



Phoenix

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Wistful



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More or Less – Emery A. Ball

If you're a wall,
I'm the storm that hits you harder,
with my fists full of water,
convinced wind and pure will can take you down.

If you're a casket,
I'm the nail that bites the head of every
coffin door you custom built,
premeditating death.

If I could open up the threshold
or fan the flame of your boredom,
would I miss you a little less?
Could you love me a little more?
Pick me up and burn me out,
pour me into a jar inside your house.

You always see right through my skin,
deep down to the skeleton—
my young corpse's dead-bones body.

You're a filthy opportunist
and business mind at best,
holding a vacuum to my mouth
stealing the air out of my chest.
My brother wants to beat the living hell out of you;
I might just let him at it—
but he'd bring the friends from our childhood too.

If I could only scratch the surface
of the barrier you built for me,
I'd tear down every letter,
letting light break through the paper ceiling.
Would you love me a little more?
Could I miss you a little less than I do?

Dinner - Iris Love





Untitled - Abbigail Corwin



Walk – Aidan Thornhill

Take a walk,
 pick yourself,
 your mind,
up and go!

Forget everything else;
 take the step—
 the giant
—and conquer.

We don't own it,
 but it's ours!
 So, go,
go, go, go!

Take yourself up,
 right,
left,
down—it doesn't matter,

there's someone to keep,
 a bagel to eat,
 and a world
to burn.

So, for the love of God, take a walk!

The dirt withers by the second,
and here we are,
talking together,
from a million miles away,

but I don't want to hear it,
I don't want to see it;
I want to FEEL it
as the entity it is.

Give me your lips,
your voice,
your hand,
give me you, not an imitation.

To Prey Holy – Hayden Harris

Blue resides along the blushed sun-kissed bay
beneath the mourning bridge where our timecapsules stay
but under the auburn moon lie our taut tethered souls
whispering truths of pleasure that no one else knows.

There, I'll wait for our broken hearts to guide me
to the tucked hideaway where you once claimed me holy
then I'll prey, kneeled and pretty, on the painted pride of you
and beckon the bloodstained bits of our days spent in blue.

i'm yours - Gwen Aguilar



Nowadays – Emily Moore

“Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.”
-Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

of course, they said
[it was no big deal, no] sweat;
Sweating for everything always made sense to me.

that dad-blamed squirrel done
tipped over that bird feeder!

the sun has curious fingers that
like to tug on tired eyelids-

(thinking of the sun
as a person always made
me feel better)

the phone rings every hour;
you’re parked bumper to
bumper just in front of
the train tracks-

(how long is a freaking
train? How many minutes
until nine-thirty?)

the building smells of
icebreakers/antifreeze/must/misappropriation
of funds/ twenty-five cents
with the state bird on the back;

(it’s put papers here and
there; discuss a thing and
circle back)

a nightly ghost of the
albatross follows you home-

(you prophetic creature! he carries
david foster wallace with him.)

I go to bed and
he perches near my feet;
flecked with black, his
wings spell a kind of
motivation:

(teeth clenched angry/hold all of your
hope in your head/not out
in the open because some big
man will come on the TV and take it/
the world is one half cup bad and one
half cup good. but we'll focus on
the one half that'll drown you/you could
disappear with the next helicopter/the
insects will crawl inside your ears/cue
for the grand piano to smash your house flat/
no one wants you to write down that

in another life the ham
wasn't salted/the glass never
shattered/snails had triangle
shells/weeks had four and a half
days (we could never figure out what
to do with the other half, so we just
threw it away)-
pencil never smudged/authority was
trustworthy/mechanical genie island
was a popular vacation destination for
those upper class classes who had money to
buy themselves over again/but then they
invented the cloning machine and
mechanical genies went out of fashion (if
you could ask yourself, would you?- this
was the advertisement at the movie theater)-
pepto bismol was purple and was made of
uranium so if you had stomach problems it
would kill you so no one ever had stomach
problems (or at least that's what the
government people wrote down in
their little books when they knocked on
your door.) I quite liked the taste
myself.)

"At least you didn't shoot me."

Blueberries - Maya VanderKamp



Lighter on Me – Simone

I always keep a lighter in my purse
Or pocket, deep in there
Sometimes between my chest
My momma says I make the boys stare

The lighter isn't for me, never has, never been,
My momma, half of herself, the other half
those marlboro reds.
Out all night I see her stress leak out her eyes
I zip it open and hand it to her
Flick one, flick two, roll down the window
She knows I don't like the smell

A day of chores, productivity high
I can almost see her smile if it weren't for her eyes
Clock strikes three, the kids need to come home
She hands me the keys,
I dig deep deep deep
Down into my pocket
For the lighter in this trade.

Passenger seat she sits,
Flick one, flick two, roll down the window
Quickly, now, only six minutes out
I know how you are around crowds.
Never let them know, never let them see,
The mother you never wanted to be

Happy family stitched together again
I'm working working working until my momma can work again.
Not a mishap in a week, neither of my siblings made a peep,

Time to celebrate, a dinner out, no more slaving over hot stoves.

I put on my finest attire
Leave my purse and pocket at home
She hands me the keys, doesn't ask for the return
I smile and believe I may have done good.
At dinner my siblings feast and I am content
I see in my momma's eyes a stint, a stint,

The beast may awake again
For her time is arriving
The years years years of giving
She hates how much of herself she is hiding.
She wants to run away, sprint, flee,
To anything other than me

I reach into my chest
Momma's lighter is here
Flick one, flick two,
Flick three,
"Step outside with me"
One long drag,
Hold her breath, hands it to me
second long drag,
I always keep a lighter on me.

The Echo of Us – Sophia Porpiglia

The soft skin of the willow tree
drapes over me,
soothing the boiling soil that
settles in my veins.

Flesh and Earth intertwine.
Leaves flow down my back as I envy
the sole-purposed stream.
Honeyed chains kiss uncertain ankles,
a lulling safety settles in soft lungs.

A whisper of wind, a hand, a promise,
a caress that lives in the
untouched corners
of an ink-stained love letter.
Air and metal contend
as the quiet willow gives way
to the silent warrior.

You watch the soil return home,
soles gently release the earth,
and laughter greeting the sky.
You give me to the Moon
and succumb to the Sun
so we can dance in the in-between
and echo in eternity.

