

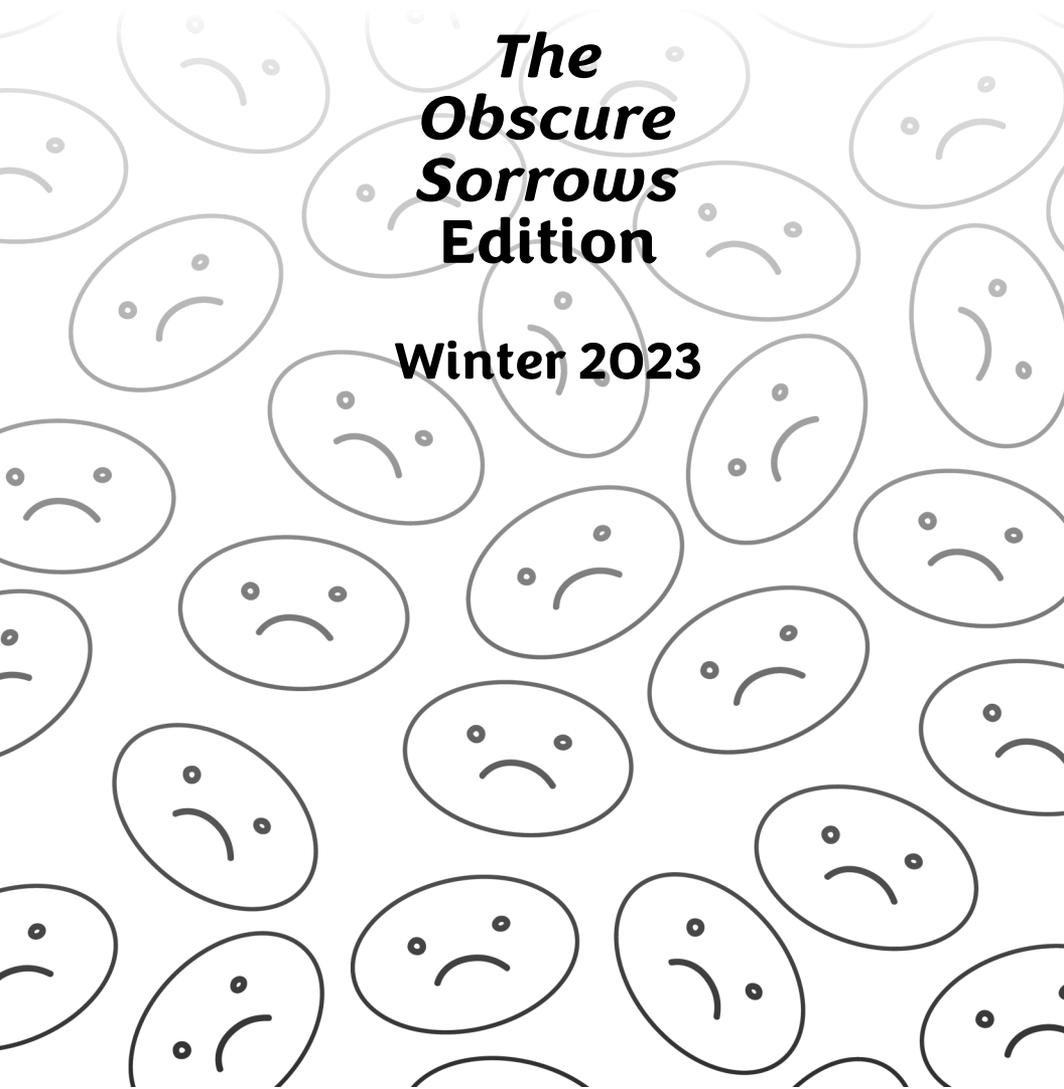
Phoenixville Area High School
Volume XXIV, Issue I
Winter 2023

Garebo

Literary Magazine

The Obscure Sorrows Edition

Winter 2023





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A Note from the Editors

Sonder is perhaps the least obscure words from *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrow*. It is defined as “the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own.” Like so many of the terms, it describes a poignant and overly-specific emotional state—a feeling that many of us have shared but few have had a word to describe. Words like *sonder*, *heartworm* (a relationship or friendship that you can’t get out of your head), and *maphiaohanzia* (the disappointment of being unable to fly) were first compiled in the blog, and later a book, by John Koenig. The words form this lachrymose lexicon were the inspiration for many of the pieces in this winter issue. Where applicable, the original definition is provided. We wish you sorrowful reading!

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Cover art by Bowen Collet

Austice

a.e. forte

Austice

n. a wistful omen of the first sign of autumn.

“The dead branch hasn’t fallen yet,” you laugh, like it’s nothing.

“That tree’s been dying for a while. It’s just not as gone as the other ones on the block.”

The sickly blue-green ring fungus creeping up the side of its trunk was as quiet as its leafless limbs, its naked roots. My headlights caught them all as I backed out of the driveway.

That tree’s been dying for a while.

I felt suddenly like a rabbit ensnared. Like my little limbs were caught up in the net of some hunter. The only thing I could do was scream (like they do when they’re scared; did you know rabbits scream when they’re scared?), or writhe, or push my foot down on the gas and take us down the street at twenty-five miles per hour. How long had that tree been there? Some fifty or hundred or two hundred years? At five there I was, looking up to its boughs on moving day, playing in its fallen autumn leaves. At twelve there I was, laying in its shadow and shivering from the chill of the earth under me. At seventeen there I was, leaving it behind me. How many more years would it have? Perhaps I would come home some day from school and it would be gone, growing mushrooms in its hollow stump-grave like the rest of the shells lining the sidewalks.

That tree’s been dying for a while.

“Yeah,” I said, and my mouth was dry. “I guess it has been.”

A Feather in the Mud Crow Castelbuono

there we were, you and i:
we walked a trail, there
in that barren land,
with the wrens that
scurried in shriveled herbs
and sat up in thin trees.
we walked the scene,
in that thick air,
as i held onto you;
your hair was shaded the same
as the coffee you said was
almost too bitter but almost too bland.
and your skin, sepia, was soft
not as silk or satin but soft
more as the feathers we shed last summer.
we sauntered ahead, on stale mud;
on mire baked from the sun.
 we were there, you and i,
when i told you i felt brittle.
you held me as i said,
“as brittle as a feather in the mud.”

Vemödalen

Noelle Collet

vemödalen

n. the frustration of photographing something amazing when thousands of identical photos already exist—the same sunset, the same waterfall, the same curve of a hip, the same closeup of an eye—which can turn a unique subject into something hollow and pulpy and cheap, like a mass-produced piece of furniture you happen to have assembled yourself.

"The daylight, the trailing glory of the sun, went streaming out of the sky" -- H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*

*Honeyed
rays of sun
drip thick
down the trees,
leaving legs
behind
like the trails
of a snail
not plated
with gold
but solid,
or of a slug
made of
pure
warmth
or like the
tear streaks
of some
great
primordial
goddess,
moved
by some*

*still
greater
beauty.
It turns puddles
into bright
gleaming
pools
of liquid gold,
of an all-healing
nectar,
of the curse
of the anti-Midas:
he who is
surrounded
by that which is
golden only
until it is
touched*

A Letter from the Bokeh in the Polaroid You Took Many Summers Ago.

There is something strange about understanding one's ghost. I should have been dead years ago. Yet I walk this earth and I speak louder than any human. I creep through the sunrises basking in the petrichor, and I waltz through the sunsets, running my hands through its rays like it were a watercolor painting. I understand Human thought better than any human. Yet I reap no fruit from assembling the ideas like jigsaws in their minds.

Why not let me die? Perhaps I could start anew in a different life. I no longer possess a haunting sense of ellipsis, fearing that the future will be without me. I am aware that I have not affected your historian's perception of the world. Yet I still lurk in bookshops and libraries. In art museums and small towns. You see my figure dancing to older music than your time in the reflections of twinkling lights. For one day perhaps I am to think that I am real, that the cataracts in your eyes show the real stars of earth- not the ones millions of lightyears away.

Perhaps that is our relationship. That I were simply an imitation of a star you saw when you squinted slightly on sunny days- and you the star that creates those days.

To the trails that still stay lurking in my garden at night: thank you for tracing my movements in the messy masterpiece of this rhythm.

To the photographer that measured my worth in its weight in gold: Thank you for not forgetting the misty perception of my life outside of focus.

Photography by Ellie Yeagle



37

craxis

n. the unease of knowing how quickly your circumstances could change on you—that no matter how carefully you shape your life into what you want it to be, the whole thing could be overturned in an instant.

It's all melting!
Each moment more decomposed than the last
Don't try to be anything right now — right now is already over!
Look ahead of you — see yourself in the future
Make a promise on your next action
Take a risk — the risk of death!
Quit putting yourself against the world
As a stain on the grand painting of existence
As a God sitting above everything horrible
Be part of the world — No!
Be many worlds
Live in contradiction
Dance and laugh with the smell of decay which blankets the world

Whelve

Barb Nieves

Silver reflections left nothing of the light ahead
Sorrow flooding the eyes of man
The unknown martyr lies there dead

Torment filled the valley before his wings spread
The shallow figure now lies in a caravan
Silver reflections left nothing of the light ahead

Good men hang on by a thread
Children left to eat crumbs of bran
The unknown martyr lies there dead

The valley became but an empty farmstead
Animals left to chew on the remnants of a kaftan
Silver reflections left nothing of the light ahead

I turned to find my reflection instead
Voyagers sailed by, clueless, in a catamaran
The unknown martyr lies there dead

A mirror revealed the cause of dread
Our own faces stare back, frozen
Silver reflections left nothing of the light ahead
The unknown martyr lie there dead

Hear My Voice

Rach Wascoe

I am listening, hear my voice.
You tell us mental health is a choice,
But when we struggle, all you see
Are kids that don't know who to be.

