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The Carson Review

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Literary Award Winners

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Submission Guidelines

The Carson Review is published once a year in the Spring. We invite submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and cover art from current students at Marymount Manhattan College. Selecting material for the next issue will take place in the Fall of 2022. *The deadline is October 30th, 2022.*

All literary submissions should include a cover sheet with the writer's name, e-mail address, and the titles of all work(s) submitted. The author's name should not appear on the actual pages of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Double-space all prose and single-space all poetry. For such texts, we ask that you send electronic submissions *as Word documents* to carsonreview@mmm.edu. The same cover sheet directions apply to front cover art submissions, which should be at least 300 dpi JPG images. If you have any questions about these guidelines or about working on *The Carson Review* as a student editor, please contact Dr. Jerry Williams at jwilliams1@mmm.edu or at (646)393-4118.

Editorial Policy

The editorial staff of *The Carson Review* is an assemblage of students at Marymount Manhattan College. In order to cultivate an atmosphere of integrity and evenhandedness, the staff evaluates all entries without knowing the identity of the author or photographer. To maintain a thriving literary arts journal at MMC, a variety of submissions remains absolutely vital, so please send us your best work.

In Memoriam
Abby Veronica Staniek
(November 6, 1999 – January 8, 2022)

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Poetry

Brittney Austin

The Tank (a Zuihitsu)

A place where someone thought it a good idea to dress us up as turtles.

We've surely forgotten what it feels like to sleep on a mattress, after years of sleeping on yoga mats. I cried in the hospital during my first outside trip. The nurses transferred me from a gurney to a Posturepedic mattress. My body sighed in the clouds. I thought, *My God, a real bed.*

Come to think of it, they may have been onto something with the turtle theme. Five out of seven community toilets are clogged. We've been inhaling one another's fecal matter for approximately three weeks now. Sort of like a turtle tank.

The water from the tap seems to be a cocktail of four parts pennies, two parts sugar—coppery with a sweet aftertaste. Woe to those who survived off the bartender's leftover pennies. They buy a lot more than what we bargained for.

Do turtles shed their shells before slumber, literally and metaphorically?

I've been told, several times, that frozen water is a privilege. I guess I am privileged to pluck icicles from my eyelashes when the heat is not working.

It is forbidden to rest straight through the night, so if you want to become a pariah, refrain from standing at 5:30 a.m., as is customary.

I was offered immunization and never received it. Then again, what for? Turtles have long life spans, don't they?

The benches in the field are designated for the hard shells. Soft shells either stand or do laps. Are turtles territorial?

Green, green, green, green everywhere. Except on the other side. Sand. And the only bodies of water are the stale puddles in the concentration-camp-style shower room. Black worms infest these puddles, but our shells protect us from disease.

It is hurtful to see such majestic creatures behave like crabs in a barrel.

Bad turtles!

Julianna Belles

***There's always been someone
else inside my house***

I've never seen what they look like,
just an outline with long hair
and unfathomable limbs,
extra elbows and too many hands,
but I know they're there,
a gaunt shadow in the bathroom
reflecting off the sink handle.

I imagine they'd have
hollowed out eyes,
a violin waistline,
and skin that squirms like maggots.
Bones might shift and struggle to
break free of their fleshy limits.
Worms may wriggle just below the surface
of their cracked concrete colored frame,
black mold bordering their fingernails,
traces of decay engraved in the corners of their mouth,
but a face that never stays,
a changeling making a home in my empty halls.
I catch a flash of them in the mirror sometimes,
but they always melt away, nail polish meeting acetone.
In the morning the kitchen is always sour
and ragged socks cling to sticky syrup trails.
The meat in the fridge is spoiled.
It's hard around the edges, gross and gray,
but I think they like it that way so I never bother cleaning.

Most days it's just easier to do what they like.
I found a fly while lying on the throw rug,
and thought about how
if it was lucky
it would be dead in twenty-eight days.

The house smells like rot and running gas.
I find spores on the light switch of an uncharted wall.
The foundation shifts.
Someone's been eating my porridge.
Someone's been sitting in my chair.
Someone's been sleeping in my bed.

When the world goes quiet, I hear voices,
familiar but choked,
like lungs woven with toadstools.
Sometimes the creature whispers,
coaxing me to let them out.

I wish they'd stop turning on the stove while I'm asleep.
They're going to burn the whole damn place down one day.

Emma Calame-Penington

Oil and Water

You've learned that oil and water do not mix,
but how you ache to exist as slippery slick,
something akin to molten molasses.

breathing so brightly will surely sting,
an unexpected bee—but see how its wooly legs
are laden with pollen, how a pinprick can sweeten
with the promise of honey.

You hear it will burn to stare into the runny-yolk sun,
how inhaling deeply will stain your lungs sulfur—
but the polka-dots imprinted inside your eyelids
will shimmer like dragon scales; turquoise, jade, and amethyst.

It will take patience to build up your soul
in careful layers of cadmium yellow,
painting flower petals in slow strokes,
coaxing the marigolds into bloom across your skin.
You've learned that oil and water do not mix,
but you can catch and kindle, become incandescent,
and unfurl into sparkling citrine.

Emma Calame-Penington

My Favorite Color

It's like purple, but not an ultraviolet pulsing,
not the face of an orchid freckled by blazing magenta,
not the stain of wild berries crushed between a bird's beak,
or the iridescence of a beetle's abdomen.

It's like blue, but not like the midnight memories
of a bottomless lake, or running headlong towards the edge of time—
if only your fingers could curl around the fabric of your anxieties,
catch on a thread of that old, fraying sweater,
unravel each problem with a single pull—

It's like gray, but not like the quietude of ashes,
or the dust that settles over stacks of forgotten books,
like the mist of songs tucked away in the utmost corners
of your mind that you can only hum—
the words ephemeral, but not lost, not gone.
My favorite color is the soft wisteria of a fresh memory,
the brilliant cerulean of a laugh hidden between lips,
that silver-spun caress of the moon, and gold-flecked kiss of the sun.
It's the tenderness of seeing myself through my own eyes,
of finding within my heart, a home. That is my favorite color.

Mary Durocher

Inside the Lion's Maw

A blue-eyed beast
slips under my quilt
and stalks my pillow.

His body faces towards me
and in the moon's silver glare
the sharp points of his teeth glisten
with spittle and bits of raw flesh,
his pupils become a dilated
entity.

I cry out,
Why are you staring at me?

He shushes me, smothering me
to his lice-infested chest
and gnaws at my cheek,
his bite uneven,
like spilled berry jam.

I'm no pure vessel.

Here is my defaced neck,
permanently seared
by a round cigarette burn.

The beast is envious.
He squeezes the past
out of my guts.

One night a Pitbull
had stopped me at the corner
of thirteenth and third.

The Pitbull smoked a menthol cigarette.
He slobbered and panted,
dominating the dark.
His spiked metal collar glowed
when he asked to follow me home.
I had attempted refuge in a deli,
crouched down among
the frozen pizzas and chicken pot pies.

I halt my story, resume silence.
The beast begins to belly laugh,
reminding me
this bed is no haven.

As I sink into my mattress
his filthy claws trace the shape
of my flushed breasts,
digging into my freckled skin.

I shut my eyes
and his jaw widens
into a rancid entryway
as my collarbone
ripens in a fresh bruise.

Mary Durocher

The Haunting of Keene Valley

A slumped, husk of an inn
perched at the end of the road.
Past the barren schoolhouse,
past the field desecrated with clover and ragweed.

A town burrowed in the mountains' clutch.
The solitary supermarket's neon sign winks.
The pharmacist hums the townspeople's illnesses.

A gift of memory,
overgrown and waiting.

My husband and I arrived at midnight.
Our Thunderbird clanked down dirt roads
until he spotted our destination.

The old married couple,
who rested in the inn's frail walls,
greeted us on the cluttered front porch.

We inscribed our names under *guests*
and the grandfather clock clicked-clacked.

The shriveled wife scowled
at the crow's feet surrounding
my husband's olive-green eyes.
She asked how old I was

before leading us to our room.
Peace makes me uneasy.
The chokehold of stillness,
the moths collecting at the lamp's nape,
the dissolving gingham wallpaper.
He and I were different.
He was at ease and didn't believe
in the screeching door hinges,
in our hosts slinking about,
in bolting our bedroom door.

He told me to relax, to take a hot bath
and I lay beside him in my lipstick pink towel
as he read a Shirley Jackson story aloud.

In the morning, we swallowed
the wife's scorched, stringy eggs.
I spent afternoons wandering
down shallow streams,
down unmarked trails.

We packed our suitcases on the third day.
I didn't get to stay in that town, Keene Valley,
where we vacationed in a wilting heaven.

That same summer my husband went away,
orphaning me to a claustrophobic city

and a three-story walk-up.
My reality has flowered into dullness.
But at night I indulge.
I chip away at my apartment wall's curling paint
and see my secret hope:

Keene Valley was haunted.
The old married couple erupted in spine-shattering howls.
The monsters under the bed,
grey goo oozing and fangs gnashing,
trapped us and we never had to leave.

Mary Durocher

Reconciliation

I was a colicky infant. Once, as my mother bounced me on her knee, I projectile vomited onto the Rent-A-Center T.V. My mother, a new parent at twenty-three, shrieked at the goopy liquid that ensued. A fragile childhood followed. If I soaked in too much summer sun or skipped lunch, my face would turn leaden. I'd go blind with nausea.

At fourteen, while at a country fair in the Catskills, I smacked my temple on the maroon and mustard Tilt-a-Whirl. My head felt like a scrambled egg. My mother dragged me home. I found no relief until I hunched over the toilet. After, I gawked at myself in the bathroom mirror. My cheeks glowed with red splotches. My throat burned. My eyes bulged as if a ghost floated behind me.

I was settled at nineteen. Like a survivor of a half-assed exorcism, I wandered the East Village unaware of the clinging spirit until in the morning when I clutched my bed sheets, unable to sit up. My roommate brought me saltines and applesauce. I tried to be better. But one Saturday night, at a house party on Mercer Street, I barfed on someone's shag rug. My mother accused me of being pregnant. I waved the negative Dollar-Store test stick in her face.

Here I stand, old habits seeping out. I've never learned. To believe in the absolution of the past is like seeing the truth of your reflection in a funhouse mirror. Nothing has been laid to rest.

Shaun Karle

Molar

I roll it around in my mouth.
It feels like a pebble
that I picked up from a playground.
A smooth, rounded rock that
spent years under the feet of schoolkids.

I use the pointed edges of the pebble,
the part that used to be under my gums,
and press it into the top of my tongue.
The skin breaks and bleeds.
In a way, I am biting my tongue.

A metallic flavor floods my mouth.
I let it melt and mix with my saliva.
The mixture drips down my throat
like cherry-flavored medicine.

My tongue fixates on
the hole left in my mouth.
The nerve shrieks and throbs,
painful when I touch it,
even more painful if I don't.

I hold the pebble with my other molars
between my upper and lower jaw.
I try to crunch down hard on the pebble.
It makes a harsh sound

like metal crashing against metal.
It slips next to my cheek.

I swallow it.
It makes an incision at the back of my throat.
I feel it move through me,
from the top of my esophagus,
until the pebble lands in my stomach
and weighs me down.

I run my tongue over my
remaining teeth.

Isabella Leach

Vessel

Every step I take
 the ground sinks.
Fresh patches of green
 alongside the buried.

It's soft, yet dense
 beneath the blustery sky
making it peaceful but daunting
 as new roses blossom.

Heavenly forests filled with families,
 hidden by each other's names.
Bloodlines lurk the rows
 praying to find their resting ancestor.

Neighbors making friends
 trading the carnations they grow.
I gaze at my isolated stone,
 overcome by nature's mold.

There's an older woman,
 curly headed and gray,
sitting under a wallowing tree
 engraved with the name Lilith.

She doesn't move,
 but her energy is captivating.

Her somber stare is alluring,
dragging me away from our father.

Her movements are swift
as she creates a draft with her speed.
Her shadow crawls along the ground
even without the sun.

I walk towards her but the grass,
it tries to devour me,
demanding me to go under,
as if that is where I belong.

She disappears into her engravement,
and so, I follow.
Maybe I met a ghost.
Maybe I'm haunting myself.

Jacquelyn Lipke

One With the Sea

The lighthouse keeper's daughter wished she were a mermaid.
Her home on the cliffs looks out at the black sea.
She catches a glimpse of the island town miles away,
with binoculars in hand in front of the beacon.
She likes to think of them as her second pair of eyes.

There is no company on her rocky cay she calls home.
When she closes her eyes, she thinks of schools of fish,
their scales little mirrors and diamonds shimmering on the ocean floor,
sharing one mind, keeping each other safe, always together.
She stares at her weather-beaten father across the dinner table.

In her thoughts, her mother is below the surface of the icy water,
where she peeks her pale eyes out above the waves, close
but far enough out to sea where she won't be seen with her daughter's
second eyes.
Her long tail is slick, fat, and warm, spotted grey and black and white,
like the harbor seals who come to rest along the shore.

She treasures the days when her father takes her hand,
and they both climb into their rickety boat, the Marina.
He lets her sit in his lap and his threadbare sweater smells of saltwater.
His peppered beard scratches her cheeks as the boat approaches the
mainland,
a fantastic show of lights and color and unfamiliar sound.

Sailors in crisp white caps and blue stripes,
fishermen in rubber coveralls and flannel shirts,

little boys pushing their paper boats along the rain-choked gutters,
but her favorite is the old fishing boat captain with his tattered coat.
He winks at her and lets her believe he is Captain Blackbeard.

The old captain serves them hot bowls of clam chowder and tells his
stories
of sharks that are big enough to swallow men whole,
of great storms that turn the wild sea upside down,
and of beautiful women who live in the ocean and lure sailors to watery
graves.
She sobs into her father's chest on the boat ride back to their lighthouse.

To be a siren's prey, to hear their song and be enchanted—
she can only dream of such a fate where she is whisked away
from her whitewashed house that stands like a tiny matchbox,
somehow unable to be blown away by the harsh winds.
She stands in the crooked doorframe and her eyes go crossed staring at
the tide.

The white surf crashes against the battered coquina shore.
Her faded yellow raincoat flaps wildly at her knees.
Suddenly she sees something fantastic in her second eyes.
A slick grey dolphin's fin surfaces for an instant and is gone again.
The lighthouse keeper's daughter wished she were one with the sea.

Jacquelyn Lipke

Spring Goddess

spring runs a languid stalk of grass between her fingertips
in her hands it becomes a lyre that plays soft music
a breeze carries the smell of sweet blossoms and her strawberry hair along
with it
it brushes the tips of the honeyed grass below her dancing feet
an audience watches, enraptured, as she sings to welcome the season
they mimic her in small, short chirps
her eyes watch them carefully as she begins to smile
imagining the journeys, they will lead as the earth blooms in her presence
the ancient cherry tree reaches up towards the sky, waking from a long sleep
his arms almost touching the clouds as he stretches awake
when his turning leaves unfurl to the voice of his favorite nymph
he becomes alive again
she snags her fine linen on his branches and they pull at her warm skin
her strong feet stamp the earth and it begins to awaken
a single white petal falls from her crown and kisses her cheek
the meadow bows in the majesty of the spring goddess.

Ruth Lora

As We Drown

Since the time of Earth's first breath,
the sun and sky gods looked upon
this defiant sphere of life,
housing so many different spirits,
and decided
that it deserved its own
spirit to look over it.

Earth Mother she was called.
The giver of fertility,
of all things living,
especially the seeds
that keep her breathing.

As time went on,
a group of travelers was blessed
for their morality, their kindness,
their appreciating and respect
of Earth Mother.
We hail from those same travelers,
the ones whose footprints
pressed into the fertile, ancient soil,
the ones who were so in tune
with themselves,
with the animal spirits around them,
that they were one essence.
We carry their legacy.

But now, we are threatened.
Our peaceful ways disrupted.
Our lands burned and pillaged.
Our ancestors' bones ground out
underneath the soles of the white man.

