trouble was, even if John was willing to go without sex, that still meant every physical encounter between us inevitably ended with me pushing him off. He was never impatient and he never complained, but I still felt guilty and weird and not quite enough of a person to be worth his time or romantic attention. When John asked me to be his girlfriend, I said no. When he graduated later that spring, I felt saturated with relief. At least when I was alone, the only one my asexuality affected was me.

Meanwhile, I once again began the arduous coming-out process. I learned that identifying as one queer identity and then adopting a different, even more obscure, queer identity seems a little suspicious to some people (in a "so much for being born that way" sense). For the most part, when I started telling people I was asexual, I received acceptance and support—and maybe a little side serving of bemusement. A few friends took it upon themselves to offer other explanations for my apparent lack of sexuality, which I think were meant to provide me hope, or something:

"You just haven't matured that way yet."

"You're probably just sexually repressed. You grew up Catholic, right?"

"You're only twenty. You just need to meet the right person."

Worse still were the comments that confirmed my fears about being seen as a little kid:

"I am so sorry, you will be so uncomfortable with this, but I have to tell you," a friend texted me, "Nick and I just had sex for the first time." Like she'd never talked to me about sex before. Like I was liable to respond, "Eww, gross, cooties!"

On another occasion, a friend patiently explained to me why our mutual female friend didn't care how much time I spent around her boyfriend. "She just doesn't see you as a threat, you know? Because of how you are." Because you're simply incapable of connecting with other people in a way that would be threatening to that relationship.

I am not a sexy person. And I don't mean that in a compliment-fishing, faux-self-deprecating sort of way. I know I'm all right to look at, as far as human beings go. Male friends have told me I'm pretty and male strangers have palmed my ass on dance floors and huffed much more explicit beer-breath compliments into my neck. What I mean is, I do not look or act in a way that I believe anyone

would classify as "sexy." Most of my wardrobe consists of sweaters from the men's section of Goodwill and Sharpie-stained jeans. Push-up bra? Never had one. Crop top? Only as part of my Kim Possible Halloween costume.

Even after I started identifying as asexual and accepted that in terms of life skills, "acting sexy" was not one I would probably ever need, I still wanted to think that if I really wanted to pass for a sexual person—like, really wanted to—I would probably be able to pull it off. Fake it till I made it. I was not a child.

The fall of my senior year, I volunteered to serve as an extra in my friend Tony's short film.

"So, I probably should have warned you that the scene we're shooting is kind of sexual," Tony said when I arrived at the designated off-campus apartment. "Is that okay?"

I glanced out at the neighborhood, the tongue of puddled pavement extending from the porch to the road, the front yard greenery soft and weighted with rain. "Is it just us?"

"No, there are a couple of other film kids coming to set up and shoot."

Just Tony, me, and a film crew. No one to step in if I wanted to bail—and I wanted to bail.

"We won't do anything you're not comfortable with," Tony said.

"Okay," I said.

In the bedroom, while one of the Film Kids draped dryer sheets over two spotlights to soften their glare to an intimate yellow, I scanned the script. Apparently, my character had to seduce Tony's character. Which was hilarious in an if-I-don't-laugh-I'll-cry kind of way.

Tony sat me down on the bed next to him. "You'll be off camera while I say the lines. When I finish, lean into frame, grab my tie, and pull me off screen."

I folded my prickly shins underneath me and fisted the bedspread in my damp hands. My whole body felt taut as a loaded mousetrap.

I mentally rehearsed the moment in the undertow of time it took Tony to deliver his lines: Lean left, grab the tie, pull back. Lean left, grab the tie, pull back. Lean left—

As soon as Tony delivered his last line, I slouched toward him, groping for his tie. My face, I thought. What is my face doing? I tried for a coy smile, which probably made it look like I was gleefully about to strangle Tony, and yanked him back on top of me. I held my stiff position until the Film Kid behind the camera pushed a button and said, "Okay."

Tony righted himself and adjusted his tie without looking at me.

"Maybe she should be on screen longer," suggested a Film Kid. "Lean in towards him during the last couple lines, feel him up a bit, then drag him off screen."

Three takes later, Tony asked the room at large, "Can someone get this girl

some red lipstick or something?" Then to me, "Do you know the term 'woman in heat'?"

"Yes?" Of course I did, but he might as well have asked whether I knew what a ninja was. Yeah, I had a general sense of the word from movies and TV shows, but could I pull off real life martial arts moves right here, right now, for the sake of Tony's film?

"When you're leaning in, just stroke up and down Tony's arm a bit," said the Film Kid who handed me the tube of lipstick and a compact mirror.

"Don't smile, and when you tug him off screen, bite your lip," said another.

"Trace your finger down his cheek when you're leaning in," the third added.

"Pretend to whisper something in my ear," said Tony.

"What, like...?" I cupped my hand around my mouth. That was mysterious, right?

"Nope, no hand. That's too trading-secrets-on-the-playground."

I winced. Stupid. "Right, right."

As I sank countless more takes into Tony's scene shoot, I made a mental checklist from the Film Kids' instructions: Stroke his arm. Lean against him. Closer. Drag your fingers down his cheek. Grab the tie. Whisper in his ear. Move your lips slowly. Don't smile. Pull and lean back. Remember to breathe. The list of dos and don'ts became a choreography I executed with robotic precision.

When the Film Kid behind the camera finally said, "I think we got it," I couldn't tell whether that take was good, or we were simply giving up.

Tony hoisted himself off the bed and took my hand, drawing me up next to him like he was pulling me out from underwater. "Thanks for your help," Tony said. He looked sorry for having dragged me into this, and I wanted to tell him that I would do it over again, but of course that wasn't true. I would have let someone else more qualified volunteer, for Tony's sake, mostly, but also to be spared of this painfully public affirmation that there was a whole realm of human experience that I just couldn't access.

For me, identifying as asexual has been more difficult than identifying as bi—and not only in the sense that it's much harder to find a partner who's sexually attracted to no one than someone who's sexually attracted to women. One of the things I miss most about identifying as bi is that I could tell just about anyone, "I am bisexual," and they would know what I meant, no questions asked. Maybe it's because the bisexual community has been a visible part of the LGBTQIA conglomerate for longer. Maybe it's because, for the heterosexual majority, it's easier to comprehend sexual attraction extending to a whole other gender than sexual attraction being absent altogether.

Whatever the reason, coming out as asexual is usually much more of

a hassle than outing myself as bi ever was. There were several times during Tony's seduction scene that I wanted to blurt out, "I'm sorry, I'm asexual," but I've learned that's just not the kind of information you can drop in the middle of someone's film shoot without (further) gumming up the works. So I didn't say anything, let the rest of them chalk my awkwardness up to stage fright or bad acting, and went on feeling stuck and small and alone.

In most cases—when I'm not surrounded by four people who just need me to get this scene right, for Christ's sake—I don't mind talking about asexuality, even if it means outing myself as the token asexual in a group. Sometimes, I feel like I don't ever stop talking about asexuality, although I can't tell whether that's because I'm so relieved to finally have a label that fits, or because there are so many ways sexuality pervades everyday conversation that my asexuality just naturally comes up that often.

I know that some people don't think asexuality awareness is important. As sex columnist Dan Savage said in the documentary *(A)sexual*: "You've got the gays marching for the right to be cock-sucking homosexuals, and then you have the asexuals marching for the right to not do anything. Which is hilarious. Like, you didn't need to march for that right. You just need to stay home, not do anything."

The crucial point Mr. Savage seems to misunderstand is that when I talk about being asexual, I'm not doing it to convince him or anyone else that my identity is valid. I'm primarily addressing other potential asexuals out there, who might not even know what asexuality is, or feel like an alien, or think they're somehow broken. I talk about it so that they—and I—might feel a little less stuck and small and alone. ❀

BREATHING AT 3:47 A.M.

brittany coppola

my eardrum	catches	vibrations from
your creaking, dusty	ribcage	while drowsy air in your
lungs sways from being	within	and without. your heart
thumps. thumps. thumps.	ticktock	to the melting, dripping clock, both
fearful that the other mechanic's	ache	will halt time from moving forward.



SHE SEES SEA

kayla agae | film photograph



FIELD TRIP

miranda romano

The year I turned seventeen,
our teachers took us to the crematorium.
They led us down carpeted stairs worn
down by the soles of the living and the dead,
a deep brown-red torn up and scuffed.
Beneath the funeral home,
they keep two human-sized boxes made of steel.

The name of the man being burned
was scrawled on a card precariously
stuck to the side of the furnace,
and I considered taking it
and returning to the bus with it tucked
in the pocket of my jeans.

But then I thought,
what happens if, one day,
a girl takes
the card off my burning box,
and the mortician accidentally mixes
my ashes with another's,
and I suddenly become one
with a stranger I never touched
in life, the two of us one large pile
of dust, and they pour us into equal halves,
put the stranger half of me
into a dark, black box,
put the other in a glazed vase;
we spend time together,
unknown,
above the mantels of two separate,
grieving families.

Back in that tiny, windowless room,
we were quiet and there was nothing
to mask the grinding of bones,
the rumble of the ovens' hungry fire bellies,
the way they were chewing that man up
to spit him out clean,
unrecognizable.

ESCAPE FROM MEMORY

virginia kluiters | digital photograph



TYPE I

maggie carter | digital photograph

AFTER HER MASTECTOMY

kevin coyne

she taught her son
how to undo and
then re-clasp her bras.
They draped them

around hangers
to dry just above
the radiator.
“Maybe don’t tell

your first girlfriend
that your mom taught
you this,” she said.
She wanted all her

old bras—empty
for nearly a year
now—clean when she
dropped them off at

the parish clothes
drive. That morning,
her brother had called,
offering his belly

rolls for the
reconstructive
surgery; she laughed
then, her chest

shallow and
heaving. It
didn’t hurt like
it used to, when

her stitches
were still two
taut crescents
across her chest.

They clipped
the bras oblong
around the wire
hangers: two

to a frame,
they swayed
in the furnace's
warm breath.

Looking out the
fogged window,
she crossed her
forearm diagonally

over the valley of
her chest, counting
all the ways
she felt less.

(for mom)

YOUR FRIENDLY LUNCHTIME REMINDER

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The Secret:



BEEF FAT

Drink your
milk if you
want to grow
big and tall.



FOR HIRE

lauryl fischer

You create your “Companion Profile” on Cherry Pickers after your co-worker Michelle emails you the article about the growing Sugar Baby phenomenon among college students like you. This is her “solution” to your busted transmission. You’ve been bitching to her on the phone about how you would never get the \$4,000 to fix your shitty 1995 Buick Riviera. Her solution: quit taco-making at the Corn Shack forever and just find yourself a Daddy, because it’s fifty times more lucrative and half the work.

At the time, this makes you laugh out loud.

“Okay, but just look,” she tells you. “This one girl’s twenty-two with no student loans and a Lexus.”

“Nuts,” you say, skimming the article, balancing the phone between your shoulder and neck. “Kind of genius also, though.”

“Exactly. I mean, I know it’s wrong. I wouldn’t do it. I’d never do it. But I gotta admire her—it’s so bold. Your car problem would be fixed like that.”

You’re both searching for sites the next second, but only, you claim, to glimpse the lives of men who seek young women, and to peek at the women who are willing to solicit themselves to older men. And that’s how you come across Cherry Pickers. Here they all are, Michelle declares—the oldest, richest, loneliest men in America. They’re easy to mock for both of you. You scroll and scroll through countless profiles as you giggle into the phone. The names are all ridiculous—xxCorporateHottie_xx; DominantFunExecutive; MrLuck. Their bios are even worse. Some range from one line (“Looking for a beautiful, intelligent woman for those lonely nights after work insert-unironic-smiley-face-emoticon”) to several paragraphs of stipulations, down to the size of breasts preferred and what the men would like their ideal woman to eat. Those pages read distinctly like business contracts.

And like the article said, all over the place there are men posting for college women specifically, wishing to dispense both career advice and loads of cash. You theorize to Michelle that this helps their consciences.

“And you know, it’s like networking, isn’t it?” you say to her. You’re actually fascinated, your cursor lingering over a man asking for an aspiring finance major in particular, hoping to “inspire and mentor.” “You could think of it like an internship.”

“Wouldn’t it be funny if we did this?” Michelle laughs. “It would be so bizarre.”

“My mom would kill me,” you say. That new transmission, with its fat bill of \$4,000, will probably kill you both first, but don’t say that. Don’t admit that to yourself. Not yet.

“Yeah. Well. You wouldn’t have to tell her—we’re adults, technically.” Michelle’s voice has changed. “It’s probably dumb. This is how girls get murdered.”

How does it actually happen? You won’t remember. Michelle tells you

you’re both still joking as you sign up, then create new identities together by digitizing your personalities into something an older man might invest in. And it’s fun. For a brief moment, forget about your dumb car, how you have to leave class early tomorrow just to catch the bus to make it to work on time. Forget about being Mara, about being twenty, in debt and doomed before your life even starts. Turn yourself into Dreamyeyed_Alice as you think about jumping down this rabbit hole. You don’t put up any pictures, but if you’re honest, it’s because you don’t think you’re the type of girl to get picked anyway, since you’re big-hipped with average boobs and dark hair. Joking about this is easy because you’re no bombshell. You never could be. This is just hypothetical.

You get off the phone with Michelle near midnight, knowing your 8 a.m. is going to be killer tomorrow, and you won’t have time for your twenty-minute nap because of this car disaster. Your mind shifts back to your infinite to-do list, and you have no choice but to push Dreamyeyed_Alice away. She’s someone with more time than you.

Your Corn Shack t-shirt needs a good wash, but you didn’t do laundry (no time, no energy), so you smell like cheese and meat on the bus ride to your shift the next afternoon. No one sits next to you because of this. You squeeze out two paragraphs for an essay as the bus jostles you back and forth, then realize you need to tell your mother that your car is dead in the parking lot of your apartment complex. It’s not a call you want to make. You could keep avoiding it. But it’s best to get it over with.

When you tell her, she sighs and the line goes silent, except for the sound of your shared breaths, in rhythm, all these miles away. Your eyes shift to look outside the window at an empty field full of browning grass, summer over and fall beginning. You can imagine the ache in her chest; it’s one you share with her. You can imagine the guilt; you feel it too. If she says, “It’s my fault for getting you such an old car,” have something prepared in response, such as, “You do your best.” Or, “It’s nobody’s fault.” Remind her that the car was a very good car to you. It lasted you through high school until now.

The bus passes an old, yellowed church. It stops at a ticking stoplight in the one-lane street. This is an older part of town, everything looking a little worn thin. You’re still waiting for her to say something, and now you’re waiting for the light to turn green, too.

“Well, we can get a used car for cheaper than the transmission,” she finally says. But not much cheaper. Don’t remind her of that.

“It’s not pressing,” is what you say.

“It is pressing,” she responds. “How will you get home? What if the bus is late? What if you miss it?”

“I just don’t know where to get the money,” you say.

“I’ll think of something,” she assures you. “I’ll call you back.”

When you hang up, you think about Dreamyeyed_Alice. It’s fleeting. Try not to entertain it. The bus is pulling up to the shopping complex anyway,

two blocks down from Corn Shack, and you need to be off that bus and jogging if you want to make your shift. That is the pressing concern. You don't have the privilege of thinking past the moment right now. Exit the bus as fast as you can and start the walk, passing by all those older Mom-and-Pop shops you've never gone in, will never go in, can hardly spare a glance toward.

You barely clock in on time. Michelle's been there for an hour, already in the assembly line by the various taco toppings, and she makes wide unblinking bird eyes in your direction across the bar, as you cross to go into the back.

You tap out high-as-a-kite Nate, who is at the beginning of the line, and Michelle pokes at Heather, in between you two. "Move," she hisses at her. Heather makes a face, but she, like everyone at Corn Shack, is used to doing whatever Michelle wants, as Michelle is blunt and not afraid to force her way. She switches with you, so you take up meat-filling duty.

"Hey, you check your emails?" Michelle whispers to you.

"No, not yet." This is an odd question. Also, you should have checked your emails, come to think of it. There's no telling what your teachers have emailed you. Assignments tend to drop out of the sky and fuck up your sleep schedule if you don't stay stringently on top of things.

"I got somebody."

"Huh?"

"Somebody. You know," she says and makes the big eyes again. She slaps some sour cream on a flour tortilla as you pass it her way, then shoves it toward Ricky, who's swaddling the burritos in foil. "He's such a freak."

No one is listening to the two of you. The air conditioning is too loud. So is the cooker behind you. You always have to shout at the customers to communicate, and they shout back. But you still feel like everyone's listening in and knows that when Michelle means somebody she means a fifty-year-old pervert from the site you both willingly signed up for. You look at the dude waiting on you to fill his corn taco with extra-spicy beef-and-beans, and you almost want to apologize to him, like, "It's not what it sounds like, it's a joke, I swear."

"Then I checked right before starting here, and I got two more. They're pouring in," she says. "Like, it's been less than a day, can you even believe it? I bet you have a whole handful."

Why would you have a whole handful, you want to ask her, but you're busy imagining ten to twenty plump, mustached men squatting in your email, licking their lips. You should delete your profile right now. You don't need this. You have too much to worry about. "That's insane," you say in the meantime to Michelle. She grins at you. She's practically glowing. Maybe it's the steam and the scent of beef getting to your brain, but you think she's enjoying this.

On your break, Michelle ducks into the back room after you and swipes your phone, pulling up your email on it. "Holy shit, you got two," she says.

"This is really messed up," you say.