The Crashing of Life – Brianna Eaton

the waves crash against the beach
harsh, rough, loud
like they have time and time again and like they will continue to do.

a tale as old as time, like the waves that crash against the beach in their cycle,
in their routine,
history will repeat itself.

like history, the planets in the solar system will continue on their elliptical path,
orbiting without change,
unless a foreign object comes in to knock it off its path.

but unlike the predictability of science and physics,
a human knocked off the path will continue to make human error,
repeating the mistakes of history in new forms.

unlike the universe, unless a humongous change like the loss of the moon,
the ocean will continue to wax and wane on the shore,
unless an unpredictable change occurs, the ocean will continue to be predictable.

unless there is a humongous force of change within humanity,
human nature will continue to act as the ocean,
repeating the same natural cycle of repeated history.

Elegy for a Patriot – L. Nathaniel Adams

I knew a kid once
who wandered into his living room
one September morning
and wondered why his mother was crying.
A kid, who at 9 years old,
Learned that when faced with the decision to
Burn alive
Or
Fall from a skyscraper,
There is one option that allows you to feel
The wind on your face
One last time.
That kid would stand tall in school,
Back straight, hand over heart
And declare his allegiance to something
That placed itself under God;
That was indivisible
And believed in Liberty and Justice for all.
That kid was excited to turn 18.
Not because he could legally consent,
But because he could legally vote,
And it was important to vote.
That kid was proud to be an American;
His blood was star-spangled.
That kid raised his right hand
And solemnly swore
To defend
The constitution
And obey
The orders of the officers appointed over him.
And I have watched him die, little by little.
He died a little when he learned that
American
And
Christian
Were not synonymous.
He died a little more when he realized
That selling his cloak to buy a sword
Was only beneficial if he eventually
Bent that sword into a plowshare.
He started to think that
The definitions of
Kill
And
Murder
Were confused intentionally
To justify training child soldiers.
Sorry.
Not children.
They're legally adults at 18

Even if their brains aren't fully developed until 25.
As that patriotic kid, now a man,
Stood on the White side
Of a conflict as a tool
Selling the narrative that
This is about
Defending
The capital, and has absolutely nothing to do with
Race,
the lid slid over that patriot's coffin.
The lines blurred between who was a
Domestic enemy
To the constitution
And
Who wasn't.
If he crossed over and stood with
The Protesters
Would he be
Disobeying
The officers appointed over him?
Would he be hanged for
Treason?
The protesters are
Americans
Too.
Maybe the
Bill of Rights
Isn't covered by the
Oath of Enlistment.
He watches
Washington now
Wondering when
The Stars
Will say something; do something.
The Constitution
Is clearly being threatened and everyone
Watches on: frustrated.
And those with an obligation
Sit back, say "yes, sir," and forget their oaths.
Or choose which parts are more important to them.
That former patriot has now found himself with the option of
Burning alive
Or
Falling from a skyscraper,
And isn't sure if the feeling of wind is worth the
Hard stop
At the bottom.

Gardens – Hannah Fletcher

Rosy light with downy feather
Mold my life to something better
Shape it like a sunny breeze
Blow 'way a winter storm.

Wild onions fists forgot
And tissues full of sneeze and snot
Break sicknesses behind the rot
I fear will never die.

When I look through cellar door
I plea and beg thee, come no more
These flights of worry plague me
And I pray they go away.

These rituals and games I play
To bite the bit and right the way
Leave me fractured, overlaid
With lies I can't ignore.

Apple peel and orange rind
When quiet thoughts meet quiet minds
I ponder what it means, to be
Free from all these failings.

I would not wish on anyone
Not snail, not snake, not bird above
To dream the dreams that I dream of
From dusk to dawn, to wake

When I am old and don't live here
I hope my mind is finally clear
With you, I'll be forgiven
And my sins forgotten for

I'll live within your holy house
And understand the ways devout
Which now I only read about
'Tween pages in a book

The world will bend but never break
When eyes set 'pon those pearly gates
Like candy-tuff and flower pot
She'll smile at me

And I'll be home.

The Long Walk Home from the Piccolo – Maxwell Edmonds



martinez (the backs of america) - Jen Martinez Mendez



Little Surfers - Emery A. Ball



Two Nude "Women" - Abbigail Corwin



Baby Fever Blues on a Summer Night – Hannah Buchanan

It sticks to me, haunts me,
Bites at me like a summer cold
I can't quite shake.

It melts and covers my hands,
My lips, leaving behind
An empty cone between my legs.

Chills me to the bone, coatless,
Biting at my exposed breasts
As evening wanes over my sorrow.

The dew of my cheeks
Sour the pavement, spoiling
The impending night of lovers.

My heart yearns for the sweet
Smell of honeysuckle, but tonight
It's masked by the overwhelming
Aroma of woods dripping fresh sap.

Unremarkable – Cooper Henson

I have known far too well
An excited chest, an empty stomach.
No, not empty, but open, pouring out
Taking in the wallowing, weeping night.

In the abyss of my ribcage, a place
For the moon to rest her weary head.
When the lights hit my retina,
My body recalls dilation.

Sometimes, I can't help but to squint
At the thought of the blues and reds,
At the headlights that chased me
Not ten feet from my legs

Cemented on Cumberland's crosswalk,
The air smelled hopeful, like springtime.
The air smelled tired, like sweat and tears.
The air felt captured.

To My Hometown – Brianna Eaton

It's always so funny to tell people where I'm from. My city is split down the middle by a state line—a city that belongs in two states. While objectively two different cities in two different states, Bristol Tennessee and Bristol Virginia are the same in my mind.

One of my first jobs in high school was on the state line. I was a barista who didn't know a single thing about coffee and could never create latte art. I would put on *The Cranberries* and get distracted while taking people's orders because my favorite part of *Linger* had come on. People from all over would walk in and ask us if they were on the Tennessee or Virginia side. I had never realized that people visited my town. They would grab their drip coffee and warmed bagel and would venture into the road, where a plate sat in the middle of the double yellow lines reading "TENNESSEE/VIRGINIA." They would place a foot on each side and snap a picture. Still till this day, I have not done so.

My entire family is from the Bristol area, both sides, neither have lived anywhere else. My great-grandparents met at church—my great-grandfather couldn't wink so he pushed one of his eye-lids down while smiling at my great-grandma. She tells these stories as if they were yesterday and every time I sit crisscrossed in my chair, eagerly, as if I don't know what all comes next. Her daughter, my grandmother, met her husband at the county high school in Bristol. He walked into their school gym for a concert and she was already in the bleachers. She saw him across the way, and the rest was history. My mother, their child, met my dad in that very same high school. They met in Spanish class and began their love story with a torn piece of paper that read "Will you go out with me? Check YES or NO."

