



2021

# Zephyrus

# Zephyrus

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## **Award Winners**

### **Jim Wayne and Mary Ellen Miller Poetry Award**

“Aberdeen”

Abigail Raley

### **Browning Literary Club Poetry Award**

“Afterlife”

Gabby Wilson

### **Ann Travelstead Fiction Award of the Ladies Literary Club**

Arivumani Srivastava

“Kumbh”

### **Wanda Gatlin Essay Award**

Kayla Spears

“Good Sister Bad Sister Flickers Joy”

### **Zephyrus Art Award**

Kendall Gott

“Untitled”

Undergraduate writing award recipients are chosen by the Creative Writing faculty at WKU; the art award is chosen by the *Zephyrus* staff.

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Hannah Basham

**Flowers**

## **Indigenous**

Kenan Buchanan

This land is my land and your land  
But neither of ours as well.  
Sending away, separating  
Slaughter, Sacrifice  
For a world knowing no empathy.

Claiming land, killing the lamb,  
Of life already here.  
Natives nurturing on burned bread  
Traded away to help and love,  
Only to become obsolete and  
Thrown away, discarded,  
Like the waste of the world.

The people knowing, and not showing,  
Or ignorant all together, growing  
In size, complaining about people needing to go back home.  
When home is foreign alike for them,  
Following the same trail, one of tears,  
But downstream for others  
In a world where whose first and last  
Depends on a dice roll of race.





Jonathan Batts

**Piece by Piece**

## **The One About Which Arethusa Forgot to Worry**

Ella Corder

A-word attacks are not  
paralysis or foammouth or fear;  
they are heed, taken.  
Surroundings, considered. Tongues  
teethed and tonguing teeth.

I take pride and heed.  
Take pride in my heed.  
For instance, allow me to  
place your thumb here—  
apical pulse knows no death—  
your tinyfingerfear must march  
with mine—MercuryMarsVenus around Sun.

That about which one worries  
doesn't happen, my mother  
hisses by the garden hose.  
I smile like a moonbeam  
and worry about strokes,  
pregnancy, assassination,  
hyperparathyroidism, endometriosis,  
hypothrombosis, embolism, and The  
Earth seems to love me And  
Heaven smiles above me As  
I linger towards the deep.

## The Rope Swings on the Lake; Or Was It Ninth

Ella Corder

I clear my throat in workshop and begin, “The—”  
“You know, that’s interesting,” cuts in  
big Mister John with his hiking shorts and  
menthols, “because when I was in college—  
I thought it was so clever, so perspicacious,  
s-so,” (his cultivated stutter tip  
toes around for a few seconds  
longer than is normal) “coruscant,

which reminds one of T.S. Eliot and  
David Water Wallace—” (he strokes  
his stomach and places his hand  
in his shirt in-between the  
buttons when he mispronounces words) “I-I  
there is such a you know  
certain interesting very  
interesting quality to—of

course if you’ve read Camus-  
DostoyevskyProustSartre—  
speaking French, I know,” (he  
slowfastslowtalks, eyes on  
white cinderblock just  
above my head, sitting  
on the desk so to present  
an air of familiarity with us almost  
rebellion from establishment but with freedom  
to move about and kick heels in a rhythm  
reminiscent of the opening scene  
in Saturday Night Fever) “yes,” he says,  
“I knew John Travolta one auspicious  
bellwether met him at a  
gallery opening in New York but such a shame

about the son, yes quite a shame and  
the fat daughter now too yes the  
Nagasaki disease I believe it was—listen  
I am not a political  
person, just personally that is not me personally—  
does that make *sense*?—  
people everywhere with their opinions—have  
you heard the one about assholes—  
well some people just need

the smoke up the youknow. I just think the bastards should be—how did Dante put it—skull-munched in the eighth circle, orwasitninth

anyways no politics here sorry if that's what you were expecting I just don't feel the need to have magnanimous winebibbers validate my opinions but if you would like you will find at my left a complete list of everything I believe allfacts including yes you may count those laptop stickers there. But

what was your name again? Yes that's right where now...I lost my train...right well my wife left me in '02 and my kids don't trust me. I had a Jeep in high school but now I drive one of those Kia Souls—ghastly cynosure of my adult life—with biking stickers on the back. I wallow every day in my nidificated cupidity for love, my penultim—oh what's the use! I haven't looked into a woman's eyes not directly in three years. I drink Early Times nightly until my forehead kisses porcelain. I think about the rope swings on the lake.”



Savannah Catalan

Untitled

## **The Angry Black Woman**

Summer Gary

I get a Facebook  
notification of an old friend's birthday.  
Go to comment on his timeline and  
I'm choked by black bodies  
being lynched in the streets.  
How is it that white people are allowed  
to police even when they aren't police?

They say black women are angry.

Well, I am  
and tired. Mostly I am tired  
but you never hear  
"black women are tired"  
why is that?  
Is it not catchy enough?

I guess nothing is as catchy as  
black people and violence.

Black bodies are anything  
but they own

how about we stay where we supposed be  
on the field, or the court, or in the streets  
sinking a ball, or singing a bar, or slinging dope and  
better not have no fucking objections and take  
a knee,  
we are still owned and chain ganged  
for their entertainment.

Black Lives Matter seen as an attack  
on white people. Now,  
they are clustered in the capital  
with guns strapped to their backs about  
communism and haircuts, and still  
to the government they are not a threat

but an angry black woman is.

**(the bees are) dying at an alarming rate**

Summer Gary

I read somewhere, a while ago,  
that bees' wings aren't supposed to be able  
to hold up their plump bodies and fly but  
they do.

Scientifically, they cannot explain  
why.

I lean on the edge of  
the bed, clench the mattress and  
sheets. Push myself  
up and  
fall

for the third time this week  
I find myself  
in the mirror and see  
another body.  
A body that is full and able.  
A body that isn't mine.

It takes my breath away  
to hold my hair and brush it  
into a sleeked back bun,  
so I don't. I can't remember  
the last time I washed it  
or the last time I fed the dog

I cancel plans, again  
because this will be the fifth time I've  
had these same tests but from somewhere  
new and after  
ten more tubes of blood  
I think I'll need to lie  
down. Not because it was too much, but  
because I know

scientifically, they cannot explain  
why

my legs can't support my body.  
My body not heavy in weight but heavy  
in the loss of not being able to

remember yesterday.  
Heavy in the numbness and  
tingling of my feet

Say "I'm strong"  
in fetal position on the shower floor, but  
my wrists are sore. Sore from falling,  
sore from mixing cake batter,  
sore from holding my partner's hand.

I know when they come in white coats  
bringing cool air  
from the hall to my bedside  
they will smile about everything being negative.  
My arms are burning so I don't

shake their hand. I just smile  
because I'm so healthy and lucky.  
I find myself in the mirror and see  
my eyelashes are gone still. Not  
that they will comeback.  
They haven't and

scientifically, they cannot explain  
why

they just say it is my fault, or all in my head  
they say it again and again. My family  
agrees. I lean on the edge  
of my bed, clench the mattress and  
crawl back in. Sheets pulled up  
to my chin. I arch my back. My body aches  
like someone took a bat to it.

Staring at the ceiling, I wonder if the bees know  
about their wings or that they're at risk.  
I wonder if they know people are fighting for them  
with signs and catchy slogans,  
but the same people remove their favorite flowers  
from their flowerbeds.



## Losing Sight

Faith Harris

Sometimes I wonder if I'm a bad person because when they told me that I was going blind, my first thought wasn't never being able to see my parents faces again, it was *Starry Night*. The swirling blues and yellow moon. The dark cypress cutting through the sky. Other art works flashed in my mind; Rothkos with deep reds, the calm balance of a Mondrian, the ever-changing mobiles of Calder.

The smell of disinfectant brought me back to reality. The doctor was suggesting classes to help me adjust to my new life. His voice was calm, as if my whole life wasn't failing apart. Everything in the room was impersonal, from the generic health posters to the florescent lights reflecting off the white wall in such a way that hurt my apparently broken eyes. It all reminded me that I was just one of many patients. That even though I felt like my life was ending when I was only 17 years old, I probably hadn't even gotten the worst news that day. The only personal thing was my mom's hand gripping mine so tightly it hurt.

She cried that day, but I didn't. All I could think about were my favorite paintings. They were already slipping away from me. Where was the steeple in *Starry Night*? Was the red rectangle the big one in that Rothko or was it the black one?

I had to wear sunglasses when we walked back to the car. They were supposed to protect my eyes, but they tinted the sky to a less vibrant shade of blue, reminding me that I would no longer be able to see the world like everyone else.

They had taken the sky from me, and it wouldn't be the last thing to go.

I walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table. The room was filled with the smell of onions caramelizing. The only light in the room was coming from the window over the sink and streaming across the room to where it met my eyes. The light was too bright to allow me to see, but everywhere else was too dim in contrast.

"Can you close the curtain and turn on the light?" I asked, trying to shade my eyes with an outstretched hand.

"Sorry, honey," she said as she closed the curtain, filtering the sunlight to a more bearable brightness.

I could see her now that the kitchen light was on. She was wearing her green dress, her favorite dress. She grabbed a red and orange bell pepper out of the fridge. My disease took the rods first and then the cones, but I wondered how much longer I would be able to see the vivid hues of bell peppers. She began to chop them; her seasoned knife skills allowed the sound of the chopping to become almost rhythmic. I closed my eyes just listening, smelling, preparing myself for when that was all I would be able to do.

"Iris," She said.

"Yeah?" I said opening my eyes.

“I think you need to start thinking about an aide.”

“No.”

“Iris.” She had turned from the stove now. One hand on her hip and one still holding the wooden spoon.

“I can see.”

“You’re going blind.”

“Oh really? I had forgotten.”

“You certainly act like you have.”

“What does that mean?”

“You haven’t told anybody, you never let us talk about it, and you never wear your sunglasses.”

“You don’t get it; you can see.”

“I know I don’t get it, and I’m sorry, but I still think you should wear your sunglasses.”

“Why can’t you be my aide?”

“I have a job, Iris.”

“Yeah, you get to have a job and a life, and I have to have some random stranger following me around, making sure I don’t bump into things.”

“The aide will help you live as normal of a life as possible.”

“I want to go to New York.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I want to go to New York. I want to go to see some real art before my life ends.”

“You have school, your ACT is coming up, and on top of that, I doubt we can afford the trip.”

“You always said that we would go.”

“That was before all the medical bills from when your dad was sick.”

“I have the money in savings.”

“That’s for college, Iris.”

“What’s the point? It’s not like any of it matters anymore.”

I could smell the peppers and onions burning. I guess Mom could, too, because she turned off the stove, dropped the spoon, and sunk into the chair across from me.

“Please, Mom. You know how much it mattered to you. I can’t die without seeing Starry Night.”

“I’ll talk to your dad. And you’re not dying.”

“Yeah, if I was, I’d get a Make-A-Wish trip.”

We flew at night. Mom was worried that the daylight would hurt my eyes and she didn’t trust me to wear my sunglasses. However, flying at night meant that I couldn’t see out the window. I had only flown once before, and I had spent the whole flight staring at the city lights as they passed by, but this time all I could do was smell the stale air and listen to music to drown out the static-filled announcements.

I had two rules for the trip:

1. No blind talk
2. No pictures

The first was because I was in denial and I wanted our trip to be as normal as possible. The second was because I knew that the trip wouldn't be normal. I knew that even if we took pictures, it wouldn't be long before I couldn't see them, and selfishly, I wanted everyone to remember it like I would be forced to.

My mom also had two rules:

1. I had to go to college
2. I had to get an aide

The first was because she was in denial and wanted my life to be as normal as possible. The second was because she knew my life wouldn't be normal.

