April 2015

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND MISSION STATEMENTS**

The editors wish to thank Western Michigan University’s Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College.

The mission of the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College is to provide an exceptional undergraduate experience for high achieving students, to inspire in our graduates a thirst for the lifelong pursuit of creative inquiry and discovery, to provide our students with the skill and passion to address critical challenges, and to foster personal responsibility informed by a global perspective.

The Laureate’s mission is to provide undergraduate students at Western Michigan University a place in which to publish their works of fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and other creative works. The Laureate strives to be a professional and engaging journal that appeals to all.
LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

The 14th edition of The Laureate is comprised of works that demonstrate the diverse talent of the undergraduate body of Western Michigan University. The various pieces of artwork, fiction, photography, and poetry found in this journal capture the creative essence of the university in the idea that it takes an assortment of differing components to make one harmonious unit. We received a plethora of eloquent, innovative, and ingenious submissions this year that made the selection of works for this edition both challenging and enjoyable. We thoroughly appreciate the eagerness and willingness of undergraduate students to share their work.

This journal would not be possible without the constant support of the Lee Honors College or the tireless efforts of the students and faculty who worked on this project. Thank you to the Design Center and Gwen Frostic School of Art for their contributions and especially to Nick Kuder, Paul Sizer, Trevor Hissong and Andy Zvonek for their diligent work. We would also like to thank the editorial board for their help in promoting, selecting, and editing various pieces for this edition. Emily Recchia, Adrianna Robinson, and Kimberly Smith were a crucial resource throughout this process.

This year, The Laureate got to expand its possibilities and deepen the reader’s experience through the addition of audio recordings online. This feat would never have been possible without the help of the WMU Sound Studios, especially John Campos and Alexander Tobin. Alex spent an extraordinary amount of time recording and editing our authors reading their pieces. This allows our readers the rare experience of hearing a work read the way the author intends it to be. We are incredibly thankful to be a part of this expansion and hope that it will continue to be a part of The Laureate down the line.

The faculty of the Lee Honors College also proved an amazing resource and we are so thankful for Dr. Carla Koretsky, Jane Baas, and Jennifer Townsend for their unending support. Our gratitude for Becky Cooper cannot be expressed enough. She has been an incredible mentor throughout this process. The Laureate would not be the respectable scholarly journal that it is without her constant enthusiasm and dedication for not only the project itself, but the students behind it. Her advice and guidance is invaluable to us as English majors pursuing careers in the publishing field and it has been an honor to work with her.

Our time as Co-Editors-in-Chief of the 14th edition of The Laureate has been one of the most valuable experiences in our English education. It has taught us the true processes that go behind the scenes to develop a literary publication, the amount of effort editors put into a published piece, as well as the degree to which authors and editors collaborate to strengthen and polish a piece into a meaningful literary work. It is an experience that will stay with us throughout our future endeavors. We now invite you to enjoy the work that is the 14th edition of The Laureate.

DJ DeLong & Samantha McVeigh
Co-Editors-in-Chief
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I have never walked across a stage as though it was a rug.
Some nights
all I dream about are words,
I wish I could write them all down,
and read them to you
as if they would soothe your thundering snores.

Most mornings
I wake up with a sore jaw
from long nights of grinding teeth,
but you say it has the same effect on you
that the rhythmic beat of a heart has on me.

Some days
I trip over the toes of my shoes.
I have learned to never fear puddles
against my sly sneakers,
because I lived by a river that was much greater.

Some days
I am far too excited for the first snowfall,
my eyes change color when the world turns white,
and I love how it feels to have to protect yourself.
I have never worn my hair up in public.

Some days
I try to forget about the ocean,
because the vast unknown shakes me to my core,
and I have tried to never sink to the bottom of anything.

One day
I realized how fragile this world has become,
how we could pick things up and drop them off
like pebbles
and never look back.
Where does neurology end, and the spirit begin?

Looking glass eyes beam blue out of blonde bangs, gazing at the Little Dipper scooping cloudy lint-balls from the wet blue-jean pockets of space.

Baggy pajama bottom heels sop in the shallow celestial reflection where sagging dock tucks under rising water. Cereal bowl full of starlight, she stands on the spoon handle.

Thirteenth year of mind, bones shying from thirty nine and they bow, both bending backwards in semicircle against Gravity, possibility, and everything else.

Cold ribs echo each other’s rick-tick-tickey, creaking in harmony with wet timbers. Seaweed sucking on toes seducing her muscles into a slow, spasmodic sleep. She falls.

Heel to sky and skull to dock, where it rots and a flash! heat lighting strikes the blue sky lavender, velveteen veins pump life into the lake like a hot spring from her head.

Lavender to pink, pink to yellow, and peach, orange with indigo roll around red streaks and red.

The thunder purrs like the crackly reassurance of old sleeping cats.

A bead of sun bitten by the wind, celestial fruit juice dripping and mixing and dancing into the water. The hysteries of hues settling back behind the tree line, an interstellar blanket of nightfall pulled over her again.

She lay in the wetness of the world as developing film, seeping dreams from her skull. Neosporin does nothing for neurosis, she’s mesmerized by the midnight map she can’t decipher, asking the universe questions it is unable to answer.

“Where does space begin and the Earth end?”

Mother maple weeps low and slow and heavy down around her, wispy fingertips reading the water’s textures in brail, a book bound on heart monitor horizon lines. Still water reflects still sky.
C H E M I C A L  E X C E P T I O N
Maura Sands

It was the weakness of hydrogen bonds that connected us
And somehow we’d metamorphosed from studying molecules
To something a little more like anatomy.
Laws of physics say materials expand in the cold
But 6 months of frozen makes water mold closer together
So somehow I thought we’d keep breaking and bonding,
Opposing,
Because we’d spent time under the igloo of my comforter
Sharing secrets over our barely burning fire
Trying to melt the cold logic just outside.
Hoping that through the adding of spring
And our history, I could achieve covalence.
But when our two substrates mixed
You were the limiting reactant
The rest forming a compound I couldn’t take back.
And I was left with only the excess of me.
I didn’t know who to tell.
I only watched those long days stretch on as my father would leave to come see you, to take you from place to place, whisking you away from treatment to treatment. I would watch as my mother retreated further and further into herself as you followed suit. I would watch as my mother retreated further and further into herself as you followed suit. I did, too. When I came back to school they all wondered where I had been, and all I said was that I was okay, that it would all be okay, that we could be okay, that, please, I was really going to be fine. I smiled as they all talked in hushed tones.

“He hasn’t been himself,” one would say.
“I’m not sure what he’s waiting for,” said another.
“How long do you think he’ll last?” a third would ask.

But please, don’t blame yourself. I couldn’t hear them, that litany of voices thrumming in the background, like the rhythm your body refused to circulate, the pace your life now refused to take. The silence played itself into the hymnal of you that was taking shape right before me, taking in shapes I didn’t recognize and couldn’t name, a book of prayers that wouldn’t be heard.

I didn’t know what would happen.

We were led into that room together. Children that we were. One by one, one following another. We children of childhood begotten from our parents’ parenthood. Generations in sync, together. The divide defined. That lifeless room. Sterilized with tears and hope. I remember that room. It housed all of us. Together in that room, a family of faults, held together by failures forgotten. We just held each other all. We cried communal tears. No one said how scared they were. More than scared, we were altogether loved.

“I’m going to be here,” my father, your brother, said to you.
“You’ll be okay,” your son said.
“What’s going to happen?” my sister asked.

And then we all watched as the synod of professionals gathered. They pulled you in every direction but towards us. They anointed you in purple. They dressed you in that gown alien to me. A beautiful mix of red and blue. The color of queens, bestowed upon you.

I didn’t know what to say to them.

You. You who could never die, who had too much to live for, who would see us kids grow and graduate, who had to be the exceptional case, because how could you not be? We watched as you showed yourself, again and again, for everyone to see.

We watched you paraded through the streets, as a beacon of strength to all others. I asked my father what was happening, and he said nothing. I asked my sister if she understood, and she said she didn’t. I asked your children if they needed anything, and they only shrugged.

And it was then that I wondered if you had ever been what we had thought, if you could have ever been what we so desperately needed. The christened figure for all of us, the centrality to a creed we no longer shared—you could feel the schisms running deep through every bond became different denominations to the story no one knew how to tell anymore—had left us necrotic, like Lazarus four days dead, untouched by his prince. And then we would be there together, a family of corpses standing for every one lying down, looking at that old oaken box holding the image of what you should have been (you were only an icon now), and we would listen to that clothed man proselytizing on and on about the virtues of you, all the while we would stand there together, hand-in-hand (but with arms crossed), shoulder-to-shoulder (with words crossed), side-to-side (with hopes and visions and revelations crossed), and we would look down into that aging box before us and see you lying there in purple, that beautiful hue, the color of royalty (it only sickened when adorned on you), and we would sing our holiest praises on and on and on until they became nothing more than liturgical phrases, devoid of the meaning they once held.

“One-in-a-million,” they would call you.
“She was a fighter,” you could hear.
“A good person,” I would be told.

Those people, those hundreds of people. They would gather for every milestone, every fundraiser, every procession, and for every vigil. Peters and Pauls and Jameses who would tell anyone who would listen about what it was that you would mean and what you would decide in your absence. I only bore witness to the good deeds they assumed, the parts of themselves that they made through you. Self-appointed apostles. Purple ribbons on every lapel like their own personal crosses to bear, they stood watch over you as a congregation of believers, believing altogether in the miracle of you. When they looked to me from their good works and asked me where I fit in, I told them I didn’t know.

I didn’t know where to look.

After three days, when that little piece of all of us that was named after you called out hopefully for its lost love, I went to look for you. We waited for you to rise like rain again, to fall down from the cross you had been crucified to (how else to explain
the holes in your skin?), to come from your tomb and tell us to hush hush, peace was with us now, and also with you. I searched all of the rooms of your house. I searched all of your favorite places. It'd been so long since I'd seen you, like years now that never were, that I just didn't know where to look. I just knew that I wanted to see you, to find you, to tell you everything you had missed, to see you laugh at something again, to hear you teach me one of those millions of parables that I didn't know, the things only you could have, the secrets that you knew.

“I miss her,” I told my father.
“Do you think she’ll ever come back?” I asked.

I never got an answer from him. And I don't know why I keep asking, but I do. One pain transferred by blood to another, the assumption of guilt borne full. We're trapped here forever now, languishing in that limbo between what it was that you meant and what it was that we only thought you did. To hear you again, to have you back, could set right the lonely infinity to come, to show us all what we were supposed to take away from all of this. How good it all could be, if you rose again like we thought you would.

“I miss her,” he said to me.

I didn’t know how to speak.

After it was over and you were only an idea once again, I was with the man you left me with, that man who had been my father, left with the boy who had been his son, empty (both) from the spirit that had once conspired to keep them together. The two of us you left behind, we now had to explain to each other what it was that you meant to either, and saw that we couldn’t.

“Where were you? Where were you all that time?” he asked.