"It's hilarious, actually. Listen—'Looking for one playful, caring,

open-minded, sensual, spontaneous, unpretentious, and drama-free sexually-submissive female who likes to travel occasionally and have FUN'—all caps, Mara—" she snickers, then continues, "and party with a handsome, outgoing, caring but sexually dominant male.' Jesus! What a list! Is there any woman even like that in the world?"

You don't even think Michelle realizes she's the only one laughing.

Then she mutters another "Holy shit." Her grin evaporates as she looks up at you before giving you your phone, the second email already pulled up. It's a gray-face anonymous profile named Terry. That's it. Terry.

Best bio I've read in a long time. You seem like you've got a good head on your shoulders. I've had several successful arrangements so far with ladies like you, one with me six years, worked out with \$400/date and was able to buy her a car. Would love to chat and see if we have anything in common. Hope you message me back.

Your stomach fills with the feeling of falling. The approaching ground is still far enough away that you don't have to be scared of it, but the rush is going to your head. It's not your fault that \$400 is a lot of money to a girl like you, that a car is exactly what you need. You think about the article last night and how the writer laid out in no-nonsense terms the kind of girls "susceptible" to this kind of reality. It's girls with a single parent, girls with too much ambition for their tight pockets, girls interested in "self-improvement," which is just the asinine way of saying that they think they're better than the life they've been given.

It's girls like you.

You and Michelle both— isn't your mutual job at Corn Shack, and your mutual lack of money, the real reason you're friends?

Think about that. Think about your bank account, buried in bills. Think about your mother and how hard she tries. Think about your father and how he doesn't. Think about how all the shrinks in the world would analyze the shit out of that, about how your parents' divorce means you're looking for Daddy in the wrong places. It's really sad, but mostly it's too embarrassing. It's an episode of *Maurice*, is what it is.

Think about how you don't have to be that girl, though.

Dreamyeyed_Alice isn't any of those things. She has time to put on pretty clothes. She has money. She probably has real friends, not just co-workers. She has a love life. Maybe it won't matter what this decision says about how pathetic you are—if you aren't the one really making it. Honestly, \$400 for one date is sounding so good right now, like the break you've been needing. You could do that.

Maybe you're desperate, but maybe you're a genius.

"This can't be real." You try to dismiss it. You try to dismiss yourself. "This guy's gonna end up cutting me in eight pieces then sticking me in the freezer."

"I dunno, he's verified." Michelle shrugs at you. You don't even know what that means. You stare at her until she shrugs again.

"You know? He's got reviews from other women you can read and the

site says he's real, that's what the green check at his name means. It's to make this whole thing safer."

"How do you know that?"

"I read about it this morning when I checked my account. Just checked out the terms and conditions or whatever."

"Why'd you do that?"

"Look, I'm not going to do anything, I don't think," Michelle says. "I haven't decided."

"This is probably illegal."

"They're not paying for sex, just your time," Michelle says. "You can't ask straight-up for sex. That would be illegal."

"Guess you read that too."

"Hey, don't get pissy at me. I don't make it up, I'm just maybe gonna make use of it." She starts retying her apron, flicks some of her fringe out of her eyes. "Maybe. Probably not. It's still a lot to think about, you know? Like, they're twice our age. But I dunno. Given the right offer?"

The question stays in the air as you two start back to the line. It follows after you. It lingers in your head. So does the number 400, flashing like a big neon sign. You wonder if that's really how much you're worth. You try to act disappointed for thinking so little of yourself, but then you'd be lying.

When you get to your apartment around 10 p.m., your roommates are up, crowded into the living room with popcorn, candy, and wine. They stop you and talk to you out of polite obligation. They ask you about your day, and you lie and say it was great. You make the excuse after five minutes of empty small talk that you need a shower, which is true. You leave them to their conversations, none of which you can relate to. They're all about boys you don't have time to meet, parties you can't get into, clothes you can't afford. It's not their fault. They're nice girls who were happy to take you in as their fourth to fill the apartment when their other friend went abroad. You even enjoy eating dinner with them when you're able, even if those meals consist of just listening, getting lost in their worlds that are so separate from your own. It doesn't happen very often, is the thing. They probably think of you as a fair-weather housemate—fading in and out of focus depending on your schedule.

You shut your door and fall on top of your bed right away, wiped out by exhaustion. You don't even want to take off your clothes, just start sleeping then and there. Instead, you grab for your laptop by your bedside. You pull up your Cherry Pickers account because—you don't know why. Maybe it's just something to distract yourself from the laughter in the other room that you never feel a part of. Maybe you're going to delete it. Yeah, tell yourself that—you're going to delete your profile now.

There's a big red 4 on the mail icon, though, and that stops you. Four new messages, four new men. You're starting to assemble a troop all your own. For a solid five minutes, you resist the urge to look at the messages (checking

other sites, as if anyone might message you, as if there are emails in your inbox from someone other than your teachers), but then you can't help it. You're too curious. There's something twisted and fun about it.

As the laughter continues in the other room, you start reading. Some of the men talk about not wanting money to matter. They aren't looking to distribute cash like an ATM machine. They want to "lavish" and "pamper" you with dresses, dinners, and vacations. One guy—username: Exotic_Life—says he goes on business trips to Hawaii all the time and wants someone to keep him company. You imagine yourself on Mr. Exotic's arm, with him dressing you up like a paper doll in tight skirts and low-cut blouses as the warm Hawaiian air touches the back of your neck, and for a second, it's all you really want. You try to crush the fantasy the next moment, but it's stuck in you. You've never even left this state, you know. Your dreams have never left the ground. You're just trying to get to graduation.

Then there's Terry and his four-hundred-dollars-a-date, which makes the six hours you just put in at Corn Shack at \$7.25 look so pathetic you want to start crying and laughing at the same time. You can do the math. Ten dates would buy you a new transmission for your car. It would take less to get a new used car that's a little less shitty. Who knows how you'd explain it to your mother, but who cares, when you'd have solved the problem.

When you pull up your message function to reply to him, you're reciting in your head that this can stop at anytime. You can just delete your account tomorrow. But it's okay for now to message him back. It can just be a joke.

You tell him hello.

You tell him you're willing to keep talking.

You thank him. You actually thank him. You don't know what you're thanking him for yet. But your mother would probably want you to thank him. When you're confessing all of this down the road, you'll at least be able to say, "Well, I did thank him, though."

It takes him six minutes to reply to you.

"Tell me about yourself. How old are you?"

Here you get to decide how honest you're going to be. You don't have to be Mara today. You can be Dreamyeyed_Alice, the girl with all the time on her hands. You can be sexy. You could wear pencil skirts. You could be a woman with a steady hand for eyeliner, who goes on dates all the time, who knows exactly what to say on those dates. Or you could be plain, fair, and firm with him and treat this like a business deal.

You settle somewhere in the middle because you haven't ever been good at lying. It makes you feel guilty, even online. So you give him the names of your favorite books and tell him you want to review books for a living and how you spend most of your time working at your unspecified minimum-wage-paying job, when not in class at your unspecified college. You do lie and say you're twenty-two, even though you just turned twenty. Then you lie again about how you like to go running, because his profile said he liked active girls.

Hey, for four hundred bucks a jog, you'd pick up exercise.

He says that's great. *Love a girl who keeps herself in shape* :). What if he's getting off on this?

You lie more in your next reply, almost viciously, saying you have two older brothers and your mother and father are both in law enforcement.

He just asks: *What are you looking for?*

Money. A way out. A nap. Maybe none of these—maybe you just don't want to be you anymore. You don't answer, not yet. First you need to shower, do your homework, and then sleep it all off.

In the morning, you're either full of fresh-eyed courage or you're just half-asleep. You can claim the latter later, if you need a way to excuse your behavior. You're finding excuses all over the place, really. But you still message Terry back. Don't try to explain why, not even to yourself. If you do, you will talk your way out of it, and you don't want to talk your way out of it.

You want to see where this goes.

You say: *I'm looking for help.*

He says: *I'm looking for help too.*

You say: *My car's transmission is shot.*

I understand, he says. *I get it.* You ask him if he has children. He says yes. Two daughters, and a boy, all grown. They all visit him at Christmas.

That matters more to you than you can say. If he has a family, someone loved him once. If he has daughters, he won't hurt you.

This is what you want to believe. But of course, your own father has a daughter, and where is he these days, besides an occasional voicemail on your cellphone?

In the end, if you can lie, he can lie. But maybe the two of you are just protecting yourselves from each other. He could be as scared as you are.

Next, he wants a picture of you, and without leaving the bed, and without caking foundation on your face, and without reaching over to brush your hair, you twist your long, dark locks and lay all that hair over your shoulder, shooting a picture with your phone from a high, flattering angle. You're in flannel pajamas, face all blemished and shadow-eyed, but he tells you, when he receives it, that you're beautiful.

And he sends another message. He'd like to meet you.

Say no. You think about it. But you don't. You ask him instead, isn't this a little fast? You admit you've never done this.

So I'm your first, he says. So he'll teach you. And isn't that what fathers are supposed to do?

It's just coffee—a trial date a few days from now—no money involved this time, though of course he'll pay for the coffee. There are ways to treat the coffee with your fifty-four-year-old benefactor like it's still part of this elaborate joke you're

telling yourself. You've always been more humorless than Michelle, though, so maybe she's the one who needs to figure out how to deliver the punch line. You have to tell her, at least. That's in the site's "Tips and Tricks for Being a Safe Sugar Baby." Step one is meeting in public, step two is to tell a friend where you'll be—and Michelle's the closest thing you have to a friend. Sometimes, you can even bring this friend with you and have them stake out the date. Michelle would get a kick out of that.

You haven't even been on many dates. There were a few in high school. There was one freshman year with this square-jawed economics major named Austin, who really wasn't your type, because you find economics dull and he kept talking about *The Wall Street Journal*, which you don't read. But you were in the same biology class and shared the same hatred for biology. That wasn't enough for romance, but you wanted it to be—you wanted just a few hours away from your books and your schedule, where you could pretend you were in a teen movie or something. By the end of it, you would have gone on a second date with him if he'd asked you—just to get away for a few hours.

He didn't ask, though. He never called. And you hadn't deserved a call, but it had been a kick to your ego all the same, which convinced you you'd only make time for someone who you actually liked, who would like you back. But here you are, making time for salt-and-pepper Terry.

Is this an improvement? Are you just too good for college boys? Are you this desperate for a date? For money? For something different to happen? Seriously, are you crazy?

You get your chance to tell Michelle during her smoke break at the Shack. It's less than twenty-four hours away. It being you-know-what. Point of no return.

You don't smoke, but you sometimes pretend you do so you can shit-talk your coworkers with Michelle in the back. You sit against the brick wall and look at the dirty back parking lot of Corn Shack, a blue dumpster a few feet from you, the air pervasive with the scent of rotten food and smoke. Michelle stands over you. She's talking about how Nate keeps copping a feel whenever he passes by, and she's debating whether or not she should report him or just kick his ass herself. Maybe both. "I wanna get his doped-up ass fired. He's not even good at this job. He's so slow, you know? He takes like two minutes to wrap one fucking burrito. It's a burrito, not a Christmas present, you know?"

"Yeah." You don't really know how to bring it up. "Hey, so."

"What?"

Here you go. "So. Um. Are you getting any more messages?"

Michelle doesn't know what you mean at first. She squints at you, blows out some smoke. You wait until it dawns on her because you really don't think you can spell it out more than that. "Oh!" Michelle nods as she understands. "Oh yeah, I deleted it yesterday."

"You did?"

"Yeah!" She laughs. "Okay, I admit I did answer this guy. We talked for like—I dunno, just a couple of messages. Then he asked for a picture and I

was like, no way. I don't wanna think about an old man using it to jerk off. It just got too real. I dunno what I was thinking."

You still need to tell her.

"But it was fun," she admits. "Right? Sort of exciting in the end."

"Yeah. I deleted too," you say. "I was just getting ready to tell you to delete. It's a bad idea."

She laughs again. "Well, you're more sensible. Honestly, maybe if you hadn't been in this to tell me how stupid it is, I might've done it, but you were right from the beginning." She drops her cigarette on the ground right in front of your guacamole-smeared shoes and taps it out with the toe of her sneaker. "C'mon."

She pulls you up from the ground and then leaves you to wipe the dirt from your pants. You watch the door swing closed behind her, leaving you out here alone, just you and her discarded cigarette bud. Watch the smoke from Corn Shack's chimney churn its way into the gray sky and disperse. It might rain tonight.

After work, sit on the curb by the bus stop with your hood up as rain begins to drizzle, lazy and half-hearted, all around you. You're the only one there, waiting for the last bus of the night, at the last bus stop. Your mother calls you. This is the universe maybe giving you one last chance.

"So I'm thinking," she says. "I can take some money from my savings."

Feel your stomach drop. You know what that means. She did the same thing for your first year of college—took from her savings—and when she reported it on her taxes and while filing for financial aid for the next year, it was recorded under income and made it look like she made more than she had. Which didn't make sense, but since when did financial aid make sense? You didn't get as much financial aid as you needed the next year because of it. Her retirement had dwindled (and there wasn't much to begin with). Her tax return was worse. It had been a hard year. She can't do that again.

You tell her as much, but she talks over you—"It's fine, it's fine, it won't be as much. You have to have a car, Mara. I'll work extra hours at Michael's when Christmas comes, it will even itself out in the end, won't it—"

"I'm really not going to let you," you tell her. Be firm. You're not ten anymore. Your mother has saved you too many times. It's your turn. You can save her this time.

You have a solution, and it's just a coffee date away.

"Mara... I can't think of another way..."

"I can." It's time to lie. "There's a scholarship I'm applying for." There you go. Good girl. "That will mean less for tuition, when I get it."

She tries to argue. She's as stubborn as you, that's where you learned it from anyway. You can talk her down or talk around her if you keep reassuring her it will be fine.

"I found this place anyway, that will do the transmission for half," you

say. "So it won't be as bad. I'm handling it."

She won't agree, but she'll say you'll talk again tomorrow, and that's all you need. Tell her goodnight and that you love her.

You feel proud of yourself, proud and guilty at the same time, for lying, which you really hate. But you also hate your mother giving you money she doesn't have. That you don't deserve. You have a headache when the bus comes, so you press your forehead into the cool glass of the window, look outside, and count each lamppost on your way home.

You have to get ready on your own.

It's time to put on Dreamyeyed_Alice's face. With your pinky finger, you dab on foundation over the dark circles under your eyes from staying up too late the night before. You cover the acne gathered around your temples and under your chin. It's a good idea to color in your eyebrows; that will help make your face look older. And it's a good idea to wear your reddest lipstick. That makes you more of a woman, too. Still, glancing in the mirror, you see Snow White, not a femme fatale. You know deep down you're just playing dress-up. You're still unsure about how much you should lie to him.

You want to look taller, so wear heels and think about how you could turn these shoes into weapons—break a toe if you have to. The pleated skirt you zip up flows in waves from the waist down and makes it easy to run away. Unbutton your blouse two buttons. Expose your collarbone. You're not sure what Terry likes. It's possible that in the near future, you will.

You leave late. The clock ticks two minutes past when you should leave and you watch it like you're frozen, knowing that you could miss the bus, and if you miss the bus, then you're off the hook. Don't pay too much attention to how fast your heart is already beating even when you're safe in your own kitchen. Just grab your coat and run out the door, fast-walk in your heels, don't think about how you hesitated.

You will arrive at the bus stop as the bus is turning the corner for you. This could be a sign that this date is supposed to happen. You are supposed to do this. This is for your mother. This is for yourself.

You watch out the window. Every one of the stops makes your muscles tense, a voice inside you telling you to get up. You think about your refrigerator with its half-empty carton of milk. This could just become a trip to the grocery store. But you don't get up. You don't take these chances. About two minutes from the café of choice, you know there's nothing more you can do. You've passed every stop. There are no more traffic lights. When you finally get up to leave the bus, you hear your heartbeat in your head. Notice your hands are shaking.

Stand perfectly still in the parking lot for a moment. Take a few breaths. It might help if you chant to yourself \$400, \$400, \$400, over and over.

Now check your phone for messages. No one has called. No one knows you are here, remember? No one knows you are capable of something like this.

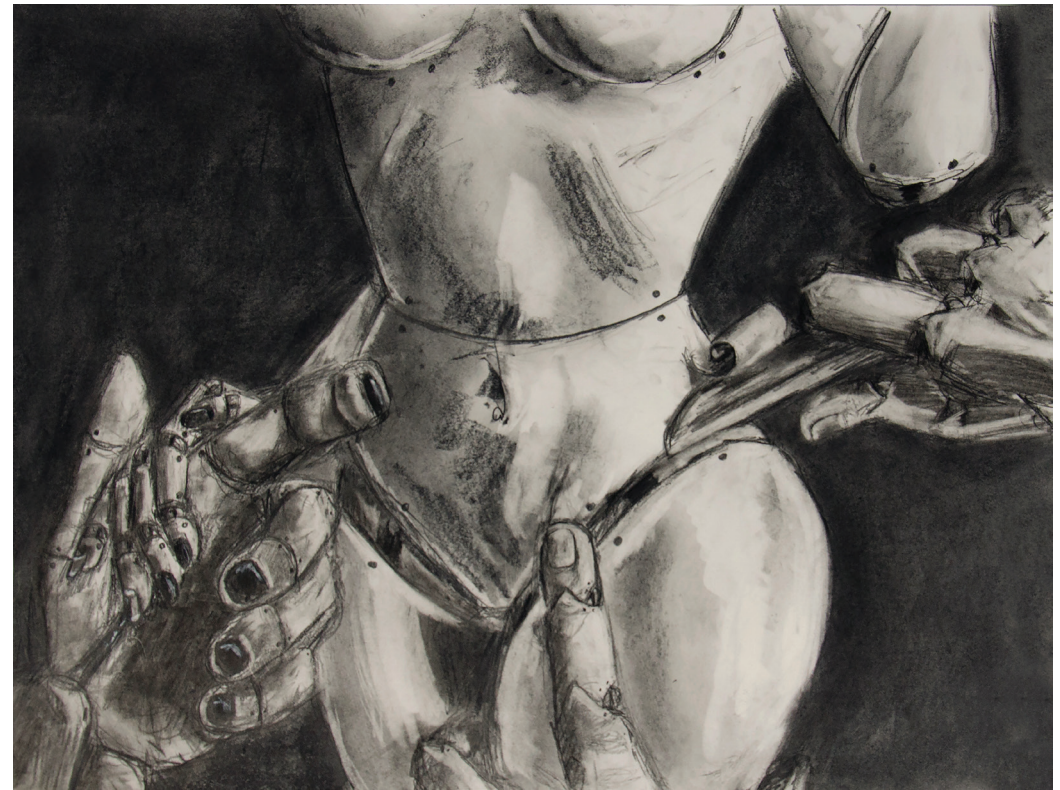
Something in you does want to prove that you are. It's this thing, whatever it is, that gets you walking your way across the parking lot toward the café. It's a crowded Saturday morning, plenty of coffee shop noise to shield you when you open the door.