It was after midnight when we landed at JFK.

"Are you sure this was a good idea?" I heard my mom whisper when we finally made it to the hotel. She must have thought I was asleep.

"She needs this; it'll be worth it," my dad whispered back.

We went to the Met in the morning. The sun was so bright that I could barely see the building with its iconic steps and ornate façade. Inside I was able to see much better. Even the lobby was beautiful, a massive statue of a pharaoh sitting under the domed ceiling. Like all of New York, it was packed with people whose chatter filled the room with a loud hum.

I didn't like the idea of skipping through the museum to my favorite parts, but the MET was too massive to see in one day. We decided to find the impressionists first. Despite all three of us having a map and Mom's insistence that she remembered her way around, we got desperately lost and had to ask for directions.

We walked through a hall of statues, including a study for *The Thinker*, to get to the room I had come for. It actually turned out to be several rooms, all filled with paintings by both impressionists and post-impressionists. I didn't quite know what to do. I hopped from painting to painting with no organization, dragging my dad along with me. I paused at the calm pastels of Claude Monet, feeling my breath deepen as his sunlit cathedral filled my tunneled vision. Of course, I stopped at every Vincent, including the irises for which I was named. I studied the texture that was so thick and the colors that were so vivid that no print could ever do it justice. There was one Van Gogh I had never seen before, done in light blues and greens, of a mother supporting her child and the father bending down, arms outstretched, urging the child to walk to him. It was called *First Steps*. He painted in 1890, which was the year he killed himself. I was almost brought to tears, knowing the intense distress that he was under at the time and seeing the innocence and beauty he was able to portray.

I pulled myself away from Claude and Vincent to go find the abstract expressionists. We passed a Calder on the way, and I stood still watching it move slowly in the air conditioning. Then we found the Rothkos. I knew that they were big, but standing in front of one, so close that it was all I could see, was more intense than I could have ever imagined.

I lay awake crying in the dark of the hotel that night, listening to the distant sirens. I had only cried one other time since being diagnosed; I had

managed to stay in denial, but being at the Met, I realized how much I was going to miss out on. It wasn't just the paintings; it was the little description next to them. None of them were written in braille, not even the titles. I couldn't even read braille yet, but its absence was just proof that the visual art world, the place I had called my home my whole life, was no longer for me. I was an outsider, and I couldn't even look in.

We went to the MoMA the next day, and I tried to forget about my disease. I tried to pretend that I was just a normal person on a normal trip.

I rushed through the first couple floors only stopping for my favorites. I got to be enveloped by more Rothkos and I saw all of Warhol's Soup Cans, but it was the fifth floor I was really there for. We rode the escalator up and there it was.

### *Starry Night.*

I walked to it transfixed. The brushstrokes were so thick, and the colors were richer than I had ever known. The cypress was actually green and not black like I had always thought. I saw brown within the blue and white of the swirling sky that I never would have noticed before. The paint was just so thick that it made me long to reach out and feel the canvas's uneven surface. I couldn't stop staring at the halos of light around the stars. My deteriorating eyesight was beginning to cause me to see light halos, and here I was looking at them painted in my favorite piece of art. Was there beauty in my ailment or was even van Gogh mocking me?

I stepped forward and leaned in closer to see it better with my already limited vision.

"Miss you need to step back," the docent rebuked.

I took the mandated step back but stayed in front of the painting. I didn't look at anything else in the museum. Everything else was irrelevant. I just stayed with *Starry Night*, taking in every inch. Trying to memorize the flow of each brush stroke, and the placement of every star. I didn't move until the museum closed, much to the annoyance of the other guests, but I didn't care. I didn't care about anything. I stared until I became one with the painting, until nothing existed except *Starry Night*.

Eventually, we had to leave the museum and New York. Eventually, my sight faded so that I couldn't see even in the most optimally lit rooms. Eventually, the memory of my own face became foggy. Eventually, it felt like I had been blind forever. But through it all, I never forgot *Starry Night*. I could still picture each of the eleven stars in their proper places. In a quiet room, I could still take a deep breath and be right back in front of it again. With the swirling blues, the green cypress, and the thickest brushstrokes you had ever seen.



Samantha Cox

Untitled

## **Magnolia**

Faith Harris

They praise you for your flowers,  
But they do not know.  
They think your worth is in your beauty,  
But they do not know.

While you are a thing of beauty,  
And your scent brings a smile  
As it wafts through the air,  
It was not your flowers that held me,  
When I sought for comfort.

They think you are delicate,  
But they do not know  
That while you signal summer's arrival  
With your pure white flowers,  
You also fought through the winter.

They do not realize  
that your blossoms are earned.

They do not know  
what we are meant to withstand,

But we know  
we know the cold of winter  
we know the struggle to hold on

Yes, we blossom  
But we are evergreen

**“NEW MESSAGE.”**  
David Hunter Hartlage

Once again, I'm paralyzed by the words at the top of my screen. I stare blankly at my phone, its faint blue glow the only source of light in my cluttered room. I take a deep breath of stagnant air as my muscles tense. I wonder how many times I've seen your name suspended beneath those words; how many times they've stopped me in my tracks.

I saw you again, today.

You were eating lunch at a picnic table in the park. You didn't notice me, of course. You were surrounded by nameless faces, laughing at some joke I hadn't heard. You closed your eyes and leaned back, a familiar airy giggle escaping from your lips. The sound reverberated in my mind.

I can still hear your laughter as my fingers hover over the keyboard. The thought of you has taken me somewhere else, a place I can't escape from no matter how long I'm away. I can still feel the warmth of the fire, still smell the earthy air, still see your brilliant smile.

“NEW MESSAGE.”

It had been a cold night in early autumn. The leaves were just beginning to turn, but the forest was still very much alive, with the small creatures rustling in the overhanging branches and wild grass. You were there, along with our other friends, sitting around a firepit in the clearing. Danny had called it a “farewell to summer” party, even though summer had ended a month ago. I think he just wanted to start a fire.

The orange glow lit up the world around us, the flame dancing in in the gentle breeze. We were all huddled close together, taking in its warmth, telling ghost stories, and roasting marshmallows as indie rock played from your phone.

You were the reason we were all there; people are drawn to you. You sang loudly whenever your favorite songs played, and you told stories with an enthusiasm that silenced the rest of us. “September” played, and you made each and every one of us get up to dance with you.

Your auburn hair put the fire to shame; your copper eyes held more life than all the world.

“NEW MESSAGE.”

I've been a lot more active around campus, recently. Student Government, the Environmental Club, open mic poetry; I stop by anything that I think you would like. I go to each and every one, hoping to find you, but you're never there.

Do these things not interest you anymore? How much have you changed these past few years?

It's probably for the best that I don't see you, anyway. Our reunion would be awkward and situational; I'd wave, then you'd wave, maybe call my name. I'd ask how you've been; you'd say “fine.” You'd ask how I've been; I'd lie. Then you'd wander off, saying we need to catch up some time. We never would.

“NEW MESSAGE.”

I wonder how you think of me. What memories come to mind? Do you think of the time you got your car stuck in a ditch, and I drove across town to pick you up? Do you remember when I fell off the bridge and into the creek, and you jumped in after me? Do you remember different memories, ones that have somehow escaped me? Do you even think of me at all?

My mind always goes back to late November, when you broke into tears in my living room. It had been a week since someone had crashed into the driver-side door of Danny's old Mercedes, staining those leather seats he had cared so much about. You had held it together up until then, but something about that night was more than you could take. You cried and screamed, and it was all I could do to not fall apart myself. I held you in my arms, promising that you would never lose me. Back then, I wanted nothing more than to hold you, forever, until there was nothing else in the world. Now, I'd give anything just to talk to you.

“NEW MESSAGE.”

I can hear the clock on my wall, ticking down the seconds. Goosebumps run up and down my arms, and my eyes begin to water. I ignore them. I can't afford to lose focus now.

On my screen, the cursor blinks expectantly. There has to be something I can say. There has to be something that's right. I rack my brain for everything I know about you, trying to predict what you'll think. What can I say that won't upset you? How can I convince you to hear me out? What do you want me to say? What do you need me to say?

How on Earth am I supposed to fix this?

“NEW MESSAGE.”

It wasn't what you wanted to hear, I suppose.

The sun had just begun to set, and the sky had melted into a concoction of red and orange that dripped between the magnolia leaves. The heat was as pervasive as it was intense, and these branches provided the only respite. You looked into my eyes and stepped back, leaving the shade as you did. You covered your mouth with your hands; you shook your head so faintly that I almost didn't notice.

I had always thought it was something unspoken, something we both knew but refused to say. But August had come, and brought with it a sense of imminent finality. I heard it in the muted song of the season's last cicadas. I tasted it in the bittersweet crunch of the wild cherries. The Earth itself was warning me, and I knew what it wanted. What I wanted.

“I have to go,” you said.

Maybe I had misunderstood you, and what you expected. Maybe, by putting it to words, I had betrayed some assumed agreement between us. Maybe it just came out wrong. Whatever the case, watching you blink away tears as you turned away made me wish I could take it back.

I should have run after you. I should have apologized, or at least called your name. Instead, I stood frozen under swaying branches as the sky dulled to an inky black.

“NEW MESSAGE.”



My phone's blue glow dims in front of me. I watch as it turns itself off, leaving me in a familiar darkness. I set it down on my nightstand, then turn to lie on my side. A chill rattles my bones, but I can't reach for my blanket. I can't move.

I think I understand, now. It won't matter what I say. You did what you had to do long ago, and you've moved on. Your new life is exciting and brilliant and bright, and mine hasn't changed. It would be selfish to drag you back here. You don't want to come back; you never belonged in the first place.

"New message."

No, I don't have anything new to say at all.



Mary Kate Dilamarter

**Echo 3**

## **Comfort**

David Hunter Hartlage

My perfectly rehearsed smile began to falter  
As the cacophony of sniffing and laughter slowly gave way  
And the air in the room became empty save  
For the subtle sweetness of the flowers and the stillness  
Of the dust that sat on the glossy photos by the back wall.

I was dimly aware  
Of the way my cousin shifted his weight  
From one loafer to another  
And the mascara trailing down my aunt's face  
Which matched the black marks on my white shirt.

All our eyes were on the matriarch  
Whose curled, dark-gray hair  
And wheelchair-bound fragility  
Masked a proud and fiery spirit which  
Heretofore had been unbreakable.

But as Mamaw wept at the sight  
Of her daughter lying in that casket  
I stood frozen as every adult in the room  
The only difference being how they tried to hide  
The fact that they were staring.

## **Self-Medication**

Zachary Hopkins

The vessel in which I synthesize:  
the words I could never say to others,  
feelings I could never confess to those I held closest,  
bottled inside, released where no one can see.  
Feelings of longing, feelings of powerlessness;  
feelings of everything falling apart, of sinking under;  
an expression of hatred to an uncaring universe,  
a cry for the love that had abandoned me long ago.

And such, becoming anthems sung by an angel,  
pulling me, with dark words,  
from the deepest parts of my mind;  
putting me on a journey to serenity,  
a wanderer, a nomad,  
drifting among the constellations;  
in search of myself,  
for the emotions I've suppressed;  
finding catharsis in shattered remains and scars.

The sound of music:  
a swelling orchestra;  
percussion pounding like rain;  
the energy drawn by a string;  
self-medication  
for the lost and broken.

## **The Switching of Hearts**

Emra Mehmedovic

I.

The wisps of his brown hair would lie atop his forehead;  
as if his style technique was to just put it carelessly to the side.  
His graphic tee made me snort as it was so *him*.

II.

I was in a daze when he introduced himself;  
he thought he had me all figured out, how arrogant.  
Why did my ears yearn to hear his voice again and again?