“I'm sorry,” I said.

“I'm not enough,” he said.

As we looked into that box I saw all that I could remember of you, and I wished then that you would come back, if but only for a moment, I would have shown you all of the lines on your face, the lines that were never there before, the lines etched permanently now into your skin that spoke in a past language (long dead), like ancient carvings in an even more ancient stone, about how you, this woman (they called you Christ, a name I didn't recognize), how much you meant to me and me alone, and how much I needed you to mean to me. I would have told you all and everything to keep you there for a little longer, to keep you long enough to notice that I couldn't speak, that there was nothing I could say, nothing that would make it better, and nothing that would bring any of you back, because I wished in that moment that you would come back, hoped against hope you could be there to judge all of us again, like you would all those times before, I wished you were there to translate my silence to a family who silence inspired, but you weren't.

I didn’t know what to do.

All those long, long nights you spent in a bed that wasn’t yours with only your brother to keep you safe. I told myself that it would be tomorrow. Tomorrow I would come, and tomorrow I would say all of those things you wanted to hear. I would tell you I loved you and know that that was all you needed, just to hear that I loved you, that now you could pull all of those painful tubes from your arms and take those thin needles from your even thinner veins and you could be cured and we could laugh at how silly all of that was, how silly it was for those people to worry and call you those names, and how silly it was for those doctors to tell you all of those long, cold things when all you need to hear was “I love you.” But I didn’t.

Tommorows stretched on forever without ever knowing today and today became months and I still didn’t see you.

“Where have you been? She needs you,” my father would scream at me.

“Don’t yell at him, it’s fine, she understands,” my mother would say.

“Please, take me to see her, I need you to do this,” my sister would plead.

But I didn’t. Please don’t be mad, I wanted to so badly, but by the time I did you were someone else, someone I couldn’t see you in, and I was so, so scared. When I finally saw you I saw them canonizing you and I didn't know what it was that I was supposed to do. A name in all the tongues I couldn’t pronounce. When I came to see you, you were gone. An indentation on the bed where you would sit, beers in the fridge where you would drink, a car doomed to sit in the driveway forever. No more, no more. I called to these empty images, asked them to reveal to me the woman inspired by them. I cried to the bed and the bottle, I begged myself to the car. They didn’t miss you.

I didn’t know how to stop them.

We all held our hands to catch you, and we couldn’t understand why you wouldn’t hold, why your form fell between our fingers. No one noticed when I stopped trying and started only watching, watching as they all held out all of their fingers netted together trying to catch the melting, waxy fat that had become you. All that time they knew we were losing you.

“When she’s better,” it had started.

“When it’s over,” you once told.
“When she’s gone,” we now said.

As you were lying there, I couldn’t help but notice them carving the hardened wax of you into pieces, calling each a relic of the saint we all remembered, except for those of us who didn’t, wouldn’t, anymore. And as you stayed up sleepless, we did, too, all of us children, every day becoming aged and old like those beloved who preceded us, those beloved who were leaving us, and we wanted to call out for you. You could have heard your name in the silence between us, and you could have called out, too. We sat up together listening most nights for your breath carried by a breeze to cull us from our bedrooms to come, to see you once before you had to go. All of us, children no more, eyes averted, stared instead at the ground between us, wondering who would be the first to speak, the first to be possessed by your ghost, to come forth and bring you to the others. None of us ever did.
Wilkes was thinking of his daughter’s hair bows when his truck collided with the deer. His head smacked into the steering wheel then snapped back against his seat. His daughter died on a Sunday in the rain. There was the sparkling sound of shattering glass and a shrieking whine as the engine died down. Greasy smoke snaked out of the hood. Wilkes’ vision shook and all his nerves screamed in pain. The large heaving body leaning against his windshield writhed around until it was free of the wreck, and then it loped soddenly into the trees, neck hanging at an odd angle.

Wilkes opened his complaining door and took appraisal of the situation. His truck had swerved to the side of the dirt road, piling mud around his tires. The hood of his powder blue ’83 GMC Sierra was bent in a slight v and the windshield was webbed and bloodied in several places. Wilkes retrieved his Browning bolt-action from out of the back, and checked that there was a round in the breech. His left leg, from his knee down to his foot, felt as though it had been attached to him backwards, and walking in this frontwards way was pulling against its nature and so causing a great strain. His head stormed with the strength of ten of his worst hangovers of the back, and checked that there was a round in the breech. His left leg, from his knee down to his foot, felt as though it had been attached to him backwards, and walking in this frontwards way was pulling against its nature and so causing a great strain. His head stormed with the strength of ten of his worst hangovers.

Wilkes’ daughter died the way in which all young daughters die—in a shocking way that inevitably leads to the father blaming himself. Her name was Sarai, and she pictured her mother as a princess-servant who had a biological imperative to make sure everything was clean all of the time, and her father as the well-read hairy beast who at the oddest times would roar and lash out his claws. Together they lived in a dustless house off of a dirt road and lived quiet, angry, TV dinner lives. Wilkes often thought but never admitted to his wife that there are two types of parents in the world: those that say “If I had all the money in the world I would give you x and y” and those that say “I have given you x and y, now do as I say and be good.” They were the former set.

One blistering afternoon, Sarai went out to play with a friend and came back two years later.

It had rained all throughout the previous night and into the early morning hours, so the ground was still churned with thick mud. The cloven tracks of the deer leading away from the crash were prominent. Wilkes could tell by their distances that the deer had an odd gait most likely due to injury. Possibly a leg was twisted or snapped. Wilkes thought how these creatures had an amazing resilience and stamina. That, coupled with the adrenaline-filled panic surging in the deer’s bosom, drove it away to what it saw as safety. Maybe it foresaw its end and simply wished for a peaceful place to lie. Or perhaps it searched for a water source.

The tracks followed the downward slope of the land, and Wilkes thought he remembered that there was a large pond in this area, at the bottom of the valley. Hunters would come and gather round, for the wildlife oft visited the pool. But more and more, they were learning the error of their ways. First the deer, when they witnessed their ilk dying off, and then Wilkes and his fellow hunters, when the deer changed water sources. Spots of blood were brushed against dead leaves and bark. The animal was struggling, had struggled. Wilkes felt in himself a strange pity. But it was hard to have pity for something so noble. Intermittently he wiped away blood droplets that fell from his forehead and onto his nose.

Eventually the cakey mud was replaced with clumps of wild grass and underbrush. The tracking grew more subtle. Padded down weeds. Clumps of mud thrown up. The tracks followed the downward slope of the land, and Wilkes thought he remembered that there was a large pond in this area, at the bottom of the valley. Hunters would come and gather round, for the wildlife oft visited the pool. But more and more, they were learning the error of their ways. First the deer, when they witnessed their ilk dying off, and then Wilkes and his fellow hunters, when the deer changed water sources. Spots of blood were brushed against dead leaves and bark. The animal was struggling, had struggled. Wilkes felt in himself a strange pity. But it was hard to have pity for something so noble. Intermittently he wiped away blood droplets that fell from his forehead and onto his nose.

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Two years, three months, and six days after she had disappeared, Wilkes woke one morning to see his daughter now two years older curled in a ball on his doorstep, soaked with dew. She breathed shallowly and did not respond to his touch. He called her mother on the way to the hospital. A balloon of hope rose in Wilkes now that his daughter was physically in reach.

When the gravest doctor the hospital had to offer came to see them in the waiting room Wilkes did not listen to him as he spoke of the various ailments Sarai suffered from, nor when he explained the cocktail of drugs that she had been injected with. He simply asked “is she okay, is she okay?” He did not hear the doctor say that she was dead. He just kept asking is she okay, is she okay, is she okay. He saw the words in his head, felt their numbness on his lips.

The deer lay at the bottom of the incline, spine half-wrapped around the trunk of the tree. On its flank the coat was a darker brown where the truck had carved against it. In its rapid flight the deer had been unable to stop its fall. From what Wilkes could see, at least both of its rear legs had been shattered. The deer still breathed shallowly.

For a moment Wilkes thought that he could just leave the animal to die now, but then he fought against that thought. Its eyes were writhing. It suffered slowly the labor pains of death. Wilkes found a more gradual path around the ridge, and came finally upon his quarry.

She lay there patiently, her only sound the rapid pantings. Her chest seized. Each time it ballooned Wilkes could see the hills of her ribs. She watched him. She seemed so massive, so much bigger than Wilkes and what he had thought of her. He knelt down beside the deer and ran his fingers gently through her rough fur along her back. She watched him.

I know, I know, he said. You wish for this to be finished. I am here. I have come. The deer was silent. She studied him. A long spout of blood ran from his forehead down along his nose and falling off the sides, taking the path normally set aside for tears, coming then to the corners of his mouth. He tasted it, and was content. He felt that he was awake, and that the world that had so long now rejected him had thrown back the shroud, revealing its autumn power and firmness.

Wilkes stood, wiped his face off on his sleeve, and unslung the rifle. Cradled it tightly in his armpit and lowered the barrel towards the animal’s skull. Still she watched him. He breathed deeply and let it out. Breathed deeply and let it out. Slipped his finger around the trigger, feeling it underneath the padding of his index finger. The sky was a shield of gray. The large pond lay there at the bottom of the valley as he suspected, and between the trees he made out the form of a naked woman standing in its shallow murk. He zoomed the scope of his rifle to close in on her, and saw that indeed she had tossed aside her clothes and was making her way into the water. Her breasts were large, pointed things, and her distended belly hung like a boulder. She was pregnant.

A short shockwave blew through Wilkes, and in the backs of his eyes he saw yellow. The deer had kicked the ground in one last pathetic effort to flee for her wretched life. It was then that Wilkes realized he just fired his rifle.

He ran, practically hovering, down the hill.

Shit, he said. Shit, shit, shit. Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit. Oh Lord. Oh shit. The ground seemed to move backwards underneath him, as panic knifed through his chest, until finally he came upon the woman’s body emitting a ghostly light beneath the black water. He ripped off his fleece jacket and managed to kick off one shoe before wading in. He slipped an arm underneath each of her armpits and pulled. He was surprised at the weight, but then he remembered the bulging stomach, and he moved even faster. Wilkes lay her out on the gravelly sand. The woman was alive, and she was slipping into shock.

He felt her pulse. It was barely there, and widely separated. Her lips trembled, a small moan echoed from the cave of her throat.

Why? she said.

The bullet had entered her left breast and exited through her ribs. The blood flowed thickly from her side and pooled around her neck. The woman was pale as a sheet and couldn’t stop shivering. Wilkes was at a loss. He placed a hand on both wounds and applied pressure. The blood merely shot through his fingers like a spring.

You shot me. Why? she asked.

It was an accident. Do you have a cell phone?

Wilkes had nothing but a landline back at the house.

No. It was the first thing I destroyed.

Dammit. It was an accident, miss, I promise you. I was looking at you through the trees and—and somehow the gun fired. I fired the gun.

