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# BLEND

The Literary Arts Magazine of Olympic College

2023 Olympic College

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## **Peek at the Tea Party**

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*Aoi Sato*

## **fish market**

---

*Maé Mullen*

there's no turning back  
once you've entered the fish market.  
humid air engulfs the building,  
it will make your mouth water.  
its contrast to the outside  
will prickle your skin.  
your eyes will adjust  
to the pale blue light.  
an ordinary fish market  
regulates their temperature  
at 37 degrees.  
we don't quite work the same.  
goosebumps will crawl up your skin,  
because the sight  
will freeze your bones  
entirely.  
red blotched bodies move swiftly  
back and forth on the white racks  
they are tied to.  
some fish will struggle  
in your grasp,  
don't let it  
discourage you,  
it will be worth your while.  
soulless eyes stare back at you  
as you pass through the isles,  
but if you're lucky,  
fearful eyes will meet yours.  
that fresh catch  
will be your pick.  
the freshest sells best,  
just ask our expensive buyers.  
whimpers and whines  
will fill your ears.  
just send the butchers,  
they will be silenced.



chopped fish,  
filled fish,  
cooked fish,  
raw fish,  
old fish,  
young fish,  
dead fish,  
and fresh fish.

our unlimited supply is perfect  
for our special guests,  
whose palettes are sophisticated  
and most praised,  
because anything can be made  
with fish.

it tastes just like red meat,  
and you love red meat.  
all are welcome but  
all must remain hidden and  
all will tell no one.

now,  
don't panic.  
you will find your fix.  
after all,  
it is just  
a fish market.



## **Untitled**

---

*Lillian Hoffman*

# **Pablo Sweeps**

---

*Justin Platter*

Early in the morning, under the looming shadow of industrial cranes, a large blue shipping freighter from Taiwan eased silently across the water in the direction of the docks. In the parking lot, a man moved quickly between the cars. Pablo's frayed straw broom picked and pecked at cigarette butts, paper stubs, crumpled receipts, and plastic wrap. Sweeping started at 4 am until the shipyard workers began arriving at 6. Drivers looking for parking sneered at the shabby dark man and drove around him. Pablo paid no attention to the arriving vehicles, his eyes scanning the dark tarmac for any off-color signs of litter.

Filthy grey slippers flipped and flopped with every step. Pablo wore faded jeans covered with holes, frayed, and ragged at the legs. By 6:45 am, Pablo felt confident with the work that he had done. Luckily for Pablo, the parking lot was such a high traffic area no amount of sweeping would ever prove enough.

When the bosses called Pablo's phone, he answered. When the bosses looked out the office window at 5:15 am, Pablo's rusty pickup would be parked where it always was. He installed a fishing pole rack to store dustbins and brooms in the bed of the brownish-green ford. A pile of overflowing black bags was due at the dump by the end of the week.

At a distance, a couple of shipyard workers looked on as the dirty old man dragged a broom through the lot towards that "shitcan-carrying-an-engine." Puffing on cigarettes, they mumbled amongst each other about the homeless problem in the area.

"Check out this nutcase."

"Tweaker."

"Got his bag lady waiting in the back seat."

They chuckled to themselves as Pablo returned his broom into its rack. He could hear the men laughing and turned to find nearly a dozen shipyard workers staring curiously in his direction. He smiled his six-tooth smile and waved, only one returning the gesture.

Pablo climbed into the truck and found his daughter swiping mindlessly at her cell phone. It had taken five months' savings to buy it. It was a frivolous distraction for a child her age, but he felt a paternal pride to get her what she wanted. Her dark brown hair was on full display; bedhead if her bed was a horse stable. It was dry, splitting, a nest of fried ends, and frazzled to almost comedic effect.

She hadn't taken a shower in two days; she was waiting for the water to be turned back on in their apartment. Unlike her four brothers and sisters, she was not fond of employing the next-door neighbor's

generosity for somewhere to bathe. The bills always got paid, and the water always came back on, and until then, she could wait.

As the street sweeper buckled his seatbelt, his daughter turned to him and smiled.

Pablo's daughter did not speak. When she was young, she suffered a kick by a donkey. She slept for two days in a hospital and left with only a few scratches, but she never spoke another word after that day. She remained silent for ten years until her mother's death, where at the funeral, she whimpered in guarded pain for a few brief moments.

To the gawking crowd, Pablo is a drug addict, and his daughter is his homeless girlfriend. In his home, Pablo is a man who served his country, a different country, very bravely. Pablo owned a business where the wives of the rich would circle and shop his wares. Pablo once dined with royalty.

The pickup truck started with a mechanical growl. Beyond the open window, there was a sound he remembered well. Over belts slipping and squeaking on engine pulleys, he heard the lonely laugh of a gull. He remembered the day his mother died and the beautiful jade dress she was wearing. He remembered the promise he made to his wife in a hospital, thousands of miles away.

"I'll never give up on our dream."



# **Growing Pains**

---

*Gregory Esters*

“Throw it! Hurry up and throw it!” yelled a cracked voice of desperation.

“Oh my lawd!” screamed a shrill voice of consternation.

“Damn!” grumbled a deep voice of exasperation.

They were only voices and blurs to me in a cacophony of celebration before it all went “pop!” 1992, Independence Day, a title fitting to what I hoped to achieve, another victory and all I had to do is believe in myself. After getting permission, of course, permission from my mama to join in the festivities as a “big boy”, by igniting and throwing spectacular fireworks, those violent, ephemeral, chromatic, man-made fireflies of tradition that always caught my eyes. Instead of enjoying the primal fun of the shocking sound, the sudden meow of a Black Cat firecracker after its lit wick purrs, I felt the painful force of its combustion in my hand as it burned. “Aughhh!” cried out a voice I did not recognize as my own.

The day began hot! The only cooling of this blazing day was the occasional sprinklers on the lawns of the old folks who cared for that sort of thing and the frozen miracles of Otter Pops. I had just learned how to ride my bike a week before, and my legs showed the learning curve I had taken. Just across the knee and along with the elbows down to the hands showed scars that some called “manly.” My limbs looked like they had been put through a cheese grater, slicing off skin to sacrifice to the balance gods. So, I was speeding down the sidewalk and through the stimulating sprinklers until I stopped violently, burning rubber right in front of my mama. She smiled warmly, lovely, and held an empty bottle which appeared to have incense in it.

“Why are we lighting incense outside, mama?” I asked.

“These are not incense, baby; they’re bottle rockets. We’re going to light them with everyone else,” she said, ever smiling gently.

She dug a tiny ditch, stuck the bottle into the ground, put a rocket in it, and lit it. It went higher and higher

into the air with a howl like a horror movie, all the way up into the sky, sparkling like a mini comet's tail until ending in that satisfying "pop!" Both of us transfixed by the rocket's trail, you could hear the smile in her voice when she said, "Go into the house and get the fireworks box on top of my bed." I yelped and ran.

Mama allowed me to light all the bottle rockets as a crowd gathered in celebration that night. I felt pride and strength in my control over fire, sound, and light. Every sniff of sulphur, every breath of burning air, and my ego rose. I was having so much fun playing with bottle rockets in the street, racing them with people as they shot off like drag racers. I lit jumping jack-in-the-boxes that were like living, colorful flashes. I lit missiles and blackout strobes (my favorite). The strobes slowed the world down, stealing time in intervals in between beaming and black. I even lit the real fireworks that looked like a mist of jubilant rainbow drops shot out of a cartoonish little cannon. I lit everything and ran back every single time, just watching the magnificent, magical display of pyrotechnics while hugging my mama's leg.

As the displays went long into the night, the only magic left was the firecrackers. Everybody grabbed a pack, lit them, and threw them. I wanted to do that too! With permission, I grabbed a pack of the Black Cats and picked it up. I looked upon future enjoyment and thought of hours past. I wanted this to last, to savor each mini explosion of the pack. They were the last of the lights. Caution should be taken for its namesake, Black Cat.

I guess they crossed my path and gave me bad luck because once grabbing the firecrackers, I lit one. The fire sparked the wick and I gazed into the sparks. The sparks gazed back into me. Hypnotized by its illumination and warmed by its heat on my small hand, I knew I was in danger and that I had to throw it, but I couldn't. I was enraptured in the light against the dark; the burn, the bright, the flicker of sparks as their oranges and yellows arched. I was frozen by fire in silent space and time. My body was paralyzed but shaking, and I couldn't concentrate on what to do with the millions of blanked out thoughts flying through my mind. I was going mad within my kaleidoscopic thoughts. Then suddenly, my arm started moving through the air trying to get rid of the thing that once was a source of fun, now a source of imminent danger. I did not understand until that moment that

fear and fun were so intimate with each other. I thought they were strangers before, but now felt both within me.

About an inch out of my hand, time and space resumed their regularly scheduled broadcast; the firecracker hissed. A fanged flash, half white and half black overwhelmed my vision. Finally reaching my hearing, a sea of voices roar. My sight came back with pain the likes of which I had never felt before.

The pain felt like a thousand needles searing and stabbing into my hand. “My hand,” I thought. “Where is my hand?” A silly question to think once I felt it throb. The pressure of light and magic after it was no more was massive, like holding a dream if it had density. My dream was now defeat as the needles disappeared into someplace deep.

Throbbing to the beat of my heart, my hand looked like a giant bruised blueberry. Seeing its sheer size was very scary. Mama ran over in a hurry, snatched me up in her arms, and carried me into the house. Compared to the night, the inside was so dark. She moved faster than any memory I could recount. She was beautiful like the sparks. Breathing hard in the absence of light, she ran cold water on my hand before I could even comprehend what had just happened this night. I had experienced freeze and flight, I felt ready to fight. I think I was angry because of a fright. Standing in the dark and with the way my hand looked, would I be alright? My enemy became pain, on sight, as it was currently my life. *Flash*, the needles had returned and multiplied into the millions. The water that inspired the new fire was now the villain. I shook in her grasp as my mama, held me in vice yet tenderly. “A little more,” she whispered. “Be strong,” was her advice while sharing her loving energy. The last drop of water still stung as mama wrapped my hand softly with a rag she had wrung. My hand was not my hand, numb from abuse. It was put into ice in a bowl so that I could regain its use.

The rest of my night took place in dreamland, as I laid my head down in mama’s lap and drifted off. The last I remembered was her soothing voice and soft kisses on my forehead, erasing the pain of my hand and making everything all better.

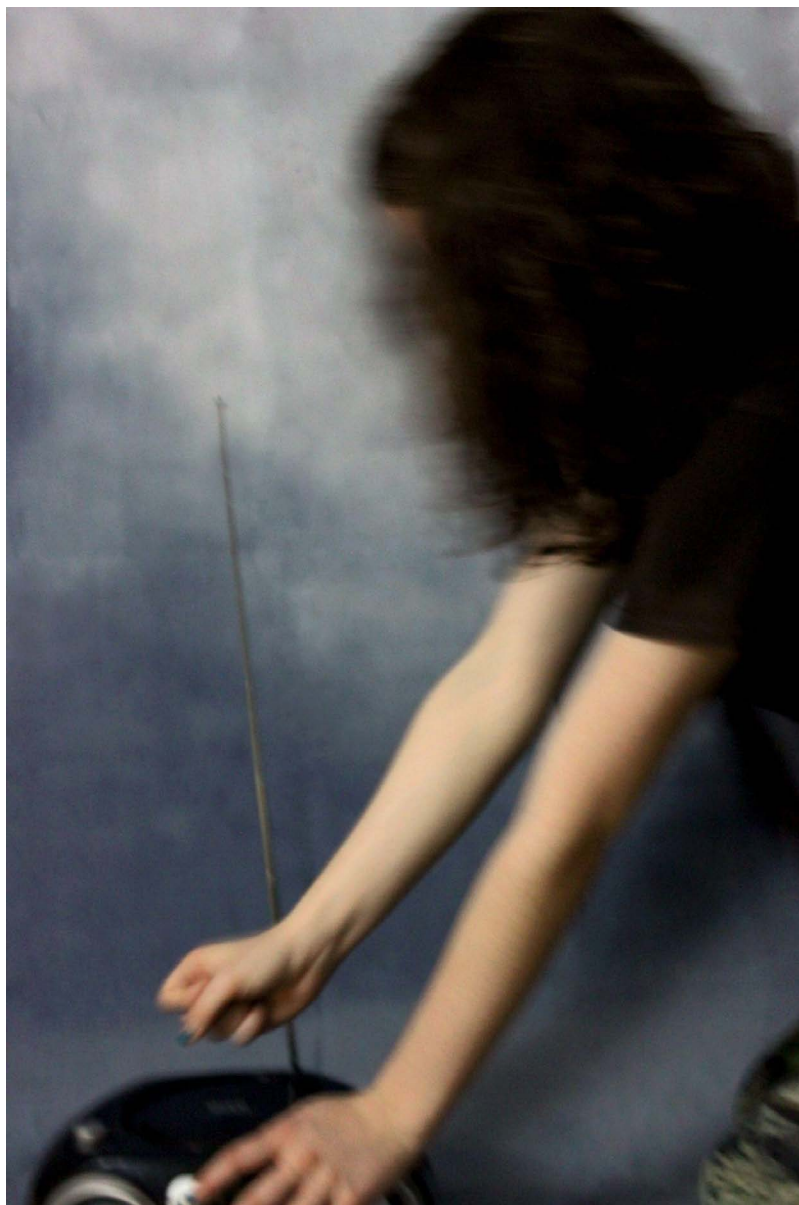


**Bleck**

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*Grace Andrews*





**Untitled**

---

*Grace Andrews*

## **Women Have to Keep Their Elbows Soft**

*Kristen Connelly*

Women have to keep their elbows soft,  
toes always in pool-ready color,  
shaved legs,  
and hairless arms.  
Keep a sense of wonder  
while keeping everyone at a distance,  
but not so far,  
lest one be called a “bitch.”  
My hands should never  
show my age,  
and my face, good Lord,  
must always keep them wondering  
if I’m at least  
ten years younger  
Balancing plates,  
making sure that none fall  
so you can tell me that I’m worthy  
of your love  
of your attention  
of your approval  
An act of defiance,  
not shaving,  
putting on too much makeup,  
or not enough.  
Challenging the need to  
keep everything  
perpetually perfect:  
my hair, my face, my breasts, my temper.  
Marveling at my own talent  
to destroy each plate,  
stop the spinning,  
and looking you in the eyes  
to say  
I love myself.