You say you care, but it doesn't show.
We need a place where we can go
To feel cared about and even heard
And not laughed at or ignored.

The solution to this problem is:
Be there for us cause we're still kids.
Please try your best to not gaslight.
We really don't want to fight.

I hope this shows you how we feel,
And maybe we can make a deal
Because mental health is not a choice.
I am listening, hear my voice.

Degrassé

Ivy Bolles

degrassé

adj. entranced and unsettled by the vastness of the universe, experienced in a jolt of recognition that the night sky is not just a wallpaper but a deeply foreign ocean whose currents are steadily carrying off all other castaways, who share our predicament but are already well out of earshot—worlds and stars who would've been lost entirely except for the scrap of light they were able to fling out into the dark, a message in a bottle that's only just now washing up in the Earth's atmosphere, an invitation to a party that already ended a million years ago.

Grass consumes me
My barriers broken
I look into the void
And see only myself
The sky continues infinitely
—It is all me.
I lose myself in the world
I speak into the night,
Hearing nothing but my voice
I fall into the flow of existence
—I am nothing now
I am a water drop that looks into the ocean,
Finding nothing but myself
Burned up in the eternal flame,
An endless pool,
Constantly changing form,
Constantly decomposing and reconfiguring.
It is all One,
And we all fall into nothing
when we find the One.

Waves

Bowen Collet

every time I stroll these sands
the blue waves crashing ashore
i can't help but laugh
the weakness of the sand
still peppered with the footprints of the day
and sea-soaked sand buried deep
that it's not hard to forget it's there
until another crash

i don't have to stroll these sands
i could go somewhere else
somewhere more serene
or where i could be useful
maybe it's the waves that draw me in
until I'm swept away
completely submerged
fighting to catch my breath

Do I do it for fun?

A Burden So Heavy

Scarlett Reichman

“A heart’s a heavy burden.”
-Young Sophie from *Howl’s Moving Castle*

Something that can feel so light
can often be so heavy
The depressions and joys in my chest arise in all time

How a heart can be viewed as something so concrete
when I can only view it so abstract
That a heart not only symbolizes love, and joy,
but also pain and suffering
and all in-between

The heavy weight that you feel
when something offensive is said,
or maybe once you find out someone
important to you is dead
Or the lightness you feel
when you receive love and support from others

It all rounds together
it all goes up and down
North and South
A feeling can be familiar,
but never quite the same
The feelings the heart releases are never still nor static

So when I hear this quote all I can think is
I'm happy my heart is here but it messes with my head
because it is a burden, but a burden that we need
without pain and sorrow
there is no gain
no lessons learned
and no lessons will be said
experience is the key
Not to undermine joy,
but joy often undermines sorrow
Emotions are so complex but simple, but enjoyable too
And the joy I grasp when I realize I can feel emotions
is like no other joy, nor any other joy ahead



11/16/2022

Candle Soldiers

Mia Stone

As the moon conquers the sun
And paints the sky in ink
The clouds move silently
And watch the shadows peak

The houses fall into slumber
Conquered by the moon
They send their waxen guards
To protect them while they coon

And those candle soldiers
Stay watching while they sleep
Not muttering a single word
Just watching as the shadows creep

Even though their wax is melting
They stay by the window's ledge
Protecting their home from the shadows
While the monsters make their pledge

In the morning when the sun reclaimed its land
And freed its people from the grasp of night
And they give forced thanks to their fallen soldiers
Who are now fully melted but held on so tight

midding

Caleb Varady

midding

n. feeling the tranquil pleasure of being near a gathering but not quite in it—hovering on the perimeter of a campfire, chatting outside a party while others dance inside, resting your head in the backseat of a car listening to your friends chatting up front—feeling blissfully invisible yet still fully included, safe in the knowledge that everyone is together and everyone is okay, with all the thrill of being there without the burden of having to be.

the fire still shines bright
though out of reach
sparking its embers into the crowd
laughing and dancing
watching from the shadows
the sour taste of the wine still lingering
the voices reach
and flow in the breeze
making their way over
the laughs and dancing
almost as if through a window
out of reach
safe in the peaceful shadow

ameneurosis

n. the half-forlorn, half-escapist ache of a train whistle calling in the distance at night.

An aching train whistle sounds as I sit in bed, blue light filtering my room from my laptop. Suddenly, I develop a great urge to chase that train down and travel with it. I will not be bound to any person, place, or thing. I will wander aimlessly through plateaus, the sun beating on my back. I will test my luck crossing a muddy riverbed. My mind transitions from these possibilities to, simply put, *everything*.

Now, with the hollow sound flowing about my room, it is easy to ponder. I contemplate how we go through life without a second thought, thinking if we make it to the end, we will feel fulfilled. But have I ever stopped to consider we have no time? It's true that I have not. Is it true we are living in a cold, empty universe? That we truly do not know our purpose? We try to find purpose in everyday life, love, friendship. We devote countless hours to work, children, or partners. Knowing that the universe conceals our purpose and our origin, however, is what brings tears to one's eyes. Could we be a speck of dust in a creaking cabin? Or the tear of a child watching their ice cream topple to the ground? We will never know, and that is troubling.

Reality clicks in as the whistle fades; it is foolish of me to think these thoughts. Slowly, I open my inbox and prepare for hours of work.

Monachopsis

Grey McAllister

monochopsis

n. the subtle but persistent feeling of being out of place, as maladapted to your surroundings as a seal on a beach—lumbering, clumsy, easily distracted, huddled in the company of other misfits, unable to recognize the ambient roar of your intended habitat, in which you'd be fluidly, brilliantly, effortlessly at home.

Three years ago, Atlantia station fell silent. It used to be one of the largest space stations in the periphery of the Federation, now it's nothing but a husk. Surprisingly, no one had ever entered that station in those three years, at least no one we knew about. That's why RecliCorp sent me, a salvage analyst, to look over the station. It was a pretty simple job, get in, mark anything of note or value for salvaging, then get out. I'd done this song and dance well over a hundred times, so much so that I'd be willing to bet good money that I could do it in my sleep. The trip to Atlantia took just over a month, but I'd gotten used to the silence. The sound of naught but the hum of the ship's reactor was calming to me. And now, I had arrived.

Before me, in the viewport, floated Atlantia Station. A once vibrant spaceport full of movements and lights was now left lifeless and dead, like a beached whale. The habitation drum that had sustained thousands of lives lay still, and a large gash in the side of it painted a clear picture of what had happened to said inhabitants. I thought that whatever had happened to Atlantia had been quite violent. Maybe a large asteroid managed to slip through Atlantia's point defense grid and had torn the station up. Through the gash I could see the inside of the drum, see all those little houses that people had once lived in. It all looked so barren and desolate that I found it hard to believe that it had ever been a major settlement. It might have just been the isolation getting to me, but I could swear that, on the edge of my hearing, I could still hear the voices of those who had once lived on the station, the laughter of children and the jolly conversation of their parents. I just shook it off. I had a job to do, and I could worry about all that when the job was over.

I pulled myself over to the ship's control console and

punched the button for the scanner. I looked over the structural scans of the station. While the habitation drum had suffered significant damage the rest of the station seemed to have suffered minimal damage, though it was decompressed. I judged that I should dock my ship at the station's port docking bay and work my way to the other side of the ship. Just as I was going to move away from the scanner, I noticed something strange. On the starboard side of the station, there seemed to be a section of the hull that was slightly warmer than the rest of the station. It was only a difference of 3 degrees Celsius, but it still confused me. The heat of the ship's hull would have become uniform over the last three years. I tried to reassure myself by thinking that it could have just been the station's supply of radioactive materials giving some of it's heat the hull, but it still felt off. I switched the screen to ship controls and entered in the command to dock with the station.

The travel to the station felt all too long, and all too quiet. I sat in the silence for so long that the quiet trilling of the ship's computer made me jump. I pushed off the hull, entered the airlock, and performed the monotonous procedure of pulling on the EVA suit. It was a big, bulky thing that restricted my movement, made me feel as if I was trapped, but it kept the air in, so it was needed. I checked how long my oxygen would last for. Two hours. I took a deep breath, then cycled the airlock. The silence around me got impossibly quiet as the air left the room. The sound of my breath was deafening. The door on the far side of the airlock turned and opened, and I drifted through.

I had worked through dozens of derelict ships and stations, but this felt different. There was always something happening, a slight hum or vibration felt when I placed my hand on the wall, but this time there was nothing. The station had come to a complete and utter stop. Stranger still, the station seemed to have been stripped of anything of value. Exposed conduit panels stripped bare of their wires, data pad casings floating bereft of their circuitry, various tools left with naught but their bare shells, all of them carefully pried open and had any precious metals removed in an almost surgical manner, I supposed that someone must have been here before me. I worked my way through the station, floating from empty corridor to empty corridor, my flashlight leading the way. All of the doors that I came across were open, some left open, others showing clear signs of being forced open. My hopes for finding

anything valuable dwindled with each passing moment.