Feeling helpless, Wilkes slid his fleece jacket around her, lifting her up gingerly to get it around her back. Her hair was wet and snakelike, the color of dark seaweed. Wilkes lifted her up in his arms and his spine lit up with pain.

I’m going to take you to my truck, Wilkes said. You’re going to be okay. What’s your name, miss?

Cassandra. I don’t want to be okay.
What do you mean? You're not well.
I came here to die.
Wilkes did not know how to answer that. He began the march up the hill. His arms were already beginning to shake, but he tensed his muscles.

You have a child, Cassandra. You have to survive for your child.
I'm not going to live. I can feel the life leaving me.

You will live. You'll be okay.
No I won't. I'm going to die. You have to prepare yourself for that inevitability. I am going to die at your hands.

The blood on Wilkes' forehead and nose had coagulated and dried. He could feel the flakes. He was chilled and sweating all over.
How do I know you're not some serial rapist murderer?
Why would I kill you before trying to rape you?
You could be taking me back to your truck to suture my wounds and inject me with a drug that paralyzes me while leaving me conscious to suffer.
I'm not a rapist or a murderer, miss. I'm trying to save you.

The wet ground slid beneath him, but he kept moving. Wilkes thought of the possibilities and watched them all dwindle down to one in his mind. He thought of the reverberations, the lies he could tell, but then realized that there were no lies to save him. The child waited patiently in its mother's womb. The child waited to be delivered. Wilkes wondered if the child could be saved if not the mother.

Cassandra's eyes rolled back and her lips began moving wildly. Spit gathered in the corners of her mouth and her brows furrowed as she was gripped in pain. Her breathing rapidly increased.

Cassandra, Wilkes shouted. Cassandra, please hold on. Talk to me. Talk to me. She was silent, but then she said hoarsely, Damn you. Damn you to hell. Hell's gonna swallow you. Swallow you whole for this.
That's right, Cassandra. Keep talking.
Damn you, I'm in so much pain. It was going to be so easy. But you took it away.
What did I take away?
My death. You took my dying out of my hands. You shot me, and you took the sin away.

Cassandra, now—
I was going to kill myself. I went down there to kill myself.
Why would you do that? Think about your child, dammit. Think about that life.
Because I am pregnant with God's child. He left me with this child in here that I did not want.

A knot of revulsion and nausea was tied and loosed in Wilkes’ belly. His knees wanted to give but he did not let them. They were near the ridge where the deer fell.

That ain't God's child.
Yes. It is.
No it is not. You're talking crazy because you are not well, and you want to place the blame on something else.
But it is you who shot me. You shot me and took the sin.
What?
You shot me and took the sin. Now the sin is on you, as it was on Cain. I wanted the sin but you took it.

Miss.
Wilkes wanted to speak because he believed it kept her alive but he found it hard. His mouth seemed cottony, and he knew eventually his body would stop working. It was only a matter of how long.

Why? Wilkes said. Why not wait at least until you had the child and could give it away?
Because it is God's child. Every child is God's until it leaves its mother. Then it becomes the Devil's. I was trying to save the child and ending my own suffering all at once.

The woman groaned some more. Her skin tone fluctuated from white to green to almost translucent. They passed the ridge and Wilkes could see his truck.
She said through short breaths, Heaven is a waiting womb, warm and silent. It is a rebirth.

Then the woman vomited onto her own face, some getting on Wilkes’ shirt and neck. A thin trail of it ran from her mouth streaming down across his arm. Wilkes lost control and they both collapsed into the dry leaves. He spat and then vomited, as he crouched on all fours. His back arched, and the venomous bile scorched his throat and his nose. His limbs fell in on themselves, and for a heavenly moment he was motionless. Then Cassandra whispered something, and he got back on his knees. He picked Cassandra up as softly as he could and cradled her again in his arms.

Leave me, she whispered.

No, Wilkes shot back.

Leave me, damn you.

Wilkes focused his eyes on the truck through the trees.
Why do you want to kill yourself, woman? Why do you want to die?
Wilkes' stomach felt as though it were a balloon filling at an exponential rate, just waiting to burst all over the forest.

Because. God impregnated me with his child, and then told me I was not pretty enough, and did not love him enough. So he left me for another.

Miss, whoever is the father of this baby, he isn't God.

Who are you to tell me? God is the absent father of all. Invisible and omnipresent.

Wilkes' lungs burned. He had to rest again against the trunk of a tree, but only allowed himself thirty seconds.

Please don't give up. Please don't give up.

Her breaths grew more and more shallow and rapid, until they quieted altogether. She grew limp. He felt the blood that had soaked through his jacket.

They arrived at the truck and Wilkes laid her in the cab, felt her pulse, and felt her pulse again. His vision cracked. He lay his head upon the tight skin of her belly.

You're okay, he said. You're okay, you're okay, you're okay.

Before he crashed he was thinking of the day he found his daughter at his doorstep. They had dressed her up in all new clothes. Even did her hair. He was thinking of the bows they had put in, bright pink bows with white stars.

I don't know much, but I do know one thing:

That nobody who says you ought to reach for the stars considers that it takes eight minutes for the sun itself to reach out its hand to earth and smack with its aurora awake the sleeping, insipid ingrates that it once inspired and some men on the television assure me that this is in itself very impressive, even though it's just the same stupid sun and I see it every day. Or that it would take a wingspan of something like twenty-five point eight trillion imperial miles, and god knows how many units that the imperials themselves use, to rub elbows with the celestials (or twice that considering that basic physiology dictates that your elbow's only ever going to be halfway to where ever the hell it is the rest of you's going) in Alpha Centauri.

This is all to say that this whole thing seems like a lot of work to tell a kid who spends his days wondering which teeth are falling in and out of place and pulling in a star of his own about the things he could accomplish if he told himself enough times that the star he's named all to himself hasn't even yet sent the sunbeams over to planet Earth to tell him to Fuck off, kid, we've got a name.
PROCESS
Marshall Sass
She stands at the pier's end, watching the waves roll below her. The water throws itself around the rigid poles, trying to stay aloft, trying to hold onto some shred of land before getting drawn back out to open sea. The wooden planks snag at her bare soles as she totters back and forth on the balls of her feet, eyeing the distance between her wriggling toes and the surface of the water. How high up is she? Twenty-five feet? Thirty-five? How high does the drop have to be before she plummets and smacks against the water and doesn't resurface? Forty? Fifty? More? She's never been good at judging distances

even as a child. She hadn't known the height of the trees in her backyard. The flat leaves of the northern white cedars brushed against her chubby pink cheeks as she scaled the thin branches, hoisting herself as far into the frigid air as she dared to go. The softness of the leaves always surprised her; the wild leaves soothed and tickled. Birds flitted and hid in the shadowy boughs as the large pinkish land animal fumbled for a handhold and lumbered into their world; she didn't belong in his bedroom. She didn't plan on winding up there. They had been hanging out, watching movies, when their lips somehow locked with each other. She didn't really mind—he was attractive and kind—so she let him kiss her. She let his fingers wander, let them brush against her in places she barely knew she had, squirming at the unfamiliarity but letting him continue. He directed her hands to soothe him, showed her how to move, to make the most of it, to flow and ebb

generation the pier, was that movement? She squints and sees nothing but the dark water throbbing below, trying to hoist itself up into the air, onto the land, away from the currents trying to drag it away, to make it come

one branch at a time, keep climbing. Ice glazed the bark but she and the neighbor boy didn't pay any attention as they scrambled up the branches. Mittens stuck to frost fractals, boots squeaked as they ascended, but bulky winter coats held the cold at bay. Her neighbor was high above her, laughing as he reached the tippy top of the tree, and she frowned as she tried to figure out which branch to step on. Above, branches swayed violently and a scream shook the air and something heavy and warm fell onto her and

she jumped in surprise and pressed her hands against him, wanting him off, get off. I don't like this anymore. He moved harder, faster, urgently, not able to hear her above his own moans, frantic, get off, muffling her protests with his lips and trying to hold her with his body as she stared wide-eyed

at the sudden frothing in the water below as reptilian heads break through the crest of the waves. Long snouts open, teeth flash, gaping chasms hiss, ready to clamp down and drag her away from land, drag her down beneath the waves until she drowns, then swallow her whole, but she just needs to fall

like her neighbor, who crashed through the branches and thudded onto the cold ground with a wail of pain. He lay still, crying for anyone to help him, to lift him up and take him someplace safe. High in the air, she gripped her branch for dear life, her muscles aching as gravity beckoned her down, screaming for help, help, he fell, help, I'm going to fall, he fell, help, I'm hurt, but nothing can be done now. He turned on the TV and sat on the couch as she gathered her clothes and left. She kept her head down as she hurried back to her apartment. She leaned over the edge of her balcony, gasping for air but getting dizzy and backing away because she doesn't like heights since she can only be hurt when she falls.
Clutched brains mold
Themselves to the ideal
They stay clutched.
Some give, some thawed movement.
Semi-cement.
Flames begin to choke.
Commence the cycle of striking,
Burning, lowering, dying.
The grey matter gets clutched
Into scar tissue.
Engulfing fibers, flame.
If the delicate tissue is peeled back,
The peeler turns to soot.
Frozen brains
Resting in a necropsy cooler.
Every day is a visit
To the produce section.

The waiting room is as steady as the breath of the old man next to me. But the beat in my heart matches my brain. The secretary clacks on her keyboard scheduling the next appointment I’ll most likely be absent to. There is no element of surprise, no game, no strategy. They’ll come and call my name. A sinking weight in my stomach. The smell of insulin filling my head, matching the supply that flows through my veins. They take the measurements and scales, while I weigh the difference between living and dying. Sacrifice. I can spend my days and night watching and monitoring my measurements, making sure that I fall into order in their filing cabinets. Or, I can forget that I don’t function the same, forget that I’m diseased. The negative effects on my body would creep up on me, the giant wave on the sea. The doctors chant their chorus of “A1C” “Neglecting” and “Diabetes.” The sterile surfaces I pass are spoiled by my persistent freedom. Hypocrisy? Because maybe I don’t see that drowning is not how you live. But they only want to heal, to help, to save me. From myself. For now, I sit in the protesting leather seat, with a throbbing in my throat, waiting for them to call me.
My daughter
Who brought panic with the news of her existence
Whose existence was irrelevantly buried
Within concentric mucous membranes
Whose imminence approached as lengthening stretchmarks
And whose lively beating heart ticked
Away the remained seconds of my life

My daughter
Whom I knew I must love
But who would surely confine me
As all shackles do. My shackle,
Whose existence I would resent because it would
Impose a duty so annoyingly omnipresent
I would never be able to escape it

My daughter
Whose incredibly fragile beauty
Left me fumbling for words
Whose helpless eyes never found mine
Until they did
Whose tiny screeches never ceased in my presence
Until they did

My daughter
Who can’t do anything by herself
Who must do everything by herself
Whose eyes that mirror mine
No longer look so helpless
Whose eyes, I fear, will someday again
Look helpless

My daughter
Whose blossoming petals threaten to wither
Whose death approaches with more fearful an imminence
Than the lengthening stretchmarks
Whose death reminds me of my own
And how helpless our eyes will be
When they can no longer find the other’s.
"She was asking for it."