## **on loving a modern leander**

*Kieran Stephens*

- i. they taste of saltwater when you kiss and you can't get enough / it's funny how tragedy can look like love if you're blind enough.
- ii. *you steal another kiss and water floods your lungs and you're breathless, helpless to do anything / you let them push you up against a wall, tell them to never stop touching you, breathing be damned. they laugh and you swear you hear the waves that threaten to pull you both under if you're not careful / you decide it's the most beautiful thing you've ever heard and press a kiss to the corner of their mouth.*
- iii. when they hold you their body burns / let them touch you with searing hands—enjoy every minute of it. handprints burnt into your skin is all they will leave you. they set your body aflame and swear they're freezing, the coldest they've ever been.
- iv. *it's the winter cold water that runs through their veins now instead of blood. you both know this but choose to pretend not to. you're both aware how a love like yours will end / modern myths all end the same. your boy has the beauty of leander and the fate of him too. one day you'll lay together, broken bodies on the shore. they brush the hair from your eyes & whisper "i love you" in that way that means they'd swim the whole sea just to get to you.*
- v. you turn off every light in your apartment after they leave / the first time they strip you both bare and press feather light kisses down your spine they tell you they're terrified of the dark ; you promise to always leave lights on for them.
- vi. *they show up at your apartment soaked through their clothes / a storm brews on the horizon and they're at the center. you don't regret falling in love with the eye of a hurricane until its too late. you're not allowed to touch them that night / they're a whirlwind of words that you can barely make sense of. "i can still feel his hands," they tell you, "wrapped around my throat while i scream." "a sword hangs above my head." / "one day, you will not be able to save me." you agree in silence. it's all you can do.*
- vii. your older brother tells you to stay away from them / you can't resist the way they make you feel. it's more addicting than any drug — they laugh in your face when you say this to them. "you're a good boy," they flick your cheek & turn away, "you shouldn't be addicted to someone like me."
- viii. *you can't help but love them / the saltwater kisses that leave you breathless, helpless. sea water in your lungs. they've got the fate of leander etched in their bones and you, well it's obvious isn't it? they're leander in his watery tomb and you're hero, casting yourself into the sea.*

## **After Deicide (This Is How the Heroes Win)**

*Alana Cardano*

Two lovers above ground is where the tragedy ends.  
The prophets write in the lining of his bones:  
This is your story told by the Gods and this is why you lose.

Orpheus sits at an untuned piano and rests his crooked fingers.

Orpheus stills before the maw of the Underworld.  
Helios whispers to him: go, go and be fast—I cannot follow you.

He purses his lips around a cigarette and lets the smoke crawl past his chapped lips.  
He tells you that there are words painted on the backs of his teeth,  
*Kulang ako kung wala ka*—he stutters on the words,  
and that it was Eurydice who left them there.

*The ichor in his veins burns something fierce  
and he knows he has never been closer to godhood.  
A voice curls around the shell of his ear and  
it sounds like Eurydice: I am not following you.*

Orpheus lets you trace the scars running from the tips of his fingers  
to the pulse point in his wrist and grins as he says,  
*The prophets knew it before me. That's the worst part,*  
he flexes his fingers, *that's what makes it a tragedy.*

Why would Orpheus turn around?  
Because that's who he is.  
That's the kind of person he has always been.

What kind of person turns around?  
A lover—*mahal*, this he says with such assurance,  
it's easy to believe Eurydice might have created the word itself for him.  
A lover always looks back.



*I used to sing the stories and praises of the old gods,*  
(Used to, he says. As in: he had, he loved it,  
and maybe once it even belonged to him.  
The taste of the songs still linger on his tongue—but no longer)

Orpheus takes his hand back and stubs his cigarette in an old ashtray,  
*maybe that's why they're all dead now; maybe I killed them.*

*For Eurydice?* You ask. He puts a finger to his lips and winks.

The bar tightens like twine around a finger. Heat seeps through the cracks in the windows.  
Sweat trickles down the back of your neck as the AC wheezes its last breath.  
A pretty girl in a dress knocks into the piano, splattering liquor on its well-stained top.

He curls his lips in a smile that's almost a snarl,  
knocks back the rest of his drink, and then your drink.  
Slinging his jacket over his shoulder, he pays for both your tabs and says to you,  
*I gotta go—I gotta run. I hate it when I keep Eurydice waiting.*

Orpheus curls his fingers around the door handle and looks over his shoulder.  
He looks back at you like this moment might someday define one of Eurydice's words  
but since the word has yet to be created, you settle for this:  
He looks back at you like he sees a bit of Eurydice in you, by which you mean:  
He looks back at you like you're something beautiful, and you think:

*Orpheus hasn't learned a thing.*

Outside, a car roars and its headlights consume Orpheus, shrouding him in light.  
Your eyes burn and you realize that this moment too belongs to Eurydice.  
And that when he turns back it'll be over,  
but for right now, he is something glorious.

In this fleeting moment, he is divine.

The light fades; Orpheus turns the handle and slips out the door.

# **The Divine Feminine**

---

*Joni Hall*

I think I'm only in love with the idea of femininity.  
Being the tycoon's trophy wife, my nylon-clad legs crossed  
as I sit on his desk, waiting for him to bathe in my beauty.  
remembering why he married me.  
He opens the door, rushing to hoist me up by my waist, his briefcase tossed aside.  
his strong hands on my full thighs make me feel small and dainty.  
In that moment, I would understand womanhood;  
the thing I was taught growing up,  
the role assigned to me.  
I can rehearse my lines as much as I please  
but I will never understand my character.  
The thought of sneaking peeks at my co-star's lines slithers into my mind,  
enticing me towards something forbidden; a fruit tasting of rustic cologne and leather.  
Biting into that fruit makes me feel at home,  
just as my husband's hand on my thigh.



## **Mother Will Keep Us**

*Emilio González*



**Anger**

---

*Grace Andrews*

## Meal Prep

---

*Maé Mullen*

*I'm on the hunt, I'm after you;  
Mouth is alive with juices like wine;  
And I'm hungry like the wolf*

- Duran Duran

Headphones on, lyrics blasting. It's a rather busy Wednesday afternoon for St. Mark's Place as I make my way through the sea of bodies. The sidewalks are overcrowded with people from all over, hushed tones and animated voices travel through miles but I stay ahead. Hands of strangers brush mine back and forth as many of us move forward. A sensation that crawls its way up my skin, my hunger only now more intense. The streets are vacant of smoky exhaust from obnoxiously loud, over-priced cars. Body odors take over my senses, from the fruitiest of scents to musky wood; but, none exactly what I'm looking for.

It's been weeks since I last tasted the pure delicacy of exotic gourmet, so having to breathe in the diverse agriculture surrounding me was my own personal hell. That, and filling in for my ex-mentor's teaching position after her sudden "sabbatical" (it was not much my fault, but possibly a lapse in judgment). With the late night shifts at Greg's Market Place, my dissertation, and dealing with the stuck-up little shits I teach, I've been distracted. But it's spring break, and while everyone's out partying, I begin planning my next meal. Although, the question still replays in my mind: What?

There's usually a preference to my taste, but as of now, beggars can't be choosers. That is, until her. Even from the other side of the street, her boisterous laugh surges through my headphone clad ears and swims its way through my blood. The light way her body is held, butter-like in the raised sunlight. Short, soft hair lays sprawled across her shoulders. I can already feel the way both my thumbs and index fingers would perfectly fit, circling around her fragile neck.

My measured gaze observes her every move as I stop in front of a jam-packed café, perfect view of her pop-up shop. She continues to laugh at something her co-worker said while I think.

Finally, I approach.

"Hummus Agora" spreads over a sign hanging above the tent. The line of customers blocking her from me gets shorter, my steps quicker and fewer, swerving and cutting through the large groups of people. As I get closer, her features become clearer, more appealing to the eye. Light brown hair adorns both sides of her baby-

smooth face and her line of sight finally lands on me.

“Hi! Welcome to Hummus Agora. How may I assist you today?” she greets brightly. Surprisingly, her voice isn’t ear-piercing like I originally thought, quite the opposite, actually. Her name tag reads Nora. Nora.

“Hi Nora,” I reply smoothly, wearing a slight smirk (it always works), “I have an idea of what I want, but still not sure. What would you recommend?”

She looks at me confused. “How do you know my name?”

I look pointedly at her chest, my smirk still remains. “Your nametag.”

A dark shade of red spreads its way up her neck to her cheeks.

“Oh, right,” she replies sheepishly. God, she’s adorable.

Regaining composure, she continues. “Right, recommendations. We have so many good ones, let’s see.”

Nora brings me to their showcase just left of the register, filled with a variety of hummuses.

“Well, there’s classic, obviously.” She laughs. “Then we have roasted garlic, spinach and artichoke, olive tapenade, black bean...”

I don’t know how, but her face grows brighter as she begins listing all her favorite hummus flavors they make.

“...but my absolute favorite is roasted red pepper. My coworkers call me basic for it, but it’s such a classic and goes with everything.” She then leans closer and lowers her voice, “It’s so much better than the original flavor, but don’t tell them that, they’ll have my neck.”

She begins laughing again as she moves back to her previous spot.

I barely hear a single thing she says. I’m too consumed in her presence to process her admission. Her scent is distinctive, it fuels my already expanding desire to devour her entirely. However, there’s only so much intimacy I can crave before it becomes unreachable. The inevitable critique will take place and will soon be over. Any idea of Nora I create is fabricated, an aberration. Her only role is to be used by me and only me. That’s where it starts and that’s where it will end. For now, I’ve made my decision, and I plan to see it through.

“I’ll take the roasted red pepper.”

*Every breath you take, Every move you make,  
Every bond you break, Every step you take,  
I’ll be watching you;  
Every single day, Every word you say,  
Every game you play, Every night you stay,  
I’ll be watching you*

- The Police

Nora Wells lives an exhilarating life, and it wasn't difficult to find out. I simply waited till rush hour, when every worker was occupied, to sneak behind the table for her purse, taking her wallet. It's astonishing what one can find about a person just with their ID and old library cards.

At age 23, she works two jobs, Hummus Agora on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday, and she interns at some small publishing house Monday to Friday mornings. She just recently moved from Philadelphia three months ago, and now lives on 205 Pinehurst Ave. And she's loaded. An only child of divorced parents, both lawyers, and both love her dearly. With easy access to her banking information, monthly checks are sent to her account from such caring parents. Although expensively raised and educated, she volunteers at different shelters as much as possible it seems. As all of this takes place, My Nora still manages to take care of herself. Alongside the frequent moisturizing lotion and gel masque, she attends weekly yoga classes and consumes a balanced diet. I watch her every step of the way. There'll only need to be a few slight changes.

A process that usually lasts at most a few days, I've expanded to weeks. As starved as I am, an astonishingly delicious meal course takes time and efficiency. Therefore, I start preparing the main course to be properly cooked.

Woven baskets filled with pre-cooked oysters, acorns, and masala. Dark chocolate cubes sprinkle over various fresh cheeses and bottles of Evian, hand delivered daily at 3:00 pm on her doorstep, usually marked with sweet nothings from a random ex-lover. She'll neglect the gift at first, but I know her, she'll finish that basket before the next one arrives. I have a sophisticated palette, I'm particular about how she'll taste - the oyster, acorns, and masala brings out the richest of flavors in meat. This method has proven best.

Sometimes I help her out before she makes a bad choice, like cutting a few leads from the spark plugs of her car, leading her to a 10-minute breakdown about the engine not starting, then giving up and going back inside. Keeping her preserved, no clubs, no fast food, no drugs. It's better for My Nora. She'll thank me.

*Little red riding hood,  
You sure are looking good,  
You're everything a big bad wolf could want*

- Sam the Sham & The Pharaohs

Greg's Market Place is eerily vacant for a Monday afternoon. Besides a few stragglers here and there, it's just me.

I make my way down the aisles in search of my sides and appetizers. Ever since my last meal, my supplies have run low and been in need of restocking. Grabbing my list out of the shopping cart, goosebumps run



up my back, down my arms as I enter the half empty freezer aisle. Nothing. There's nothing I need from here, in my mind, so I head to produce. Onions, peppers, celery, lemons, carrots, garlic...

Walking toward the spices, the usual elevator music fades and a familiar song flows out the speakers and fills the aisles. The moment I recognize the melody, my blood runs cold, and all my senses shut down as I'm lifted away from my body.

"Darling I, with you all the time..."

Delicate fingers absentmindedly stroke through my hair as the vinyl plays. She hums softly against my chest as our bodies tangle together, swaying to the music surrounding us.

My ex-mentor. My last meal. My love. My Veronica. Living in a dream with me, our desires consumed us and we never wanted to go back. Soon, she became part of me.

She slipped through my fingers and into my stomach, destined for devourment. But my pleasure disappeared the moment she was gone, completely, permanently.

Without her, I was sinking within myself, like she was pulling my heart down from the inside and squeezing it with all her might.

I was no longer dancing with her flesh, but with her bones, guiding us around the living room. The record stopped, now only the screeching of its end.

Alone, with leftover pieces of her. And no one to blame but myself.

Tears stream down my face as that final memory of her stays frozen forever. Paralyzed, only the pounding of my heartbeat brings me back to the present. The song had long since ended, elevator music reclaiming its place over the speakers.

"Sir? Is everything alright?" an older man hesitantly asks.

God knows how long he's been there, his eyes shifting from my face, to my hand, then to the floor. Confused, I look down. Glass and thyme, everywhere. What the fuck? Blood drops from my pierced hand onto the floor below me, following the shards. Shit.

"Apologies, I guess I spaced out."

I'm sweating and the silence is eating me alive. Abandoning my items, I make a hasty exit, needing a shower immediately. Panting and on the verge of a bitter trip down memory lane, I promise internally to finish shopping tomorrow. For now, I need to forget my slip-up.

*Preying on you tonight,  
Hunt you down, eat you alive...  
Think you can hide,  
I can smell your scent for miles...  
I'll cut you out entirely.*

- Maroon 5

My equipment takes up the majority of the foyer and kitchen of my house. All of the final touches are almost complete and the food is ready to be prepped, except for the main course. Exactly one month since I pursued Nora, she's ready to be cut and marinated. It's time.

The dark halls of her apartment building lead me to her front door at 8:30 pm exactly. The door is locked, but the spare key is found under her doormat. Stupid girl. After entering, I shut and lock the door behind me, making my way to her kitchen. It's a spacious living space, warm and welcoming with every textured pillow and blanket and patterned surface imaginable. Not my favorite aspect of her, but her choice of design won't affect her taste. Although one of poor taste simply tastes...poorly, Nora made up for it diet-wise.

After the dining room light is turned on, her vinyl collection and an expensive vintage record player come into my line of focus. Under the TV console, several oldies and recent albums filed spine out. Perfect.

With a few minutes till 9, "Closer" by Nine Inch Nails plays and two glasses of red wine are set on the table (we won't be needing it). When the door knob jiggles, the click of the lock sounds and I can't help the large, menacing smile that takes over my face.

"Hello Nora," I taunt. I've lured her into my trap and there's no escape.

Her eyes meet my face and she freezes. But, before she can turn to run, I cross the living space and drag her in, hand over mouth.

"Now, now. Don't try to struggle, it'll only hurt you more," I say as if I'm talking to a baby.

Nora's breathing becomes frantic, wide eyes welling in tears. She tries to scream, though it's muffled beneath my hand, scratching at the arms that engulf her.

"Tsk. Tsk. What did I say, Nora?"

She keeps squirming and clawing at me in restless torment, but she's yet to understand that this is what she wants.

I pinch her pressure point. Her body now limp, I begin the transition.

*To make things right,  
You need someone to hold you tight,  
And you think love is to pray,  
But I'm sorry, I don't pray that way.*

- Soft Cell

Whistling to the beat of the song, I drive through the still-bustling streets back to my place.

Glancing in my rear view mirror, the moonlight glows over Nora's unconscious body, sprawled over the back seat.

Smiling, I continue whistling and tapping my fingers against the steering wheel as I drive into the night.