III.

My cheeks burned like an inferno when he smiled;  
my ribs ached with the laughter he had coaxed out of me.  
Dear heart, why do you beat so fast?

IV.

The walls he had built up brick by brick throughout the years;  
were an enormous fortress no army could even dream of invading.  
It's as if the key was in my hands the whole time, I entered.

V.

Dear heart, where do you go? Why must you flee from your home?  
I gaze at his gentle face, do my eyes mistake me?  
There in the depths of his soul, my heart stares back at me.

VI.

He got me! Stole it right from under my nose.  
My heart is now his, but I guess we are even;  
as his own beats within me, touché I suppose.

## A Proposal of Sorts

Emra Mehmedovic

I have a word or two to say to the person who started this whole proposal thing. Why can't I, a woman, propose to you, a man? Am I really supposed to wait around for who knows how many years for you to pop the question? That seems a bit unfair, don't you think?

"Can we just get married in Vegas?" You say one day when we're watching some stupid tv show where the characters do just that. I'm squealing uncontrollably in my mind.

"Oh yeah," I say nonchalantly. "Big weddings seem embarrassing anyway."

You hum in agreement. My goofy smile makes cheeks ache.

After that, I started wearing a ring on the middle finger of my left hand. I'm hinting, but I'm not crazy. Wearing it makes me think about the kind of ring you would get me. It'll probably be a diamond. Everybody gets a diamond, fake or not, but I'd rather have an emerald. Your birthstone is an emerald, mine a ruby. Your favorite color is red, mine green. It just makes sense! After a week, I stopped wearing it. The whole idea was stupid anyway.

When we stroll down the frenzied walkways of the mall, I'm always acutely aware of where the Zales and Kay stores are. I don't really care about the ring itself, just the idea it represents. The diamonds are now behind us, but I fail to ignore their calls. I turn back and look at them, then at you. However, you're too distracted by the GameStop right across the way. Am I hopeless, or are you?

We're broke college students, but somehow, we're always on the brink of pressing that enticing "Add to Cart" button.

One day, you jokingly complain about how an item you wanted is now out of stock.

"Why didn't you buy it?" I ask.

"Because," you sigh, "my wife wouldn't let me."

I laugh even though I can feel my cheeks heat up, "I never said that!" Wife? He just called me his wife!

While we are cuddled up on the couch, a TV-show character mentions how he spent 2 months' salary on a ring because that's what men are "supposed" to do. I go on a tirade about how absolutely ridiculous that is, and I'm too scared to see if you're listening. What I really want to say is, "Hell, I don't even need a ring. Just ask me."

In the late hours of the night, as we drift into unconsciousness, I caress your finger: second from the left, right next to the pinkie. Apparently, there is a vein in the ring finger that connects to the heart. Can your heart feel me caressing it? I gently rub the skin that would be beneath the ring. Are the subliminal messages working? Do you get it, do you - oh, you're already asleep.

When we started dating at 18, your mom jokingly asked you if you wanted her grandmother's ring. I'm sure you rolled your eyes, cheeks as red as your favorite fruit punch, but what would you have said? Would you have taken the ring? Will you *eventually* take the ring? Everybody who is married talks about the moment they *knew*, but I never had that slamming, sudden feeling. Every time I look at you, all I can see is the person I want to spend my life with. That's that, no sudden realization; it's always been there. What's a reasonable amount of time before a couple gets engaged? Does it really matter?

Are my hints working? At the store, I've been pointing at decorations that start with the letter of your last name; not once have I pointed at an 'M.' In an effort to get you used to being on one knee, I've even been untying my shoes on purpose. Why do *you* even have to propose to *me*? The whole idea is kinda sexist. Actually, it *is* sexist. It's all so dumb and stupid and - well, you're kind of hopeless, so will you marry me?



Shelby Hahn

Untitled



## **Capturing the valley with my polaroid**

Cassandra Merena

Muscles slide off a decaying mouse  
in mid-September, its fur becoming coat

to worm. Sun reaches tendrils past the  
scope of the lens, shy in its job of being

first to bed. A vortex generates above  
Taraxacum Erythrospermum to lift its

children from parent, proud to see them  
outlast the turbulence.

Wind ruptures through lilac bushes, but  
quaking grass stands fearless, remembering

the art of seaweed; current confiscates  
motion, roots steal it back.

## Two Kids

Cassandra Merena

sucking on rocks like honey  
tipping 'em back--swallowed whole  
leaning into the kid beside you,  
sharing lice with Jasper  
watching frogs glide through the jade  
rummaging through mud, looking for  
Davy Jones' Locker, where is it, where is  
o there it is, right under your heel  
lift it up  
never mind, false alarm. must have  
sunk down further  
place a frozen green bean to the lobe  
of your ear. wow what a  
hack, a shock, a welcomed militant  
invasion. the ants are singing:  
"drop the bean, we'll take it off your  
hands!" the sky is raw,  
stripped of clouds--those puffy white bubbles  
there's nothing now to block the sun  
"protect me please, protect me, guard me,  
pull me up, sit me on a chair and wipe  
my burns, my cheek, place your puff  
on my knee to keep me from melting"  
a prickly chair, a prickly pear sticks to the  
roof of Jasper's mouth--he wails, sticking  
his tongue out like a pup,  
allowing a hummingbird to come drink from his mouth.  
broken stained window glass lay on the street  
scattered. the wind shapes it into a lone petal  
weeping for a stem, a bee, a partner  
what a life. what a life  
"Jasper scoot over"

**May 1<sup>st</sup>**  
Emily Moore

To the magnificent spring: you were a little cold,  
but vibrant! Emerald and verdant.

Fuchsia peonies blooming in the (back)yard,  
the tulip tree full of buds, honeysuckle just barely yellowed.

Scattered dandelion seeds in the wind.  
Chipmunks scuttled across the pale lumber  
that once held our deck,  
now demolished. They were in search of  
the Blue Diamond unsalted almonds my mother set on the edge.

But then, the oaken trees...  
they started shaking, the limbs akimbo.  
The leaves rustled with the anger of a giant,  
azure skies darkening to tones as deep as a seal.

As the storm progressed, the strength decreased and  
it made me ponder. It was rhythmic but I was apprehensive.

Would it destroy the delicacy of my world?  
Why must this thunder intrigue my mind so?

About halfway through, the rain itself was steady,  
a streamline of thoughts, always ready.  
My neighbor's pool sparkled like diamonds  
as each drop descended from the heavens.

*pitter patter, pitter patter,*  
the bounce of each leaf as a dew-drop hits it.

I noticed the cobbled stepping stone covered in dampened moss  
as the sky's magnificent vengeance ceased.

And all at once, a scent loved by many... the petrichor.  
Our "spring" hadn't been much until the sleek swift rains  
drove out dry grass and unhappy flowers.

The Sun wasn't quick to come out from hiding  
But once it did peek out, the light,  
it was Radiant and Piercing,  
working with the water to create new life for the kind nature I so love.

## Red Ruby

Emily Moore

I sit quietly on her bed as she packs

*I'm* unassuming but on the other hand

she's pretty, dusky rays through her hair...  
innocently highlighting every caramel lock

She's beguiling and by god everything  
about her makes me want to

I should **n o t** finish that sentence

Instead, I look down,  
pretend to not exist,  
when he comes over.

I don't want to watch how she's  
kissed,  
and it's not being done by me.

(I shouldn't be jealous, that's not fair)

So, all too soon,  
I tell her I need to go...

She offers her hoard of jewels  
I take a ruby

Redder than my face

I arrive home and look at it in my window  
with the afternoon heat lamp

There are small white gems surrounding the ruby,  
*how darling*  
The jewels are on a nice golden chain,

I'll add this to my memories...

## Fueling the Fire

Abbey Norvell

Jessie always loved an adrenaline rush. She loved roller coasters, skydiving, slingshots, bungee jumping, anything that made her feel alive by bringing her close to death. Her favorite adrenaline rush that trumped any other rush was fire. Burning things tethered her to this world in the simultaneous excitement and peace it filled her with.

Jessie's mother always told her that if she kept playing with fire, she'd get burned. The demeaning sentiment echoed in her mind at the most inconvenient times.

*If you keep playing with fire, you'll get burned.*

Little did her mother know that burning things grounded her, kept her soul content to feel like she had control over one thing in her life. Her lighter was a precious possession, the only thing she had left from her father and an inadvertent symbol of rebellion and disapproval of her mother.

Jessie lived with her mother, a shred of a parent who brought a different man home each week, never filling the nagging void in her as hard as she tried. Jessie's father's abrupt departure 10 years ago left her mother shattered, and nobody seemed to know how to piece her mother back together. At the ripe age of seven, Jessie wept with her mother after realizing daddy was never coming back. While her mother found solutions in temporary fixes of alcoholic men, Jessie found solace in her best friend.

Mason was her best friend, the only person she wholeheartedly trusted. She stumbled upon Mason right after her dad left— less than 24 hours later, to be exact— in the woods. It was almost as if when the world took one person away, it granted her another. She didn't realize how much she needed him until he was there for her.

Jessie stood in precisely the same spot in the woods she met him, crushing the orange October leaves under her black combat boots and dragging shreds of them around the bottom of her bootcut jeans. She vividly remembered meeting him, even though it was many years ago. They shared the woods that held a simple path to each other's houses, spending each day playing tag and swimming and each night eating dinner and climbing trees. Did things between them change in high school? Of course they did. Mason was a popular football player, and Jessie was an uninvolved recluse regularly bullied by the girls who swooned over Mason. They didn't spend time in their treehouse anymore, the treehouse that they had renovated together. Regardless of this social difference and time discrepancy, Mason always treated her the same— seen, heard, and worthy. She couldn't love him more if she tried.

She stared at her long, skinny legs while her long black hair curtailed her face and pondered a life with Mason. Jessie was not the type to daydream and definitely not the type to plan for the future, but Mason changed things. Once she realized her feelings toward him were more than feelings for a best friend, she was awkward around him. For the past six months, she rarely saw

him for fear of falling deeper in love and finding herself in an entanglement. She took so long to admit her feelings to herself, and she now felt a tangible, magnetic pull to find him and confess everything. She wanted to tell him she loved him— actually loved him, not like they usually said it as friends.

The dry fall Arizona air filled her lungs as she took deep breaths, but the deep breaths did not calm her. She started breathing faster and faster and faster until finally realizing what was missing— the fire.

*If you keep playing with fire, you'll get burned.*

Her favorite pastime, adrenaline rush, and everything in between. She kept her father's cigarette lighter handy at all times in her jeans pocket because she never knew when she would have the opportunity to burn something. She typically burnt small things, and the crunch below her feet sparked an idea in her mind. She wanted to burn a leaf or two, let the rising smoke and impending heat pierce her nostrils and distract her heart.

The familiar cigarette lighter slid out of her pocket with ease as she grasped it with one hand and searched the ground for a leaf with the other. She chose her victim, a dark yellow leaf with small holes dotted throughout its surface. She ignited the cigarette lighter and stared at the flame for a lifetime before letting it tickle the base of the leaf and catch fire. Waves of heat from the leaf made the thin hairs on her fingers stand up. Her undivided attention was focused on that consuming flame, a bright light of destruction on a dry and dark day in the woods.

*If you keep playing with fire, you'll get burned.*

Suddenly— a branch broke. Her heart jumped. Soft laughter ensued.

She scanned the woods, trying to figure out the source of the noise until her eyes landed on the treehouse. Squinting and confused, Jessie tried to make out the figures she saw in the treehouse window. Laughter rang in her ears again as she realized Mason was in that treehouse, hugging and holding some girl. Mason was in that treehouse— their treehouse— with some girl. She felt the weight of everything all at once, and her face became dangerously cold as her stomach tried to relieve its contents. Her mind, body, and soul recoiled as she dropped the burning leaf and was cemented in place.