When I was a little girl, I was told I could become anything when I grew up. They handed me a figure of plastic with a plaster smile and said "Be whatever you want, but this is woman."

In an artificial casing with stiff, implausible limbs and a mask that speaks of the "vacancy" behind. Of the desire I didn't know I had. Stunted skirts, deep shirts, feet molded to the tips of toes first.

This is us—

walking down the street somewhere between midnight and the idea of running ahead lest "we should get dinner sometime" because the fact that speech is happening at all means she's towing attention. And a woman who draws herself past the hypocrisy of the expected norms society has plunged upon her evidently deserves the punishment of suffering such advances.

"Well, you saw what she was wearing."

where she was, a club, a bar, what she does without her own permission, conformation written with permanent marker downed with the drinks she shouldn't have ordered within the reasonable restraints that a woman must abide by. Because she made "when she drinks that much, she should know what she's getting herself into" a decision, withholding her right to say "no." Apparently. Walking down a shadowed street, she beckons with sightless eyes to the mind-reading wants of those who think her ability to say "when" and "where" are choices she makes when she pulls open her wardrobe.

"She wanted it."
When she walked down those crowded halls, self-conscious,
Watching the pliable self-respect
that leered at her from behind clay money and glossy
status established by counterfeit attraction.
Her cheap infamy can't compare
and she knows she tries too hard. They said so.
But how can she not attempt to alter the natural
image that tracks her?
Strain.

A child of the system—

accepts when they ask if she'd trail to their “hangout” because they
think she's “pretty cool.” With the intentions of a puppy born yesterday, she
enters into the idea that they must realize her painted confidence isn't
trying too hard, but her desperation to be realized as the person she
dreams of. With the ignorant poise of a magazine cover, she opens the door and
slips.

"Well, she's the one that followed all those boys."
with their voices calling, preying on her
wishes to be something humanity has
written will never be possible. Because
"with a nose that big, and hips that
wide" she's hardly the pick of the litter.
Welcoming arms stretched, they
wrap her up in their pressuring embraces
while she vanishes inside the penetrating
waves of one, two, three, four…
Walled up in her bedroom, she still smears
wringing attempts across her face. But
with words now accusing, destroying those
wasted boys’ lives, she grabs the rope and
washes away.

"I swear, she was asking for it."

Begging.
Pleading.
Mute.

And the officer says—

"Well, okay."

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**SOMETIMES ANGRY IS GOOD**
*Kathryn Ashbay*

- A nice Greek girl
- Madness hidden behind lenses (you know, the hot librarian type)
- Open legs for you only

I am not bullet points
That can be bent
To your needs
Sprawled across the bed, on my knees, over the sink

I am more than 2-D, 34C, my tolerance for alcohol and parties

My mother planted a seed in her heart
Of ideas and works of art
For me…
Me

I will not allow some intellectual infant
Who is afraid of his own dreams
To be the most significant part of my body, my soul, my self worth or esteem
ideas and images would explode in vibrant colors
and blinding flares of light, spotting my vision
as they bashed against my skull
clamoring to be freed from the confines of my primitive mind.
They would leak from fissures of gray matter,
flow like quicksilver
past each other in droves as they shot
down my spine through my shoulder down my arm and hand leaping
from my fingertips to my pen in a streaming spark of ingenuity.

If I were the world's greatest poet,
words would trip over each other as they flee my body and
impose themselves upon the paper. The cascading words
would hardly pause for breath as they near the end
of the page, but would blaze to a fresh stretch of whiteness
and continue racing, undeterred.

If I were one of the world's amateur poets,
ink would flow like blood from my pen,
spilling over the thin, flimsy paper in frantic, seamless strokes,
illegible to uncomprehending eyes,
scandalous gibberish to blind minds—
But still I would bleed and ink would run, indifferent
to the life draining from me
as it spilled upon the page.

If I were one of the world's amateur poets,
the pen would succumb to the weight of my hand; it would snap
and splatter across the tabletop, leaving me bleeding
with no way to channel my life-force. I would flee
to the computer and pound away at the keyboard
eyes wide and unblinking as I stare at the harsh screen,
while my blood pooled around the keys,
making them sticky and slick and smeared with scarlet.

If I were the world's worst poet,
I would write unceasingly, striking the keys with curled fingers,
typing my bloody words, gasping,
until I was drained dry. Then,
ink staining my hands, blood smearing the keyboard, I would
collapse. I would crumple to the floor as the last of my words,
the last of my spirit, ran dry,
leaving me a bloody husk.
I would be satisfied in my final moments
and then I would die.
To see the confidence with which
Shine cuts through canopy
Before it finds the forest floor
At last!

She lets her arms link loosely
Her breasts against his chest
Wearing little more than morning air
As dropping dew drips between branch and ray
Of gold, a strand of her hair
Falls across his face.

They share themselves silently
Catching a grain of sand
As it falls between glass orbitals
He watches her lips
But they never part
Her eyes speak

Holding his neck
Holding her gaze
They swing without swinging
Sitting on their plank
Refusing to move
Like clock pendulums

With hands gripping their
Grain of sand
They sit still, staring.

---

The broken branches of our love O God is from me.
I realized it the day you kept me,
From a relationship I wanted,
Not knowing that this person was lightning,
and would burn the existence of my tree.
The little broken spaces are from me failing to communicate,
And the distortions in branches is because I fail to read my word every day.
But I know the root of my tree is you O God.
Fulfilling my inner tree desire with water,
And warmth I didn't know I would later need.
You even use the holes to make homes for your birdy mothers,
And the fallen leaves to make a snagged tooth boy cheese,
And though I plead for rain that you know I don't need,
You're patient with me.
And wait until finally I see. My tree is palpable and my strength impenetrable.
But it's only because I'm recognizing,
That it's not me upholding this tree.
Senior year. Last day of school. 2004.

His last chance.

Biting the inside of his lip, Jude reached down and shakily smoothed out the front of his dress shirt, unaware of the way the tails hung out the back. He then ran his hand through his curling, untamable brown hair—as he always did when he was nervous—and straightened his glasses. Behind him, parked in the dusty driveway, was his mother's silver Acura, which he'd used to take the short trip across town to the VanDam ranch. In his pocket the keys felt heavy, as if tempting him to yank them out, jump back in the car, and drive away.

Yet as his stare trailed across the drive, the sight spurred him into remembering why he'd come in the first place. The landscape beyond was lined with wooden planked fencing, pasture, and horses. Further still, the fields stretched on to the horizon, bordered by trees and basking in the late spring sunlight of northern Oklahoma. Like a white beacon commanding the flatness all around, the VanDam house rose up out of the dust, seeming to loom and judge in its three-story presence. Its shadow slowly skulked closer and closer the longer Jude stood simply doing nothing, and its gradual creeping spurred him into moving up toward the front porch.

It was a grand old farmhouse, well kept despite its age. Supposedly Craig VanDam had purchased it some thirty years prior, slowly fixing up what had once been a decrepit, sagging structure until it was the blossoming pride of the present day. Crisp white paint, clear windows, all the shingles intact. Not nearly as ignored as some of the houses closer to town—the ones that sometimes stood hidden in the trees, only peering out past the overgrowth when someone happened to look. The property, too, mimicked the attitude, quite as though it'd been pulled out of a picture and pasted atop the dirt. Not a single thing seemed out of place; not a single blade of grass dared step out of line.

Jude felt like quite the intruder by comparison, as if every fragment of dust that flitted across his ill-fitting dress slacks dominoed into another until he'd disturbed the entire scene. The dust, like a cat, raised its head to see what was the matter when a bulky form happened to walk into the path of its sunlight.

But he was already at the screen door, once again straightening his shirt and hoping he appeared presentable enough. The VanDams were the up and up sort of people after all. Supposedly Jude Marino, right?”

“So you remember me?” the younger of the two teenagers living in the house. It took her a longer second to recognize him however, seeing as there was a good four-year age difference between them. She'd likely only recognize him from the one time he'd been over before—two years prior, to work on a biology project.

Not possessing in the trait of shyness, she pushed the storm door open, her face no longer crisscrossed with the tiny squares of the screen. She had her older brother's watery blue eyes, and a similar splash of freckles over her nose.

“You're...” Her eyes narrowed, surveying him critically—as critically as a thirteen year old could. “You're Judaea Marino, right?”

“Uh, yes,” he nodded, his own gaze darting only quickly to the side, nerves once again getting to him. Gulping, he settled them well enough to look back at her. “You're my...brother’s friend?”

“Well,” Jude tried to find a better descriptor, but couldn't think of one. He wasn't even sure he'd called them acquaintances. Retired lab partners maybe? Like colleagues? “I was wondering if he was here, Jude moved on. “I'd like to speak with him, if that's okay.”

“I think I remember,” he replied.

He remembered exactly where it was.

“Okay, just take your shoes off,” she issued as he stepped up and in. “Mom doesn't allow shoes in the house.” The door closed behind him, Berretta still watching as he bent down and slipped his loafers from his socked feet. Placing them delicately atop the dirt, he then allowed himself to look around, the smells and sounds of the house both familiar and foreign.

Like the outside, the inside was kept in formal condition. Crisp and spotless, a palette of biscuit and white. Even the carpets matched, which were kept meticulously...
clean by the mother of the house. Staying at home as she did, Mrs. VanDam was the cookie-cutter ideal of a housewife, ever dutiful in her actions and dedicated to her children while also eradicating every bit of filth any of them managed to drag in. Her husband, by contrast, took his action outside the home, out in the wilds, and so fulfilled the other side of the equation.

“So…” Berretta was staring at him suspiciously, Jude realizing that he’d been looking around far too long. “Like I said, Colt’s upstairs…”

“Yes, of course,” Jude nodded politely. “I’ll just… go talk to him.” He tried to offer her a small smile, but it came across as more of a cringe. Despite this, however, he skirted his way over to the stairs leading up on the left, his hand falling to the white, finely painted banister as he pulled himself up. The stairs wore a thin, worn carpet, dampening his footsteps as he climbed.

Behind him, hands going to her pointed, skinny hips, Berretta stared after him, questioning. Supposing her brother’s friends were none of her business however—they were prone to running around the house without invitation most of the time—she soon turned away and headed back to her own activities, Jude left alone as he reached the second story of the house.

Throat somewhat dry, he bit the inside of his cheek again as he first looked down to the right and then left. Glaring, pane-divided windows stood on each side of the hall, allowing for light to filter in through the bars. He wondered, quickly, if maybe it would be possible to sneak out one of them. But after a quick evaluation, he established that the windows didn’t open, his chest twisting as his stomach got sick all over itself.

No. This was it. His last chance. He couldn’t chicken out. He was nearly there.

