

Ghost Girls

Vol. 3

Grief

Grief



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Letter from the Editor

Grieving is dirty work. Knuckles bloodied, scraped knees, set the bone and swing again kind of dirty. A former therapist once told me that you have to pull up a chair for grief; you have to set a place at the table, have to talk to it like an old friend; that when you acknowledge grief's presence you can learn to coexist with it. It's supposed to hurt less that way. I wish I could say that I'm learning to do this—learning to carve out room in my life for grief—but I can't help but feel that grieving is more like suddenly slipping into the deep end of a pool.

One minute you're above water, driving or laughing or watching TV, and suddenly you can't breathe, sorrow burning in your lungs, body heavy with loss, and you're sinking now, desperately clawing your way to the surface of something you can never quite gauge the depth of. And for a split second you're sure, so sure, that you are never, ever going to pull yourself out of it. You will simply let yourself sink all the way to the bottom of your heartbreak like it's where you were meant to be in the first place.

Grief can be synonymous with death, with sickness and aging and tragedy and losing loved ones, but it is also strangely complex and rich, messy, sometimes even sweet. Grief colors everything around us, invites itself in, whether it's wanted or not. Grief is the loss of the soft spaces in your mind that mental illness robs you of. Grief is the hard lines carved into you after sexual assault, a marked before and a marked after, and the murky blur of a perspective you didn't ask for. Grief is the loneliness that sits at the end of your half empty bed, a dip in the mattress left behind by someone no longer there. Grief is the complicated swirl of relief and ache you feel when you think of a friend you no longer wish to speak to. Grief is all the little losses: of innocence, of money, of years stolen by a pandemic, of bars and coffee shops you can no longer visit without thinking of them, of the afters you never wanted, and the before's you still dream about.

Worst of all, grief is in the dark spaces you are terrified to look too closely at, festering in the things you can't begin to fathom. Grief is 25,000 dead in Gaza, grief is human's ability to even be capable of something so evil. Grief scrolls with you as you watch a genocide play out across your cracked phone screen, dripping in shades of spilled blood and helpless anguish and rage and begging and grief, and grief, and grief. And when you think you can't take any more, grief floods in again.

I started thinking about the theme for this issue on the coattails of a stubborn pandemic, feeling resentful that I had lost the last lingering sip of my 20s huddling inside my bedroom, my hand cramped around a phone I couldn't seem to put down. I wanted to create a space for communal grieving, a place where we could lament the little losses and try to make sense of the big ones together. The theme has resonated with so many, and before I knew it, hundreds of submissions poured in. I spent the year it took me to read and edit them grieving with you all, your words and your art sitting by my side, night after night at my desk. It hurt, in the way these things have to hurt, but I am so thankful to all of the creatives who helped make loss a little less lonely—for me, but hopefully for you too, dear reader.

In all of the worst ways, grief weaves us all together, filling up the quiet spaces between us with scars and memories and love. And when you feel it, all that grief, that's when you know you're alive. That is what this issue is about—the things that grief steals from us, but also the thing it gives back: grieving, if anything, is unadulterated resiliency, the kind that only comes when you realize you're alive to feel it.

Gratefully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Autumn Durand". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Autumn" written in a larger, more prominent hand than the last name "Durand".

Founding Editor of Ghost Girls

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Grief

by Tallen Gabriel

grief for the end of a small magical period (there will be more but this one deserves a tombstone) grief for all of the conversations you and I never had
grief for all of the nights I spent sleeping next to someone who didn't see me
grief for the relationship I wish I had with my mother grief for all of the allowances he gives to other women but which I was denied grief for all of the unslept hours
grief for the skipped meals grief for what I had imagined this job could have been
grief for all of the attempted compromises turned shrinking of self
grief for the miles between what could have been and what was
grief for the times I wish it was just easy grief for the silenced voices grief for a country and an ethos dipped in silver shades of hate
grief for holy texts warped that make enemy out of love and wholeness
grief for everything my ancestors took
grief for that which was taken from them
grief for all of the times and ways I didn't know how to say no
grief for all the times and ways I shrank
grief for the dog I no longer know
grief for the desert house I was not able to visit
grief for my grandmother's fading memory
grief for the world that turned my mother hard
grief for the 55 degree January days
grief for all of the times I believed in you

Untitled

by Irina Tall Novikova



MY DEAD GRANDMOTHER READS THE NEWSPAPER

by James J. Siegel

On nights like this my dead grandmother appears
in the corner of the room reading the newspaper
the way I remember her –

Perm perfect.