Her throat, chest, and feet burned with horror and hurt, and she felt as if she might never move again. Her heart pounded against her ribcage— BA-BOOM, BA-BOOM, BA-BOOM. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the scene in the treehouse, oblivious to the flame that caught the bottom of her bootcut jeans.

The reality of what was in front of her grew strong arms to physically grab her heart, twist it, and rip it out of her chest. As she felt the betrayal seep like toxic chemicals into the marrow of her bones, she smelled smoke. She jerked her head towards the smell to realize it was emitting from her. Her eyebrows creased as she tried to understand the scene in front of her. How are flames licking up her legs? Where did those come from? The world seemed to slow as the flames grew higher and higher. Instead of feeling a comforting adrenaline rush, these flames seemed to confine her, hurt her, shame her. Her

face dripped sweat as she snapped into real time and started violently hitting her legs in an attempt to put out the flames, but it was too late.

*If you keep playing with fire, you'll get burned.*

Her heart exploded into a thousand pieces as her knees went weak, and black consumed her lungs and vision.

Jessie blinked herself into consciousness and vividly remembered the flames she left behind. The scene flashed before her eyes as if she were back in those woods staring at Mason and his mysterious new girl. Mason. Girl. Flames. Mason. Mason and girl and flames.

In an instant, her world crashed down around her, and she was the one who caused it to crash. She inadvertently killed her best friend and the love of her life without even telling him how she felt, which was all she wanted earlier that day. She was breathing heavily and started a war within herself. She wanted to scream at her own brain that she didn't deserve deep breaths.

*If you keep playing with fire, you'll get burned.*

She didn't deserve to feel calm. She didn't deserve to be okay. Yet, her mom wrapped her arms around her, and she melted into a puddle of grief and guilt and depression right there in the comfort of her mom's thin arms. Her mom stroked her hair and told her that she was sorry, that it was her fault for not protecting her and loving her like she should have.

Jessie quickly blinked tears out of her eyes as her mom pulled back and shuffled away to reveal another figure approaching her.

"Jess, Jess, are you alright?" Mason asked.

The familiar sound of Mason's voice both confused and comforted her, but how could it be him? She had killed him in the fire.

"I thought you were dead," Jessie said.

"Are you kidding me? I thought you were dead. I saw the fire from the window of the treehouse, and I saw you lying on the ground. Tina called 911, and I raced down to pick you up and carry you out of the woods. I was so worried about you."

As Jessie comprehended Mason's words, she finally examined her surroundings to discover she was in the burn ICU unit of a hospital. She averted her eyes to her own legs and saw them wrapped in thick, snowy white bandages with stains. The second and third degree burns on her legs dotted seeping yellow puss and red blood onto the bandages.

"Where's Tina?" Jessie asked.

"I told her to leave. She doesn't mean anything to me. When I thought I was going to lose you, nothing else mattered to me," Mason said.

"How many times have I told you that if you play with fire you are going to get burned?" Jessie's mom asked.

"Never again," Jessie said. "I love you, Mason. Thanks for rescuing me."

"I'm your guy. I don't know how I didn't realize it before, but now I see what's right in front of me, what's always been there for me," Mason said.

As Mason leaned over the side of the hospital bed to kiss Jessie's forehead, he whispered.

“I love you, too.”

Jessie finally felt that adrenaline rush like no other rush before— the one she’d longed for since her dad left her splintered years ago.

Mason pulled away, and she wanted nothing more than for him to kiss her on her forehead each time she woke up. The mischievous look in his eyes said he wanted that and more with her.

“Oh, Jess, I threw away your lighter. I hope you don’t mind,” Mason said.

“Of course not. It was time. Time for me to let go and move on.”



## **The Arm of Mezentius**

D. B. Nure

Were you an earthbound star,  
Too holy to touch?

No.  
If so, you were more rose than star.

I found you such a grand and glowing creature,  
your divinity so apparent, that to my blooming madness,  
it seemed to warrant nothing but worship.

I loved you as a Persian his fire,  
and your light, as all lights do, lengthened my shadows  
despite my cautious distance.

O, if only in my love I had been more errant,  
if only I had spit in the face of my god,  
had defied that strange paganism, found in many youths,  
and found, simply, a girl I loved;  
for even the gods, knowing the ecstasy of mortals,  
descend from their immaculate palaces, quitting their divine mates  
to seek their holy amours in the stables and wild places.

## **The Shrouded God**

D.B. Nure

There seems to be  
a kind of perception  
behind blindness;

In the wonder given  
from the clouds  
of their wide eyes

They seem acolytes  
prostrate at the feet  
of an unseen prophet;

In their realm  
of total absence,  
what is the shrouded god?

With all earthy variance  
diminished, does the divine revealed  
stand at their right hands?

Or, in the expanse of void,  
have we but one place to kneel;  
and in that dark haunt,

Does the black prophet  
tell nothing?

## **Aubade**

Noah Powers

Not for the woman with whom I am in love, no,  
I am writing an aubade for the caterpillar  
that I watched crawl across a branch real slow  
this morning, as the sun rose and I was not alone,  
as its tiny legs took each step drenched  
in anticipation, coat of hairs a row of columns,  
my own hair matted to my scalp from sleep,  
from the love connection of head to pillow and  
the hand of a woman slinking over my stubble.  
I wished for a moment that I was the caterpillar.

Perhaps the poem should be for her, or God  
who is a specter, a possibility, in the bedroom  
(both are) when morning slides into place.  
I only worship in bed beside her,  
my hands clasped over her navel,  
a prayer slips into her ear,  
scripture finds its way into this poem—  
Oh, how holy! How holy, how holy,  
I tell her all at once how holy she is  
and her cheek, chin, then lips, eyelids  
are butterfly flutters, eyes are dollops  
of hardened amber, bright pools of liquid bronze,  
I am in sanctified ground, I am, I am,  
thankful to not be a caterpillar.

In my last dream, I never went to sleep at all.  
I caught a blue butterfly in hand,  
bare like a winter branch, and it was gone  
when my fingers uncurled. I hungered for the moon  
to stop, looked for an emergency brake to yank  
and make night infinite. In this world I hardly know,  
she is dawn's break and bird's first song, blades of light  
and warmth on the rise. In my last dream, my coffee broke open,  
the windowsill wore sunlight, and the poem did not end.

## Variations on Yankee Candle Scents

Noah Powers

### *A Calm & Quiet Place*

To produce the scent of A Calm & Quiet Place, harbor a fear of anywhere outside of your bedroom. Become shaky when speaking to a stranger or in front of others, develop nausea at the thought of going to a party or bar and embarrassing yourself, and therefore, never go. Contemplate all the times your anxiety proved credible, such as the first party you went to but didn't want to, sophomore year of high school, when the cops came and left, but you still threw up a pile of black-tinted bile from a mix of distress and dark liquor. Ask your mom to order your food in public until you get to college. Spend a chunk of time in each friendship explaining that it's hard for you to be social, to be normal, multiple days a week. Keep secrets if only to preserve the peace in your relationships. Treat each day home alone like a resort experience, solely because it's the one time when there can be silence. Realize that living in a big city makes you miserable, because there is rarely any calm or quiet. Lay in your bedroom, door closed, and daydream about living out west, where the unbordered desert and sky-scraping mountains are this type of place.

### *Sun and Sand*

To produce the scent of Sun & Sand, give your high school best friend with the perhaps-too-cool dad a twenty and wait for the text that the beer has arrived. Drink too much and plan a trip to Florida, where the same friend has a perhaps-too-cool mom with a beachfront apartment. At the age of seventeen, catch a flight with one other minor and an eighteen-year-old from Nashville to St. Petersburg, Florida; call an Uber for the ride to the beach. Next discover that your friend's mom smokes weed, which you've never tried before, but you will now. Scrawl a grocery list of alcohol: something cheap for beer pong, something with flavor for fun, something hard for shots. Find yourself sleeping on the floor in the apartment which is the size of a regular home's living room. Slam your knee against the grey, stone table in the backyard where a sheet of plywood is topped with Solo cups, those that match the color of the fresh blood imitating a burst pipe down your leg. Don't notice the blood until morning, when it's dry and matted into your hair. Drink enough for a DUI, take hits from a pipe, and walk down to the beach with your friends at sunset. Watch the sky turn orange, pink, and red all at the same time. Sift through piles of sand with your numb hands and wonder if it ever gets better than this.

### *Color Me Happy*

To produce the scent of Color Me Happy, you have to use your imagination. Imagine that your parents kept their marriage together. Imagine that splitting your life between a home and an abusive household didn't foster severe anxiety. Imagine that Caneyville, Kentucky, with its population of 612, faded brick post office (originally built in 1837) and cobwebbed storefronts isn't a place you

know well, the pitstop between your parent's homes. Use that same imagination to yank yourself out of those therapy sessions that were scheduled on and off throughout your teenage years, and instead place yourself wherever a happy teenager may be, perhaps in Caneyville back when the *Kentucky Cardinal* train still ran through from Louisville to Memphis, Tennessee. Imagine, then, the *Planter* rumbling down to New Orleans from Memphis with you onboard, reading the poetic names of other Illinois Central Railroad trains: *Green Diamond*, *Magnolia Star*, *Sunchaser*, *Land O'Corn*, *Panama Limited*, and so on. The Limited being the northbound from New Orleans, the one that would lead you back home, to Kentucky, to the place your imagination is leaving behind. Instead, imagine your several block walk from the train station to the French Quarter, to Café du Monde and its crisp beignets and warm café au lait. Imagine that this moment is finally one you don't wish to leave behind.



Ethan Justice

Untitled

## Aberdeen

Abigail Raley

I creep through town at 45 miles an hour.  
I do not pass the Louvre. I do not pass that feverish, old  
windmill. Now, I am drafting a poem in which Sylvia Plath is  
my accountant, but I think maybe that was done before  
somewhere in Venice. I played a game once  
that was set in Venice; it reminds me of the summer  
before Dad left, when he would curl around a desktop  
with fresh tobacco thick on his teacake tongue and  
command me to do something new to solve the puzzle.  
I do not live in Venice, though, and I have not solved the puzzle,  
and I may not have a father, but I do know a man in Nashville  
who knows some tricks on guitar, which at this point feels  
close enough. For now, I drive past a Walmart, a Target,  
two Krogers, and a Piggly Wiggly which makes me  
think of Mamaw and not Keats, who would have  
much more to say than Mamaw would on the death of this  
whole thing, but he would not be a very good accountant,  
I think. So instead, Mamaw and I strap into the '98 Honda  
and cruise for a while. She tells me about Nashville (not  
knowing about the man I loved there last year) and  
begs me to take her, but I remind her where the clerk's  
office is and she remembers that she is a lonely woman  
in a small town full of little fires, always burning. She does  
not see Vanderbilt, much less the Louvre. Rather, I drop  
her off at Aberdeen and she sinks back into her bleeding  
grave. I scratch a new death date on her headstone  
(until the next time you want to sing me "You are my Sunshine")  
and let the preacher know  
that fire and brimstone is not as frightening as  
my mother's maiden name —Burden— when it bleeds like  
an open sore on a native tongue. I do not see Rome  
burn, but I watch an old oak tip. I do not see the Parthenon,  
but I see the way my mother's hands  
knot at the knuckles. I do not see Mecca or you, dear reader,  
who are billions of 45's away in a much more important  
place than this,  
but rather the emptiness of Kentucky shade stretched out,  
dead or dying, ultimately, unsure of which.