Realizing that there would be nothing left of value on this side of the station, I decided to move to the other side. This would necessitate my traveling though the center of the habitation drum, the station's lack of movement making this all the easier. I moved through the station's myriad of maintenance tubes, all the while unable to shake the feeling that something was watching my every move from the shadows. I wanted to get this over and done with as soon as possible. I continued to move up and up towards the station's central shaft. Once I had arrived, I looked out across the habitation drum, across the two kilometers of open space I would have to travel to reach the other side. This was going to be a long job.

I checked how much I had left in my oxygen tanks. Only thirty minutes left. I sighed, and pushed myself back down the maintenance tube, back towards the ship, all the while feeling that something was off. I found my way back to the airlock where I had docked my ship and opened it. I floated back into the ship, feeling relieved that there was something when I put my hand to the wall. I pulled the small oxygen tube from the wall and plugged it into my suit. I floated there, watching the oxygen meter fill, slowly creeping up and up. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the tanks were full. I removed the tube and pushed off the wall, working myself back to the central shaft, ready to just finish my job.

I found myself back at the central shaft, looking out at that vast abyss that was the habitation drum. I put my hands on the hull plating and pushed off. It was a long and boring journey. From inside the station, the gash in the side of the station looked a lot larger from inside. It did look like a large asteroid had hit the drum, though I realized something strange. There weren't any bodies. Over ten thousand people living on this station, and yet not a single body, it didn't make any sense. Some of them could have been pulled out of the station, but not all of them. There wasn't any way that anyone could have removed all of the bodies from the station without being noticed. I tried to shake it off, tell myself that it wasn't my job to worry about this, but I couldn't convince myself otherwise. I'm not quite sure if it was my nerves getting to me, or my isolation finally resulting in visual hallucinations, but I could have sworn that, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something move across the surface of the habitation drum. I spun around to face it, but there was nothing

moving.

However, looking at the opposite face of the habitation drum, there was something that I hadn't noticed when I first looked out across it. The surface of the face across from the gash seemed to be covered in this shiny black material that looked almost like obsidian glass. I couldn't come up with an explanation as to how such large quantities of such a material would form in such a place, or as to why it would only form on the opposite side of a hull breach. I didn't like this, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. I had a contractual obligation to search the station, and I would do my job.

I glanced up ahead of me, I was moments away from reaching the other side. I was glad, I'd never liked the feeling of freely floating, with no way to move myself. I grabbed hold of the hull and pulled myself into the central access shaft. All I had to do was get to the reactor, see if anything was still there, then I could finally leave. The job was almost over, and I could get out of here. I pulled myself through the various corridors and access tubes, moving myself towards the reactor room. When I reached it, the door was sealed shut. This was the only door that I'd seen that was shut. Along the edges of the door, there was more of that obsidian glass like substance. I grabbed a hold of a large spike of it to break it off but pulled my hand back when I felt a sharp pain shoot up my arm. I heard the terrifying sound of air escaping through a hole in my EVA suit. I checked my hand, some of the obsidian glass had cut into me and lodged itself into my hand. I quickly pulled out my suit repair tape and sealed the hole. I'd still need to get medical attention, but that could come later.

I grabbed a knife from my tool belt and started chiseling away at the obsidian, breaking it away from the door so that I could open it up. It took longer than I would have liked, but I managed to work the door free. I pulled it open and peered into the darkness of the reactor room. It took me a moment to realize why it didn't look like my flashlight was lighting up the room. Instead of a nuclear reactor being there, the entire room was coated in that obsidian glass. I'm sure I was just seeing things, but it looked like it was moving. This was it; I was done. I pushed myself away from the reactor room and worked my way back up to the central access shaft. As I floated through the habitation drum I watched the obsidian glass closely, waiting to see if it would move. It didn't, but

I felt that, just under the surface, there was something that was moving, trying to get to me.

When I finally reached the other side of the drum, I quickly pulled myself back towards my ship. I pulled the airlock open and moved in. The airlock took all too long to cycle, and all the while my hand hurt like hell. When the airlock finally finished cycling, I pulled off the EVA suit and quickly went to the ship's controls. My fingers moved quickly over the terminal, undocking my ship, and spinning up the FTL drive. I entered coordinates to take my back to RecliCorp HQ on Luna. Once this was all done, I began to move to my ship's med kit, looking to fix my hand up. When I got to the kit, I took out a pair of plyers to take the obsidian glass out. I glanced down at my hand. The glass had started to spread across my hand like water and was spreading quick.

antematter

n. the dream versions of things in your life, which appear totally foreign but are still somehow yours—your anteschool, your antefriends, your antehome— all part of a parallel world whose gravitational pull raises your life's emotional stakes, increasing the chances you'll end up betting everything you have

and again
the same reoccurring dream
where i am motionless and paralyzed
a purgatory like void
i stand on the damp floor
as it happens again
my hands reach out
and like a strained dove
the paper returns in my hand
i look at it and try to make out the words
written, decaying
but as normal
the writing becomes smudged and indistinct
the paper to crumble and shrinks
and shrinks
and shrinks
the ground warps and whines
until what was previously
is just a misty memory



Photography by Ellie Yeagle

Saltwater; Frail Fins Crow Castelbuono

The sea wavers, unsteady. It
laps at the coast. The
ocean and its lather, its
sickly foam, but the water
is always lured back in
to lay heavy on my frail
fins. Kelp plastered
onto my skin,
pasty
and
soaked.
Flay it, my bleak skin, as
I heave
a draft of water into my throat.

There's a rift in
the water, in this
sick sea; the
ocean will leak. So
as the waves sway
my senses, and
with the last of my breath,
like a flounder I'll flail
as I'm whisked from the scene.
I hear, maybe only
in the fit of the moment, and
in the saltwater and its sores, I
hear
you
cry
a solace for me; for
me and my frail fins.
As the waves sway
my senses, and
with the last of my breath,
I'll hear you cry a solace:
I'll hear you say—

Come to Think of It, Listening to Podcasts about Gruesome Murders is Actually Kind of Weird

Talia Rein

I used to have an inexplicable hunger for tales of the macabre. What I hungered for the most was true crime. I spent my afternoons laying on my stomach, my feet dangling over the edge of my bed while I played mindless mobile games and listened to unperturbed narrators unpack bloody details of grotesque crimes. Something about it drew me in. Maybe if I was a better person, I could say it was the psychology of the killer that interested me. That for some selfless reason, I wanted to learn how the mind of a killer operated—maybe one day I would be able to identify a murderer and save lives. But that would be a lie. My fascination lay with the crimes themselves—with the violence in particular. The more detailed the gore, the closer attention I paid. It would be wrong to say I enjoyed absorbing the world's depravity. I was entertained, but took no joy in the suffering of others. What I felt, why I kept coming back was something else entirely. Something I'm still trying to figure out. I was hardly outraged on the victim's account. I knew that what the killer was doing was evil, but the sense of empathy I felt around true crime was purely surface-level. To be candid, I didn't particularly care about the victims, nor the killers. True crime wasn't real to me. I listened to the podcast *Serial Killers* as if I were reading a novel. I even blended the line of fact and fiction by listening to ghost stories based on real history—often originating from violent events of which there were grisly descriptions. Edmund Kemper was a work of fiction, as were his victims. This might have registered as unethical to me, even at eleven, had it registered at all. It didn't register, though. My strange entanglement with true crime continued for years.

Once I reached the eighth grade, the reality of existence as a woman had sunk in. I wasn't completely aware of it. I knew my worldview had changed, although the depth was lost on me. Regardless of my own awareness, the fear of sexual assault was

If I had paid better attention, I could have recognized it. The problem was that I didn't want to recognize it. Who would? Instead, that fear manifested in an entirely different way; by changing the way I thought about true crime. Something began tugging at me when I listened to narratives featuring sexual assault or sexual torture. There was an uneasiness that wasn't there before. This feeling turned an initially normal and entertaining experience into one fraught with terror. I was finally experiencing a long overdue sense of empathy. After that, I couldn't ingest true crime the way I previously had. Even violence free of sexual motive became nauseating. My liaison with true crime had ended permanently, and with it emerged a fresh sense of clarity. I could suddenly see the bigger picture, which turned out to be a rather ugly one. Before, I hadn't thought twice about true crime being a moral issue. I considered it a form of educational entertainment, like a documentary or a book of facts. If that's how I truly thought about it, it wouldn't have been a problem. But unconsciously, I was thinking about true crime like it was fictional. It was real, but it never felt that way. By looking back on the podcasts I had once listened to, and this time keeping in mind that everyone—every “character” in the unfolding narrative—was a human who deserved compassion and respect, I discovered a callousness in the handling of the cases that used to slip by unnoticed or ignored. The narrators of these podcasts were casually chatting about the horrifying deaths of people who had lives and families. Real people had suffered and died, and their stories were being capitalized on by an industry that catered to people who didn't really care—people like me. Who knew if these people would have wanted their stories to be told. What about their families? Did their communities deserve to be defined by tragedy and turned into a monument to despair? Consumption of true crime was turning the greatest misfortune of someone's life, and arguably the greatest failure of human society into meaningless background noise to be exploited by indifferent content creators for indifferent listeners. This realization ruined true crime for me. I stopped engaging with it then and haven't reconsidered since. But my experience seems like a rare one, especially given the recent increase in the popularity of true crime, especially on TV.