Our women, children, and elders,
our men and protectors
raped, sold, scalped, slaughtered, enslaved.
All in the name of God,
of westward expansion,
of gold underneath our ancestors' graves,
of industrial city blueprints and plans created,
of glory only they can see.

And so,
the white man's civilization
drowns us,
the humble
of the blessed travelers
from so long ago.
A tidal wave of cities, animals, and consumers,
of disease, capitalism, and the entitled.

They push us away,
seduce our children
with beautiful, wicked lies.

And pat them on the head
when they learn the horrific truths.

We are dying.
Our lands, our ancestors,
our roots, our ways—
ripped from us.

Who will love the land?
Love and care for Earth Mother
the way we do?

Mark Alberto McKnight

cafeteria fugues

the first time I heard music was
when you joined our two-man, middle school, satanist club.

we became friends, and you invited me over
to an empty house,
where every time I sat in your room
 chariots of sweat raced
 down the valleys in my back,
 the tubas in my heart barked and crunched,
 and reeds ricocheted around in my stomach.

but I was always allayed
by the refrains in your carpet.

we talked about the adagios in dark corners,
where the trees howl and the wind sputters,
where we've both met the decrepit man living in the reefs of light:

you told me about how you soaked your hands in melted treble clefs,
and how the colors which sparked and coagulated across your knuckles
cracked your arms into sanguine rivers.

I told you about the junctions of carnage sliding in and out of my palms,
concertos of flesh, forking into tiny spears of red and black,
and I showed you my bloated, steamy, arms bursting like apple bombs.

our spirits pounded in a crescendo across the beams in your ceiling,

mixing, splashing, colliding,
my eyes found divinity when I dived across the ravines of your raven
black visage.

you offered me kissing practice.
I was too excited to be offended.

I remember your forearms looked like sheet music,
I wanted to press notes on the staff like tulips,
plant chords of kisses on your wrist,
and make the score bloom with my lips.
I often did your homework.

on your birthday, I wrote you a poem in a letter, with a real stamp, your
address, and hid it in my closet.

(I think it's still there.
I never actually sent it.)

I often played your music in the dark. each measure played like a violin
on my veins, and when we met before lunch, we compared clarinets in
the sterile linoleum light. after the bell rang, we covered ourselves back
up with each other's harmonies, parted ways in the lunchroom, and in
the fugues of the cafeteria, our melodies got lost and drowned out.

when I gave you cayenne soda,
you coughed up oboe blueberries on a low note.

at your birthday party
you trapped me in the closet with your best friend
nothing happened, but you didn't believe me,
so you locked yourself in the bathroom with your boyfriend.
the others said you were having sex,
they were older and I didn't know what they meant,
so I called my parents
and they picked me up.

when I got home,
I looked up sex on the computer.

I love looking up sex on the computer!

at school, the monday after,
I let you cheat off my test
because you told me you didn't study.

that midnight we walked the wire set with tar molasses,
used jet black cardboard and radios to make carcass dioramas.
we read each other's first editions, cover to cover,
kept our thoughts and words hostage,
developed stockholm syndrome with our octaves,
breathed in each other's sweet plumes of bliss
while crying through the spaces in between our lips.

the night-time was your forte
and you squeezed soprano stars

plucking out the wrong notes and
exchanging them for the right ones
but we were both baritones,
so you transposed the sky
and arranged nebulas into arias
into a place where we could both reach
so our voices wouldn't have to keep breaking,
and our poems could sound a little more like singing.

Carey Marr

**New York, NY, Thursday, February 25,
46 Degrees, Mostly Sunny**

What does another day in the city amidst a pandemic look like?

I awake later than planned again, stumble into the bathroom to examine
my face

 closely, before my contacts are in.

I sit to pee, wipe and stand.

I guzzle water from an elephant-sized Yeti tumbler while pouring stale
coffee

 grounds into the French press, which is actually a cafetière,
invented by a

 Frenchman,

 patented by an Italian and used by every enlightened American
in New York City.

Welcome to the melting pot.

These days it's more of a frying pan, but I often consider the oven, myself,
because

 Sylvia Plath made it infamous

 and I can make it marketable.

Pandemic getting you down? Husband on the fritz? Try the freestanding
electric GE, or

 perhaps you're a traditionalist?

We have the KitchenAid gas stove with your name on it.

 Really, engravings are extra though.

I peek into Tina's room and see her unconscious, curled into a haphazard
position

 surrounded by books, a laptop with the screen still flipped
open, hempseed

 oil lip gloss on the windowsill next to a stig pen, extra cartridge
boxes freshly

 ripped open.

Yell her name and she doesn't move, but I quietly flick the light on and her eyes shoot

open, an alarmed, wide-eyed smushy face acknowledges me and then turns over.

I then pour steaming coffee into a bowl-sized mug with a baby from a vintage

Campbell's Soup ad painted on the outside of its white glaze that I bought for five

dollars

from an antique market in Baltimore, and tenderly walk into the living room,

approximately five steps from the kitchen, where I turn on our flat screen smart TV

that

takes up an entire wall of the apartment fit for a prisoner, and click over to Netflix.

I start and end my day with the *Gilmore Girls* intro song christening my waking hours

into the few I spend sleeping.

After checking email, maybe putting on respectable clothing,

after finishing breakfast and pretending to do homework,

I find a reason unbeknownst even to myself often, to go outside for a walk,

usually returning with a coffee, pizza slice, random grocery item Cristina or I wrote

down in our phones or even occasionally, empty-handed when minimalist me guilts

consumerist me into laying down for a while.

When she rests, minimalist Carey strolls down John Finley walk
along the East River,
attempting to make connections the way New Yorkers do
through their eyes
with faceless, masked individuals
jogging, pushing, smoking, dazing and grazing by
with little more than a sniff from a leashed dog.

A leather-skinned shirtless oily man reminiscent of the Florida Keys
reclines in a
foldable beach chair along the side of my path following the
river.

That's the funny thing about the city, even if it may seem strange, you
can do it

anyways because no one has the time or energy to protest.

I often place oddballs of the city into the suburbs in which I grew up in
my mind, and

imagine what would happen were a crazy old alizarin and
cream-colored man to sit in
nothing but board shorts in a reclined beach chair covered in
oil in 46 degree
weather, smack dab in the middle of the sidewalk in our tiny
town center.

Cars would stop, people would walk into one another craning their
necks, confused,

laughing, exchanging bewildered what-do-we-do looks—
should we contact someone for him?

Is there someone who can come get him?

Teenagers would steal pictures for social media and adults would call
one another up

to ask if they'd heard about the naked old man tanning on
Main Street without a care
in the world.

I start to feel bad for the geezer and drop him back into the Upper East-
Side river-walk

and I let his tiny wrinkled shape get smaller behind me on my
way back to the
apartment.

I pass the fruit vendors, the coffee cart, the elder people in crosswalks
that I give more

than six feet's distance on my way around,

I smirk under my mask when someone has to guard their shitting dog in
the center of

the sidewalk and then bend down to scoop its warm crap into a
thin plastic bag that
they'll ditch in the nearest trash bin on the next corner.

I skip up the steps to my apartment building and unlock the first door
on the ground

level, walk up the first set of steps rounding to the second floor
and unlock another

two barriers to our tiny home in the heart of chaos,
only to stand in our entryway for two more minutes than usual,
accounting for hand-sanitizing, peeling off my mask,
stepping out of my boots, hanging my jacket, and retrieving my
phone from the pocket,

I walk down the hall to Cristina's door and rap twice before pushing in,
she lays in the

same position as three hours before and I know it'll be a good
two

more before I can count on having someone present to talk to.
In the evenings we eat in front of the TV, unless class is scheduled
perfectly
inconveniently that night, then one of us cooks and sneaks into
the other's
room, hiding from the laptop camera to drop off a plate of hot
food that won't
get eaten until after the stress of virtual academia passes and
dinner is cold.

Nine o'clock, we reheat full plates in the microwave, along with coffees
from hours
earlier, and sink into the black foldable couch in front of yet
another screen.

Dawson's Creek. Gilmore Girls. Classics Night? Reality TV dramas?

What will fill

our over-stimulated, over-tired minds before sleep creeps in for
another night and

leaves too soon yet again when the morning light rises
through the windows of our self-imposed prison?

Teo Occhino

What the faggot said

i've seen what you do
sneaky little gay
going to the chest of wonders
slipping and squeezing your small feet into a sparkling slipper

you need to strut when you put them both on
with the height, reach up, touch my colors
yet still stretching with absolutely no support
i know what you want

and. you. can't. have. it.

red anger fills your face like tinder bell,
my orange enthusiasm fills your fingertips like nail polish

and you want your toes to match

you're such a young gen z with your i-pad christmas present,
social media has entered the eyes that rest on your head

and there you stand
right infant on your ipad timer
snapping photos
posing
wearing your mother's jewelry and heels
and you are happiness
it fills you with my yellow
full but never satisfied

your green eyes post away

faggot

your third grade brain hasn't ever heard this word
you hear it again

faggot

while changing in to your cleopatra halloween costume
faggot, you're a fucking faggot
it bruises you
deep and wide, with my blue and purple

but keep your head up, queen
you look in the mirror and see your art of a body,
art that is filled with all my colors
you are you
all the red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple of you.

Maeve Penman

Midnight at the Carnival

Carnevale spurts golden light.

To be *unbridled*.

To be someone else.

Mystery in every tilt of the eyebrow and curl of a finger.

They said this place was magical—*alive*.

There is no enchantment once the clock strikes midnight.

No wonder remains once the masks are removed

and it is just you and I.

There is no longer divination in your eyes

I see true sin.

And above all things, true sin is

seductive.

Carne: *the flesh*

The obsession with skin

The silken delicacy of a bare shoulder

The scent of pennies and vetiver.

Levare: *to put away*

The compartmentalization of the self

The suppression of reality

The chains intent on diminishing

Carnevoel: *biding of the flesh; the making of a spectacle*

The security of no identity once under a silken domino

The ambiguity that leads to seizing a drunken opportunity

The sheer violation of justice.

The desecration of love

To taste and see the marvels of the Carnival, I lost a part of me.

You made me complicated.

I gave you *love*.

It was a promise of forever in a night.

Convinced that you idolized me with charming smiles and “heated gazes”

I was a petty fool for you. Fool for the devotion I thought I deserved

but that adoration turned to sacrifice,

turning to necromancy in your darkening eyes.

Now I trace the grey smoke trail of a snuffed candle

as I wait for the memories of the Carnival

to *fade*.

The lights, the masks, the damnation, and most of all

you.

Emma P. Slattery

Burnt Out

Flip-flopping between manic and depressive
like a fish out of water, I gasp to breathe.
Sandwiched between oppressive force of the scorching sun
and the torrid gravel beneath me.
A rock
 and a hard place.

Sisyphus cried as, with all my might,
I arise from the bed. Breaking free of Blanket's ivy arms.
Introspective, waiting room contemplation ensues.
The call to march has come.
My knees fall on deaf ears.

I would rise and move on, if I could.
Leave me behind, if I could.
Lay waste to this vessel, take off with packed bags,
carton of fags and watch what once was my body
crumple to the ground; an old, forgotten t-shirt at the foot of my bed.
Hollow,
 boneless,
 empty skin sack.

The physical manifestation of my aching brain
tears through the sallow skin of my freckled back,
like one hundred greedy claws reaching toward the sky
to feed.
Frail and sordid; doubled over
I become acquainted with the floor.

There is a madman behind these thin, pale, unassuming lips.
A barbarous monster lurking within these Acheron pupils
and a terrified child between my ears
pinned helplessly to the ground six feet above me,
listening to the disappointed eulogies for the person I might have become.

I used to be enough—nay! I used to be a star.
I burned so bright that even Sun herself envied my very existence.
So bright that Moon's wandering eye couldn't help but steal a glimpse.
But stars too, burn out.
Fizzle away into cosmic candy floss.
Until,
 eventually,
it is dark again.
I yearn for enthusiasm.
I yearn to bask in the golden glory of kind words
and earnest sentiments,
trust that those around me are not trite.
I yearn to love; to feel passion
but the itchy sensation on the underside of my skull renders me incapable.

I yearn to feel the in between
everything
 and nothing at all—

If such a place even exists.

Abby Veronica Staniek

Lemonade

We'll meet in the garden of peonies
and daffodils. You'll laugh and giggle
when on my sundress sweet lemonade spills.

Once seen the darkness, now I'm drawn
to the light—the scent of sweet flowers,
freshly cut grass, God-given sight.

I wish this life was as carefree
as a lemonade spill, if only one could stop time,
watch the universe stand *still, still, still* . . .

Fiction

Julianna Belles

Eye on the Ball

Bottom of the 23,845th inning. One out. The Queens Crowns at bat.

Taking a moment to knock the dirt off their cleats with a forceful tap of their bat, Carter stepped up to the plate. An uncomfortable sweat stuck their light pink jersey to the back of their neck in the artificial lamplight that hounded down from above. The heat had been nearly unbearable for at least the last hundred innings, though Carter wasn't sure whether that was because someone turned up the brightness or because the ring of flames surrounding the stadium had recently crawled so high that they could now see it cresting the back of the scoreboard, licking at the reddened brick and ivy vines coiled up the highest wall. If they had to pick, they'd guess the latter.

The neon green numbers on the board loomed over the players, digging into them like predatory eyes. Las Vegas Roulettes 1,734, Away 1,734, bottom of the inning. The Roulettes' cleanup batter managed to tie the game up (yet again) at the top of the inning with a beautiful moonshot out to left field, the crack of rawhide, rubber and yarn colliding with wood echoing around the stadium as the ball sailed straight into the blueish-purple void that had swallowed the seating section before the folks sitting there even got a chance to evacuate. As the ball disappeared into the inky absence, the gurgle it made could almost be called cheerful. Either that, or Carter hoped it was cheerful. The alternative wasn't something Carter wanted to think about while their teammates were that close to the pit.

Carter heard the blood thrumming in their ears as the perpetual white noise moved through their body. They could see both Delgado and Bennett out on base. The grimace on their face as they stepped up was immediately wiped off as they glanced out onto the field and noticed Bennett waving to them from second, their rainbow hair tied tightly up into a tight ponytail bouncing eagerly. Carter waved before pulling their focus back. They

thanked Bennett internally for that. Something told them their nerves were showing outwardly again, whether that be the idle tapping of their fingers on the bat handle, or the rapid lashing back and forth of the new pink tail they were still getting used to.

Carter wrapped their fingers around the bat, taking a deep breath as they stared down the pitcher. They weren't sure when the Roulettes' pitcher had sprouted her sixth arm; last time they checked they were positive she had five, but the sixth was now budding just below her ribcage, opening and closing the hand as though it were still getting used to its fingers. The Roulettes looked just as drained as the Crowns, a field of players in black and red pinstripes who, if Carter looked at a little too fast, they could practically mistake for zombies. The second baseman's eyes, all twelve of them, carried deep purple bags, and they shifted from leg to leg, trying to keep conscious as the heat settled in more. Carter took note of that, hoping if they drove the ball in that direction, they could maybe catch him off guard.

The Crowns hadn't escaped mutation-free either. Carter hadn't started the game with bright bubblegum pink skin, or with ram horns that curled around their ears, or much less a skinny tail that came to an arrowhead point. It was small at first, pink splotches appearing on their skin in a cow-print like pattern, and the horns and tail budding shortly after.

"You look like a devil covered in Pepto Bismol." Their teammate Tiana had said, picking absentmindedly at the feathers on her neck that recently sprouted, a beautiful dark brown with a golden sheen.

"And you look like you should be on someone's Thanksgiving table." Carter had half-heartedly jabbed back as they poured their water from their bottle into their cupped hand and attempted to wash their face of the pink, scrubbing and scrubbing before finally giving up to step up to the plate.

That was months, maybe years ago. Carter wasn't sure at this point. The sun and moon had cleared, leaving an empty and unsettling sky to fill, and leaving the players blind to the passage of time. Whether time moved slower here, or time ceased to exist entirely, Carter wasn't sure, but they did know something with the concept of time was off, the hands on their wrist watch spinning with enough fervor to lift an airplane.

