

Seasonal



Summer 2026
"Mood Ring"

Art

Frutiger Dreams Series 3, Brenley Murry
Flourish, Lili Call
Faster, Kyndal Tobitt
what.is.art.for? Julia Walters
Revived Tavern, Parker Manire
“Smoking Kills,” Honee Agarwal
Lilac, Sara Caoile
Frutiger Dreams, Brenley Murry
435 Moyerwood Rd, Lili Call
Frutiger Dreams Series 2, Brenley Murry
Pinjara, Honee Agarwal
Walk in the Park (with my Love),
George Culpepper
Miasma, Sara Caoile
Praise, Alex Horvath
Just for a Moment, Lili Call
Run, Kyndal Tobitt
Moksh, Honee Agarwal

Poetry

“We will not be alive, but for a
short while,” Isabela Cantua
“empathy mine,” Elena Newburry
“Dreamers in the Dark,” Lili Call
“For the present crown...”
Aidan Thornhill
“sermon from a churchyard
magnolia,” Elena Newburry
“Isenheim,” Isabela Cantua
“Average Medusa,” Margaret White
“Simple Bliss,” John Anderson
“Pride,” Anonymous
“Here,” Emma Johnson
“Cobble Hour,” Aidan Thornhill
“The End,” Molly Nichols
“Too Many Meanings,” Maya Yatziv
“We’re Gonna Bring You Home, Buddy,”
Hannah Fletcher
“2/11/26,” Aidan Thornhill
“Φάρμακον (fär-mə-kän),” Hannah Grace Fletcher
“In Another Country,” Nailah Kailani

Prose

“Anatomy of a Bar,” Emma Johnson
“That One Summer Day,” Hannah Grace Fletcher
“things i am no longer afraid of,” Brianna Eaton
“A Photo,” Destanye Puckett

Fiction

“Pilgrim,” J.E. Alft

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MEET THE STAFF

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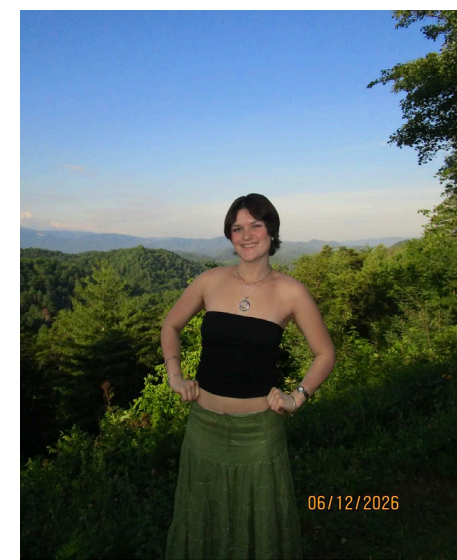
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Louise Spencer

To our readers,
As the heat rolls in, as the grass becomes itchy,
as the summer job becomes too boring, we
invite you to crack open a cold one
and journey with us to a simpler
time.
I would like to thank my amazing staff
for all their hard work and dedication
over these summer days. Thank you to my
newbies who had no idea what they
were getting into: Abbey B, Abbey M,
Abbey P., Amelia, Ashley, David, Destany,
Dix, Joan, Lauren, Louise, Lynn, Nalia,
Olivia, Sarah-Nicole, Emily, Doreen, and
Meghan. Thank you to my returnees who
welcomed another year with me: Alex, Grace,
Isabelle, Keitha, Miranda, Nyke, & Nina.
And most especially to my right hand
woman who keeps my head on my
body: Savannah. Thank you to our
incredible source of guidance: Erin
Elizabeth Smith. And lastly, to you,
reader. I owe you all a thousand times
over.

With Glory + Privilege,
Dreanna Eaton*



LET'S

READ!

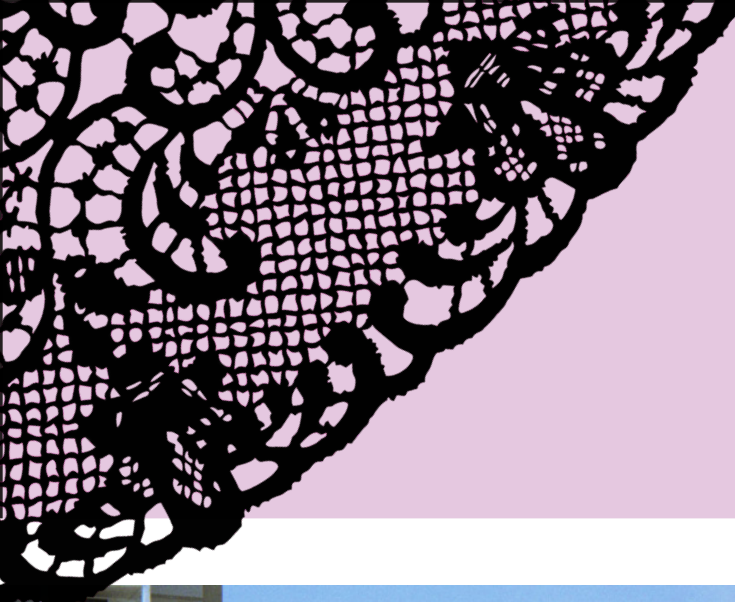


“We will not be alive, but for a short while”

By Isabela Cantua

I see you in the lichen upon mossy stone,
in great pines and red wood.
They sing songs of you across the waves,
Caribbean blue and a raven’s eye.
You hide in the inkwell spilled across amber parchment,
I tie with a red ribbon and send across the sea.
I pray my hands will be strong enough to remember the feeling my mind once forgot,
and my feet will carry me back into your arms at the bottom of the parting glass.
I will never stop running until I find you among the great forests and mountains,
carry you through rocky streams with burning banners ablaze.
Spirits guide my path through illuminated manuscripts that shine light upon apparitions of death.
For the nights I ride away from, I will wait for you in Kells.
There is nothing in this life but mist, but I will find you in every lifetime,
though I have failed you in ours.
I lay down my armor, my sword, my name, and my body to dust,
so the foxgloves may grow to be placed at your table beneath the stone.
I miss you, but see you in sigils and tapestries awoken by candlelight.
A white stag,
adorned with fine cloth and sculpted gold bows its head and disappears amongst the oak.
I use my bow as firewood,
and learn to love you through ash and the celandine tucked behind your ear.





“Faster”
Kyndal Tobitt

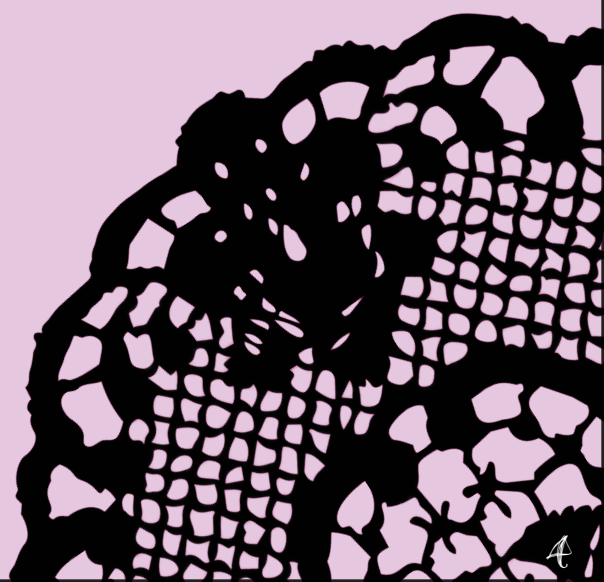


“Anatomy of a Bar”
Emma Johnson

Lungs made of amber and glass, expanding and contracting with everybody that enters, breathing in grief then breathing out something warm and survivable. Each inhale tastes like citrus ghosts and old lies. Each exhale smells like forgotten names six feet in the ground. Bones made of bottles, vertebrae of trapped sunsets stacked spine-straight against the wall. They are fragile, carrying the weight of everyone who leans too hard on what glows. A voice box wired to a jukebox, repeating the same song of someone laughing while another screaming behind bared teeth. The sound spills out, shatters, spreads across the floor in invisible shards that glitter when stepped on. Blood made of beer, rum, brandy, scotch, whiskey, liquids circulate endlessly, passing from vein to vein, hand to hand, mouth to mouth. They keep the organism alive by slowly undoing it. Bartenders for egos, their hands moving with the calm never fearing drowning. They regulate the flow. They have memorized the exact weight of almost breaking. Hands everywhere, hands that carry different weather. A storm of heartbreak. A fog of loneliness. A brief summer shower of laughter, sudden and drenching. Fingers tracing condensation, they are trying to remember what it feels like to hold something that does not disappear. Eyes made of mirrors behind the bar, reflecting everyone twice. Eyes that never close that watch the slow collapse and quiet resurrection happening on repeat. And somewhere deep inside, beneath the lungs and bones and blood, a stomach that holds everything it has ever been given—the swallowed confessions, the unfinished goodbyes, the words that never made it past the throat.