I often feel like a traitor. I didn't go to the high school my grand-parents or parents

met at. I went to the high school in the city, and I did not meet my future husband there. I am also one of the first ones in our direct family line to move away. Their stories are all so connected, and mine seems so far. I attend the college my grand-father lives for. I have never seen him wear a color that wasn't UT orange. He never misses a game, and calls my mother to make sure she doesn't either. I don't connect to this school yet, not like my grandfather does. But coming here, in reality, has only made me realize how thankful I am for Bristol.

What I love so much about Bristol, I discovered, is the history. Bristol was founded in 1852—the site of two meeting railroads—a town formed with the purpose of prosperity and hospitality. If you compare current photographs to old photographs of downtown Bristol, not much has changed. Of course, older buildings have gotten torn down and the businesses aren't the same, but the original foundations are still there. The original train station still stands—now an event space—one where I met Santa Claus and graduated 6th grade.

This history, to me, makes Bristol rich, and makes Bristol worth missing. The entire time this city has been around, there has been community. I am walking the same concrete sidewalks with my friends to eat dinner—the same as loads of women who came before us. I am clocking into my weekend job in a building that used to be a warehouse that made suits—I am eating at the diner that was the last place Hank Williams was seen alive.

All these things, all this history, is my history.

Copper Stories – L. Nathaniel Adams

I liked the idea of a copper pen, so I bought one. Copper tarnishes. Every time I used it my fingers would cause the metal to darken. If I gripped it a different way the metal would darken in a different pattern. Copper collects and remembers stories. I liked the idea of this pen that would, itself, tell the story of its life.

I carried the copper pen everywhere. If I needed a pen for anything, it was my go-to. It darkened and gained interesting colors. The thing is, copper is a soft metal. I dropped the pen once and dented the tip. I couldn't get the ballpoint to come out anymore. I remember taking tools and widening the hole so that the pen would function again. It gained a dent and a little deformity to match the darkening metal. It gained another chapter in its story.

I have a scar on my left arm from a surgery to remove a cyst when I was a kid. The cyst is gone, but the purple line remains. It was out-patient, and I was awake for the whole thing. The only pain I remember was the needle from the syringe for the numbing medication, and the numbing medication itself burned. The surgeon was slicing open my arm and twisting scissors in the wound, but I felt nothing. I have a scar on my arm, and another chapter in my story, my pen has a dent.

Another time I lost the pen for a week. It had fallen out of my car at church. It hung out in the same parking spot until we returned the next Sunday, and I spotted its brown barrel reflecting in the sun. It still worked like a charm, but now had a new chapter to show off.

I left work for a week in 2020 to attend Funeral Honors Level 1 school. I left work at least once a year, for at least two weeks. Work no-doubt missed me. They were becoming frustrated with how much I missed for the National Guard, but I always returned and brought with me leadership skills and the work ethic

inherited from my father honed by military discipline. I picked up work right where I left off after the Funeral Honors School, or after annual training with new skills, and new stories.

I trusted the clip on that pen more than any pen I have ever encountered. It never bent out of shape, and it held in my pocket better than I had hoped. Most pen clips eventually snap off. Not this one. I trusted it too much. Last summer we went on a family vacation to Dollywood. I got on a roller coaster called Dragonflyer with my nephews in the Park's newest area. I emptied my pockets of my wallet and keys but left the copper pen clipped to my shorts. It was secure. A coaster wasn't going to knock it loose. It is somewhere in Wildwood Grove in Dollywood under a roller coaster now. I hope whoever finds it continues to add chapters to its story.

I like collecting pens and notebooks. I even carry a notebook on me in case I want to write something down. I often don't. I rely too much on my feeble human memory to remember the experiences I need to fuel my writing. I tried keeping a journal on my last deployment, but everything seemed so mundane. I could've written about almost crashing a Polish wedding but going to have drinks with a high-ranking officer instead. I wrote none of that down, and now the details are gone. Maybe that's why I write fiction. I can make up the details. I can fill in the gaps with whatever fantastical or mundane event I want. I carry pens, I sign receipts with them. But, I do not trust that my life is interesting enough to write things down, even if I go through the motions of carrying a notebook. Hopefully someone finds my pen and continues its story, and hopefully I start writing mine down. The copper pen will always maintain its tarnish and dents, but I cover mine with new dents until I forget why the first ones are there.

Pear – Neveah

I remember the squeak of cheap rubber on concrete
My non-slip shoes
Black and reeking of mop water
The swish of my black slacks
And fluffy ponytail
My bangs also kept time
Back and forth as I walked
The paper towel in my hand was wet
Clasping around a bright green Pear
I had stolen as a snack before work
I lifted it to my mouth
Its skin young and soft
Like mine was
I bit down
Its flesh tore
The inside a soft yellow
The color of my teeth, its juice blended in
I'm not sure if its taste was amplified
By the warmth of the spring day
But never so delicious a Pear
Did I eat again
I remember I sat on your bed giggling to myself
Telling this story
To uninterested eyes
Maybe my smile flashed too wide
My teeth still carrying the color

Swan Song – Harper Brabson

Names hold power, I chant
your syllables in silence to steady your crown
laying the foundation of a life without you,
furrow to your memory

I step into the dusk and smell you again,
iron's sweet corrosion, bike rims in soft rain
palms cradle my shorn edges
sawed off to fit your jigsaw
your tall tales marked on the doorframe,
the ink stays firm while the wood rots

How long will I stay
a poet, weaving prose of pain
letters lying flat on a page, remembrance
of a flight of fancy and a delusional devotion

Block Receive – Elliot Ashlock



the color of your mind - Gwen Aguilar



Demolition Derby 2 - Blaine Atkins



What Makes the Green Grass Grow? – Adele Ferguson



Ants – Ella Thompson

I'm creeping slowly through the grass,
Weaving skillfully through the blades.
My mind wanders to all that has passed,
And my scattered thoughts make me lose my way.

As I stray further, my gaze trained towards the skies,
I come across a human standing tall,
Water streaming from her eyes.
Her problems so big make mine seem so small.