At first, you don't see him. He could have stood you up, you think, with relief flooding your tense body. But then in the corner, there's a man like the one in his pictures. He's bent over his Blackberry. He's got a Roman nose and gray hair slicked into silver with the gel he's used to keep it back. He's got knobby elbows and frameless glasses.

You move behind the long line near the register, then peer through the windows that the bodies of strangers make. As you watch, he looks up and scans the room before returning to his phone. Even this far away, you think you could count the lines on his face.

He's waiting for you. He's looking for you. He keeps looking, each glance up hopeful in a little-boy kind of way, before he ends up frowning. He does not look like you think. He reminds you of a few of your professors. He reminds you of your real father. And the more he looks around all lost and hopeful and sad and old, the resemblance between him and all the people he reminds you of grows, until he reminds you of yourself.

Leave. Just go. Don't think twice, just duck out the door and walk as fast as you can, away from the loneliness that is growing inside you just from looking at him. The faster you walk, the farther you go, the quicker this feeling will fade, and the easier it will be to delete your profile, to crawl out of this hole, to forget you ever knew a man as lonely as you. ❀



DOLL MAKER

mollie crawford | graphite and white pastel



AUTUMNAL FUTURE

julia sorensen | photomanipulation

THINGS I KNOW TO BE TRUE

maddy keith

That there are exactly 193.9 miles between
your house and mine, but it's under

three hours if you speed. That
you speed. That you snore

when you sleep drunk or flat
on your back, which you only do

drunk. That when you sent me "Spring in Fialta"
I didn't get it, but I promised you I'd never

crash in a yellow car anyway.
That I get it now.

That I said I'd never try to add to the
superfluity of songs and syllables about love.

And yet here we are, here I am
trying. Because maybe I think I can say

something differently, but more likely because I
can finally say it exactly the same. Like a whispered

word to get through the gates
into someplace great. So let's ask to sneak

one more pair into Nirvana, even if it's only as
visitors, as migrants. Just one more.

Just one more. And perhaps the locals
will blame us for the economy or overcrowding,

or we'll get in and find we hate the food,
but really enjoy the wine. I don't know.

But of all the things I don't know to be
true, can we cling to the ones that I do,

the way I cling to you
while we slowly sway

in the bar where no
one is swaying. Calling

out to the jukebox, or the bartender
or each other:

Just one more

Just one more



A GRAIN

kayla agae | film photograph



COLONY COLLAPSE DISORDER

hannah fernandes-martin | oil on canvas

CLEAN - SHAVEN

gabby fortunato

It has only been a few weeks since Pop started dragging his oxygen tank, like a leashed dog that he abandons every so often, to sneak

a smoke out back. Now, Dad says, "Here, Pop, let me clean you up," and untangles the tubes from his ears, round and flat like saucers. Dad puts new batteries

in the electric razor and is careful around the tumor, purple and pulsing out of Pop's neck. Pop closes his watery eyes and cracks jokes about

the post-diagnosis colonoscopy. "But the only place I don't have cancer is my ass," he says, and I laugh even though I've heard this joke before. He tells me I'm a better

audience than the hospice nurse. Dad wipes the stubble from Pop's cheeks and lets out the breath he's been holding in whispered words: "All done."



"ALL HAIL JOSEPH, WALRUS KING!!!"

hannah fernandes-martin | linocut on paper

FOR ITS BITS

maddy keith

6.) "I like it for its bits," she prefaced.

She sent me "Little Expressionless Animals" by David Foster Wallace. It was as if she were trying to kill me. She'd gone through the trouble of creating a PDF I could print because she knew how I felt about holding words in my hands in order to truly understand them—to appreciate them.

Her girlfriend would be in the city soon, and shortly after, I'd be flying out, a fact I was trying to remain blissfully ignorant of. Whenever the subject got brought up, we both physically tensed up and prayed for the moment to be over, like when you watch a sex scene with your parents.

But we couldn't avoid the date of the girlfriend's arrival or my departure much longer, and here she was sending me heartbreakingly beautiful essays. It felt like head games, giving me more emotions than I was used to having to deal with—than I was equipped to deal with. I had felt bold this summer for wearing my heart outside its normal, methodically guarded cage. She made me feel bold. But I started to wonder if I just wasn't brave enough to walk away.

Sometimes it made me long for the days of the simplicity of boys. Boys who I could laugh with over dumb jokes and easily impress by chugging my beer or pushing up my cleavage, just a little. Focusing on the outside as opposed to constantly looking inward, like searching for a shell on the seafloor, blindly grabbing handfuls of sand, hoping to feel something solid in my fingers.

1.) I fell in love with the city and the girl in one fell swoop. They happened simultaneously and are correlated. I took them both on like a new persona. I was all cold-brew coffee shops, dive bars in Brooklyn, trying to read *Ulysses*—in a word, pretentious. But I was intoxicated on having the girl think I was smarter and greater than I was. She saw the sum of my parts as something they certainly were not. I waited for the day when she'd figure me out, realize she'd done the math wrong. But that day didn't come and every text, every date, every kiss came as both genuine shock and assurance.

She was standoffish—intimidatingly so. The first time we were alone was on a train to Connecticut to see a mutual friend. She didn't speak much, but when she did her words were wise, or funny and weighted in worth. I spoke pennies, spouted them out like a broken Coinstar machine, cramming in the cracks of any and all silences. At one point during that hour and seventeen minutes, I was prattling on about myself and thought *Oh my god, you're still speaking*, and then just stopped mid-sentence and let out an awkward giggle.

She turned to me and said, "Don't worry. I love it when you talk." Twisting the ring on my index finger, she asked me about its origin to kick-start me into another rant.

3.) "With a girl!?" My sister only focused on the latter part of the statement

when I called her. To me, her gender seemed like the least important part.

"I'm in lust." I repeated the more exciting aspect, the aspect that had me reeling, the aspect of finding someone I needed to kiss, touch, explore. But she was already lost in semantics.

So I started to focus on the semantics. I'd never shared anything romantic with another girl before, save a few kisses that were sticky with cheap vodka and an immature desire to get a reaction out of the party. I would think about it as I zoned out during my internship. I would become excited about the unknown but also terrified.

I started to think if a girl breaks your heart it has got to be infinitely worse than when a boy does. If things don't work out with a boy, we girls can explain it all away, chalk it up to him being "just an idiot guy," incapable of understanding your personal brand of feminine mystique. But with a girl?

She understands it. She has it. And if she still doesn't love you? It's as if she looked directly into your soul and gave a quick and resounding "no thank you."

5.) By the end of the summer we were using Google slides to communicate unofficially, as if speaking through a form of Google docs was not a form of cheating. It started out so I could help her brainstorm ideas for ad campaigns for her internship. It quickly turned into a live stream of our thoughts. It was impossible to follow, nonlinear and very honest. She made a joke about making a modern, lesbian adaptation of *You've Got Mail*.

"We could call it *Edit This*," she said.

I thought about editing—deleting parts of the story, slides of the summer. Her girlfriend, her very long-term but long-distance girlfriend, would have been first, probably. It didn't change the way I felt about her, but it should have. And it certainly should have changed the way she felt about me.

"She's a cheater," my friend said as we walked our usual route to my favorite taco place. His tone implied this was a final argument.

"And I'm a homewrecker, an ideal pair."

"I'm serious. If you were to do this for real, how could you ever trust her?"

I wondered about the threshold she and I would have to cross in order to be "doing this thing for real." It already felt pretty real, and I liked obstacles. I liked relationships where there were obvious pitfalls or ways they could fail. They felt safe because they had a scapegoat, something to blame, which allowed me to shirk any introspection about what might be wrong with me.

4.) She called me Woolf after sending me a letter from Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf. I contemplated if this—sharing lesbian literature—was just the standard when dating girls. I hoped it wasn't—that this was special. I'd never been sent literature by a boy except for a dirty acrostic poem made from my

name on Valentine's Day in high school, years ago. That paled in comparison. It didn't matter that the words weren't hers. I told myself the feelings were hers—she merely outsourced the romance.

Vita is self-deprecating in the letter. I mean, how could you not be, when you're sending a letter about something as lofty as love to Virginia Woolf, who would probably look at each word, come up with far superior synonyms for every line, words which would ultimately create an incredible photograph, where you, inferior Vita, had merely drawn stick figures with a heart in between?

But Vita says in Woolf's attempts to beautify, she would lose the honesty of the raw. And she's right. For me, love wasn't in the stars, memories of hot gas shining brightly, light years away that have already burned out and died. Love was in the bruises on my arms from when we grabbed each other so tightly in pure need the first night we slept together; when our bodies grinded together like gears turning, breaking away and then finding each other in new grooves, as we rotated around one another.

7.) I was riding the subway to work, a particularly hellish five minutes on the 4 express line smashed into a grind line, an old lady's umbrella handle poking into my left breast and the young Wolf of Wall Street wanna-be's briefcase (which was most likely empty because he was an intern and what could he possibly have in there) finding its way in the crevice of my ass. I tried to find a place to avert my eyes.

I saw a couple. Her hair had fallen into her eyes and was working its way frustratingly into her mouth. Her hands were occupied with the subway rail bar and a cup containing a bright green thick substance that undoubtedly was full of kale and named something like "green machine" or "detox monster."

Her male companion dropped his belongings, much to the annoyance of his subway neighbors, and delicately moved the hair from her eyes, her mouth, and lingered an extra second with his thumb on the apple of her cheek.

I couldn't shake the image even as the 4 stopped at Grand Central and birthed me out of the doors and into work. I titled a slide in our sacred Google space "Fleeting Subway Thoughts..." and set the scene for her. I posed the question on my mind.

"Did she think 'Gross, his grimy subway hands on my face, he better not have just given me the stomach bug working its way up and down the Bronx-bound trains', or did she just think it was beautiful?"

She responded, "Well, what would you think?"

"Normally, I'd tell him to get his janky fingers off my face. But now... I'm not so sure."

"I'd like to touch your face," she typed.

8.) When I got to the park I found an isolated bench and wrapped myself in

the DFW essay—the words, the plot, the subliminal messages of her giving it to me. I agonized over the lines as if she'd stood behind Wallace as he wrote, imploring him to use verbs that would best work to let me know she loved me.

A man sat down beside me on a bench made for one, or two close friends. He waited a minute to see if I would acknowledge his seat choice, his encroachment on my bench, on my thoughts. I did not. I tried to get myself back into the essay.

"You look like you are trying to take over the world," he said in a manner that expected a playful response. My knee-jerk reaction was to give a pity laugh to make him feel comfortable. But he shouldn't have felt comfortable, he should have felt uncomfortable because I had taken on all of that to normalize the situation. And I became pissed off at his entitlement to my time, my space, my date with the park and my essay.

When he gave up hitting on me, he stayed on my bench and made a phone call. It was becoming dark so I decided to leave then, even angrier that he had wasted the last precious lighting of the sky to read by. As I was crossing the street, I made the mistake of making eye contact with a stranger. He switched directions and caught up to my purposefully rushed pace.

"You look like my ex-girlfriend," he said.

Yes, but never your next girlfriend, I wished I'd said aloud. He trapped me in conversation with questions of where I was going, where I was coming from. My eyes were flighty as I kept looking back toward my route home; I hated how I felt like a cornered animal. And I thought about whether I could ever love a man again.

9.) My cab made its trek to La Guardia. I was sleep deprived and nauseous—the outcome of a day of drinking and a night of no sleep. I'd just said goodbye to her but I was too tired to be sad about it. She and the city had exhausted me. I didn't know the next time I'd see her—if there would be a next time. At 7 a.m. on a Saturday, the streets were the quietest I'd seen them all summer.

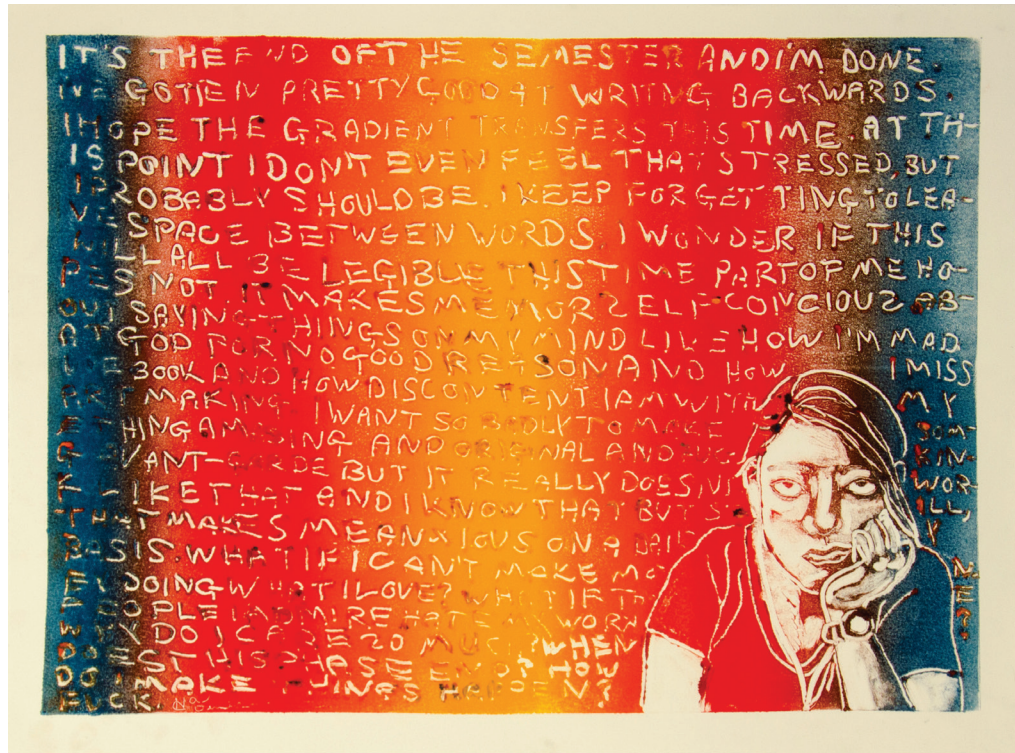
I thought about the bits of the summer, of the city, of her. It was perfect afternoons drinking five-dollar champagne in Washington Square Park. It was also frustrating nights spending thirteen dollars on a teacup of gin in the Meat Packing District. I was either moving rapidly with the rush of the city, like subway cars, like all the lights, or waiting, stuck in a line or an amorphous blob of people, of traffic, of reluctant realities, waiting for her.

I added them together, then subtracted, then divided, looking for a sum of the parts, of what they all equaled. I tried formulating until my hung-over head protested. I pushed it against the chilled glass of the window and blinked goodbye to the Brooklyn Bridge.

2.) The city was all enjambed lines, people, and trash at the beginning of summer. Sometimes when I thought about trying to grow here, to live, or just be in such

a crowded place, it made me want to lie down and take a nap. I thought I should start anew where there's still uncharted territory to be claimed. I started to think where that might be. Mars? The deep sea? South Dakota?

Over our first brunch, she spoke about her girlfriend, and her-ex girlfriends, and I wondered where the cemeteries were in the city, if there were any. Manhattan feels like a place with no space to forfeit for the dead, or even the living, for that matter—only for what hasn't happened yet. ❀



SENTIMENTS, DECEMBER 2, 2015

hannah fernandes-martin | monoprint on paper

LESSONS FROM GIRLHOOD

virginia kluiters

Put your napkin

in your lap, Grana says.

Sweet-tea-drunk, she groans back
into her patio chair and presses her nails
into its curling, wrought-iron arms.

I am a small, hard body, all tanned
limbs and yellow bruises. I balance a sticky plastic
cup between my thighs while my feet dangle
from my chair, the mark of childhood.

When I squirm, pulling my knees
under my chin, Grana says, *Sit
like a lady*. I'm playing a game
of domestic dress-up, wearing an apron
covered in faded, aquamarine roses. We watch
the men in the yard toss pine straw. Shirtless
and coppery, they walk back
and forth through the hydrangeas
to the toolshed.

Later, I sneak into the kitchen to lick
the butterscotch icing that's cracked thick
across a wooden spoon. Between Grana's legs
I dance, swinging from one shining thigh
to the other until she says
Settle down, and yanks the ribbon
on my apron. Together we wash with soap-shells
that look like waxy-green mints and morph
in our palms under the warm water.