True crime TV shows are a somewhat recent phenomenon, but if *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, one of the most

recent installments is any indication, they're experiencing massive success in the entertainment industry. They usually center serial killers—compelling figures who audiences can follow for entire seasons. People get a personal look at famous killers, growing close to them and even being drawn to sympathize with them as they follow the serial murderer's journey into depravity. Charming, attractive actors are being cast as merciless, unstable, and most importantly, *real* murderers. Victims find themselves sidelined in favor of the character of the killer. Centering the killer instead of the victim can dehumanize the victim and humanize the killer, even crossing the line into romanticization. And while it's true that the killer is also human, making them into a sympathetic figure at the cost of making the victim less sympathetic can minimize how heinous the crimes really were. Series like these are being categorized with horror series about supernatural happenings or fictional murderers, blending the lines between fact and fiction and muddying the separation of real and fake victims. The whole thing feels grotesque and confusing.

After my gradual epiphany regarding violent true crime, I replaced *Serial Killers* with *American Scandal* and *Assassinations* with *Swindled*—still true crime, but true crime about Ponzi schemes and government cover-ups rather than murder and rape. Now, the most gore I willingly consume is shredded paperwork and ugly legal battles. But that innate fascination I used to surrender to completely is still there. Every so often, I'll come across a mention of a disturbing case online. I'll look it up and read the Wikipedia article with relish. Once I'm done, there's a mixture of shame and lingering curiosity. I never look for more information, though. I've thought too much about true crime to go back.

I'll end by saying that if I'm ever murdered—or on the off-chance I decide to become a serial killer, I don't want some self-absorbed microcelebrity with too much free time to tell my story on Spotify. At least make it a TV series.

backmasking

n. the instinctive tendency to see someone as you knew them in their youth, a burned-in image of grass-stained knees, graffitied backpacks or handfuls of birthday cake superimposed on an adult with a degree, an illusion formed when someone opens the door to your emotional darkroom while the memory is still developing.

My hands mirror yours
‘round a coffee cup
across the booth stall
we both are sitting in.

I wonder when
it was that you cut
your hair? I wonder
if you have noticed mine.

Here we are. Faux
leather chair backings,
bad drinks we used to
love. Your tastes learn with age.

And when I stand to
walk out of here for
the very last time,
I hope you’ll miss me too.

Fawn

Jay “Prince” Gray

My legs tremble as we amble onward, trekking into woodlands shrouded with mist and blanketed with rotting foliage. Each step I take crushes another leaf, the smell of spoilage wafting into our oxygen with every second traveled. Hooves give out, and I sob. I sit cross-legged on the damp forest floor, ligaments shredded and bones deteriorated. You, a hunter, tower over me. I have given you all I could give. But darling, how can I sustain the lives of both of us? You look down upon me— me, with my fur dappled in sickly shades of white. I'd had tried to make it a coat to keep you shielded from the grueling cold, but it'd had only been enough for a lifeless rug. A rug in which I now lay lousily on the forest floor, too hungry to go on. Above us, the setting sun makes the woodland glow a hellish orange, and you turn your back to me. My doe eyes widen, and I wane. Don't leave me here.



Drawing by Jay Gray

Heartworm

Caleb Varady

heartworm

n. a relationship or friendship that you can't get out of your head, which you thought had faded long ago but is still somehow alive and unfinished, like an abandoned campsite whose smoldering embers still have the power to start a forest fire.

though they moved away
forgotten for years
until those late nights
random memories of what was
just an asthma inhaler
that sparked an ember in the darkness
a memory
of what was
what is covered in dust
and fall leaves of the years
the old prom photos
you should have forgotten
still up on the shelf

Food for Thought

Zoe Cimo

You come home from a long day of school, another three hours of homework weighing on your shoulders. You meander up the steps of the porch, slowly open and close the door, shrug off your bag, let it thump to the ground, and collapse on the couch. Then, your stomach growls.

Why is it that the study snack is such a token of high school life? Why is it so unthinkable for us to factor a single equation, write a single annotation, conjugate a single verb without goldfish, apple slices, or chips ahoj to munch on? Don't even try to deny it—your mind won't let you. Those pretzel sticks just keep rolling through your mind, clogging your brain until you satisfy your craving.

Snacks provide nourishment (hopefully), fight fatigue, and create happiness. When's the last time you've been upset while eating a granola bar? They provide checkpoints throughout the day: something to look forward to. Everyone knows a student's day revolves completely around lunch. The day is basically two long periods: before lunch and after lunch. It doesn't matter if you eat in class, in the cafeteria, or simply drink a protein shake. It is the turning point of the school day. And the afternoon is the same. How could you possibly go on with your evening without the after-school snack? That micro-break, bit of tasteful ecstasy, alertness-booster. It really is a staple of the teenage years.

You're probably thinking: Okay, sure, but why go on and on about it? What's so important about all this? Well, it's meaningful for a few reasons. Firstly, it needs to be emphasized the importance of a snack break. For teachers, students, and parents. To the teachers who don't allow food in the classroom: nobody should be denied the opportunity to boost their mood and their brain. To the students: no class is so important that you don't take time to eat, even if it's while you're writing notes. Also, to the student athletes: you're told school comes before sports, but snacks, too! Food is fuel — mentally and physically. And to the parents! Let your kid have five minutes to savor their tortilla chips before you shove their notebook and pencil under their nose.

Secondly, what about the kids who don't have a snack? Nobody should be denied this opportunity. But short of solving world hunger, what can we do? Well, offering not only nutritious school lunch options, but satisfying and appealing ones can make the meal that many rely on just as joyful as any other. And it *is* winter after all, the season of food drives. Even just one thing, like a box of mac and cheese, is better than nothing. PACS will be collecting! Also in Phoenixville, Ann's Heart is an organization that offers hot meals to anybody and volunteer opportunities for any aspiring chefs, good Samaritans, or NHS members.

And finally, don't feel bad that your afternoon snack is the highlight of a dreary day! You may be denying that your snack was the one bright beacon of light on a gloomy Monday (because it was), but most of us have those days. It's not because your life is sad. It's because your body is craving that bit of energy and happiness. So eat your snack, whatever it is. And use it to fuel your body, your mind, to pursue your schoolwork and hobbies, which will one day be your education, which will one day be your passions, which will one day be your life. (See? A pack of crackers can go a long way.)

Not Your Galatea

Pâro

I

Apomakrysmenophobia *n.*

The fear that all of your connections are ultimately shallow

Staring into a sea of people
The sea staring back
They examine every inch of smooth stone
They pick apart every little imperfection
To be the centerpiece
To be examined
A million people
A million interpretations
They won't stop staring at me
They are not looking at me

II

Monachopsis *n.*

the subtle but persistent feeling of being out of place

Why can't I be like the other statues
They get to stand there in their beautiful poses
While I am stuck being out of-
I am on display like them
We are in the same exhibit
But why then
Are they so much better at fitting in?
We were made the same
Of marble and stone
From chisel and hammer
But why am I different

I just want to be like them

III

Exulangus *n.*

the tendency to give up trying to talk about an experience because people are unable to relate to it

Do you ever-

Do you ever feel like you are on display?

Put on like a show for others

...

I couldn't move

I was made to be the perfect woman

I stayed not stone

I stayed not a woman

...

I'll be quiet now

IV

Occhiolism *n.*

the awareness of the smallness of your perspective, by which you couldn't possibly draw any meaningful conclusions at all, about the world or the past or the complexities of culture

What is an experience?

There is so much in the world I will never be able to see

To *experience*

I know what I know

I want to know what I don't

To feel what I can't

To float among the asteroids in space

But I am merely a pebble of earth

V

Moledro *n.*

*a feeling of resonant connection with an author or artist you'll never meet,
who may have lived centuries ago and thousands of miles away but can
still get inside your head and leave behind morsels of their experience*

What should I call you?
Creator? Maker? Father? Artist?
I am your ideal image of a woman
You carved me from gorgeous marble
I was beautiful
I was admired
The craftwork impeccable
Pygmalion made his Galatea
You made yours
But I came to life on my own
In a museum rather than your studio
Rather than by Aphrodite's hand
I am eternally grateful for my creation
But I made a few more carvings to my form
Goodbye, Pygmalion.

VI

Scabulous *adj.*

*proud of a scar on your body, which is an autograph signed to you by a
world grateful for your continued willingness to play with her*

From carved and polished stone
My skin was refined from marble
Meticulously buffed to a shine
Polished and perfect
Except for two rough rounds upon my chest
An afterthought to myself
I grabbed a chesil and fixed it myself
My silhouette now perfect

Although some parts of me are still petrified
As I become myself
My body becomes more human than statue

VII

Daguerreologue *n.*

an imaginary interview with an old photo of yourself

1. Hello, I am your future
2. ...
3. Are You a person yet? You still are stone silent.
4. ...
5. How long have we been like this? How long have we
 been locked in stone?
6. Maybe always. You are odd aren't you
7. ...
8. How are we doing?
9. Amazing, we get to grow into who we are
10. We get to grow?
11. Yes, we start to see the world and see ourselves
12. You look amazing
13. We look amazing; we even get to remove our chest.
 Take this
14. Hello, I am your future





Kairosclerosis

Noah Kocher

kairosclerosis

n. the moment you realize that you're currently happy—consciously trying to savor the feeling—which prompts your intellect to identify it, pick it apart and put it in context, where it will slowly dissolve until it's little more than an aftertaste.

Smushed

Green black

On

Into

Water

Dirt my

Foot

Grass

It

Knock Off Animal Farm

Kate Smith

Rhinchtern

n. the innate longing for a moment of time long past, specifically one that changed or added dimension to your life.