And yet, as I scramble back home over pebbles the size of boulders,
My worries rush back and pile up on my shoulders.

Drunken Therapy – Hayden Harris

Here, in this underground refuge for the souls looking to drink away the day's disappointments, a golden glow permeates the air. The sense of self, nonexistent, yet whole through the unified desire to tear down the emotional walls that began construction long before we realized the beauty of sincerity. Between these shared breaths, our hands, both calloused and bruised from the labour of holding our hearts together, will be washed clean by the drunken vows inevitably forgotten by the dawn of the next day. And the secrets shared will be buried with the names of the strangers we promised to remember, while the laughter that echoed and the grief we laid down that night will be the ones who walk us home. And in the morning, when we wake with a headache, there will be a longing to do it all over again.

The Futility of Compromise – Aidan Thornhill

Compromise is an action of utter futility in the context of human disagreement. The disdain one party almost certainly holds towards another in some sense is an eternal flame that will never be tamed nor extinguished in a world void of risk. The date between warring ideologies at the middle ground we know as compromise presents nothing but continued resentment as the efforts of both factions yield fruitless. Compromise is safe, compromise is naïve.

The concept of compromise sabotages any and all chance of mutual understanding and potential rest among humanity. Compromise feeds off the uneasiness of the other party's existence. To know that your assets could not overpower what you have been bred to despise drives you further down that path. And some will disagree. Some will argue that they hold no animosity towards their ideological enemies and that they instead simply don't understand, but that is naïveté.

By denying yourselves the opportunity to explore the world, not only for its physical bearings, but the philosophical, you deny yourselves global compassion. It does not matter if after this you still disagree, conformity is not the point here. To find justification for your own minds, you must explore the minds of others.

You cannot simply meet in the middle and end the pilgrimage. If this never occurs, then neither will the mutual appreciation of said parties. If they never get to know each other; if they never get to know their systems, thoughts, morals, beliefs, then they will never have the right to their own worldly claims. Take trees, the mystical organisms. With their vibrant green clouds of summer, copper tendrils in the fall, exposed skeletons in winter, and their colorful recovery in spring, trees exemplify the idiocracy of compromise. One may lust for the orchestral palette of leaves in spring and summer year-round, where another may be captivated by the haunting husks of late fall and winter, and they will never agree on the beauty of a tree. Their preconceived notions deny them any access to the true beauty of nature. If they continue to simply acknowledge the existence of each other's preferences, they further establish this. The only reasonable course of action would then be for whatever color favoring group to make the point to examine the state of trees as a whole in winter (and vice versa for the other party). The two must learn to appreciate the nuances beyond their own desires in order to truly appreciate the cycle of the tree's life. This is inherent to all other systems.

An Apology from Your Sister – Helayna Garlett

I can see the handprint in my mind from that one fight you know the one you
always remind me of it I can see you standing up at my graduation party after
Nana just told the room how I was always such a good sister and you responded
with a story about how I told you to erase a letter when you were learning to write
them even though it looked good I do not remember this but you have told
me this story enough times that I can now see it through your eyes I guess I have
not done enough in the decade since to earn forgiveness for that g mostly I see
you in the doorway listening as I let the words flow out that I had been holding in
all weekend to our mom I see in your eyes that you do not understand I see that
you will always forgive him for more things than I will ever do to you I can see
you in the closet that first break I didn't go with you calling to tell me everything
that has gone wrong I can see the fear when he opens the door I see your tears
in the courtroom both of those summers.

I will tell you I love you every day until my vocal cords snap I will hug you tight
until my bones break I will walk beside you until my shoes fall apart and my
feet bleed I will fight for you until I am given life in prison I will be the
best aunt I will spoil your children and I will tell them stories about you from
when you were little Not the story about the day you cried when I stepped on the
ants but the one when you found the four leaf clover in the outfield during your
little league game not the one where I gave you a black eye while
sword-fighting but about the days where we would play with my dolls and your
legos and we would make something wonderful I will die before you I will not
allow anything else you will stand up at my funeral and tell the story of when I
told you to erase the g

emperor – ethan harkness

Spite me baby, I'm on FIRE!!!
I am the dawn-soaked rooster
I am the restless mists of morn
I am the calloused fist
beating back the countless foes

Brash words given solid form
Sharp-spined-bull in a china house
Fall in pieces before me!
Become nothing in my vile radiance
For my vastness defeats you

Lo,

In all my glory
Atop my killer's throne
Gallus sleep rips mind from flesh
Armor discarded, steel giving to numbness
Weak now, so brittle now

Pray, I am compelled
To bow at your mercy soft
Washing the feet of all fragility
Begging for an acre croft
Dirty hands close together
Where glass skin shines
And shatter-corium marks strength

But what of thy kingdom
My misery manifest
Hard earned blood
Well fought supplicants
Terror so sound
It pangs through the air
Let go for what?

Some infant cry
And joy's noon shadow
Fetid siren, no doubt indeed
But nearing now, so it seems

Closer to nothing
With wire wrapped 'round my neck
Closer to something
Oh Darling, just a peck

The Path – Kylie Bennett

It smells sweet in the air
like when you were
here, and I wonder if the
breeze has brought
you back.

And by the creek I could smile—
half a smile for half a moment—
at the strangers who have your eyes,
your chin;
the father running
with his two boys,
the nodding girl
on her bike.
A smoke stack
looms over my shadow,
overtakes it,
and I keep to the right.
This is not my path
to disrupt.

How lush the
bush may seem
when the pale grass
surrounds it.

Summer Oranges - Maya VanderKamp



D.O.G.E. Protest in Chattanooga, TN - Blaine Atkins



I Know You - Elliot Ashlock



Downtown - Olivia Kittredge



Lamentation for Innocence – Eli Bailey Hosford

To see the world within a wilted flower
And taste progress in the metallic wind
To glimpse eternity within an hour
And feel the pulse in life forever dimmed.

A bull wandering blindly through its pen
Ignorant of the malice that imprisons it within
A doe, whose gaze once held the spring
Now sleeps in shadows where the carrion birds sing.

Predators no longer roam the lands,
Instead, prey lie next to roads
That cross the land in blighted strands.
As flies buzz in rotting odes

The river poisoned by human greed
Fails the creatures it should feed
For we take too much too recklessly
And claim need excuses our careless cruelty

come here it's warm – Jacqueline Ciabattari

Golden Hour is where I can hold you close.
Embraced and Entangled in the yellow light, it comforts me.