In the faded fluorescent lamplight,
Grana prefaces stories about her childhood
with *Do as I say and not as I do*, because only a boy
should have a crew cut, a pocketknife,
a tough, rough tongue. I listen, wondering why
she taught my brother
how to use a hammer, and me
how to sew a blouse when I know there's a toolbox
in her dressing room under her beaded shoes
and silk skirts.

I watch her laugh
at her own stories, her red-lipsticked mouth
stretching open. Her eyes, which are brown
like my own, but faded, widen
when she describes the dirt
that used to cake her nails. I don't tell her
that once I walked the perimeter
of the backyard wall barefoot,
hopping over pinecone-grenades,
and scaling magnolias,
with palm fronds shuddering
around me.



CELESTIAL DANCE

hannah podhorzer | photo transfer and pen

INTERVIEW SERIES - V

colby meagle | collage and oil on canvas



NOT TOO MUCH OF ANYTHING

hanna elmgren

When my grandma was in the hospital, in the process of dying but still, at the time, very much alive, my mom told me it was time to start mourning.

My grandma was admitted to the hospital that night because she was having difficulty breathing. Knowing her, I would have expected something like a motorcycle accident or an alcohol-sodden liver's failure to do her in, but it was simply good, old-fashioned cancer. Originally breast cancer, it had spread into the lungs, aggressive and hungry for old-woman life, whatever was left of it.

My grandma was unconscious, sedated, a respirator covering her mouth and nose. The doctor said that she didn't have long to live, and my mother put her hand on my shoulder and closed her eyes. Her big-knuckled, thin fingers were fragile as they clung to my collarbone. The doctor looked at me, expecting me to reciprocate the touch, to comfort her. I didn't.

"I'm so sorry, Autumn," the doctor said, reaching out and tapping my mother's elbow, as if he were going to grip it comfortingly and then decided against it. My mom was a nurse at the hospital, though in the maternity department, and I wondered if they knew each other.

My mom sat down and picked up one of her mother's limp hands. She held it to her face. It was supposed to seem tender. I didn't doubt that she was mourning. I simply doubted that her grief wasn't exaggerated.

The doctor offered me a sad smile; I gave a tiny wave. As he left, I couldn't help but imagine his judgment of me, the bitter granddaughter who refused to grieve.

There was a framed photograph of the three of us, taken last year before Grandma lost her hair, on the bedside table. My mom had grabbed it from its place on the skinny table in the front hallway on the way to the hospital. Looking at the photograph, I noticed again how similar my mother and grandma looked, and how little I looked like them. They had the same deep brown eyes, the same thin face. I was more my father, who was rounded and tall and light where they were angular and small and dark. The picture frame was tilted towards the door, away from Grandma's bed, just a piece of the tableau for my mother's audience: sick old woman, grieving daughter, framed picture of a loving family.

Leaning against the wall just inside the doorway, I knew I wasn't playing my part. If Mom realized, she didn't say anything. She was in the process of waiting for her mother to die.

Within twenty-four hours, my grandma was both off the respirator and conscious. She still needed her nasal cannula, but she'd already been wearing one for the past few weeks because her failing body could no longer provide itself with enough oxygen on a daily basis. In my eyes, the cannula had become

a part of my grandma's face.

It was the beginning of the summer after I graduated from college. I had moved back home because my mother had asked me to and my post-grad strategic communications internship didn't start until August. This was how I found myself, two mornings after my grandma had been admitted, in a hospital room, reading borderline-pornographic novels out loud to a bald old woman who cackled at the authors' creatively terrible euphemisms for male genitalia.

"Toni, did you call your father?"

I stopped reading mid-sentence and looked across the hospital bed to the door, where my mother was standing. She looked almost as ill as Grandma did and acted more so.

"Yes, I left three voicemails," I said. "Two yesterday and one this morning."

"Call him again," Mom said.

"Give it up," Grandma said from the bed. Her voice was hoarser, quieter than usual, but just as sharp. "He's a cheating bastard." It was an accurate accusation, but I felt my dad's choices didn't warrant her anger. His infidelity was a reaction to the person my mother was, which was a reaction against who her mother was. Mom had always told me that Grandma had been "negligent in her affections," which I guessed was why Mom needed the attention of everyone around her, why she had to be perfect and sophisticated in every way that her mother was improper and wild.

"He should be here," my mom said, ignoring her mother. She didn't need to say, "I need him," aloud for us to hear it.

Grandma hissed through her teeth. "Well I sure as shit don't want him here. He'll make Antonia stop reading to me."

(The last time she'd been in the hospital, my dad had offered to sit with her, but had refused to read graphic sex scenes aloud to his mother-in-law. He'd asked for a different book, and she'd chosen *The Scarlet Letter*. He'd walked out.)

"Toni, call your father," my mom said again.

"Autumn," Grandma began, but her words disappeared in a coughing fit. Mom hurried to the side of the bed.

My phone rang. I put the book down on the bed next to Grandma's bony hip and bent down to pull my phone out of my bag. Mom was holding a glass of water to Grandma's lips, cradling the back of her head with the other hand.

I looked at my phone to see who was calling. "Hi, Dad."

Mom's hand jerked and water splashed over her mother's chest. Grandma turned over and vomited, missing the garbage can in favor of her daughter's shoes. Mom ran out of the room.

"Toni, I got your messages." My dad sounded out of breath and I could hear traffic in the background.

"Mom wanted me to call."

"Are you at the hospital now?" he asked, cautiously, as if he were

checking to see if his wife was lying to him via their daughter.

"Yes, Dad," I said. "I really am here, and Grandma really is sick." I flicked the paperback cover of the book a couple times. Mom, carrying her shoes in a small plastic garbage bag, led two unfamiliar nurses into the room. All three of them began trying to clean up the vomit.

"She wants me to come," my dad said.

"Yeah."

He paused and I imagined him standing on a street corner, still unconvinced that his wife wasn't playing a trick on him. I spread my hand across the book, as if I could suffocate the embracing couple on its cover. Against the colorful paper, my skin looked achromatized.

"Well, I'm supposed to have dinner with a friend tonight..."

"Dad."

"I was just about to say that I can cancel," he said, almost defensive. He knew that I had, for a long time now, been old enough to understand that "friend" meant "lover" in the same way that "business trips" weren't always about work. We both acknowledged his lifestyle and my acceptance of it, but it still wasn't something a daughter talked about with her father. I'd been angry at first, but I wasn't anymore. I knew it was just part of being married to my mom.

"Thanks, Dad."

After Dad assured me he was coming, I hung up and picked up the book, hoping I could start reading before Mom said anything.

"Is he coming?" She had her arm outstretched, hand on the wall, as if she needed it for support. The other hand still held the garbage bag with her shoes.

"Yes." I often spoke in monosyllables to my mother. The less you gave her to use against you, the better. I stood up. "I'm going to call Evan." Evan was my best friend, and really the only person I wanted to talk to.

"Not now, Toni," my mom said, standing upright.

"I'm tired," Grandma announced, ending the conversation and sending everyone present into a flurry of motion to make her comfortable. I closed the book and put it next to her and left, not saying goodbye.

It didn't take Mom long to join me in the waiting room. She eased her thin frame into the hard chair next to me and closed her eyes as if to look at the hospital around us any longer would be more than her delicate constitution could bear. I bit the inside of my lip so I wouldn't frown. Picking up a magazine at random from the end table next to me, I pretended to read. She leaned her head back against the wall, waiting for me to ask how she was feeling.

"Toni, you can't invite Evan here," she began, when I stayed quiet.

"I wasn't going to."

"It's just not appropriate."

Evan and I had always danced on the line between friends and more-than-friends. I was always the one who took the step back and had an excuse ready for it: My dad's cheating. My parents won't get a divorce even though they don't love each other. My grandma has cancer.

I stared at the model airbrushed to perfection on the page in front of me. I imagined my mom would love to airbrush my life, smoothing away all the blemishes, sharpening the lines between me and Evan, so that there was no ambiguity, no impropriety. I said nothing.

"It's so hard," she said, changing tack. "You're going to be without a grandmother."

"Mom, she's never been around, anyways." I wasn't trying to be cruel, not entirely. It was true. And it was Mom's fault. She had kept me from her mother, as if to protect me from the wildness and the unpolished edges, the sex and alcohol. The laughter and adventure.

"Toni."

I turned to look at her. She had moved her head ever so slightly toward me and opened her eyes. This gave the impression that any further movement would be too taxing.

"She's going to be dead."

I could feel the words I knew I shouldn't say coming to the front of my mouth: *I know what cancer is, Mom*. It was petulant and childish, but living in her house, in my childhood bedroom, and having a curfew for the first time in four years made me relive my teenage attitude, at least internally. Sassing my mother was out of the question now, especially when her own mother was going to be dead. I said instead, "I know. I'm sorry."

Mom closed her eyes and straightened her head again, appeased now that she had been given the proper sympathy. I turned back to the magazine but couldn't focus on the pages. I hated that I harbored this bitterness as Grandma was on her deathbed, but I couldn't help it, not after twenty-two years of my mom's implying that my love for her was never enough.

I stood up and walked the short distance down the hallway to the water fountain. My dad stood near the elevator, looking blankly down the hallway as if he didn't know why he was there. He smiled when he saw me. I couldn't help but smile back.

"Nice of you to show up," I said to him, mostly teasing.

"I know, I'm sorry. I don't see you enough." He had an apartment in the city, close to his job and far from his wife in the suburbs. It wasn't easy to explain this married-yet-unmarried arrangement, so I didn't usually try, especially since it involved admitting that my mother wanted a husband but didn't particularly care about my dad himself. The only person who really knew all the details was Evan. Everyone else got by with vague impressions.

I gave my dad a quick hug and said, "It's fine."

"You look tired, Toni. You should go home and sleep. I'll call if you need to come back, okay?"

I nodded. I hadn't gotten much sleep the past two nights. Dad and I walked together towards the waiting room, but he held back as I walked in.

"Are you leaving?" Mom's eyes were open and fixed on my face as I picked up my bag. I didn't have to work hard to hear the indignation.

"Dad's relieving me," I said and watched as her gaze settled on her

husband. She stood slowly, the leg she had tucked under her still resting on the chair so that she looked like a heron, balanced on one leg.

It was like something out of a play, the way she walked, shoeless, over to her husband, with one perfectly controlled, small stumble halfway there, to show that the dignity she was displaying was a front and that underneath she was very much in pain. It looked like too-perfect acting, like she had blocked the whole scene but had not given anyone else stage directions. She threaded her arms under my dad's arms and behind his back, resting her head against his chest, a faint smile on her lips. Dad was slow in hugging her back, as if he were unsure of what he was supposed to do. With his arms sticking out around her awkwardly, he looked to me like a child.

I waved at him over my mom's head and headed to the elevator, ignoring the feeling I had that I was abandoning three people, each for separate reasons.

Outside on the street, I checked the bus schedule on my phone and realized that if I hurried, I could catch the same bus that I'd taken home after work every day last semester. Technically, I was going the wrong direction, away from my mom's house, but Evan worked at a hotel this way down the line, so I could visit him.

It wasn't just a sentimental thing, taking the same bus that had been part of my daily routine for my last semester of college. It was also about seeing Hank the Green Scarf Man. Two weeks earlier, when I had been about to graduate, Hank had been getting on the bus with a green scarf every day for two months. Every day he made an announcement to the passengers: "Hi, everyone. I'm Hank. Is this anyone's scarf? A woman left it on the bus on March 18th, and I want to give it back to her."

By graduation, I'd begun to recognize the people who took the bus at that time every day, because they no longer looked alarmed when Hank made his announcement. Hank became a routine to me and the other daily commuters: Beanie and Headphones Boy, Man Who Always Reads Espionage Novels, Lady With the White Service Dog.

The day that I left my dying grandma and already-mourning mother and bumbling father at the hospital, I sat down next to Lady With the White Service Dog and smiled at her. The return smile was without teeth.

I realized that my leg was bouncing, and I forced myself to sit still. The hospital bus stop was three stops down the line from campus and one stop before Hank got on. When the bus slid to a halt, I leaned forward to look for him. Three people got on, but Hank did not. The doors hissed closed. I turned to Service Dog Lady and asked, "Where's Hank?"

Several people looked up at me. Service Dog Lady took out one earbud delicately, tipping her hair out of the way. "What?" she said, and the dog looked up at her.

I looked at the dog for a few seconds too long, and then back at the

woman.

“Nothing, sorry,” I said, turning away.

Espionage Book Man was looking at me strangely, and I wanted to ask him when Hank had stopped getting on the bus, but I didn’t. It wasn’t something people did, talking to strangers on the bus—like clipping your toenails at work or staying in a marriage with your cheating husband. So why had Hank done it? What had he hoped to gain by getting on the bus every day with a scarf and an announcement? Maybe he was just the kind of person who worked extra hard to do someone a kindness. Yet, part of me worried that Hank might be the kind of person who took a forgotten scarf as a sign, who thought that the Mysterious Green Scarf Woman was his soul mate, so he got on the same bus every day to try to find her.

I leaned back in the seat, hugging my bag, imagining how my mother would react to my fascination with Hank. I knew it was weird, but it seemed important to understand what kind of person would do something so strange. Mom wouldn’t have cared about Hank, only that I was being irrational.

I looked out the window. You’re being stupid, I thought to myself. Stop.

It wasn’t worth dwelling over. I’d tell Evan, though; I told him everything, even the silly things.

A couple stops later, I hopped off the bus and crossed the street to the hotel where Evan worked as a valet. He looked miserable. He hated working in the summer; the uniform jacket made it too hot. In the winter, he could wear a big, puffy coat and gloves and a hat and stand under the heater at the valet booth. In the summer he could only sweat.

“Thought you were at the hospital,” he said as I walked up.

“Dad came to relieve me.” I crossed my arms and stood next to him. I liked to look in the same direction he did. At work especially, so that I could warn him when a hotel guest was pulling up. He tended to forget to do his job when I was around.

“Your dad showed up,” Evan said, chewing on a mouthful of mock surprise. “Will wonders never cease?”

I rolled my eyes. Evan had been around for all the stages of the Moore Marriage Saga: when I found out my dad was cheating, when I found out my mom knew and was holding it against him, when I found out my mom was trying to convince my dad to have a second child to “save the marriage,” when I found out my dad kind of, maybe wanted a divorce, and my mom didn’t because it meant giving up the image of victimized wife she had made for herself. Evan had experienced all my emotions—shock, rage, confusion, despair, relief, disgust. Evan was the only person I let joke about my family.

“So your grandma’s okay?”

I looked up at him and smiled with half my mouth. “I think so. She’s breathing better now. They took her off the respirator last night and she made me start reading a shitty romance novel out loud this morning.”

Evan laughed and nudged me with his arm.

“Remember Hank the Green Scarf Man?” I said. “I took the same bus today and he didn’t get on. He wasn’t there.”

“You think he found her?”

I shrugged. I wanted to say more about it, but I wasn’t sure what else to say. A car pulled over in front of the hotel.

“Looks like you actually have to do your job now,” I said. I was tired, I realized, and hungry. I didn’t want to stand idly on the side of the road and watch cars and buses drive by anymore. “I should go. Want to come over later?”

“Your mom would be okay with that?”

The car doors opened, the hotel guests were clambering out, and I was already walking away. I threw the answer at Evan over my shoulder: “Yeah, sure, it’s fine.” Only after I’d gotten on the bus did I think that it might not be.

I knew there wasn’t much to eat in the fridge at the house, so I stopped for a sandwich on the way back and ate it standing up in the kitchen. Sitting at the table felt too much like committing to stay.

Still eating, I wandered the house, looking at the pictures of my parents and me. My mom liked to maintain the façade that we were a beautiful suburban family, even after both Dad and I had moved to the city. Around the same time, Grandma had moved in and forsaken the life of “debauchery and adventure,” as she liked to call it. I never found out what exactly Mom said to convince her flighty mother to settle down, but it worked out, in a cruel sort of way: Grandma was diagnosed with cancer a little over a year after she moved in.

I finished my sandwich and walked across the house to the first floor master bedroom, where Grandma slept since she’d gotten sicker and couldn’t handle the stairs. Mom had moved upstairs into the guest room. We’d been sharing a bathroom.

Mom had carefully made the bed in the master, probably late at night when she should have been sleeping but was instead contemplating death and loss and tragedy. In the attached bathroom, everything was tidy and cleverly organized—pill bottles, lotions, eye drops—so Grandma could find them. My mom was the kind of woman who thought about things like that, who cleaned up after her mother who wouldn’t clean up after herself.

My grandma was the kind of woman who said “sugar-tit” when she was annoyed, who held by the mantra “Use ‘em and lose ‘em” for relationships with men. She’d never known who my mom’s father was and had never married. When I came home from college for breaks and the occasional weekend away from campus, my grandma would show me pictures she’d taken in countries across the globe. Only cancer had stopped her from traveling, hitchhiking, and sampling alcohol—in large quantities—from different parts of the world.

Part of me wondered if staying too long in the room my grandma slept in would affect my sensibilities, if it would have a bad influence on me, the kind

of bad influence that my mother had always been afraid Grandma would have on me. I'd only met my grandma twice before the cheating came out. With a grim smile that felt like I'd painted it on my face, for only my own benefit since no one else was there, I collapsed on the couch in the living room.

I woke up to the sound of the doorbell. It was Evan, and he had takeout. We headed upstairs to my room; it was where we'd always gone in high school, the only place in the house that was more me than my mother.

When he opened the boxes I realized that I was hungry again. Evan grinned at me. He looked pleased that he'd thought of a way to take care of me. I looked down into the box of fried rice I was holding, unsure how to deal with the frank emotion on his face.

"You okay?" Evan asked, nudging me.