I caught them,
I try to catch them again:
Catch them with afternoons spent in warmth and in light,
Catch them with dust dancing in front of the window's glow before
the sundown I ache to see.
And after hours of school
And hours of work
any amount of work would've been worth this,
Anything worth this feeling
This feeling worth chasing, a pursuit to feel the high again.
This feeling was worth the hours
This feeling was worth the tears
Even the transitional fears
Even wearing gloves that smell of glue
Even costumes that itch and
And even the bruises on my thighs from a typewriter case,
Those florescent flickers from an old ghost
Those conversations held on makeup benches
Those gatherings held on risers
Those middle fingers and hearts from the wings.
The little prints behind my eyes where the stage lights are.

And through it all I see you, and the feeling of you
I recognize myself, sitting as close to you as I can
while wolfing down lukewarm chili with
Tabasco sauce in a stairwell
I recognize the flutter I get when we lined up to dance, hoping that

it might be you this time
I recognize the disappointment when you were similar, so similar that we
played parallels all week,
never interacting in that plane,
always gazing across.

Through so many parallels in how I feel, when I hear and when I heard.
Through it all, is pain and hope and joy,
It is letting go of the thing I just had, of the One Good Thing,
It is the fear and the anticipation, the wanting,
It is truly understanding the wanting, for the first time, to return to that
moment, to that set.
It is the gratitude, the benefit of hindsight that is knowing every good
thing
it has given me,
That you have given me.
And even so.

The crowd is clapping, and we are bowing and laughing and crying and
screaming in triumph as the curtains close and all at once, then and now,
I feel whole.

Vellichor

Meredith Dobry

vellichor

n. the strange wistfulness of used bookstores, which are somehow infused with the passage of time—filled with thousands of old books you'll never have time to read, each of which is itself locked in its own era, bound, and dated and papered over like an old room the author abandoned years ago, a hidden annex littered with thoughts left just as they were on the day they were captured.

The ache of a heart
The longing feeling for the joy we once shared
Our happiest visions that I look back and laugh
Now I wonder how things could have been different
What we could have gotten to come across together
If only I have not let you go
Now as we continue
A remembrance of our past amity
We can keep our friendship
But just as memories

Ecstatic Shock

a.e. forte

ecstatic shock

n. the surge of energy upon catching a glance from someone you like.

Here it is: a meeting of the eyes
a slight laugh
a quirk of the lips;
And I sigh a drunken sigh

Do you muffle your smiles
in the fluff of a pillow too?

If they cut me open I am sure
they would find a heart
that has dashed itself on
the rocks of my ribs

Would you like a piece of me
to take home with you?

The bus stop is empty,
all the people gone home.
Fluorescent lights; *Goodbye.*
Almost an afterthought; *I love you.*

How much longer can we stay here?

Backmasking

Caleb Varady

backmasking

n. the instinctive tendency to see someone as you knew them in their youth, a burned-in image of grass-stained knees, graffitied backpacks or handfuls of birthday cake superimposed on an adult with a degree, an illusion formed when someone opens the door to your emotional darkroom while the memory is still developing.

the foreign memory
swinging in a hammock
laughing and eating popcorn
model rockets
turned into schoolbooks
and phone calls left unanswered
the dust left on a photograph
the “friends forever” frame
the smiles frozen
from so long ago
laughing and secrets
diaries
boxed up and forgotten



Bones

Julie Weaver

old bones, how they *rattle* and creak
settled in their death, now enjoyment they seek
the *click* of the dice, the flip of the cards,
these rotten creatures relax in their graveyard

the smell of the worldly wafts through their noses
like a fresh book... or maybe some roses?
But oh, not a rose, just a flower from hell
some unlucky new soul, fresh from Asphodel

sounds of cheer dance through their little band
this newcomer, given a welcome so grand
the laughter swells, the chatter loud,
the happiness swept through the crowd

this young soul, first shaken by this sight
now smiles, realizing, 'death is no blight'
these joyful creatures who once caused our friend fear,
outstretch their arms, beckoning near

this little patron of the underworld
spots an old lover, their hand unfurled
reunited at last, the embrace so strong
the fellow sees, they can do no wrong

this recent deceased now joins the fray
the games resume, and they all play
a feeling of glee hangs in the air
accepting all who will end up there

Dead Reckoning Jay “Prince” Gray

your still figure was a candle in the dark,
but your flame flickered fiercely,
until saccharine sleep dwindled
from my eyelids

in your memory’s wake,
the sun was reminiscent
of the very flame that flourished
as strongly as the tang of kimchi on your
tongue

when sweet sleep tugged my consciousness,
once more did i see your light,
only this time it diminished
until it was but a spark

and as a splinter
pricks into your side persistently,
i failed to shake the familiar feeling
of frantically clinging to that lingering
warmth,

 carried away
in the
subsiding
breeze

Ellipsism

Silas Swomley

ellipsism

n. sadness that you'll never be able to know how history will turn out, that you'll dutifully pass on the joke of being alive without ever learning the punchline—the name of the beneficiary of all human struggle, the sum of the final payout of every investment ever made in the future—which may not suit your sense of humor anyway and will probably involve how many people it takes to change a lightbulb.

Oh, my beloved, how you always pass on,
Oh, my beloved, my sacred ticking love,
Oh, my beloved, how you bring about every dawn,
How often I cry, how often I wait, for my never-ending, always fate
 Until then I change, and fall with the waves,
Ever crashing and booming in on my days
But eventually I realize my own ridiculousness, and look to the stars
 When I finally leave my state of haziness I am sad once again
I don't know what I'll miss most

I'm reminiscing

 Reminiscing

People reminiscing of the memories of past, and dreams for the future
 Dreams I'll never see

 I'll never forget

 The look in your eyes when you dreamed of me

 What I could be

Oh, my beloved, how I must pass on
I'll miss, my beloved, the future I haunt

midding

v. intr. feeling the tranquil pleasure of being near a gathering but not quite in it—hovering on the perimeter of a campfire, chatting outside a party while others dance inside, resting your head in the backseat of a car listening to your friends chatting up front—feeling blissfully invisible yet still fully included, safe in the knowledge that everyone is together and everyone is okay, with all the thrill of being there without the burden of having to be.

Age eight

Lying on my back

In the attic bedroom

Watching the ceiling wash with light at every passing car

And under the shhhh of wheels on road

Under the cooing of owls

Under the chirping of bats

Under the mews of stray cats in the alley

Under the sounds of laughter

Of aunts and uncles and friends downstairs

Under the clinking of glasses

Under the groaning of tired floorboards

Under the fussing of the baby in his room

On just the other side of the wall

Under the footsteps coming to calm him

Under the snoring from the twin bed in the corner,

A quiet sound dances down

From the bunk above me of

“In the Bleak Midwinter”

Or

“There Was a Crooked Man”

Or another song

That she learned in music class

And for which I had begged;

Please sing me to sleep

Quorum e.a.l.

The table is set (plates, napkins, forks, knives, spoons, delicate glasses half filled with blood-red wine). The chairs are poised (yes, all thirteen, he checks again). There are no decorations (he didn't think they'd be appropriate). The Chandelier is lit (no electricity in this ancient house). Candles ran down the length of the table (trying valiantly to stave off the darkness so often found in this drafty room), and entertainment would be provided as soon as his colleagues arrived. He sits down in his seat (first on the left) and silently begins to wait.

The clock chimes six o' clock at night. The hound that's prone to haunting the stairwell begins to bark, and then the doorbell rings, loud and clanging like a church bell. The floorboards creak as he gets up and begins to make his way through this gothic pile of a home. The path to the door is not very direct and so he has to wind through the Sitting Room, Salon and Visiting Room before he reaches the Entry Hall. He opens the door and sees his oldest friend.

He nods to him, "Welcome Mr. G."

The guest replies in an ancient, creaking whisper, "Thank you Mr. H, for offering this place to meet."

Mr. H nods solemnly, for he knows a pleasant meeting, it will not be, and offers him an arm so he can lead the way through the treacherous house back into the Grand Dining Room. He guides Mr. G to his seat, fifth on the left, and pulls out the chair for his elder. Once Mr. G is seated comfortably, Mr. H returns to his seat, four chairs down. They begin, silently, to wait.

The hound that's prone to haunting the stairwell begins to bark, and then the doorbell rings, loud and clanging like a church bell. He says to Mr. G, "Please feel free to remain here, I will only be a moment." Mr. G nods in acquiescence.

The floorboards creak as he gets up and begins to make his way through this gothic pile of a home. The path to the door is not very direct and so he has to wind through the Sitting Room, Salon and Visiting Room before he reaches the Entry Hall. When he opens the door, he frowns; it is Mrs. A who always has the stench of

her profession hanging about her like a poison cloud. For this reason, she is always seated at the end of the table, where she won't trouble anyone.

"Welcome, Mrs. A."

"Thank you, Mr. H."

"May I show you to the Grand Dining Room?"

"Yes, please."

He does not help Mrs. A into her seat, but once they are all seated, they sit quietly, and continue waiting.

The hound that's prone to haunting the stairwell begins to bark, and then the doorbell rings, loud and clanging like a church bell. He says to Mr. G and Mrs. A, "Please feel free to remain here, I will only be a moment." Mr. G nods in acquiescence, Mrs. A glares at him.

The floorboards creak as he gets up and begins to make his way through this gothic pile of a home. The path to the door is not very direct and so he has to wind through the Sitting Room, Salon and Visiting Room before he reaches the Entry Hall. When he opens the door, he sees a girl, who had clearly once been beautiful, but now certainly looks like death. He frowns. He hadn't remembered her attendance would also be required for the meeting.