He pushed his feet slowly over the carpet to the door at the end on the right side of the hall. It was closed, which left him in a momentary state of panic. He’d have to knock again, which was horrible. But the alternative, that of the door being open, didn’t seem like it would have been much better, so he reasoned that he was simply letting his nerves get the better of him.

With great trepidation and several trembling, panicked breaths, he allowed his fist to tap lightly on the door, announcing far too loudly that he was there.

“Door’s open!” was the call that came from inside, Jude actually flinching away from the sound of it. “You’re early!” So smooth and certain; completely unaware. For a moment, Jude’s flight instinct seemed to kick in, spurring him to run. Maybe even break free and fly out through the window if only to save himself what he’d...
as he considered the fact.

“Oh,” Colt sounded honestly surprised, pulling his bedroom door open a little further. “Well... come in, I guess.” He shrugged, not nearly as perturbed by the circumstance as Jude. Turning away, he pulled back into the room, Jude watching through wide eyes.

Though Colt’s facial features might be seen as soft, the rest of him was hardly so. He’d grown up on a ranch after all, his wide strides—legs seeming to naturally bend out due to hours on horseback—gave his gait a heavy, intentional kind of step. His broad shoulders seemed to flex in every movement he made, his well-toned physique the result of hard labor and playing nearly every sport their school had to offer. His blue and tan letterman only added to the stereotype. One he flaunted willingly. Blindingly, maybe.

“I was waiting on some friends,” he explained, his head turning over his shoulder as he spoke again, his movements pausing when he realized that the absolutely terrified Jude hadn’t followed him in. “That's who I thought you were.” His tone echoed of awkwardness, Jude realizing that he was the one instigating it and, thus, sprang into action a little too hastily. Jolting into the room, he reached up and grabbed at his own skinny elbow, eyes surveying the bedroom quickly.

It was similar to how he remembered it, echoing of the rest of the house. White walls unadorned because tape and tacks would injure the paint. Tan carpet, two windows imbedded into one wall. They were paned similarly to the ones in the hall—a inability to be opened, or unwilling. To keep the cold from the air-conditioning in. The bed was made, well kept, and the dresser and desk matched, as if they’d been purchased as a predetermined set. The corners were clear of clutter, closet doors firmly closed without the threat of anything bulging from behind. The only thing seeming out of place, which Jude noticed when he glanced up, were the strings hanging from the ceiling tiles, paperclips hooked at their ends.

There had once been a conglomerate of model airplanes hanging down. They’d been meticulously painted and put together, done so by careful hands with the aid of directions likely coming along with their boxes. Colt had explained it’d been a habit he’d inherited from his father, proud of what he’d considered artwork. As it was, however, they were all torn down, Jude’s attention falling from the clips that had one held them to the desk. The bodies of the planes were placed carefully there, lined up in an orderly fashion. And stacked up behind them were the wings—removed from the central pieces. Or rather, by the looks of it, ripped violently away. The only jagged, misshapen surface in the room were the ends of those wings and where they’d once connected to their other pieces.

Colt cleared his throat, Jude looking over as his attention went to the windows. A narrowed, thoughtful expression overcame Colt’s face before he then focused on Jude. He looked at him for only a moment before peering shrewdly to the door. Walking across the room, right past his intruder, he closed it, making sure it was thoroughly latched.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out why.

Looking down at the floor, Jude’s face flooded further red, his thoughts flitting quickly to what Colt’s friends would think if they found him there. At least with the door closed, there’d be warning of someone coming in.

Time enough to hide or something.

“So,” Colt addressed him again, Jude pushing his lagging feet to the bed before he sat down on the edge of it, “what’s up?” The other boy placed himself backward in his rolling desk chair, arms folding over the top as he stared expectantly.

“I didn’t mean to intrude,” Jude muttered, his hands folding in his lap nervously. Colt smirked a little, amused.

“You’re not,” he assured easily. “Like I said, I’m just waiting for some friends is all.”

“Right,” Jude took a deep, shaking breath. “I’ll try not to take up too much of your time then.”

“Sure...” Colt actually chuckled a little, but Jude didn’t hear it over the sound of his anxiety.

“I came here because there’s something I want to tell you,” he started, his voice somewhat shaky. “I’ve wanted to tell you for a long time actually. ” Colt raised his eyebrows questioningly. “And I figured that, since we’re graduating, it couldn’t hurt to be honest.”

“Is this going to be one of those ‘I hate you’ speeches that the nerds always tell the popular kids in the movies in the end to get some kind of revenge?” Colt was abruptly suspicious. “Because if it is, I’m so not cool with that.”

“It’s not,” Jude assured him quickly, his blue eyes wide as he shook his head. He tried to ignore the generalization that had just so flippantly been placed upon him—that of “nerd,” whatever such a term actually meant. In all honestly, it really only confirmed his status as someone Colt’s friends beat up on regularly. Throwing him into lockers, jeering and taunting during class, actual beatings whenever he ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time—expected, Hollywood stuff.

All Colt’s friends, yet not Colt himself. Colt had never once laid a single finger on Jude. Not one.
Not even to help him up afterward.

"It's quite the opposite actually," Jude continued to answer Colt's question. "I'm not here because I hold some kind of grudge against you, or something." Still his sweating hands fidgeted and slipped in his lap.

Colt's blue eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Do you remember that biology project we did during sophomore year?" Jude asked abruptly.

"Yeah..."

"It started then and I... I just want you to know the truth. I don't want to hide it anymore." Jude took a deep, steadying breath, closing his eyes momentarily. He gathered his thoughts, put them in order, and was thankful that Colt remained silent while he did so.

But it didn't matter what words he considered, there was only one way to say it. He just had to get it over with. "I... " Jude opened his eyes again, catching Colt's.

"I'm in love with you."

There, he'd said it.

It was over. Done.

No going back.

But it didn't matter what words he considered, there was only one way to say it. He just had to get it over with. "I... " Jude opened his eyes again, catching Colt's.

"I'm in love with you."

There, he'd said it.

It was over. Done.

No going back.

And what he got in return was a long, torturous, pregnant silence.

At first, it almost seemed like Colt hadn't understood what he'd said. That watery gaze narrowed further, mouth falling open slightly. He stared at Jude as if the words were taking eons to sink into his skull. Like there was some kind of language barrier between them.

But it had to get through eventually.

Standing abruptly, Colt nearly knocked his chair to the floor as he did. Jude jumped, but didn't get up from the bed. Rather, somewhat fearfully, he stared up at the "I'm not gay," Colt immediately claimed, though Jude couldn't say he'd expected anything more. He'd just wanted to be honest. One of those things that if he hadn't gotten it off his chest he'd left, he'd have regretted it forever.

"I know that," Jude replied quietly. "I just wanted—"

"Then why are you telling me this?" Colt asked harshly, Jude nearly shying away from him. "Why are you even saying anything? You should have kept this to yourself!"

Still his reaction didn't shock Jude. They'd grown up in a small Oklahoma town. People being uncomfortable with the thought of homosexuality wasn't exactly new.

"I wasn't trying to make you uncomfortable. I was just—"

"Uncomfortable?!" Colt was extremely pale, eyes wide, and Jude wondered if perhaps he should have just forgotten the whole thing. Like his nerves and anxiety had issued he should have in the first place. Maybe jumping out the window would have been smarter. "You think that you coming into my house and telling me that you're... What was even the point? I'm not a fag, so I don't know what you thought you were accomplishing!"

Jude's blood ran cold, his own nerves seeming to slow and freeze. Abruptly, a cold, unfeeling kind of cloudiness overcame his anxiety.

"You're right," he agreed, Colt still visibly keeping his space. "I shouldn't have said anything. He'd known he was hoping for the impossible when considering that Colt might return his feelings, so he hadn't allowed himself that luxury. But he hadn't imagined it totally far-fetched that the other boy would be open-minded.

Maybe it was just time he left this podunk town.

He was going to make something of himself.

And he was never going to come back.

Colt and his family could keep their prejudices and their labels and their ignorance. First loves were never meant to be.

"I'll leave," he stood. "I know we don't know each other that well, and you probably hate me for what I told you." Colt was still staring at him with those wide, apprehensive blue eyes. "But you don't have to worry about it anymore. I just wanted to tell you to get it off my chest. I'm going to school out of state, and I'm not coming back, so we'll never see each other again. Don't worry about me bothering you any more with my faggy tendencies."

Pausing to stare at Colt for just a little longer, he eventually had to walk away. And the whole time, he could feel his heart breaking. He'd known this would happen. That he'd be rejected. But still it hurt. Still it stabbed him all over and fisted his lungs until he felt like he'd never be able to breathe again.

Never be able to break free.

But he did. He left the VanDam house. He walked out Colt's door, down the stairs, and out into the sunlight. He went home, he planned his future, and he never turned his head over his shoulder to look back.

He never saw the way those blue eyes watched him, sunk with confusion and unease.

How they flowed with doubt.
BLUE LEATHER

Marshall Sass
WALLS
Hana Mitchell

You can’t assume who I am by the clothes that I wear.
   Come into my room and see the things
   that help to define my character.

The guitar and violin in the corner
   both have worn strings from hours
   of being played over the years

The books on my shelves will clue
   you in on my sources of inspiration.
   Tony DiTerlizzi and Brian Keene, to name a few.

Don’t think that the collection of movies will tell
   you as much as the line of video games beside it.

Have you peeked into that closet?
   Various puzzles stacked in boxes
   along the top shelf, every one
   worn and missing pieces.

Push the dog out of your way as you walk
   to the desk; she won’t mind as long
   as she’s still near me. She’s funny that way.

Those notebooks in that caddy are private,
   My works in progress, and some have not
   Been touched in years due to other projects.

But that bed is my fortress at night and I stay
   Safe and warm under that beautiful tiger
   Blanket surrounded by my pillow guardians.

It is there that my dreams give way
   To the ideas that become stories
   And flow from my pen onto the page
   Like the way my bow travels over strings.

Don’t assume that you know me for who
   I really am until I let the walls fall that
   Protect me so I can reveal myself to you.
PERSONAL AD
Maura Sands

I snore in my sleep,
Although I’ve been told it’s “light” and “cute.”
And
If you buy me flowers
You must be mistaken,
The way to my heart
Is by appeasing my stomach.

Warning
Some call them “Daddy issues”
But I say it’s just a few too many mistakes.
And
More than likely,
A mindless ride in my car
Can cure any emotional ailment I might have.
But
Sometimes I have too many drinks
And I tend to blurt out more
Than just a few spoken slurs.

However
I am a social person by nature
But I find myself spending more time
with friends a little more feline
And
Although I say “Thank God”
I’m not remotely religious
But
Over all my many flaws
You should really know
That I’ll more than likely be late.

PATIENCE
Mary Maroste

Monotone walls mimic bubbling shapes
as if I am a child and soap orbs will make me smile.
When had countless rustling pages
begun to sound like my car’s radio and waxen floors?
My shoes had been cleaned, why are they not counted as my feet
after I’ve nicked them around the edges.