I shrugged and grabbed my laptop awkwardly with one hand. "Want to watch something?" I opened the computer without waiting for an answer. I picked a movie at random and put the computer at the edge of my bed. Evan and I sat against the wall, shoulder to shoulder. When I was done eating, I couldn't focus on the movie, could only think about Evan's shoulder touching my shoulder, about Mom's fingers gripping my collarbone.

I leaned forward and paused the movie.

"Toni?" Evan touched the back of my arm.

"I feel out of place, like I don't belong in my family," I said. The words only became true to me in the air of my childhood bedroom. They tickled the pictures of my friends and me on the bulletin board, saying not real, not real.

I had, in the past few weeks, living with my mom and grandma, become uncertain whether or not I was supposed to be the me I'd found at college, or partly them as well.

"What do you mean?" Evan asked.

"I just don't relate at all to my mom and grandma," I tried to explain. "They're just—so much, you know? My grandma's blatantly sexual and loud and crude, and Mom is..."

"A prude?" Evan said, smiling. Teasing again.

"Sure," I said, indulging him. That one word did nothing to sum up my mother.

He waited, but I didn't say anything. "So what's wrong?" he asked finally.

"What I am supposed to be?" I asked, not quite able to keep the laugh out of my voice. It was a stupid question, but it came from somewhere serious inside me and I couldn't shake it.

"The perfect mixture of the two," Evan said with a soft grin.

I took a shallow breath. "But if—"

"Don't worry about it," Evan said. He was looking at my shoulder with a kind of seriousness I didn't think my shoulder deserved. "This isn't something you should be getting upset over, Toni."

I watched his face for a minute, but he didn't make eye contact, just followed the progress of his fingers as he ran them down my arm. I heard his breath change before he moved, enough time for me to remember that we were sitting on my bed, in an empty house. He was leaning in, maybe towards my shoulder, maybe towards my face.

"I have to pee," I said, and scrambled off the bed and out of my room. I needed to get away from the way Evan had told me that what I was talking about wasn't that important, the way he'd wanted, lusted, for the me that lived directly in between the extremes, the perfect moderate, not too much of anything.

The bathroom was neat, bisected between my things and my mom's things. It was so clean it made my ears itch. I thought of Mom intently, purposefully organizing the space, of Hank with the green scarf talking to strangers on a bus every day. I thought of Grandma traveling to Thailand at sixty just to go. And I couldn't even say yes or no to Evan, to anything really.

I heard the door open downstairs and my mom call my name.

I fled the bathroom, forgetting the pretense under which I'd gone there, forgetting to flush. It was 8:30 p.m., too early for her to be home. "Shit, I thought we had more time," I said. I'd planned to get Evan out before she came home to minimize what she saw as offenses. Inviting Evan over during our Time of Mourning was sure to count as an offense.

"It's okay," Evan said, cleaning up.

I helped him carry the boxes downstairs. He insisted I keep the leftovers even though he'd paid. In the kitchen I put the takeout boxes in the mostly-empty refrigerator and Evan waved at me before heading down the hall to the front door.

"Strange seeing him here," my mom said. She was standing at the kitchen table, looking through the mail.

"I invited him over," I said.

"Why?" my mom said. She sounded injured. "Why now?"

I didn't say anything. I'd learned a long time ago that it was impossible to argue with her when she was facing trials and hardship. My mother, suffering, could not be wrong.

"Your grandmother is dying, Toni, and you're in my house, with a boy, doing God-knows-what, while I'm trying to make my dying mother comfortable. Haven't you learned anything? Don't you know that he'll take advantage of you when you're vulnerable?"

"That's not me, Mom," I said. I didn't think I needed to say, "That's you," for her to hear it. She was projecting herself onto me and I wanted her to know it, but I couldn't say the words. The sentiment rested in the air between us, not quite said, but not unsaid.

My mom flattened all ten of her knobby fingers against the wood of the table, leaning over slightly. She looked tired—but even more so, she looked disappointed. I thought she was trying to manipulate me, in the way she always tried to condition me into being what she saw as the perfect daughter, in the

way that she manipulated my dad into sticking around even though she only wanted him there so she would look like an angel.

I felt sorry for her. The bitterness that was usually my only companion in my mother's house eased away and pity rolled in, sour in my mouth. I had spent my college years reflecting on and raging against how fucked up I was because of my mother, how she had made me into a chaotic mess hidden behind a shiny surface that she polished so that no one would look at me for too long. I'd never really thought about how fucked up she was because of her mother.

"You look tired," I said, not quite managing to remove the stiffness from my voice. "Sleep in tomorrow. I'll go in early." It was my contribution, my prerogative, for once. It was my attempt to belong in my own family. I didn't stay to see how my offering was received. I went upstairs and brushed my teeth in the immaculate bathroom and crawled into my childhood bed.

The next morning, I did as I promised and got up early to go to the hospital. Grandma was awake, coughing hard. I stayed out of the way of the nurses until she had stopped coughing and was settled back down onto the bed. I picked up the book I had left there the day before, trying not to feel guilty for my inability to do anything other than read to her. I was afraid to get too close. She was a stranger but also part of my biology and breath.

"So did you get my dad to read this to you?" I asked.

She laughed, more of a quiet exhale than anything. She seemed a little worse than yesterday. "No. Shame. Actually, he and your mom came in and wasted my time with their bickering anyway."

"Sorry," I said, opening the book.

"Don't you apologize for their shit," Grandma said. "You're always in the middle of them and you don't deserve that. When I get out of this damn hospital—I know I'm terminal, but just let me bullshit you for a second—we're gonna have so much fun you won't even have to think about them."

I smiled, looked down at my fingers holding the book. It was well-intentioned, but dishonest, and about ten years too late.

"My mom..." I stopped, flipped the pages of the fat book in my hands absently. "My parents are such a mess, but my mom tries so hard to hide it, you know?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Why?" I said.

"Because I never hid it, kid." She waved a heavy hand in a small sweep along the front of her. "My mess was always out in the open. There's no hiding it. What, you got a mess you need hid? I know a guy."

I smiled again, looking at the skin on the back of my hands, white-brown, dry.

"My mess," my grandma said after a pause, "her mess—same thing, just passed on. I wasn't the best mother. I know that. I know it's my fault." She adjusted her cannula. "Tell me a story," she said, as if it were a change of

subject, though I could sense that it wasn't, not really. "Not this stupid book. I've had enough of it. Tell me something only you could tell."

I stared at her for a few seconds, trying to decide whether or not she was making fun of me. "Okay... I guess I'll tell you about Hank the Green Scarf Man. How he got on the same bus every day with a green scarf, looking for the woman who'd left it there."

"He sounds like an idiot," Grandma said.

I laughed, about to scold her for interrupting.

"Okay, fine, I'll let you tell me this story about the idiot with the green scarf."

And I did. When I finished, she asked, "So did he find her? Did he give the scarf back?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Probably not."

Grandma smiled. "But it's a nice thought. A stupid scarf bringing two people together."

"Or maybe he just gave it back and went on his way," I said. I waved the romance novel in the air, like a flag. "This isn't real, Grandma."

"I know what life's like. Been living it for seventy years." She started coughing again, and couldn't stop. I pressed the call button as her breathing became more difficult, her sickness lodging in the space between us, even though it had also been the thing to bring us together. As the nurse came in to help, I watched, holding the book in my lap, feeling useless. Eventually her coughing abated, her breathing improved, and my grandma fell asleep. She looked a little annoyed, even in sleep, familiar in that way, and yet still the same stranger she'd been my whole life. Maybe she felt as much a stranger in our family as I did. I put the book aside, and with both of my hands, reached out to my grandma to hold one of hers. ❀



UNTITLED

maggie carter | digital photographs





EIGHT YEARS BACK

caroline guardabassi

Today I drove by that house
we once thought about buying.
The yellow one you'd always liked,
with the gardenia bushes that
you would steal blooms from.
Our last fight before you moved out
happened on that same street.

I wouldn't even have noticed
the house if it hadn't been for my
daughter in the back seat,
gurgling at the pair of beagles
lying in the front yard.

Your baby must be four by now.
I remember the Saturday,
drinking bourbon
with my neighbors,
that I got your mass email
with a pregnancy photo
and your new Dallas address.

I'd smiled at my phone's reflection
in the half-filled tumblers;
the image of your husband's hand
on your stomach
refracted in the glass rim
beside my wife's wrist.
I was proud of us.

Every year when the radiator burns
off summer dust,
I remember our city apartment.
Your curls hanging loose
as you drank honeyed coffee
in our cold, morning kitchen.

Now my weekends are
covered in powdered hot chocolate
as my children's blue mittens
grab up fistfuls of orange lawn.
I hope you can still see
the leaves change in Texas.



HAUNTED HOUSES

nikita demare

I lived in a house of horrors once, one with an ill structure, worn down by a quick-tempered devil who dressed like my stepfather. He disguised himself in crisp suits and pungent cologne, using a smooth, coaxing voice that would make anyone stay. The house saw more of the terror than I did, but its thin walls couldn't mask the sounds: my mother's limbs tossed against cabinets, her muffled screams, her pleas. I waited for the house to collapse, my mother folding in with it, both consumed by him. But it remained standing, the echo of my mother's feet against hardwood floors scrambling to get away its steady heartbeat.

I only saw the evidence of my stepfather's wrath once, when I crept into my mother's bathroom early one morning. I shuffled over to her, my small body enveloping her right leg in a tight embrace as I looked up at her reflection in the mirror. She was putting on foundation, the powder kind that leaves residue on counters and sinks. She was using too much on one spot—the circumference of her left eye swollen and bruised like an overripe peach.

We were helping trim trees in your grandparents' backyard last night when a branch fell and hit me, she explained, her voice tucking me into the lie. She then touched my forehead, running a thumb over my eyebrows, trying to smooth away the tension.

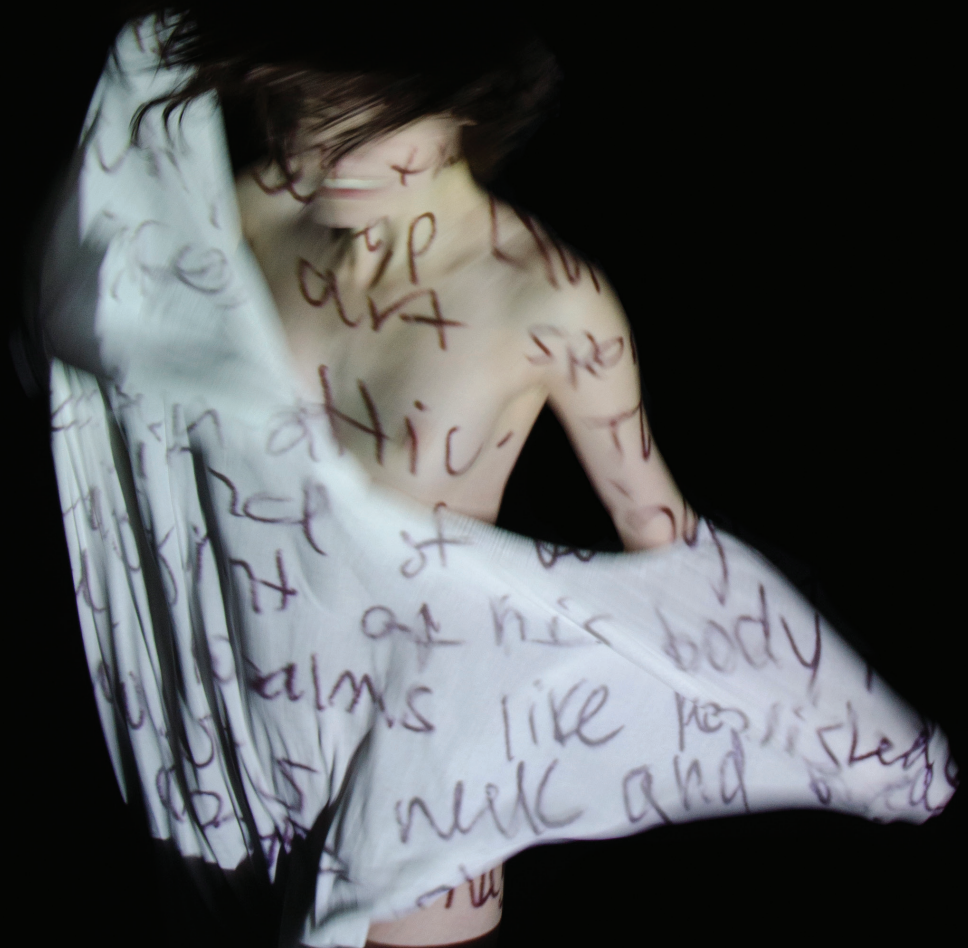
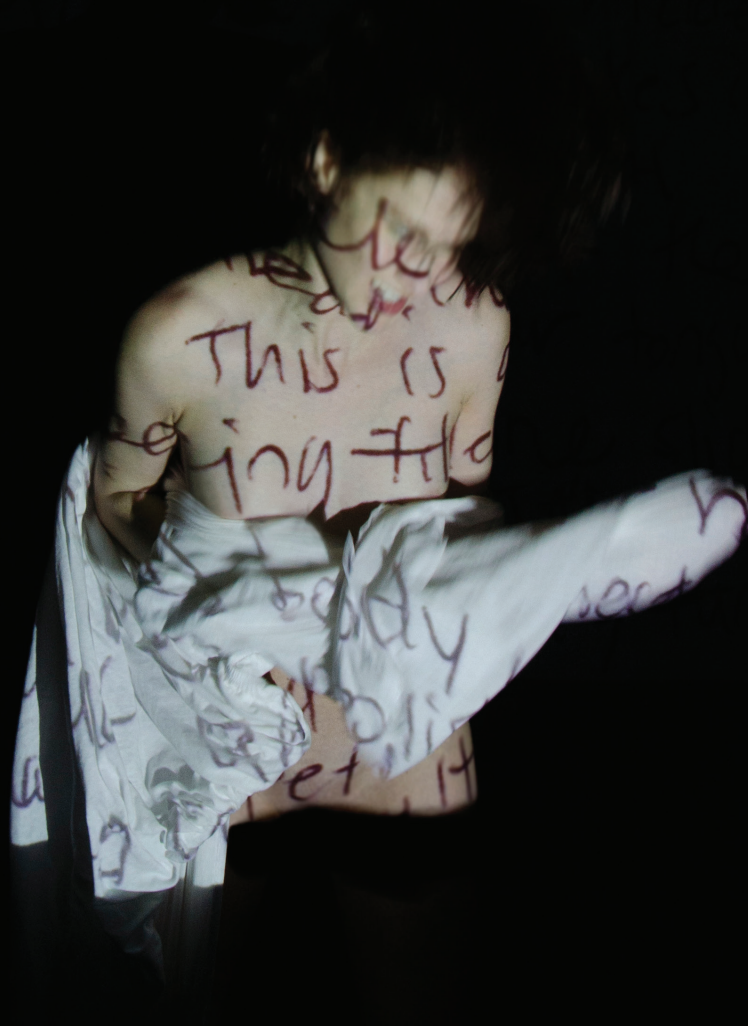
My muscles tightened with the cold that last, brisk morning, just before we left. Clouds of breath fell from my mouth like ghost bodies, as I slid into the passenger side, listening to my mother's determined grunts as she forced another piece of our lives into the backseat. I didn't look back when she got in and revved the engine—a fierce growl traveling through the silent cul-de-sac. I didn't let my eyes dart toward the side mirror either, because I knew there would only be him—a shadow, dark and looming. Once we started to drive, I was expecting there to be a tug of war, like he had attached a rope to the bumper and at any moment could yank us back to him. But we just charged forward, fast, like we were running from Hell. ❁

WITHIN OUR REACH

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MEDITATIONS ON AUTONOMY

virginia kluiters | digital photographs







THE ORDER OF NATURE

trevor fox | pen and ink with digital manipulation

IF YOU GIVE A MOUSE A CROWBAR

margaret bryant

Johnny places the empty 40 oz.
before my Doc Martens
the color of stepped-on
cherries. I cling to the
curved end of the crowbar and
grip it like my old pink and teal
Louisville Slugger from seventh grade.
Part of my life is still packed
in a box with your name on it.
I can't shake you from this place.

Johnny shows me how
it's done; he's swinging
one hand over his head.
His ex's ukulele makes a shallow pop
as it splinters and scatters in the grass.
I line up the crowbar. I've never golfed
in my life. If you were here, I wouldn't
be smashing bottles on the hill behind my apartment
where the trees muffle the gasp of broken glass,
but you're planting sweet potatoes
on a goddamn organic farm in Virginia
so I'm trying to decide which direction
to aim and how hard to swing.

The parking lot is quiet. The brick wall
is my backdrop. I raise my arms
like a carnival strong man
and fold over myself,
smashing the 40 to shards,
tucking my face into my
dark, quilted coat. I can feel the glass
sprinkling my shins—a sharp dusting of satisfaction.
My palms smell like metal and my fingers are cold and raw.
I'm hitting bottle after bottle, and Johnny's smiling
like his kid just scored her first goal.

If you ever ask,
I'll tell you I broke
some bottles and got over it.

BIBLE STUDY

sarah jane knowlton

Suzanne is almost too upset to be embarrassed that her childhood crush has found her crying against the side of his house. She isn't there for him, but for Bible study. It just happens that Aaron Hadley is the older brother of her church friend, Kaitlin, who hosts their ninth grade small group at her house. When they were little, all three of them had spent Sunday afternoons after church together. She misses that now, the time she spent with him, trying to get his attention while keeping Kaitlin from noticing.