"Welcome, Miss H," he says stiffly.

"Thank you," she replies with a smirk.

She sweeps past him, and when he arrives in the dining room, she is already in her place, second on the left, directly next to him.

He says, "You feel free to make yourself comfortable here, I think I'm going to wait in the Entry Hall for the rest of our colleagues. If you need anything, call out and it will be attended to. Beware, however. The servants here are quite flighty." His guests nod and murmur thank-you's.

As he makes his way back to the Entry Hall, the clock chimes six-thirty at night. He stations himself by the door just as the hound that's prone to haunting the stairwell begins to bark, and then the doorbell rings, loud and clanging like a church bell.

He opens it and says, "Ah, Ms. A, how have you been? Mr. O, are you unwell? You're looking rather blue tonight."

Ms. A simply smiles, but it looks more like an animal baring its fangs than someone greeting their colleague. Mr. O responds

with a melodic, if melancholic, voice, “Am I? I hadn’t noticed. Are we the first to arrive?”

“No,” Mr. H says, “Mr. G, Mrs. A, and Miss H are here already.

“Hmm,” Mr. O says, with a small, pensive smile.

“Let me show you to the Grand Dining Room,” Mr. H said hurriedly.

“Lead the way,” Mr. O replies.

When Mr. H returns to the Entry Hall, there is already a man standing there. His shirt looks old, and the necklace ‘round his neck is of stylized eyeballs. There’s a wild, angry look in his eyes. Mr. H doesn’t even bother wondering how he got into the house (through the locked door) without alerting the hound.

“Please, follow me to the Grand Dining Room, Mr. M,” Mr. H says. Mr. M says nothing and walks without making a sound as he follows Mr. H.

“You’re seated here, between Mr. O, and Ms. A, Mr. M, right here, second on the right.” Mr. M sits silently and stares at the others sitting quietly at the table. The clock chimes seven at night, breaking the silence violently, but no one seems to take notice. The hound that’s prone to haunting the stairwell begins to bark, and then the doorbell rings, loud and clanging like a church bell. “Please feel free to wait here, I will be back with our next guest momentarily,” Mr. H says to everyone else. No one responds.

The floorboards creak as he gets up and begins to make his way through this gothic pile of a home. The path to the door is not very direct and so he has to wind through the Sitting Room, Salon and Visiting Room before he reaches the Entry Hall. When he opens the door, he sees Mr. Y, a tall regal man with bright skin and Ms. S, a sickly woman with open weeping sores.

“Welcome,” Mr. H says. “You are right on time.”

“Is no one else here yet?” Ms. S asks.

“Yes, everyone is here but the Twins and Ms. N,” replies Mr. H.

“I’m sure she’ll want to make a grand entrance,” Mr. Y comments scathingly.

“Best not speak ill of her,” Ms. S says, looking scandalized. “She’s very powerful.”

“Nonsense.” Mr. Y says, angrily.

“May I show you to the Grand Dining Room?” asks Mr. H, looking concerned.

They both nod, and he leads the way. “Here are your seats. Ms. S, you are here, last on the right, and you, Mr. Y are here third on the left.”

They both nod in gratefulness.

After a few minutes, there was a loud sound from the front of the house, and the hound that’s prone to haunting the stairwell began to bark frantically. Mr. G rolls his eyes while Miss H and Ms. S both sigh in annoyance. Mr. H just frowns.

Mr. Y says “Here we go again...”

Into the Grand Dining Room storms an enormous woman clothed in flowing black robes.

“Hello, everyone,” she booms.

“Ms. N, your seat is over here, between Mr. Y and Mr. G,” Mr. H, who has no time for her nonsense, says.

“Is He here yet?” Ms. N asks.

“No. No, you know He always waits until everyone else is here so He can make a big spectacle of Himself, rather like you, Ms. N,” replies Miss H.

“And the twins are rather late now, He won’t be happy about that,” Mrs. A says.

Mr. M starts to cackle.

“Shhh,” frets Ms. S, “Don’t talk like that, stop that, we’d better just sit and wait quietly.”

The clock chimes seven-fifteen.

Time passes.

All at once several things begin to happen.

The house trembles, as if the building is being pulled towards the center of the earth.

Every one of the candles goes out.

A cloud of smoke engulfs the room.

And a Man, in a Suit like Fire, suddenly appears in His appointed seat at the head of the table. “*Well, well, well,*” the man says, “What a *lovely* little gathering for me to pop into.”

The flickering of a cigarette lighter emerges in the darkness. It is Mr. H, looking utterly displeased, as he tries to relight all the candles he had carefully positioned on the table and in the Chandelier.

“Oh, *darling*, do let me take care of that, will you?” The Man in the Suit like Fire sitting at the head of the table says, looking completely entertained by the expression on Mr. H’s face.

Instantaneously, all the candles are lit. But not by the pleasant shimmering light that candles are supposed to have, but with a violent, angry red-orange light, not unlike hellfire.

Mr. H notices the staggering amount of candle wax that was spilled all over his Grand Dining Room. He becomes even more displeased, for he knows he now has a huge mess to clean up tomorrow.

The Man with the Suit like Fire, who was reclining in the seat at the head of the table, clinks his spoon against his wineglass to regather everyone's attention, and says, “Welcome everyone, *welcome*, before we *officially* bring this meeting to order I'd like *to say a few words*.” His tone grows more serious (but only slightly), “First, I'd like to thank our *dear* host for *graciously* providing a meeting place this year.” Mr. H frowns and Mr. M, whose eyes are weirdly reflecting the strange candlelight, begins to grin. “Second, my *dearest* of colleagues, I believe *this* will be *our* year.” Ms. A bears her teeth like a smile again and Ms. N tosses her hair proudly. “*Finally* our time in the darkness, excuse my pun,” He gives Ms. N a naughty look, “will be *over!* It will be our time to ‘shine,’ as I believe they say, and everyone else,” The Man with the Suit like Fire stands and his inflection, and voice grow louder and more passionate, “will get *to live in darkness, suffer as we've suffered*, yes my friends, THIS IS THE YEAR--”

The doorbell suddenly rings, interrupting the Man with the Suit like Fire, loud and clanging like a church bell (even the hound that’s prone to haunting the stairwell knows better than to bark while the Man with the Suit like Fire is in residence).

The Man with the Suit like Fire frowns, possibly upset that his moment had been ruined, “What is that *infernal* clanging?”

“The doorbell, Sire,” Mr. H replies dryly.

“What?! This meeting was to begin *half an hour* ago, who could we *possibly* still be missing?” The man with the Suit like Fire rages.

All the other people at the table look nervously at one another until Ms. N, who can’t resist a chance to stir up trouble replies, “The twins of course! Mr. P and Mr. D!”

“*My god*, hah, you get it? You all are getting so new fashioned

with these nonsensical names. I *command* you quit it at once. What I'm *going to do to P-*"

"Sire, would you like me to answer the door?" Mr. H asks, as the doorbell had not stopped ringing.

"Yes! Yes, *of course* I would, good heavens," the Man with the Suit like Fire laughs heartily, "What do you *think* I want you to do, *sit around* like a useless *lump!*?" He asks Mr. H with fury that is quite alarming (especially given his laughter only a moment ago). Mr. O has to stifle a chuckle at this outburst.

"Of course, Sire. Please feel free to remain here and get comfortable, everyone. I will only be a moment retrieving the latecomers." Mr. H says hurriedly, looking harried.

Mr. H rushes to the Entry Hall, and when he opens the door he whispers, "Hurry up you two, you are very late, and He is extremely upset."

The two men, who had looked quite jolly when the door had been opened, now look as though they'd seen ghosts. Mr. H rushes them back to the Grand Dining Room, but when they arrive the room, once again, is pitch black. Mr. H frowns (although no one can see it) and struggles to return to his seat in the darkness.

Then, from somewhere far above in the high cavernous ceiling a single light dimly illuminated the room and a booming Voice that seemed to shake the house, rang out, "*PHOBOS AND DEIMOS, WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY FOR YOURSELVES? WHAT EXCUSE OR EXPLANATION CAN YOU PROVIDE? YOU ARE OVER HALF AN HOUR LATE TO OUR MEETING AND HAVE THUS DELAYED PROCEEDINGS.*"

The latecomers appeared terrified, for the pair had begun shaking in their leather boots.

The Voice continued, "*FOR THIS VERY SAME OFFENSE I HAVE SENTENCED OTHERS TO ETERNAL PAIN AND SUFFERING WITHIN THE DEPTHS OF MY UNEARTHLY REALM. I COULD SENTENCE YOU TO BILLIONS OF YEARS OF AGONY. LONGER THAN THE EARTH HAS EXISTED OR WILL EVER EXIST. FOR MILLENIA YOU WOULD FACE THE MOST EXTREME PAIN I, OR ANYONE ELSE, COULD IMAGINE. IN MY EVER-EXPANDING EMPIRE, YOU WOULD FACE THE WORST OF ALL EXISTENCE AND NONEXISTENCE. I COULD CAST YOU INTO THE*

DEEPEST REACHES OF MY KINGDOM, PLACES YOU COULD NOT HOPE TO ENDURE OR ESCAPE, PLACES EVEN I, YOUR LEADER, YOUR GRAND LORD OF THE FLIES, BANE OF ALL HUMANITY, FEARED BY ALL GODLY BEINGS, SUPREME RULER OF THE GAPING PIT OF HELL BENEATH THE EARTH, THE GREAT AND TERRIBLE MEPHISTOPHELES DARE NOT EVEN VENTURE, THERE, I COULD SEND YOU.” At this point both of the twins fainted from fear, and yet the Voice, which belonged to the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles, continued, after a spectral hand waved and Mr. P and Mr. D were inexplicably revived, “AND YET I WILL NOT DO THESE HORRIFIC, YET JUSTIFIABLE THINGS. DO YOU KNOW WHY, UNWORTHY TWINS?”