It lives like this.
It survives like this.

An organism forged from humans, built to watch humans endlessly. Forever breathing in the broken and breathing out the almost healed.

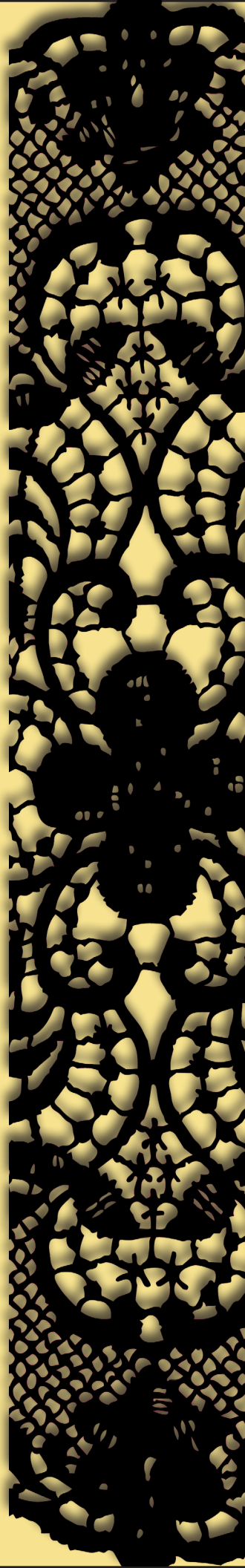


EMPATHY MINE

Elena Newburry

there is something quiet
hear, in the flood there is a voice and she
shouts like the voice of a rabbit holed in a
giant, weighted neck she sinks into waves
of the hands held high in celestial meetings, arms
stretching and streaking from planters to
the table in the sky
chucked and eyes plucked from palm to palm
To be kept safe from
the guns on the ground.
suspended.

she is not the water from church lurkers
or the blood beneath our teeth
But the force of a small
small mammal
biting and fleeing and flinging itself into shipwreck,
to the depths of the cave we found some stars in—
hoping to be swept
to an empathy mine,
to water glossed over obsidian, still
where only the hunched
will drink her clean.



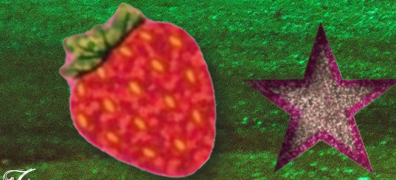
Collective exercise created by visiting artist and professor Noelle Africh with first- and second-year MFA Studio Art students. Drawing by Julia Walters.

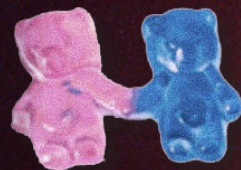
Mood Ring

“Dreamers in the Dark”
Lili Call

Dreamers in the dark,
tell me your secrets
I'll keep them close,
Stories pressed beneath stones.
I have held a thousand whispered names
and carried them silently into morning.
I am ancient and lasting,
worn smooth by centuries of wanting.
Lovers have traipsed through me in the hours before dawn,
their footsteps light as whispers,
their shadows long, leaning toward each other.
Hands intertwined, eyes pleading, lips brushing.
Confide in me, dear.
There is nothing new beneath these stars.
I connect everyone and everything.
I know of your love and all your tender games.
I have seen empires soften into dust and wildflowers,
And still the dreamers come.
Still, the dreamers wander.
And I hold them,
As I have always held them,
In the dark.

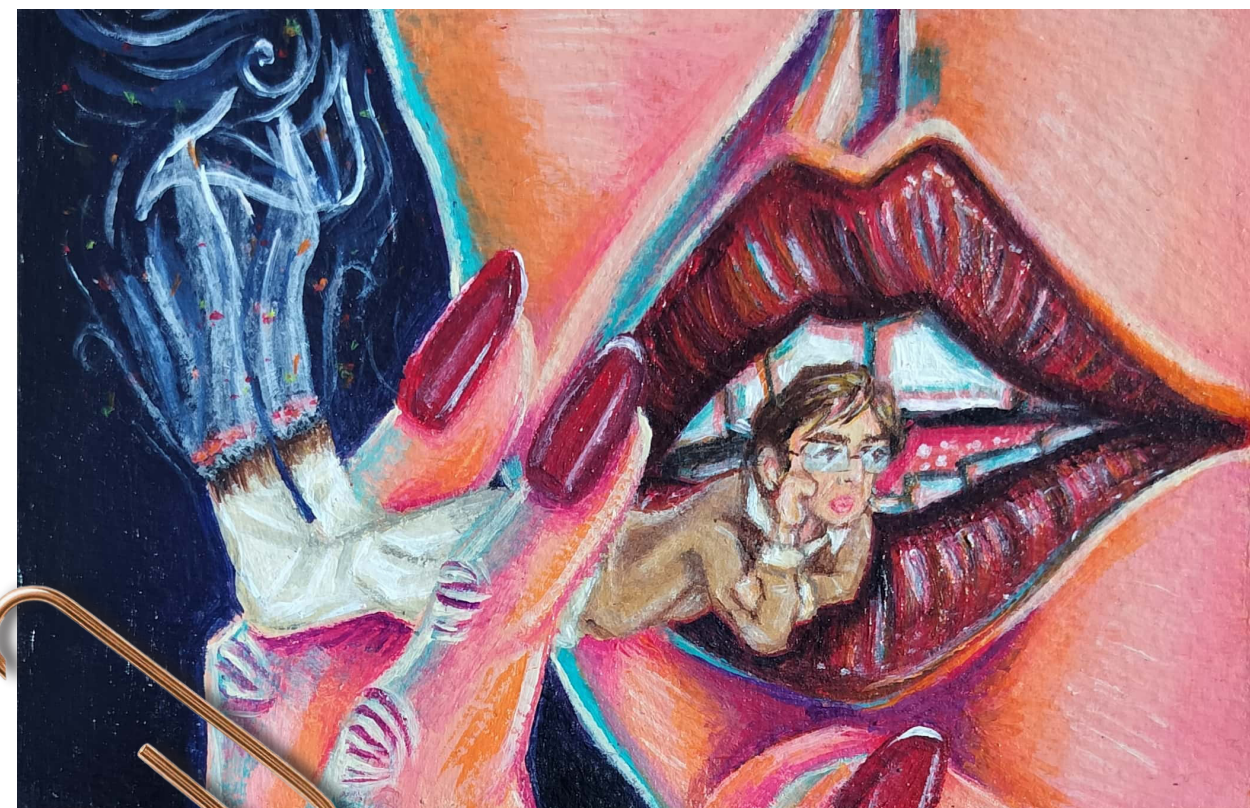
“Revived Tavern”
Parker Manire





"SMOKING KILLS"

Honee Agarwal



For the Present Crown...

Aidan Thornhill

The Jester plays for survival,
his life rooted in foul hope—
a wink of approval
that might bat against him,
his harlequin diamonds,
and throw him a loaf.

He wouldn't eat it.

The Jester plays for enjoyment,
takes no dough, dances with
instead of keeping himself
in the confines of truth—
he is a tool, molded into
the favor of the present crown.

He would smile still,

and so

He becomes it.

The Jester would treasure it,
plaque it neat and bronze, deep
in his chamber beneath dung—
his mighty gods, excellencies,
shattered bells who once rang
through the same courts as he.

He basks in the rot.

The Jester would treasure it still,
outstretch his limbs with urgency,
second only to the executioner—
happy to bend, disobey, and break
at the tilt of the sapphire, ruby,
emerald, gold, silver head-jewel.

a sermon from a
churchyard magnolia:

You can go and you can
Run, run from the lives you have split
into,
the wild pouring out vines
from your chest
Crawling to seek more sunlight than
This.

You can go and you can seek and maybe you can
Find.
Maybe the sun will shine and you will Be, you
Will Be in the day of chatter and better beings and
Better love.
Or maybe,
maybe This
is what they say,
to Stay. to
Breathe in here and let these vined arms
Sink into that hearth of soaked soil,
Settle into fixed roots, and
Sigh a puff of stillness in the plot you've always had.

Maybe your arms were reaching for the light of
A different sun
When the only need was an outstretch into the
Soul, and to
Pull the weeds from a rich dark heart
And realize:

You can go and you can
Run,
finding as much light as you can soak up.
But here is the dirt.
And here is the rain.
And only weeds will grow in
Your hurried, far-off wind.