Now, the sound of the announcer's mic crackled over the speakers. Carter half expected the inflated voice of the announcer to spring to life with his usual introduction, "Next up, batting for the Queens Crowns, number two, Carterrrrr Celestial!" drawing out the "er" sound in their name the way every announcer ever did. It took a moment for Carter to remember the announcer died weeks ago, his pleas and cries for mercy at the hands of some unknown entity broadcast for all to hear before a sizzling sound cut his voice short. Now, there was nothing but perpetual static. It hummed over the stadium like a great weight. A never-ending white noise.

The crowd was long gone. The managers were long gone. Just the two teams remained trapped, locked in an unwinnable stand-off, with the giant Eye that watched overhead.

Even with the constant threat of death dangling over the teams on a string, Carter still thought often about what life was like before and leading up to the fatal ninth inning. The team hadn't been out to Vegas in what seemed like months, with the season set to close and green summer leaves shifted to autumnal colors. Known rival teams, games between the Las Vegas Roulettes and the Queens Crowns were heavily attended and highly anticipated. Crowns fans had followed the New York team all the way out to Vegas for one of the season's most anticipated games, and they were certainly getting their money's worth as the score forced extra innings.

The Eye originally opened after the bottom of the ninth. It must have been years ago now, but time being a flimsy and fickle thing, Carter wasn't exactly sure. Thinking back, they definitely remembered Erika was at bat, hitting the ball with a high arch that glided almost perfectly into the center fielder's mitt. That had left Tiana between bases, and the moment she hesitated to turn back, the center fielder whipped the ball to first baseman, who caught it with a practiced ease. A textbook double play. The crowd's cheer swamped the stadium as the score was still tied, 10-10.

Carter warmed the bench, water sitting in their cheeks, swishing it back and forth as they tried to make the redness in their face fade. They'd struck out just before that play, right in the order before Tiana, hell of a way to start a quick inning. Widely known as the Crowns' worst batter (Not

worst player though, that title went to pitcher Murphy Law, whose motto seemed to follow their name: anything that can go wrong, will go wrong), Carter knew the crowd was rightfully pissed with them for starting the inning on such a sour note, and if the team let up a run in the next one, it would most likely be considered their fault over better players like Tiana Dexterity and Erika Martyrdom, fan favorites with RBIs higher than Carter's Twitter follower count.

The sun was high in the sky, right where the shadows were tallest. The Roulettes hustled back to their dugout as Tiana and Erika trudged the opposite direction. Tiana tightened her jet-black ponytail, clearly disappointed while Erika held her shoulder to anchor her. The duo was a power couple on and off the field, and Erika not only anchored Tiana, but the whole team as captain. Erika was electrifying, the kind of person who could pep talk you out of quicksand. Her pull as team captain was unlike any other captain Carter had ever played under, and she had talent to match. Rarely struck out, always organized and ready with exactly what the team needed to hear, if ever there was an MVP, Erika was the definition of it. As Tiana leaned up against the wall, arms crossed, Carter sported a devilish grin as they swallowed the now warm water and they took up the spot next to her. "Was that hesitation I saw out there? Really? From the great Tiana Dexterity?"

"Oh, shut up." Tiana's response was blunt as always.

"What? I'm just teasing." Carter nudged her with their shoulder, offering her a piece of gum.

Tiana looked from the gum in Carter's hand back to their face and scoffed at it before her eyes flickered down to her nails. "You? Tease? Please, call me when your strikeout stats don't match my credit card debt."

"Tiana." Erika's warning cut into the conversation as she tied back her mess of thick red curls for the third time that game.

Tiana sighed, gaze shifting between Carter and Erika before settling on Carter. "Fine. That was mean. You can call me even if your strikeout stats match my credit card debt."

"That's not what I meant." Erika physically placed herself between the

two for a moment to take a breath while the others grabbed their mitts. “I really thought you two were getting better about getting along.”

“We are! I haven’t thrown a baseball at them today to see what sound it makes!”

“And I haven’t snapped a bat over her head! See, progress!”

Erika’s eyes shone bright as she stifled a laugh. She reached up, tugging Carter’s cap down over their eyes in a fond gesture. “And that’s all a captain can ask of her team, isn’t it? To not use the equipment as weapons on each other?”

Carter rolled their eyes, fixing the cap along with their messy dark hair as a determined grin crossed Erika’s face. She turned away from Carter then, facing the rest of the team. There was a boldness to the way she spoke, as though daring some God to challenge her. “Alright, Crowns. Extra innings, no big deal, just a little more time to show ‘em what we’ve got! We’ve done this before, we’ll do it again!”

Carter listened, nodding. She wasn’t wrong. The past few times the Roulettes and Crowns had played, they’d had a pretty even split of wins to losses, and the last time the Roulettes had taken them in extra innings as well. This time, it was their turn. That’s how it always was.

Carter reached for their mitt, eyeing up center field when suddenly it was as though someone extinguished the sun. A blue-ish haze washed over the field, evaporating shadows that had previously stretched larger than life. A hush fell over the stadium. Carter watched confused looks paint the faces of their teammates all crowded inside the sardine can of a hole in the ground. Carter noticed Erika, who now instinctively had a bat in hand, slung over her shoulder, posed to swing. No one dared to breathe.

The silence was broken by a disgustingly long, wet noise. The ground shook and the players rattled from wall to wall. Carter hit the deck, cramming themselves under the bench, remembering something about “. . . in the event of an earthquake, blah, blah, blah . . .” from when they were a kid, grabbing Tiana’s arm and forcing her to duck with them. Only Erika stood her ground, eyes on the sky. Her stony expression melted into one that could only be described as complete and utter horror. Then, the screaming

started, a cacophony of fans above, but not in the way Carter was used to. These weren't screams of joy or chants for a homer, no, this was something else entirely. There was terror in the way those voices sounded. Footsteps clattered above like massive hailstones, a rush of people above thrumming in Carter's ears as they covered them. Their heart was in their throat now, trying to get a glimpse of something, anything, but the ground wouldn't stop.

Through the quake, they managed to look up, peer through the hair in their eyes to catch one last glimpse of Erika Martyrdom before she went up in flames. The fire started at her fingertips, sparking at the nails and crawling up her hand like a careful wick, then formed a halo around her heart, a brilliant blue blaze, hot and burning. She took a few steps out of the dugout, hair falling loose from where it was tied the moment before. Beside them, Carter could feel Tiana stiffen and she scrambled to her feet, starting after her.

"Erika!"

Erika didn't turn back as the fire expanded, devouring her as if she were paper, flaking away bit by bit into brittle ash before catching entirely, a bright blue bonfire. Where the captain stood a moment before was nothing but her bat, splintering and crackling like a fire pit log as it clattered to the ground. Carter barely heard Tiana's anguished cry, barely heard the shock of the team beside them as the shaking died down. Carter struggled to stand, grabbing their glasses off the ground from where they fell and frantically placing them back on their face. Stumbling out of the dugout to meet Tiana at her side, they froze as their gaze met another one.

Blotting out the sun above, staring down and contemplating the players like little ants, loomed a giant, bulging eye. The Eye hadn't been there moments before, but like a sink hole it appeared, sudden and gaping. The pupil was jet black, save for a sliver of light blue iris around, so thin a tightrope walker wouldn't dare use it. The Eye took up the entirety of the sky over the stadium, larger than anything Carter had seen before, blood-shot and pulsing as it scanned the field from one end to the other. The sky itself had curled back like an eyelid, The Eye embedding itself into what might have been a socket if this were a skull. It was almost impossible for

Carter to wrap their head around. Looking directly at it sickened them, feeling their head swim and their stomach churn. The stands were empty, swallowed entirely by a moving void of starry black matter, not a spectator in sight but the one above. Waiting for something. Watching.

The stadium sang with the hum of an abyss, and just as the silence settled in, the scoreboard flickered back on. The noise surrounded the players like a worn gramophone, the familiar organ fanfare beginning to play, though it modulated at an eerily minor key. The green words flashed back on and Carter felt their breath catch as the letters flickered faster than usual. *Play Ball!*

Tiana, still numb from the loss, knelt down with purpose and picked up the ball at her feet, looking at it over a moment. Tears still staining the sides of her face, she tossed the ball to Addy Townsend, one of the Crowns pitchers who was still half in a daze, blood trickling from her nose after hitting her head a little too hard in the dugout. “What are we waiting for?” Tiana’s tone was distant and hard. “Let’s play ball.”

And so they had. The two teams were tied for 23,834 innings now, and morale was at an all-time low.

The odd body modifications started small: sharp fangs and little budding horns, all purely cosmetic. But as the teams continued to play, the modifications grew more grotesque and elaborate. These players were developing jaws that open way too wide with tongues to roll out like tape measures, limbs impossibly too long out of the corner of Carter’s eye until they actually focused on them for a moment, only to find the player had disappeared entirely. There was no use trying to run, they found rather quickly, as a pitcher for the Roulettes attempted to walk out, only to be met with the same fate Erika had. His charred and boney remains shuffled off to the dugout by mourning teammates. The game continued. The Eye, whatever it was, wherever it came from, remained. No one dared to look at it directly again.

Like clockwork, Carter approached every at bat the same way, a checklist rooted in their head. Tiana had gone over it with the team briefly after Erika’s incineration. She pulled the team into a huddle and Carter could feel that her hand was shaking as she grabbed the collar of their shirt from

behind, pulling them closer to her, her arm around their shoulder as the whole team leaned in close. Carter hadn't quite gotten a chance to speak to the other players at this point, and they could see the fear in their eyes, especially those of the two younger players, Bennett Gradient and Delgado Lamination, not yet old enough to be out of college, but with the thousand-yard stares of soldiers. Tiana cleared her throat.

"Alright. So. First things first, raise your hand if you want to go home."

Every hand on the team went up without hesitation, in absolute unison, even Gambit Greatness, who recently grew two extra arms she was still trying to gain control over.

"Right," Tiana continued after a quick glance, "That's what I thought. So, in order to make sure we all get home in one piece, we are going to be implementing a few rules. Keep them in mind when you're at bat. Rule number one: Try to hit the ball."

As Tiana started listing, she turned to Carter after rule one and Carter could feel the daggers in their back, a warning with the message loud and clear. *You need to fucking hit the ball or I will throw you so hard that being burned by a giant eyeball in the sky will be the least of your worries.* She spent an extra second with her eyes on Carter before starting to list again. "Two: Try not to get killed. Three: Try not to get anyone else killed. Think we can handle that?"

Tiana's pep talk lacked the actual pep that Erika's had, but it certainly got the point across. It was easy enough, and Carter had done well with rules two and three so far, though one proved to be a bit more difficult. Swing and a whiff after swing and a whiff, Carter found frustration made a home in their muscles.

Being stuck in a perpetual purgatory for as long as they had since that day, Carter would have thought they'd be a little better at this game by now.

This time though, after thousands of innings, Carter was determined to knock it out of the park. Delgado and Bennett were on first and second respectively, if they could just bring them in. Carter stared down the six-armed pitcher, biting down hard on their tongue to concentrate. A nugget of wisdom Erika gave them crawled into their memory.

“The pitcher isn’t your enemy, the ball is.” She’d told them when they’d first joined, back when their nerves were new and their name didn’t make sports fans groan. “If you focus all your energy on the person throwing, you’ll give all the force to them and not the ball. And what are you looking to hit?”

“Well, the pitcher if they’re being an asshole.” Carter remembers joking, bat casually resting on their shoulder.

“That’s right. The ball.” Erika ignored them, winding up a stellar pitch. “Think fast!”

The ball flew out of Erika’s hand as the memory faded and suddenly a gust of air flew past Carter without making them flinch. “Strike one!”

Crap.

Alright. This was fine. Carter shook their head, reshuffled their feet, tightened their grip on the bat and shook out their shoulders. They were just a little tense is all. Next swing, focus on the next swing. Their feet square, eyes transfixed on the pitcher, trying to predict which arm she’d use. She wound up, letting the ball fly and Carter followed it in. They swung, nothing but the air to combat them, a complete miss. The umpire nearby, a large mass of shadow with claws the length of stop signs dragging the ground, shouted in a voice that boomed around the stadium. “Strike two!”

Carter could feel the heat rising to their face, their pink skin moving from rose to magenta. Their tail swished back and forth in annoyance, nostrils flaring. One more shot. . . .

Carter knew the pitcher wasn’t the enemy, her face said that enough. She was exhausted, the arms not in use hanging limply at her side. She exhaled through her nose and Carter could tell she was preparing. Fingers curled around the ball, she picked up her leg and let the ball sail. Carter waited, watched the ball as it zipped forward. This was the one. They swung and . . .

“Strike three! You’re out!”

A cold and horrible chill surged up Carter’s spine and instinctively they took a few steps back, brandishing the bat in front of them in case of attack. Both teams held their breath, waiting a moment . . . two moments. . . . Before a collective exhale. Carter was out, but not *out*, which had been

about their luck so far. The “Terminal Out” as the players had begun to call it only happened twice so far, but it was enough to put everyone on edge whenever the possibility was there. Carter scurried back from the plate after the tension deflated, head down, tail dragging against the dirt ground creating a trail. Heading into the dugout, Tiana caught Carter by the shoulder on her way out to the plate. “Careful.” Carter felt her sharpened nails dig into them, a warning. “We don’t need you getting yourself killed.”

“I’m not trying to,” Carter parried.

Tiana looked them up and down before giving their shoulder one last squeeze and stepping out onto the field herself. Bat across both shoulders like a yoke, she approached the plate with purpose. Carter settled just at the opening of the dug out to watch her. They examined the turn of her feet, how her stance seemed textbook perfect in every way, from the wrist placement to the torso twist as she gave a hefty practice swing that could have taken a chunk out of an oak. One more out left in the inning, Delgado and Bennett still on the bags. This score could win it for the Crowns if they were careful, and after that, maybe they all could go back home.

Carter could barely remember New York, with its bright tourist attractions and countless taxis and their borough, the place they’d lived their whole life, nearly erased from their mind. As their memory slowly faded out, Carter wondered if winning the game really would be that easy if they got to that point, if there would be some kind of caveat. After all this time, they couldn’t imagine there not being some catch to set them free.

Tiana’s bat scraped a bit of dirt off the mound before she perched it just above her shoulder, poised to swing. There was something about her gaze though, Carter couldn’t be sure from where they were standing, but her eyes darted back and forth in a way that seemed way jumpier than Carter had ever seen before. Carter watched as the pitcher wound up and let the ball loose. Tiana swung, but a moment too early as the ball rushed past her into the catcher’s mitt. “Strike one!”

Tiana straightened her hat and Carter could see the newly budded maple brown feathers on her neck fluff up slightly, but otherwise she remained

unphased. Buckling down, cleats dug in, Tiana swung at the next pitch, missing the second ball by a fraction of a moment. “Strike two!”

Something was distracting her, Carter could tell, but couldn’t put their finger on what. Carter watched, glued to the moment. Sure, if Tiana didn’t make the hit, they’d go into another inning, nothing too different than usual, but a gut instinct told Carter otherwise. They weren’t quite sure what drew them to this particular at bat, whether it was the grayish haze beginning to filter around Tiana’s feet, or the way The Eye seemed to be staring down Tiana like she was the last person left out here, but Carter kept one hand instinctively on their bat just in case.

It wasn’t often that Tiana Dexterity struck out. Hit a fly ball, sure, that happened all the time, and they were grabbed just about as many times as they were missed, but with one swing, Tiana’s arms came front and wrapped back around her shoulder, another swing and a miss. “Strike three!”

As suddenly as it had appeared, tendrils of grey haze spiraled up Tiana’s legs, tethering her to the ground. Her eyes widened and her hands clasped around her knees, attempting to pull them free. No luck. The gloam of the sky struck a bright royal blue as the Eye, previously fixated on Tiana, bulged and fought against the pocket of the sky it was nestled into. *The Terminal Out*. Wind whipped as Tiana struggled, and Carter could barely hear their own voice over it as a panicked cry escaped them involuntarily. Their voice ripped through the thunder like a little kid’s, screaming, “Tiana!”