And now Aaron, perfect, quiet Aaron, is standing in front of her. He cracks his knuckles nervously, a teenage boy caught in the onslaught of female tears. Someone like him, who had left the tight-knit youth group as soon as he'd gotten to high school, seemed unlikely to help her now. Suzanne remembers praying about it then, that he would come back to church, get involved in the Word again. She'd also prayed that he would notice her. It had even seemed possible when she'd miraculously gotten boobs the year before. But now she was into November of her freshman year, Aaron in his junior year, and all hope seemed lost. He was nice enough to her, but she knew he would never see her as anything more than a church girl. And boys like Aaron Hadley, with their flannel shirts and cigarettes, don't want to kiss church girls. Even church girls with great boobs.

"You okay?"

His voice sounds so much deeper every time she talks to him. Like when they'd played monster when they were children, tucking their chins and trying to talk at the deepest part of their throats.

"Oh." She wipes at her eyes with the backs of her hands, laughs. "I mean, not really. But I will be."

Aaron turns slightly towards the house. "Want me to go get Kaitlin or Melanie?"

"No." It comes out forcefully. Melanie was the new leader of their small group, and she always rubbed Suzanne the wrong way. She takes a deep breath. "No, I'm fine, really."

Considering Melanie and Kaitlin are the reason she's crying, she's desperate for him not to go get them. They'd started in on her about her boobs again—the same ones she'd guiltily hoped Aaron would notice. Just thinking about how they'd told her she'd better be more careful with how she dressed makes Suzanne feel like crying again. "You don't want boys only noticing you for your body," they'd said. Which had made her feel bad for wanting Aaron to notice her. Had made that secret, powerful burst of womanliness and pride she feels when she puts on a low-cut top dirty and wrong. She gives a futile pull upward on the v-neck she is wearing. They'd essentially called her a slut for not constantly apologizing for her chest, pushing it down and in with punishing sports bras and camisoles. *You're not honoring God when you make men think about your body.*

But how could she explain this to Aaron, this commingling of shame and pride? How, despite her best attempts to follow all the rules and love God the way they talked about in Bible study, they wanted her to give up wanting boys to like her? Was it really so horrible? Or how could she admit to him how lately praying feels like tuning a rusty radio dial? Like if she could just get it on the precise frequency, God's voice would come through. Instead, all she gets is white noise, her own heart beating in her ears.

So she offers her best, most brightly polished smile. It's hard and smooth and almost convincing, and Aaron hesitates. For a moment she thinks he'll just leave after all, which gives her a mixed sense of relief that he won't see her like this and also trepidation at the thought of being left alone again. Instead he sits down across from her, his back against the fence, and stretches his legs out so the tip of his shoe just barely grazes her knee. For a moment, that contact point is all Suzanne can feel.

"Talk about it." It's a question, though, squeezed out around the cigarette he is trying to guard with one large hand as he attempts to light it in the wind. It catches, burns, and as she stares at the cherry red end she realizes she's talking.

"I mean. It sounds dumb, but I just feel like they're always picking on me since I decided to go to a different school than all of y'all. And tonight was—" Thinking back on it makes her eyes feel hot again, this time more from fury and helplessness than shock. "It was just the last straw."

"Oh, they guilt-tripping you or something?"

Suzanne crosses her arms across her chest, uncomfortable with how close to the mark he is. But they aren't guilt-tripping her, are they? They're just looking out for her. Right?

She's saved from answering by Aaron's phone ringing. He answers it with a blank "yo" and then laughs, his face crinkling into its familiar, childlike smile. It's so sincere she wishes it were directed at her. "Well, I'm bringing a friend, so I'll drive." Aaron is smoking his cigarette faster now, and Suzanne leans her head back, feeling awkward that she's listening in on his plans. She inhales deeply, imagining the smoke that had touched Aaron's lips drifting into her own body. "Yeah, I'm leaving now."

With that she feels angry again, at him for leaving her, and herself for being angry at him for having a life. She punishes herself and him by moving her knee so it no longer touches his shoe. He doesn't notice.

"So you ready to go?"

Suzanne looks up at him, startled. "Me?"

He laughs, offers her his hand, and she takes it.

Aaron drives an ancient, black truck, the kind with a manual gear shift and a bench seat. She's never been inside it, but she's fantasized about it. Aaron driving her home after church, taking her to lunch, maybe even kissing her before she gets out. She's imagined pulling open the door and getting in so many times it feels comfortable. Suzanne slides in, wiping at her face and hoping her mascara hasn't puddled around her eyes. "So where are we going?" she asks.

"To pick up Ian and Josh."

She feels her stomach twist a little at that. Ian and Josh Spano also go to Suzanne's church. At least, sporadically. They're brothers, just a year apart, and nearly inseparable. Josh, the youngest, is much lankier and taller than his stocky older brother, a fact Suzanne always found funny. She's never talked to them; they seem so much older and stranger to her. Whenever they come to Sunday school she notices that underneath their quiet surfaces is an explosive energy. She calls them "the Spazzos" to Kaitlin, who used to laugh at the nicknames she gave people. Now she just tells Suzanne to be nice.

When they pull up to the curb the brothers are lounging on the grass, but Josh springs up when he sees them. He squints. "I know you. Suzanne, right?"

Suzanne feels a little pleased they know who she is at all, but she can't tell if he approves or not. She feels like Ian doesn't from the way he slowly gets off the ground, brushing dirt from his jeans. "Hadley, you didn't tell us you were bringing one of your girlfriends."

Suzanne teeters between elation that Ian thinks she and Aaron are together and despair at the thought of Aaron with a girlfriend. "Girlfriends?" she asks, dragging out the "s" like a "z."

Aaron laughs and cranks down the window. "It's not like that. You know Suzanne. From church. Get in."

Josh is already opening the door, looking down at Suzanne. She feels awkward, unsure if she should move closer to Aaron or get out to make room for Josh. He sighs. "I can crawl over you if you want, but —"

Thank goodness, she knows she can move now. Glancing sideways at Aaron to make sure it's okay to move closer, she scoots down the bench so her leg is against the gearshift. Josh sits next to her, reaches his hand out for a handshake. "I'm Josh."

"Nice to officially meet you," she says back, grateful for the normalcy of an introduction. His eyes are genuinely friendly. Ian, who begins running back towards his garage, yelling at them to wait a goddamn minute, excuses her from trying to make any follow-up conversation. She's too afraid to ask what he's getting, or what's going on.

Josh looks over her head at Aaron, smiling widely. "This is going to be fun."

When Ian emerges from the garage he's carrying a watermelon above his head triumphantly. "You motherfuckers ready for an explosion?" He lightly tosses the watermelon into the back of the truck and pulls what looks like three or four packs of sparklers out of his back pocket, along with a roll of electrical tape.

Suzanne feels nervous to ask, but she does. "Um, what is that for?"

"We're going to blow up this watermelon with a sparkler bomb," Ian says.

Fear and excitement trill in her stomach and she realizes that her answer is important, that the rest of the night hangs on how she reacts now.

She imagines how their faces will fall if she does anything besides go along with it. She smiles. "Cool."

Her compliance seems to relieve their fear that a girl would ruin their fun. Aaron nudges her conspiratorially with his elbow, making her smile even wider. Josh begins pushing preset buttons on the radio and turning it up, banging his hands spastically on the dashboard to the beat. Ian introduces himself. Without a handshake. He's too busy pulling Lone Star cans out of the pockets of his cargo pants. She feels a little shocked that they're drinking. The smoking and swearing she sees at school now, she's almost used to it. But she's never even been to a party where anyone even talked about drinking. Except to say that they could have fun without it.

Aaron sees her face and leans closer. "You don't want to go home, do you?" He's asking to be kind, she knows, but it makes her realize she wants to be here. She thinks about home, about explaining to her parents why she's back so early. Her father, newly unemployed and wandering the house like a guilty ghost, sighing and switching between banging on his keyboard and pacing loudly. Her mother tense and tired. Going home now would be like waking up just when a dream is turning good.

"No, I want to stay," she says, shaking her head and looking him in the eyes. "I want to stay."

He nods. Ian hands another beer to Josh before popping his own can open, and his brother props his foot on the running board, one hand on the top of the cab, leaning in.

"There's definitely not enough room in there for me."

"Do you mind sitting in front of the gear shift, Suzanne?" Aaron asks. She feels a little shock at the sound of her name in his voice. "I won't make you shift or anything."

Suzanne nods, wishing they weren't watching her as she throws one leg over the gear shift, her butt making an embarrassing squeaking sound against the fake leather of the seat. Josh moves closer, but all she can feel is Aaron next to her. The way his arm hair, bleached blond from the sun, grazes against her when he upshifts.

"The Hill?" Josh asks. The yes must be obvious because no one answers.

They fly down 610, driving at just the right time in Houston that it feels ghostly, the entire city colored in bleached sepia light from the streetlamps. 610 turns into I-10, all eight lanes clear. Aaron upshifts enough to pass even the speediest low-riding sports cars. She wishes she had a seatbelt. But it's easy to ignore as the brothers whoop, singing along to the radio, and Josh asks her questions about her dog (he simply assumes she has one) and new teachers. She appreciates the way he slides into companionship, bypassing all the awkward in-between stages. She keeps quiet as much as possible, though, laughing at their jokes, afraid that one misstep will result in one of them saying

Nope, never mind, and taking her home. And she so desperately wants to keep driving, traveling forward in this place in time. Being inside the cab is electric, the speed and the overwhelming presence of three older boys. But she never loses track of the feel of Aaron sitting quietly beside her, the rushing, dirty air roaring through the window flavored a little by his smoky smell even as it whips her hair across her face.

The Hill is actually more of a boastful slope (Houston is mostly flat, after all). It's far enough off major roads that, once they've parked, the boys feel safe cranking up Aaron's radio and lounging in the bed of the truck. The Hill slopes into straggly trees and bluestem grass that shushes eerily in the brisk wind. Ian pulls even more beer from his pockets, burping as he rolls a can down the bed of the truck to Aaron.

"Are you an amateur magician or something?" Suzanne asks as Ian finds yet another pocket beer to hand her. They laugh and it feels like praise. She's never really had a drink before, but tonight she feels strange, pulled from her skin and her life. Tonight she's a version of herself that drives without a seatbelt and blows up watermelons. She takes a swallow of beer that fizzles all the way down her throat.

Aaron leans into her, so close his breath in her ear makes her body shiver. "Go slow with that." Nodding, she smiles sheepishly and takes another sip. He smiles, and she feels hot all over.

Well into their third or fourth beers, Ian and Josh argue over the best way to attach the sparklers to the watermelon. Aaron finally settles the argument. "I'll cut a hole into the watermelon and we'll stick the sparkler bomb in that way." He points at the twins. "Y'all make the sparkler bomb."

They nudge each other and smile, Ian grabbing the electrical tape. Aaron pokes him. "Make sure you leave one sticking out so we can light it."

Ian flips him off, so matter-of-fact that Suzanne almost isn't shocked by the gesture. It makes Aaron laugh. He jumps out of the back of the truck and motions for her to hand him the watermelon. She pretends the melon isn't as heavy as she finds it.

"Would you help me with this?" he asks, kneeling on the ground and pulling a knife from his pocket. It's a relief to be asked to help, and makes her feel more part of everything. The fact that Aaron asked makes it sweeter. She takes a bigger drink of her beer for courage and hops out of the back of the truck, hoping the thud of her feet on the ground isn't too loud. When she looks up he's watching her, eyes lidded and unreadable. He clears his throat and starts positioning the watermelon. "Hold this for me?"

She kneels across from him, holding the watermelon upright as he begins to cut into it. Why had he been looking at her? Oh my God, had she jiggled or something when she'd jumped out of the truck? She almost takes a hand off the watermelon to pull up her shirt. But maybe this is the night he'll notice her. The beer is moving through her now, making her feel giddy and warm. His head is near hers and she imagines what it would be like to lean forward, place her head in the curve where his neck meets his shoulder. Lips

meeting neck, his hand under her chin lifting her face to his—

"That look like a big enough hole to you?"

Josh yells back from the truck, "That's what she said!"

Aaron rolls his eyes and she blushes. "I think so," she says. Not that she would know. She takes a breath, leans forward, and examines the rough opening he's created in the melon, pretending like she has experience to draw from. "How big is the sparkler bomb, anyway?"

At that, Josh leans over the side of the truck, looking down at the watermelon. "Bigger than that. We're just putting the tape around it now, so hurry up."

Suzanne turns the watermelon upright again, but Aaron holds the knife out to her. "You want to try?"

Yes. Yes and no. She doesn't want to mess it up or look like an idiot. But she also, stupidly, wants to impress him. "Okay, just hold it steady."

He looks impressed that she's taken the knife and pride rushes through her.

"You have some watermelon on your face," she says, reaching out with her free hand. She rubs it away and laughs, cutting into the rind instead of looking at his reaction to her touching him. Her own boldness makes her feel a little shaky, and her hands are cold from nerves and the dropping temperature as she widens the edges of Aaron's initial cut. "That should be good, right?"

She looks at Aaron, but he's staring down at the watermelon, so she directs the question to Josh, who gives her a stinging high five and an enthusiastic "nice." Ian nods in approval. Aaron takes the knife back from her without saying anything as the brothers shove the sparkler bomb into the watermelon. Had she misjudged their relationship? She curls the offending hand into a fist and wishes she could undo it.

Josh pulls on the back of her shirt so she takes a step back from the bomb. "We definitely need to be much further away."

"How big will this explosion be?" Suzanne asks.

Josh answers, rubbing his palms together like a villain: "Pretty fucking big. We set one a little bigger than this off last year at our uncle's in the Hill Country." He smiles widely. "We put it down on a slab of rock and the bomb broke it in half."

Ian nods. "Whoever lights it is going to have to run like hell to get out of the way in time."

She looks at Aaron again, a little shocked they're doing this at all. She wonders what her Bible study would think of this, where this falls on the "trying to be Christ-like" scale. She wants him to look at her, offer reassurance.

He doesn't. Instead, he claps Ian on the shoulder. "You want to do the honors, bro? Your idea and all."

"I can't run fast enough," he says and shakes his head. "And neither can you, man, what with your smoke-for-shit-lungs."

Aaron concedes to him with a smile and a shrug.

"Suzanne," Ian says with a smirk.

Startled, she feels as if they've suddenly turned a spotlight on her.

"Hey." Josh sounds indignant. "You skipped right over me."

"Shut up, man, we know you freak out doing shit like this," Ian says, eyebrows rising up slyly as Josh turns red.

"I thought I saw a cop, man. I had to run."

Suzanne can't imagine what they were doing, but before she can open her mouth to ask, Aaron cuts in. "Whatever, I don't think Suzanne should do it."

She knows it's not meant to be mean, but it annoys her to be dismissed by him. He's not even looking at her, but at the watermelon, repositioning the sparkler bomb. Anger and pride rise in her chest, and she understands how he sees her: as a church girl who can't flick a lighter. She just wants Aaron to look at her. To be the sort of girl he notices.

So she says yes.

They go a ways away from her and instruct her how to light the watermelon. She feels a little like a child learning how to ride a bike.

"Just light the wick and run," Ian is saying.

Josh interrupts: "Run fast."

They laugh. She tries not to think of Josh's story, of rock splitting and what an explosion like that could do to flesh and bone. Fingers and sinew. It's cold now that the sun has set and her fingers are shaking as she holds the lighter, her thumb trying to get the flame to catch.

The boys are getting impatient and Aaron starts towards her. "Here, let me help you—"

The flame catches and the sparkler is burning, hissing, heat grabbing at her sleeve. She drops the lighter, staring, and then starts at the sound of Aaron yelling her name. She runs, her foot hitting the melon a little, and it rolls forward and toward them.

She runs faster. And then she is narrowed to nothing but adrenaline and speed, feet pounding beneath her. She pivots and hits the dirt only a few feet from Aaron's fingertips just as the blast hits and the ground shakes beneath her. The pink flesh of the watermelon flies and evaporates. And she is laughing, hands-over-mouth, eyes wide. She wonders how it would be to be this weightless forever.

Aaron holds out his hand to help her up.

Once they're done laughing they realize Josh is missing. He had panicked when Suzanne kicked the watermelon and ran head down and into the tangle of trees that bordered the Hill. Apparently he was the fastest one after all.

"Does he do this every time?" Suzanne asks, feeling high on pyrotechnics and buzzed from beer. She sits on Aaron's tailgate, swinging her legs back and forth.

Aaron snorts, and Ian nods. "Yeah, he's fucking paranoid."

Ian sighs when Josh doesn't pick up his phone. "Guess we gotta go look for him."

Aaron pulls himself up onto the tailgate by Suzanne and she feels her body tense in anticipation of his closeness. "Can't you just use your twin telepathy or something?" he says.

Ian shoves Aaron halfheartedly. "Oh, fuck off, we're not twins." He flips them off and begins walking towards the trees, dead grass crunching beneath his feet.

"Feeling better?" Aaron asks once Ian's far enough away. His face is smooth and casual, but his voice is earnest.

She smiles slightly and looks out at the field, the ever-present I-10 glistening from miles away, cars flashing by. "Yeah. Thanks."

She sees him nod and take a hand out of his pocket. He braces it behind her and she can feel the slight warmth of it. "No, seriously, Aaron." He turns to look at her again, and she swallows loudly. "Thank you."

He smiles. "No problem."

But he isn't turning away, and neither is she. He leans closer. His bottom lip is slightly fuller than his top and she's not sure if she should pull away or touch her mouth to it. She's never really kissed anyone before, not in a way that wasn't a dare on the playground. She leans a little bit forward and is sure for half an instant that he will kiss her. That this silent sort of elation means that kissing is not so different from prayer after all.