## **Break Joint<sup>1</sup>**

Abigail Raley

*“The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence”*  
~Psalm 115:17

The flies took us last summer, back  
in Birmingham, when the mail  
was stolen and the grass grew  
between the clutch and the floorboard.

The maggots came that summer  
when the mechanic missed our bodies  
clipped up by the skin, the clothesline  
leaking lake water down our toes,  
puckers at the shoulder blades.  
*Don't let her crease, now.*

Before that summer,  
Joseph knelt before the oak  
in our backyard, turned his face  
up, and drowned in the rain.

Before that summer,  
Clay went down to the basement  
and never came back up for whiskey,  
never thrashed his head against  
the steering wheel again.

Before that summer,  
Mamaw wrang her last chicken neck  
and, fresh as Sunday morning,  
disappeared into her nightgown  
with citrus sticky cheeks.

Polio slept in the toes that summer

Blackberry palmed,  
we ate cubed cheddar and slept with the windows  
open  
shot fox frothing by the screen door  
slammed shut.

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<sup>1</sup> “The epiphyseal cartilage at the distal end of metacarpal bones used to classify carcasses as lamb” (Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources)



Before the flies got us,  
we went to the river,  
baptized the water moccasins,  
our teeth rattling with the threat  
of pulling.

We slipped away before this--  
this home full of dead people  
and old things:  
the box of pencils  
Aunt Sheila only afforded after Christmas,  
Jesse's folded wheelchair,  
the hand you hold alone

on your walk to school  
through the woods  
when wolves are near  
and Kentucky is just as hungry  
as your murmuring gut.

Before that summer,  
when the dolls and the window  
and the store were new.

When the house was ours  
the foxes and the cans and the clothesline.  
When we were alive  
and had breath in our lungs

before this all was condemned  
and quiet  
and sold

I wondered  
about the dust we'd gather  
when our bodies hung to dry  
and no one came  
to start the car.

## **Airport Bones**

Elizabeth Roth

I am that bird you watch  
slamming myself into the window  
hoping between seconds that  
instead of  
cold and unyielding Glass  
the bright Sky  
will be there to greet me.

I didn't mean for it to be this way,  
a spectacle for pitying eyes,  
trapped and separated.  
A thin strip away from Freedom.

My bones rattle and I fall,  
very different from the first time,  
when I was learning to fly,  
tumbling in a rollercoaster way.

You make cooing sounds  
as I look up at you and try  
to breathe around the Disappointment  
in my chest.  
It festers around my broken ribs.

Your hands are Gentle  
when you pick up my body,  
the one that I have meticulously made  
of Paper skin and Glass bones.  
Instead of feeling comforted, though,  
I feel all the more helpless.  
Trapped.  
I can't even  
knock myself against the window now.  
I can't even  
See the Sky.



Cierra Pegg

Untitled

## Life Should Be So Sweet

Elizabeth Roth

The farm has always had a kind of quiet heat. In the moments between speaking, it would settle in the air pockets of your joints and expand until you couldn't breathe. And then, when someone would speak, the pockets would pop and expel cool air into your bloodstream like soda fizz. This is not typical of any farm, but it was typical of ours.

The barn itself was well kept, painted a friendly eggshell white by yours truly. Outfitted with deep lacquered wood on the inside and a rope cordoning off the staircase to the loft, where Mama would speak to the people who would come there. We even had little window stickers that looked for everything like stained glass windows. Mama laughed at that one for ages and said we really were like a church now. Our house, an acre away, was a peeling but settled yellow. It was not meant to be seen by visitors to our farm, but whenever Mama felt it was needed she would invite a visitor over to our porch for a glass of homemade sweet tea, which sometimes wasn't very sweet at all.

I was usually the one to help Mama with chores around the place; my little brother Max was no help, as he was two and usually screaming. My sister Mary moved off to college a few years ago and has resolutely ignored us ever since. I don't take offense to it, and neither does Mama. She could never handle the work or the people, and that's just the job. I'm never exactly sure where Papa went. I vaguely remember him hanging around but sometime around when I was five, he just drops off from my memory. Mama likes to be cryptic whenever I ask her about it, saying he ate an especially sour lemon, his face puckered up so much that he just shriveled away. I don't doubt that it could happen, but more likely he moved into a motel with some hooker somewhere and just didn't deign to tell us about it. Whatever Mama wants to believe is fine, I guess.

It was a particularly cloudy day on the farm when I learned exactly what it was we sell. I was in second grade, and I remember I had been telling Mama about some craft that I had thrown together, swinging my big metal lunchbox back and forth as we walked up the dirt path to the house. I stopped when I saw a lemon on the road, busted open. Now, I will be the first to admit that I was a nasty little heathen when I was small. I put anything in my mouth that would fit. I made a grab for the lemon when Mama nearly yanked my arm from the socket.

"Never that," she whisper-yelled at me, her voice high with concern. "Never eat the lemons or limes from the farm, Grace. Remember that."

Naturally, I was terrified. Mama was supposed to be strong, always, and her fear scared me more than her warning ever could.

For the next two years, I studiously avoided the patch beyond the house. All that sat on that land was a single lemon tree, and a single lime tree, which I never questioned for the simple reason that I never thought about it much. I started thinking about it a whole lot more when my sister left. The night

she went away I heard her and Mama in an argument. Mama wanted her to stay and help with the farm, and Mary wouldn't hear nothing of it.

"All those people," she kept squeaking, "All those people."

The next minutes after that were filled with more frantic whispering and the next thing I knew I was hiding around the corner by the staircase. Mary was storming out the door with her little suitcase in one hand and the other furiously swiping at the tears that leaked out of her eyes. The door closed behind her and I wondered where she was going. It was nighttime and raining, and the dirt that got kicked up on dry days would suck you down like quicksand when it was wet out. I wondered if she had brought her pair of sunshine-yellow boots with her that she liked to tease me with, saying I would never grow up enough to fit them.

Mama came out of the living room, and that yellow light surrounding her in the hallway made her look for everything like an angel. The swirling patterns of dust in the hallway formed a halo for her, and I suddenly forgot all about Mary, and how she must already be prying one of her shoes out of the mud outside.

"Grace, I know you're there," she said in that soft voice that she usually only used when she was fixing one of my scrapes. "Come here, let me tell you a story."

That was the night I learned what we do on the farm. We sell miracles. Well, not miracles exclusively. Those lemons and limes we have out there growing in our backyard can be mighty sour or mighty sweet, and you never know which kind you have until you bite into it. Mama told me that night as we sat in my favorite overstuffed chair, her stroking my hair, that people will pay a whole lot of money just for the shot of tasting an extra sweet fruit from one of our trees. I laughed at first. I was sure she was pulling my leg like she loved to do when she told me that if I ate a strawberry it would grow a plant in my stomach. But no, she just looked at me with those serious eyes of hers and waited for my little giggles to quit. She told me Mary didn't like working the farm because she didn't want to be selling curses to people, but Mama said it was the miracles that mattered to her. I thought the same.

We had a man come by on the first day I was allowed to work the farm. I drove the little golf cart Mama bought at a second-hand yard sale up to the main road where the man had parked his car. He looked awful rough. His hair was sticking up in greasy spikes and his eyes were almost sunk into his face. Mama told me later that's what a lot of folks look like before they take a bite of their miracles. I took the man to the little patch behind the house where he forked over a wad of cash to Mama before plucking a lime off the tree. (Mama says a lot of people go for the limes because they think limes are sweeter than lemons, but after the years we've worked there we know there's equal chances no matter which tree you go for. Limes may not taste as sour at first, but they come back around and hit you just when you least expect it. That's just the nature of the lime tree. The lemons, though, they hit you right up front. Those are the miracles and curses that we get to see right up close). So, the man took his lime, and we took him back to the barn. We have a few old couches in there,

and a counter where the person can cut their fruit open. Recently, we've started offering water just in case they're the fancy type that can't handle a mouthful. As long as they're miracles, they don't have much to worry about. We moved up to the loft to watch. This man just cut his lime in half and took a heaping mouthful. Me and Mama both watched for the tell-tale pucker, but it never came. A smile had spread on the man's face and he stumbled back to take a seat on one of the couches. Mama walked down the stairs and shook the man's hand. He left laughing. The next week we opened the newspaper to find a picture of the man in the features section; he had won a large sum of money at the horse races. That night me and Mama danced in the kitchen.

Life continued like that for a while. I saw a fair bit of curses take hold. We had to stop one woman from using the knife to stab herself after she took a bite of a face-numbingly sour lemon. She got into a car crash on the way home and broke her pelvis. She was a marathoner, so we realized this was especially unfortunate. The first few curses I kept track of, but after a while, when their lives just kept getting worse and worse, I turned to a scrapbook full of the moments when our miracles first took hold instead. Mama likes to joke that she ate a sweet lemon before I was born. I like to joke that I ate a few sour grapes that had grown on a vine nearby and was cursed to work there. Really though, things weren't bad. I didn't go off to some fancy college like Mary did, but the people in town smiled as I walked by, and me and Mama and Max had a hot meal every night.

One night, a cold night, the kind that gets into your bones and makes every breath cold, Max started screaming up a storm. At first, Mama and I thought he had an ear infection. He was always sticking things into his ears the same way I stuck things in my mouth. Family trait I guess. We looked closer. His tight little fist was all sticky, and his shirt was wet. Mama shushed him, rocking him back and forth in her arms while I looked for the culprit. There, under his bed. A barely ripe lemon laid, squished open, and juice puddling around the rind. Wordlessly I pointed to it. Mama looked around Max's squirming head, eyes wide and mouth open in a terrified "O."

"Maybe it's sweet, Mama."

She started to cry and set Max down on the bed. I grabbed the sticky lemon from under the bed handed it to her. She sat down with it, cradling it like she might have done to Max or me when we were smaller. Mama was never a loud person, but this one time I wished she would make a sound. Any sound at all. I held my hand up to my nose, trying to catch a whiff of the juice. Miracles always had a different smell about them. Sugar and tar. My face split open into a smile.

"It's sweet, Mama, Max got a miracle!" I wiped the juice off on my shorts and shook her shoulder. She was wearing an old flannel of my father's; it was soft with age and stained with too many coffee spills. Max was still bawling, but his screams had quieted to sniffles. I wanted to laugh but she was still crying. Why was she still crying? "Mama?" I asked, taking my hand off her shoulder.

She looked up at me with those eyes and I had never seen a more pitiful expression, not even on the faces of the customers with the sourest of fruit.

“Grace,” she said. Her voice cracked. Just that one word and my soul shattered.

“Mama.” I wish I could say I knew what she was going to say. I wish I could say I was prepared.

“Grace, my light,” Mama sniffed and looked back down at the lemon that she still cradled in her palms. “There are no such things as miracles.”

My breath was coming in short gasps and I knew without looking at the bed that Max had died with the sweetest taste on his tongue. “Mama?” I fell to my knees. My hands made weak grabbing motions, but I couldn’t make my arms move. She still hadn’t let go of the lemon and distantly I realized that she probably wouldn’t if she had the choice. She was selling curses and turning a profit doing it. Those stained-glass stickers were just the prelude to her twisted game, my very own god. I worshiped her. I was her devoted, her light, her miracle. My throat closed and I choked, gasping, scrambling away from her and out of the room where she was still clinging to that sticky corpse.

I don’t remember the next few hours. I had run up the dirt road where I had driven our willing customers for years, graciously carting them to disappointment and a life of hurt. I flagged down a passing car and flagged down another passing car and rinsed and repeated until I got to Missouri State where I was pretty sure Mary went. I’m not sure what the desk attendant of the Student Union building thought when I stumbled in, blood on my palms from where I fell traveling up that dirt road (no more Mama to croon me to sleep with that soft voice of hers) and tear tracks on my face.