Carter’s feet moved before their brain, taking to the field, a soldier surging into battle. In the chaos, most of the fielders took off running back to the dugout for cover. The few that were brave enough to start towards Tiana to try and help were forced to stumble back as lightning struck the Earth, sending the dirt of the field flying up to blind them. The Eye pulsed, the iris growing much larger as blue swallowed back. Carter could see Tiana looking up and freezing, the tips of her fingers beginning to smoke. Dread washed over them as they rushed forward. In the lowlight, Tiana looked a mirror of her partner, gazing up at the all-seeing moon, light washing over her almost peaceful, but Carter knew quite well what

would happen next. Pulse jumping, they made a B-line for their friend, only to be cut off by the barrier from the lightning before. Carter covered their face with their sleeve as a gust of wind and sand spattered them in a wall of kicked up particles. Gritting their teeth, they stopped in their tracks, tail swishing back and forth. They could hear Addy yelling out from the dugout “Carter! Stop!”, her pigtailed blown back into her face. Carter ignored her.

Helplessness set in as the first flame sprang to life on the side of Tiana’s face, licking away at her cheekbone. Tiana didn’t flinch as the flickering started and the heat settled in. Her hand slowly raised to her cheek before pulling it away quickly, the fire burning far too hot for her to touch. Tiana opened her mouth for a moment before closing it once again, looking back at The Eye. It observed, and if it had a mouth, Carter was sure it would be twisted into a cruel smirk.

Time slowed down. Carter took a moment to breathe, stilling their shaking hands and speeding head. In that second, Carter felt something light and hard knock against their foot. The ball at their foot had rolled over from the mound, settling neatly in the crook of their cleat as if it had done it on purpose. The gears in Carter’s mind clicked as bodies rushed past them, players fleeing, but Carter stayed rooted in place. They bent down to pick it up, rolling it over in their fingers, tracing the frayed laces of the worn ball over with their thumb. The idea started in the back of the skull and they pursed their lips, tightening their grip on the ball. The Eye wanted a game, Carter would show it a game. Carter knew what they needed to do. Gathering up all their courage, they looked to the sky.

They hadn’t directly looked into the Eye since it first manifested, and as they did they could feel their body starting to boil. Their blood tingled, and they could feel it bubbling just below the surface of their skin. They ducked around the sand wall, eyes on the prize. Feet moved faster, putting one in front of the other, no longer focused on the burning form of their friend. They could feel their own form growing hot, ignoring the smell of burning hair and flesh, ignoring the fact that they knew their jersey was beginning to smoke. If they were going to go out, they were going to go out

blazing, just like everyone else here. Adrenaline pumped as Carter stared down the enemy, this time not the ball, but The Eye just past it.

One ball in hand, two at their feet at the pitcher's mound, they had three shots to get this. Carter laughed at that before taking their first shot at the eye. They threw the ball up into the air in front of themselves to hit, but their bat collided with the hide laced ball at an angle and knocked a grounder into center field.

What are you looking to hit?

The thought overtook Carter suddenly as they fought to inhale. They were just nervous, that's all. They could do this. They *had* to do this. They planted their feet, the way Tiana had before, and scraped the mound with the tip of their bat before taking aim. This time the ball missed, cresting just under where they needed to, barely missing the bottom lid. Carter exhaled, bitter.

Well, the pitcher if they're being an asshole.

Right.

One more shot.

Make this count.

Determined, Carter's hands were steady as they tossed the ball up in their air. It turned 180 degrees on the way down, Carter watching it like a hawk as they wound up and swung. The weight of the ball hitting bat reverberated up Carter's arms, shaking them to their core. Teeth grit, Carter could feel the driving force out and up following the eyeline Carter had pointed out to themselves not moments before. They watched it soar, a satisfying *whoosh* emitting from it as it grew smaller in a straight line.

The Eye never saw it coming. It was a line drive straight into the pupil, with the blunt collision causing the wind to die down around them. A sound shook the Earth's foundation, a cross between a screech and a bellow and that terrible voice that announced the strikes. Carter shifted their weight to stay standing, steadying themselves against their bat. Out of the corner of their eye, they noticed the bright lettering of the scoreboard blinking, lit up like wildfire, reading *Home Run!*

The sky glitched as The Eye shut faster than it had opened, the little sliver

where it would do so still visible, twitching, pulsating. Carter watched The Eye move behind the lid as the sound grew louder, more irritated and pained. Thunder cracked, and Carter watched as the flames around the stadium began to die down. Glancing at Tiana, the flame ignited had been snuffed, and she'd fallen to the ground, hand over her eye. Still there. The Eye twitched for another moment before it stilled, and the large crevice in the sky began to seal. Clouds stitched the closing wound with soft white threads as they rolled past, the light, calming blue of the sky the needle.

Carter froze, staring out at the open, sunny sky. The light touched Carter's face and it felt warm. Not a blazing hot like moments prior, but warm, and real and inviting. Feeling a hand on their shoulder brought Carter out of their daze. Tiana managed to stand, hobble her way over to where they were. Her face was still half burnt, the skin around her eye red and raw for now, but there was a smile on her face despite it all. Tiana took Carter by the shoulders. "Carter . . . you did it."

The air left Carter as their head whipped to the scoreboard. Shattered in the aftermath, the void surrounding it and the seating section now disappeared, the numbers read in slight cracked lights, Las Vegas Roulettes-1,734, Away-1,735. Bottom of the 23,845th inning. A Queens Crowns win.

It seemed the effects of The Eye still lingered, as players began to emerge from hidden nooks, limbs and antlers and all. They looked ragged, but alive, and the feeling of relief was brewing. As Carter glanced from Tiana to their fellow players, a proud smile crossed their face before realizing they were actually crying. Noticing a worn ball in Tiana's opposite hand, they reached forward to grab it. They glanced at it a moment before turning back to the sky. The empty air smelled like freedom. Tossing the ball right back to Tiana, Carter spoke to the group, a sense of hope behind their eyes.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's play ball!"

Shaun Karle

Mary's Garden

Dear Diary,

My family moved into a big blue house a couple days ago. I think whoever built this house wanted the paint color to match the sky. The house looks like it could lift right up out of the ground and blend in with the clouds. My Mommy said this move would be good for the family. I don't really know what she meant by that. Maybe she meant there would be more room to play with my Dawn Dolls, which there is! I like playing in the kitchen when Mommy is making dinner. I also like playing in Daddy's office, but I can only go in there when he's not there. When his door is shut, that means Daddy is working. Only after dinner does he leave his office door open. My favorite place is the big wooden staircase. Daddy always tells me not to play on the staircase—he says I could crack my head open. But Mommy lets me play wherever I want. Today was the first day it hasn't rained all day. Mommy and I walked around in the backyard. I tried crunching all the red and orange leaves that had fallen from the trees, but most of them were too wet. Mommy says the trees are too tall and need to be trimmed. She wants to plant a garden next to the house. Says it would be good to have some homegrown vegetables, but I don't know how they could be any different than the vegetables she buys from the grocery store down the street.

P.S. I hate when Mommy brings home carrots. Those vegetables are so yucky!

January 29, 1979

I've decided to start a journal and today is the first day I'm writing in it. *Good Housekeeping* says that all well-rounded housewives keep a daily journal. I also wanted to commemorate this moment today because we *finally* found a house! It's a bit run down, it looks like it hadn't touched

since the bicentennial year, but it has character and that's what counts. The wooden staircase is just gorgeous. The first thing this house needs is a fresh coat of paint. Baby blue is just *so* not going to work, I'm thinking more of an earthy tone, maybe something like beige or a green. Do people in Massachusetts even have greenhouses? Or is there a color scheme I have to follow?

I haven't had much of a look around the property yet; I just can't stand the cold! I haven't been to the department store to pick up a proper winter coat yet (I never needed one in Virginia). But the air is so much sharper here, the wind sends shivers all the way down my spine. And the *snow!* Oh my *gosh*, the snow! I have never seen so much snow on the ground, I thought it was at least 3 feet high. The paper wrote that it was a measly 6 inches. Only a week ago we were in Virginia's 55-degree weather, certainly not warm but *certainly* not Massachusetts' 15 degrees.

Can spring *please* come any faster?

-S.

Dear Diary,

Spring is here and I can finally play outside again! My new favorite place to play Dawn Dolls is on the side of the house. Mommy started to work on her garden, said she's doing something call *til-ling*. I'm helping her by digging around in the dirt. And every time it rains, I go outside and find worms to make them a new home in the garden. One day Daddy came out to help us dig but Mommy told him to "Eff off". Except Mommy used the real word, and then she said I couldn't repeat what she had said until I was older. Mommy and Daddy have been fighting a lot more lately. I don't know what it's about. I try to stay away from them when they're mad at each other. It makes me upset whenever I see Mommy mad. Her eyes get really big, and her hair always looks crazy. Whenever they're fighting, I can always tell because I can hear Mommy pacing on the creaky wooden floors. She never stays in the same place when she's angry. And I always know when the fight is over because Daddy comes in my room and tells me he loves me and kisses me on the cheek. I wish he wouldn't do that;

his breath always smells like *whis-key* and it gives me a headache. At the old house, Daddy would always sit in his big leather chair and watch TV until the flag came on. I couldn't sleep one night and I asked him what he was watching. He told me not to bother him. He was drinking something brown and I asked him if he was drinking root beer. Mommy never lets me drink root beer late at night. He got mad at me for asking another question and threw his bottle near me. The carpet smelled really bad for weeks and Mommy said the smell was *whis-key*.

P.S. I got really good at not asking Daddy questions after that night.

April 17, 1979

Spring is finally here and *Oh!* does the house look as lovely as ever! Crocuses came up all around the house last month and now the daffodils are starting to get their buds as well. I'm not quite sure, it been months since I've read up on flowers, but I think there's some lilies coming up as well.

There looks like a lovely spot next to the house that would be just *perfect* for a garden. *Good Housekeeping* says that the healthiest vegetables are one's grown from your own garden. I wonder, did we keep our hedge clippers from the old house? The weeds are already growing wildly in that plot. There must be something in soil that makes everything grow so good! I'll ask one of the kids to remind me to check out the seed selection at A&P the next time I'm there. Maybe they'll finally start to eat their vegetables if they were grown by their own mom!

-S.

Dear Diary,

Today Mommy put a sign up in front of her garden that says Mary's Garden. I helped her paint it! But her garden doesn't look like much of a garden. Nothing seems to be growing and I know Mommy planted a bunch of seeds because I helped her. It's been two months and hardly anything has sprouted besides a bunch of weeds. Daddy isn't too happy about the garden, or the "mud pit" as he calls it. Last night I heard him say, "We wasted \$300 to chop down a bunch of trees just so you could make a mud pit?" That's

when Mommy told him to eff off. I think it's funny the way she says that, but I don't like that she only says it when Daddy gets angry. Daddy is really scary when he's angry, the veins in his forehead get really big and puffy. And his face gets bright red like the devil. One time I said he looked like the devil and he said, "You have no idea." Daddy got really angry with me yesterday because I was playing on the stairs. He said I shouldn't play on the stairs because I could fall and crack my head open. That's what he always says to me. "Don't play on the staircase you'll crack your head open." "Don't run on the sidewalk you'll crack your head open." "Be careful when you're in the bathtub you'll crack your head open." Yeah right.

P.S. Mommy was making yucky deviled ham sandwiches a couple days ago. I said Daddy looks just like the red devil on the can. She laughed a little bit and then said not to tell him that.

July 18, 1979

No wonder the pilgrims came to Massachusetts! I would've come here sooner if I knew how well vegetables grow here. I decided to go with tomatoes, cucumbers, and radishes this year, the easy stuff. And my *gosh!* have they grown well. I've never seen tomatoes grow this big. The kids have never been too fond of radishes, they think they're too spicy, but they've even started eating the ones from the garden. There's just something about growing your own vegetables that makes them seem more *alive!*

I had to call the girls back in Virginia and tell them about my garden. I hope no one notices the long-distance call on the phone bill next month! I told Mary Ann, I said, "Mary Ann you just *have* to come visit my garden sometime soon. I've got enough tomatoes for a whole potluck!" I don't think she believed me. I told her if she really wants proof, I'll send a postcard with a picture of my harvest so far. She told me not to waste a stamp on her, but I think I just might.

My stomach's been giving me a little bit of trouble lately. Now I'm well past the age when I need to worry about something growing in there. I'm sure it's just my stomach adjusting to finally eating some home-grown vegetables! I always tell the kids I don't like eating at those "fast food"

restaurants, it's too fast for any *natural* food to be made. If I want a good cooked meal, I'll make it myself (or head across town to the Howard Johnson's *ha!*).

—S.

Dear Diary,

Mommy and Daddy are fighting right now. I know because I hear mommy walking around downstairs. And I think Daddy has been drinking his *wis-key* again because I can smell it from upstairs. I like to close my eyes and pretend I'm at sea when the floors creak from Mommy walking around. The creaky wooden floor reminds me of what I think a ship would sound like. But it never lasts long because their yelling is so much louder than the floor. I think I know what they're fighting about this time. When Mommy was gone grocery shopping, Daddy started digging a big hole in the garden. I thought he was looking for all those pesky seeds that never sprouted, so I went out to help him. I asked him what he was doing and he said remember the last time you asked questions. Then he told me to go in my room and don't come out until he told me to. That made me so angry! I was just trying to help him and he sent me to my room, how rude! Wait, I think Mommy and Daddy might be done fighting for now. I don't hear Mommy walking around anymore and I hear someone walking upstairs. Probably Daddy to kiss my cheek and tell me he loves me like he does after all of their fights.

P.S. I wish Mommy would be the one to kiss my cheek instead of Daddy.

August 3, 1979

Well, I'm finally mustering up the strength to write after about two weeks bed ridden. When I say I've never felt worse, I have *never* felt worse! I won't bore myself with the details (and I certainly don't want to remember them), but it was *harrowing*.

I called the family doctor and he told me to stop by his office this week. I asked if he could make a house call just this one time, I was basically bedridden for *goodness* sake. So, he stopped over and asked me all the usual

stuff, checked my temperature, listened to my heart, and then told me it's probably just a stomach bug. I told him, I said, "I've got two kids in school, I've seen a stomach bug. I've *had* a stomach bug, and this is not a stomach bug, Doctor." He looked shocked but I kept going, "I've got a headache like I just cracked my head open and I've got a fever as hot as the *devil* himself. This is no stomach bug; this feels like someone trying to escape my body!"

The doctor asked me if I've been eating anything different lately, I told him, "Well I've been having fresh vegetables from my garden every night with dinner." He said that shouldn't be the cause of any illness, "Unless there's something in the soil." He chuckled at his own joke.

He started packing up his bag and I asked him what I should do to feel better. All he said was to take an aspirin for the headache. I told him I already had, so he told me to take two. Men . . .

-S.

Dear Diary,

Mommy left me last week. When Daddy came up stairs to kiss my cheek after their fight, he told me Mommy left the family and is never coming back. I told him he's lying and that Mommy would never leave without saying goodbye to me. She would never leave me with Daddy. I haven't had any sleep since she left. Every time I close my eyes to sleep all I see are pictures of her in my head. The first night I went to Mommy and Daddy's room to try and sleep in their bed. Daddy told me to grow up and I told him I would if I could. He didn't like my backtalk and he washed my mouth out with soap. I think Mommy probably walked to town and took the bus somewhere because her car is still here. Mommy's car is my new favorite place to play Dawn Dolls because it still smells like her. I miss the smell of her hairspray coming out of the bathroom. There's also so much room in the back of the station wagon, I think I could fit my whole doll house out there! Part of the hole Daddy dug in the garden is gone too. Today must have been a good day for Daddy because he was answering any questions I asked. First, I asked him what he dug the hole for and he said he had to

fur-til-eyes the dirt. I didn't know that word he used, furtileyes, but he said it makes plants grow better. I asked him if Mommy left because he dug up a hole in her garden and he said, "Something like that." Then, I asked why he only filled up part of the hole and he told me, "I still have something else to bury." Wait, I think I hear him coming upstairs. I wonder why he would be coming upstairs now? He usually stays in his office until it's time for dinner or he just had a fight with Mommy. I know it's not time for dinner and I know he didn't just have a fight with Mommy. Maybe he's gonna yell at me for playing on the stairs again. He told one day I was gonna crack my head open and I told him that was never gonna happen.