A snake
Whose existence I’d forgotten about coils over and around my favorite arm
while you count the times it twitched its tongue.
Every tree I’ve ever conquered flashes past
As you tense your breathing in reaction to my sharp jaw.
Will all of this stain?
Should I have broken in my new jacket with a different perfume?
I’ve seemed to have forgotten the names of all the tools you’ve placed on the walls.
I was never informed of the idea of flattering your bravery.
I assumed it was a process of recycling and recycled
and I was another dime in your brown bag,
All the cards and papers have stolen my identity again, that I regularly pick up as if
they are holiday presents.
I began swallowing my tar and feathers for you
and I couldn’t answer your A or B questions while you looked so tart.
I was never sure who was the egg and who was the water
that was going to soften one to the other in the grand scheme of things.
I had begun to think that I wasn’t allowed touch the tip of my toes
without your frozen plates rubbing my bones together.
There was never a formal apology
for the number of years you bottled up
In jars and stamped to your washed out walls.
There was never a normal minute
spent sitting near the fire you meagerly kindled next to the candy counter.
Resting on
a pink comforter stolen from
some corner
of the house
no one visits anymore, thinking
about how there are
No more roses for Emily, &
no flowers for Algernon,
I can't feed off good intentions
and the long ago words of some dead man
or two,
just a mattress laid to rest on the floor for
someone laid to rest before and after the fact.
Elastic-y muscle snapping at the tendons
and snippets of fatty tissues now
absorbing themselves are
all that's left to decorate
that mattress on the floor.
Mr. John Wyatt flipped the page of the morning paper with a flamboyant crinkly flap. He already scanned every article at least three times and his wife eyed him as he took a miniscule sip of his cold coffee. He scratched his head, not because it itched but because he knew that he was so deep in thought that acting natural required conscious effort. His eggs and sausage were almost in the same position as they were when served 45 minutes prior. The Wyatts sat on opposite sides of their oak kitchen table in their matching, plain yellow pajamas silently. The muted, tiny television on the counter soundlessly displayed a program about the South African wildlife.

“What’s on your mind, John?” Mrs. Sarah Wyatt finally chimed. A lot was on his mind, in fact. He was thinking of his daughters who, in exactly one week both were to graduate high school. He was remembering fondly upon the time where they sat at that same table almost a decade and a half earlier when Nancy, the slightly younger of the two fraternal twins, declared that she could finish her pancakes exclusively with her mouth and, when she came up for air, had maple syrup sticking in webs to her forehead and hair and her smile protruded her cheeks and Mr. Wyatt’s fond memories. He scattered his memories on the table before him, like pictures for a scrapbook. Mr. Wyatt remained silent for several moments, and then responded:

“Our girls have lived a good life, right?”

“I believe so, but—” Mrs. Wyatt started to reply but was interrupted by her husband.

“I mean, everyone is sad sometimes,” Mr. Wyatt continued, “but our girls seem to have maximized their fun and minimized their pain. They have a good handle of the world and were able to put themselves out there and worked hard and made good decisions and—”

“Get to the point honey,” Mrs. Wyatt interrupted, sipping her third cup of coffee.

“I think— Well, I think we should kill our daughters,” Mr. Wyatt finally declared. Mrs. Wyatt took another sip. He pushed his plate away, slid his chair in, and sat with an improved posture. He continued: “They’ve lived such good lives,” he placed his elbows on the table and made tiny motions with his hands as he spoke. “We were good parents and we managed to avoid tragedies like disease, crime, natural disasters. We did our best, the girls did their best, and we had luck on our side.”

“Honey, I know what you’re saying but—”

Mr. Wyatt cut her off, “And we can’t be sure that it will stay that way. Things could get worse.”

“Things could get better,” Mrs. Wyatt replied, curtly.

“Yes, but,” Mr. Wyatt adjusted his glasses and leaned forward on the table with his hands out, starring his wife down. “Even if that was likely, you have to remember that things will always seem worse than they actually are. Nancy could, provided she got enough sleep, thrive if the conditions were right. But Penelope, she is a bit of a, well, she is a bit of a Negative Nancy!” Mrs. Wyatt’s eyes glanced upwards as her brain processed, and she conceded a slight nod.

“The people that are out there,” he pointed out the window without looking away, “can do awful things, do do awful things. There are killers, there are guys that would—”

“And girls out there, too.”

“Y-yes, but that’s not, I mean yeah,” his eloquence lost both due to his wife’s untimely interruption and the slow digestion of his wife’s implication. “I’m just trying to say that—”

“If things do get worse, it’ll be our fault.” Mrs. Wyatt finished her husband’s meandering thought. She too pushed away her plate and leaned forward, engrossed in the sentiments of pure utilitarianism.

“How will we do it?” she added.

“I was thinking poison; you know they consume it while they’re eating. They won’t notice a thing. It is not unlike gently falling asleep.”

Ostensibly, Mrs. Wyatt thought, fully aware of his lack of both primary and secondary sources on the matter. In lieu of pointing out her husband’s oversight and flustering him unnecessarily, she redirected him.

“I think that it is a good idea, but don’t you think we should ask them?”

“Y-yes, but that’s not, I mean yeah,” his eloquence lost both due to his wife’s untimely interruption and the slow digestion of his wife’s implication. “I’m just trying to say that—”

Mr. Wyatt scratched his unevenly shaven chin in thought and then concluded, “You’re right, you’re right, it’s only fair, after all. They worked hard in school, they have made smart choices, and they’re very rational, especially for eighteen year olds. Yeah, you’re right, they can think for themselves.” As he got up to collect the dishes, Mrs. Wyatt stood up and reached for his newspaper and began to peruse it.

“What if they don’t want to, though?” Mrs. Wyatt asked without looking away from the article on the world’s waning lion population.

“I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that. They’ll make the right choice.” Mr. Wyatt responded before turning on the faucet.

Over the next several hours both John and Sarah Wyatt preformed their daily routines and prepared the house. Mr. Wyatt insisted upon cooking dinner, and Mrs. Wyatt insisted that their daughter’s last supper be memorable. Mr. Wyatt went to a local butchers followed by a grocer. Mrs. Wyatt prepared an old recipe that her older sister formulated a decade or so ago. It was simply a steak, but the recipe
demanded exact temperature and precise amount of seasoning and mushrooms. It was a secret Bellow family recipe, although the secret largely stemmed from the fact that the rest of the Wyatt's never cared to look it up. The daughters went to their friend Juliet's after school, giving Mrs. Wyatt more time to prepare and Mr. Wyatt the time to do his crossword.

The girls arrived several minutes before six o'clock, fully aware that a moment later would produce a night of familiar lectures. Nancy walked through the front door and dropped her purse on the table next to their worn couch. Penelope followed inside, making sure the door was shut, and put the chain on it as habit dictated before putting her purse next to her sister's. They walked mechanically with stone faces that avoided the other's glances. The girls were almost identical, save several features. Penelope had a freckle on her right cheek and Nancy's hair was a shade darker due to her frequent experiments in dye, among a few other minor nuances that were not immediately recognizable. Penelope, the Valedictorian for their class, had been accepted to the University of Iowa for Anthropology and was even to compete on the women's track team. Nancy, who complained constantly of being tired but stayed up late doing what amounted to absolutely nothing, was also a successful high school student and bound for the University of Iowa to major in some discipline of business. Nancy wore a vertical striped black and white striped shirt and jeans while her sister wore a white dress with a small, black sweater. Nancy walked straight into the kitchen and took her place, between her parents and opposite Penelope's seat, while Penelope hesitated in deciding between the bathroom and the dinner table. She decided her urge was minor and could wait and went to the oak kitchen table with muttered greetings.

Penelope, her sister's senior by mere minutes, stared at the meal and gave a dirty look when no one was looking. She was a vegetarian when possible, but her parents still ate meat and strongly believed that one must eat what one is presented with. She was a about a shade darker due to her frequent experiments in dye, among a few other minor nuances that were not immediately recognizable. The daughters went to the top shelf of the parents' refrigerator, an unmemorable grace with her self-proclaimed overbearing parents.

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As they feasted on their freshly cooked prey, Mr. Wyatt looked up, gracefully made a Wyatt dinner time announcement: "Girls, we have something to tell you," Mr. Wyatt bellowed in an unnecessarily loud and confident tone. "You're having a baby?" Nancy smirked. "No, no, quite the opposite," Mrs. Wyatt replied breathing in a laugh and leaving a smile. "We," Mr. Wyatt and Mrs. Wyatt glanced at one another in concert, "We're going to kill you!" The air in the room retreated outwards and the invisible sounds that distill silence ceased, save the clanging of Nancy's silverware and movement of her blouse as she shrugged. Penelope's heart murmured and every organ and cell momentarily ceased functioning to listen to their creators' declaration.

"Wait, what?" Penelope said, after waiting for several moments for a misplaced explanation.

Nancy glanced in her direction. "It's pretty obvious, Penelope. They just told you," she snarled quietly. "Oh, Penelope, don't you worry about the details, we've planned it all out. It'll be painless. We'll put poison in your food, or your drink; we haven't already mind you," she said when she noticed Penelope eying her meal, "but you won't taste a thing. It'll be like going to sleep; wouldn't that be nice for a change, Nancy?" Mrs. Wyatt laughed. Nancy actually stifled a laugh, usually annoyed with her parents' prodding humor but was able to muster some subdued appreciation in that instance. "Mom, Dad, no. I get what you're doing, I really do. But—no. It's just—it's not necessary." She stood up with her hands on the table, leaned over and pleaded, "My college has a lot of security and I take good care of myself! I will—"

"Penelope, I'm surprised at you," Mrs. Wyatt gently scolded. "We thought you would at least think it through before protesting. Remember how you never liked mushrooms till just a few years ago? You refused to look at them meal after meal. And then one day when we ordered pizza, you know during that big storm and the power went out? It was the weekend before that big science fair you almost won. Anyway, one of the pizzas had mushrooms on it and you accidentally tried a slice in the faint candlelight and you absolutely adored it! And look, you're eating them now!" Penelope looked at her meal and dropped her fork, too perturbed to consider sustenance. She felt trapped. Mrs. Wyatt hid her disappointment behind a heavy smile. Penelope's heart murmured and every organ and cell momentarily ceased functioning to listen to their creators' declaration.

"But—" she uttered weakly.

"Penelope, this is just how things work," Mr. Wyatt explained, impatiently. "Just
the way the world works. It isn't perfect; I'll give you that. So sometimes we have
to do things that we don't want to do, but are necessary. If something unthinkable
happened we would be completely crushed and you would blame us and yourself
for not doing the right thing earlier. You're fretting, I know, but in doing so you are
simply... procrastinating.” He overestimated Penelope, he realized.

“But Dad, listen—” Penelope cried.

“No buts. Leave us. Go to your room!” Mr. Wyatt interrupted with a roar, his
hands massaging his temple as he tried to contain his volume. The disheartened
growl circled the room and trapped Penelope's equilibrium in a cage barred by
parental guidance. Her hands quivering, she got up and began to walk away slowly.