*Through every forest, Above the trees,  
Within my stomach, Scraped off my knees,  
I drink the honey, Inside your hive,  
You are the reason, I stay alive*

- Nine Inch Nails

The room is a perfect mix of humidity and dryness. Nora's skin is flourishing, even more so than normal. Yet, her body moves swiftly back and forth against the far corners of the space, only brief flashes of emotions visible when the even light shines on her face. Angling her body away from me (as if that would ever stop me), she tugs at the restraints carefully wrapped around her wrists.

Nora is an uneven mess. She woke up soon after I placed her unconscious body on the green chair in my spare room. She shivered, and tensed, and whimpered, putting far too much stress on her skin and muscles. At some points her screams wore out and tears dried up because she understood that no one would help her. The spare room was made for this.

The thermometer had been set at a perfect 68 degrees to maintain natural body regulation. Sterilization set in after 24 hours following the initial breach, resulting in a healthy, confined reset.

My menu is complete with different dishes that Nora filled. The first course, a necessity, is composed of a smoked and glazed, slowly cooked leg, combined with roasted garlic and squeezed lemon. She falls off the bone, melted like a popsicle on a stick, dipped into a roasted red pepper hummus. And that is just the beginning.

My dear Nora, your flavor will only enhance and linger on my rasp-like tongue till you are left with nothing but bone. And I'll enjoy every minute and ounce of it. Savoring your once sculpted body, blood juices

so divine that colored pools and dark shadows flood my vision. Your creation, horrifyingly ornate, yet so intently beautiful.

*Love is when you suddenly wake up as a cannibal,  
and not just any old cannibal, or else wake up  
destined for devourment.*

- Hélène Cixous

I'm involved with a devoted community that caters to all. They understand my very desire. The exotic market they entertain worldwide takes my meal preparations to the next step. My body is owned by them, entirely.

Decadent tastes become exquisite through their guidance. The feelings and tastes reach every crevice of my body, filling me whole. And My Nora got to be a part of such a beautiful process. Her willingness to give herself to me, to surrender, is taken with great satisfaction. Her young tortured soul will fade, and soon she'll be one with me.

Agony is released, and the process starts again.

I walk the streets, all that makes sense is now more. And I feel alive.

*You'll think it's love,  
while he dines on your heart.  
But he's so hungry,  
he'll eat you all in one sitting,  
and you'll be in his belly,  
and what will you do then?*

- Catherine M. Valente



# **Don't Ask RIOT Don't Tell**

*Gregory Esters*

- It used to be; Teddy soft, we were Asking  
Protesting, believing in better nature without a big stick
- Hoping fully, that *We Shall Overcome* that  
*This is America*, their *Battle Hymn of the Republic*
- Despicable, sick of the hypocrites  
Finagling fiends, false cherry-picking religion and glory-
- Hallelujah to vote, *Sister Suffragette*  
Pop a *Strange Fruit*, cacophony a *Threnody* story
- Two not trinity, gory crucifix affixed not to son, ghost, nor the father  
But the mothers, tears falling, they're jonesing
- Bent over from *16 Tons* of debt, a Rosey war time they *Hold the Line*  
Praying that *7 Pounds of Motherfuckin' Pressure* leaves their boys chosen
- Resistant to chattel pimpin', the whippings, and lynching  
Massacres, depression, and oppression 3/5ths of citizen-ship, we Tellin',
- We yellin', *Say It Loud* that *I Have a Dream* that a *Change Gonna Come*  
That *You Don't Own Me* and I ain't buying what you're sellin'
- *What's Going on* is my right to bet on Black, you bet on Crack-  
Down, infiltration with guns an assassination of our leaders
- Feeling safe behind your military-industrial complex like you can't be us  
*Masters of War*, silent fears really scream knowledge that you can't beat us
- Cause I've crunched the *Mathematics* doing the *Mos*, searing static  
As *Napalm Sticks to Kids* made nameless as they now have no faces
- In mass factory education where the numbers don't add up, you see no *Changes*  
We all look and bleed the same to you, are you racist or a sadist?
- Oh honey, bless your heart, your privilege got you thinking that we're not the *Same Love*  
Well in this cypher, we feed on your greed an entitlement, our *DNA* is different
- With *U.N.I.T.Y.* in civil Riots, we gon' be *Alright*  
*Fight the Power*, the *Revolution Will Not Be Televised* but imminent
- We gonna be what we deserve, no longer unheard, we're not Asking, nor Telling no more  
Dance to the *Sound of da Police*, corrupt your *Colors*, red and blue
- 'Til we, like a *Symphony*, all really matter *Over the Rainbow*  
Our dreams are your nightmares, lucid interpretation *F. Y.O.U!*

## **dandelion in a box**

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*Maé Mullen*

she sits and waits,  
beautiful as can be,  
“i can’t look away,” he said,  
“she was meant for me.”  
but she’s unreachable,  
her lovely seeds too fragile,  
so she stays in that box,  
and he doesn’t get to touch.  
or so we think,  
there’s no telling what he will do.  
he’ll reach and reach -  
for his treacherous taboo.  
waiting for who’s inside,  
he caresses the box,  
his loose, sensual words crack the bound.  
her flurry seeds shake and tumble,  
the ruptures pulling her to pieces.  
his unwarranted touches picking her  
apart.  
one final blow of hot breath,  
she won’t stand a chance.  
the box secured around her -  
couldn’t hold together,  
for his mission-forbidden wishes -  
destroyed her entirely.  
all that’s left is stem and center  
she’ll shiver and shiver,  
“i’ll be your warmth,” he promises,  
“you’ll only need me.”  
but she continued to freeze  
too frail, too small -  
she was protected until she wasn’t,  
supposed to be frozen in time,  
but now she dies.  
once she’s no longer preserved,  
her stem wrinkles to age;



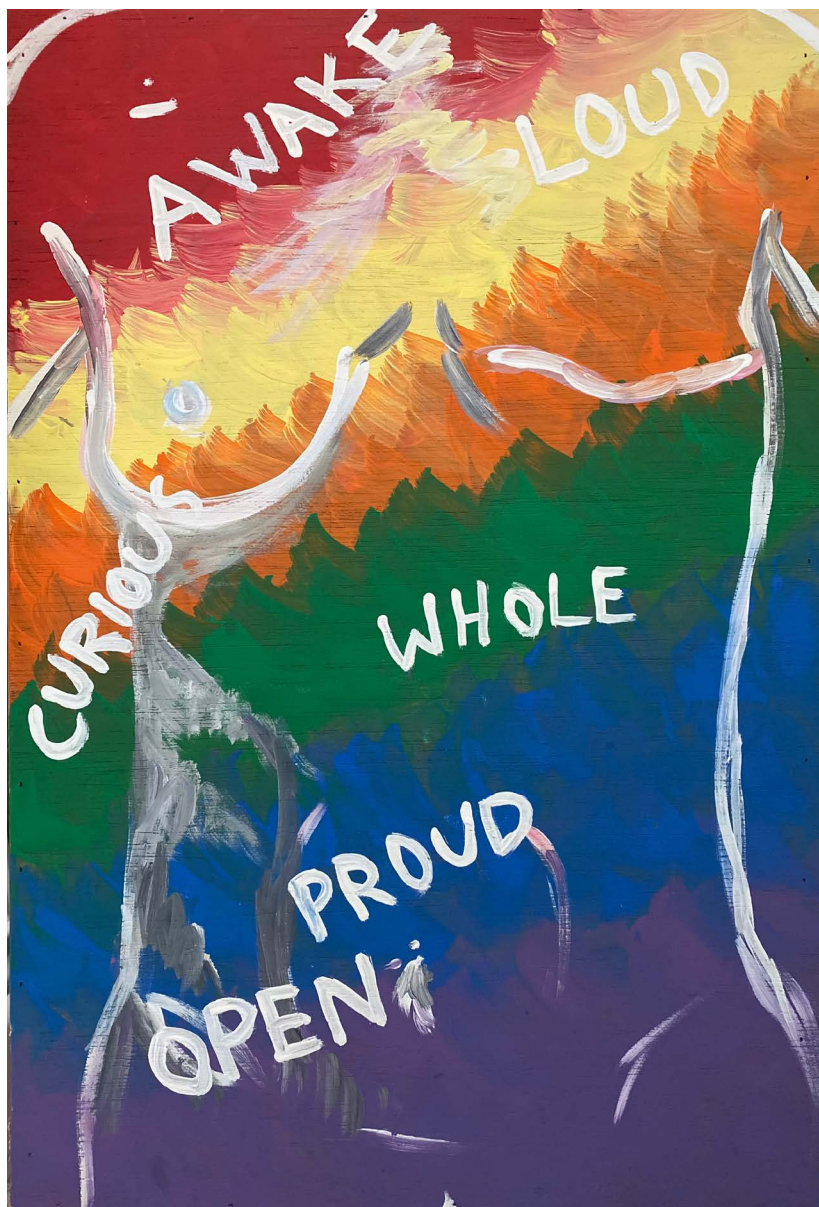
his promises do the same.  
what once was her warmth,  
    once had her freed,  
    once let her grow,  
now leaves her alone.



**Summer and Emily**

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*Reed Sanders*



**Untitled**

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*Sara Hewson*

# **Hunger Pains**

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## *Kato Charters*

Loose change made music in my pockets as I danced in and out of my mother's sightline, one hand trailing on the textures of clothes that lined the racks of the store. Denim, tulle, cotton, cotton, spandex, I hummed quietly to myself, listening to the sound of the buzzing lights instead of whatever song was playing overhead. Cotton, cotton, corduroy; my hand slid across something soft and slippery.

"Mama, can I get this shirt?" I held it up for closer inspection, posing next to the flowing fabric to show how perfectly the little flower details matched my smile.

"No."

I glanced up at her, confused. We were at the store to get things for my sister who my mom claimed would be born any day now, school supplies, and fried chicken for dinner. Didn't school supplies mean school clothes? At least one shirt?

"Fat people wear shirts like that when they are trying to cover up their big stomachs," she explained, "but it really just makes it worse."

She tugged the shirt out of my hand, demonstrating her point by jutting out her stomach dramatically and hanging the shirt over it.

I thought that she looked pretty in the colors.

"When fat people wear shirts like this it just hangs over their stomach, it doesn't hide it."

"But what about skinny people?" I asked.

She looked at me, eyebrows raised in amusement before continuing on towards the diapers and baby wipes.

I didn't know what she was trying to tell me. Did she think I was fat? Was I fat? I remembered a few weeks before when I had gotten my gymnastics unitard and she had me choose a patterned one because it distracted from my figure.

My mom was skinny, praised for the beauty of her thin frame and low number on the scale. She wore small shirts in the summer and tight pants that no one else could fit into. Her triathlon wetsuit was the smallest size the shop had. She'd always been like that; hadn't changed a bit since high school. I had always thought I was just like her.

For the rest of the trip, I held dutifully onto the rail of the cart, discouraged from adventuring back into the clothes, afraid that they might confirm my fears.

...

In school, my eyes and mind wandered. First grade was just too slow for someone as smart as me, and we did the same thing every day. Today, I skimmed over the light highway traffic, and little fish tank, and whatever my best friend was doing with the paper towels, and how slow the other kids did their multiplication tables. Instead, I focused on the bodies in the classroom, searching for the heaviest of them. For who was fattest. To my dismay, there was only one kid in the class who seemed to be wider than me, his loose fitted orange shirt hanging over his rolls just as Mama had said. Maybe she was right.

I didn't want to be fat. Nobody liked fat people, they were lazy and ugly and... well... fat. Those kinds of people had no friends. Those kinds of people were an embarrassment.

My teacher glanced over at me, her eyes furrowed in annoyance. My teacher was always mad at me. I had always thought it was because she knew I was smarter than her, but maybe it's because I'm fat. Maybe she's upset about having to look at someone like me.

Quickly, I slipped on my teal hoodie despite the warmth of our classroom, happy for the relief that obscuring my body brought.

Across the kickball field and sand pit, screams echoed off of the colorful metal bars and plastics of the main playground. On the other side of the school yard, teachers and students mingled together playing games on the heat of the black top. And in the middle of it all was me and my friend, alone. Nobody else was interested in the thin, unpainted rows of corroded metal bars and woodchips. Every day at recess Kamberlea and I practiced the monkey bars, swinging back and forth as many times as we could before our callouses started to bleed with pain and we had to get them taped in the nurse's office.

Kamberlea and I often entertained ourselves by playing games together on the monkey bars, games that involved climbing on top, or going through an obstacle course, or playing tag. Today, though, we were just swinging. Today, the competition was in my head.

I counted how many I could do in a row, how long I could hold a hang for, and how fast I could get across. And then, I counted what she could do as well.

I could swing back and forth three times without dropping, and she could go one bar farther. I could hold a hang for forty-six Mississippi's, and she could hold it for fifty-two. I could go faster, but that didn't matter. It was only because I was taller than her. She was better than me even though I practiced more.

Curious, I glanced at her body, comparing it to mine, noticing how I could see all of her ribcage when she swung instead of just soft outlines. I noticed how her tight shirt hugged her stomach but there were no rolls. I noticed how her legs and arms were thin like the monkey bars. I noticed how my friend was skinnier than me.

Maybe if she wasn't I could have won.

"Do you wanna race?" she asked after a little while.

"No thanks."

...

After my sister was born, and my mom quit waiting tables for an auditing job, her diet of Cheetos and cherry Pepsi started catching up with her. She began to gain more weight.

My mom cut out "junk food" from her diet.

She then "slipped" and decided that the whole thing was ruined.

I remember swimming at Wildcat Lake with her when she started training for triathlons again. I would watch her and the other women swim big circles around three buoys, their coach calling out to them to power through the dribbling rain and burning muscles.

"Mom," I said after practice one day, "Can I practice too? I wanna work out and get in shape." This was around 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

"No, you might drown in the swimming leg of the race, nobody is watching you. It happens all the time."

She then switched to running 5k's when she became afraid of drowning.

My mom went through half a dozen online weight loss programs and workout routines. She bought an elliptical and joined 30/10, eating nothing but pre-packaged powdered meals and weighing herself on a fat percentage scale for months. But despite all her efforts and attempts, nothing ever stuck. As soon as she missed one workout or ate one "wrong" thing there was no point in continuing.

...

For several years, my analysis and comparison of size continued to be a constant worry in my mind, and by the end of elementary school it had started to take its toll.

I had slowed down a lot since second grade, having been lectured and belittled by others for my energy, among other things... and lectured and belittled by myself for my weight, among other things. By the time I entered 5th grade, all of my previous outward energy had transformed itself into anxiety, a prison filled with all my deepest fears.

As diligently as I could muster, I worked on a school project about cursive that was due later that evening. It had to be perfect, even though it was rushed. The expectations were high, even though I had no time.

Having successfully completed my project within minutes of its due date, I wandered out into the living room where my mom was playing *World of Warcraft* on the home computer and my little sister was working on her homework, whatever that meant to a kindergartener.

I was going to reward myself for the progress I'd made with some ice cream, a treat I had been indulging in almost every day the past week. I crossed onto the cool linoleum floor, my feet recognizing where I needed to go despite my absent mind, and I opened the freezer in preparation.