I want to be here rising
and falling

in breathing
and in sighing

Your fingers brush against my skin,
The beacons of light from your eyes, they envelop me.

I want to be there in the warmth, the heat.

the smoldering embers
in blazing fires

Golden Hour is where I want to see you the most.
In the dim and very little, its enough for me.

Sodium Coma – Lillian Nazarova

One meal I crave everyday is the Cheddar Flavor Tuna Helper (by the Hamburger Helper brand). Yes, gross. It is best described as a sodium-bomb of cheese sauce, spiraled pasta, and two cans of tuna. We would always use one can that was soaked in water and one in oil; so little bubbles of grease would always rise to the surface of the sauce. Oftentimes, the cheese melted in weird chunks and the tuna tasted like metal. To me the one-pan-out-of-a-box household staple was more than a treat, it was my favorite meal after a long day of elementary school. My dad would use the same exact pan every time, sometimes letting me measure out the butter or pour the milk. It was butter that could not possibly come from any cow, always just a little too yellow and a lot too salty. The pan was a scratched up non-stick that I had known my whole life. It was dented in the middle so that it never stood straight. Dad would bring the milk and butter to a simmer, then add the powdered sauce packet, then the noodles, and finally the tuna. Maybe to give the tuna and sauce as little time to get to know each other as possible. My mom would sigh and say it was unhealthy, while my (then teenage angst fueled) brother would complain and say it was the worst flavor. He preferred the broccoli alfredo, often out of stock when we went shopping together. I never cared though, always happy to eat my bowl of warm, milky tuna as my dad faced me across the table. As they complained he would roll his eyes dramatically and point out how excited I was. He would always catch my eye after about twenty minutes and we would giggle as we both raced for seconds.

Looking back now as an adult who fends for herself in the kitchen, I realize a lot of my favorite childhood meals are what people would consider to be “struggle meals.” Recently online I even saw someone recreate my beloved Tuna Helper as a quick and cheap meal option for those struggling financially. I

never perceived that we only shopped at discount grocery stores. I thought everybody wore their cousin’s hand-me-downs. I would be confused when my parents didn’t take work off to randomly surprise me at school as my classmates’ did. People often hear of the “American Dream,” and the long histories of generations beginning with small roots and building upon hard work and wealth over time. Immigrating to America offered this promise; eventual wealth. My family was not quite at the “eventual,” instead paving the way for the “beginning.” The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 left many of the formerly connected countries economically devastated. My grandmother once told me she used to eat grass for some of her meals, which my mother scolded her for later. As the political climate grew more violent my dad scrambled to find a way out. My father and uncle both won the Green Card lottery in Turkmenistan in 1998. They brought my family, including my (then 8-month old baby) brother, to the States with next to nothing.

My parents both worked hard to climb in their careers and provide an increasingly stable life for us. Both of them now hold their dream positions at jobs they enjoy. As a teenager, I began earning an allowance (for a blissful year and a half until I was forced to get a job). Tuna Helper turned into nice pasta with a meaty tomato sauce. My dad still cooked it, although I helped less. Unfounded by my younger self a storm had calmed. Still, clear skies are always temporary. In 2016 my brother was diagnosed with Lupus, an autoimmune disease that ran in my family. It was caught late (because our pediatrician thought the telltale sign of rashes on his face was just acne) and affected him very aggressively. He was put on steroids, had labs run weekly, and even had to defer from college for his freshman year. He was more susceptible to sickness in general, being rushed to the ER almost

regularly for intense fever or stomach issues. My mother threw up her hands and, in an attempt to control a situation that was haunting her, announced we would be eating better from now on. Pasta became quinoa, ham sandwiches became salads, beef became salmon, and the younger me became miserable.

Annoyingly, I have become childhood Lillian’s worst nightmare: healthy. I gave up eating added sugar as part of a challenge my senior year of high school and have stuck with it ever since. I exercise almost daily and walk to the bus stop half a mile away instead of driving to class so that I can get my steps in. I attempt to get the appropriate protein to carb to vegetable ratio on my plates. I rarely eat out or buy myself snacks, usually preferring to cook myself something where I can see the ingredients used. None of that is an attempt to brag; just things I enjoy implementing to make myself feel better. The longer I live in my body, the more phases of my life it carries me through, the better I seek to treat it. My friends often tease me and ask if I could eat anything in the world, what would it be? I always giggle and say mac and cheese or Taco Bell (if I’m being honest, both still mistresses of mine I sometimes see on weekends) but really those pale in comparison to my cheddar Tuna Helper.

Maybe my craving for it is creeping back now that my brother is doing very well; owning businesses as well as his disease. He lives in Connecticut after completing his remaining three years at Boston University and is constantly busy with work or the stressful social life he often asks for advice about. Or that my dad began traveling for work much more at his new job and, coupled with college, I rarely see him anymore. After getting laid off during COVID, the fact that he found something that he enjoys so much is so

exciting. It left my mom and I home alone for the latter half of high school though. Or because the SEC college culture is as foreign to my mom as her Soviet childhood is to me, she is usually pretty miserable visiting me. We mostly talk on the phone and count down the days to breaks. She enjoys the quiet house though, confessing to me that it is finally in the order and arrangement she has always envisioned. She also invested in some property overseas and enjoys travelling with her friends.

I feel a distance that I never felt when I was little and every meal was had together. The American Dream is real, achievable, yet demanding. It demands long evenings spent at my grandmother's because my parents had to work late. It demands wearing all clothing trends a few years late because my older cousin or brother wore them first. It demands burning the roof of your young mouth on Poptarts and Tuna Helper because that's what Piggly Wiggly down the street had. Even after the Dream is achieved, it demands. It demands you work hard in school and don't skip any classes so that all of your parents' hard work is worth something. It demands you feel grateful for every meal you have and every stitch of clothing on your body. Of course, it demands you feel happiness for your parents who now get to enjoy the success they earned. As they expand their careers or travel, you accept the texts instead of the phone calls and don't demand more. To have happy parents, a healthy brother, and the college experience I've always wanted is all a dream come true. Sometimes though, I think of my other dream. Reaching with my dad to get the plates my parents got at their wedding from the top shelf, removing the lid from my beloved non-stick pan, mixing its contents with the only ladle we owned,

wafting the smell of cheese and tuna up my nose, and sitting down together to enjoy a serving or two of Tuna Helper with my family.