“Push your chair in!” Mr. Wyatt exclaimed without looking up from his half-eat-
en meal. Nancy muttered something inaudible about her sister's dramatics under
her breath. She looked at her sister, but the only thing she noticed was her freckle
adjacent to her lips. Nancy was not certain why, but that freckle was an instigator
of envy. Penelope at school was always “Penelope,” while she was nothing more
than “Penelope's twin.” When the two were in elementary school, Penelope used to
brag about it to her saying that it made her “more pretty” than her sister. It angered
Nancy so much that she would obsess over that single freckle, even resorting to
drawing on herself. Nancy attributed her sister's popularity to that brown circle; she
felt that it gave her face a character that made her significantly more attractive. As
the gap between their academic and athletic feats widened, Nancy subconsciously
concluded that the freckle forged the distance, and her corner in Penelope's shadow
was genetic. In high school Penelope would cover it up out of what Nancy saw as
ill-suited distress.

“You understand what we're trying to do, right, Nancy? That we are only trying
to help you?” Mrs. Wyatt cooed as Penelope pushed in her chair.

“Yes, Mother,” Nancy replied in a disinterested tone. She had large bags under
her eyes and her mood was particularly distant. Penelope was walking away as
demanded, but then rebelled. She turned towards her sister.

“Nancy, you always just do what you're told and you never think for yourself.
Mom and Dad chose your college, your major, and your clothes even,” she made
a motion with her hand towards her striped shirt. “What do you want?” Penelope
pleaded with her distant sister.

“She wants what her family wants!” Mr. Wyatt boomed, slamming his fist on
the wooden table. Mrs. Wyatt jumped. Usually one to avoid her husband when he
was in such a mood, she remained silent. Penelope maintained a desperate stare
towards her sister. Everyone's thoughts turned inwards for several moments and
the dinner time banter congealed into calm.

Finally, Nancy turned her head towards Penelope. “You know what I wanted for
myself? I wanted to ask someone to prom. To dye my hair green. To take a year off of
school and visit Europe. But who asked Juliet first? Who canceled my appointment,
and who told Mom and Dad my plans before I could? You think everyone should
live life as expected in obnoxious quietude. You look at your expansive shadow at
sunset, but ignore the ball of light that creates both you and your dark passenger.
Sometimes the right decision is to just stop hiding behind yourself, to fall in line and
see where it takes you.” Penelope was flabbergasted. The absurdity of the situation
took hold of her brain and produced primal fear unlike she had ever felt before.
She felt surrounded on all sides by predators. Her shaking thoughts produced only
one logical response: run. She bolted to the door but her father pounced with the
precision of lightning and intercepted her before she could touch the knob.

“Damn it, Penelope!” Mr. Wyatt thunderously exclaimed. Mrs. Wyatt scurried
over to witness the commotion, but kept her distance. Nancy stayed in place and
continued to gnaw on the cooked cow corpse. Mr. Wyatt was able to quickly grab
hold around Penelope's arms and carried her over to the living room couch with
ease. Penelope struggled and flung her legs up and around in a desperate attempt
to break free.

“Penelope!” Mrs. Wyatt chastised. “I've never seen you act so unladylike,” re-
ferring to her daughters violent motions that allowed her wrinkled dress to come
up. Penelope looked over to her mother wide-eyed and bewildered in the face of
her callousness. She weakened her resistance. It was clear that she wouldn't be able
to break free as the circumstances were, but perhaps, she thought, if she feigned
docility her father would be unprepared for a sudden burst of energy and she could
escape. In addition, she was not entirely convinced her parents were serious. Before
tonight, they never so much as laid a hand on either of their children. Maybe it was
some test, or some extreme example they wanted to set so they would be prepared
for the real world. Penelope knew those reasons hardly justified even the most
protective of parents to act. Then again, her parent's actions could not be explained
by conventional logic. And so, she reduced her aggression to simple observation
in order to collect information and await an opening.

“Why don't you just break her neck?” Nancy half-heartedly shouted with a drizzle
of greasy spit. Her words dripped onto the heads of her family and carelessly soaked
into their frazzled brains.
“Don’t be ridiculous, Nancy!” Mr. Wyatt replied with a shout that shook the leash on his temper, which was becoming increasingly loose by the moment. He looked over to his wife, and they both nodded in silent affirmation. Mrs. Wyatt, with a gust of energy, returned to the kitchen.

“Don’t say such awful things, Nancy. Come on now, you know better than that,” Mrs. Wyatt told her daughter in a cross manner. Mrs. Wyatt’s words fell upon Nancy’s hunched shoulders, which simply shrugged them away. Nancy already finished her plate, and went to work upon her sister’s. She developed a pool of sauce on the side of her mouth to which Mrs. Wyatt hurriedly went over to Nancy’s side to clean it off with an untainted napkin.

“We aren’t animals,” she continued as Nancy pushed her away, embarrassed. Mrs. Wyatt walked over to the cabinets near the refrigerator. She opened one. “Nancy, this is a mess! It’s like a whirlwind came through here. I thought I told you last week to tidy this up?” Mrs. Wyatt put her hands on her hips in an anger that was slowly beginning to match that of her husband. Nancy, again, shrugged. She missed the steak with her knife and started cutting at the air as her eyelids instinctively fluttered shut.

“You and your sister have been acting so childish lately. What’s gotten into you two?” Nancy remained silent, although she wanted to tell her mother that there was no “lately.” They were both logical extensions of themselves; she soured by a spider web of optimism that failed to catch the buzzing fears and inadequacy, and her sister with the tendency to chew pieces out of any hand that dare feed her. Furthermore, it was not so much irresponsibility as it was an unnecessary delegation of tasks to begin with. However, she decided to just continue to keep to herself as it was much easier to play dumb than to argue. Nancy learned long ago that the less she challenged her parents, even if they perceived that she was in the wrong, the lighter her shoulders felt.

Mrs. Wyatt continued to search through the disorganized cabinet until she found the unlabeled white bottle full of deadly cyanide pills. A decade earlier, Mr. Wyatt returned home with a slamming door, exhaling whiskey. In his pocket he had a bottle labeled as ibuprofen, but was filled with cyanide capsules purchased from a black market dealer several towns over. Mr. Wyatt was officially unemployed. He sat down at their new kitchen table where a wrapped chicken sandwich showed his reflection. He knocked it off the table, shattering the porcelain and ruining dinner. Their dog, Ulysses, sensing his owner’s distress, walked over and began licking his owner’s frenzied hands. The world’s depravity set in upon Mr. Wyatt, and he began sorting tablets on the table before him. He set aside one for himself, one for his wife, one for Penelope, one for Nancy, and one for Ulysses. He fed it to the dog, who shook his tail wildly in excitement for several moments. Immediately after, Mr. Wyatt received a phone call from his future employer.

Like a kite that finally caught a magnificent breeze, Mrs. Wyatt glided out of the kitchen, forgetting to close the very cabinet she stressed over moments ago. Mrs. Wyatt walked over to her gloomy daughter, opened the cap, and pulled out the brown pea-shaped capsule. At this moment Penelope’s heart sank. Her dwindling doubt completely dissipated. She knew that her parents meant well and, to them, this was a calculated and logical decision, a manmade squall looming over uncertain shores, which made her mother’s approaching figure all the more frightening. To them there was only one decision. So, Penelope made her own.

Suddenly, Penelope’s purse began buzzing. Its vibrations stole the attention of her parents. Penelope, gracious for her caller’s sense of timing, seized the opportunity and with a burst of strength kicked her mother with both legs, who wobbled back and fell into an adjacent chair, and then pushed against her father’s limp arms with her upper body and successfully broke his grip. Unfettered, she tried once again to open the door. Her forcefulness shook the room and the buzzing purse fell to the floor. She pulled the door open, but the chain allowed only a brief, crisp breeze to escape. She closed it and, with shaking hands, took the chain and unattached it. She started to swing open the door to her freedom and safety. Before the door opened a crack, however, her father once again grabbed her with a powerful bear hug, tearing his daughter’s hand off the bronzed knob. The pull caused the door to open quickly, but Mr. Wyatt closed it with his foot as he brought his daughter back into the living room. Mrs. Wyatt, red in the face and with tears in her eyes, walked over resolutely and with broad shoulders and disorderly hair to grab her daughter’s legs. Penelope was trapped, surrounded on all sides by primal viciousness, benign pragmatism, and distinguished indifference. The two of them carried Penelope over to the living room chair, the green, leather loveseat that Mrs. Wyatt fell into a moment earlier, in perfect wordless synchronization. They placed her on the chair. Mr. Wyatt quickly went around it and reached behind the back of the shiny cushions to hold Penelope in place. The phone fell silent.

Mrs. Wyatt held Penelope’s legs and screamed, “Nancy! We need your help, fill up a glass of water and get the pills off the ground.” Nancy rolled her eyes stood up and emptied her sister’s dinner cup and filled it with clear water from the fridge.

“Nancy, hurry up!” Mr. Wyatt called.
“I’m coming,” she replied, muttering the name of a long lost religious figure under her breath. She strolled into the living room, picked up the overturned bottle, leaving the wayward cyanide in its place, and went to her sister’s side.

“Give her the pill, Nancy,” Mrs. Wyatt demanded.

“And make sure she swallows it!” Mr. Wyatt exclaimed. Nancy held out the lone pill to her sister’s mouth. Penelope’s face was expressionless. Although her parents were putting all their energy into preventing a repeat escape attempt, Penelope no longer put up a fight. She knew what it was like to be a zebra exposed in the wild, or a lamb caught between a wolf and barbed wire. They know at a cellular level that it’s over before the blade comes down or the teeth set in, and while they may fight back, she realized, it’s merely out of helpless habit. She looked at her sister’s face and saw her own, minus a single brown dot. She looked into her sister’s eyes and saw sanguine nothingness.

“Nancy,” Penelope uttered voicelessly, “I’m sorry about Juliet.”

“Don’t be,” she replied. “It was never about her, not really. We’re sisters, we can feud but I would never do anything that would hurt you.” Penelope spent the past several years of her life trying to erase her freckle. But humility is its own sort of pride, and regardless, Penelope, deep down, always felt that life owed her something: the envy of others; their compliments; their concern. If the freckle made her better, it also made her life more stringent, and so balancing praise with practicality was not unlike an elephant balancing on a ball at a carnival. When the world conceded, it wasn’t what she imagined. Penelope forgot all about the world and, in that moment, decided that if she couldn’t be right, someone ought to be.

“I was born first, so I guess it only makes sense that...” her voice trailed off. Nancy looked at her sister’s face again and barely could see her freckle, as if its declining affluence also reduced its perceived size. Nancy figured that, notwithstanding all of her accomplishments and her intelligence, she did not realize that some things in life are simple and commonsense. Nancy put the pill in her sister’s mouth, and then put the glass of water to her lips. Penelope, trapped, her heart broken, her strength drained, found but one decision left to make; for the prey to move out of hiding and into the center of the raging tempest. Penelope took a drink and swallowed without moving her face. In seconds, all possible future misfortunes disappeared. The Wyatt parents stood up and the intensity started to fade from their faces. After several moments of calm following the hunt, they noticed a rancid smell emanating from their disorderly daughter. Quickly calculating that it was not early onset decay, Nancy snickered and started looking for her camera phone inside her faux designer purse.