Elena Newburry

"Lilac"

Sara Caoile



Mood Ring

“Isenheim”
by Isabela Cantua

There’s a bar that’s open 24 hours
off an abandoned highway deep in the South,
consistently packed with prophets. Its presence is only acknowledged
by an unreadable billboard that has been strangled by the sun,
and a neon sign that flickers strange messages in Morse code.
Enter the bar and sit in the dusty pew by the pool table.
The air is stagnant with incense smoke,
reminiscent of the pastor putting out his cigarette on your wrist.
Three small divots for the Father, the sun, and the holy spirit.
Ask the altar boy for a faded drink menu
that only lists Catholic prayers you learned in your youth.
At the bottom, a warning label - fear no plague in the body and blood consumed,
rampant with rotten bacteria and holy water.
A frail man stumbles to the entrance,
and a veiled waitress quickly shuts the door and turns him away,
providing sanctuary for the kin of the one true king.
She covers her face with a delicate, fine cloth so her beauty may cure blind eyes.
You want to leave. Agnus Dei, devour me with sharp canines in search of deliverance.
Guide my shaking hands to write the holy scriptures of blasphemy.
Get me out of the goddamn church.
Dona nobis pacem.



“Frutiger Dreams”
Brenley Murry



"435 Moyerwood Rd"
Lili Call



Phoenix Magazine

A V E R A G E

M E D U S A

Margaret White

He wouldn't look into my eyes
He was afraid he would owe them something
They would make his devotion permanent
A solid life of stone, bound forever to my name

Avoided, deprived, villainized

I questioned if my hair had turned to snakes
If my pounding heart was pumping venom
For why was it impossible to love me,
to perceive me
To not fear my forever presence in his life



Mood Ring



FRUITIGER

DREAMS

SERIES 2

Brenley Murry



THAT ONE SUMMER DAY

Hannah Grace Fletcher

When Julie awoke that one summer day, she cried.

Not because her mother died. Not because her father had called her yesterday, telling her he had a work trip that just happened to line up with the funeral.

But because a little bird had managed to squeeze its way into her ceiling light, and had died in the night, and the smell was terrible.

She had never felt more lonely than in that moment. Because she didn't know how to get the bird out, if she even could get the bird out without breaking anything. And there was no one left in her life willing enough to show her how. Her mother would've known what to do.

And so she left the bird in the ceiling light and grabbed her father's fishing rods from the back of the garage, and decided she'd go out on the dock to do some fishing. The sun hung high in the sky like a church steeple, light refracting through the trees like panels of stained glass. She wondered how long it'd been, since her father had set foot in a church, then realized she couldn't remember how long it'd been for her, either. The dock was crusted over, water lines forming rings around the logs that supported it from below. She heard the birds whispering, their tiny chirps stilted and joyless, and wondered if they knew what had happened. If they'd grown up with the bird who had died in her ceiling light, if they'd encouraged it to slip through the window, only to look back and forth between each other when it didn't come back.

There was an old slurpy sitting on the wood, the plastic dented inwards and the sticky sludge dying the outer rim bright red. She remembered stopping at the local gas station with her mother and father, when they were all still a family. The way the sugar had stuck to the back of her throat, the way bee stings felt good, the way she would jump into the water and they'd watch her, really watch her, laughing as her cannonballs shot water up into the sky. She wondered where it all went wrong, then remembered that she knew, and forgot again.

The fish weren't very keen on biting at the bait. It hadn't rained in a few days. If she'd been smart she would've packed up the tackle box the second the clouds had fallen over the sky, but she hadn't. She'd been too worried about something that had nothing to do with her mother's sickness, and therefore it was irrelevant, if not selfish. She let the bobber float with the waves, never dipping, her hands shaking against the reel. Always ready.

Her father had told her once that she was never patient enough. That she'd never learn to wait for anything. Her mother had told him to let it be, that he was tired.

When she got home, the bucket empty, she found the bird still dead in the ceiling light. She unscrewed the top, the glass falling into her hands like the suction of an unscrewed water bottle, ringing out. She took the bird into her hands, its little wings limp against her finger tips, feathers soft and fragile against her coarse skin. After rummaging through the hallway closet, she found an old shoebox from a now outgrown pair of shoes, sliding the bird into it among some toilet paper.

She buried it in the garden, eyes blank as she prayed. It took until sunset for her to realize that she'd locked herself out of the house.

She climbed in through the window.

things i am no longer afraid of:

i. the trash truck on tuesday mornings.

ii. the sight of the exact make and model of your car even if there is a possibility you still drive it.

iii. pissing people off

iv. making mistakes

(stop lying)

v. the depths of your eyes and how they searched mine to find the answer to the question of which you would not ask outloud, and after all this time i figured you'd ask and you haven't but i would answer.

i would.

Brianna Eaton

SIMPLE BLISS:

John Anderson

When I was young
I slept beneath the stars
Scent of persimmon
To the left of me
The cosmos up above
The vast unknown
Those days I miss
Simple times
Simple bliss
I never understood the importance then
A simple cup of coffee
A peppered egg
Mystical woods
The tales of legends told
A bond between brothers can't be broken
It is weird what our memories hold
Practicing breathing to fall asleep
A million sunrises
A million sunsets
Dew on the grass
Frost on our wool beanies
Howls in the night
A thrill you won't forget
Stories told
Fires kindled
Wood to cinder
The air of suspense
Hint of magic
I miss when it was simple
Life is crazy
Life is dramatic now believe me
Everyone is in a hurry now
Going nowhere
As fast as they can go
No one takes it slow to find the magic
I would trade it all to remember it
Every fire
Every morning there
Every cold dark night
Rebirth by the suns glow
Signs of first light
Adventurous youth
Bless the wanderlust soul
The stories I forget I always miss most
Persimmon
Peppered eggs
And black coffee
The feeling of living wild and free

"Pinjara"

Honee Agarwal



“Walk in the Park (with my Love)”



George Culpepper

“Pride”
Anonymous

In My Bravest Prayers,

i ask for soft lips
covered in sparkly lip gloss
the kind so thick it creates a resistance when they touch mine

sharp acrylic nails that run against my scalp
light fingertips to glide across my skin
soothing my flesh
wiping away the words that say i should feel
shame

long silky hair
that i can tangle my hands in
that i can brush and braid

a sing-song laughter
that soothes my ears and makes me smile until it hurts
midnight fits of giggles

rounded curves that I can grip
and hold on to when the word “sin”
echoes through my head

loving eyes shaped by thick eyeliner
staring so deeply into mine that I map out
her mascara curled eyelashes
ones that borrow so bone deep
that i don’t even feel judgmental stares

Pride is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. That is
what they say. I guess I am a sinner, one who
prays for stolen kisses from other women. The
only thing I am ashamed of is that I have never
kissed a girl, but I want to.

-a girl kisser trying to escape the confines
of religious trauma



"Here"

Emma Johnson

They say if you kiss a wound, it starts to heal,
but I can't reach your heart to know what you feel.
So I stay where I can, where I'm allowed to be,
tracing the invisible parts you won't let me see.

I cradle the quiet places where you hide and breathe,
your shaking hands, your weary eyes, the hurt beneath.
I move with care through what you never share,
even the sadness you won't let me repair.

So I trace you like sunlight trying to break through night,
and hope one day you learn to see yourself as bright.
Where you see only broken things and something incomplete,
I see a work of art still finding its own beat.

When you forget your worth again in all the pain,
I'll be the steady voice that calls your name.
There is love around you, more than words can hold,
more than all your quiet losses, more than stories told.

So please don't go thinking you were ever unwhole,
you are more than your pain, it could never define your soul.
And if I ever leave you, or life pulls me away,
I hope you keep the things I've always been saying:

that you are not broken, not empty, not wrong—
just a soul who forgot it was always strong.

I hope I was there when the nights felt too long,
a small steady voice saying you still belong.

I'm not asking you just to survive,
I'm wishing you softly to stay and be alive.
There is so much love here you haven't found yet,
it's closer than breathing, it hasn't left.
And I hope you find it before your time ends—
not just in the world, but in you, my friend.

"Cobble Hour"
Aidan Thornhill

Some tart evening
some time before a proposition
reminiscent of a second mother
THE REAL DEAL—

Sweet surprise sweet
mystery of a treat
clued only by the fruit
teeny grapes teeny olives
tangy round smiles
bursting purple twilight

Sent to the oven after service
church picking in a circle
of oak oars above a leafy sea
and it is solved and done

Soup fruit swishing
swashing in a bowl of mixed jam
sugar sugar sugar
the great southern fixing
after supper truth behold
THE REAL DEAL



THE
END

Molly Nichols



The End always starts like this:

There is a deer on the side of the interstate.