Church Hands – Hannah Buchanan

The feed and seed smells of cigarette butts and honey vanilla hand lotion. It always has since I was a child. It probably always will. The smells plague my mind vividly with how they mix and assault each other, how they embrace and apologize for their harsh words. They smell like warmth and love, covering my child-like memories with a blanket worn down by detergent and generations of use. There's an old woman who stands outside the doors every weekend, waiting for the bluegrass gospel band to perform. Her frail frame is always in a beautiful yellow dress with a white polka dot collar, polished black dancing shoes, and a set of dingy pearls that have heard more music than I ever will. I dream of her often. I dream that I dance with her, holding her soft, worn hands. They smell of honey vanilla hand lotion, and she offers me a light.

Loveknot – Grace Rook

I do not believe in stars that cross
In strings that stretch across land
Twisting and tying, binding
Leaving red marks on my arms. Cuts like fishing line

You believe in the hands, in the cup
Of a palm letting slip some other
Form that rolls like a boulder
Rockslide into you. Bruised and breathless in a valley

I do believe in coincidence
That you crossed land and I was here
I believe in the choices I make
To cross over to you again. Trailing lines like spilled ink

And it brings me to tears, the fragility
That I stood there, already whole, and still
You added your own to me, giving nothing up
But bringing bounty on top of blessing. Doubling what is shared

Until our hands overflow, and I let go to hold you
Because the strings are not for me, and I am here still

Horse Boy – Grace Sutt



2 Nelsons - Emery A. Ball



paper doll house - chloe adsit



Blues – Daveney Winterburn



6/8

"Blues"

D.W.

Drown'd Appalachia – Vivien Sloan

My historic mountain home—
Dear deep roots, shredded,
Swaller'd by Helene's thunder breath,
Drown'd in her wailin'

Pitiful, it is.
Them old folks shoulda known to head down yonder—
Now their lungs are gurglin' under mud,
And Papaw's grave sits twice as deep.

Who cares 'bout them hicks?
Reckon they'll claw their way outta the muck,
They're used to leavin' their own to rot
Like lost to time fuel stations and old general stores
Like cabin bones and Poppy's ol' rust-bit truck in Nana's gravel driveway

Them's good ol' boys down in the holler—
Raised to work 'til they hit bone,
Whether in their hands,
Or creek beds 'neath hill church stones.

Ground'll be twice as rich come spring,
Papaw's hole home might unearth a little
And halves of missing funeral attendees

Them damned birds'll still fly back from the north anyhow

These mountains reach high,
But we're just a creaky porch step—
A fat rock crushed under costly soles
Meant to snuff our allfire

Our rot feeds an unquenched burn,
Fallen trees buryin' us made fine kindlin'
I smell scorched meat
Y'all seen this on the news?

Who'd you vote for?
Did you see what that rich man said on
TV?
Guess who just went to space?

Did you hear Don lost his farm?
That Ruth and Tom lost their boy?
But they show us celebrity homes
Fryin' like salmon patties in hot oil

Ruth's son
He wastes in pieces,
Buried deep in hearty mountain soil

Laura Jean washed away in her home,
Clutchin' her paper and old tabby cat.

But she'll be mighty fine—
Good for the dirt,
When plantin' comes again and them
damned birds come twittering outside our
windows
beggin' for seeds

SUNNY SIDE UP – Carrie Cheng

Features deep with resting stories,
his hands and arms tanned
and two feet still soring,
roulette-picked hair strands
are slowly growing,
turning, fading
more
gray.
I wonder, perhaps foolishly,
when I was born,
were his limbs worn for me?
Or are they a product
of a two decade long work
he's been forced to be doing?
Did he mourn the loss of freedom
to be stupid and carefree
or is it a 'does he'?

(Does he...
 regret me?)

Because I've heard stories:
stolen goods even with the money,
and seen photos locked like some forgotten memory.
He's been on boats and docks, leisurely fishing;
I haven't even been on
a trip close to the real thing.
I only had a toy rod without the string,
but he had that classic photo of a fish held up
while he stood,
lips spread
from cheek to cheek.
I heard he dropped out of school,
but was incredibly
intelligent,
I'm not either of those things
even with the higher education
because I somehow forgot that he
was someone
before being
a parent.
Before being
my dad,
he was his own person,
but I never saw him like that.
And yet he was someone's husband,
and before that,
his mother's kid.
And just like how I have my own best friend,
he must've had his.

I wonder if it's the man we call uncle,
or someone who has passed since
he was his own person
with his long-lived experiences.
But I don't think I'll be able to see him
as anything (else) than who he is
to me.
Because I don't know his reasons or his stories.
I don't know his mind or his personality.
How can I return the favor when I know nothing?
He's watched me grow up and now I'm doing the watching—
From his preferences in soda to the things he reads,
he drinks beer over wine but I don't know if he likes drinking.
We have similar tastes in fruits but he never eats any.
I'm making a list of all his wants and it's
so
 scarce,
but mine is plenty.
So I sit once again, wondering,
trying to find any semblance of who he was
before he had me.
And though I still don't know a lot,
at the very least—
I know how he orders
his eggs.

And that's enough
for the moment.

Green Leaves Fallen Against the Red – Hannah Fletcher

“I am tired,” she says to me.

“Why?” I ask. “The sun is high, the breeze is low. That is your favorite time, is it not?”

“It is not the time that tires me,” she whispers, her rustles faint against my roots. She is still green, I can tell.

“Just hold on a little longer,” I offered, guiding the breeze in her direction. “It is almost the time of rest.” But she only sighs, her familiar chuckle like a notch, reminding me of times long forgotten.

“Caril—” she starts, but is interrupted by the wind. She knows it was me, but ignores it.

“Why do you deny it?”

“Eventually your leaves will turn red, like the rest of us. Just because you’re a late turner doesn’t mean—”

“It means.” The wind stills for a moment, and I let my focus shift to the forest floor below. We’ve all been losing for a week now, our leaves landing on one another, coating the dirt like a wildfire of our own creation. “We can start fires, too, you know.” I speak, letting my thoughts reach her. I do not care if she calls me crazy. I only wish to talk about anything, anything else, than this insistence she has.

“The sickness is spreading.”

“This conversation isn’t.” I snap, pulling my roots away from her. She’s always been this way, over-stressed, over-zealous. She twisted her roots in a knot, when she was younger, and hasn’t been the same since. Every time she reaches for me, her roots gently caressing mine, I pull away, until she cannot reach me, anymore. Night falls.