I had made it through about half of my small dish before my mom noticed and paused her game.

"What are you doing?" she asked, walking over to me.

"I'm having ice cream." Wasn't that obvious?

My mom told me that eating ice cream will make you fat. She told me that her sister ate ice cream every day and became overweight. The ice cream began to churn in my stomach. She told me that I was becoming overweight too. I stopped eating the ice cream.

To avoid suspicion and judgment, I waited until after my mom had returned to gaming before wandering into her washroom.

I stared in to the mirror intently. A different face stared back.

They had a wide jaw and chipmunk cheeks filled fuller than anyone I knew. I gently felt my face, I felt the fullness of it. Maybe that person was me?

They didn't have enough hair to balance out their face, it was thin and stringy and clung to them. It made their cheeks look even worse. Their oversized cheeks that were the focal point of their face.

I traced my eyes down their neck. Their collarbone that didn't seem to be as defined as everyone else's, as skinny people. Their arms that were too flabby and pinched at the armpit. Their stomach too filled with rolls and handles. Their thighs too big and hips too wide. I looked at this person, this hideous person who was supposed to be me. This fat person who told me that they were me and that I was unlovable.

I stopped eating ice cream.

...

My mom had just started a new diet-workout binge when she beckoned me into her washroom, gently shutting the door behind us.

My stepdad's darkened stare followed me as I walked across the tiled floor, sitting down on the edge of the free-standing tub.

My mom stood over me, face dark from the mirror lights behind me, adding a menacing definition to her eyebrows as the walls of the room began to close in.

"We need to talk about your health. I'm concerned—we're concerned," she began, glancing at my stepdad.

"You have become very chubby. It's embarrassing. What does that say about us as parents?"



The sound of the room paused, heavy breaths and electricity stilling for a moment. My mom thinks I'm fat. My stepdad thinks I'm fat. I am fat. I couldn't escape from that fact any longer. It was true. It was a problem. I was a problem.

I stared blankly into the mirror, reflecting the back of my mom's thin, currently red hair, tears gaining weight as they rolled down my face. "I'm sorry."

My stepdad rolled his eyes and opened his mouth as if to speak before settling back down into his signature scowl.

I felt myself falling as my mom continued to speak, tumbling into the ocean, the pressure forcing against my skin.

"Something has to change. Tomorrow is the first of the month. I will give you \$30 for every 5 pounds you can lose."

"Okay." \$30 was a lot of money. If my mom was offering that, there must be a big problem. I must be fat. My body went numb, but the pressure didn't lift.

She grinned in a bittersweet kind of way, having completed her task for the evening, glancing between my stepdad and I, prepared to mediate the tears and anger if they arose, but there was only silence. I couldn't speak. I couldn't cry. I couldn't breathe as her words and all they implied rolled through my head. I was fat.

I stood up to follow them out of the suffocating room and met my own eyes in the mirror.

It wasn't me, but it wasn't who I had seen last time either. This time it was someone new. Someone even worse than before. I couldn't be like this, I couldn't be fat. Something had to change.

I stopped eating fast food french fries. I stopped eating buttermilk bread.

I stopped drinking fruit juice.

I stopped eating anything that brought me joy.

After a week, nothing changed, and so I started working out every day. two hours a day. I started drinking weight loss shakes and water, just like my mom. Only weight loss shakes and water.

I started losing weight.

...

The sun streamed gently through the room, somehow still failing to brighten it as my mom marched into the washroom, her stride matching her desire to check this off her to do list, to move on with her day.

I watched the ground as I walked, following her off of the plastic-looking beige rug, over the thin brassy seal that segregated the carpet from the squared linoleum, and onto the smooth glass of the family scale, presented proudly in the center of the washroom, a statement piece. What statement would it make about me?

My mom's tinted brown hair hung loosely over my shoulder at one of the longest lengths I had seen in years, and I could smell sweat dripping down her face.

A month had passed.

My stomach churned against subtle pinching pains as the numbers slowly started balancing on the scale. I wore beige legging shorts and a beige tank top, the lightest clothes I owned, to lower the numbers on the scale. Everything in this house was beige: the walls were beige, the floor was beige, and maybe if I were beige too I would just disappear into walls. I would become nothing, the lightest you can be.

"You lost fifteen pounds! Good job, I'm so proud!" My mother beamed at me in celebration.

It felt good. Losing weight felt good. It gave me value. It made my parents proud. But it was fleeting. She forgot that I was skinny moments after handing me my money. I went back to being fat.

I stopped eating.

...

"I'm tired of this bullshit. \$300, the grocery bill was \$300, when I go alone it's \$250, every time." The ends of my stepdad's words turned up with tension as I crept around the corner of the hallway.

In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I went vegan for ethical reasons. This meant I could no longer eat most of the food in my mother's house, and so once a month I'd go to the grocery mart with my stepdad.

"They need to eat." My mom stood up for me, for a moment.

"They can eat our goddamn food if they're hungry. I'm not buying them more food to waste."

My mom went silent. \$50 a month for food? A waste? I tried to imagine why he was so upset. It wasn't about money; my stepdad had an \$8,000 home theater system (now \$14,000). It wasn't about money, and food was a necessity, so it must have been about me. I must not have been worth the money.

After that, I didn't go shopping with him anymore. I stuck to scrounging for scraps and only eating meals on weekends. It was better this way, I had been eating too much.

...

My crossed legs bounced against the ground of my sisters little pink oasis as I helped her choose her holiday outfit. My unfocused eyes hovering over the brightly painted walls, almost sickly in color. Something moved around in the haze.

"You look beautiful," I smiled at her, tuning into her little dark blue dress coated in tulle ruffles.

She shook her head in dismay, running her hands over her little 7 year old legs as my eyebrows wrinkled in.

“Yes you do, that dress is pretty on you.”

“No it’s not, I look too heavy,” she stared at her strong, soccer player legs in dismay before returning to her closet for another try.

“No you don’t, you are a perfect size, you are strong and healthy,” I tried to comfort her despite my absent mind.

It was a holiday, that meant that I would have to eat. I didn’t want to eat. I wanted to keep losing weight. That and I needed to do school, I was behind on an assignment due on Monday, but if I just had the time to start I could still get it done in time. I could preserve my grade, a sure measure of my worth.

But I couldn’t skip out on the holiday.

“You guys look beautiful,” my mom’s voice caught me off guard, “Kato you look so beautiful and skinny lately.” She smiled in the doorway, already dressed.

Being called skinny felt good. I couldn’t risk getting fat again. I threw up after dinner.

...

Early the next year we began hearing about a new global pandemic, Covid-19 and schools quickly shut down. I hadn’t been eating a lot, but I could scrounge for a survivable amount of food off of my friends’ plates at lunch and maintained a manageable 400 calorie a day food allowance. My grades were good. I didn’t get called fat at lunch anymore. Things were good.

With the shut down of schools, I lost a food source. I lost consistency. I lost a distraction.

I lost weight.

The dark hallway shadows stretched out around my small flashlight, dancing across the walls as I walked into the washroom and gazed into the glass, slightly dizzy from the walk.

Someone chubby gazed back. Unrecognizable, but still the same as they always were. Fat.

My stomach rioted as I stepped onto the scale, the numbers wouldn’t lie. With the isolation of Covid, I could barely find the motivation or energy to get out of bed most days, much less do school, and so I hadn’t. And so I was failing all my classes. But I was still skinny, I had to be.

The little black digital numbers flicked down on their soft green background, dipping down below what it had been the night before, below what it had been in 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

I bounced my hand down my ribcage, looking at each detail in the mirror, clasping my fingers around my fatless wrists, noticing how all the curves were there even if they didn’t show in my reflection.

My mom had been mentioning it more lately, how happy she was that I was skinny and healthy. How worried she had been that I was going to end up fat. I was happy about that. I wanted the praise. Maybe I was

skinny now, but I could get skinnier. It wasn't enough.

...

Dark clouds hung over the inlet reflecting shadows onto the turmoiled water as we walked off of the dock as a team. Debating about where to go for dinner.

I had been on the rowing team for several years before Covid, but always wished I could sail. Wished I could be out on the water without my head spinning from the exertion and grief that I wasn't the strongest on my team. Finally, in the Spring of Sophomore year, I signed up early enough to make the sailing team and I loved it, even if it left me tired and feeling weaker than I had before. It made my mom happy too.

I wanted to go to team dinner, but I didn't want to have to eat. A fairly common problem that left me completely void of social interaction outside of sailing, always canceling on anything that involved food.

They decided on Sharie's. I took a head count to reserve a table, relieved. I could only eat chips and salsa at Sharie's. I wouldn't have to eat very many. It would be okay.

...

The end of the school year rolled close, days away, I was still failing all my classes. I couldn't be. I couldn't fail. I struggled to complete the work, my head blurry and spinning despite my focus on the task. It had begun to get worse since sailing started, progressive as the season went on. It was probably from the food. Surely I wouldn't get fat if I ate just a little. Just to finish school.

It was a lose, lose situation.

Finishing up my schoolwork, I managed to get myself to eat something, and get mostly good grades along with my withdrawal's. Still, the numbers rising on the scale brought tears to my eyes, and I worked even harder to get them back down again.

As summer started, so did sailing camps, and despite not wanting to eat myself, I did want other people to eat. I wanted to bring them food to make sure everyone was provided for because no-one deserved to go all day hungry. Along with bringing food to camps though, I also had to eat something.

I think that's what helped the most. I want other people to eat. I want to cook for them, but then I had to eat too.

...

Today my mom is in a workout program, and lately she's been keto off and on, currently with the addition of intermittent fasting. She is still not and has never been fat, just not as skinny as she was in her teens. But why is that seen as an issue? Why is remaining the same through all of life's hardships and changes desired? What is

wrong with an aging body, a body that has gone through the amazing and difficult process of growing another human.

I moved out of her house in September, and since then our relationship has greatly improved. I realized that it is not my fault. That my mom is and was struggling just as much as me, brainwashed by the expectations around us. She's apologized since I was young, admitted that she was wrong about me being unhealthy.

My mom does her best to not make the same mistakes with my sister, but it's difficult when 'weight loss' and 'skinny' echo through the world, forcing us into belief. It's difficult for my mom to teach my sister that her body is healthy and strong, when she herself is still stuck in the mindset of being less.

I'm able to eat more than I used to. I maintain a normal weight and eat food twice a day, but the desire to be skinny sticks to my shadow everywhere I go.

In grocery stores, weight loss formulas and posters pop out against the walls as if subtitles to the infomercials overhead. Society wants weight loss. Society wants you to get skinnier, or at least they want you to think that it is the best way to be. That skinny equals healthy and beautiful and wanted and successful.

In the checkout line my grandma complains about her weight, sharing that she doesn't want to buy her dress for my uncles wedding yet, that she wants to lose more first.

In TV shows everyone is skinny, widdled down to skin and bones. The people we are meant to idol.

Everything is always telling me to lose more weight. That I am not skinny enough as it is. That I need to buy into their lies. Everyone is always smaller than me, skinnier than the person I see in the mirror.

But that person isn't real. And being skinny shouldn't be all that matters. A person's weight is not a moral flaw.

I keep looking at bodies, comparing them to mine. Sometimes I slip into old patterns, searching for the skinniest of them, seeing if it is me, wanting it to be me as if illness is a competition and death is the winner. I try and catch myself though, I try and remind myself that nothing is worse for your body than starvation.

I remind myself that genetics plays a role in weight and body shape, that illnesses out of a persons control can lead to weight gain or loss, that everyone has a different weight that is perfect for them, and that it can change over time. Bodies are always changing and growing, adapting to the battles they have overcome.

I shift my focus to the beauty of other people. I've always seen it, but now I try and mix myself in with the beautiful people. I look at other people who are bigger or smaller than me, people with rolls and divots and fullness to their cheeks. I focus on how perfect they look just how they are, how I am no different from them. My healthy body is good just as everyone else's.

I try and remind myself that I am enough just as I am, and that I deserve life.

...

I spin slowly around on the barstools of my partner Evan's kitchen. My body flaring alarms at the lack of food in my stomach.

"Have you eaten today?" I look towards him. "Yes, have you?" He looks back at me. "No."

"Kato you need to eat something, I'm gonna make you something," he smiles at me as he walks towards the kitchen.

"Is it going to make me fat? Is it okay for me to eat something?" My unfiltered thoughts tumble from my brain as panic starts filtering into my stomach.

"No, love you aren't going to get fat. You are beautiful and healthy and your body needs food. You need to eat to take care of yourself, its good," his love and arms wraps around me from behind the couch and it feels nice. I trust him.

"Okay, thank you. Can you make me an orange juice and ice cream float? I miss them. Is that okay? Will it make me fat?"

"No love, it's okay. It's all okay," Evans smile widened, getting ice cream for himself too as he came back over.

"When you're done with school, do you want to go get lunch somewhere?"

I nod, happy. Healing.

I spoon out a scoop of orange juice drenched ice cream. Reminiscing on the simpler times of my childhood, feeling the memories of the acidic fruit against the smooth cream as it slides down my throat. Its been years since I last had this despite it being my favorite. I was always too scared though. Scared that it would make me fat, but it didn't, and it didn't matter. Today I just enjoyed it.

Today, I ate ice cream.



**Untitled**

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*Sydney Stahr*



# Until the Sun Dies

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*James Taylor*

People rarely notice the sky, other than to bitch about it or make small talk. It's always baffled me that people take it for granted because it's always there. I guess I take advantage of it too, but I also appreciate it more than just awkward, stifled comments made to fill the space when nothing else seemed to. Take right now, for example, in watching the perfect cerulean sky slowly get lost with the sun's final attempt to stave off the night that's coming rapidly. Streaks of golden light pierce through the misty veil of clouds, reflecting soft hues of twilight. This is my favorite part of the day, hands down. Unless they're Gavin's hands. That's a completely different subject, though.

Sunset is like a thousand possibilities fracturing the sky before the darkness of night wipes it all away. Faint echoes of vibrant gold still cling to the horizon, promising to fight again every day and never back down. Violet overlays it, a reminder that one person wins only because another loses. Crimson as a rallying cry, bolstering those who fell to get back up. And finally, a velvety midnight blue that overtakes it all, because one person's ending is just a different name for another person's beginning.

Of course, Gavin thinks I'm being way too philosophical. He thinks a sunset is nothing more than that, the sun setting, a day ending and a night beginning. He reminds me of it every time he catches me out here, yet he's always willing to settle next to me and intertwine his fingers in mine.

The rippling shades of emerald and jade grass underneath me darkens as lengthening shadows brush against my pale bronzed skin. I weave my fingers together under my head as I gaze up at the sky, the wispy, puffy clouds barreling northward, opening up the sky and driving the rain elsewhere, out of the way of my perfect view. It's almost too perfect, one chance in a million.

A cool breeze brushes across my body, sweeping under my shirt, curling swirls of wind through my wavy black hair. It twists over my eyes, and I brush it back. I don't get this luxury everyday. Days with Gavin are the best imaginable, but they're always filled to the brim with things to do.

"Torres," Gavin's voice flits through my head, sending my stomach a flutter. That's all it takes. The sound of my name on his lips. And before I know it, my lips are lifting into an unconscious smile that he would tease me about endlessly but still secretly loves.