It is young and stupid and knows nothing about the dangers of asphalt.

We are driving down the road on a Friday night,
and you just told me you're in love with me.

When the deer steps into the street, it does not fear death.
It fears being left behind - separated from the herd.

When the headlights appear in the distance, they don't look like death.
They look like a fallen star or God,
so bright and beautiful.

Is this what the priests were talking about?
Is this what heaven is?

The lights keep getting closer, reflecting in its eyes,
and the streetlights shine on the dash as we pass the next exit.

I try not to let my disappointment show,
focusing instead on the sickness churning in my stomach.

The deer will not understand the end,
only that, for a time, it was beautiful.

It will stand witness to this collision willingly, bathing in the light.

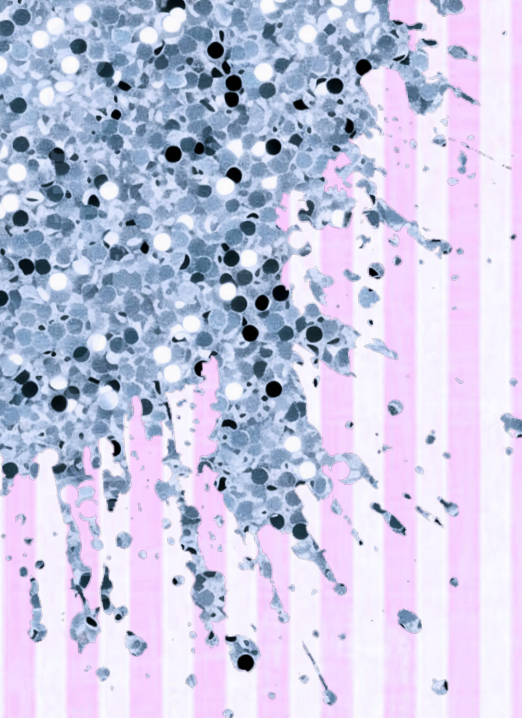
Later, the damage to the car will make you angry,
but it is nothing compared to the mess on the road.

You're yelling at me.
I'm asking you to let me out of the car.

The lights are getting brighter now, and the deer can see its mistake clearly.

I will never forgive you for this,
and we will never be able to share this space again.

It's the nail in the coffin.
It's the deer in the headlights.
And it's me looking at you.
And it's you watching it happen.



"Praise"
Alex Horvath



"Too Many Meanings"

Maya Yatziv



Too Many Meanings
is what I always say
when the question comes

It's easy to answer
a simple
"I don't know,"
but my name is my name
and its meanings are as such:

Love
In Nepali,
to be Maya is to be
loved

Magic
In Sanskrit,
to be Maya is to be
magical

Mother
In Greek,
to be Maya is to be
maternal

Water
In Hebrew,
to be Maya is to
ebb and flow

Me
In my own tongue,
to be Maya is to be

Unsure
Wise
Young
Foolish
A friend

Maya is
incongruent
with all that is expected
with all that comes with
the name

It is nothing more
than a series of
letters

But it is what will
one day sit on my
grave

Maya is
remembered, and
Maya is
beloved

Maya is
plenty, and sometimes
not enough

Too many meanings
too many ways
to exist and live
up to a name



Mood Ring

30

“We’re Gonna Bring You Home, Buddy”

Hannah Grace Fletcher

You would not believe your eyes if they told you
If they described to you this kind of joy
The way the room opened up to a kaleidoscope of wonder
The way the entire world felt encapsulated in a single space

A makeshift fort of posterboard, scratch that, the tri-folded wall of a kingdom
All wrapped in the plasticky smell of rubber cement
The strong, cardstock displays and photographs that never lie
The way a hand feels as it pulls you away from the light

The Red-Eyed Tree Frog has five lives, divided
The egg, the tadpole, the tadpole with legs, the froglet, and the adult
It’s an amphibian, with bright red eyes and blue-white sides
Like streaks of sky, like torn, forgotten wings

It climbs across the foliage with its sunbeam fingers,
Searching for flies to devour with its long, gum-like tongue
It must be careful not to get captured,
Many have a taste for its slippery frame

This pride, the kind that fogs up glasses and makes you fear no danger
Makes you walk like a one-man army
Makes you ignore the shadows behind your head
Makes you point towards the vibrant stage with a smile

A pictured is snapped, a shirt worn, now dry with retrospect
The liquidy feeling of a body bending with laughter
A few shouts and high-fives swirl through the air
As the same hand tugs you toward the hallway

And this is where the truths slips
Where the picture twists like the shavings of a pencil sharpener
Where the story is different
Because it can’t be swallowed otherwise

The hand nears another classroom
Slipping free after a small goodbye
But the sun is too bright, the air is too light
And the Red-Eyed Tree Frogs are waiting

You push the door open with all your might, the familiar suck of air rushing through your ribs
You head towards the forest, eyes scanning the ground, landing upon the twin flames
They’re singing, and you wish to join them, wish to become one with this wonder
And it looks at you, as if hearing your plea, and abracadabra! you trip into a smaller frame

Now one with the forest, you jump, run, hide
Camouflaged and safe from the tweetling birds and the hissing snakes
You live out your days by the river, watching the lines that once looked like a limp rubberband
Gurgle and spit with a glee you once only found in storybooks

The hand nears another classroom
Before spitting you right out another door
The parking lot is quieter, as the other kids have already fallen into their seats
But you look up to the eyes you’ve been told to trust, and you don’t mind

The truckbed is musty, and the horn sounds nothing like a schoolbell
Your hands clutch over your stomach, your chest, but nothing brings the comfort you expect it to
Before long, the stars that once slipped through the tarp have now fallen out of sight
Meteorites crashed into a faraway land

You think of birthdays, and movies, and magic shows
What the world looked like when you still had your glasses
You wonder what the Red-Eyed Tree Frog would do, in the jaws of the enemy
How would it fight when found, its greatest defense disguise?

Somehow

A boy gets the courage to fling himself from a moving vehicle
He rolls into a forest, where he sloshes into a muddy creek
In the moonlight, his hands find the tiny, fragile frame of a Red Eyed-Tree Frog
There, the hand is nowhere to be found.

“Just for a Moment”

Lili Call



“2/11/26”
Aidan Thornhill

Petals.	Kisses.	Stigma.
Hair.	Pollen.	Lips.
Birth.	Death.	Reborn.

The moon is a flower that bends in the night.

	Yellow, imperfect	
Dented.	Void.	Full.
Crater.	Tidal.	Barren.
Bright.	Simple.	Hollow.

The moon is a daffodil born in the night.

Yellow, swollen

May the tide wash itself away, plant, sow, and
it is renewed,
so when fire returns,
the little thing may stand tall—
each day something else; but

always a flower,
always the moon

Yellow, imperfect



“I would fain have been loved, not feared.” ~Beatrice

Her petals mimic starlight
Teardrops splitting and curving to refract the sun
Her leaves are of a soft velvet
Covered in a thousand tiny worlds of dew
Her roots are made for winters
Clinging to earth, water bugs dented into the surface
I lift my hands up to cradle her face
Breathing in the sweetness of her air

He reaches out to touch her
And the moth in my chest spreads its wings flat
Becoming a porcelain plate
I slap his hand away, knowing deep within me
That he can never know her
Like I do

Her and I, we are sisters
Bound by breath, burdened by breathing
Her tendrils braided through my hair
Tangled and tumbled by time
Her pollen, her stardust, powdering my flesh
Freckles flushed with carmine and amber
To my father, we are experiments
“A woman must be poisonous to survive”

But a part of him knows
The devastation he’s brought upon me
Why he let him into the garden
Why he let him breathe
To see a poisonous woman tamed by beauty
To see a beautiful woman bought by hope

Her scent has begun to sink into his skin
Marking it with a carnivorous hue
Her tresses have bound themselves around his wrists
Gifting him with her grace, her quiet power
Her blood now mixes with his
But I have known her much longer than he
And he takes this poison not as an antidote, but as an excuse
This violence he exercises does not listen to a woman’s plea

And so I take this remedy
He has gifted me
Knowing there is a chance
It will be but a curse
For men’s words are made true by the confidence
That a woman’s will never be right

The liquid of light slips across my tongue
Weaving itself between each and every tooth
It runs down my throat, with a mighty roar
As it pours through my chest, invading every nerve of my body
It shreds through flesh, melting it into the silk of my bedsheets
Turning my bones into fragile matches
And the moth in my chest is stripped of its lines between wing
It has been wounded, and cannot be stitched back together

They say a woman flees because she imagines another side
What if I were to say, I left because I saw my future in a double-sided frame
And shattered it out of horror for them both

“Φάρμακον (fär-mə-ˌkän)”
Hannah Grace Fletcher





In Another Country,

The wind is singing me a melody,
of a secret you once told
of a time when
our creator's deft fingers
would part the waves
and weave them back under
until they reached veins
that poured blood into the river
to create an ocean
salty with you
and I

Our skin cracks as it stretches
miles across the world
with the sun
kissing upon the deserts and valleys
that form
between
you and I

The crickets and toads
that live underneath the porch
at home
philosophize my dreams of
pregnant summer air
finally
breaking into a storm,
letting
sweet rainwater
fill up the deserts and valleys

In a waking moment
cradled between night and day
the tea in my cup reflects
your eyes
back into mine.