Morning comes. Next to me, her leaves are a brilliant red and orange. Inwardly, my limbs buzz with glee, but I’m still angry, and I reach out to her slowly.

“I suppose you have an apology to make,” I start, my roots grasping around hers.

“Another day is here, and your leaves are—”

But the root that I’ve touched is numb. Panic seeps through me for a moment, a few of my leaves dropping to the ground. The forest flinches, sensing my fear, and I draw back. I reach for another root.

“Your leaves are—” But again, she is limp.

“Rier, you should really tend to your roots, what did I tell you about—” I start, but she doesn’t hear me.

“Rier, your—” Lifeless.

Sick.

Her other roots are too far for me to reach. I reach out to Yiasen, and it takes a while for him to get back to me. He asks if I want to talk about it, and I free myself from his grip.

Green leaves fallen against the red, are the only pieces of her left to me. Her red ones don’t last as long. They’re fragile. Weak. Gone by the next rain.

No man will cut her down, not like this. She will remain beside me until the sickness reaches me. I pray for it to hurry. I do not wish to see.

For Solace – Hannah Fletcher

A plane is landing.
Broad, shiny wings, cutting through the air.
The clouds move above
Shifting, shapes nothing but figments of reality.
My mind finds form in the world I want to see.

A tree is rustling.
I look through the leaves for solace.
My mind plays tricks on me. Sometimes. Often.
I come to and remember that I am a human being.
Then I remember what that means
And I forget again.

My neighborhood is different.
I almost turn right towards my childhood home.
I've only driven there myself, once.
I moved away before I learned how.

I look in the mirror and I scare myself on purpose.
Who is that?
I spend so much time looking in that I never look out
Of myself. I think back on my childhood
And convince myself that I'm an undiagnosed narcissist.

I draw pictures of places I've never been
And feel more connected to them than
Those I have.
I sing songs and don't believe the words
But fear what will happen if I stop singing.
A part will be missing, they'll see that.

To be free is to be unafraid.
Then why must we live in darkness?
I think of how lonely it must be to not believe in God.
I wonder what time it is in Heaven.

When I was younger I wondered if everyone's
Heart beats at the same time.
If our thoughts were interconnected.
If at a singular, rare moment,
We could all stop and hear each other.

I wish I could speak.
I write, instead.
I wish I could describe it better.
I hate that this is what we've become.

If I told you I loved you, would you believe it?
Or would you look, instead, for all the reasons
why
You can't love me?
I pray God saves you.
Just as fervently as I pray that he saves me.

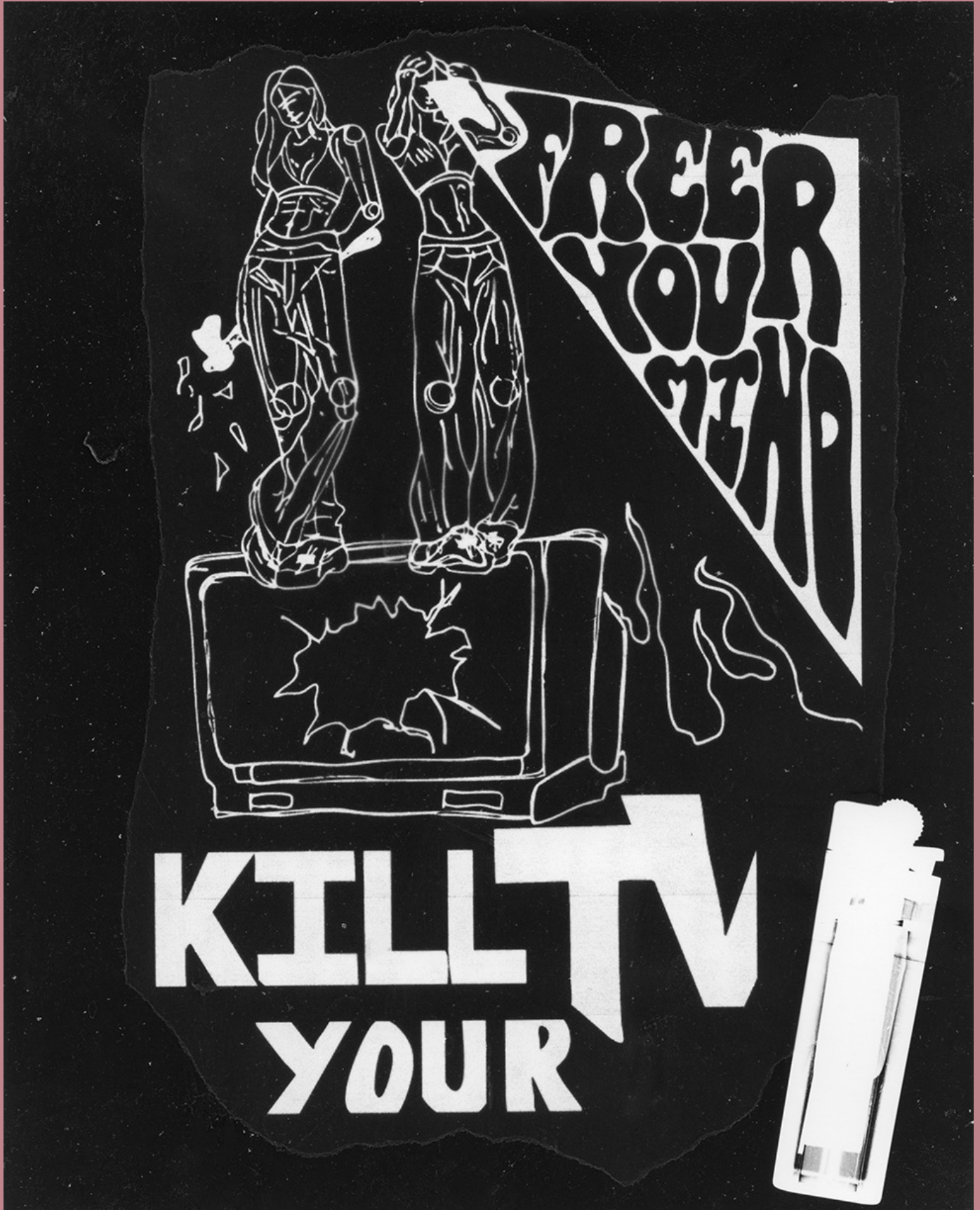
I fear that is not enough.
I pray for solace, instead.