Gavin is so much different than any other eighteen-year old I know. He isn't rash or impulsive, but aloof and reliable and beyond brilliant. No matter how much I fuck up, he's always there for me, giving me all of him until my tears are nothing more than a distant memory. He's uniquely suited for it in a way that no one else ever

has been.

Something feels wrong about all this, Gavin here and the near perfection of the sky, but I can't figure out what. Then he speaks again, and I can't remember why.

"Watching the sky again, Tor?" Gavin drawls, his southern accent lengthening each of his words and lilting the syllables. His words rise, then fall, dropping letters and driving me crazy. It's hard to pay attention to the sky when all I want to do now is pay attention to him. A single look in his eyes is all it takes, waiting for his grin, and sending a wave of excitement through my body.

Gavin stands over me, looking like perfection made in the flesh. His honey-colored eyes steal my breath away, suspending everything in those pools of golden light until I can't tell one blissful second from the ones that came before or after it. The cool summer breeze tousles his unruly auburn and gold hair, like a wreath of summer-tinged fire around his head, intensifying his gaze, and making the small smile on his lips brighter.

"Don't do that, Gav!" I complain as the stars slowly start appearing in the dark sky, like tiny shards of light bursting against velvet. It's unfair, the way he uses that tone on me.

"Do what?" He asks innocently, eyes wide and only the smallest smile betraying his amusement.

"That tone!" I hop up, nearly losing balance. Gavin instinctively grabs my arm to keep me from toppling over. Laughter erupts from his lips as he hangs onto my arm to keep me upright. He's used to my clumsiness by now.

I remember the first time I heard that tone, and it drove me crazy back then just as much as it does now.

...

*Gavin walks by my side, my hand in his as he walks me up to the porch. As far as first dates go, it was a really good one, and he hasn't tried to push for anything more than my company, which is relieving. I do like him, but I'd also like to take my time in getting to know him.*

*"Torres," He said as soon as we were up on the porch, drawing out his speech in a way that makes me want to swoon. I turn to him; seeing his eyes makes me know exactly what he wants. He's also waiting, giving me the chance to turn him down. I probably should. I told myself I was going to wait but with his hand in mine and his big beautiful golden eyes hesitantly asking, telling him no is the last thing on my mind so I don't, and hope he takes it as a go-ahead.*

*Gavin leans in slowly, almost excruciatingly slow, giving me every chance I could want to back out, always making it clear that he'll never push me into anything. He's always been like this. From asking me out ("if you're not busy tonight, or some other time") to where we went ("We could go get dinner, or a movie, or anything you like"), he has always put my comfort first.*

*His lips brush against mine, slowly and softly as if he expects me to come to my senses and pull away. I don't. Our lips move together at an even slower pace, a single second spanning into a million seconds of warmth and desire. Gavin pulls away, a goofy grin plastered on his lips like he couldn't help it. If it felt anything like that for him, he probably can't.*

*"What was that?" I ask sheepishly, still feeling a little light-headed – though in the best possible way, like floating on clouds, and feeling invincible.*

*Gavin shifts on his feet, like he's unsure of what the correct answer is at that moment. "A kiss?" He offers nervously, idly twisting a lock of his hair.*

*"A kiss with a question mark?"*

*He looks up at me, suddenly confused. It's an adorable look that I want to see again. "Uh, what?"*

*I take a step closer to him. "Because that felt more like a kiss without a question mark."*

*"Is that so?" Gavin's confusion dissolves into warmth easily, and he no longer looks nervous. God, I could get lost in his golden eyes.*

*"Yeah. It is. Exclamation point." I say with a grin, bolstering my courage and leaning in for another kiss. His fiery hair brushes against my forehead as his lips brush against mine. Cinnamon, just like the candy he always carries with him. My breath catches when his knuckles brush against my side, feeling like tiny bolts of lightning even through the jacket.*

*I finally pull back from him when my protesting lungs threaten to give out, but I know there's a dopey grin on my face. "I...didn't mean to do that?" I try as my cheeks flush bright red. I can't think of anything to say that won't ruin the blooming warmth spreading through me like a wildfire.*

*"You didn't mean to do that, question mark? Because that felt more like double exclamation points to me." He teases, which is exactly what I need. He understands me better than anybody else.*

*"Only double? I must not be trying hard enough."*

*"Care to try again?" He purrs, already leaning back in.*

*Gavin...*

*...*

*That's what feels so wrong about all this.*

*It feels like I've taken a sledgehammer to the gut. Taking the breath from my lungs with crushing force. The pain lancing through me is bad, but the guilt that laces through it like razor wire, leaving my broken heart in tatters, is so much worse. The Gavin standing in front of me, with the tiny brilliant smiles that were always a hell of a lot rarer than I should've let them be, isn't my Gavin.*

That look in his honey eyes, brimming with intensity and purpose so bright that it could make everything else in the world seem unimportant in comparison is so much like Gavin's that it's painful to look at.

I wish that this could be real, that this could be my Gavin, but I know deep down in my selfish heart, tucked back away in a spot that I refuse to admit exists, that this isn't real, can't ever be real. I lost everything that I cared about in a single night, when I should've been there and I wasn't. I was off making the same mistake that I'd made a dozen times before then, and probably would've kept making if he wasn't gone.

It's not the life I miss. It never mattered where I lived or where I went to school, or who the people I hung out were. No, the only thing that I miss was the person that I promised to share my life with. Gavin was my everything, and yet, all I managed to do was treat him repeatedly like he meant nothing. I would give anything to make that right, anything that I have or will ever have, to get a single moment with him to make that right.

I know that this is only a dream, that the Gavin standing in front of me is nothing but an echo, a remnant of the boy I knew that my mind conjured up, but it's the best dream that I've had in a long time. I deserve this pain, of seeing him. But I also get the chance to say everything that I should've in life. Even when I know that he's gone, that he'll never hear the words spilling off my lips, I have to say them to him. It's the only penance that I get.

I sweep him into my arms with as much strength as I can muster, nuzzling his neck. His laughter is low and musical in my ear. I never did this enough, held him for no other reason than I could.

"I'm sorry, Gavin. I'm so sorry. It's all my fault." I breathe against his neck, my body shaking with sobs ready to break loose and shatter me into a thousand tiny pieces.

"It wasn't your fault Torres," he tries to reassure me, his slender fingers untangling my black hair. He doesn't understand, though. It is my fault.

"It was. I promised you that you wouldn't have to go to that party alone, and yet I ghosted you. I ghosted you to be with some girl that meant nothing. And when you called to tell me that you loved me, that you needed me, that you were scared, I didn't answer. I didn't fucking answer! While you died, I was off sleeping with a girl whose name I never even bothered to learn. You needed me, and I wasn't there." I say raggedly.

"If you had been there, Torres, you would be dead right along with me. Those bastards weren't there for money. They weren't there for hostages. They were there for death, and that is exactly what they got," Gavin says, his anger incandescent against his soft sun kissed skin and less soft honey eyes, lined with long paddle lashes that I can't help but miss. They used to flutter when I would kiss him, and it drove me crazy.

I can still remember that night for all I've tried to forget.

*My phone rings again, for the third time in five minutes. The pretty blonde girl tucked in my arms pulls away, pouting at my phone like it stole candy from her. She gestures for me to go and take it so we can actually have some fun without being interrupted. It's hard to make out when you have to constantly stop to decline a call. I can't think of her name (Thalia? Thea? Tessa, maybe?) but she was far too pretty for me to pass up when she smiled at me from across the gym. Any plans of joining Gavin at his party vanished when she gave me that come-hither look*

*"What?!" I snap into the phone as I answer, tugging my jacket on as I walk or onto the balcony. We were just getting to the good part, her hands pulling my jacket off and tugging at the edge of my shirt while her hot lips roam over mine. That's what I'm in the mood to deal with, nothing else.*

*"Hello, this is Detective Lydia Hayes. May I speak with Torres Kendrick?" a woman asks politely, ignoring the way I snapped at her.*

*"This is Torres. How can I help you?" I ask, toning down my irritation with an attempt to sound polite. As a general rule, it's never a good idea to go against the people that you may need to rely on someday, such as the police or doctors. Gavin would also have a fit for having to bail me out of jail for antagonizing a detective. Then again, Gavin is really cute when he's upset, which he rarely ever is, so maybe it'd be worth it. Food for thought, at the very least.*

*"Yes, Mr. Kendrick," Detective Hayes says after a brief pause, "Were you aware of the event being held at Holstrom Development tonight?"*

*"Yeah, I was supposed to meet Gavin Holstrom there...but something came up. I'm sorry, what is this about?" I answer slowly, not sure why it matters. Maybe there's another group of protesters that turned violent, or someone crashed the party. I wouldn't exactly call it common, but it's not unheard of, either. I've gone to plenty of events with Gavin where either or both have happened.*

*Detective Hayes makes a noncommittal sound in the back of her throat. "Does the word 'pantheon' mean working to you?" She asks, deftly changing the subject and making the violent protestors theory a lot more likely.*

*"As in, Holstrom Development's Pantheon project?" I ask, assuming for a lazy, unworried tone that in all actually sounds tense and clipped. This was always Gavin's strong suit, displaying only what he wanted others to see with ease. At the detective's expectant silence, I elaborate. "Holstrom Development got the state to declare eminent domain over a dozen streets full of old subsisted buildings, forcing people to sell, to put on office buildings and condos. It was supposed to be the big new place in town, like the pantheon of everything new and exciting. What does this have to do with tonight?"*

*There's another impossibly long pause, long enough that I check to make sure the call didn't disconnect*

*before she speaks again, in a hesitant and wary tone, as if the words press down like a weight on her shoulders like the weight of the sky pressed on Atlas. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kendrick. We tried, but it was too late."*

*Everything freezes the somewhat chilly spring air drops into the freezing category like a voice clamping down on my chest. That girl (Tammy? Trinity?) means nothing. Her long toned legs that were so dizzying minutes ago don't do anything for me now. "You're sorry? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"*

*"I need you to calm down. Can you do that for me?" she asks, her wariness shrouded in a controlled, patient tone employed by every public service person ever. I don't trust people who default to that tone at the first sight of panic. It's never as calm as they seem to think it is.*

*"I'm not asking." I try for the cooler than frostbite tone Gavin used to whip out to bully anyone who disagreed with him into submission. It doesn't sound the same coming off my lips, not sad knife edge sharp, but plenty cold.*

*"I will explain if you'll stay calm and..."*

*"Don't you dare to tell me to stay calm, Either tell me what happened to my boyfriend, or I'm hanging up."*

*"He didn't make it to the hospital. We tried to save him, but he'd lost too much blood..."*

*I hang up. There must've been some mistake. I talked to Gavin only a few hours ago. He can't be gone. It's just not possible. I would know if somebody happened to Gavin. Wouldn't I?*

*And yet, my mind still panics. Leaving the girls apartment and hopping into my car is all a blur. The only thing that isn't is the way my foot presses harder against the gas pedal, the car whining in protest as I fumble for my phone.*

*There are three voicemails from Gavin. I hit the oldest.*

*"Hey Torres. So I guess you aren't able to make it tonight. It's okay, I get it. I know these parties aren't really your thing, or at least, no more than those admittedly horrible high school dances were. Is it crazy that I kind of miss those dances, where you were the only person that cared if I showed up and not the entirety of my father's development firm?"*

*"Argh, listen to me babble! I did not call to reminisce about high school. Though to be fair, this does kind of remind me of that winter formal, sophomore year, when...not important. I guess I just wanted to call to say that I love you, and that next time you decide to play hooky, take me with you. The most interesting thing to happen so far is a group of protestors outside, upset because of father's new project. I don't get it. This project is giving these people more opportunities than they ever would have had without it!"*

*Gavin pauses, a distant voice talking in the background, too low and distorted for me to make out the*

*words. It's probably his father telling him to get off the phone, if his heavy sigh is anything to judge by. "Father's calling me up to the front for his speech. Next time, you cannot leave me here! I'll see you at home, okay? I shouldn't be any later than midnight or one o'clock. I love you, Torres."*

*My foot eases up on the gas pedal, feeling slightly ridiculous for speeding all the way across town. That high of relief only lasts until I hear Gavin's next voicemail. The panic in his normally aloof voice sends me foot slamming down onto the gas pedal so hard that, as I try to weave through other cars, I'm pinned against my seat.*

*"Torres, babe, why aren't you picking up your phone? Listen, I know I told you that I understood and that it was okay, but it isn't. Umm, the protestors I told you about? They're turning violent. Like, setting fires, violent. I don't know what to do, and I'm probably just overreacting, but I could really use you here with me. Please, as soon as you get this, I need you by my side. I love you. See you soon."*

*Gavin had sent that two hours ago, while I was still busy speeding dangerously around corners with that girl in my lap. Guilt swarms through me. One of the few times I've heard my boyfriend say that he needs me, I'm MIA with another person in my lap. My hand trembles as I click the final voicemail, sent an hour ago. He's going to be furious. I don't want to hear the fury in his voice, but I have to.*

*"Tor, do not come here," Gavin says, no longer sounding panicked, but his voice is thick with tears. For a split second in that silence, I fear that I've pushed him too far, made one too many mistakes, and he's breaking up with me. I hate the sound, pushing the car harder, making the speedometer climb even higher. "I know that I said I needed you here, but whatever you do, don't come here. Stay with whatever blonde caught your eye. They weren't protestors. They...they...they started shooting people.*

*"I'm such a coward. As soon as the first shot rang out, I ran and hid. I'm still hiding, but I know they're going to find me. I'm so scared, Torres. I don't want to leave you, but I'm so glad that you're not here. I couldn't handle losing you..." Gavin cuts off abruptly, not even the sound of his breathing coming through.*

*After an aching long second, Gavin's voice comes back, a faint whisper. "I can hear them walking by the door. I'm...I'm not going to make it out of here. I'd give anything just to hear your voice one more time, to tell you that I'll love you until the sun dies. I'm so scared, but with my last thoughts being of you, I'll be brave. Torres!..."*

*A gunshot rings through the air before the voicemail cuts off.*

...

The memory shreds my soul to bits. I cheated on him so many times and I always felt so guilty that I would admit it to him. Every time, he would hold me and tell me that everything would be alright. He never once

got mad, when he had every right to. He never left me, when he should have. “I love you, Gavin. I love you with everything I am. You are my world.” I never got a chance to tell him that, the day he died. I never said it enough.

Gavin wipes away my tears with the palm of his hand. “Of course you do, silly. You love me just as I loved you. I never doubted that,” he reminds me with a soft kiss, his lips brushing against my cheek like a soft breeze. It makes me feel so much worse. How can he not be mad? How can he not hate me? Why won’t my mind let him hate me?!

“I’ve given you every reason to doubt me,” I hiccup, ashamed of everything I did. I never deserved him, and he deserved a hell of a lot better than me. I press my face into the crook between his shoulder and neck, just as i always used to when I fucked up. He holds me close, much closer than I deserve.

“Oh, my love,” he whispers in my ear, words only for me and the universe to witness, “I knew what I was getting into. I knew that I’d never have all of you, and I was okay with that.”