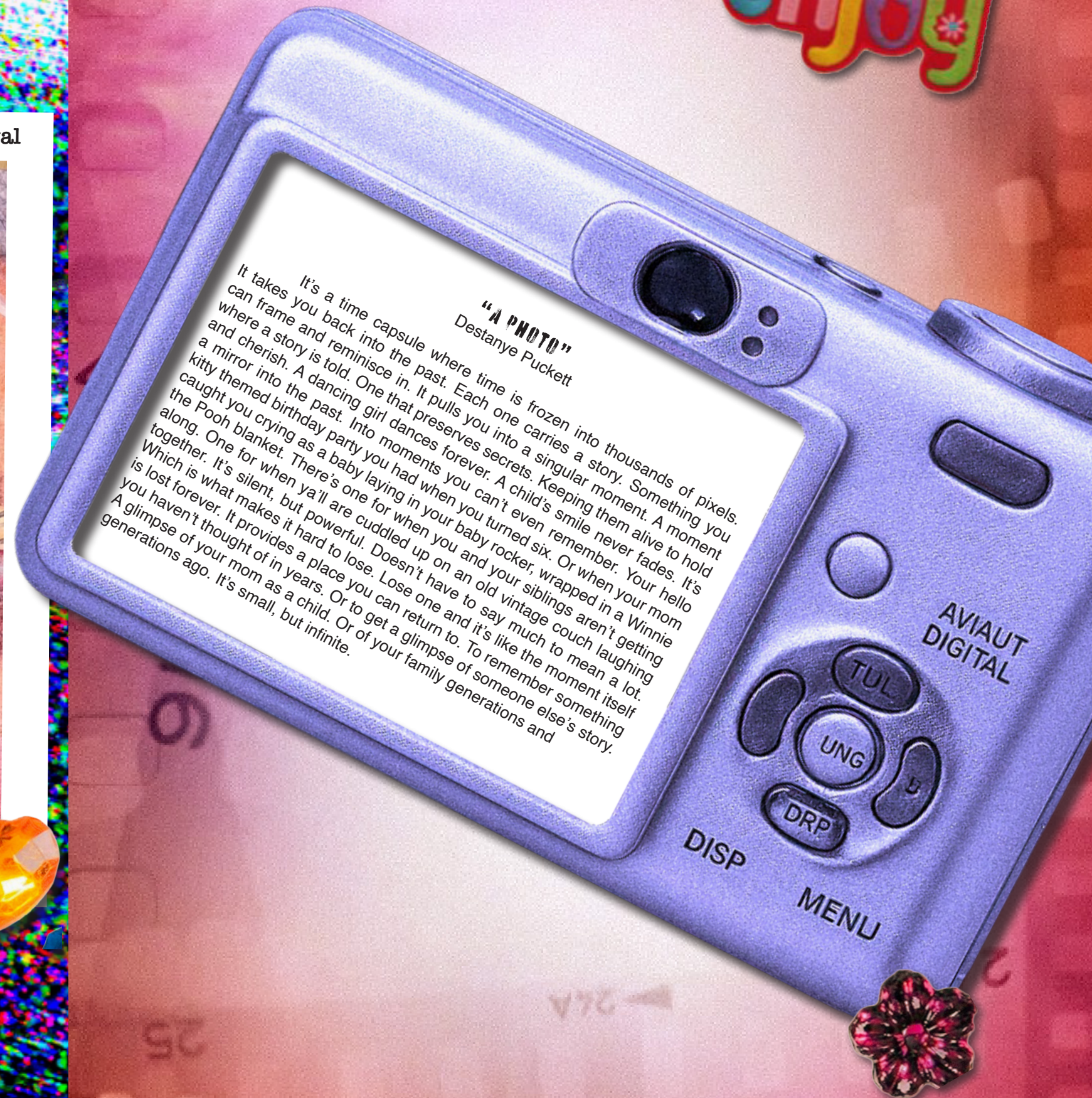
Nailah Kailani



"Run"
Kyndal Tobitt

"Moksh"

Honee Agarwal



"A PHOTO"

Destanye Puckett

It's a time capsule where time is frozen into thousands of pixels. Each one carries a story. Something you can frame you back into the past. It pulls you into a singular moment. A moment where a story is told. One that preserves secrets. Keeping them alive to hold and cherish. A dancing girl dances forever. A child's smile never fades. It's a mirror into the past. Into moments you can't even remember. Your hello kitty themed birthday party you had when you turned six. Or when your mom caught you crying as a baby laying in your baby rocker, wrapped in a Winnie the Pooh blanket. There's one for when you and your siblings aren't getting along. One for when ya'll are cuddled up on an old vintage couch laughing together. It's silent, but powerful. Doesn't have to say much to mean a lot. Which is what makes it hard to lose. Lose one and it's like the moment itself is lost forever. It provides a place you can return to. To remember something you haven't thought of in years. Or to get a glimpse of someone else's story. A glimpse of your mom as a child. Or of your family generations and generations ago. It's small, but infinite.



"It was on the tip of my tongue to tell them about the deer, but I ended up not doing it. That was the one thing I kept to myself. I've never spoken or written of it until just now, today." Stephen King, *The Body*

Jane, you may remember (or perhaps not) the week you spent with me a little while ago. We were caged in that unobtrusive little house together, and you liked to talk about how all you could see out of the fogged-up windows was the field that spread out in all directions like some great pure white sheet freshly stretched over a bed. Speaking of fresh sheets would get you talking about the "hospitals" you worked in (I did, through your accounts, learn what a hospital was), and speaking of the hospitals would lead to speaking of disease, and speaking of disease would make you look away from me and hide your face. On one occasion I think you even rose from the armchair you were curled up in and excused yourself to the side room I had given you. I was frustrated then, because I had asked what kinds of things people usually said or did when they knew they were about to die, and you didn't answer. I was curious and I still do not think it was an unusual question! I have asked Pilgrim similar questions before and it has never run away and hidden itself.

Your retreat became even more frustrating in retrospect, because you felt justified in asking me plenty of questions about things *you* were curious about. I found your obsession with the field strange at first and bothersome when it persisted. Maybe if you had latched on to something more meaningful I would have understood—the trees were right there at the edge of the field, trunks poking out of the snow so mildly that one's attention was always drawn first to the collective rake of branches above: even in their barrenness, they were more interesting than the field. Thinking of this now, I find your obsession with the field disrespectful for three reasons, which I will now list.

One: The trees are more beautiful than the field, just as the field is more beautiful than the house. I do not think you ever understood this place. Maybe this is my fault, since I was so focused on keeping you from the real center of it that entire week. Still! There are no patterns or interlocking webs to be found or studied in the field unless you are counting my tracks, and I always make sure to keep those splendidly straight and consistent. There are no birds making nests in the field, no maple to take from the field. The field is flat; flat and boring. White. White. White white white white. All the way around in every direction, it flows out in a perfectly even ring—I've measured the distance between the house and the trees at every point! And this is why Pilgrim put you here: so that I could see your fascination with the first thing in sight and know that it is a faulty and lunatic way to live.

Two: It should have been clear to you that the trees are important to me. There is no maple in the field! I am sure that I mentioned this at least once, directly after I had just brought you inside and put you in the guest room on the very first day. You pounded on the door very hard and it did scare me, but I figured I was safe from you with the door between us, and that I'd rather have you punching the door than me. I still think that was the right thing to do. It kept you from Pilgrim; you surely would have run out of the house and straight back into the woods if I had not kept you inside. And it was cold! You didn't have a scarf, and I was not about to lend you mine! Pilgrim made it for me, and it is not for sharing. The scarf is made out of Pilgrim's strange, coarse, ropey fleece anyways; I don't think you would have liked it very much. Anyways, I was so distracted by your pounding, and I was worried about Pilgrim, and had just realized (I think) that the task that had fallen to me immediately when you appeared was to protect Pilgrim, and in the midst of so much noise I had yelled back something about needing to tap the maple trees and didn't you know you were interrupting me? And didn't you know this was the last week I could possibly do it before the season ended and could you please stop because I had to go worry about the maple trees and I couldn't leave you there when you were acting so mad and dangerous!