Jacquelyn Lipke

Tattooing of the Huntress

The woman wore the pelt of a leopard across her chest and black kohl around her eyes that seemed to make the whites glow like two backlit gemstones. Her image was barely visible in the dim light of the glass-lidded oil lamps lining the way to the altar, where she sat upon a silk cushion with her legs tucked beneath herself. As I approached the temple room, the hairs on my arms and legs stood on end. The energy that surrounded her was so saturated with power that the air itself seemed to buzz, charging in wait of something unknown. It was almost acidic on my tongue.

I sank carefully to my knees before I fully entered the inner room, smoothing out my linen shift as I leaned forward, resting my brow on my outstretched hands. It would've been rude to meet the eyes of the woman without her permission. My black hair spilled out onto the sand, covering my shoulders like a thick shawl.

"State your purpose, child," the woman called out. She shifted and the thick golden bangles decorating her wrists made soft music.

I swallowed. A bead of sweat gathered at my temple and dripped onto the floor.

"I am to be huntress."

"I see," the woman replied. Her voice was loud and powerful. It rang throughout the sandstone room like the echo of a great drum.

"I was wondering when you would come. You may raise your head."

I obeyed, lifting my eyes to watch her figure as she stood from her cushions. She rose to her feet with an effortless grace, every movement purposeful. A trail of fine, decorated linen followed behind her, taking the shape of the stairs as she descended them one at a time. Lines of faience beads in brilliant shades of sapphire, turquoise, emerald, and ruby dripped from her gown as she crossed the distance from her seat to where I waited,

still bowing in the doorway. I had never seen such finery in my life. Even the dress of ceremonies and weddings in the village was nothing compared to the woman's regalia.

I held my breath as she came to a halt in front of me. The beads and jewels that hung from her gown rattled against each other. The rich scent of perfumed oils radiated from her warm skin, suspended in midair by the thick, unrelenting heat. Suddenly, she dropped to her knees. She seized my chin with her thumb and forefinger, jerking it upward. Her grip was strong and against my will I was forced to meet her eyes.

Up close, they were the rich, warm color of the fertile riverbank soil, yet they were sharp and calculating—cold. I didn't dare look away as the woman kept a steady grip on my chin. She had challenged me by forcing my eye contact.

"You have a warrior's spirit. I can see it in your eyes that fear does not rule you." She blinked, taking in the rest of my features—my copper skin, the untamed black eyebrows I inherited from my father, the arch of my aquiline nose. "You are much like your mother was when she came to me, you know. Too young and inexperienced. But who am I to question the ways of the village elders?" Her question was aimed away from me, at the sky.

A jolt of adrenaline rushed through my body, burning my arms and legs. "You knew my mother?"

A telltale trace of what could've been a smile passed over the woman's painted lips. "Of course. I know of everyone in the village. They all have come to my temple at some point, or they will in the future."

She released me from her grip.

"Your mother was beautiful—almost as beautiful as she was strong. I was very sorry to hear of her passing. But tragedy comes naturally to the huntress, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I answered quietly. When I closed my eyes, the picture my father cradling the body of my cold mother in his arms was still fresh in my mind. The tang of her dried blood lingered in my nose. "It does."

“It was not always that way for our people. The huntress was once a position held by princesses and priestesses such as myself. Hunting was for sport and amusement—not for necessity and war.”

I could hardly imagine the village huntress slaying enemies with the kind of finery the woman wore, let alone being able to yield a weapon in it. I bit back a smile as I imagined myself pulling back the string of my bow in a gown woven of gold and decorated with jewels. The idea was too ridiculous to possibly be real, but the woman had no reason to lie to me about such a thing. There would be nothing for her to gain.

“Times and circumstances have a way of changing, sometimes for the worse, and sometimes for the better. When our enemies began invading through the desert . . . the huntress was forced to change her targets from animals to soldiers.”

The woman turned around and began walking the stone path back to her altar. The glimpse I caught of her worn face was grey with sadness. Her hair was in one long silver plait that reached past the hem of her skirts, tied with a single leather cord. It bounced gently against her back as she moved with the determined elegance of a heron, carefully taking each step back up the altar before lifting a hand heavy with gold rings in my direction. She beckoned me.

“Come.”

I stood, brushing off my modest dress and following a safe distance behind the woman. The chamber was longer than it appeared and my eyes were drawn to the walls, where reliefs of solid bronze that stretched from floor to ceiling depicted fantastical scenes.

A woman in battle armor stood proudly with the heel of her sandaled foot driven into the head of an enemy soldier’s corpse. A young couple held hands above a lit hearth, smiling with a harvest bounty beneath them. A husband mourned the loss of his wife at a fresh grave, throwing his hands to the sky in anguish. Each detail caught the low flame of the oil lamps, making the images hauntingly lifelike and sickeningly familiar.

I felt a chill crawl up my spine to the nape of my neck like the icy cold, prickly legs of a tarantula.

“Lie down here.”

The woman prepared for the ceremony with her back turned to me. In front of her was a narrow wooden table piled high with carved bowls and anointing oils. As I lifted my body onto the altar, I kept my eyes trained on the woman’s hands. They almost danced around the table, silently moving from each vase and carafe. There was no hesitation in her movements—she was well versed in her art. The sweet smell rising from the concoction was making my head spin.

She carefully lifted a soaked hemp cloth from one of the cedar bowls. It was stained red.

“Spices, to cleanse the skin.”

I relaxed my shoulders as the woman gestured for me to fully recline. I let my head drop backward until it met the cool stone of the altar. She held my cheek with her warm hand as the cloth met my skin. The spices were thick and greasy with animal fat and smelled of cinnamon. It made my eyes burn with hot tears. They spilled over from the corners of my eyes, soaking the thick hair at my temples.

“As huntress, you are very special. Your first trip to the temple is your first test of strength. The other villagers don’t receive the same ceremony, you know. Each one is different.”

The woman grabbed a pair of pale animal bones from the table. They were impossibly delicate—maybe even those from a bird’s wings. The honed tip of one was bent at a sharp angle and had been freshly dipped in a pot of radiant blue dye. A fattened drop of color that had gathered at the very end of the bone threatened to spill onto the stone floor. My hands began to tremble but I curled them into fists until the pain of my fingernails cutting into my palms steadied them.

If my mother had gone through this when she became huntress after my grandmother passed away . . . then their same bravery must have run in my blood.

“You will match your mother,” the woman said quietly. “A huntress’s tattoos are my favorite.”

She held the ink-dipped needle above my brow with one hand, suspend-

ing the other bone above it. Without blinking, she began to firmly tap one bone against the other, forcing the sharpened end of one bone to pierce my skin, leaving blue pigment deep beneath the surface.

My forehead began to ache and sting. I steeled my jaw and clenched my teeth, trying to keep my face relaxed as the woman tattooed the markings of the huntress into my skin. I could feel hot liquid dripping down my face and into my hair—but was it ink, or blood?

Eventually, once my mind had left the temple and was thinking of other things to distract myself from the pain, she suddenly stopped. She gently set down the bones on the table and clapped her hands.

“Finished. Would you like to have a look?”

I wearily pulled myself up from the altar. The sun had set outside, turning the sky a dusky purple, and the flames of the candles in the inner chamber flickered against the walls. The woman was tired. The lines around her eyes were harsher now, and strands of her silver hair had come loose from her braid, framing her face like a soft halo. She placed a mirror into my palm, using her other hand to wrap my fingers around the handle.

I lifted it with my tired arm until I could see my reflection in the polished surface.

The air was sucked from my lungs.

All around my once plain face were extraordinary works of art, each a beautiful scene of revelry and celebration. The colors were so bright and intense they looked as though they were painted on my skin instead of buried within it. A ceremonial spear rested on my cheekbone, a gilded bow and arrow on my brow—I sighed, remembering the same pictures that had once decorated my mother’s battle-scarred face.

The fate that I had inherited from my mother was less daunting than it had felt before I had come to the temple—it was now my own. I belonged to it the way that it belonged to me.

“Thank you,” I said to the woman. My heart was full.

She offered me a genuine smile this time, bowing her head.

“You are welcome, Huntress.”

Maeve Penman

Remembrance for Barren

The obnoxious sound of my husband searching for his keys pulled me from the final dregs of sleep. Our Egyptian cotton sheet tangled around my exposed legs. The sound of him rifling through the contents on the top of our dresser stopped. His work shoes clacked on the hardwood floor of our perfect suburban home. We hadn't lived in Southlake long, but this offshoot of Dallas was becoming my dream hamlet with its rolling golf courses and charming town square surrounded by middle-class luxury shopping stores. David's shoes stopped echoing next to my side of our California-King. Through squinted eyes, I made out his silhouette.

"Good morning beautiful," He whispered, "I'll see you for coffee at eleven."

He bent down and placed a kiss on my forehead before turning to clack out of the room. The smell of toothpaste and his musky cologne lingered next to my nose. We hadn't been married very long. Our two-year anniversary lurked a few weeks away and I wanted nothing more than to surprise David with a baby. I stayed in bed with my legs crossed, half-sitting up for another fifteen minutes as I began my daily devotional. Today I read from Corinthians chapter two, verse four. I felt the spirit entering me as I clicked my pen to journal my thoughts, feeling prompted by the greatness and glory of God. May all praise and glory go to Him.

When my eight-fifteen alarm began playing Chris Tomlin's greatest hits next to my bed, I knew it was time to throw the covers back and get on with my morning. This was my eighteenth month of the same robotic morning routine.

Every morning I woke up, kissed David goodbye, took my temperature, peed on a stick, brushed my teeth, prayed, checked the stick, felt numb, pee on smaller sticks, prayed more, and continued on with the day a little less

hopeful than I was when I woke up. It was a cycle that started over at the first of every month when my monetary contribution to Kotex and Midol increased and my uterine lining left my body.

This morning was the exact same. My body had not ovulated in six weeks according to the smaller white strips I dipped into a mug with “world’s best mom” printed on the side, filled with my morning urine. I should be pregnant. David and I have been trying twice a day for a baby. Unless he’s too tired or I have a headache or if there’s a Cowboys game on.

I brushed my thick mousey brown hair rhythmically while a hoard of butterflies took charge from my stomach to chest over and over again. I wanted to give David everything. When we said our wedding vows, I meant every word.

When David and I got married it was a surprisingly cold November day in Atlanta. I hadn’t slept well the night before and spent most of the morning with my momma and bridesmaids massaging serums into my puffy purple under-eyes. The ladies from my momma’s salon that we hired to do my hair and makeup were kind, rotund women with thick eyelashes and bingo wings. They curled my hair into the perfect old Hollywood wave and lacquered my lips with a tasteful berry color called “Sweet Marsala.” The name made me feel like a seductress ready to go steer a man away from his life’s calling. It also made me feel glamorous. Eleanor, my maid of honor, was in the early stages of her first pregnancy at the time and could barely stomach the way my hairspray smelled. She stuck by my side all morning, even as she gagged and made routine trips to the bathroom. My wedding dress was a charming white ballgown with lace pulled from my momma and grandmother’s wedding dresses. The sleeves clung to my arms as the neckline draped over my collarbones. I had never felt more beautiful. A close second was my first date with David, where he took me bowling and looked at me with the big red rental shoes on as if I was the Virgin Mother reincarnated. David always thought I was beautiful no matter where I was or what I was wearing.

During our ceremony, the Monsignor, a spritely pale man with thin, wire rimmed glasses recited to us, “Are you prepared to accept children

lovingly from God and to bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?”

David squeezed my hand tenderly and smiled to me, “I am.”

I nodded, “I am.” My voice echoed through the massive stone church.

My three-minute phone timer blasted out from the speakers of my phone, tearing me away from the happiest day of my life that had been replaying in my mind’s eye. I had made a vow that day to partake in my role as a good Catholic woman and bear my husband’s children. I just wanted to follow through with my vow.

Cautiously, I looked down to the half-hidden blue and white pregnancy test. In digital black letters the test read, “Not Pregnant.” My stomach dropped. I was used to the disappointment in black letters that I received almost every morning. I no longer broke down in ugly sobs as my body rejected attempt after attempt at carrying a child. Taking a deep breath, I threw the tests into the trash can and climbed into the shower.

Once I felt thoroughly awake and clean, I headed downstairs to my dream kitchen. Not only had I married the dream man, who happily encouraged me to quit my job so my body would be “less stressed to increase my chances of getting pregnant,” I had achieved almost the dream life. The only thing missing was nine months of a swollen tummy followed by a lifetime of bliss. I grabbed a cast-iron skillet from one of the white cabinets and plopped it onto the sparkling stovetop.

“Hey Alexa,” I call out to the little robot nestled in the corner, “Play my Good Morning God playlist from Spotify.” The blue ring around the top of the smart device blinked twice before the opening synth of Hillsong United’s song “Oceans” began to fill our home.

I cracked the eggs David had left out on the counter for me into the pan with some butter and seasoning. While my eggs cooked, I poured six drops of lemon essential oil into a glass-domed diffuser on the edge of my breakfast bar. The diffuser began to puff a happy smoke of oil and water. I flipped my eggs over and dropped two pieces of bread into the toaster adjacent to the silver stovetop. I moved my hips to the slow music and raised my hands in praise. I pressed myself against the white-marble countertop and

savored the sting of the rock pushing into my empty abdomen. Turning my eyes to my phone, I opened Facebook.

The first post was my college roommate announcing her second pregnancy while holding her gorgeous ten-month-old. Two babies. She's having two children so close together and I couldn't have one after two years of trying. I tried to scroll past it, but I couldn't help myself. I had to indulge in reading her paragraph long caption,

"Being a parent is weird, but each day is filled with joy and baby giggles that I could've missed out on. I am so happy and so grateful God chose to give us baby number two! I dream of the day I get to meet him or her and teach them all about Jesus and how much he loves them. God knew exactly what he was doing when he gave me my little Eden and now baby number two. So thankful to have the privilege of being a mama bear and excited to soak up more gummy smiles next May!"

As each digital word passed by my eyes, I felt my heartbeat picking up speed and my chest tightened in anger. The sizzling of my eggs grew quieter as my pulse raced in my ears. Her post slapped me in the face.

The perfect picture of a perfect ultrasound from her perfect body to have the perfect baby.

The only ultrasound I had ever received was to make sure that my uterus looked healthy. According to two specialists and three doctors, I have a more than healthy looking uterus and ovaries. It looked fertile enough to have children every nine months on the dot. I took a deep breath, calmed myself down, and checked the clock.

My cream-colored toaster popped and I turned away from the counter, abandoning my phone. I grabbed a thick ceramic plate from an overhead cabinet and placed it on the counter with a dull thud. It was part of my matching set of Pottery Barn dinnerware that I had requested on my wedding registry as if it would be the thing that makes or breaks my marriage. I pulled the toast from the toaster. Spinning on my heel, I headed back towards the sizzling pan of eggs. I removed them from the stovetop, turned off the heat, and served them next to the toast.

With my phone and plate in opposite hands, I moved to the breakfast

bar. Sitting down with the steaming eggs and unbuttered toast in front of me, I clicked into Instagram on my phone, hoping to see inspirational posts from my favorite Christian bloggers.

The first post is Eleanor with her little boy. My thumb double-tapped the image before scrolling past it to reveal a friend from high school announcing her pregnancy. I kept scrolling and blindly dug into my breakfast. Family portraits, children with lost teeth and new bicycles, babies crawling in videos to their mothers all passed in front of my eyes.

“Stop it. Stop scrolling you idiot,” my conscience seemed to shout at me.

Images of my niece and nephew in their Halloween costumes, a nursery in shades of pink, the chunky cheeks of an infant. Everyone had children that were chubby, carbon-copies of their parents. God give me the strength to carry on.

“Stop.” My voice cracked as it broke through the barrier of intruding thoughts in my head. I dropped my phone on the counter and felt the weight of my fertility crashing down. The eggs in my stomach felt heavy and out of place. I wanted to scream. My throat felt tight and my face was feverish. My lower lip trembled before the tears began. They fell from my eyes in big hot droplets.