Mr. P shook his head meekly and tried not to cry, but Mr. D raised his hand (it was shaking from fear). The Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles nodded, and Mr. D began to speak, “B- because you n-need a Quorum m-my L-lord, my righteous a-and horrific S-sire?”

“PRECISELY, *DEIMOS*, I NEED A *QUORUM* FOR THIS MEETING TO CONTINUE AND WE HAVE *SERIOUS BUSINESS* TO ATTEND TO. I COMMAND YOU AND YOUR *WORTHLESS BROTHER* TO TAKE YOUR SEATS. AND I WILL LET YOU OFF WITH A *WARNING* THIS TIME. YOUR WARNING IS THUS: *ONE MORE MISSTEP AND EVERY HORROR I HAVE PROMISED YOU WILL BECOME YOURS IN AN INSTANT.*”

Mr. P and Mr. D practically trip over themselves trying to get to their seats, the last two on the right, thanking and praising the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles profusely the whole way.

The candles relit themselves for the second time, again burning with that with a violent angry red-orange light, that probably *was* hellfire. Mr. H again notices that even more candle wax has been spilled all over his Grand Dining Room and his expression once again grows dour; he knows he now has even more to clean up tomorrow.

The Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles was once again reclining in His chair, but He now had a stony crown upon His brow. He said, “Now that that is settled, let's call this meeting to order, *Secretary* are you prepared to take minutes?” Miss H nods, so He continues, “Then I shall begin to take roll. I, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity, Supreme Ruler of Hell, and President of this board, *Mephistopheles* am here. Ruler of the *Du 'at*, Reborn *King of the Dead* with Blue Skin, former *Pharaoh* and *Vice President of the Board*, *Osiris*, are you in attendance?” Mr. O, Osiris, answered affirmatively for the record.

“Very well, Ruler of *Helheim*, Custodian of the Dead, *Lady of the Double Faces*, *Daughter of Loki* and *Secretary of this Board*, *Hela*, you are also in attendance, no?” Miss H, *Hela*, nods.

The Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles continues, “Is the *Guardian of the South*, *First-to-Die*, Reborn King of the Dead with *Green Skin*, son of *Surya* and *Treasurer of this Board*, *Yama* here?” Mr. Y, *Yama*, answers affirmatively for the record.

“Is the Ruler of *Asphodel Fields*, the *Fields of Punishment* and *Elysium*, husband of *Persephone*, son of *Kronos*, Patron of *Wealth* and *Funerary Rites*, *Hades* in attendance?” Mr. H, *Hades*, nods.

“Is the Ruler of *Mictlan*, *Husband of Mictecacihuatl*, Patron of *Owls*, *Mictlantecuhtli* here?” Mr. M, *Mictlantecuhtli*, nods.

The Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles continues, “Is the *Goddess of Darkness*, *Daughter of Chaos*, Mother of a thousand monsters and *Destroyer of Heroes*, *Nyx* here? Ms. N, *Nyx*, answers affirmatively with a coquettish smile, “Why, you flatter me, *Sire!*”

The Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles, ignores her and continues, almost in a drone at this point, “Is the *God of Old Age*, feared by *all mortals*, son of *Nyx*, *Geras* here?” Mr. G, *Geras*, had to be awoken before he could answer for the record, as in the intervening hours since his arrival, he'd drifted off to sleep.

“Is the *Goddess of Poison*, the *Goddess of Misery*, *Daughter of Chaos*, whose visage the mighty *Hercules* chose to paint on his shield, *Akhlys*, here in attendance?” Mrs. A nodded sweetly.

“Is the *Goddess of Smallpox*, the *Cool One*, *Guardian of Neem Leaves*, *Sitala*, here in attendance?” Ms. S, *Sitala*, answers

affirmatively for the record.

“I know that the *Twin sons of Aphrodite and Ares*, Phobos and Deimos, *Gods of Panic and Fear* are already here,” the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles, takes a second to glare at Mr. P, Phobos, and Mr. D, Deimos, who both gulp in fear. “So, I will ask instead, is the *Devourer of Heats, Demon of the Du 'at and Goddess of all Demon-hood*, Ammit here?” Ms. A, Ammit, answers affirmatively for the record.

“Good, Good, we’re all here!!!” said the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles with a long sigh, although He just seemed to be delighted to be done calling role, “Now on to New Business!!!”

“Any old business?” Mictlantecuhtl asks in a raspy tone, the first words he’s spoken all night.

“Ugh, *Mictlantecuhtl*, nobody cares about *Old Business!* We’re here for *new business!* Come on, you, people! This meeting is more boring than *church!*” the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles whined.

“Old Business must be resolved before New Business can be introduced.” Mictlantecuhtl stated, “We agreed to follow a derivative of Robert’s Rules of Order during our 1879 meeting, and I *demand we honor our agreed upon procedure.*”

The Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles sighs petulantly but waves his hand towards Nyx and says patronizingly, “Read the Old Business, *‘Miss P’* (he accompanies this last bit with appropriate air quotes).

“Absolutely, Sire,” Hela beams at him. “Actually, Sire, there's only one piece of unresolved business.” She frowns, “It appears to be a motion put forth by Mictlantecuhtl and seconded by former Board members Jormungand and Fenris to make Mictlantecuhtl the president of the Board.”

A literal fire appears on top of the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles head, he was so angry. But Geras spoke up, “Do we have to honor that motion, given that the members who

seconded it are no longer on the Board? Besides I *never* liked that *lousy* upstart Fenris. Did you *hear* what he said about you the other day, Ammit? Because I was *genuinely* surprised you didn't appear right then and there to smite him, it was that *awful*!"

Ammit screeches, "No! I *didn't*! What did he say this time, by Geb he is the *worst*!"

"*And* according to the 1344 amendment to Board rules, we'd need a *unanimous vote* to change the president...," said Hela.

"THAT'S what he *said*, I'm *actually* going to *devour* his *filthy heart* the next time I *see him*!" Ammit shouts, after Geras whispered the nasty comment from Fenris into her ear.

"WHAT?" screams Mictlantecuhtl, "That is so UNFAIR!"

"I KNOW!! And it's not like there was *any* reason for him to say that *either*..." Geras responds.

"Wasn't that amendment passed under duress, when Mephistopheles threatened those of us on the council at the time with eternal annihilation by an army of the undead?" Yama asked.

"Wait, *wait*, WAIT, Geras did you hear what *Ratatosker* was saying about *Kokopelli* and-" Sitala couldn't hold back

A judges gavel suddenly appeared in the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles' hand and he aggressively banged it against the antique Walnut table (designed by *the* Bruce James Talbert) and Hades shudders, just hoping his table (let alone his *house*) will survive the meeting.

The Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles shouts "ORDER, ORDER, ORDER, I CALL THIS MEETING TO ORDER," everyone falls silent, "I move to *dismiss* the old business, we all know this motion will *not* pass and that I, who have been the president of this board since the *epic* meeting of 1229 when I *violently* wrested control from Uranus, will not be overthrown and there is *no way* that a unanimous vote will pass because if you vote against me, I'll *damn you forever*!" he continues cheerfully.

"I second the motion to dismiss old business," Akhlys says.

"Then let's put it to a vote," the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles says.

"And remember, only a simple majority is needed here, and

you can abstain,” Hela says primly.

“All in favor, say ‘Aye’” the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles says.

Yama, Osiris, Akhlys, Phobos, Deimos and Mephistopheles all said “AYE”.

“All not in favor say “Nay,” Hela said.

Mictlantecuhtl said “NAY”. Everyone else abstained from voting.

“The ‘Ayes’ have it, motioned passed, Old Business dismissed,” the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles said and banged his gavel on the table again, just for effect. Hades winced.

“And *Finally*, holy hell, *New Business*,” the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles said with a long sigh of exasperation, “I’d like to introduce a motion to *immediately* put into action our long-standing plan to *conquer* the *earth*, *destroy* mankind, let the dead *wander* the world, kill *all* mortals and plunge the planet into *eternal despair and darkness* while we rule it and so on and so forth.”

“I second that motion,” Phobos and Deimos said, immediately, and in unison.

“I move that the floor be opened for discussion on this motion, before we put it to a vote,” Osiris says quickly, and Mephistopheles groans, muttering “damn *discussion*, *always* some *damn discussion*,” under his breath.

Sitala said, “I second that motion.”

Hela said, “All in favor of opening the floor for discussion of our long-standing plan to conquer the earth, destroy mankind, let the dead wander the world, kill all mortals and plunge the planet into eternal despair and darkness while we rule it and so on and so forth, say Aye.”

Osiris, Sitala, Hades, Nyx, Hela, Yama and Geras all said “Aye”.

“The floor is open for discussion,” Hela said.

“What could there *possibly* be to discuss? This has been our goal since the *very beginning* of this board!” the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles complained.