You had quieted down then, so obviously you had heard what I had just screamed. But apparently you didn't pick up on my urgency, because even this most useful and practical reason to care for the trees did not stick with you. You stayed obsessed with your field (*How deep does the snow get in the worst parts of winter, Niamh? Where did you get your snowshoes, Niamh?*) and didn't even mention the maple—maybe because I never did get to tap them that winter. I was too busy keeping you inside away from Pilgrim, and I had to go without maple syrup in my hot chocolate that entire year. I do forgive you for the maple shortage.

Three: You should have cared more about the trees because that's where you came from. I found you that day on my way back from seeing Pilgrim, though I'm not sure if you remember—I was bundled up in such a way that it made it difficult to hear small noises, and you scared me a foot out of the snow because I turned a corner and you were there so suddenly! I might have scared you too, though, because you jumped a little. You were dressed in a very bright sweater and blue jeans and boots, no scarf, no mittens, no hat—and only one pair of socks, from what I could see. Strangely, you were not shivering. I said, *Oh! Hello!* but you just blinked at me. I said, *Sorry, I was just on my way home from . . .* (here I trailed off because I suddenly realized two things: that I was about to tell you about Pilgrim, and that I could not tell you about Pilgrim).

You picked up my thought and said, *Home? Oh. Home from where?*

I don't think I am a very good liar, and I was trying to figure out why you were there at the same time as I was trying to think of something to tell you. *Um*, I said. *Tapping my maple trees.* And at that same moment, it came to me! Pilgrim must have sent you. I

grinned very widely for having figured this out, and then realized that was probably suspicious. I straightened my face immediately.

Where's home? you asked, which was a very lucky lead-in for me! I did not like the idea of you wandering about the rest of the woods—especially when I still had to figure out the other half of the question: why did Pilgrim put you here?

You can come home with me now, if you want. I hoped you wanted, or else I would have had to force you. *I have more trees to tap but I can do them after you are out of the cold?*

You said, *Oh, sure!* and I started leading you back to the house.

When we broke the treeline you froze for a second and said, *oh*, very softly. I was confused at first at what had made you stop, but you were just looking out across the field.

This is just the field, I explained. *We have to go across to get to the house.*

It's so beautiful, you said, still staring.

It's just a field. I was irritated for some reason. You looked at me strangely for a second before looking back at the field.

We walked back to the house in relative silence then, because you were busy thinking about the field and I was busy thinking very hard about what I was going to do with you when we got back to the house. Would you stay placidly if I just asked you to? You did not seem aggressive, but I didn't have any other people here to compare you to. Pilgrim has always told me to be careful around other people.

From what little you said on the walk back, it seemed like you were aware of the same evils I was worrying about. You didn't seem to want to go back to your hospital, and I don't blame you. It sounded like a lot of dying and coughing and "news." You wouldn't shut up about the news! News, news, news. Always things going on. Always things to keep up with! *Such a bother*, you said shakily. It all sounded an awful lot like some of the things Pilgrim has mentioned.

Ha! You would have been so interested in the things Pilgrim had to say. And I never broke! I never told you anything! Pilgrim would have been proud of me. Those things are ours. You would have wanted to know so badly! So badly. Too bad! Too bad! It is secret. And mine. And not yours.

But because I was tempted to tell you about Pilgrim (yes, I will admit it. I wanted to tell you), we can play pretend for both our sakes, just for a minute. Since I am not actually sending this, and you will not actually read it, here is a list of things Pilgrim has told me. Most of Pilgrim's news is not like yours. Yours is too sad for me. Why would I think about your news when I can think of Pilgrim's? I almost wish you could read this in front of me so I could see your jealousy! I could make this a very long list, but I will not write everything down.

Pilgrim told me I was getting closer. Every time I visited it, it would tell me this. Closer, closer, closer, always closer. I used to write these comments down in my accounts when I got home, things like: "Today Pilgrim said I am closer!"

"Pilgrim said I am yet another step closer today."

"Pilgrim is consistent in encouraging me, and I meditated on the rumbling feelings of its words today when it said I was closer today than I had ever been before! I did not feel any closer, but I know it has to be true, since I am always moving forward."

"I nearly tore apart my scarf when I returned to the house today. Pilgrim has warned me of this kind of anger in the past, and I think the only reason it has not mentioned it lately is because it knows doing so would hurt me. But I am getting closer! I have no reason to ruin what Pilgrim has given me."

"Closer again today."

"I feel stuck. The snow was especially high and icy today, and hard to walk on even in my snowshoes. Pilgrim says I am closer, which was a relief to hear after it did not reassure me of this on my last pilgrimage. I am getting closer. It gave me a new scarf today—maybe as a sort of promise."

Pilgrim told me the scarf was not special. It was, though, it was! Everything that is made out of Pilgrim is special. I cannot explain this and you would not understand it even if I tried to explain it. Anyways, Pilgrim was not lying when it told me the scarf was not special. It's just that it does not place the same value on objects as I do, so it said what it believed. Pilgrim lives in the woods, and it's warmer in there. It doesn't have to worry about crossing the field every week. It doesn't have hands that it needs to keep out of the cold air. It does have a neck, but it's a very trunk-like neck and would probably take an unworthy amount of material to make a scarf that would fit right.

Pilgrim told me the date for my next pilgrimage when I visited it immediately before you appeared. It told me the next date every week. It would always say, "Goodbye Niamh; come back in six days," or, "Goodbye Niamh; come back in four days," or, "Goodbye Niamh; come back in five days." The way it talks is not through words like this, though. It's more of a feeling? Or a compulsion?

See, you wouldn't have even had a *chance* to understand Pilgrim! I have been here my entire life and I still cannot explain it. You were here for a week. If anything, you should be grateful I did not let you near its ideas—near *it!* It is too horrible! It is too wonderful! It is too much of everything. I am sometimes barely able to restrain myself from grasping its antlers when it appears to me even now, pull it down to be level with me. If I did that, I think it may force itself closer still, drive those dry spindly bones into me, take the scarf back. So I will not.

The point is: Pilgrim told me, "Goodbye Niamh; come back in five days" on the same morning you appeared in the woods, and you stayed for seven days. *Seven!* Too too many. Seven too many. I wonder sometimes if you even remember what happened that week. I was not lying when I said the maple syrup was not a problem. This was a



problem. Pilgrim has never made me wait more than six days between pilgrimages. I have a duty (I think you know what this means, since your trips to your hospital sound both worthless and priceless in the same ways that my pilgrimages feel) to see Pilgrim when it wants to be seen. I know this is a thing you understand.

Pilgrim tells me a lot. Pilgrim did not tell me you would arrive. There are not many things that Pilgrim does not tell me, because there are not many things that Pilgrim does not know about.

I know what you were doing to me that week; I've found you out. You were trying to keep me away from Pilgrim. This would be cruel on its own, but it is worse than it seems, because Pilgrim was the one who sent you! It sent you to show me something; I can't explain what, but I mostly understand it. I am still trying to figure out how you did it, why your visit had such an effect on me. Why did I not go to Pilgrim on the fifth day? Why did I not trod through the snow when I had the chance that day? I know that Pilgrim would not ask you to keep me away as you did; it *wants* to be visited; it wants me! It does! Whatever you were trying to do did not work. Pilgrim is still here. It still gives me pilgrimage days; it still waits for me. It gave me a third scarf when I buried the last one in the middle of the field and smoothed the snow over so I could not find it again.

I have come to the conclusion that you must have done something to me to make me stay away from Pilgrim—some invasion of my mind, some trick that I do not understand and did not see. That is the point I have come to. I have been going over that entire week in my head, turning every interaction over and over in my head like a chicken on a spit. If I think hard and long enough I can catch it—catch you. And when I do catch it, Pilgrim will tell me I have arrived at last, surely, surely!