Why did God forsake me into this constant heartbreak? I have fallen on my knees at the altar and begged for a baby above all things. Haven't I been a good enough Catholic? I have done daily devotionals, had the biggest Catholic wedding the parish in Atlanta had seen since the 1980s, hosted a bible study weekly, knowing Corinthians like I was one of them, reciting a Psalm to David before falling asleep with a crucifix facing us, leading the rosary through the stillness of Adoration even when my knees went numb and were bruised for weeks. I cooked for the youth group on Wednesday nights. I have spent every Sunday with our local Parish Council making sure that the church has everything it needs. Even after all of this—all of my devotion—He is still forsaking me. What did I do to deserve this? Why has God abandoned me in my one moment of need? Would I even be a good mother?

I attempted to steady my breathing and pushed the plate of eggs away

from me. Salty tears marred my face and made my vision blurry as my hands groped at my lower stomach where I should be swollen with a child by now. For eighteen months David and I have tried for a baby. For twelve months we have heard people asking us when we will start a family and to “stop trying so hard and a baby will come”. The faces and voices of our family who are eager for a new grandbaby haunted my head. I wept into my eggs. Even stupid chickens have eggs that could turn into chicks.

My discarded phone dings with a notification. I found sanctuary from my thoughts when I read the reminder. I had an appointment with Dr. Jill at 9:30 this morning. Dr. Jill was the best women’s health and fertility specialist in the whole state of Texas. She surely would be able to fix whatever part of me was broken. She told me to hold out hope during my last appointment a few months ago. I wiped the remaining wet streaks of tears from my face and pushed the plate of half-eaten eggs and untouched toast away. I hopped down from the stool I was on and headed to the mudroom. I shouted for Alexa to stop playing music.

In the mudroom, which was decorated in a mid-century modern design that reminded me of churches built in the ‘70s, I slipped on a pair of sneakers and tied them. I grabbed my car keys and purse from a wooden peg before I left the house.

The drive to Dr. Jill’s office was short and straightforward. I drove past a small collection of cows and horses that dotted the flat wheat-colored ground. My tears were dry. My stomach tightened in nervous excitement. Maybe today was the day that she finally gave me good news. I pulled off the road and parked in the crowded parking lot outside of her office. I entered the office with a smile on my face. The woman at the front desk, Janice, checked me in. My favorite nurse, Laura, called me into the back and took my vitals. She then led me to a room where I waited.

My waiting was interrupted when Dr. Jill gave the door a sharp single rap. She entered the white and gray patient room.

“How are you today, Mrs. Beekman?” Her voice was kind. She sat on a rolling stool and examined a thick folder of papers. Her blonde bob haircut swished side to side as she read. I shifted on the paper bed lining causing

it to crinkle underneath my weight. I crossed and uncrossed my ankles, wringing my fingers against one another.

“So,” Dr. Jill begins, pressing her glasses farther up her nose, “Mrs. Beekman we have run every possible lab test on you that we can. There is nothing that shows up in your blood work. There were no abnormal results from your uterine biopsy. There is nothing wrong with the general functionality of your ovaries. Your hormone levels are stellar for a young woman.” She looked up from the crisp white paper in her hand. I smiled at her. My heart began to race. I was going to be a mother someday. Her lips formed a straight line across her face. Why isn’t she smiling with me?

“This is good news, right?” I asked her. “David and I should be able to have a baby then. When should we be plannin—” I began an excited rant.

Dr. Jill held a solemn hand up and stopped me. “Mrs. Beekman, it looks like the issue is the *quality* of your eggs. You could try getting pregnant every day, using IVF, and sperm donors and I don’t think you ever will carry your own genetic child. Your eggs just are not healthy.”

My throat constricted as the LED lights above me suddenly felt too bright. My chest felt like a semi-truck tire was resting on top of it.

“What are you saying?” I choked out as my eyes welled up. I could feel my face growing hot.

Dr. Jill removed her glasses and took a deep breath, “Mrs. Beekman, you are unfortunately infertile.”

I did not breathe for a moment. All I could feel was abysmal agony. Dr. Jill’s words were a knife thrust into the center of my uterus. If she had ripped my body apart with her bare hands, I would have been in less pain. The word “infertile” was so final. It rang in my ears.

“You have what is known as Primary Ovarian Insufficiency,” Dr. Jill continued. “Your body no longer has healthy eggs. It is rare for a woman of your age and health to develop P.O.I. and there are currently no treatments offered in my office for women diagnosed. There are alternatives if you and Mr. Beekman are open to speaking with our fertility office in Colleyville.” Dr. Jill smiled at me in a sad way.

A ringing filled my ears as my vision speckled into and out of dark-

ness. Dr. Jill had warned me to prepare for the worst six months ago. She told me I might be infertile—*might* was the word I was holding out hope for. I couldn't hear anything as I nodded blindly through the rest of the appointment. There was no way to heal my eggs. She mentioned the idea of receiving an egg donor for IVF treatments, but God does not allow for the tampering of human life. I could never abandon my God in exchange for a scientific miracle baby.

Dr. Jill left the room with a flat, tight-lipped smile. The bed lining no longer crinkled under me. The patient room was silent. My eye bore into a poster on the wall advertising a special laser for fixing vaginal canals in postmenopausal women. A short knock echoed against the door and Laura entered the room. She guided me quietly to the front desk where I checked out with Janice. The nurses and office staff smiled at me. I could sense the pity in the air.

I left the office and climbed into my awaiting car. The interior was sticky from the late-autumn heat. I turned the key in the ignition as I swallowed the tension expanding inside my esophagus. The digital clock display reminded me that I needed to drive towards Coppell where David's office was. He was expecting me to arrive for our coffee date no later than eleven. What was I going to say to him?

I drove along the highway ignoring the way my praise and worship music made my head ache. I pulled off of 121 and suffered through being bumper to bumper at the stop-lights blocks away from the highway. I shuffled through the songs playing on my speakers with a mindless tap. The sound of a bass guitar being strummed filled my car. The expanding tension in my throat returned. My eyes stung as I blinked away tears, inching closer towards the light, resigned to wait another full light-cycle before I could turn into the coffee shop parking lot.

"Here I am, down on my knees again, surrendering all. . . ."

I screamed the lyrics into my steering wheel as the smooth Hillsong vocals reverberated against my ears. The light changed to green and I edged forward still shouting the lyrics out.

I crossed the intersection and turned into the coffee shop. I parked in

a spot far from the door and sat letting the worship music speak prayers that I knew my lips couldn't right now. I knew David was inside the coffee shop ordering our usual drinks. He always had a flat white which he would dust with cinnamon until the frothy top looked entirely brown. I always had a hot latte with a pump of caramel sauce. We would split some type of pastry while we dreamed up vacation plans.

I was infertile. There was no changing that. I think there is no changing that. I realized that Dr. Jill had walked me through the alternatives for having a child at the end of my appointment. I turned down the music and stared out the window with blurry eyes, grateful that I neglected to apply any mascara this morning.

This infertility will mean forgiving my broken body and asking my husband's forgiveness for the lifestyle I can't give him. I don't want to watch David walk away from our marriage and have a family with someone else. A family is the one thing I wanted more than anything else and I can't have it. It's finding a way to fill the space in my heart for a child that will never come. I feel abandoned. I never understood why when Jesus was crucified, he cried out, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?" until now. The words left my mouth in a quiet chant as I pushed tears back against my lashes, forcing a smile at the end of each rendition.

My phone buzzed with a message from David, *"I have our coffees, beautiful. I missed you. Let me know when you're here. xx"*

A sob tore through my chest causing my throat to feel like it's been ripped apart. I took a deep breath, trusting that God will guide me through all things like He always does. God is good. God gives us the burdens he knows that we can bear in life. Through prayer and devotion, I can fix this. I can fix myself somehow. I smiled at my reflection in the rearview mirror—a croaked splotchy smile.

Killing the ignition, I got out of the car and walked into the coffee shop, immediately spotting David and giving him the dazzling smile I know he loves. He stood up and wrapped me in his arms, filling my nose with the smell of coffee and his natural musk.

"How was Dr. Jill? Any news!?" He asked, pulling me down onto the

leather lounge next to him. David reached for his flat white, already covered in cinnamon like I expected. He smiled at me.

I swallowed and nodded, “Dr. Jill thinks if we try extra hard that we should get pregnant before Christmas. She thinks I’m just overwhelming myself and should take a step back from all the testing.”

David let out a small whoop of joy before planting a wet, warm kiss on my cheek, “We could have a little boy before the next football season. I’m going to start looking for Cowboys onesies right now.”

His excitement was contagious as a sense of dread creeped up the back of my neck. I have never lied to David before, but I don’t believe that God blesses young women with good hormones and a healthy uterus unless He is going to have it filled with babies soon. I will raise my babies in the law of Christ and his Church. The design that God created for the family is beautiful; a man and woman who are the picture of Christ and His love. I know God’s design and I planned to live toward mirroring the picture of Christ and the Church. No matter what happens, I have the Lord on my side. The Lord will give me a baby one day soon. I know it. I have to have the faith that it will happen. David will never leave me, if I give him a baby. I will give him a baby somehow even if it means begging for forgiveness from scientific intervention. David and I need a baby to be complete. God knows my baby before it is even in my womb. That is what the Bible says, and I trust God’s word above all else.

I took a sip of my latte and glanced at David as he scrolled through NFL onesies.

“Do you think the baby will have my eyes or yours?” I asked, surrendering my sanity and hollow uterus into God’s hands. I ignored the way the guilt stung.

I will give David a baby somehow.

Stella Platero

Muse

His body, drenched in moonlight, belongs on the cover of a magazine. Wren looks at him from the bed, her eyes bleary in the cigarette smoke floating up to the motel's popcorn ceiling. He turns his back to her, and she shifts underneath the scratchy bed covers. She considers asking for a drag if only to hijack his attention.

"Andrew," Wren says, and he looks over his shoulder to meet her gaze. "Can you pass me my notebook?"

He smiles at her, nods his head of brunette bouncy curls, and reaches over onto the bedside table to retrieve her journal. When he gives it to her, their hands brush, and she notices the ashy smell of smoke fresh on his fingers. A smell originating from a habit, one he has meticulously concealed from the public eye. Wren feels special, seeing him here, guard down and smoking a Camel cigarette. No one else ever has. Not even his wife.

She opens her notebook, feels the paper soft between her fingers. She writes best at night, the clock on her bedside table reading 1:38. Turning to her most recent work, she runs her eyes over the forsaken words she had earlier begun to write on the page.

"Your pen," she hears. Andrew is looking at her, a lopsided grin on his face as he holds out Wren's fountain pen. "You didn't ask for it, but you're probably gonna need it."

Wren smiles, and she wonders what she has done to get tangled up here, sharing a bed with an actor she used to fantasize about. An actor fifteen years her senior.

She takes it from him, whispering a gentle thank you.

"What're you writing?" he asks as he leans over to the bedside table and puts out his cigarette on the motel's ashtray. Then he curls up beside her, his head near her torso. He blinks his dark brown eyes up at her, smiling.

“Something,” she answers, bringing the notebook close to her chest.

“Can I see?” he asks.

Wren shakes her head. “You’ve read my work before.”

“Well, yeah,” he breathes. “But that’s the stuff everybody sees.”

The stuff everybody sees. She wonders if Andrew notices the irony in his words. And as he stares up at her, Wren cannot shake the thought that he *must* care. He is still here, asking about her writing and the success of her blog. Andrew takes secretive trips from his wife and away from the media to spend time with her.

Wren’s heart sinks at the thought of Andrew’s wife. He claims that they have been growing apart for years now.

Once a week, or sooner should Andrew text her, the two arrange to stay at a motel for a night. Living in Los Angeles caused unwanted attention, so they had to be careful. Word getting out would name Andrew a cheater and Wren a homewrecker. It worked like this: after picking Andrew up from a discreet location, Wren would pay for a room. The owner doesn’t ask questions. Then she brings herself back to her car, offers Andrew a lovestruck grin, and pulls around to their designated room.

Suddenly, Wren feels Andrew’s hand on hers.

“Are you okay?” he wants to know, his brows furrowed and his eyes gone soft.

“I can’t show you,” Wren says suddenly, taking her hand from him.

The grin slips from his face, and he allows her to get up from the bed.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” she says, rolling over to the other side of the bed. Goosebumps sprout upon her skin, the open window having let in the night’s chill. She reaches to the floor to retrieve her clothes, quickly placing her notebook and pen on her bedside table. If Andrew watches her enter the bathroom and close the door, Wren does not notice.

She dresses in a quiet shuffle, the fluorescent bathroom light illuminating her dour expression. A mirror stretches across the entirety of the bathroom’s wall, just above the sink. Running the tap, Wren attempts to clean the smudged makeup from underneath her eyes with the pads of her fingers and the bar of soap on the countertop. It smells like cotton, she notes, as she scrubs her face. She ignores the burn.

It is late in the evening, but time has nothing to do with Wren's exhaustion. Tired of hiding this relationship, she finds herself feeling pathetically alone. For her life's entirety, she has written. Diary entries and short stories had been Wren's favorite pastime as a child. Now a senior in college, she has found her true passion: creative nonfiction. Having to find an internship for school is the best thing to ever happen to Wren; she adores interning for *Stray Dog*. It's been her favorite literary magazine for years. If she hadn't gotten the intern position, she never would have met Andrew. Their paths crossed one night at an industry party Wren had begged her superior to let her attend.

Wren has always loved a good story, only now she craves a story born from the truth. She is doing her best to make a name for herself, with support on social media platforms from her appearances in *Stray Dog* and other popular literary magazines.

For so long, Wren has given her work her all, and now she has decided to keep this to herself. Andrew is worried about the word getting out. Wren understands that. But keeping something like this *only* to herself is so unfamiliar and terrifying. When it ends, because Wren knows in her heart it will, who will be there to comfort her during the aftermath if nobody knows?

Wren Summers will be alone then, even though she feels alone now.

She turns off the tap, an eerie silence creeping in. Her reflection is a wreck, blonde hair a mess of tangles and her face bare. She looks like a badly kept secret. With a heavy sigh, she finds herself thinking back to the night she had first met Andrew. A mere six months ago. She had seen him through the crowd, had heard his magnetic laugh as he joked with a shorter man Wren did not recognize. At first, Wren couldn't believe it was really him—but the likelihood of running into him there was high; she goes to school just outside of Los Angeles.

He had been drinking, she could smell it on him like an expensive cologne. *Whiskey*.

He had offered to get her a drink. She pretended not to know who he was.

Wren had been itching for a story, and when her boss had mentioned

a party, she thought it would be the perfect opportunity to find one. But then she and Andrew had left together, his arm around her. They couldn't go to Wren's apartment because of her roommate, and so he paid for a motel room.

She had thought he would be put off by her age: twenty-one. He hadn't been.

The two have been frequenting the same motel as it's cash only, and the owner minds his business. Wren never requests the same room, but the man usually gives it to her. She figures she is one of only a few customers.

The evening of the party had been the first. And so naive, Wren had thought the only. But after so many mornings waking up alongside Andrew smoking a cigarette, the news a low hum in the background, Wren realized she did not want this to be a story anymore. Andrew had been so funny, charming—more than she had ever imagined. On television he seemed sweet. But behind the scenes he was so much more. She has never met anyone so bizarre, with weird quirks like talking with his hands and poking his tongue out when he is deep in thought. He's charming too, and incredibly modest. If Wren hadn't known his name, she would have never thought him famous at all.

Andrew had fessed up to being married as the motel coffee brewed. Wren had told him she knew. She said that she knew his name, had watched his debut show, *Muse*, when it first aired seven years ago. She understood that she couldn't tell anyone about what had happened between them. She had left out the details of her teenage infatuation.

The show ended three years ago, so Andrew Davis is still fairly famous, but only popular enough that true fans of *Muse* would recognize him. Other than that show and a single blockbuster film, Andrew hadn't done much acting apart from a few independent short films.

Wren hadn't been planning on using his name then, anyway, later on when she was going to recount the night's events to her close friends.