I ignore the soft reassurances. “I was so foolish and immature. I’m so sorry. I should’ve been there with you.” My words choke me off, and I squeeze my eyes shut, unable to stand looking him in the eyes. I know what I’ll see there, and as much as I want it to be hate or anger, I know that it won’t be. It never is with Gavin.

His hand pushes my face up to meet his, and as soon as his lips crash into mine, all my apologies die. He always did that to stop my rambling. I revel in the remnants of cinnamon on his breath, refusing to let things speed up so I can savor every second of it.

“Never say that,” he says, breaking off the kiss despite my objections. “I’m glad you were with that girl that night. I was scared of dying, yes, but I was terrified of losing you. I’m glad that you didn’t answer, that I didn’t have to listen to your heart break like I know it did,” he says, voice cracking as tears fall from his golden eyes, each one shimmering like diamond. I know that he means it too. He never lied about things like that. How can he be happy that I was cheating on him? That I never got to tell him that I loved him one more time? I would give everything to go back and answer that phone.

“I’ll love you until the sun dies, Gavin Holstrom,” I whisper painfully.

“And when it does, I will love you in the dark, Torres Kendrick.” He smiles, the words flowing sadly from his lips, but without a second of hesitation. His incandescent eyes meet mine, a demand burning in them. “Promise that you will always love me, Torres. But also promise me that I won’t be your only love.”

I recoil as if he slapped me, horror roiling through me. “You can’t ask that.” My words tremble. The problem is, he can ask that. The real Gavin would’ve, too. But just the thought of anyone but Gavin threatens to send me into a panic attack.

He steps closer to me again, into my arms. “I am asking it,” he purrs. “And I’m holding you to it, Tor. For



me, move on, be happy, and I'll see you when the sun dies.”

Gavin leans in again, his lips against mine in a final goodbye, as bitter as it is sweet. This is the last echo of cinnamon on my lips, his warm body against mine, of his intense honey gaze lingering on me for a moment too long.

“Gavin!” I yell hysterically, jerking up in my empty bed. I can still feel him, his lips on mine, his hand on my hips, the cinnamon scent enveloping him, but it fades too quickly, my heart beating painfully. He’s truly gone now, and it feels like the sun truly died for how much anything means.

“Goodbye, my love,” I whisper in the eclipse of meaning, letting out a deep breath, and the sob that comes with it.

# Shaping Survival

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Elaina Goodnough

The trees were leaking their shadows as the snow recoiled at the rain's touch. Winter was melting away, and one girl was sitting there watching it. Her hair gently lifted and danced in the breeze; her cheeks blushed at the audacious bite of the wind.

*I grabbed a fistful of clay and brought it over to my work surface. My hands became darker as the mound clung on to the crevasses in my palm.*

What was her story? This one, all alone, her face stained with leftover tears. Her mind wasn't quiet, it hadn't been in longer than she could remember. Voices fought to gain control of her, voices from the past, voices that had been raised in a distant room. Weeping voices, angry voices.

*I wedged the shapeless form, molding the wet substance upon itself to get rid of unnecessary pockets inside. My shoulders began to sore, but I kept working, knowing that this would help me be able to make a beautiful piece later on.*

Her story had been a disturbed one, a little girl grown up faster than most had. She was born to a father with alcohol-stained lips and a mother with black and blue tainted skin. A father who threatened, and a mother who ultimately ran away.

*I slapped the clay onto the table, and it didn't bounce back, it sat there, almost defeated looking. I picked it up and dropped it again, releasing the pockets of air inside of it, making it more whole, more condensed.*

She lived with her father, but she stayed within the four walls of her room. She decorated with flimsy posters trying to cover up the holes in the walls, trying to brighten up her life but secrets don't change the truth so every night quiet sobs could be heard throughout the house.

*I wedge it one more time. I put it back on the work surface and I walk around the studio, gathering the tools I need for the next step. I look at my hands, dried and cracked from the coating of clay. It's ironic how a wet, sloppy substance can dry out anything it touches.*

She had tried to escape as soon as the government deemed her an adult but the voices inside her were existent even then and they told her to do things a younger version of herself didn't even have knowledge of. She met with people that scared her, but she put on a brave face.

*I pushed a hole through a portion of the mound, careful not to break all the way through. I slowly pressed my fingers against it, making it thinner and expanding it. It took shape, but because of the heat of my hands it started to crack and dry.*

One morning she woke up, her head leaning against a graffitied cement wall. Her head ached with intoxication; she found her hand wrapped around a beer bottle. As the rain falling around her came into focus, she realized she had done the worst thing she could've possibly done. She had become her father.

*I wet the clay with vinegar, because sometimes even water is too harsh to hydrate something. I take my fingers and rub it against the little mushy thing. I push the cracks together, piecing the thing back together. I continue pinching the sides of it, making it start to look whole.*

She picked herself up. How had this happened? She escaped only to become the abuser herself. She hated herself for it. Had she been hurting someone as much as her father had hurt her? Or maybe she just wasn't close enough to anyone to hurt them. She stumbled out of the alley way. She threw the cheap bottle on the ground, and it shattered, little brown pieces fluttering all around her.

*I finally finish the shape, but it's marred by roughness and streaks of fingerprints. It isn't anything to be proud of...yet.*

She finds help. She is repulsed at herself and wants to be anyone else, even if telling someone what has hurt her and shaped her is what hurts the most. She finds herself lonely, but healing. The alcohol distracted her, but it didn't fix anything. She stops drinking.

*I smooth out the imperfections. I know it will never be completely perfect, but I like it like that. After all the wedging and scraping, it is finally done. It isn't exceptional, but it's beautiful in its own little way.*

She sits on the park bench, watching the rain and the snow battle out their differences, and although tears have carved a place in her cheeks, it was almost like her entire life, she was being shaped into someone new. Someone that knows what it's like to truly survive.

## Old Things

---

*Naomi Thompson*

I am in need of a release  
time spun its wheels across my right foot  
leaving me stranded and slightly off balance so  
I'm chipping away at my foundation  
to make way for collapse  
this is the time for breaking old things.

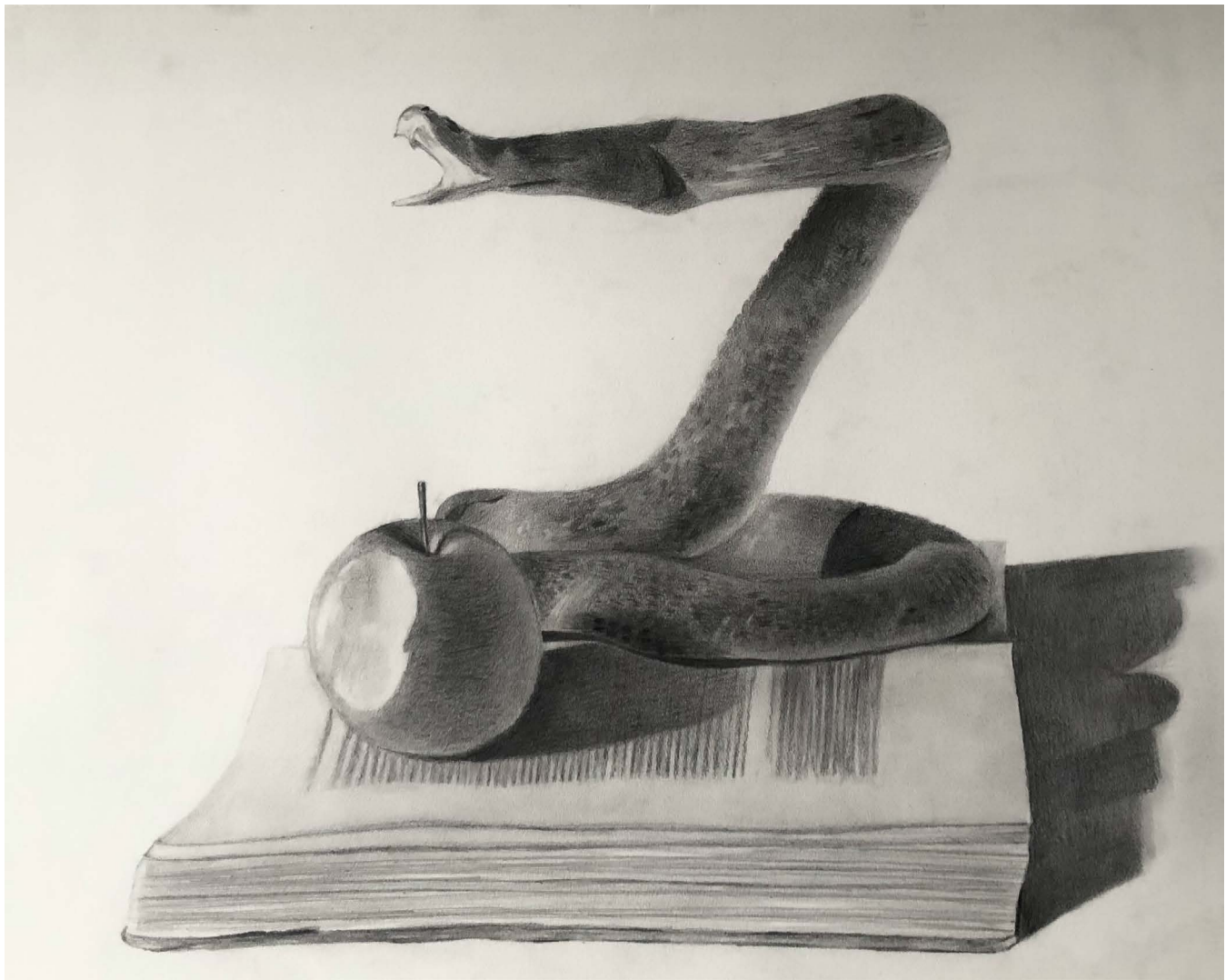
I have already let loose on my grandmother's silver  
bent the spoons into coat hangers  
to hold my baggage overnight  
grandma has fissures all over her memory  
and I called her shattered  
before she left the hospital.  
This summer, I will steal stories from  
all of her pages because  
this is the time for breaking old things.

Next is the ranch house on Skydale  
split open the drywall  
let it bleed out my sister's quiet depression  
every dollar my parents never found  
all of the fights they left scattered  
outside my bedroom  
take the bottles from the fridge and  
smash them against the brand new wood floor  
dig up the remains of the mulberry tree  
use it as kindling to  
burn down the barn for a second time  
take a sledge hammer to the curb  
between my house and Tommy's  
late night talks under streetlights  
don't mean anything when bulbs burn out  
and he forgets how to speak to me  
weeds have already consumed the front yard  
and spilled into the garden  
my dad's motorcycle has rusted through and

this time, we break only old things  
There is one board left from the barn in the yard.  
Bring it inside.  
Cut it in fours in dad's wood shop downstairs and  
build a picture frame  
big enough and  
strong enough  
to remember all of these old broken bits

Take the spoons off the wall.  
Weld them into microphone stands  
place them in every café that gave you a voice  
now the street lights  
replace burnt out films  
screw them in behind eyelids  
they will illuminate the edges you  
continue to trip over  
grind down broken drywall  
blend it with curbstone and fractured glass bottles  
to patch up the holes.  
Press the last batch of mulberries down  
into deep purple paint and use it to  
cover the walls of your Clifton apartment with  
every word that burns on your tongue  
Your father's scowl has begun to wrinkle your forehead  
now is the time to build from old things

Sweep the sidewalk clean of old fights  
save them in ziplocs  
you will need them when your children stop knowing you.  
They will help you to teach them  
the importance of rebuilding  
even when it means breaking old things.



**Untitled**

*Aoi Sato*



**Antiquity**

*Ellie Duran*

# **Bring Your Hunger**

---

*Marco Retallick*

When someone hears the words “demonic empire,” the assumption isn’t typically a pleasant one. When Kallen had first heard of the mysterious Western Empire, a sinister land of darkness rampant with undead and wickedness that was ruled by an evil demon, it was in a damning sermon by the Brotherhood priest in his small hometown.

Being the son of a witch and a prostitute, he had never invested much in things the Brotherhood had to say and so he moved on with his life.

The Empire came up a few more times, always distant, never really at the forefront of his mind. Occasionally he would see a post on the mercenary guild board for a high rank job in or around the place. The simple fact that assassination was legal there further cemented in the mercenary’s mind that the Empire was a dangerous hellscape and not worth the money. He would stick to low level framings and spywork, thank you very much!

And yet, here he stood on the steps of the Night House Senate building, searching for the literal queen of the damned in a crowd of laughing vampire Lords, with their waist coats and intricately arranged hair, milling about in the moonlight. *What the fuck am I doing here?* he wondered often. Kallen was only human. Very literally, he was only human. He had no real magic, he had a lifespan of maybe eighty years if he played his cards right and right now he was playing go fish in a room of poker champions that had been cheating with each other for literal centuries. Suddenly, he saw the flash of his employer’s wavy red hair and rushed over to meet her. “I brought the uh...blood. Was there anything specific you wanted? Like from a specific species?”

His employer, Jessandra Nicole Lowe, was the youngest Vampire Lord in the Empire at eight hundred years old and the heir to the head of the Senate. She looked up from her conversation with the driver of the coach they were to be taking that evening and smiled. “There you are! Took you long enough. Anything is lovely as long as it’s fresh, thank you.”

He shuddered at the mention of “fresh” and wondered briefly how close he’d ever been to being the blood bag that he was handing to her. It was a thick leather canteen that felt like a living creature in his hands, filled with still warm blood that the local dispensary had taken care to offer when they heard he was on an errand for a senator. Once upon a time, Kallen would have vomited at the thought of it but now he was almost desensitized to the matter. He shook the discomfort off. “Yeah...so when were we heading out?”

“I’m working on it. Our *friend* here isn’t being very cooperative.” She huffed, turning back. “Listen, I



respect your right to be a superstitious fool but-

That wasn't going to work out. He quickly moved to her side with what he hoped was an easy going smile and nudged her shoulder. "Hey I can get this. Why don't you eat something, maybe you'll feel a bit better?"

Burning gold eyes turned violently his way before softening the smallest of fractions. All the same she still gave a tense nod and stepped lightly into the coach. "Ten minutes."

He exhaled the nervous breath he'd been holding and turned to the driver, a pear shaped man who looked ghostly pale. It was rare for someone to turn down the absurd amounts of money that Jessandra usually threw around. "So what's going on here, friend? Is my lady's money not good enough for you?"

"She's wanting to go to Mer de Feu."

"Do you not offer long distance services?"

"I do if the money's good and the place isn't haunted!"

Money seemed to be less of the issue which made this a great deal more difficult. "I'm not sure what exactly constitutes as haunted in a country where half the government is undead. But, have you ever been to the Angel's Tear?" The Angel's Tear was a brothel run by one of the local Lords for money laundering purposes. It was an upscale circus of flesh. Kallen had been there several times, on business of course.

At the mention of said den of sin, the driver's eyebrow lifted and his mouth twitched subtly. "You can get me into the Angel's Tear?"

"The proprietor owes me a favor. Take us where my lady asks and I can get you a full night with whoever you like, consent allowing."

"I want a VIP lounge."

"You have a VIP in your cab, do you want to be treated the same way? Seems a little masochistic to me."

The old man thought hard before slowly nodding. "One night, and what the lady's already offered. I'll take you to the bloody moon and back."