“Is there a Mary here?” I asked, voice shuddering and the inexplicable taste of citrus in my mouth. Or maybe it was pennies, from when I bit the inside of my cheek trying not to scream. “Mary Park?”

The desk attendant did some searching and found Mary, who came into the building to find me shuddering on one of the lobby chairs, crying in the silent way that I inherited from Mama. The chair I was in raised the hairs on my arms, and I thought miserably that Mama would have told me the night was too cold to go wandering in coveralls and a t-shirt. But Mama wasn’t here, and Mary’s arms were warm, and she wrapped them around me with a frown. She had a sensible cardigan on. Mary was always sensible. I knew that about her like I knew she drew smiley faces on her pancakes with blueberries, or that she played with her food when she was done eating. She looked at me like a stranger that night, and thinking back on it, I must have looked an awful lot like a ghost, so pale. That night we did not talk. She took me to her dorm room and let me sleep. Her bed was hard and uncomfortable in the way my bed at home could never be, which soothed my unconscious mind because I knew this way Mama could not look in on me while I was sleeping to check if I was okay. I didn’t need her to check in on me to know that I wasn’t okay.

In the morning Mary took me to get pancakes. She was mostly silent. Her pancakes were plain. I wondered if she had only dressed her pancakes up to make me smile.

Idly I thought back to that man who had won money at the horse races. My scrapbook covered the miracle's first successes; I was too naïve to look for anything else. After his gamble had won him the lot, he decided to take another gamble. One that would lose all the money and then some, one that cost him his life when that lime grabbed him by the throat and thrust him into a world that was too over his head for him to handle.

"There are no miracles, Mary," I said.

"I know," she sighed.

So we sat together in a sticky booth off of her campus for a few hours, eating bland pancakes, and we both told the waitress 'no' when she asked if we would like lemon in our water.



## **Emptiness**

Lauren Sheppard

When I am writing  
From where do the words come?  
From nothingness?  
They swirl aimlessly, contentedly  
In the living void  
Until they need to come to me  
In a rushing tide  
Of creativity.  
They are unfragmented  
Streaming along  
As though connected  
Long ago  
By a force larger than me.  
Believing in  
The void means accepting  
Nothingness.  
Accepting nothingness means  
Knowing that  
Something  
Always comes from  
Nothing  
And feeling empty  
Only means that you are ready  
To be filled.

## Good Sister Bad Sister Flickers Joy

Kayla Spears

Waited to hear my sister wail before I dove headfirst out of the womb. Hardly my last selfish act.

Kissed the worm lips of a boy under a movie glow; she blurred my treason to the teacher. Made my muscles scream on runs through the woods; she crushed bananas into sweet bread with my mom. Daydreamed how to make a reader's mouth water for tastes unreal; she composed calculus notes with rainbow pens. Dreamed of living on the Sun; she dreamed of living within the shadows of the Moon.

The summer of our thirteenth year, breasts and insecurities just beginning to bud, I danced atop our grandparent's garden wall. Dirty yellow converse scraped stone in song, never stopped to consider the fall. What it would feel like to snap. Laughed as my sister, with wide eyes and a bird's cry, begged me to come down. That same autumn, I left a love letter in the locker of a boy whose name she moaned in her sleep. *I dance with you in my dreams* signed with her name. The fantasy gone.

Every night, stuffed animals secured between our arms, we exchanged "Goodnight, I love you" with "Goodnight, I love you too." Our ritual to remind each other we were not alone in the dark. Sometimes, I rattled the room. Bit my tongue, grinning, as her voice groped for me in the dark. The light, rushedly flicked on, revealed her face red with betrayal. Mine, red with laughter. I assured myself I was teaching her to be less afraid. A lesson. The truth: it was funny to see her squirm. My feet were steadier to know she shattered with one gentle breeze.

Reader, you might think I am a bad sister. Perhaps I was. Perhaps I am. But there are moments when I was good. I was the one who held her hand on bumpy bus rides – minds humming together through headphone wires, hearts pulsing to the same tempo. Lifted her off the ground, pale and sweaty, after she lost herself to a brownie bought from a pimply shithead. Shared whispers in the dark about our parents who never loved each other, about our grandpa who called us the wrong names, about our choir director of yellow teeth and wandering hands. We lifted the grimey truths, the fears we couldn't admit to ourselves in the light, off one another's brittle backs. My sister is in every flickering memory of joy. Interwoven into every definition of me.

Last August, we cradled each other one last time before differing educations severed us. Our childhood room like the womb of our mother. Our souls nuzzled, prepared for our headfirst dives. Eyes closed. I swear – the first night on my twin-sized mattress, I could hear her crying. I think she heard me too.

## Hungry For What I Cannot Eat

Kayla Spears

I was born hungry. Only when my belly was sloshing with my mother's milk would my anger subside. My childhood was smiley face french fries, homemade strawberry cakes, and chicken nuggets drizzled with barbeque sauce. Hands constantly sticky from the melted Skittles in my pockets. Mouths, glowing in the light of the refrigerator, dripped with the coffee creamer my sister and I stole. Food was associated with everything I loved: to eat was to check in on my mother in the middle hot summer days; to bake was to giggle with my twin as we got powdered sugar on our noses; to gather blackberries and pick apples was a chance to sweat with my crinkle-eyed grandparents.

When I was ten, food became calories. A cold-calculated number. Our school uniforms of baggy polos and loose khakis were wiped away – wiping away the anonymity of my body in a crowd. Clothes to me, up until then, were simply there to do their job: to cover my nakedness. I learned that girls could choose clothes that instead inspired fantasies of their nakedness. Girls strutted into middle school with skin-tight jeans that cupped their asses, spaghetti-strap tops with bras peeking out, and high ponytails that highlighted the slender slope of their necks. The hunger I was born with shifted. I became hungry for eyes.

That winter, I wept at Tumbleweeds when my mom surprised me with ice cream. I wept with hunger. The salt tasted good on my tongue. When I finally blurted out, between gasps, that I was scared I was going to get fat, my parents rolled their eyes. “That’s ridiculous, Kayla. You are as thin as a stick.” Like how we laugh when a dog is fearful towards a trivial object, like a balloon or a vacuum, they laughed at me. Instead of growing out of my ridiculous fear, like a gnarled root digs its way into the ground, I grew into it.

In high school, my finger finally found the courage to wiggle into the back of my throat. I had found a way to cheat the system. Ice cream, cake, fried chicken – they could all be mine as long as I gave them back. I scooped out my insides like Pooh Bear scoops out honey. One Tuesday night, I watched as a mangled, bile-soaked version of my grandmother's pumpkin pie flushed to the sewers. Earlier that day, my grandmother had gently smiled as she watched me over the kitchen table. “My growing girl,” she had crooned. What would she have thought of me if she had seen me cowering before the toilet, choking on her love?

This morning, my partner poured sugary sweet syrup over my waffles. Over cups of coffee, we sighed as our bellies were filled with flour, sugar, and butter. I refused to give it back.

I plan to die full.

**Atta**  
Arivumani Srivastava

The blistering heat of the Punjabi summer struck Ranbir's skin like a bullet. Papa hobbled alongside him, his cane trembling as he picked it up with every step.

"How are studies in Allahabad, beta?"

"They're going well, Papa."

"When is your train back?"

"Tomorrow."

"Acha, acha. Good, beta. Could you get the door for me?"

Ranbir opened the screen door and propped it open. He grabbed his father's arm and helped him up the stairs and through the door. His father looked back out at him.

"Ranbir, please be careful at Jallianwala Bagh, the Army is supposed to be there."

"When have I not been careful?"

"I know, beta, I just can't spare to lose both you and mummy."

"Yes, Papa. Do you need me to pick up some atta on my way home?"

"Please."

"Okay, I'll be back by six, Papa."

"Take care, beta."

Ranbir shut the screen door behind him and waited for the click of his father locking it. Convincing his father to let him go to independence demonstrations had always been a chore, but his documentation of the growing independence movement with Professor Reddy was invaluable. Allahabad University was a center of revolutionaries, and Professor Reddy had recruited him to record the demonstrations planned at the garden.

Ranbir turned down a narrow alleyway to escape the boiling heat from the summer sun. Stalls selling pani puri and chaat dotted the edges of the path, and the bustle of farmers hauling in flour from the previous year's harvest season filled the center. He zig-zagged his way through the crowd, and eventually made it out of the narrow backstreet. Ranbir, who had always been obsessed with time, checked his pocket watch.

*5:30, I'm going to be late, dammit.*

He ran to the narrow entryway to Jallianwalla Bagh and entered the vast garden. He heard the chants of nationalist protesters and the screams of British soldiers to back off. He pulled out his pocket notebook, pulled back the flimsy band keeping it shut, and began writing furiously. He documented every part of the demonstrations, from the villagers who had traveled to Harmandir Sahib to celebrate Baisakhi, to the university students and independence movement leaders who led rallying calls against the Britishers' arrest of freedom fighters. Ranbir checked his pocket watch again before he began sketching.

*5:36, I need to hurry to be able to stop at the market for atta.*

Ranbir began scribbling on a new page, depicting a courtroom-like sketch of the freedom fighters and the opposing line of pale soldiers wrapped

along the fringes of the wall of the garden. He began to draw the bushes dotting the garden when suddenly, a loud pop and screams erupted from the crowd.

Gunfire. The once jubilant and righteous crowds of protesters now ran towards the exits, which appeared to be blocked. Ranbir stuffed his notebook in his pocket and sprinted towards the main entrance in panic, feeling the flesh of the wounded under his sandals as he stampeded along with hundreds of others towards the only way out. Hundreds of rounds seemed to fire off from the guns of the British, and Ranbir watched as bodies around him erupted in a red burst and dropped to the ground. To his left, the wall of soldiers was now covered in a veil of smoke from their rifles. To his right, he watched in horror as people jumped into the bagh's well, figuring that the possibility of death from the fall was better than being shot by a Britisher.

Ranbir continued his sprint toward the narrow gate, but the crowd around him seemed to be thinning. The stampede that had previously been hundreds had now been reduced to a few dozen, and the beautiful green grass that had covered the garden was now coated in red. Ranbir had almost reached the exit when suddenly, a bullet ripped through his skin, and the pool of blood splashed as he hit the ground. His notebook flew out of his pocket, the pages newly stained with red. The sound of his precious pocket watch crystal shattering was a mere whisper among the rounds of ammunition being fired and the screams still engulfing the garden.

Papa checked his watch.

*6:05, Ranbir should be home anytime.*

He placed the tawa on the stove and pulled out the rolling pin in preparation for dinner. He limped back to his lounge chair in the parlor and sat down, resting his elbows in the indentions of the arms from years of sitting and studying. He picked up his copy of *Times of India* and continued reading from where he had left off, waiting patiently for Ranbir to return with atta for tonight's chapati.

Papa turned his gaze to the grandfather clock in the corner of the room.

*6:20, where is Ranbir?*

He pushed against the chair, grabbed his cane, and shuffled to the door. He gingerly opened it and looked out at the empty road, waiting for the familiarly heavy footsteps of Ranbir, straining under a hefty bag of atta. Instead, he was met with an unusual silence, interrupted by the howl of a stray dog in the distance.

## Kumbh

Arivumani Srivastava

The bustling crowd of the Allahabad train station enveloped Vivek as he stepped onto the platform. Squeezing his way through the hordes of people, he quickly found the exit and emerged onto the equally crowded street. Mopeds and rickshaws zipped around him, all rushing to the same place. The heat of the Indian summer quickly dehydrated Vivek, so he stopped at a street-side stall to purchase a bottle of water. As he twisted the cap, a roaring, sluggish Mahindra tractor pulling a wagon full of saffron-clothed sadhus and pilgrims ambled by him. Vivek looked up at the driver, a man about his age, and silently debated whether to try and ask for a ride, but the tiredness of his legs soon overcame him and made him cave.