But he sighs and pulls away, taking a cigarette out of his pocket and lighting it. Suzanne crosses her arms, burying her fingers in the crooks of her elbows to keep them warm, her cheeks burning. Honestly, she can't believe she leaned forward at all. He must think she's an idiot, a stupid freshman. She wants to bang her head against the side of the truck. How could she be so stupid?

But then his arm goes around her, pulling her closer. "Sorry."

For a second she thinks he's apologizing for making her think he was going to kiss her. But he's not. "I didn't think it would be so cold out. Wish I had a coat or something to give you." He nudges her playfully. "Can't return you to your parents missing fingers and toes."

He rubs her arm briskly, the movement deliberately paternal. It's insulting enough to make her want to throw him off her, but a bigger, more pathetic part of her basks in the feel of his warmth against her. She lets him hold her, afraid that if she even breathes too deeply he'll let go completely. Closing her eyes, she lets herself imagine that this is her life. Open fields and the whoop of victories, quiet nights with a strong arm around her. Maybe it is possible.

Aaron's mouth is inches from her ear and she can hear him inhale, begin to say something, before she hears yelling from the other side of the Hill. He drops his arm and hops off the truck, making his way towards the brothers, who are arguing about how high up on the pussy scale Josh ranked himself that night. Suzanne fakes a smile and welcomes Josh back with a celebratory high

five. Aaron doesn't look at her again and she can feel tears pressing at her eyes, glassing them over. She blinks them back and climbs into the truck, letting their ribbing wash over her, too miserable and knotted inside to completely enjoy being pressed so close to Aaron again.

They drop the brothers off soon after that. Enough time has passed that Suzanne has already taught herself to shove the image of Aaron leaning closer to her to the back of her mind. They slow so the two can jump from the moving truck and roll across the grass. Aaron shakes his head at the two of them whooping and high-fiving.

"I like them," Suzanne says, smiling.

The drive back to her house isn't long, and Aaron leaves his hand on the gearshift. She wonders if he does it on purpose. She hopes he did.

He downshifts to a stop in front of her house and she pauses before trying to wriggle her way out of her spot. Sitting here, in his truck, her own house looks like a memory. It's completely dark out now. The lights in her house are warm and silhouette the familiar profile of her mother reading her Bible in the kitchen. The third floor light is also on, where she knows her father is sitting. It seems no one has noticed Aaron's truck parked in front of their house and she wishes that someone, anyone, would notice. That they could verify later to her that all this happened—what possibly almost happened. All her worries from a few hours ago roar back into her mind. Shame drops into her stomach.

"You okay?" he asks, turning down the radio.

She's dreading going inside, knowing that it will mean returning to the anxieties, the nitpicking, and the God-searching. But she nods and turns to him, planting her feet firmly again. She wants to ask what he thinks about God. To ask for a hug, or why he doesn't go to church anymore, or if he's ever had a crisis of faith. If her questioning things is wrong. If she will get better. She wants to kiss him.

But instead she asks, "Can we drive around the block?"

He looks surprised.

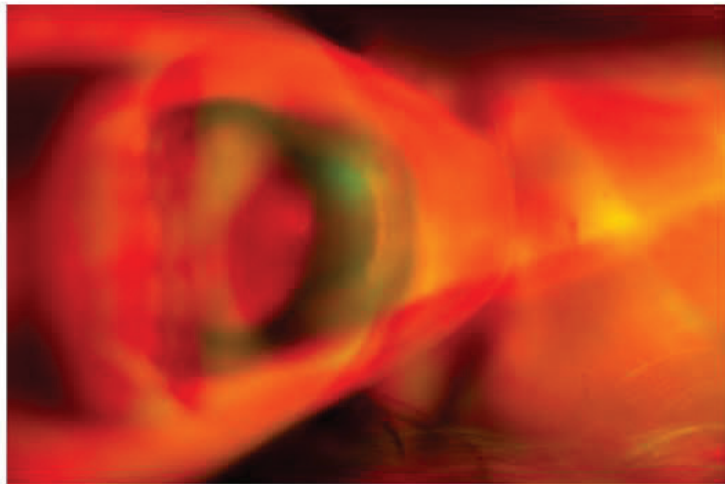
"Just once?" Her voice is quiet, desperate. It sounds more like prayer than a request. He smiles, upshifts, and the truck lurches forward.

They don't speak, but halfway down the block he rests his arm against the back of the cab. She's careful to keep her neck in light contact with it, afraid he'll pull away if she leans too heavily. She allows herself to pretend he means it. When they get back to her house, she is ready to go in. ❀



OLD LEGS

kayla agae | pinhole photograph



NO WORDS

kayla agae | digital photographs

TWELVE STANZAS TO DEAL WITH YOUR AUNTIE'S DEATH

kevin coyne

There you are, eighteen, by her
bedside: the responsible nephew.
You're half-sure she's breathing, but
the nurse wheeled away the EKG

a few minutes earlier — her
respirator's still plugged in,
humming beside her headrest.
In the x-ray photo clipped to

the bed's footboard, her liver's
all shriveled. You are drunk,
with worry and beer and whiskey.
For this, you feel guilty;

also good. Your motor skills lag —
clunky as the controls of a bad
video game — when you set
your hand on her quilted leg.

Beside you, Dad clutches
a green plastic rosary
he doesn't know how
to pray with. Just an hour

ago, you huddled around
a Boston bar with your
cousins; the bartender
didn't ID you. Your drunk

of an uncle with a sunk-in
skull sulked at the end
of the bar, alone. A soon-to-be
widower — the catalyst to her

cirrhosis, enabler extraordinaire;
him, with the platoon of
wounded PBR soldiers
saluting from their nightstand —

he cratered the crown of
his head in a solo motorcycle

wreck a month ago. At the bar
Mom walked past him and

tapped you on the shoulder,
told you it was time to go, and
gave you a Ricola to hide
your beer breath from Dad —

who's lapped all his siblings
through the Program. You
switched seats with her to
parallel park the car when

she couldn't. And so here you are:
at the ICU, drunk, thinking of
the yodeling Ricola man, wondering
what to do with your hands.



BALANCING ACT

hannah podhorzer | digital photograph

YOU, ME, AND OTHER THINGS THAT CONSUME ORDER

brianna duff

The universe consumes order. Okay. Fine. But then what are we, sitting here, playing hand games under the lab table and remembering raw lips in the middle of the night? We must be disorder

since we are not consumed yet, since I can look over at you and see the curl of your bleached hair against the curl of your ear, and I can feel something like love and something like desire

to stand on an edge with you, any edge. It's what we're good at. If the universe consumes order, then we consume edges. Even now, you like to press

the soft pad of your thumb against the hard edge of my nail to see how far you can go before something about me hurts you. I feel the pressure of it

as the teacher puts a picture on the screen. A black hole, he says, showing us the dark middle like a rubber ball because you asked about disorder at the center of massive things. He says the measure of chaos

is too big to comprehend. Like us, I think. We are full of chaos. We like to joke about how we would make a bad equation, how, with us, you couldn't just slap down a function and integrate

because we are the kind of indefinite of late mornings where we skip class to read Richard Feynman lectures over pancakes and orange juice, wearing thin shirts

and thinking less about the collision diagrams of subatomic things and more about the shape of hips under white cotton. I like thinking of you as a series of curved shapes.

I like thinking of you bent against gravity, especially now, at this lab table, with the picture you asked for still onscreen, reminding us that some questions don't have answers.

It makes me want to raise my hand and ask other impossible things, like what kind of order is the universe hungry for? How neatly do I have to stack the forks in the drawer at our apartment

before the universe consumes them, too? I think about how you like to hide spoons at the bottom of the pile because it always surprises me, and I guess I don't care what the universe eats

as long as it's not hungry for us. If it was, it'd mean I wouldn't get to be the girl you dyed your hair pink for so it could match my toenail polish. We wouldn't be the kind of people who danced

in the living room, trying to samba as our dinner revolved in the microwave. You wouldn't say things that made me laugh, things I didn't expect,

like how you would have just opened the fucking box, Schrodinger, to see what was inside. Screw the cat. Screw making things fit into neat lines. You never fit, and I don't either. Especially not now

when you manage to rearrange me with just your finger against mine, while we're watching some video of Chex mix in a box in class, listening to our teacher say this is impossible

as the mess of shaken cereal settles down into neat, distinct piles of squares and M&Ms: entropy in reverse. It makes me think of the story of the steadfast tin soldier you told me last week

when I said tell me what things make you feel young because I'd had too much of feeling big and old and tired with the world and I wanted you to shrink me. You held my hand

as you talked, played with the loose skin on my knuckles as you tried to remember details, and I thought then, as I felt your finger press on mine, that we'd never be reduced to something as ordered as that: a pair of paper roses locked and cooling on the hearth. We'd always be entropic, hard-edged, drawing on our skin with highlighters as we pretend to study at night before bed, the ink staining the sheets orange until we are left with smudges on our cheeks: the kind of chaotic you make it easy to be.



LITTLE FRIEND

jessica gore | watercolor and pen



FOREST MICROCOSM

john martin | digital photograph

A CONCISE, INCOMPLETE LIST OF THINGS I'LL LIKELY NOT GET AROUND TO IN THIS LIFETIME

frankie campisano

I don't think I'll go skydiving at any point in the future, nor return to Catholicism or cheap whiskey. I'll likely never fire a gun or be shot at, or wear a pair of shoes that light up when I walk. I won't own a Dalmatian, let alone over one hundred, and at this rate if I were to break my first bone, there's a good chance I'd also break my last. I'll never have better eyesight than I did the day before. I made it this far without ever having to sleep through calculus. I'll chance it I never have to fight a war, or have to look over my shoulder at night in my own neighborhood.

I won't climb Mount Everest or *Billboard*, and I'll never see most of my friends again. I'll never revisit that feeling of hearing my favorite songs for the first time. I don't have plans to eat at my favorite diner on Staten Island and I won't remember how I used to waste time. I doubt I'll be fluent in another language or learn when to cut my losses and just walk home. I won't go forty-eight hours away from a screen for the rest of my days. I'm not going to have a piercing or recognize bird calls or remember what exactly was said and by whom at the end of everything.

I won't feel as human as I think I'm supposed to. I'm not going to grow a beard that strangers want to take pictures of, or step outside the atmosphere. I'll never hold office. I won't learn how to code or properly tend a garden. I won't be making any blood oaths or learning to unicycle or breaking promises to you again, hiding in my car and trying to talk myself out of ringing your doorbell.

ON LOSS OF HAIR AND OTHER THINGS

margaret bryant

I've been reading a lot about alopecia, which feels weird and self-indulgent because I am pretty much just Googling my own experience. You would think having lived with an incurable, but not life-threatening, disease for the past ten years would be enough to satisfy my curiosity. And yet, I still find myself typing the same words into the same search engines hoping there will be more information than the last time I checked. Almost every site I come across says the same thing.

Alopecia is not a common disease. It affects 0.1%-0.2% of humans. Alopecia isn't racist, sexist, or ageist, though it more often occurs in children and young adults. It can happen to you at any time without any warning signs. It happens to otherwise relatively healthy people who may have a family history of autoimmune disorders. I have asthma, ADHD, anxiety, a hypoactive thyroid, which runs in my family, and the profile for Hashimoto's disease, which, at my age, means that I essentially have that, too. I am otherwise a healthy person. I've finally given in to my mother's healthy eating habits; I'm an avid runner and a yogi—I try to meditate every day.

Explaining my condition is not a new task. And even though it isn't as hard to articulate as it used to be, thanks to ample time and practice, it isn't simple to explain. Regardless, I've got the elevator speech down pat. I've had ten years to practice. I even have a shortened version ready for the rare occasion that someone is already familiar with alopecia, which isn't often. There are medical and technical ways of talking about it; there are funny and lighthearted ways of talking about it. I try and find the honest way of talking about it, which usually falls somewhere between the two.

I haven't always had it; I haven't always been bald. Once upon a time, I had a full head of thick, luscious, dark brown hair that was almost black against my ivory skin—I looked like a freckly Snow White as a kid. I wasn't diagnosed with alopecia until I was in sixth grade and my hair had started falling out in clumps without any explanation.

I was one of seven sixth-grade girls spilling out of a patient parent's minivan all nervous about their winter middle school dance. I had snagged my sister's short, black miniskirt that had netting peeking out of the bottom, black high tops, and a black scoop neck shirt; I thought I was such a badass with my raccoon-style eyeliner and my high ponytail. I remember taking out my hair elastic and running my fingers through my hair. I could feel the hair entangled in the band. I dropped the hair on the sidewalk and tried not to think about it, but it didn't stop falling out.

There are a lot of words and ways of talking about losing your hair. When Dr.



AN EXERCISE IN VULNERABILITY

hannah fernandes-martin | ballpoint pen and paper

McMyers at the Wake Forest University Hospital explained to me what was wrong with me, she told me there were two types of alopecia: the kind where your hair can come back, and the kind where your hair doesn't come back. I have alopecia areata—the one where patches of hair fall out in cycles and has the potential to grow back.

Typically, the hair loss comes in waves; often the loss follows periods of stress. It's a vicious cycle of being stressed out because your hair falls out when you're stressed out. To be told there is hope for regrowth is the worst kind of wishful thinking.

Sometimes it comes back. I like to use language like "it comes back" because it sounds like my hair independently chooses to leave and return and that's what it feels like. Mine has a few times. When I was younger, I just lost some of the hair on my head. Later, I lost all of it. When my hair came back for the first time, I was in eighth grade. I had been getting steroid injections into my scalp in an attempt to combat the inflammation. I was meditating through the panic attacks, reclined on an examination table, and holding hands with whomever was in the room as my childhood best friend's father, who is conveniently my dermatologist, carefully inserted syringes into my scalp.

Within months, I had hair again. I wore a pixie cut for a year before small bald patches resurfaced. I wore a lot of beanies and bandanas, even in gym classes. I didn't lose it all again until my senior year of high school. It came back the summer before college, only to start falling out again during my first holiday break home from college. It came back again during my sophomore year, but just a few months later, it fell out again. It hasn't come back since. Sometimes little, white, baby hairs grow and then disappear again. The disease is inflammation-based. Occasionally I have to cut the two silver hairs—they grow quickly and ironically.

Right now, I'm mostly hairless, aside from sparse patches of leg and arm hair, eyelashes, and eyebrows that come and go like tumbleweeds. I have exactly two hairs on my head, both of which grow abnormally fast, regardless of whether there is any other hair. There's a steep learning curve when it comes to penciling your eyebrows in and making it look like you have eyelashes. Sometimes I look like a Disney drag queen. You don't realize how essentially human eyebrows are until you don't have them. It means that I am almost always wearing some sort of makeup just to make myself look typical, just to blend in.

To be honest, I'm sick of talking about what alopecia is by definition. Any doctor or search engine can detail the symptoms of inflammation, like hair loss and nail pitting, and temporary treatments like cortisone injections and Rogaine, which did not work in my experience. The way I see it, my immune system is just a misunderstood, impulsive teenager who will do what she wants and likes to lash

out against my hair follicles like they're her parents, even though they are in no way responsible for how she is feeling. I would rather make you smile by telling you that I wash my hair in a bowl than give you my medical history. And yes, my wig is my hair; I paid for it, it's mine.

I haven't written about alopecia areata a whole lot. The first time I wrote about it was as a freshman for my high school's literary magazine in a poem entitled "A.A." I only now realize the cultural implication of that abbreviation as the title of a poem about a long-term personal struggle. As I've been researching, I've also been writing more about it, but focusing less on the signs and symptoms and more on the experience: on how when I come home after a long day, the first thing I do is take my wig off and run my hands over my scalp—it's like shedding a thick layer of skin that smothers the soul—or how when I wake up, I have a strict cocoa butter and baby oil regimen that follows my morning shower.

One site I found presented a question that I had not seen asked before: *How will alopecia areata affect my life?* The response was as follows:

"Alopecia does not make you feel pain and does not make you feel sick. You can't give it to others. People who have the disease are, for the most part, healthy in other ways. Alopecia areata will not shorten your life, and it should not affect activities such as going to school, working, marrying, raising a family, playing sports, and exercising."

And then I realized that this clearly wasn't written by someone who makes up that 0.1%-0.2% of us. Technical or medical descriptions only take you so far. You're on your own with alopecia; your experience is the newest research. Alopecia looms over you every day as you try to navigate the world with a little less hair than everyone else. What I keep coming back to is the fact that the website stated that it should not affect these things, and it is right to an extent. Hair, or lack thereof, should not affect activities and daily life, but it does.

My alopecia affects my future. I worry about having kids. I joke with my roommates that I refuse to spend my life with someone who doesn't have good hair and good hair genes. One of us has to. Alopecia is not necessarily hereditary, but genetics may have something to do with it.

It's completely unpredictable. It can skip generations. There's no way of knowing if my kids will have to deal with this or not. And I won't know if they will until it happens, if it does at all. I have to remind myself that these are hypothetical worries for future Mags—a version of myself with a partner and small humans. I also have to remind myself that they will be lucky if they do. They will have someone who loves them who understands and can help.

I found an article that lists alopecia Q & A's in which a woman asked if her condition had anything to do with her struggle to get pregnant. I felt a ping in my chest like a needle dropped in a Mason jar as I read. I have thought about my kids having alopecia, but not that I might not be able to have them because of my alopecia. My life is an experiment in which my condition is the controlled variable and my interactions are the uncontrolled variables. Every day and

every encounter is research, especially my life at school. If anything, alopecia makes you think a lot more about everything. And now and again, I find myself thinking about the fact that I might be this way for the rest of my life. It's hard not to think about what it will be like to be a mother or a partner, or about my wedding day. I might still be drawing on my eyebrows and washing my wig by hand every two weeks in a large basin like a delicately tailored blouse. But just as quickly as I think of these possible complications, I remember that it is the experience I know—it's mine.