Nyx spoke up, her voice, for once, in a serious tone, “Do we have the funds to be making such an aggressive move? Will we have the support of our ‘allies’? Because *you all* know how things went the *last time* we tried thi-”

“What? Fine! What is the state of our finances, Yama? Will we be able to fund these ambitious plans?” the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles said.

“Because we are all literal gods, Sire, we have access to unlimited resources, and if the board approves them, our expenditures will be fully funded with no financial detriment to ourselves or the board,” Yama answered succinctly.

“Fine,” Nyx said, “But still the question of *support* remains unanswered. Will we have the backing of the ghosts, ghouls, all other spirits, ogres, giants and other magical beings? Will we have the support of the creatures of the night *and* all of Demon-kind?”

Ammit spoke up, “Demon-kind stands by you. There *was* a small petition from some of the Ice Giants to abandon the effort, but that can easily be amended by agreeing to promise them Antarctica when we finish conquering the realms.”

“Thank you, Ammit,” Mephistopheles interrupted, “Can we *please* put it to a vote now?”

“No. I don’t think this has addressed all of my concerns yet,” Osiris said, “What kind of opposition will we be facing? What are your plans for the immortal beings? Can we really advance our plans if other gods or heroes choose to fight us?”

Deimos spoke up before anyone else could, “Those are sound concerns. However, I can assure you that all the titans and many gods are at least sympathetic to our cause and some, like our father,” Deimos gestured towards Phobos, “will even be prepared to fight with us.”

“That is true,” Hela said. “Many of my kin are also tiring of the old ways and desire a change, it could be very easy to sway many of them to our side.”

“And what of their children? The heroes?” asked Hades.

“I will devour them,” Ammit declared.

“I will open the ground and Mictlan will swallow them,” Mictlantecuhtli said.

“I will make them all grow old,” Geras suggested.

“And sick,” Sitala added.

“And *miserable*,” Akhlys contributed maliciously.

This seemed to please Hades and Osiris.

“I move to close the floor from discussion,” Yama said.

“I second that,” Phobos and Deimos said, immediately, in unison.

“All in favor of closing the floor from discussion of our long-standing plan to conquer the earth, destroy mankind, let the dead wander the world, kill all mortals and plunge the planet into eternal despair and darkness while we rule it and so on and so forth, say Aye.” Hela said.

Every member of the Board said “Aye”.

“The ‘Ayes’ have it, let the floor be closed from discussion of our long-standing plan to conquer the earth, destroy mankind, let the dead wander the world, kill all mortals and plunge the planet into eternal despair and darkness while we rule it and so on and so forth,” said Hela.

“Let’s put it to a vote then,” the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles said. “All in favor of *finally* putting into action our long-standing plan to *conquer* the *earth*, *destroy* mankind, let the dead *wander* the world, kill *all* mortals and plunge the planet into *eternal despair and darkness* while we rule it and so on and so forth say Aye.”

Everyone at the table said “Aye”.

“It is decided then, unanimously, let it be recorded,” the Man with the Suit like Fire, Lord of the Flies, Bane of Humanity and Supreme Ruler of Hell, Mephistopheles said, banging his gavel enthusiastically on the table again.

This time, Hades did *not* wince. He did *not* flinch, and he *did not* frown. In fact, for the first time in a *very long time*, Hades began to smile. He knew that by the time tomorrow rolled around, it *wouldn’t matter* what his dining room table *or* his Grand Dining Room *or even* his house looked like. He and the other members of the Board would be *all-powerful*, and maybe he would *finally* be able to force his lousy servants to clean his house for him.

maphiohanzia

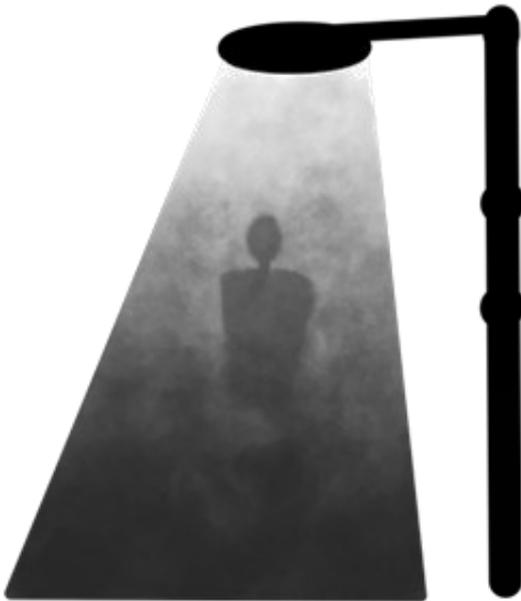
n. the disappointment of being unable to fly, unable to stretch out your arms and vault into the air.

The winter frost; its
fingers creep up my living
room window like a
young child's. I want it. In
my thin clothes it would kill me.

With What Lurks

AJ Muth

You are taking a walk down the road. You are only illuminated by a singular streetlight. Walk forward. Stop. You hear a second set of feet stop a second after your own. Your pulse quickens. You walk forward again. The steps behind you quicken. STOP. The steps stop. You want to turn around, see what follows you. But you can't, you are paralyzed with fear. It is breathing down your neck. You muster up the last of your courage and slowly turn around.



Digital art by AJ Muth

Step Nine Letter Cat Baxter

it only took a few months for the letter to arrive—
rippled, white, crisp
—it goes unopened and unread, and you do not press for that to
change — you cannot
you already knew that

i wonder if it's blank and void
or an essay of apologies gone unopened
or thick, old, and fraying construction paper painted
with drawings of mine.
or yours.
only you know what it contains and that i might not
you already knew that

i do not burn it the way it burns a hole on my countertop
or crush it the way its pressed and resting against the pages of a book
or toss it with the rest of the mail in the garbage
it stays and i do not do anything about it but i also do not have to
read it

but you already knew that

liberosis

Noah Kocher

liberosis

n. the desire to care less about things—to loosen your grip on your life, to stop glancing behind you every few steps, afraid that someone will snatch it from you before you reach the end zone—rather to hold your life loosely and playfully, like a volleyball, keeping it in the air, with only quick fleeting interventions, bouncing freely in the hands of trusted friends, always in play.

Where have I seen
something like this
before? Where have

I been absorbed
like this
before? It's almost

as if the forest has
reached up
and eaten me whole.

When—has this
happened
Before?

If this is what
birth
and death
feel like, then maybe

I'm not afraid
to live.





Collage by Noah Kocher

Fishing

anchorage

n. the desire to hold on to time as it passes, like trying to keep your grip on a rock in the middle of a river, feeling the weight of the current against your chest while your elders float on downstream, calling over the roar of the rapids, "Just

The sun attacked from multiple angles, its light ricocheting off the water like so many arrows to converge on my brow, my hands, my eyes, and the shining pile of flesh between us from which danced the swirling smell of brine. You told me it was all about patience and being still. Patience. I could feel the tops of my ears reddening by the second. The lapping of waves has always made me queasy, but today I wished the bay would show some signs of hidden life, and that the life might move towards my line. I waited, searching the surface for ripples. Patiently. No movement revealed itself.

Enticed by visions of air conditioning and cold lemonade, I gave up. If you were disappointed, you didn't show it. I can't remember if I searched the lines of your face for an indication: a furrowing of the brow or a squinting of the eyes (did you tell me to keep trying? did you help me put my line away? or did I simply leave you there at the end of the dock, waiting exactly as still and exactly as patiently and a little more alone than before). I must not have taken note—I must have sat inside, lounging and sipping my lemonade in bold defiance of that crushing force I could not yet detect. In retrospect, it was omnipresent. Every time you drove me to camp or took me out for ice cream, the future grew smaller. Every time you offered to teach me how to shell crabs, how to steer the boat, how to play spades. Every time I declined.

Every time I failed to catch a fish.

It wasn't until two summers ago, hiding just around the corner to listen to the grown-ups talk, that I felt it. It came suddenly and all at once. My mom would tell me later that you've never been good at talking about your feelings. I wonder if it would have been easier in your first language, if you wouldn't have gotten so angry. I wonder if I wouldn't have tiptoed away down the dark hallway only a couple minutes later, choking back tears in an attempt not to be

heard, only to trip over my own feet as the floor engaged in a nauseous tilt as if the hallway itself was choking, too, around the foreign object of my presence.

I couldn't sleep that night through my own breathing and the quick, soft sounds of my parents' last-minute packing in the other room. In the morning, they told me what I already knew—we're going home early. We wouldn't know until that winter that we would never have a chance to come back, but we already knew it would never be the same. It hadn't been, really, for years, in ways that I didn't want to think mattered. Your new wife had repainted walls and reupholstered chairs. She had taken down old pictures and hung up new ones, she had moved in her couch and put her little things on shelves that used to hold familiar trinkets in a room that used to feel like mine. In a house that used to feel like home, the last remnant of that feeling being you.

You, of course, and the queasy lapping of the waves, and the taste of fresh crab, and the same board games behind new cabinet doors, and the swirling smell of brine, and the tang of lemonade sipped with no sense of rush as the ice cubes melted and the clock ticked and as you fished alone.

goodbye, goodbye

e.a.l.

this will be my winter of discontent
the beginning of the end of this good thing
this warm spring
this peaceful rest
the coming storm will interrupt
my personal descent

why can't I keep my mourning
for when it's already gone
why can't I wait for the proper time
to begin to cry
preemptive disappointment

for the last of the leaves to fall
for the frost to settle in
for this final day of sunlight
for your last sweet kiss
for you to turn your back
for our final good-bye

i miss you already