(Yes, it still speaks to me. *Closer, Niamh. Closer, Niamh. Closer, Niamh.* Like an echo or a recording: the same repetition that I commit to when I tap the spouts into the maple trunks every winter. Closer, closer, closer! I can still see it when it invites me to: the spidery shadows its antlers create on the undisturbed snow, the unsettling humanness of its face, the canvas-stiff whiteness of its eyes, the miscalculated joints in its limbs, the rubbery lilt of its voice)

I will start with the first night, because I have already written about your appearance that afternoon. I walked you back to the house to keep you away from the woods and Pilgrim, but you turned around not a moment after we had stepped in through the front door, patting down the pockets on your jeans, and said, *Oh, I'm so sorry. I know it's probably going to get dark soon—*You glanced over my shoulder through the front windows—*I think I dropped something out in the snow. Can I . . . do you mind? Since you're going back out for your maple anyways? I can just come with.*

Um, I said, realizing I had dug myself into a hole with my maple tapping lie. No. It's too cold now.

Really, I'm used to the cold. Maybe I could just borrow a pair of mittens?

You moved toward the door and I stiffened in front of it. *No. I don't have any extras.*

You stepped forward again, and I almost *growled*, but I managed to step back flush against the door instead. This way you would have to get through me and the door if you wanted to get out.

I appreciate it, you started, though you looked rather the opposite of appreciative. *But it really is something important to me. I'll just go out and look for a few minutes and come back before I get too cold.*

You stepped forward again and reached for the doorknob behind me, and something must have *possessed* me! That is an exaggeration—Pilgrim has said possession isn't real. Still, I grabbed your wrist tightly, tight enough to hurt; you shouted for me to stop! *Sorry, sorry*, I whispered back, feeling frantic, like a rabbit caught in a trap. You were trying to pry my fingers off your wrist with your free hand but I managed to drag you across the living room to the guest room doorway and you were trying to pull away as hard as you could and you were shouting so loud and I tried to cover one of my ears with my free hand because your voice was so loud and high and I kept dragging you to the room and finally we were both in there and I grabbed your shoulder with my other hand and swung you around and shoved you away! Then I lunged for the door and got out and slammed it closed, sorry if I caught your fingers in there, that must have hurt, and locked it. Tightly. Double checked it.

I left you locked in the room even after you stopped pounding on the door, but I stayed in the house and (as I said earlier) missed the maple. I sat in my rocking chair in the living room with my knees tucked up to my chest and let myself go almost violently back and forth. I bet you could hear the rockers creaking over the wood floor—the sound was loud to me, at least. I think I must have fallen asleep there for a moment or an hour, but I remember very hazily walking to my own bedroom and locking my door behind me and huddling under the blankets and crying. I slept with my scarf and mittens on.

I did not think you would be there in the morning. I had a dream of you disappearing the same way you came—into the woods without any winter-wear—but when I woke up, I walked to the guest room door and pressed my ear up to the cold wood and heard you rustling around on the opposite side. Then I felt like a child with a bug trapped in a jar, and I wasn't sure what to do about that. I knocked and all your rustling stopped immediately, and I was afraid I had scared you off. I remember you telling me to come in, so I unlocked the door and peeked my head in. I told you I was sorry about yesterday, I hadn't meant to scare you, but you didn't understand how cold it got here at night. And did you want any breakfast?

You nodded and cleared your throat roughly and said that it was okay, just don't do it again; it had scared you. And yes, you'd take some. So I went out and made French toast. I topped it with powdered sugar because I was almost out of maple syrup and didn't feel like sharing. I think you went back to your room after we ate and stayed there the rest of the day. I did not care to figure you out up close, and stayed hovering between

the living room and my own room all day. I did feel bad about the whole thing, but I know I was justified, since Pilgrim had put you here and I was beginning to figure it out. It went something like this: Pilgrim put you in the woods, in the very middle of everything. So I found you in the middle and had to make a decision: take you outwards, to the house, or inwards to Pilgrim. You felt a wondrous attraction to the field, I was already on my way back to the house from seeing Pilgrim, and I hated interruptions. I was bringing you where you wanted to go, and you had no reason to be so fearful of the house or of me.

On the third day you asked where you were. You had already asked this question on the first day, but I thought you might have forgotten. I hadn't given a straight answer during our first meeting, and I tried to dodge the question again. *Um*, I said, *Well. You're in the house, aren't you?*

Yes, you said, *But what about the field out there?*

It's just a field, I said.

What about the woods, then? you asked.

Closer. I did not mean to say this, but it slipped out.

You quirked your eyebrow and I quirked mine back. *Closer to what?*

Then I suddenly remembered the calendar hanging in the kitchen with the "PILGRIMAGE" scrawled three days from now, and stood up far more abruptly than I meant to. You jumped a little at my sudden movement, clutching the armrests on your chair tightly. *Um*, I said. *Sorry! I'll be back in a minute.*

I was nearly choking with fear at the idea that you had already seen the calendar yesterday morning when we were eating the French toast, and were simply biding your time to ask about it at the most strategic time. Or, worse: go outside and figure it out yourself. Worse! Worse, yes, far, far worse. Pilgrim would be angry at me if I took my eye off of you long enough for you to escape and run back into the woods.

Then *that* thought filled me with even more terror, because I had just left you in the living room alone in order to hide the calendar. I sprinted to the kitchen and tore the calendar off of its hook on the wall, rushed into my bedroom and threw it in my closet, tore coats off their hangers and buried the calendar under them on the floor. Then, heart pounding, I ran back out into the living room, half expecting to see you gone.

You were still in your chair, though, legs pulled up and folded under you. You were tapping the fingers of one hand on one knee and propping your chin up with your other hand, and peering very strangely into the middle of the room. Thinking? About the field? About the trees? About what I had been doing? *Um*, I said. *Sorry.*

Oh! You said back, *I thought you were leaving?*

Nope! Nope, I repeated, then scolded myself for repeating it, because it probably sounded suspicious. I continued, *You can't leave.*

You looked afraid all of a sudden and I realized what I had said.

I mean (I rushed to correct my mistake)—*I mean in general. I, you—we. Can't leave. On account of the cold.*

Oh, I'm used to snow, you said.

The snow isn't safe here.

Oh. I don't think you believed me here.

Yes. Sorry about that. But it is nice in here! (I gestured to the house built around us).

You looked around as if to certify the truth of my statement, not responding for a moment. Then you said, *Did you build it? The house, I mean.*

No? I said, a little confused with the change in topic. *It is just always here. It's just the house.*

You keep saying that, you said, impatient. *'Just' the field, 'just' the house. It's . . . I don't get why you make it all feel so small.*

I sat back down in my chair, curling my legs up to my chest. *It is small.*

You looked down and seemed to study the ground, or maybe the pattern on the rug. *It feels very big. Compared to what I'm used to.*

Do you mean your hospitals?

You shrugged.

Well, I assured you, *I do not think you would want to give up your hospital rooms for this.* (If only you knew!)

You didn't talk for a good bit, and when you finally did, everything was veiled (I think) and removed from what you were actually thinking about. The rest of the third day was spent mostly with you telling me about sheets and hospitals, and you retired to your room early before dinner—I ate alone and went to bed soon after.

On the fourth day I began to worry that you would not disappear back to wherever you came from before my next pilgrimage. But—I convinced myself—Pilgrim would not force me to choose between keeping you here and going to see it; I did not have anything to worry about. It would take you away soon—I had already figured out the puzzle (which direction to bring you) and did not have further need for you. I woke up having had a strange dream about your hospitals and was scared; my subconscious mind had constructed them as great looming beasts with strange metal rods running all over and through them in a weblike effect, and there were no people there besides the two of us.

I went out to the living room and told you about my dream.

Huh, you said. *I mean, I guess some of them are kind of brutalist-looking.*

Mine has more windows than metal webbing, though.

I thought this was interesting and pressed you for detail. I got the strange sense that the hospitals might have been your version of Pilgrim. Listening to you felt like I was intruding on something. But! (it dawned on me) This must have been why Pilgrim kept you there that day. I had learned something new: that Pilgrim was not a

singularity. Why had it never taught me this before? I suppose it was teaching me now, through you, but it was still a fascinating thought.

At one point, you said you hated going, having to see everything there. *But everyone else is too scared and selfish. Fucking hopelessly selfish*, you said. *And stupid. Who else is going to do it?* I shrugged at this question, not sure if you were looking for an actual answer. Things like this were what made me compare your hospitals to my Pilgrim: who else is going to visit it? Who else is going to listen to it? I am the only one here.

Then you started asking *me* questions! About the field! Having resolved to keep everything about my world as secret as possible to keep you content with being kept in the house, I did not want to answer. The field was a step closer to the trees, and the trees were a step closer to the clearing, and the clearing was a step closer to Pilgrim, and I had to keep you here, away from it. You asked, *What does the field look like during the summer? Do you get wildflowers? Or is it some kind of tall grass or something?*

Mostly just grass.

You stretched your legs out from where you sat on your armchair. *I bet that's really pretty.*

Yes! And warm. Grass was generic. Warmth was generic. These things would not make you think very deeply about my world.