He had asked if Wren was okay with keeping this a secret. Wren had lied.

It wasn't supposed to happen more than once, but Andrew had left his number on the bedside table while Wren was in the bathroom.

The teenager inside her couldn't believe that this was real. This is the same man who used to be on her bedroom walls. Wren had him in the flesh. Wren had been kidding herself when she thought she wouldn't get attached; she couldn't help herself and called him before even finishing the first draft.

Amidst the second and third meet-up, she finally admitted to herself that this was no longer a story.

And now Wren is here, sharing a motel room with Andrew. She tries to focus on brushing her teeth, but it's so hard knowing that he is right in the other room. She soon collects herself and rinses off her toothbrush, leaving it beside Andrew's toothbrush. That slight domesticity makes Wren's heart skip a beat, but she pushes that thought down and opens the bathroom door instead.

Andrew is up from the bed, his profile a silhouette on the wall in the bathroom's light. Wearing only his sweatpants, he holds Wren's notebook, flipping through the pages slowly as though still registering what has been written. Wren feels her stomach lurch, and quickly moves to him, reaching to grab her private scriblings.

"I said you couldn't read that," Wren says, attempting to tug the notebook from his grip. Andrew tightens his grip until he finishes reading the last page, then he lets go of the notebook and Wren falls. She stares up at him, her notebook heavy against her chest.

Rising to her feet, she says: "Why the fuck would you do that?"

She has never cursed at him before, but she is embarrassed. Andrew says nothing, keeping his gaze steady on the cream-colored rug. "Andrew?" Wren says, his name ugly in her mouth. Finally, he turns to her, their eyes meeting through the tension.

"I wanted to see what you were writing," he admits, raising a hand to cradle the left side of his face. "You're always writing when we're together."

She tries to understand, but the confession makes Wren want to sink to the floor. She feels dirty, exposed. Staring at Andrew, she can see his anger building. But he isn't a yeller, or a screamer, and he sighs in frustration and looks down at the carpet.

When he finally speaks his voice quivers.

“You know you can’t show anyone this, right?” he says.

Wren sits with his words. Feels them in the pit of her stomach as she crosses her arms over her chest. She knows that posting this aspect of her life would spike complications—that for once she has to keep something to herself.

“Do you know what that would do to me?” There it is. As soon as the words leave Andrew’s mouth, he seems to realize the embarrassing sincerity of them. His shoulders drop and he lets out a heavy sigh.

Yes, Wren wants to scream, but do you see what it’s doing to me?

“Wren,” Andrew says her name like a disappointment, the single syllable slipping off his tongue too easily. “I didn’t mean that.”

Wren does not look at him. “Yes, you did,” she tells him. It is not even that she blames him; she understands. Her heart *yearns* for him. It bites and breathes for him. It has ever since she was a teenager.

Andrew’s words find Wren in the darkness: “You’re right. I did.” She hopes he cannot see the scowl on her face. While she is angry, the comfort she so desperately craves is his embrace. Avoiding his heavy gaze as it attempts to grab hold of her, Wren says nothing.

“I know I can’t tell anyone,” Wren says softly. She hears Andrew from across the room, how he shuffles over to turn on the bedside lamp. The light glows a subtle yellow, highlighting Andrew’s unshaven face and tired eyes. Wren loves his stubble. She loves the vulnerability behind it, how it reveals his comfort around her. “What are we doing here, Andrew?”

Immediately his face falls. Wren meets his stare, fighting the urge to take back her question. But it is true, the look of affliction in Andrew’s eyes, and that makes this real.

His answer: “Why would you even ask me that?”

She looks at him, steady.

“Where does your wife think you go?” Wren asks, no malice to be detected. It is simply a question. “When we’re together where does she think you are?” Rendered speechless, Andrew shrugs his shoulders. “Please. I wanna know.”

“With a friend.” The look on Andrew’s face is not at all convincing.

“A friend,” Wren echoes, crossing her arms. “So, she knows?”

“She hasn’t said anything,” he says.

“And you don’t feel like you have to?” Wren asks; if their roles were switched, she doesn’t think she would be able to live with herself. Wren never wanted to be the other woman, but it is too late for that now and she knows it. “Answer me,” she pleads, staring at Andrew’s crestfallen face. She repeats herself. “What are we doing here, Andrew?”

“We’re . . .” he pauses, shifting his weight from his right foot to his left as he considers his response. Wren watches as he shuffles nervously, unable to place exactly what he wants to say. Unsure what else she can say, Wren decides she will state the obvious.

“I’m turning twenty-two next month,” she says, and she can tell by the way Andrew’s eyes widen that he knows where this is going. “You’re *thirty-six*.”

An unsettling silence falls upon the motel room. Andrew’s face falls as he clenches his fists, like he is finally processing the weight of their relationship and what it means to Wren.

“I had a crush on you when I was younger,” Wren admits, pursing her lips. Andrew watches her, still in time. “*Muse* had just come out . . . and it played every day at the same time, right when I got out of school.” She has never told Andrew this before. “Matthew was my favorite character. I only really watched for him . . . for you.” Thinking back to the role Andrew played when she was only a teenager was strange. Judging by the look on Andrew’s face, he agrees.

“How old were you when *Muse* first started?” Wren asks.

“Twenty-eight.”

Wren bites her lip. “I was fourteen.”

Wren has never taken age into much consideration. While her parents are six years apart, Wren doesn’t think they’d be thrilled if her partner was fourteen years older. It’s that thought that haunts her. Growing up, Wren had crushes on boys and girls, in grades above and maybe even a year below, and it never seemed to matter much. Even now, with Andrew, Wren feels it doesn’t really matter. But she wonders if it should.

“I don’t know what to say.” Andrew’s voice is level, calm. They have never discussed this all before—the reality of their situation. It is clear

now neither knows what exactly to say. Then, a quiet confession: “I wasn’t expecting to like you so much.”

Wren almost laughs. Andrew has stolen her words; even torn by their secrecy, they are somehow on the same page.

“Me too,” she replies. They exchange a longing look.

A silence dawns on them, and Wren almost wishes she had never brought this up. She wishes she could be content like this, hiding part of herself from her writing and those dearest to her, but she feels a deep twang of pain in her heart and knows she is not.

“I’m sorry,” she says. Though she doesn’t know why. Perhaps it is Andrew’s sad eyes that make her apologize, or the look of uncertainty he wears as he glances away from her. At a loss for what else to do, Wren folds into herself. She turns away from Andrew and sits down on the edge of the bed. The bedside lamp on Andrew’s side projects Wren’s silhouette on the wall. Even her shadow looks a disheveled mess.

The other side of the mattress dips, and Wren hears Andrew light another cigarette. She doesn’t want to leave him—to abandon this before it has had a chance to flourish. To say goodbye to a piece of her life—to his *presence*—would feel like her greatest loss. Wren does not wish to will Andrew away, but part of her feels that is the only way to reconcile the space he has taken up in her heart. But then she finds her way back to him, feels the calluses on his fingertips cascade down her side and swallow her up, and it is his touch that makes her think she always will.

Creative Nonfiction

Mary Durocher

Ketamine, Puzzles, and Tangerines on Avenue D

Noah and I stood in the infinity room at the Museum of Illusions on 8th Ave and West 14th street. Glossy mirrors surrounded us and made my vision whirl. The room was pungent with the overwhelming scent of Windex and plastic. We were alone, unlike in the other exhibits at the museum where screaming, snot-nosed kids sprinted past me, and families argued about where to head to as I tried to enjoy the optical illusion. The infinity room seemed quiet; it was almost eerie. Our image in the mirrors bombarded me. My brown, frizzy curls framed my winter-pale face, wide blue eyes, and permanently creased forehead. I observed my outfit. I had thrown on my paisley scarf, crossbody purse, green army jacket, black denim skirt, and high-top Converse with black tights. *Fuck*. My black tights had a snag right above the knee. I hoped it wasn't too noticeable or that a passerby might assume it was on purpose, like an edgy Debbie Harry.

Noah was more put together. He had on the long, navy-blue pea coat I loved and his new charcoal, gray jeans pooled around his ankles. He was 5'4 and hadn't gone to the tailor yet. His hair, light brown and auburn, had grown out into curls and his pale, blue eyes gazed at me in the mirror through his tortoise shell glasses. He sighed and wrapped his arms around my waist. I rested the side of my face against his cheek, and the scruff of his beard irritated my skin. Our breath, shallow and tense, was the only sound. The stillness of the room hung over us and we grinned at each other. I should've been in the moment. But the same thought kept pounding in my mind. *What are we doing together?*

"Are you feeling better?" Noah asked, his gravelly voice twinging in concern.

"Yeah, I think that third coffee is finally kicking in," I said, kissing the auburn scruff on his cheek."

"Three coffees usually do the trick," he said.

“I thought that hangover was worth a dozen coffees,” I retorted.

“You’re such a lightweight. I didn’t feel anything this morning,” he laughed, shaking his head.

“Does that make you feel special, Noah?” I asked, leaning back to get a better look at his amusement.

“It does, actually,” he said.

“God, you’re annoying,” I cried as I laid my head on his shoulder.

“Come on, let’s get the fuck out of here. These mirrors are starting to creep me out,” he said, unwrapping his arms from my waist. I trailed behind him as we left the infinity room and returned back into the museum’s chaos.

The Museum of Illusions profited off of people being entertained by being tricked. The exhibits were all a bunch of hands-on puzzles that tested the participants reality. Most of the puzzles at the museum had to do with eyesight. You’d be asked to stare at black and white striped zig-zag picture and then quiz yourself to see if your eyesight held up. *Nothing is what it seems!* It was an entertaining, overpriced museum perfect for elementary school field trips and wholesome family activities. We decided on spending the afternoon there because Noah had been meaning to go for a while, and I was too hungover to pretend to enjoy a serious art museum.

The infinity room, which was really just a room full of mirrors, was the last exhibit on the first floor in the museum. It was before the inevitability of the gift shop, with shelves full of varieties of puzzles and games I knew were all too difficult for me to figure out. I browsed the magnets and postcards with *Museum of Illusions* printed in bold lettering as Noah studied each puzzle option like he was preparing for a midterm.

“Do you want anything?” he asked, picking up one of the postcards. Wherever we went he was always asking me if I wanted him to buy me anything. I was convinced he believed if I received a plethora of gifts it would compensate for our confusing relationship. Or maybe it was instinctive guilt about our financial situations. My college student part-time receptionist job restricted my budget to subway fare, food, and rent. His salary as a real estate attorney didn’t restrict anything.

“Nah, all of these games are too easy,” I told him. “Do you?”

“Well, it is Hanukah, and no one has gotten me a gift yet,” he admitted, frowning.

“Pick anything you want,” I said, outstretching my arms to the possibilities of the gift shop. It didn’t matter that I couldn’t afford the puzzles. I had a habit of doing drastic things to make him happy. I also got a kick of superiority from getting him a gift instead of it being the other way around.

“What about this?” he said, picking up a wooden cube puzzle wrapped in plastic, his gaze lighting up.

“I think it’d look great on your desk,” I said, taking the wooden cube from him. “Let’s do it and get the fuck out here.”

Noah and I trudged up to the cash register, where a dead-eyed museum worker wearing a teal company polo slouched over the counter. I plunked the puzzle down and gave Noah’s hand a squeeze.

“Thanks for visiting the Museum of Illusions,” the cashier grumbled as he pushed the receipt at me.

“Thank you,” I said, and I turned to hand the cube to Noah.

“Can you hold onto it in your purse?” he asked.

“Sure,” I muttered, storing his gift away in my bag.

As we exited the museum and onto 8th Avenue, the wooden puzzle weighed heavy in my purse. It banged against my thigh with each step I took and I wished Noah had brought a backpack.

It was late in the afternoon but still warm outside despite it being mid-December. The Windex and plastic scent and screaming kids was replaced with the complicated smell of the city and New Yorkers pressed for time. Noah and I stood in a trance on the steps of the museum, adjusting to the whiplash change of scenery. I couldn’t understand why December had produced such a mild, autumnal day. But, unlike Noah who overanalyzed everything, I tried to accept nice things when they happened.

We walked down the steps onto the sidewalk and I leaned against the white brick wall of the museum building. The sun had produced a midday haze and little puffs of clouds punctuated the baby-blue sky. The scent of fried food intermingled with the smell of pavement and overflowing garbage. A car sped by with Patti Smith’s “Dancing Barefoot” blaring out the window. Fragments of people’s conversations drifted as they passed,

but I didn't really hear anything, too absorbed in my own thoughts of how much I had enjoyed my afternoon with Noah.

"Hey," Noah said as he pulled his phone out of his coat pocket. "I have a missed call. I'm gonna go see what that's about."

I nodded, and he walked over to the edge of the sidewalk to make the call. A lump formed in my throat as I watched him from a distance, his silhouette small against the disarray of the city street.

What are we doing?

The night before we had shared a steak at an Argentinian restaurant on Ludlow Street. After a couple of glasses of Malbec, we had stumbled out of the restaurant, gripping onto each other's coats until we got back to his apartment on Mercer Street. It wasn't until we were back in his apartment that he remembered it was the first night of Hanukkah. *I don't even have my own menorah*, he had cried. *We'll think of something*, I had said, hating to see him distressed. We had to improvise. Noah was a seltzer fanatic, and in a moment of pure genius, I had decided to gather the cans together and had found old birthday candles in his kitchen drawer. Noah had stacked the cans and placed the candles on the granite counter. Together, we had lit the candles as Noah sang the first night blessing. He had wrapped his arm around my waist, and I had leaned into him. Drunk and flushed, we had stared in awe at our little creation.

I had awoken the next morning disoriented and in his bed. I was still wearing my makeup and clothes and the comforter was still tucked in. The stark morning light bled through his curtains and my head felt like it was splintering into pieces. Noah had slept on the couch, and we sheepishly said *good morning* as he brewed coffee. The seltzer menorah was still standing, the wax from the candles had dripped and dried on the outside of the empty cans.

We weren't supposed to be in this proximity to romance again. A few months prior we had made a pact to just be close friends. No sleeping over, no sex, no romance. Spending the weekends with each other, going to the park on Saturday afternoons, and sleeping together made me ache for what I couldn't have. Why torture ourselves when we wouldn't permit

it to develop beyond friendship? I kept telling myself we had too many differences—that a relationship would be disastrous.

Or, in honesty, we were more than compatible and there was only one glaring difference: an age gap. A thirteen-year age gap. I was still attending college and his law career was established. Maybe love shouldn't be confined by age or financial differences, but it doesn't eliminate the baggage. He had told me he felt insecure compared to his friends who lived in the suburbs with three kids and a mortgage. He also didn't want to stunt my twenties by asking me to commit to him. I knew I couldn't give him marriage or kids for a long time. In practicality, it would've been smarter to cut off ties with Noah, to continue to pursue Michael, a guy I was seeing from a mutual friend group who was my own age.

But it was hard. An unexpected attachment had blossomed since we met at an obscure concert at the music venue LPR on Bleecker Street a year ago. After the concert we had walked through Washington Square Park, where he had mentioned his love of Walt Whitman and we had debated whether the Chrysler building or Empire State building had more interesting architecture. That had swooned me over enough to go home with him on the first night. Since then, we had become inseparable. Despite our attempts to avoid each other, we kept calling each other over small things: a new brand of coffee, a restaurant closure, thoughts on a new poem.

The pact we had made was continuously dissolving in my hands. I didn't know what I should be doing or what I wanted. I wasn't used to vague romantic relationships. When I was a kid, my family emulated content, Catholic married couples who married young, didn't fight in front of their kids, and didn't get divorced. My mom always told me relationships should be easy. Two people enjoy each other's company and decide to be together. That's it. I think simplicity bleeds into being naïve though. I leaned my head back against the building in frustration and dug my fingernails into my arm. How could my stomach churn in so much uncertainty?

“Mary!” Noah called out, beckoning me towards him.

“What?” I shouted back, ambling over to where he stood with his arms crossed against his chest and a smirk on his lips.

“It was my friend, Ben, whose call I missed,” he said. “He’s staying in his brother’s apartment in East Village this weekend and wants to hang out.”