“Bhaiya, are you going to Kumbh?” asked Vivek.

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“Could I get a ride?”

“Hurry up and get in the wagon.”

Vivek grabbed the side of the wagon and threw himself inside. He settled into a small space between two sadhus, and the ash covering their bodies brushed onto his tailored black pants. After struggling for nearly a month with his senior honors thesis, Vivek’s professor had instructed him to take a day trip to Kumbh Mela, the largest gathering of people on Earth, and fill a journal describing his thoughts on what he saw. Clueless, Vivek had no idea what he was going to write, for in his mind, Kumbh was nothing more than what he had read in books and seen on television: a pilgrimage of people taking a dip in the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers to achieve moksha. Nevertheless, he had bought a ticket for Allahabad, and arrived with a leather journal and pencil in one pocket, and a few hundred rupees in the other.

As the tractor inched its way through a particularly narrow side street, one of the sadhus Vivek was wedged between turned his gaze on him.

“Beta, what is your name?”

“Vivek, baba ji.”

“Vivek, why are you coming to Kumbh Mela?”

“It is a part of my studies in anthropology.”

“I see. Very good, beta.”

“Do you mind if I ask you the same?”

“Kumbh is the only time I leave my akhara to converse with other sadhus.”

“Why do you need to converse with sadhus outside your akhara?”

“Discourse is one of the most important things a man can engage in, is it not?”

“I guess so, baba ji.”

The tractor came to a halt, suddenly jolting Vivek and the sadhu forward. Vivek jumped off the side of the wagon and in front of him lay the Kumbh grounds. Thousands of tents lined the paths along the river, each spilling forth

its goods onto the walkway: in some, merchants attempted to sell their goods to pilgrims, while in others, sadhus discussed the religious philosophy of the vedas and recited mantras. At the Triveni Sangam, the confluence of the Yamuna and Ganga, a swarm of worshippers all jostled to get their chance to bathe in the mystical waters and achieve moksha, releasing themselves from the cycle of rebirth. Meanwhile, thousands of attendees filled the narrow roads running throughout the grounds seeking advice from sadhus or bargaining with merchants, eliminating any remnant of personal space. Vivek turned around to say goodbye to the sadhu, but the wagon was gone, and he was immersed in the sea of people, flowing towards the grounds of the festival. He made his way down from the sidewalk of the road onto the sandy banks of the confluence.

As Vivek approached the edge of the Yamuna, his shoes sank more and more into the damp sand, so he slid them off and tucked them under his arm. When he approached the shore, he was greeted by the formidable presence of a procession of sadhus crossing the pontoon bridges floating on the river. The warm colors of the saffron cloth they wore, the beauty of their flags, and the potent fragrance of their marigolds engulfed the narrow path, with chants and music making their presence known.

Breaking his entrancement with the sadhus' colorful procession, Vivek turned around and began to move towards a crowd of people gathered around a car. As he worked his way through, he realized what everyone was gawking at: a man pulling a car with a rope attached to his own genitalia. Repulsed yet intrigued, Vivek pulled out his notebook and quickly began jotting down notes about the theatrical exhibition the holy sadhu was putting on. Next to him, a sadhu noticed his expression and spoke to him.

“Beta, why do you look disgusted by this holy man?”

“What is the use of him pulling the car like that?”

“This is his way of displaying the power of yoga and his devotion to God, beta.”

Still doubtful of the practice's validity, Vivek walked away from the spectacle and slipped down an alley filled with vendor's temporary stalls and tents. Gazing at the vibrant, miniature idols of staple deities like Ganesh and Shiva for sale, he pondered what else he would write in his journal, since his professor would surely criticize him for having nothing more than a man tugging on a car with his genitals.

Vivek paused at a small, makeshift tea stall and purchased a cup of masala chai. As he exchanged 20 rupees for the earthen cup filled with scalding hot tea, he noticed a group of sadhus sitting together and chatting a short distance from the stand. He turned around, bought three more cups of chai, and worked his way towards the circle the men were sitting in. Hands trembling from holding the hot chai, Vivek gave each of the sadhus a cup.

“Baba, do you mind if I take a seat beside you?” Vivek asked.

“Of course, beta, take a seat.”

One of the sadhus shifted to the edge of the bench, freeing up a small space. Vivek pulled out his notebook and pencil and opened it to a new page, ready to write.

“What is it that you would like to ask, beta?”

“Baba ji, what makes life as a holy man fulfilling?”

“How can a man be happy when he has to worry about his things being stolen? With no possessions, I have nothing to worry about besides dedicating myself to God.”

Another sadhu grabbed Vivek’s wrist, pointed at his wristwatch, and picked up where the other had left off.

“So long as you have nice, expensive things, they will gratify you quickly, beta, but losing or damaging them will forever be looming over your head. You must release yourself from this if you want to live a happy life.”

Vivek quickly thanked the sadhus and left their circle, feeling attacked and slightly confused. If what the sadhus said was true, how could his father have led a fulfilling life? He had more money than almost anyone in his hometown; their house had been filled with luxurious imported furniture, chandeliers sparkling with hundreds of crystals, and paintings from renowned artists. His father was always a prominent member of social life, attending opulent balls and parties in the time he wasn’t working. Despite all of this, though, he had always sworn that being chief medical officer made his life fulfilling beyond a doubt. Either his father was confused, or the sadhus were wrong. The thought of either idea being true made him uncomfortable, though, since both his father and the sadhus were respectable, upright people. Or perhaps they were both wrong about how Hinduism instructs you to lead your life, and there was an answer unbeknownst to all.

Vivek strolled to an empty edge of the festival grounds and sat down on the riverbank. He tore out and crumpled the pages he had written in his notebook so far in frustration. As he was about to stand up and head back to the train station, an elderly sadhu gingerly settled onto the sand beside him. He sat next to Vivek in silence, his gaze focused on him for some time before he spoke.

“Beta, I can tell something is worrying you. What’s wrong?”

“It’s okay, baba ji; I’d rather not waste your time.”

“I have nothing but time, beta, so tell me your story.”

Vivek looked at the sadhu for a moment, debating whether or not to explain everything he had gone through to this man who had simply walked up to him, but his presence beckoned Vivek to introduce himself and explain. He started from the beginning of the day when he got on the wagon to Kumbh to observe for his thesis, and went through every event, from the man pulling the car with his genitals to his inner conflict over his father and the possessionless sadhus. After spending nearly half an hour explaining, the sadhu simply chuckled and turned back to watch the Ganga. Vivek began to stand up again, but the sadhu began to speak.

“Beta, who do you think was right, the sadhu or you and your father?”

“I don’t know, I can’t tell anymore.”

“Do you think both led a fulfilling life?”

“They couldn’t have both, baba ji, could they? Their lives were vastly different.”



“Look around, beta, you’re at Kumbh. Millions of people here, do you think they all lead the exact same life to fulfillment?”

“No, of course not.”

“Because everyone finds their own path to fulfillment, Vivek. For your father, it was enjoying the finer things and helping those who need it. For the sadhus you spoke to earlier, it was giving up all possessions to pursue God. And for the sadhu who devoted himself to chastity and pulls heavy objects, that is his way of finding fulfillment.”

The sadhu turned back to the river, focusing on the sun beginning its descent into the horizon as Vivek kept his focus on him, waiting for the sadhu to resume. After a moment of thought, he spoke again.

“Everybody has peace and God inside them, beta, and we all have our way of finding it. That’s the beauty of Kumbh, is it not?”

“What do you mean, baba ji?”

“Everyone has their own opinion of how to lead life, but they all come together here as a collective to discuss and be together. It does not matter whether a person believes in Shiva, Allah, Jesus, or nothing, beta. As long as a man finds his way to fulfillment and leads a good, compassionate life, he will find his way to the one God we each have our own name for.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“It’s from my own thoughts and discussions within my head, beta, but who knows. Perhaps I’ll end up in hell too.”

“Surely not, baba ji?”

“We will find out soon enough, beta, won’t we?”

A deep silence lingered between Vivek and the sadhu as they gazed out onto the water. As the sadhu began to get up, Vivek interjected.

“Thank you so much, baba ji; can I buy you a cup of chai or anything?”

“Absolutely not, beta, but thank you. You need to get on with your writing, the day is almost over.”

Vivek thanked the sadhu and walked back into the crowded heart of the festival. He stopped at a vendor and bought a small plate of pani puri; he had eaten nothing all day except a meager breakfast in the early morning. He relished the eight potato, chickpea, onion, and chutney filled bread balls, then walked towards an abandoned watchtower along the river. He scaled the ladder and settled on the edge of the railing, admiring the festival grounds covered in a bright red shimmer from the setting sun. In his mind, this festival was the perfect embodiment of what the sadhu had told him. It was a testament to the individualism of one’s thoughts, but everyone’s collectivism as a people, all discussing their own pursuit of self-realization. Although Vivek still didn’t know how he would make his life fulfilling, the sagacious words he had received reassured him. Looking over the beautiful chaos of the festival from his perch, he pulled out his notebook from his pocket and began to write.



Brenna Pepke

**Stuck In Bed**

## Gone Fishing

Sarah Stevens

Donne said  
that fish hooks  
are beautiful.  
Well, not said —  
not in so many words —  
but the implication —  
"With silken lines,  
and silver hooks"  
— is so much softer  
than the reality  
of the dripping steel  
that I have hooked  
into you.

Oh  
the sweet  
dawning  
horror  
of drawing you out  
towards me  
on the end of a line  
as you fight to keep yourself  
in the water  
(in your own head).  
"You may not  
keep your silence,"  
I say.  
I have snared you  
through the upper lip  
and demand that you share with me  
the secrets that swim  
behind your eyelids.

Donne said  
that fish hooks  
are beautiful.  
I think that maybe  
in his philosophizing  
he forgot  
the simple pleasure  
of winning the damn thing —  
of forcing you —

in your shimmering scales  
— into the light  
and into the air  
which sustains me  
and ruins you.  
“Forget the hook,” I say.  
“You have the fish.”

## Labor Laws and The Undead Cause

Sarah Stevens

“Look, I don’t see why you need home insurance. You live -- er -- you *reside* in open graves. And the request for life insurance is ridiculous.”

The Necromancer pushed their glasses up further on their nose as they examined the fine print of the proposed contract. They held a leatherbound notebook tucked under one arm, neatly concealed by the long sleeves of their hooded robe, and they struggled valiantly to keep their irritation from creeping into their expression. The document in question was illuminated by a single floating candle, enchanted to follow its user outside and into the castle courtyard. The half-rotted faces of the undead horde didn’t change at the protest, but the Necromancer wasn’t sure that they had connected the nerve endings in the heads properly anyway.

“That isn’t the point, sir,” said one ghoul with a misshapen jaw. “We demand adequate compensation for our labor.” There was a murmur of agreement.

“Besides, what if the churchyard floods?” another chimed in. “Do you know how hard it is to bail water out of your casket with your own skull?”

The Necromancer scowled, pulled out their notebook, and made a note on the paper in ink that gleamed like freshly spilled blood. “Well, what about this bit on hazard pay?” they asked. “You’re here to guard the stronghold. Every job onsite is a hazard. I don’t see why the salary should increase for certain positions.”

“Look, if you was ever out here you’d know. You’re up on the battlement third from left; you’re less likely to get an arrow through your ribcage. You’re manning the front gates, you’re gonna be spending the next week trying to find your tibia after getting bowled over by a horse.”

“Or a battering ram,” one particularly crushed looking skeleton added.

The Necromancer made another note, writing with enough force to tear the parchment. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“A cafeteria would also be nice.”