I ask my best friends, whom I am lucky to call my roommates, to call before they bring someone over to our apartment. Even just a quick text is enough of a warning. It's not that I am ashamed by my lack of hair, but I want to feel like I have a choice in the situation. That I get to decide whether or not someone I don't know, or someone I do know, gets to see that part of me. It's like having show-and-tell day sprung on you, and so instead of bringing your pet turtle with a lazy eye or your favorite Lisa Frank sticker book, you have to bring yourself. It's not that it is secret, or that it is something I want to hide, because it isn't, but it is personal.

The feeling and reactionary act of scrambling to find my wig as I hear keys jingling and voices outside the door is not one I like to feel, but happens fairly often. My roommates forget. One of them has told me that she is so used to seeing me without the wig that sometimes it doesn't register to her that there's a difference. Jay says she doesn't understand why I want the warning, though she respects it. She has also shaved my head blaring Kendrick Lamar whenever I've needed it. Joan calls me her little bald yogi goddess, and she wishes that everyone saw that version of me. Recently, Clare and I were talking about it. She cocked her head to one side, looking up at the ceiling, and said, "I don't think I could do it. I don't think I could not have hair." And I know she meant it as a compliment. Commentary on my personal strength, to tell me she thinks I'm strong and knows it isn't easy. I love her for that and feel validated, but sometimes that praise feels heavy in a false way because I didn't ask for this. At no point did I volunteer to be bald and brave. It just happened. My body gave me no other options.

My hair is a reason why I tend to stay away from one-night stands. Everyone is a wild card, especially when drunk. Think about the things you say uninhibited by inebriation. Think about how often you regret saying those things.

I maintain the unapologetic perspective that I don't have to share every part of my soul with you in order to have a good time, but I do have to feel that there's a mutual respect. We don't have to share secrets before sex, but I'm also sure as hell not going to sleep in my wig. That's absurd. The times that I have slept in a wig have been during impromptu sleepovers and have resulted in me worrying half the night that it might come off. And then, what? Think

about that. What the fuck do you do then? Carry on. Put it back on, or don't, but either way feel uncomfortable and exposed at an unexpected time. When it comes down to it, it's simple: if I'm sleeping with you, I'm not sleeping in my wig. Otherwise, pillow talk is problematic.

There was a night I brought home a guy, who at the time, I would have classified as a "group setting friend." I knew him well enough to know that he had a collection of ocean-oriented poetry on his bedside table—he really likes boats. I didn't tell him about my hair until we were already in my bed with only the twinkle lights to cast shadows of our clumsy figures on the wall and window blinds. I wasn't withholding, but I hadn't really thought about it and when I did, I didn't really care.

"Wait, you know about my hair, right?" I asked him casually. And before he finished saying, "What about your hair?" I whipped my wig off and tossed it effortlessly on my desk. He just looked at me, sweetly skeptical. Like I was giving him some sort of test. And to be fair, I guess in some ways I was. "Yeah, I don't have any," I said in the same matter-of-fact tone someone might say they don't like cauliflower. He smiled at me and nothing more was necessary.

Later, as we lay there, he nuzzled closer to me. Hesitantly and gently, he ran his fingers atop my head, investigating it like a sailing chart or topographical map, and was silently surprised by the softness of my skin. It feels a lot like peach fuzz. He stroked my scalp and smiled as I closed my eyes. We slipped into a quiet comfort in which words were unnecessary and we both understood. To this day, we've never talked about it. We don't need to.

Men don't always react that way. In Ireland, I went on a date with a guy I met on a meditation retreat. He studied mathematics and I spilled wine on myself twice because I was nervous—not only because he had the dreamiest accent and eyes, but also mostly because I figured I would have to tell him about my hair at some point. I drunkenly disclosed my lack of hair mid-date. He never called again.

Some people just don't handle it; I've learned not to dwell. I'd pull my hair out—if I had it—worrying about people like that. Sometimes they simply don't know how to react. I don't blame them. There isn't a pamphlet for how to tell someone you're bald and there isn't one for how to respond in that situation either.

Occasionally, people say the wrong thing. When I'm home on breaks and for holidays, I work at a yoga studio—the same one that I've practiced at since high school. Working at the front desk means that sometimes I'm wearing a wig and sometimes I'm just wearing a bandana. There are days when I utilize both. When I've just taken a class and I'm still sweaty and in a yogic daze, the last thing I want to do before I clock into work is put my hair back on.

When I was still new at the studio, my boss, a wino and self-appointed yogi master, sat down next to me one day in between his classes. He had just learned my name despite the fact that I had been practicing at his studio for nearly two years.

“Do you ever,” he said, turning to me and chuckling slightly, like the punch line is just too good. “Do you ever get mistaken for a chemo patient when you’re wearing your bandana?” He laughed. I responded honestly.

“Yes, actually, it happens a lot.”

He looked at me blankly, wondering if I was waiting to deliver the punchline. I tried not to share his expression as I explained the nature of my condition and that I was wearing a wig. Eventually, he said, “Oh,” and not long after, he proceeded to exit the room with purpose. Months later, at the staff holiday party, he drunkenly attempted to apologize, explaining that he didn’t realize that I was bald. He thought that I had just pushed my hair under the bandana. He then showed me pictures of him from high school when he looked like an obese version of Justin Timberlake circa his *NSYNC days. The apology was almost as uncomfortable as the incident.

A client, whom I see often, but do not know well, was on her way out of the studio, drenched in sweat, her stringy gray hair a mess. She stopped, practically slamming her water bottle on the counter and asked, “Now is this a new look or are you ill?” The room was still. My coworker and roommates were quiet. I told her “both.” She then asked me if I was seeing a good doctor.

“I want to make sure you’re getting good help.”

I don’t think of myself as ill. I never have. There’s always a twinge of hurt whenever I am reminded that what I’ve come to see as just a part of my existence doesn’t look that way to someone else.

Sometimes people say the right thing. My recently acquired endocrinologist asked if I save a lot on razors. The first time I took my wig off in front of Joan’s ex-boyfriend, he smiled and said, “I bet that feels really good, doesn’t it?”

A few years ago I was with a friend from Ghana for whom I had fallen hopelessly. When I went to take my hair off, I apologized—I was less comfortable with myself then.

He leaned into me and stopped me. “What are you apologizing for? Why would that not be beautiful?” I curled my body towards his slender shape. I tried to explain, but spoke clumsily and was now embarrassed from being embarrassed. “In Africa, bald women are everywhere. They are seen as beautiful and powerful.”

Some people don’t say anything at all. The most wonderful of these moments are at music festivals. People just smile and accept you as you are because no one is there because they want to fit in; they’re there for concert summer camp packed into a long weekend. The second summer I volunteered at Firefly Music

Festival in Dover, Delaware, I left my wig in my bag the entire time—one music festival wearing a wig in one-hundred-degree weather was enough. Jay wrote on my scalp and drew funky flowers, decorating my sunscreen-slathered skin. I never feel more like myself than when I am bald, covered in flowers, paint, and dirt. It’s true. I was at a show of thousands seeing Cage the Elephant. There was a shirtless, tanned guy with dark hair and Ginsberg’s beard. There were small pink flowers threaded into his dark hair and beard and he wore shiny teal sunglasses. As everyone danced together at the show, he came up to me smiling, cupped my scalp in his hands and kissed my forehead. And while that doesn’t and shouldn’t happen every day, or with your average stranger, those moments can bloom in a crowd of eighty thousand. I’ve never loved being without my hair so much as those ten days. I fell in love bald at that music festival and it meant everything to me.

V for Vendetta is one of my absolute favorite films. It has been since it came out in 2006—when I was twelve, had lost most of my hair, and was acutely aware of the lack of bald, female role models. It was the first R-rated movie I saw and I had only been able to convince my parents to take me because Natalie Portman was bald for a large portion of the film. They actually shaved her head on camera; they had one chance to do the scene. She knew going into it that she would have one time to authentically and helplessly sit there sobbing, as someone shaved all of her hair off. Personally, I find this scene traumatically beautiful. Every time I watch it, I feel as if I forget how to breathe for a moment. When I finally stop holding my breath, my exhalation is encompassed in the sensation of my validity and feeling a little less alone. That is what it feels like to lose all your hair. I’ve never seen or felt a better representation of my experience in a physical manifestation before.

For the rest of the film, she has a closely shaved head and is stronger as a result of her suffering. There is a line in the film that Evy (Natalie Portman) reads from a letter written by a woman who endured the same torture and isolation that Evy does before she died. She says that it seemed strange to her that life would end in such a terrible place, but then she adds that for three years she had love and “apologized to no one.”

These scenes always play out much longer in my head than they appear on the screen. That line has stuck with me for ten years. Only recently have I truly come to understand why that film, why that scene in particular, strikes such an intimate and crucial chord somewhere deep within me.

My explanation of my condition has always felt somewhat like an apology. I’m sorry for being complicated. I’m sorry I’m not simple. I do not mean that I am this elusive, unique aura of special snow-flaky existence. But what I do mean is that I have been apologizing for nothing for a long time. I felt the need to justify the space I occupy for almost ten years.

I spent a summer in Boulder, Colorado, studying at Naropa University. I participated in a one-month writing program with writers of all kinds,

including forces like Eileen Miles and Thomas Sayers Ellis, who are changing the canon. Each week, the students gave a reading. When I sat down on the edge of the stage to read my two poems, I took a deep breath and addressed the quiet, dark sea of people seated before me. I talked about how Naropa feeds the idea of unapologetically existing and being true to your spirit.

I sat on the edge of the stage because the podium felt too formal, as I held my little pink writing book. Wearing my ripped-up Bowie *Rebel Rebel* shirt and one turquoise dangling skull earring, I took off my wig. I've never been so scared and so sure of what I was doing. The entire auditorium erupted with applause. I don't remember what I read, or how I botched the phrasing, or how I gave up on that poem days later. I remember the feeling of exposing my skin to a room full of strangers-turned-companions. There was no explanation, no apology—just the overwhelming love that met my natural existence. ❁



STAFF & CONTRIBUTORS

kayla agae is from Las Vegas, Nevada. She has worked with photography for a couple of years now and prefers to work with film more than digital photography, but she goes back and forth between the two.

margaret bryant would like to thank everyone who has given themselves to art at any point in their lives, and her family, for never doubting the validity of the humanities as a life path. She would also like to thank her incredible staff, mentors, and coffee, and boots, and cats.

frankie campisano is available wherever books are sold.

maggie carter works mostly with photography and videography. She loves exploring and learning about the world and will never stop growing as an artist and a human.

brittany coppla grew up in a small town in northern New Jersey with her mom, dad, and younger twin siblings. She is currently a sophomore and plans on graduating with a degree in creative writing and minors in communications and religious studies. Following graduation, Brittany hopes to pursue a career in publishing and later earn her graduate degree so she can be an English professor. Much of the inspiration for her writing is drawn from authors such as e.e. cummings, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and John Irving.

kevin coyne is from Boston and studies literature and creative writing. Deeply identifying with Chewbacca, Kev spends most of his time practicing his Wookiee roar. He likes beer and books and has trouble taking things seriously.

mollie crawford is a literary fantasy writer and artist currently pursuing an arts education. Mollie works in a variety of two-dimensional media, but lately has been working primarily in graphite. The majority of Mollie's work focuses on portraiture and the human body, exploring themes of divinity, beauty, myth, and fantasy.

nikita demare is a senior cinema major with a minor in creative writing. She is the sarcastic tall girl you see on campus who's normally holding a cup of coffee. She's been writing since she got her first journal in fourth grade, and spends most of her time obsessing over fictional characters. Nikita enjoys carrot cake, ghost stories, and watching too many TV shows.

brianna duff ('15) is currently working as an account coordinator for BookBub, a digital publishing startup in Cambridge, MA. She spends her days talking to authors and learning how to be a businesswoman after years of physics classes and writing workshops. While she loves her city and the morning commutes

on the T, she often misses Elon and the home she left behind Under the Oaks.

hanna elmgren is a senior English major who has been known to cry with happiness over pizza and read twelve books concurrently. Her interests include: travel, dragons, and overcoming her greatest enemy, tip-of-the-tongue syndrome. She would like you to know that we are all Tatiana Maslany.

hannah fernandes-martin is a junior art and art history double major who is mostly interested in petting dogs, critiquing things, saving the bees from dying (because, guys... it would really suck if there were no more bees in the world), and playing Tetris. She hopes to live in the beautiful anarcho-communist utopia that Camille Pissarro dreamed of, or, at the very least, not live in a cardboard box.

lauryl fischer is from Cary, North Carolina, and is majoring in strategic communications and creative writing. Like most writers, she loathes a cliché, but is one herself, as you can find her in any generic café, probably wearing a fancy scarf, as she reads or writes or pretends to be writing (she's probably on Tumblr).

gabby fortunato is a self-identified coffee enthusiast and a senior creative writing and political science double major.

trevor fox tries to explore the invisible relationships between humans and their environment. His inspiration is drawn from the world around him and the study of neuroscience. He tries to use his art as an outlet for those interests.

jessica gore was born in South Africa and studies biology —she likes trees and critters and reading books (sometimes to the critters in those trees).

caroline guardabassi is a senior English major, and she hopes to always be creating, whether it be writing, painting, or something completely new.

maddy keith is a double major in creative writing and strategic communications, which is an expensive way of saying she's bad at math. She's the president of EFFECT and wants to change the world, but will probably just take a nap instead. The past four years of creative writing at Elon have taught her the difference between the type of honesty that belongs on the page and the type that belongs in the hidden depths of her eighth-grade diary. She's still learning.

virginia kluiters is a South Carolina native who's majoring in creative writing and art. In her free time, Virginia can be found binge-watching crime shows or consuming large amounts of coffee and chocolate.

sarah jane knowlton is a chronic napper and fun-fact enthusiast. She is from

Houston, Texas and is majoring in English with a focus in creative writing with minors in psychology and communications.

john martin is an aspiring writer, filmmaker, poet, and any other combination of artistic words that'll compel you to hire him. His interests include pensively staring into the distance and collecting regrets.

colby meagle is a senior art major who focuses on painting and video. She is interested in the figure and the media's relationship with the shaping of cultural and individual identities.

lauren phillips is a literature and creative writing major, and all you really need to know about her is that she is the epitome of Type A. If you care to know anything further, she researches the intersection between young adult literature and feminism, runs regularly, and loves spending time in the kitchen—cooking and eating. She has previously worked with *Good Housekeeping*, *Four Seasons Magazine*, and Elon University's own *The Pendulum*.

hannah podhorzer loves drawing, photography, long skirts, laughing, and anything in nature.

miranda romano is studying professional writing & rhetoric and creative writing far away from her homeland of Ohio. Her friends, and probably strangers too, accuse her of wearing too much floral. A professor once said that her poetry is rich, playful, passionate, sensory, emotional, and powerful, and she likes to think that this describes her personality as well.

julia sorensen is a sophomore who is in love with the human mind. She has been into art and writing since she was a little tall girl.

emily stone is a storyteller and collector with a passion for photography and digital art.

maria temming is a senior physics and creative writing double major and aspiring science journalist. When she's not composing book chapters about SETI for her thesis or blogging for the Elon Tech Blog, she likes to write personal essays, short fiction, and occasional fanfiction (she feels your judgment, and she doesn't care). Maria's non-writing interests include: aimlessly scrolling through Tumblr, frequenting Oak House, wearing sweatpants whenever possible, and jogging.

jessica trinidad is a senior English professional writing & rhetoric major. She is a wanderlust soul emitting enough light to replace the sun and is constantly searching for her next adventure.

SPECIAL THANKS

elon university media board
casey brown
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david banks
patrick phillips
jennine capó crucet
steven church
cheryl strayed
paula patch
robbyn harper
our contributors
our readers
phil smith and the oak house
elon university english department
drew perry
tita ramirez

and lastly, pat jones, for whom we are endlessly grateful. we wish her well in retirement, though we will miss her terribly.

FREDERICK HARTMANN CONTEST WINNERS

FICTION CONTEST 2015

judged by jennine capó crucet

first place: maddy keith
honorable mentions: kevin coyne
lauryl fischer

POETRY CONTEST 2015

judged by patrick phillips

first place: kayla hammer
second place: emily deMaioNewton
third place: kevin coyne

NONFICTION CONTEST 2015

judged by steven church

first place: rachel lewis
honorable mentions: casey allen
lauryl fischer
sarah paterson

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

As the undergraduate literary and art journal of Elon University, *Colonnades* welcomes all submissions from undergraduate writers and artists in fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, as well as visual and audio-visual art. Submissions are accepted year-round; however, there are deadlines each year for the current issue. Any submissions received after those deadlines will be considered for the next issue. Pieces for each issue are chosen through a blind reading and ranking process by staff members. This process does take into account the available space within the issue.

Submissions must be free of all grammatical and mechanical errors. All pieces must be submitted electronically, by emailing the appropriate address. All literary pieces should be emailed to: colonnades@elon.edu. All art pieces should be emailed to: colonnades.art@gmail.com. The subject of the email should be formatted as: lastname_title. The body of the email must include only your name, Datatel number, title of piece, and genre. Submissions must be saved as the title of the piece. Submission pieces must be attached to the email; do not paste the piece into the body of the email. You may include multiple submissions in one email.

Literary pieces should be saved as Microsoft Word documents. Art pieces should be saved in 300 dpi resolution, TIFF format.

The deadline for literary submissions is January 8, 2017, and the deadline for art submissions is January 22, 2017.