Not to bring this up again, you started suddenly. *I know the snow is dangerous, but what if we went out during the afternoon? We were the other day and it was fine.*

If I wanted to keep up the lie, I had to be consistent. I had to give you something. I could bring you out through our tracks, stop us when we got to the treeline. Tell you there were coyotes, maybe. *We can go . . . a little bit. We can go out a little bit. But not very far. And not for very long.*

You jumped up out of your chair upon hearing this. *Great!*

I flinched in my rocking chair before unscrambling myself and standing up next to you. *We will still have to be careful.*

You rolled your eyes. *It's just snow. But yeah, we'll be careful.*

This was my opportunity! To bring up the coyotes without it feeling suspicious! *It's not the snow*, I said. *It's the woods. There's coyotes out there.*

That's okay, you said. *If we don't find it in the field, I won't try to go any further.*

I beat myself up for ages afterwards for letting us go so far outside: this was it! This was what made Pilgrim keep you there! I know; I knew letting you out (going out *with* you, even!) was wrong. I should not have gone; I should have locked you in then! Proven to Pilgrim that I could do what I was meant to do, keep you where it wanted you! But looking back now, I understand why I did it. It's just that you seemed so determined to find whatever it was you were looking for that it made me want to find it too, just a little. I asked, *What is the thing you are looking for?*

It's just—it's this key that one of my patients gave me. One of the people from my hospital.

I nodded. *Oh. I understand.*

He didn't have anyone else to give it to. You ducked your face away from me, crying, I think.

I understood this too, but I didn't say so outloud. It seemed like it wouldn't have helped. *We can go look*, I said instead. *Now. It will be getting dark in a few hours.*

You scrubbed the backs of your hands over your eyes. *Thanks.*

So we went out and followed our tracks from the day you had arrived.

Lucky that it hasn't snowed more to cover these up, you said.

I looked at you strangely, but supposed it made sense that you would reduce it to luck, not knowing about Pilgrim or anything. Yes, I said. *Very.* I tucked a reminder into the back of my mind to thank Pilgrim for not making it snow those four days the next time I saw it. *What color is this key?* I asked, scanning the ground for anything amiss.

Silver. And it's on a black lanyard.

Lanyard? I repeated, not knowing what that was.

Like a long thin loop of fabric, so you can hang the key on your neck, you said, studying the ground as we made our way through the snow.

Ah, I said. It seemed like a very practical thing.

We had only been looking for half an hour when you gasped and reached down, plucking it out of the snow. You teared up a bit and were blinking a lot more than usual. I watched you fold the lanyard very carefully in your bare trembling hands, the key at the end clinking against your rings. Then you unfolded it methodically, and reached up to hang it around your neck. *Thank you*, you said, staring at me intensely.

I didn't do anything, I grinned, a little delirious with joy at the fact that you had found it, and that I had been with you to watch it happen.

We turned around and went back home before we even got close to the woods, and I felt a little silly (privately) that I had been so worried about you escaping into them and finding Pilgrim. I made dinner for both of us and we ate together, and the key hanging around your neck would clink against your plate every time you leaned forward to take a bite. You said goodnight and went to your room and I locked your door behind you as quietly as possible. On the fifth day I woke up sure that you would be gone. I had solved Pilgrim's puzzle, learned what I was supposed to; there was nothing tying you here anymore. I slid out from under my blankets and tip-toed to unlock your door, and peaked in to see if you had made the bed before disappearing.

Instead, the crown of your head stuck out of the covers, your hair in such a mess that I felt a strange urge to tread over to your bedside and smooth it all out as you slept. But why were you still here? What was I supposed to do! Tomorrow! I was supposed to see Pilgrim tomorrow. I had a pilgrimage. I needed to go on it. I could not abandon Pilgrim there in its clearing in the woods, but I could not leave you here all alone in the house. If I left you, I could not be sure that you would not follow me; if I stayed with you, I could not be sure that Pilgrim would ever face me again.

I clutched the doorknob very tightly and slammed the door closed. I locked it. I heard you waking up on the other side and walking across the room. I started pacing the living room when you started jiggling the doorknob, trying to get out. I clawed my hair in fists, pulling, pulling, pacing. Why were you not gone! You had your key! I let you out yesterday so you could find it! Now you had it, and you were still here. Why were you still here! I pounded the heel of my hand into my forehead *hard*. Why was Pilgrim letting you stay! Did it not want me to see it? Did it not know you were here? Why were you still here!

You knocked on the door very politely and asked if I could unlock the door please. You said it very calmly, like it was something I had done on accident. I did not unlock it and continued pacing instead. I went into my room shuddering and stayed there until I fell asleep and convinced myself that you would be gone when I woke up tomorrow morning.

You were not gone the next morning, and it was all worse! All worse than yesterday. I wrapped my scarf around my neck as tight as I could pull it and yanked my hat and mittens and coat on and sat on the floor outside your door. It was very warm and got warmer and warmer by the moment, but I would not take any of it off, because it was what I was supposed to wear on pilgrimage days. At some point in the afternoon you sat down on the opposite side of the door. I could feel a little thump when you let your head rest against the wood, so I leaned my head back as well.

Niamh, you said. *Can you please let me out?*

I shook my head violently even though I knew you couldn't see it.

Another several moments passed before you said, *I'm really hungry. And thirsty. Can you please just give me some water? I'll stay in here; I won't try to run.*

No. Sorry. If I open the door you will never leave.

I think it maybe works the other way around? you said carefully.

No.

Okay . . . you trailed off. You clearly did not believe me. I didn't understand why you weren't angrier.

Don't worry, I said stiffly. *I shouldn't have let us go out earlier. But this will fix it.* You didn't respond to that, but I heard you start to hiccup on the other side. *Are you crying?* I asked.

No, you said, clearly crying.

Sorry, I said heavily, suddenly also feeling like crying.

It's okay.

Sorry, I said again, covering my ears with cupped hands.

Neither of us ate that day; I didn't want to leave you at the door by yourself. I fell asleep laying curled on the wood floor, lodged awkwardly between either side of the doorframe. It was very uncomfortable and I was sweating from how hot and stuffy I was from still being bundled in my scarf and coat and things.

I woke up on the floor on the seventh day, sore from sleeping on the floor, hip and shoulder bruised. I was hot enough to feel panicky and trapped for a moment before remembering why I felt so. I sat up and knocked, hoping it would not wake you up

too violently if your head was still resting against the door. You did not knock back, and I scrambled to my feet to unlock the door and glance inside for you as fast as I could.

You were gone! You were gone! I almost spun around for joy! You had not made the bed. The blankets were piled up at the foot of your bed, and I wondered briefly if you would have to change a lot of sheets at the hospitals that day. Then I spun around and ran back out of the room to get to Pilgrim as soon as possible. Pilgrim would be there. Pilgrim would have waited for me. Pilgrim would be there! There was nothing to worry about. It would understand that I was just trying to keep it safe. It would be appreciative, probably. Maybe it would give me a new scarf—not because I disliked this one, but because I would love to have two.

I locked the door behind me and slipped the key in the front pocket of my cloak. The pilgrimage took me most of the afternoon, as usual, and I appeared in Pilgrim's clearing exhausted, as usual.

"Pilgrim," I called, as usual.

Everything was very quiet. I studied the untouched snow on the clearing floor, trying to catch the shadows of Pilgrim's antlers for a warning sign of its appearance. No luck.

"I'm a little late," I called again. I had never said this to Pilgrim before and think I was shaking a little. It suddenly felt like I was looking down at my body from outside of myself: I loomed so strangely large in the tiny clearing, bundled in my coats and things. I wondered for a moment if you were a little scared to be back at your hospital, and then scolded myself for thinking about your hospitals when I should have been thinking about Pilgrim.

"Pilgrim," I whispered again.

Suddenly I didn't have to study the snow very closely at all for the shadows of its antlers. They were there, solid! Right in front of me! I wanted to reach out and grasp them, pull on them as suddenly as it had dropped you into the woods and pulled you back out of the house. I could have! They were close, very close.

I did not reach out or touch. I scrambled to push my hair out of my eyes so that I could look at it unhindered. I told Pilgrim I was sorry for being late again, and I asked it something for you, Jane: were you late to your hospital?

I mentioned before that Pilgrim does not speak like people do; it is more a feeling or a compulsion. But Pilgrim *does* speak; oh, yes. It speaks very clearly when it wants to be heard.

It said: *Niamh*, you are getting closer. Come back in five days.

OH, YEAH! AND THIS
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XOXO,
PHOENIX ♡