“I need to take a picture of this—she is always so dramatic. And I’m supposed to be the younger one?” Nancy giggled to herself.

“No, this isn’t the time for that, Nancy. Leave your sister alone,” Mrs. Wyatt looked at her watch, “and get ready for bed. You’re falling asleep as it is and you have an early morning tomorrow.” Nancy stopped wading through her purse, mildly annoyed, and placed it back on the table and went to walk up the stairs opposite the front door. Just then, the bag released a stifled rumble. Mr. Wyatt picked up the drifted corpse and kissed it on the forehead.

“I remember their first steps up those stairs,” John whispered to his wife, proud. “I’m so disappointed that Penelope acted so resentful. We’re her parents; we want what is best for her. Maybe if she was just a little more mature, I would’ve been able to watch both my daughters walk up those stairs for the last time, too.”

“This is the only decision,” Mrs. Wyatt declared as she unzipped Nancy’s purse. “It’s the only way to be sure they never have to limp up those stairs, that they aren’t eaten alive… “ she said, thinking aloud. The screen declared that Nancy received a text message from Juliet.

“Two lambs saved from the slaughter.” A tear began to form in Mr. Wyatt’s eye. “Hey,” he said, wiping it away and attempting to change the mood, “with the kids out of our hair this weekend, would you want to go up north to the cabin?”

The next morning Sarah and John Wyatt sat opposite each other and ate chocolate chip pancakes with their lone daughter feasting amid the bemused table. The only child, surrounded by words of disillusionment that echoed faint optimism, fell face first into syrupy memories.
It was a sad and withered-looking thing, that black balloon. Small and morose, it would hover wistfully over the chimneys and clock towers and all things London, only to realize that it was not wanted and went off in search of a new nirvana. Sometimes it would peek into children's nurseries at night, and sigh (*I was never a child*), scattering paper dolls gently across the room—a melancholy wind.

The rocking horses never cared much for it; its string had been caught in their tails one too many times. A tail is a tail is a tail. And aren’t strings tails? It shouldn’t have made a difference, but it did. Rocking horses can be stubborn.

Oftentimes the nurseries were not enough, and so the black balloon would continue to wander, wander through the sewers and the zoo and the stairwells. Its surface, once sleek and proud, had begun to gather mold. Grease. Wrinkles. *Is this the beginning or the end?*

Nine o’clock came around quickly those days, and the streetlights would come on, but the balloon left no shadow. Perhaps it was a shadow already. Perhaps its blackness came from the core and there was no light left in it to cast one.

A photographer saw it crawling down the street one day. He chuckled at the sorry sight, took a picture, and went on his way. *Do I really look that odd?*

The picture was developed that same day. The black balloon came out red.
We ran up and down those old wooden stairs, every day, up and down, up and down. Up was the easy part. We would stretch out our short, tanned legs as far as we could in order to smack a sneakered foot onto the topmost stair within reach, grab onto the old railing and pull ourselves upwards like a mountain climber. But going down, going down we had to confront the red-faced man. The red-faced man clung to the towering wall of the stairwell, his black, marble eyes piercing into the glow of a single hanging light bulb from the shadows in which he resided. His most menacing feature was also his most recognizable, his tanned, leathery-red skin. It creased tightly around his strong cheekbones, framed by a collection of gray and white feathers he adorned on a headdress. His pepper colored hair hung down in matted braids. It was recognizable because it was my father's face, and a mirror of my father before his, reflecting the same color as his father and the father before him, too.

Adorned directly below the red-faced man was a plaque reading "good judgment comes from experience, experience comes from bad judgment—Old Indian Proverb." We rarely stopped to read the faded script for fear of being trapped in the man's gaze for too long. We knew what the red-faced man was capable of. In the night he would throw bottles, slam doors and overturn tables. His putrid, sour-whisky smell wafted down the lightless hallway and into our room. We knew it had to be the hauntings of the red-faced man because in the morning, when the sun would seep through the shutters and lift us from our beds with its warm arms, we would walk out of the hallway and into the main house to find everything arranged as it had been the day before, perfectly placed, swept, and shined. Only the faint burning scent of his presence remained. Some nights we would awake to a cacophony of grunts and groans, the red man enthralled in some animalistic dance as my mother softly cried. We were frozen to our beds, afraid to speak out or move. What if the red man came for us in the night?

Our cousins told us even more horrific stories about the red-faced man, forcing them out of bed in the night, or forcing himself in. They each had their own red man that haunted their home, too, silently waiting, watching for night to arrive, for his flask to empty. One day our cousins Charlie and Annabel came to stay with us for the weekend because the red-faced man had beaten our aunt blue. He did something else, too, but we couldn't decipher our mothers' muffled whispers through the wall separating the family room and kitchen. When they finally came out, their faces were as expressionless and stiff as that of the red-faced man. It was a look seen often on their faces, but unlike the face of the red man, our aunt's face was bruised, patched a vibrant purple-blue, a pattern our own mother sometimes carried. That's the story of it, the red-faced man and the blue-faced woman, naturally opposite, conflicting, but when one appeared the other always followed.

They told us to go downstairs and to "stop snooping around and mind ourselves." And so we did. Everyone raced back down the stairs to continue our usual childhood romp, but not me. I went down the hall and ascended the old dusty stairs slowly, counteracting the cold stare given by the old, weathered portrait. It was the first time in all of my life that I wasn't afraid of it; I knew that he was of no harm, because our red-faced man sat lethargically in his armchair down the hall, drinking his brown liquor, waiting for a blue-faced woman to bring him his dinner.

That Sunday we went to church. Our cousins sat in front of us and next to them, our aunt, with the thick, leathery-red arm of her husband wrapped around her once again. I looked around the sanctuary as our red pastor asked us to bow our heads in prayer. The room was filled with red-faced men and blue women, all calmly sitting with stiff, vacant faces. And I can't remember a time when I ever prayed as hard as I did that day, my hands tightly clasped, turning my knuckles ghost white, eyes shut tight; I prayed for me and my sister and all of my cousins. I prayed to God that we would forever be white.
**DARE TO DREAM**
*Marshall Sass*

The naked piano stripped of purity and rusted with sin.

Everyday plays a tune similar to mine.

Its rickety old soulful tune,

Compares to the crooked eye I look through every night.

It is only until the musician that loves me,

comes and plays;

Do I understand why I’m made this way.

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**REDEEMED TUNE**
*Stefani Waits*

The naked piano stripped of purity and rusted with sin.

Everyday plays a tune similar to mine.

Its rickety old soulful tune,

Compares to the crooked eye I look through every night.

It is only until the musician that loves me,

comes and plays;

Do I understand why I’m made this way.
I
My face is my mask
Protecting my vulnerability from curious eyes,
   Colorful and feigned.
I exercise surfaced expressions
   Only to please my inquisitive audience.

II
My core is my power
Sending purpose to each of my limbs,
   Solid and boastful.
The energy condensed and spiraling within
   So strong, it consumes me.

III
My legs are my calligraphy
Embellishing my smallest movements,
   Limber and lean.
Their strength is cleverly hidden
   Beneath the barrier enclosing my mind.

IV
My feet are my shells
Bearing the weight of my battered frame,
   Used and abused.
So much brutality upon them, I’ve inflicted
   Always humble without affirmation.

V
My mind is my challenge
Rebelling my plea for further discovery,
   Stubborn and deceptive.
I yearn for progression, so endurance must avail
   Yet my subconscious revels in havoc.

the week hung highest
when strewn across the horizon.
a curiously silent quivering
took place, shaking all
   but her
   (the girl who ambled
   and tottered around,
   intent on catching fireflies)
as the light bowed defeat
to the night.

the remains of the day
shuttered shivered shimmied
   under the closing curtain,
ready for slumber.
she placed the daisies she had collected
   next to the jar that
illuminated the divide
between the stillness
   of the water’s surface and the cool
terrain beneath her toes.
she admitted to the fogged air that she was
afraid but
took off with a leap, and leapt—
she thought of the crickets with their song,
the mosquitos with their bite,
and the many stars that so graciously acquainted her
   with the night
many times prior
   as she sunk
   sideways.
Eating breakfast alone
is surprisingly lonely.
Like that unbearable ex-favorite
song after a break-up,
table number six is
teeming to the brim
with 1,000 sour calories.

It is stale,
this food—picked too early, served too late—and bitter.
You have told me on two occasions
that you enjoy morning solitude,
only when we were together;
the next time we weren’t.

(we were,
in fact,
as far apart as
it is possible to be)

Your cheeks,
once flushed with
daring late-night secrecy,
are plain ivory;
angry porcelain teacups stripped
from the conveyor belt
before the pattern has dried.

Won’t the pink come back?
Please.
Gather your rainbows,
unlock this door—it
is thatched only with straw,
after all.

My heart is pounding
with all of the things
you never told me.
Call me a fool,
(I love you)
consider me wretched,
(you will never be okay)
ask too much of me,
(you will never be right)
but do not insult
my instinct.

Because my instinct—it
calls for more.
It recognizes that cucumber lotion
splayed between your spidery palms
and your pounding feet
on staircase landings—you
oughtn’t stomp, my dear—and
the only voice
I have ever fallen in love with.

So just this once,
let’s set the table for two.
I will pour the coffee
like a gypsy and a gentleman combined
and ask you what you’d like.
And you will say, “another girl,”
and be on your silly way.
A game of hate is easy.
Yet a game of love is tough.
It challenges and erupts, a side none of us, animal nor human,
Thought we could encompass.
Most of us gamble a try a few times in life.
We scrape what good, what pure we have to win a game we’ve known no one to have had.
Cheaters get close, strategic players play rough,
Passionate, consistent ones get the closest
Until just when they think they’ve won it,
And suddenly they’re shot with a gun of jealousy.
And the game of love, has suddenly faded.

the early afternoon sun breaks through his dusty window shades loud but gentle all the same
the warmth falls in strips across that sleepy body. I watch the dust float around us like confetti or glitter made of dead skin and hairs, and I can’t help but trace his new stripes with my fingertips as he slumbers cozy
dreaming of lemonade and freckles and sand beneath fingernails.
I kissed those scruffy cheeks tight eyelids hoping to be some influence on his sleep’s reality that my mouth’s warmth would be warm enough I start to count the heavy kisses falling like coins onto his beard when my heart plunges into my pelvis as he opens his eyes—
and it’s in the way he looks at me, as if he almost wished he hadn’t for I am not the lightness he seeks has sought in his dreams the dust still floats and we continue to breathe it in—
but this time there’s less magic in the act the sun hides behind the clouds (of course) and his stripes disappear.
CYCLICAL BALANCE
Rachel Stickney