Csodaszarvas az út mentén – Grace Sutt

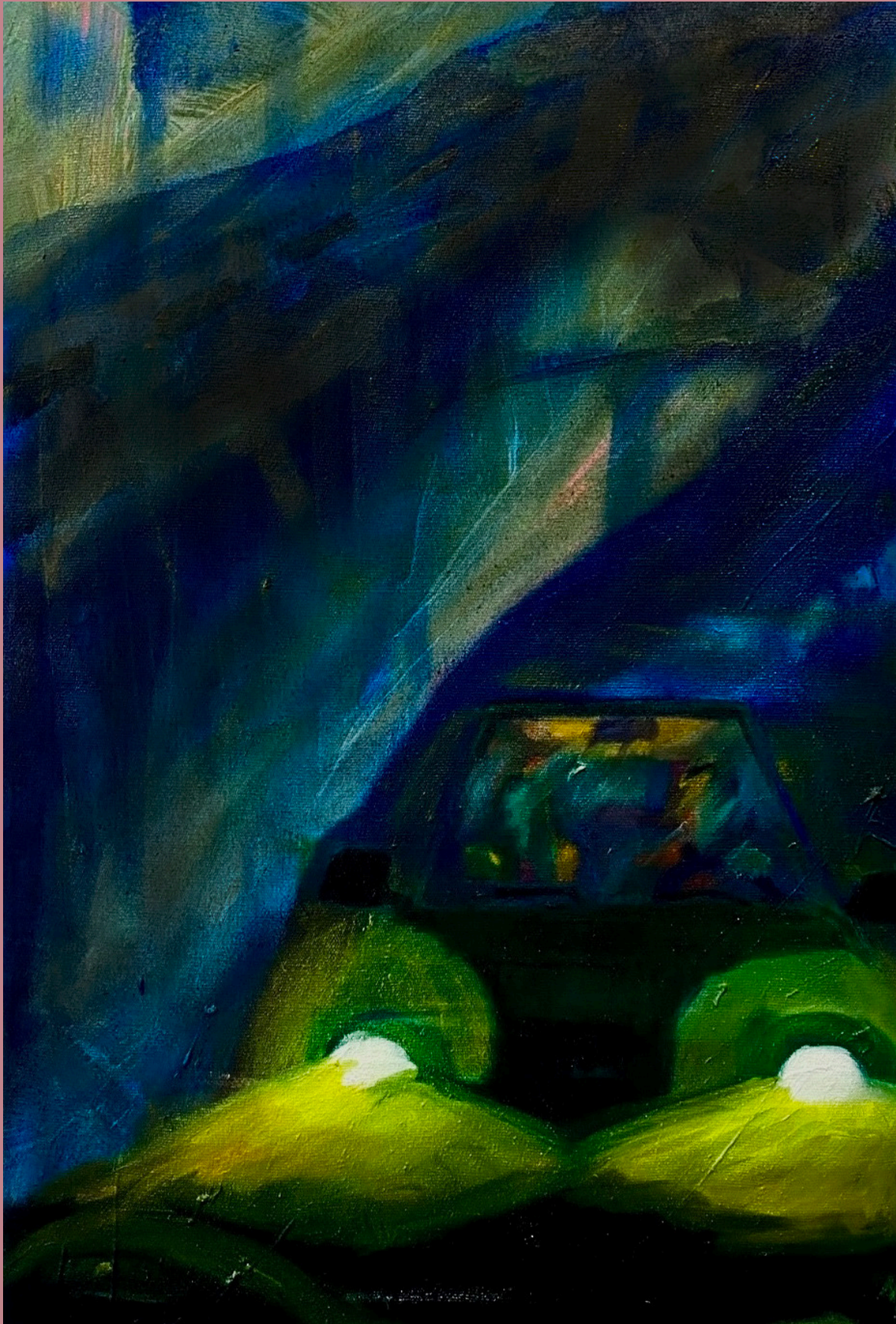


we all fall down – Jen Martinez Mendez





Proceed to the Route - Maxwell Edmonds



The Thing – Destanye Puckett

Something is affecting my sleep. When I go to sleep at night, I believe I'm sleeping for the entire night. Until I wake up, and am still extremely tired. It's almost as if I was never sleeping at all. I don't remember being awake—even getting out of bed. I have never had trouble sleeping before, but when I moved into this apartment everything changed. I can barely function nowadays. The energy feels drained out of me. Especially after the dream I had last night where I was in my apartment standing in my doorway facing the hallway. It's like I wasn't looking through my eyes, but looking onto myself. I have no clue what I was looking at or what was in the hallway. I knew that I was asleep in the dream... but I could feel that someone was awake in the house. The dream felt so intense and real. I was petrified and the air was filled with dread. Soon, I woke up. It felt fast, but when I looked at the clock, five hours had passed.

Five hours!

I was so confused because there was no way I was sleeping for that long. I tried to remember more of the nightmare, but it was impossible and hopeless. Since I was still super tired, I had no choice but to go back to sleep. I laid my head down. Closed my heavy eyelids and fell asleep. It was almost instant. But something was wrong and scarier about my nightmare this time. I was in the same position as before and I was looking at myself standing in the hallway, but this time the other me looked back. Her face was menacing and eerie. I was even more frightened than last time.

My body was shaking violently and I was finding it hard to catch my breath. I tried to wake up, but I was frozen. The other me started to walk towards me.

"You're dreaming, you're dreaming," I repeat to myself. That only seemed to make her angrier and she charged at me. That's when I woke up. I looked at the clock to my right and an hour had passed. Then I looked in my doorway. No one was there. I picked up my phone and looked at myself through the camera. I was sweating like crazy with teary, red eyes. I drank some water out of the glass next to my clock and tried to sleep one more time. Again it was the same nightmare except this time the other me wasn't standing in the doorway. I was almost relieved until I looked next to me. She was standing right next to the bed with an expression that could kill. I tried to scream, but before I knew it she charged at me, choking me violently. I fought and fought and woke up from the nightmare having to catch my breath. I decided to get out of bed and go wash my face at the kitchen sink. Only one problem, I never made it to the kitchen. I froze at the doorway and as I turned around, I was looking at myself. I was laying in my bed frozen in shock and lifeless. And yet I still couldn't scream.