“Oh,” I said. “I guess the R train for me to get back home isn’t too far from here.”

“Wait, I don’t want you to go yet. It’ll be fun, stay,” Noah said.

“I know but is it right for me to meet your friend? What are we going to say?” I asked, running my fingers through my hair. “And I think Michael, the guy I’ve been seeing, wants to go on a date tonight.”

“Who cares what we’ll say or what he’ll think?” he cried. He was concerned that it mattered to me too much what others thought. “And honestly, Mary, that Michael guy sounds like a terrible fit for you.”

“Don’t be mean, Michael’s a good catch,” I said. Michael was the kind of guy you show off to your friends and bring home to your parents after a week of dating. He was tall, athletic, opened the door for me, planned dates for us, had the same group of friends as me, and he was only twenty-two. Michael had done everything right but no matter how many dates we went on, he wasn’t the one I jumped at the chance to spend time with. “But I’ll let him know I’m unavailable tonight. Where’s your friend’s apartment?”

“The building is all the way on the East side, on Avenue D,” Noah said.

“We got a long walk then,” I said, and I laced my arm through his as we crossed the street and headed towards the East Village.

Ben waited for us outside his brother’s apartment building, a pre-war walk-up with chipped, maroon paint coating the bricks and many oversized windows. A few potted plants, yellow and dying, sat outside on the flimsy fire escape. Although it was winter, a grouchy looking old man with tufts of white hair leaned on his elbows on his windowsill, smoking a cigarette. Across the street a young couple with a Corgi argued about their electricity bill, and their sharp jabs stood out above the other mosaic of city noises, like sirens and honking car horns. As we approached the building, Ben waved to us.

“Hey, Noah,” Ben said, embracing him in a hug.

Ben was over six foot, and he towered over Noah and myself. Other than being tall, he was lanky like a string bean and his friendly, wide smile seemed almost too large for his thin face. A mustard yellow knit beanie

covered most of his greasy brown hair. His jeans were stained with paint, and he had waited outside in just a button up shirt and no jacket.

“This is Mary, the poet,” Noah said as he broke away from Ben’s hug.

“Nice to meet you,” I squeaked as Ben embraced me.

“Ah, so I finally get to meet the poet,” Noah laughed. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

You have? I thought, cutting my eyes to Noah, who stood smiling, his hands in his coat pockets.

“Oh, Noah,” Ben said, his grin growing wider. “I got some big news.”

“Oh, God,” Noah joked, his hand resting on my back. “What is it this time?”

“I’m going to propose to Beth tonight,” he giggled, pulling a small but elegant ruby red jewelry box out of his jean pocket. He slowly opened the box to show off the engagement ring. I didn’t see what the ring looked like though. I turned away, choosing to instead focus my gaze on the old guy smoking.

“Married?” Noah cried. “How long have you known her? Are you sure about this? I’m one of your oldest friends and I haven’t even met this woman.”

“We’ve been together for four months and yes, Noah, I’m definitely sure about this,” Ben said, snapping the box shut and shoving it back in his pocket. “Let’s go upstairs. I bet you guys need something warm to drink and we can catch up.”

“This guy is always *sure* about his crazy decisions,” Noah whispered to me as we climbed up two flights of stairs to Ben’s brother’s apartment. I squeezed his hand; the surprise engagement had thrown him off. On the walk over to Avenue D Noah had told me he had been friends with Ben since they met in an English class in middle school on Long Island. Ben had started out working for his mom’s real estate company before deciding to just focus on his art a few years ago. Noah was unable to explain to me what Ben’s art consisted of. But he could tell me all of the wild choices Ben had made over the years from sleeping on a park bench in Spain to almost moving to Morocco for his ex-girlfriend.

“I’ll go brew some chai tea for us, if you guys could just take off

your shoes,” Ben said as he unlocked the door. “Mary, would you like a tangerine?”

“Yeah, thank you,” I said as I slipped off my Converse and Noah laughed at Ben’s random offer. “Tangerines are great.”

“Of course,” Ben said, holding the door open as Noah and I walked into the apartment. The apartment was small and sweet. It was colorfully furnished and thrift shop paintings of fruit and flowers hung up on the wall. Ben grabbed a tangerine from the fridge and filled the tea kettle with water and put it on the stove top. “Would you two be interested in doing Ketamine with me? It really opens the soul up for fruitful conversation”.

“No, I don’t want any of that shit,” Noah said, pulling a perfectly rolled joint out of his coat. Noah had also briefly mentioned to me on our walk to the East Village that Ben was a Ketamine enthusiast and was trying to secure funding to open up a Ketamine therapy clinic. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Sure, but I think you smoke too much,” Ben said, pouring the hot water into two ceramic mugs. “I also don’t have a lighter.”

“I don’t have one either,” I told Noah, shrugging my shoulders.

“I’ll just light it on the stovetop,” Noah said, a little desperate and irritated as he bent down towards the flame. “And I don’t smoke too much, only on the weekends. At least I don’t do hard drugs.”

“Smoking harms your lungs, Noah, and doesn’t enhance your world perspective. And if you guys don’t mind, I’m still gonna do that Ketamine,” Ben said, walking over to the tan, straw mat on the living room floor and sitting down in crisscross applesauce. He took out a small plastic baggie full of Ketamine powder and put it on the coffee table. He lined up some of the powder on an old *National Geographic* magazine. I winced when he snorted. It looked like a scene out of *Goodfellas*.

“Looks like fun,” I lied as I unpeeled my tangerine, the acidic juice making my finger cuticles sting. I turned towards Noah, who was still hunched over the stove top trying to light his joint as his fingers shook. “Having a hard time over there?”

“Fuck,” Noah said tossing the unlit joint onto the kitchen counter. He

glanced quickly over at Ben, who was still in the living room absorbed with his Ketamine. “We need to talk about today and last night and everything.”

“What is there to say?” I asked, my cheeks flushing as I sipped the steaming tea.

“That Michael guy wants to date you seriously,” Noah said, staring at the hardwood floor. “And I don’t want you to be in another relationship, but I don’t know what to do.”

“Excuse me,” Ben said before I could respond, dizzily rising from the floor and putting a Thelonious Monk album on the record player that was likely manufactured after 2015. “I think you two should save that conversation for home or we can hash it all out as a group.”

“Okay,” Noah said, his shoulders stiffening at the prospect of this discussion. “What do you think, Mary?”

“If we don’t have this conversation now, will we ever?” I said, shoving my hesitations to the side for the purpose of finding clarity.

Noah and I made our way over to the brown, pleather couch, my hands full with the mug of tea and half-eaten tangerine. We sat down and I put my mug down on the coffee table crowded with old magazines and notebooks. The Ketamine powder had been reduced to a faint dust. Ben’s green eyes already looked glossy. *Does Ketamine kick in that fast?*

“Now,” Ben said, his voice going up an octave as he clasped his hands together. “Tell me what the trouble in paradise is my friends.”

“We’re not fighting or anything,” I said as I took a gulp of the tea and glanced at Noah, whose cheeks were red.

“It’s just there’s some guy who really wants to date her,” Noah said.

“He is kind of serious about getting into a relationship at some point,” I said, wringing my hands together.

“Which I think is a horrible idea,” Noah said as he moved a bit closer to me on the couch.

“Do you love this guy?” Ben asked me, tilting his head to the side.

“No,” I practically shouted, my whole body starting to grow warm and my head fuzzy. “But he is my age.”

“I don’t understand,” Ben said, outstretching his hands and gazing at them, like they were artwork. “I’ve known about Mary and you for over a year, Noah. Why aren’t you two together?”

“It’s the age thing,” Noah retorted, leaning forward, his forehead creasing.

“I don’t want people to get the wrong idea about him, what if they think I’m just a dumb college girl he’s giving money to or something?” I snapped, spilling the tea onto my skirt. The mellow music of Thelonious Monk didn’t sooth me but instead agitated me.

“Yeah, what if my parents get the wrong idea about her?” Noah asked.

“What if my family doesn’t like how much older he is?” I said, scowling at the stain the chai tea had made on my skirt.

“What if she gets hurt?” Noah whispered and my mind stopped spiraling for a moment. There was no doubt that I loved him. But my tangle of anxieties held me back from voicing what I wanted and needed.

The conversation circled back to the familiar fear of getting hurt. To that craven instinct to avoid pain at any costs, even if the present holds the possibility for sweet wonder. What if we hurt each other? What if I lost who I was again, like the last time? My last relationship had ended with me being a nervous shell of my former self, with a mutual hate festering between my ex-boyfriend and myself. I never wanted to go to such a low point with Noah. I cowered at the thought of hating him in the inevitable future. But was it worth not taking the chance at all?

“I can feel a lot of love in this room,” Ben said, closing his eyes and leaning his head back towards the water-stained ceiling as he shivered from what I assumed was the effects of drugs. “You know, a little judgement is healthy sometimes. No one wanted me to propose to Beth so soon, but I feel absolute in my choice. You both should make a decision that makes you happy, even if it’s not practical.”

“You’re not wrong,” I said, and Noah kissed my forehead. Ben’s phone, which sat beside him on the straw carpet, started to buzz and beep.

“Oh fuck,” Ben said, standing up and breaking his Ketamine induced trance. He looked shaken; his wisdom had dissipated. “Beth is about to come home, you two need to go.”

I jumped up from the couch, always worried about overstaying my welcome, and chugged the last of the chai tea. Noah and I scrambled to our shoes, and I knelt on the floor to lace up my Converse. Ben ran around the apartment in a frenzy, tidying up the coffee table and putting dishes back in the kitchen cabinets. Apparently, it was acceptable to be high when proposing to your girlfriend, but not to have a messy apartment.

“Thanks for having us over,” Noah said as he threw on his coat. “And good luck tonight.”

“I don’t need luck,” Ben said, coming to a sudden halt. “I feel confident in Beth and I’s love. Here, let me get the door for you guys.”

“Thank you for the tangerine and tea,” I said, zipping up my jacket and shrugging my purse over my shoulder. “It was nice to meet you.”

“It was nice to finally meet you too. I’ll see the two of you soon,” Ben said, holding the door ajar as we stepped out back into the hall and the door slammed shut.

“You have a very interesting friend,” I said as we trotted down the stairs.

“I know” he said. “He’s always telling me how to improve myself, but for some reason I still feel like I can easily open up with him.”

“I don’t know how I had that conversation with him, I hate telling people my personal business,” I said.

“Me either, we’re similar like that,” he said as we reached the door of the building. On the other side of the glass door a woman stood waiting, her head bent in concentration as she texted on her phone. She wore a faded, black leather jacket, a daisy patterned dress with black tights, and a pair of Doc Martens. Her hair had grown past her shoulders in bleach blonde curls and the circles under her eyes looked like two half-moons.

“How’s it going?” I said as I held the door open for her.

“Oh, it’s going good, thank you,” she said as she walked into the building. “Sorry for just standing out here; I was waiting for my boyfriend to buzz me in.”

“Have a good night,” Noah said as we walked out into the darkness. The temperature had dropped from earlier and the neighborhood was calmer as we headed towards Tompkins Square Park.

“Do you think that was Beth?” I asked.

“Maybe,” he said. “She doesn’t know what’s coming for her.”

“I hope she says yes, I would feel bad if she didn’t,” I said as we entered Tompkins Park, where twenty-somethings smoked cigarettes on the park benches and homeless people congregated at benches.

“Me too,” Noah said as he sat down on one of the benches. I sat next to him and huddled against him for warmth. “Do you still have that puzzle?”

“Yeah, it’s been in my purse the whole time,” I said, taking it out of my bag and handing it to him.

“I don’t want to go home yet,” he said, unwrapping the puzzle from the plastic. “Do you want to try to figure this thing out?”

“I kind of lied to you earlier,” I said, turning away from him. “I’m not good at figuring out puzzles at all, they’re too difficult.”

“I had a real knack for them growing up,” Noah said, turning on the flashlight on his phone so he could read the directions. “So, for this one we got to stack all of the smaller pieces together to try and make a solid square that has no gaps.”

“I don’t know,” I said, laughing. “That sounds past my capabilities.”

“Come here,” he said, and I turned back towards him, and he kissed me. His kiss was warm compared to the frigid night of Tompkins Square Park. “We’ll try to figure it out together.”

“I’m scared of failing,” I said, kissing him again. We weren’t talking about the puzzle anymore but neither of us wanted to admit what we were thinking about.

“I guess we can just start and see where it goes?” he said, as he dismantled the puzzle and placed the base of it on the empty part of the bench. We spent about twenty minutes that night trying to make all of the puzzle pieces fit. But it kept getting colder, the flashlight on Noah’s phone was draining his battery, and we both had to go to work in the morning. We decided to put the scattered pieces of the puzzle in my purse. It was lighter when it wasn’t all compacted together. Noah would leave the puzzle on his desk in his apartment and some nights we would try to make all the pieces fit again. It was fun and frustrating, and I never regretted spending money I didn’t have on it.

The morning after visiting Ben, Noah and I decided to get in a relationship, realizing that the fear of losing each other was worth more than never giving it a chance at all. We got over the biggest hurdle holding us back, but our future still sways unsteadily. There's no certainty. Life could crumble what we've built at any moment. The puzzle sits there dismantled. Some nights I sit at his chair, the wooden puzzles spread across his desk, and I try desperately to fit everything back together and to create something whole.

Contributors' Notes

Brittney Austin wrote her poem to satisfy a creative writing assignment in a course taught by Suzanne Gardiner of Sarah Lawrence College, part of the Inside Out Program at MMC's Bedford Hills Correctional Facility campus. Brittney was experimenting for the first time with the Japanese form of poetry known as *zuihitsu*, which translates as *running brush*.

Julianna Belles is a senior at MMC, a musical theatre major, a creative writing minor, and a queer nerd who likes Eldritch horror and poetry.

Emma Calame-Pennington, class of 2022, is a double major in Creative Writing and Dance Media. Inspired by humanity and nature, she is passionate about speaking from her soul, moving authentically, and breathing deeply.

Mary Durocher is a poet. She's from Schenectady, New York. She's also a senior who studies Creative Writing and Journalism. Her work has appeared in *KGB Lit Bar*, *Laid Off NYC*, and she was nominated for the Best New Poets Anthology. She hopes to get an MFA in Poetry.

Shaun Karle is a junior majoring in English World Literatures with a concentration in Literature New Media. He draws inspiration from his home state of Ohio.

Isabella Leach is a graduating senior with a major in Creative Writing and a minor in Gender Sexuality Studies.

Jacquelyn Lipke is a transfer student and a Creative Writing major in her junior year. Although this is her first time appearing in *The Carson Review*, she's had work previously published in *Ember: A Journal of Luminous Things*. When not in class or working in the admissions office, she enjoys reading horror novels and historical fiction. She hopes to one day publish books of her own or work in the field of publishing.

Ruth Lora completed her poem in a course entitled *Native American History and Culture* offered at MMC's Bedford Hills Correctional Facility campus. She had just finished reading an account of the United States government's plan to remove Native Americans whose land and culture were being destroyed.

Mark Alberto McKnight is a radical explorer of words, ideas, and language. Every morning he drinks an ambiguous smoothie, brushes his hair, and thinks. He often leaves potatoes for too long in his living room bowl because he likes the idea of potatoes, but never actually eats them.

Carey Marr is a writer and artist living in Brooklyn. She holds a B.A. in Business (Social Entrepreneurship) and minors in Literature and Studio Art.

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Maeve Penman is a graduating senior with a BFA in Creative Writing and a dual major in Digital Media & Video Productions. She has always been interested in the art of storytelling with a preference for fictional prose.

Stella Platero is a junior studying Creative Writing. When she isn't working on her novel, she is spending time in Central Park with her dog Birdie.

Emma P. Slattery is a freshman at MMC. She has been writing and performing poetry and music in her home city of Bangkok since the age of 14.

Abby Veronica Staniek was born in Jamaica, Queens and raised in New Jersey. She was an exceptional observer of the intricacies of human emotion and relationships and had the ability to express her insights in original and deeply moving ways. She was a double major in English and Philosophy and Religious Studies at Marymount Manhattan College.