Oh thank fuck. Kallen grinned and opened the door. "It's a deal, let's get a-rolling!"

The ride was long and consisted of more of the Empire than Kallen had ever seen. They traveled through the Badlands into the startlingly abrupt lush green of the nearby farming areas. Soon the green gave way to the rich blue of the coastline as they continued up to the North.

Jessandra watched the scenery pass with a blank expression. She had a slight frame, dainty, almost pixie-like with fine features that seemed naked without her usual dramatic red lips and kohl. It struck Kallen that he had never seen her without some kind of subtly applied mask of make up until now. From where he sat he could see how pale and sallow her cheeks were, how shadows settled under her eyes, and the almost endearing spray of

freckles along her nose that had never made an appearance until now. “I didn’t know you had freckles.”

She startled and looked at him with wide eyes that had none of their usual black lined emphasis, a hand rising to rub the blemishes almost absently. “I couldn’t bring myself to be rid of them completely. Perfection is so boring, you know.”

“Where are we going?”

“An old piece of property that I forgot about a while back. I want your thoughts on what can be done with it.”

“Is it really haunted?”

She gave a small pause and seemed to force a smile. “No more than I am,” Jessandra replied like the politician she was. She pulled her legs onto the seat. “So does Lukas really owe you a favor?”

Lukas did not owe Kallen a favor. In fact Kallen was pretty sure Lukas was only passably aware of him as a person. His wife however had just as high a stake in the brothel and was there more frequently. “I find Bianca to be accommodating enough.”

Jessandra gave a wry smile behind her hand. “Oh dear, you are a player, aren’t you?”

“It’s nothing like that.”

“I know Bianca and Lukas, sweet boy. I would be shocked if it weren’t like that.

You know he’s older than the Empire, right?” “He was your mentor, wasn’t he?”

“Back when I was young and stupid, two hundred and naive, you know how it is.” He had no idea how it was. “I’m thirty five.”

Realization dawned on her as she palmed her forehead. “Of course, I forget sometimes. You’re *mortal* mortal.” She frowned, searching for words. “I suppose it would be like...you know that fresh quality young people have when they’ve just left their schooling? All bright and full of hope, just begging to be swindled.”

An intern. In theory it made sense that a senator had started as an intern but the idea was mind boggling. What did an intern to a millenia old vampire even do? Pull the curtains? Make blood runs? Oh good lord, was *he* an intern? “It’s hard to think of you as naive.”

She snickered at that and stretched out, cat-like, along her side of the carriage. “Kallen, darling, I consider that the highest of compliments.” The way she draped herself her black and gold skirts shifted to show off the pale flesh of her legs. Her stockings, garters and shoes were noticeably absent. “But I’m losing my touch.”

He desperately wanted to disagree. To say that she was still on top of her game and all sorts of lies that would keep money in his pocket. Instead he looked out the

window and tried not to think of the momentum she’d lost in only a few weeks. *A few weeks is all it takes*

*in our line of work.* “I mean you’re farther ahead than I am.”

Jessandra gave a small smile. “That’s sweet but when I met you, you were taking odd mercenary jobs and almost got killed in five different ways,” she sighed. “And you could go farther.”

“Aren’t you a little young to be talking like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re planning to retire, the average Night House tenure is at *least* two millenia.” He tried to keep his tone light, a weak attempt for humor that clearly didn’t land.

She didn’t meet his gaze, instead choosing to get comfortable against the side of the coach cabin, though how the vampiress did so in stays, Kallen had no idea. “We should be there in a day or so. Wake me when we stop and rest.”

Kallen met Jessandra when, thinking she was a courtesan of some kind, he unwittingly attempted to seduce her for information about who he believed to be her master. The man was a small time lord who, unbeknownst to Kallen and most of the mercenaries present, was a close friend of hers.

*He could still see her knowing smile that should have, as he learned later, heralded his death. At the time she just looked like a late twenty something with hair that seemed to glow in the torchlight and dancing embers in her eyes. “And what’s your name, angel?”*

*Her laugh back then seemed like honey but in hindsight it was a dripping, stinging venom. “Definitely not an angel,” she snickered. “Just call me Jessie.”*

It was supposed to be a low level spy job. She was supposed to be a nice perk until he got paid. Then the water got hotter than he could handle. A simple week-long job turned out to be part of something bigger than he could have dreamed, a terrorist plot, not that any of the unfortunate grunts like him could have known the size of the ocean of trouble they’d found themselves in. Jessandra knew what the real game was, of course.

When he turned out on the losing side of the month-long cold war he’d found himself in the middle of, it was by sheer luck that she offered him a job instead of killing him outright.

“I’m just a spy.”

She was so much sharper then, like a demon coming to make a deal, “I respect a man with a can-do attitude and balls of steel. You have both.” She adjusted one of her glittering rings so it’s smooth opal face was perfectly centered on her middle finger. “Besides, I can pay you five times what you’ve been making.”

The word was out before he could stop it. “Ten.”

Her now chilling yellow eyes met his with a predatory certainty, like a wolf watching a limping fawn, before her blood red lips slowly broke into a toothy grin, canines glinting in the sunlight. “Then I want the full

set.”

“Full set?” What did she... “You mean the others?” He’d started the job with eight other men. Aside from him, there were four left. “I can’t guarantee—”

“You will for ten. Do we have a deal?” She held out her manicured hand and he was amazed at how small it was when he shook it, almost in a daze. “Handsome and smart. I think we’ll get along famously.” That had been two years ago. In that time, his

salary had doubled twice and he’d gained several friends in high places, none human and most in the Night House.

Kallen was jarred from his thoughts as the coach stopped at an inn in the small morning hours before the sun rose. He carefully reached out to shake Jessandra’s arm in an effort to rouse her, fingertips barely brushing her cool shoulder when her cold claw-like hand seized his wrist. She shot up with a hiss, needle like fangs bared with murderous intent. “J-Jessandra!” he cried out, arms shielding his face in a futile attempt at defense.

She stared at him with wide eyes, breath momentarily shaking. And then like a switch being flipped, her face resumed a reserved neutrality. “Are you alright?”

Was he *alright*? Kallen glanced at his wrist where four crescent moons of blood were beginning to well. “Do you think there’s a healing kit at the inn?”

“For my money there’d better be.”

It was a warm place, both in temperature and ambiance. Lanterns illuminated the building with buttery light that melted into Kallen’s limbs. Jessandra floated to the front desk while he sat down and soaked in the smells of stale beer and baking bread. It would have felt like home, were it not for his stinging arm.

He didn’t realize his eyes had closed until he heard the sound of plates being set down in front of him. Jessandra had a tray in her hand as she shoved a stein of lager his way. “The keeper is getting a kit from the back. I’ve rented us three rooms and all the standard fare, I know how you enjoy places like this.” She then took a seat across from him, grabbing a slice of dark rye. “Fortunately, it’s the slow season so no one is going to care about a high level politician and one of the big movers in the Empire eating tavern food.”

Soon the healer’s kit arrived. Jessandra took it with a smile and a thank-you before offering a hand to him. “What?” he asked incredulously.

She rolled her eyes. “You only have one hand to work with, wrist please.” He sighed and gave her his arm. “I feel like I’m in my mother’s house.”

She snorted. “Did your mother stab you often?” Her small hands fluttered about his like tiny doves, deftly securing the pad of cotton she’d pressed to the deceptively deep puncture wounds. “I’m sorry, by the way.”

“It’s what I get for poking at a sleeping vampire.”

“Well that’s bad press if I’ve ever heard it,” she snorted as she nibbled her rye bread.

Yet another glaring difference between the world Kallen knew and the world he lived in. “When I first read a news column I thought it was the weirdest handwriting I’d ever seen,” he mused, trying to take the focus off of what was dangerously coming close to a moment of sincerity.

Jessandra gave a soft giggle at that. “Bella told me about the hot water fiasco. How long was your shower? An hour? Two?”

Hot water and flameless torches were by far Kallen’s favorite inventions. “Damn right it was, and I would do it again!” They went on like that until their plate was empty and Kallen finally needed to sleep.

They rested and returned to the road for an uneventful ride. By early morning of the next day the carriage finally stopped on a grassy hill overlooking the countryside and a large stone fortress. “This is as far as the horses are willing to go.” The driver announced, opening the door for them.

*The horses, huh?* Kallen thought skeptically. *More like an ass.* “Is that alright, Jessandra?” he asked.

She gave a noncommittal shrug. “I’m a corpse, I’m not going to get tired on a hill,” she replied, stepping down into the dusty road. “But if you aren’t waiting here when we get back I’m charging for the dress I’ll ruin catching up to the horses,” she smiled at the driver with a vicious grin. “And this is silk.”

The walk up the deep green hill through the misty marine layer, already beginning to burn off with the morning sun, was mostly silent. An unsettling uncertainty gnawed at Kallen’s stomach until he forced himself to speak. “So tell me what the deal is with this property?”

Jessandra’s face was blank, her eyes far away as she intoned her response. “When the Empire absorbed my homeland, this was the keep we gave to the reigning Vampire Lord at the time.”

“Your *homeland*? How old is this place?” “Older than me.”

“Aren’t you the Lord here?”

“I was advised against moving in.” Her vacant expression sharpened into a wicked and angry grin that was almost a grimace. “Structurally unsound, they said,” she sneered.

“So how did *you* get it?”

She unconsciously fiddled with a black band that lived on her left finger. “I inherited it from my *last* husband.”

“You were *married*?” The day was getting stranger, Kallen could feel it in his bones.

They approached the face of the building. It was a soaring keep with cinder black walls, crawling with ivy and wild roses that had long broken down the outer walls that had once kept invaders out. The buttresses were

sharp, almost jagged, points that offended against the blue sky. Kallen half expected clouds to roll in and lightning to crack ominously.

Jessandra spoke softly. “Do you know, Kallen, that I was never meant to have my position?” Her hands brushed along the rough stone absently. “You could almost say I stole it.”

A strange chill crept along Kallen’s spine and spiked into his blood. “What is this place?” he asked hoarsely.

With a hearty push, the vampiress’s thin arms shoved the great oak door of the keep open to reveal a dark and dingy interior. “This, Kallen, is where I was murdered.”



**Untitled**

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*Jessica Hedahl*

## **Pressing Our Flower**

---

*Ryan Hagerman*

The water trickled into the pot.  
The petals gleamed with life.  
The dirt no longer dried and coarse.  
The temperatures were perfectly maintained.  
I took care of our flower for a year and some months, but the seasons changed, and the petals wilted.  
The pot dried of water and love, and you left me with our rose.  
The pot began to wither and crack,  
and your name now a memory shaved from the plant you helped give life and purpose and love to.  
A rose dead with our memory wilted.  
The petals were something I cherished, so I protected what few that remained  
Leaving nothing but a browning stem and bud in its dry and coarse and withered pot of dust.  
That plant had died months ago,  
but my petals remain protected in my favorite book pressed between chapters that no longer remind me of us.  
My rose buds again.



# **The Pains of a Lonely Heart**

---

*Alexandria Garay*

I want to go back,  
Back to the way things were.  
When we were free,  
Free from worry and heartbreak.

The heart,  
A powerful thing.  
Sole purpose to pump blood,  
It's what makes us alive.

It can die,  
It can stop beating.  
But what if it cracks?  
Will it still beat?

As a kid,  
Kissing was gross,  
Cooties were real,  
And love wasn't on our minds.

What happened?  
Suddenly you want to have your first kiss.  
Suddenly boys were eye catchers.  
And suddenly friends were a must have.

These sudden necessities,  
Things we overlooked young.  
They were a need,  
And love was a need.

The idea that is.  
Some of us aren't so lucky.  
Our friends find love,  
Leaving us behind and forgotten.

I've watched them all leave,  
Wondering when it would be my turn,  
To experience love for the first time.  
But it never happened.

I was left alone,  
Forgotten by my "friends."  
A new pain began to form,  
As I could only watch them leave.

I began to notice certain things,  
Things overlooked by most.  
Small things,  
Things I didn't have.

People holding hands.  
Couples hugging.  
So tightly,  
Like they were saying goodbye.

I watched others kiss.  
Some soft and tenderly,  
Others with passion.  
Sometimes, it was their first.

My first never came.  
Although in my dreams,  
It did,  
Many times as I slept.

It was a perfect dream.  
But like all dreams,  
You have to wake up,  
And face the real world again.

I wondered how long,  
How long would I be in this pain?  
What was this pain?  
I never had it as a kid.

But there is a name for it,  
A pathetic name.  
Loneliness.  
Oh so lonely I was.

Why must it be called that?  
Why of all things?  
A word begging for sympathy.  
I hate it.

Yet despite all of it,  
The lonely nights,  
The silent cries,  
The yearning to be loved by someone,

I'm optimistic.  
Through all of it.  
All I've seen,  
And all I hope for.

One day,  
I hope one day.  
And when that day comes,  
Maybe I won't feel alone anymore.

Right?

## Love<sup>3</sup>

---

*Christopher Waggoner*

I love putting things in boxes.  
Big boxes  
Little boxes  
Boxes inside of boxes that I deposit in my closet.

I can put someone I just met into a box.  
Put that box in a box and put that box in my closet.  
Deposit it next to my soul's opposite;  
a beautiful skin that never did fit.  
I threw it in a box where the moths tore the cloth into bits.  
A box in a closet next to Christmas decorations is where it sits.

It's not just my aesthetics, it is my identity.  
So I fold her into a box where I can have company.  
All in desperation to maintain toxic masculinity.  
These boxes I create to eliminate individuality.  
An attempt never ceasing to manufacture my reality  
so I don't have to recognize the sovereign right of every woman  
to be exactly who she wants to be.

I like to put people inside of boxes  
Cubes with skulls and bones and crosses  
Boxes with outsides labeled toxic.  
Little black heart-shaped boxes that fit inside of living coffins,  
Boxes inside of boxes, zombies talk as they walk dead.

Heart shaped lock-boxes  
hang from nooses to unlock bliss.  
Souls trapped inside of locket  
so we pass each other lock-picks.

In a closet is a chest where I locked away a heart.  
In the dark is where it sits apart from all my other broken parts.  
A battered heart it's bruised but still beating.  
Not perfectly, but it's a start.

We even meet inside of boxes  
Greet, eat, speak, laugh, love inside of boxes.  
Speak excitedly to each other,  
we don't care if someone walks in.

Maybe I can stop this toxic feeling that I am helpless  
She snuck inside my chest and has given me a heart-kiss.  
Is this love? If it is, I cannot stop it.  
No stopper for this bottle and maybe that is what love is?

I love putting things in boxes  
Big boxes  
Little Boxes  
Boxes inside of boxes that I deposit in my closet.

Heart shaped lock-boxes  
hang from nooses to unlock bliss.  
Souls trapped inside of locket  
so we pass each other lock-picks.

I will fashion a skeleton key in the shape of a ring and call it my lock-kit  
And keep it in a box that fits inside of my pocket.  
A locked-box in the shape of my heart where I will deposit my locket.  
On her finger will forever sit a ring-shaped key for her to unlock it.

With this ring we will free each other from our boxes,  
Because finally we found someone to have authentic talks with,  
Open hearts open boxes and they leave us feeling breathless.  
I guess that would make love our perfect lock-smith.