The Necromancer looked up in consternation. “I have no idea what that is.”

“Oh, see, it’s ‘cause you’re ancient,” one zombie explained, not unkindly. “Some of us are freshly dead, and we’ve got recent worldly experience, see.”

“Just tell me what it is.”

One vampire cleared his throat to speak. “You know how we always eat outside? That’s nice on nights with a clear sky or on sunny days, even as bad as the smell gets when it’s warm. But it rains a lot here -- lovely, clever way to cast gloom and despair across the kingdoms of men, by the way, that spellwork - - but it’s terribly hard to drink a man’s blood when it washes away before it ever reaches your mouth. Some of us are a little more cultured, and it’s bad manners to just drink straight from the source like a savage --”

“Yes, but you haven’t told me what a cafeteria *is*.”

“Oh, you know, just a separate building with a roof to eat under. So the brains don’t get soggy and Mr. Cultured over there doesn’t get his dinner all over the front of his shirt,” a poltergeist grinned. The vampire who had previously spoken huffed, offended. “They usually have seating and food provided.”

“Your food is free range,” The Necromancer pointed out, scrubbing one hand over their face in consternation. “You can go get it yourself. I don’t have the time to provide the bodies, and we’re under minor siege at least once every fortnight anyway. Plenty of dining opportunities there.”

“Food is a right, sir, not a privilege!”

“Where did you even hear about labor contracts?” the Necromancer snapped, craning their neck to see who had just shouted. “I know that most of you never learned how to read. And those of you who can read don’t have enough of a corporeal form to turn pages.”

There was a brief, embarrassed silence.

“We went to a rally,” one ghost muttered finally, noticing the Necromancer’s mouth face growing steadily redder. The flush deepened, causing the vampires to squirm uncomfortably.

“A human labor rally?”

“A human labor rally,” the ghost confirmed.

The assembled crowd of the undead watched their lord’s face go from red to purple, and then to white, and then come to a halt somewhere around a fascinating green-ish gray. “And they didn’t notice?” the Necromancer croaked, wondering how they still had any sort of army at all if their soldiers thought it good practice to wander around the land of the living undisguised.

At this reaction, a vampire at the front tilted his head in thought, unnoticed. In truth, only a select few of the unrecognizably dead had gone to the rally, and the message that they had brought back had been circulating for weeks. But perhaps there was an opportunity to be had here. Before anyone could respond truthfully to the Necromancer’s question, the vampire cut in smoothly: “Oh, not this time. But it really is only a matter of luck, you see.”

The Necromancer’s anxious, glowing eyes found him in the crowd. “Explain.”

The vampire smiled his most charming smile as the moonlight glinted off his pointed teeth. “Well, we’ve obviously gotten a taste for human rights and their fun little social functions. And of course most of us have a taste for the humans themselves. It would be a terrible shame if one of us with a bit less *delicacy* were to be noticed in one of the kingdoms of men. It might *accidentally* start a war with the humans that your lordship isn’t prepared for.”

The Necromancer stared at him, aghast.

The vampire pressed on. “But really, if our current requests were filled and that contract were signed --” the Necromancer glanced down at the parchment in their hands -- “then we wouldn’t have much need to *continue* to go to these rallies, would we?”

The Necromancer swallowed. “I see,” they said, chewing nervously on the end of their quill. Their eyes drifted over the parchment, back to the crowd, back to the parchment.

The horde waited in tense silence, eyes and eye sockets boring into their lord’s still countenance. Those of the undead who could still hold their breath did so.

The Necromancer’s posture suddenly slumped. “I want a copy of this contract on my desk by the next moon cycle,” they said, sounding defeated, and brought their quill to the paper. The bloody ink on the page had barely dried when it was pulled into the waiting hands of the undead, whose whoops and victorious cackling split the night air like a cut of a knife. The Necromancer slipped back into their stronghold with a sigh, pulling the great double doors shut behind them with a resounding boom. The growing cacophony was instantly muffled.

*Life insurance*, they thought, shaking their head. For *walking corpses*. They set off back to their distant chambers with their candle floating behind them, thinking tiredly that the benefits of evil and the hilarity of crimes against the laws of nature might not be worth all the trouble you got from trying to see them done.

**I must have been a leaf in a past life**

Mary Catherine Thomas

for leaves are  
only held  
onto by their host  
branch for as long  
as they are  
green.

once they show  
their true colors,  
they are dropped,  
discarded,  
and forgotten.

lately,  
I have found myself  
overstaying  
my welcome.

I should've known that  
though green turns to gold,  
colors muddy  
and fallouts occur  
in the blink  
of an eye.



**Teach Me: *the perspective of a hearing American Sign Language student***  
Maria Wells

I had never met my classmates' eyes  
or remotely looked at my professors  
as they lectured  
until chairs were pushed to walls  
and faces replaced the backs of heads,  
and whispers and coughs and  
even pen drops drew eyes,  
before we learned how to  
keep from shifting them.  
Now I know what it means

to pay attention, and to be

paid attention to.

How do I mute  
the air conditioner's murmur or  
the click of laptop keys?  
The thought of a soundless piano  
brings tears to my eyes, yet  
I shake my hands in joy  
at another Deaf victory.

Why do I mourn  
what they don't miss?  
How do I not blink, somehow

see clearly,

close my ears?

How do I watch until I learn,  
look until I see?  
Teach me what it is to  
communicate without  
headphones and radios  
and voices,  
how anything  
can be made in silence,

with interaction,  
face-to-faces.

Teach me what raised  
or furrowed brows mean,  
of the respect fought for, and  
a full life that can be held  
in one's hands.

I think that I do not understand,  
please teach me.

## **This bathtub smells fishy**

Maria Wells

Coronavirus is a hot bath.

I think we were all ready to fall asleep in it  
before we realized we'd drown.

I knew as soon as my toes curled in the boiling water,  
as soon as the calm music I played to set the mood  
was louder than my hands' slap against the water,  
as soon as the mint-scented body wash I breathed in  
begged my nostril hairs to fall out

and no matter how many times I spat

I couldn't get the soapy smell out of my throat.

I guess I started to drown when I heard Dolly Parton  
tell the world to keep the faith while I sat in the loft  
of my childhood home in Lewisburg,

my toes curled in icy water.

I only drink tap if I put ice in it.

I make my ice with trays, yes I freeze tap-  
water tastes like nothing when it's comfortable.

Put a straw in a cup, fill it with fridge water  
and drink as fast as you can until it overflows.

If you don't drink fast enough it never will.

I hit the hay last night and dreamed like I was awake.

The lukewarm water of sickness is a snorkel from Dollar General,  
you can swim barely underwater like a mermaid  
dying from pollution. Ria, we are all fishies out of water.

We will breathe in the air, we will die.

Overwater clouded eyes, dry scales.

I'd trade these lungs for a voice any day.

Incluso entonces, todavía estaría ahogada.

I flush my nervous vomit to the ocean's bath  
with all the floating bloated fish.

## Afterlife

Gabby Wilson

i never wanted to run away  
maybe just take a long walk  
where my name bells timidly like a windchime  
behind me  
and i hum an old song that only my nana remembers  
as i make my way towards the sunset  
or into your arms  
or into mine.

this was the night we agreed that  
blue cotton candy is better than pink  
and that when we die, we become stars  
and we agreed that would be enough.  
for a moment  
we cracked open the world and found comfort in its anonymity  
you told me of ancient stories about trees and their rings and their lives  
and i told you about the stars and how they are really people  
looking over loved ones they have never met  
we traded these idled beliefs like treasured playing cards  
both longing for the airy sweetness of  
blue cotton candy on our beging tongues

i put my hands in the soil and felt the earth melt softly  
plucked the grass from its roots and offered you strands  
as if they were flowers  
you put them in your hair,  
made a joke about basket weaving  
i laughed and heard my great-grandmother's heartbeat  
in the warmth of the night  
and wished  
just for a moment  
i could have one more crocheted blanket  
pearled from her nimble fingers  
my grandpa was never able to teach me about love  
but the pictures i have of him and my grandmother  
gave me my first lesson  
and i know i love you  
and i know you love me  
but we are two stars on a distant plane of a universe that keeps expanding  
  
you will always be beautiful to me

i wish we were back in that shared astronomy class studying a star chart

so, i could point you out  
among the tangle of stars and say  
*look,*  
*there you are*  
*in the big dipper*  
*always constant*  
*always there*

i took that long walk  
and called my nana  
as the song still lulled on the tip of my tongue  
and passed your house  
wondering if blue cotton candy and sacred company  
unlocks the universe  
just for a single, precious moment  
telling us that all we ever are and all we ever will be  
are stars  
or rings on a tree  
and that's all we ever need to know.

## The Season of Bees

Gabby Wilson

that year, summer was a light dew that stuck to our clothes  
and slicked sweetly onto our skin like honey  
making us golden.

the bees buzzed, busying themselves with their erect duties  
their skin collected wisps of stubborn grains  
from tempting stamens.

a dizzied, distressed worker bee  
mistook the bubblegum pink of your tongue  
for a blushing snapdragon.  
stricken with the internal desire to  
pollinate  
nested itself on the tip as if it were a fashioned stigma.

your throat groaned with shock  
its thin interior scratching itself raw,  
waiting for some sort of blissful relief.  
your nose scrunched and distorted itself  
a glossy trickle gleamed from its base to the plump curve of your upper lip  
officially offending your senses into a startled, sensational state.

you swallowed the bee whole  
and feared it would build honeycombs out of your abdomen,  
sticky your flesh with wearied wax and spoonsful of honey.  
you joked that you were now the queen bee  
made a scrapped and lopsided crown from pulled blades of grass  
and unfortunate weeds, trampled upon and inherently unloved.

the pollen sank to the catacombs of your stomach  
freckling itself on display to a churning audience,  
trying to be a mother to spacious seeds burrowing in fat like it was soil.  
time is a fickle thing in the inner workings of the body  
hastening the germination period  
sprouted seedlings anticipated their bloom.

summer tumbled along to the symphony of orchestrated hums  
plants grew extensions off themselves, cozied close against the suns nurturing  
warmth,  
consistently snacking on their energy source.  
your budding babes were developing as well  
growing fuller and purposeful from the warmth balled in the pit of your being  
an estranged photosynthesis.

you were an enchanting greenhouse  
a bumbling hive,  
though you liked to call yourself a lonely botanical garden.  
you wished for visitors  
but attracted colonies of determined bees  
who loved you only for what you offered, not for who you are.

you described that summer as a vacant feeling  
a pesticide seeped field that wilts the living and beckons for the dead,  
you looked at me and worried that the life you had inside you was only there by  
accident.  
i reached for your petals  
and watched them slip delicately through my fingers like quick silk  
you proclaimed i loved you not.

summer was growing tired  
waiting for its dear old friend autumn to awake from her nap,  
you asked me if i knew what it was like to be a mother and then cried.  
thorning up your air passage  
a beautiful flower fully blossomed in your jaw  
curved around your swollen cheeks and poked through the gaps in your teeth.  
i asked what type it was  
plucked it free from its home,  
you watched intently as my nose lingered over its perfume scent.  
picturesque posies  
robust roses  
darling daisies.

you rambled off their names searching for the one that sounded right  
and reached into yourself,  
pulling out a bouquet and declaring that you were all of them.  
you kissed them into my hair  
combed them back into a braid  
and thanked me for loving you when you forgot to love yourself.

when autumn lazily cascaded her breeze through my hair  
and shook out the flowers,  
i opened my mouth to apologize.  
you spun me around as if we were suddenly slow dancing  
lightly shushed me and asked me to listen closely  
to the far-off whirred song of the bees temporarily bidding goodbye until the  
next summer.



Elizabeth Tatro

Untitled