We even meet inside of boxes  
Greet, eat, speak, laugh, love inside of boxes.  
Speak excitedly to each other.  
We don't care if someone walks in.

Heart shaped lock-boxes  
hang from nooses to unlock bliss.  
Souls trapped inside of locket  
so we pass each other lock-picks.

## **paint store pessimism**

---

*Naomi Thompson*

Walk in.  
View the colors.  
Each choice is a sprinkle on your cake wall.  
Purple could look great in the bathroom.  
Brown in the den might invoke your mother.  
Let's not make it look like your old bedroom.  
Plain apartments are for loners.  
This is what it means to grow up.

Pull chunks of cardboard to seal your childhood.  
Throw school notes in the fireplace.  
Stick tape around the ceiling.  
Keep the outlets shocking.  
Cut empty spaces.  
Silence the carpet.  
Find a better hiding spot for the poet.  
Clean the blade.  
This is what it means to stop breathing.

Show your girlfriend a better shade of blue.  
Watch the cement floor judge customers.  
Lights from above flicker.  
Off goes the expired candy.  
On goes the recliner.  
Lean back for a better view.  
Argue when healing.  
Bite the end off your pizza slice.  
This is what it means to choke.

Move over.  
You block relationships from becoming.  
Type a search word.  
Read suggestions.  
Internet results say listen.  
Value the other person's words.  
Soak anger in gasoline.

Torch it.  
This is what it means to move forward.

Crack your bones.  
Stack paint cans on the floor.  
Pry the lids.  
Open her choice to live with you.

Close your mind before time goes cynical.  
Past exes are no longer ghosts in the bed.  
Stop shopping for fixtures in Home Depot.  
Find her smile waiting on your left.  
This is what it means to check out.

Strip the old apartment.  
Watch morning take all the leftover junk.  
Everything else can fit in the new place.  
Nights are friendlier there.  
Trees like to drop romance from the sky.  
Pick one of them up.  
Bring a piece inside anytime you want to remind her.  
Start with the right shade.  
This is what it means to be together.



**Untitled**

---

*Elias Martin*





---

**Untitled**

*Emilio González*

## Losing Letters

---

### *Kato Charters*

They want to take our letters away  
I heard it in the news  
The publics mad with uestions  
Everyones confused  
They said that ink's e pensive  
That we don't need them anyway  
That the 'll start ust one b one  
Graduall ta ing our letters a a  
I rite frantic to m mother  
I lo e ou, I miss ou, I'm o a  
To t ose in po er I scra l a letter  
lease sto ta ing our letters a a  
T e ca itol is ad it riots  
T e oli e an't al t e do n  
T e eo le a e een silen ed  
No an er is t e on sound  
uture il on't no  
T e or s or ot er or lo e  
an annot rea e  
I' e et to earn en e' et o e  
o e ne enera ion  
I' o e i n' in o a  
e' ea o o oi e o  
e ' e a e a o e e a a

## How to Leave a Town

---

*Justin Platter*

If you asked me, what reminds me of home  
I'd ask you if people still lived there,  
Old memories like vintage films  
townsfolk pulling in with pickup trucks and cheap sedans  
Pack a smokes, can of coke  
out of a quick check parking lot.  
A Manasquan river, Sea Rays and sailboats,  
Cascades of emerald fluids  
Jittering around the island called "treasure"  
Tides pulling at finger thin sandbanks  
crawling slowly  
back  
and then forth  
from the inlet

Running a gauntlet  
between spray painted jetty stones  
and the shimmering lights  
of dockside cafes.

Red and gold autumn leaves  
the craftsman's morning commute  
coffee and shady pine cradled stretch of road  
A twisted green sign that reads "Herbertsville"  
dot the map with horse farms and apple orchards  
valley wide openings in tree lines  
accommodating high wires  
climbing way up beyond the hills.

hushed whispers, midnight snow flurry  
across salty rotten  
boardwalk planks.  
Where Just over the horizon  
drifts a fleet of draggers  
turning leeward heading home  
to avoid an approaching squall.

Smokestacks spew black tar  
diesel smoke,  
all their outriggers bobbing  
port ----- and ----- starboard  
gently dancing with the tide.

There is a bar for the longshoremen  
lying in a nest  
on Ocean Avenue  
between bungalows and  
seaside shacks for rent  
a homely new waitress updates a chalkboard  
mundane lists  
happy hour specials  
deep-fried and freshly caught  
The urinal still doesn't work  
the oak bar top has grown a few shades darker  
the camaraderie of loneliness  
and complacency  
amongst the dedicated old drunks  
remains a bond unbroken  
except,  
at closing time.

Can't imagine the women inside have gotten any better looking,  
all the young children on the block have grown a year older.

just a few days they'll be walking and driving  
to a nearby high school,  
to be taught by the same teachers.  
walking the same halls  
past the artwork of classes long gone.  
Every one of them  
eager for their graduation,  
choosing off the same list of ivy leagues  
printed on the same glossy pamphlets  
lined up in the counselor's office  
sitting on dusty shelves

But so many will stay there,

sitting in the same bars  
next to the same teachers  
listening to tomorrows music  
Taking chances  
making fools of themselves,  
perhaps spending an evening  
handcuffed  
to some police bench  
thinking  
“God, I need to leave this town”.  
Teenagers run off to attend Rutgers  
or just drive as quickly as possible  
up route 18  
to find that high school sweetheart  
whose world perspective had grown,

30 miles and 2 men  
Broader,  
then their own.

definitions of Love,  
change in opposing area codes.  
They'll turn around and head home,  
but it is not home they seek,  
just a house.  
A house lived in  
by a friend,  
with hardly any family to speak of.  
weekends will seem so long  
a case of cheap beer  
entices so many strange faces.  
Everyone will laugh  
and dance  
and get sick  
and wash up  
so, they can kiss somebody new.  
They will all speak candidly  
reassured  
of where their journey  
was taking them next.

Someone is in the backroom having sex,  
someone will get an abortion  
next time,  
they can't afford it.  
colleges will deny applications  
new cars will get t-boned  
weed isn't half the kick  
of cocaine  
but god,  
doesn't the needle  
get it done  
so much faster.

Addresses will change,  
boys ask quiet girls to move across the country  
parents become just fond memories  
in frames  
sitting softly on windowsills.

the news will get worse,  
bills will get higher  
the bowling alley is just rubble now,  
cordoned off  
as the main street attraction.  
Finally, the last friend walks  
out the back door,  
ears ringing  
lights still left inside  
to mingle  
with the encroaching rays  
of the morning sun  
take a seat on the couch  
open another can  
and just think,  
"God,  
I need to leave this town".

**Grace Andrews**

My name is Grace Andrews. I am 17 years old and use all pronouns. I have loved art for as long as I can remember. My family comes from a long line of artists, so I would always look to them for advice. I am a visual artist at heart, it aids me in finding myself. Expressing my emotions has always been hard for me. Whereas, when I display how I feel through colors and expressions in photography, I feel open to the world.

**Alana Cardano**

Someone once told me “an Orpheus that does not turn around is an Orpheus that does not love Eurydice” and I really wanted to capture that. I’ve always loved their story and I wanted to put my own spin on what happens after it all ends. I really wanted to show how their love transcends by using multiple languages to emphasize how just one cannot define their feelings while honoring my culture by using Tagalog.

**Kato Charters**

My name is Kato Charters and I am a non-binary and disabled student. I am 18 years old, and plan to study biochemistry/molecular biology in university, but have always had a love for creative writing and other art forms. I seek to express both my own truth along with my perspective of what’s around me through art.

**Kristen Connelly**

I love expressing myself through words, making connections with others, challenging what’s already been said, and getting at the heart of things. As a teacher, a nurse, and a mother, my goal is to always try to understand one another.

**Ellie Duran**

From scribbling on the walls as a kid, to painting and selling my art: art has always been my passion. All of the sixteen years of my life, I have experimented with many forms of art, until I eventually found my happy place in painting. As my artistic path grows, I hope to one day create a greater impact, using my talent to teach others how to amplify their own voices through the art world.

**Gregory Esters**

What up doe? If you know, you know. I’m Gregory (not Greg, please and thank you) and I write on occasion, when I encounter inspiration. Lastly, if I could change just one thing about the world, as a nerd, by my calculations it would solve everything if everyone was just a bit more considerate instead of absurd.

**Alexandria Garay**

Hello everyone. My name is Alexandria Garay. I’ve been attending Olympic College since late 2020 to earn my Associates Degree & Fashion Certificate to transfer and earn a degree in costume design. When I’m not doing school, I run my small business The AliCraft Studio. I’ve been a small business owner since late 2019, and started doing craft markets with the Local Makers Group in Gig Harbor, WA since June 2021.

**Emilio González**

My name is Emilio González. I am an 18 year old college student and professional artist. I live in the Kingston area and my primary medium is graphic design and spray paint, but I also occasionally use other mediums such as colored pencil, acrylic, and clay.

**Elaina Goodnough**

Hello! My name is Elaina Goodnough and I am a Running Start student at Olympic College! “Shaping Survival” is an idea I came up with after reading Isaiah 64:8 in the Bible. The verse says, “...you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” The story is meant to show how painful life circumstances are there to shape us into better people, even if it hurts.

**Ryan Hagerman**

Hi! My name is Ryan, and I’m a second year student at Olympic College! I’ve always loved art and made my own impressions of the world around me, mostly writing my creative worlds into existence or scribbles that show my unique perspective of the world. I’m submitting my work after being encouraged by my professors, because I didn’t have faith that my works were worthwhile. Thank you to my amazing professors!

**Joni Hall**

I am studying to get my bachelors in teaching at OC. Though, writing was my first love; I started when I was ten and haven’t stopped since. I’m 20 now and its crazy to think I’ve been at this for a decade. I think facets of my life and my ever-puzzling thoughts about my identity/where I fit in the world influences what I write about as well as broadly influencing my writing style.

**Jessica Hedahl**

This painting is 16x20 and took 20 hours to paint with acrylics. I painted this candlestick for my final in Painting 1. I love the storytelling and mystery of this candlestick and it was a blast to paint. I mixed around 3 different styles to create a painterly style that I have grown to love.

**Sara Hewson**

Mother, student, survivor, crunchy, and social justice advocate are just a few words to describe myself. I am Mommy to two adorable crazy little ones. After completing my BA in human services I worked with non-profits for ten years before burning out then became a stay at home mom. Then after the birth of my son went through treatment for breast cancer. That experience and many others had led me to pursue nursing here at OCC at the ripe age of 38!

**Lillian Hoffman**

Hi! I’m Lillian Hoffman. I am a Junior in Running Start. I have lived in Washington all my life but I moved to the peninsula three years ago. This has inspired me to start taking photos. Everything is so beautiful here, and there is so much wildlife. My favorite things to photograph are landscapes and wildlife. Taking the ferry to Seattle occasionally has given me a new eye for city life as well.



**Sasha Lukas**

I had a talent for art for many years. I have only taken Art I and Art II classes. Mostly self-taught. Currently earning a AAS-T Interactive Web Design and soon pursuing a BAS IT degree with a specialization in Cybersecurity.

**Elias Martin**

I'm Elias, I'm a filmmaker and I paint portraits sometimes.

**Skylar Moar**

My name is Skylar Green Moar. I am a 17-year-old artist that works in multiple mediums. I use art as both a way of expression and a coping mechanism. While I favor digital artwork over most, I enjoy painting, traditional illustrating, sculpting, and much more. Aside from drawing I like biking around my neighborhood and baking sweets. And, ironically enough, my favorite color is green.

**Maé Mullen**

I grew up loving the concept of art in different forms - whether that was paintings or stories. I'm working towards getting my BA in Creative Writing. Painting and writing are a large part of my life and I hope to incorporate that in my future (hopefully as a designer at a publishing house!!).

**Justin Platter**

I am a writer & artist living in Silverdale, Washington. I grew up in a fishing town on the Jersey Shore. I enjoy sourdough bread, and buying the New York Times on Sunday. I make a fantastic bolognese and practice piano weekly. Dogs seems to like me, and I can count very high.

**Reed Sanders**

I am Reed Sanders. I am a seventeen-year-old portrait and product photographer as well as a running start student at Olympic College. I began learning photography at the age of thirteen when I bought my first camera, and since then have grown my desire to make art into a professional skillset.

**Aoi Sato**

I took "Peek at the Tea Party" with a camera, NIKON D5000 which I inherited from my father. This is in my garden in my home country, Japan. A small tea party would be held in an old gazebo after passing through the arch of banksia rose. You can see a wisteria trellis in the background. As you know, the wisteria flower usually is purple, but this is pink actually. Who was fascinated by the pretty rare flowers and gathered?

**Sydney Stahr**

I am Sydney Stahr and I am a budding photographer. I prefer landscapes over portraits, but I do enjoy helping families (including my own) record their memories with photographs. I still remember getting my first digital camera from my grandfather at the age of twelve. He also preferred landscapes and sepia or black/white photography. I photograph everything I find beautiful or different in his honor.

**Kieran Stephens**

My name is Kieran and I'm never sure what to write when asked about myself. I'm 21 years old and I'm not sure what I'm doing with life yet but I plan on trying to have a good time while I figure it out. Writing poetry is a long-time hobby of mine that started as a way to deal with the complicated stuff I was going through emotionally. Occasionally I do write sappy things about the little things that you can and should romanticize in the world.

**Jeffery Taylor**

I am a Senior in the Running Start program, and I love writing. I took a creative writing class last spring, which is where the original version of this piece came from, and my professor inspired me to submit this year. I hope to eventually become a published author, among other things. This is the first piece I've tried to submit for anything like this.

**Naomi Thompson**

I am a poet and musician who came up on the slam poetry circuit of Cincinnati, the Queen City. Poetry has been crucial in providing me an outlet to express feelings in a way that is relatable to others. In expressing my innermost feelings and thoughts, I hope to let people know they are not alone as other artists of all types have done for me.

**Christopher Waggoner**

I was a previously incarcerated individual who found a new way of life through reflection, musings, and creative writing. Much of my material was created or started while still incarcerated in prison. Today I use words and creative writing to empower others through messages of hope, inspiration and recovery from traumas.

**M.D. Imalsha Wijewardana**

This is a 9" × 12" Acrelic Grisaille painting of a Buddha statue. It is one of my personal favorites because it reminds me of my home country Sri Lanka, where we would often visit temples with huge Buddha statues towering over the temple. Even though the statue I used as reference is only but a foot tall, it still brings back warm memories.



## Acknowledgements

*Blended* would like to thank the Student Government of Olympic College as well as Dr. James Estrella and the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for making this publication possible with generous funding and support. We also owe gratitude to OC's Communications department for promoting our magazine and events and helping us with our website, to Molly Young for designing our Canvas work shell, and to Scott Sigman for supporting us in hiring processes. More thanks to Amanda Cain and our amazing librarians for hosting the second annual community reading event and to Jocelyn Crabbe for recording the event.

In particular, Candice Morrow and Christina Camarena would like to thank Sam Hayden, our talented designer, and Adeline Bugg, our thoughtful managing editor. Sam, you have a true gift for design, and Adeline, we greatly admire how you advocate with empathy and eloquence for the creative works you love.

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