Bifocal lenses.

Slacks pressed by heaven's laundromat.

She doesn't make a sound,
not even her trademark sigh of disgust when she turns
to the political pages and sees the face of Regan or Bush.

She only mouths the crossword puzzle,
working her way along in ink until each clue matches
down and across,
every box filled with block letters.

I don't think she sees me or even knows
she is here in my living room
flipping from the funnies to the supermarket savers,
her form scratching and flickering until solid.

It is then I know
I am slipping from the living.

The dead are still dead and safe in their place
but I am fading like the sun-soaked wallpaper
in my father's childhood bedroom,
the Lone Ranger blurring into a mountain range,
Silver the stallion the ghost of a horse.

And who wouldn't want to be the ghost of a horse
when the color of the world has drained?

With the solstice still weeks away
it is only a matter of time before
my dead grandfather strolls into the room,
pennies in his pockets for all the good grandkids.
A ride on granddad's lap, galloping
and giggling like little cowpokes.

Listen to those coins jangling like boot spurs,
bells at the reigns.

Follow that sound.
There is a sunset waiting for all of us to ride into.
And there is a sunrise somewhere
if we want it,
if I can just find my way
out of this.

we are victim to five stages

by Sophie Marlowe

first i will deny your last breath
i will hear your voice and see you
you will not be dead
i refuse to let you be dead
you can't be dead

then rage will consume me
how dare you leave me
it isn't fair that you get peace
and i'm left to deal with
the heartache of your absence

bargaining follows and
i search for a deal with the devil
i scream to the moon
and i shout to the gods
come back and take me instead

nothing changes and the world
dims leaving me an aching
breathless wreck of longing
unable to comprehend
how i can go on living without you

and finally acceptance arrives
after a long and treacherous journey
but i don't need her to tell me
that it's hard to say goodbye
i know it is but i need to

-you can't keep me from living anymore, goodbye.

Ghosts of Grief

by Jay Kennedy



how(I)

by Lake Vargas

Took a long time to get here. Driver said I'll lead you in, my mom's buried here, my grandmother. They hadn't carved your name into the marble yet. I pulled a sign from the mud and wiped away the speckles of dirt. A wooden sign, half-soaked. DAD: You'll Always Be My Hero.

The Internet told me you died as if you were a Grammy nomination or a school shooting. When I found out I told anyone who would listen, that man ain't going to Heaven, that's for sure. Now I'm here holding red and white flowers wrapped in cellophane. I said, fuck, I forgot to take the sticker off, and then I laughed, and then I cried.

I am still trying to figure out how. How a man could die from natural causes at sixty-four. How falling into sleep could mean falling into nothing. I'm one-third your age and how am I not supposed to go the way you died when last summer I was adding vodka to everything. How could I think everything was okay when I was finding you, miming you.

When I cried it was that hitching and broken sound. How could the man who double-knotted my shoes, who flipped pancakes a fluffy inch-high, who nudged me towards the muddled pane of the duck pond—how could this person be here and dead? I laid my hand over vacancy. I said you weren't going to Heaven but I don't believe we go anywhere at all. The headstone doesn't even have your name on it. How is anyone supposed to know you're gone?

My dad stopped talking to you because you drove my gay cousin to prom in his truck. I'm the prodigal daughter in a leather jacket and a fistful of rings. I plastered my hand to the grass but I knew you weren't there. I know. I was too late.

Were you a hero on the highway? Were you a hero when you chaperoned my field trip, and you told us to jump in the glass elevator, our bodies halting mid-flight? I have to carve you up and wear your boots, but leave your jacket behind. I have to say he was a good man. They were all good men. When I left the graveyard, I was holding your clothes.

Bath

by L. Callon

last night I dreamed
I was bathing you again
your soft form trembling
as water filled the room
above my ankles
above my knees
as the small waves crested
on the countertop
you swam to me
gently I lathered your head
your skull no bigger than
a peach in my hand
tenderly I cleaned your sores,
the growing lumps at your throat
finally I heard voices down the hall
This has to end by summer.
We can't afford to keep this going
I looked down into your warm black eyes
there were still two
and I thought
how can you put a price on this

Pray, You, Love, Remember

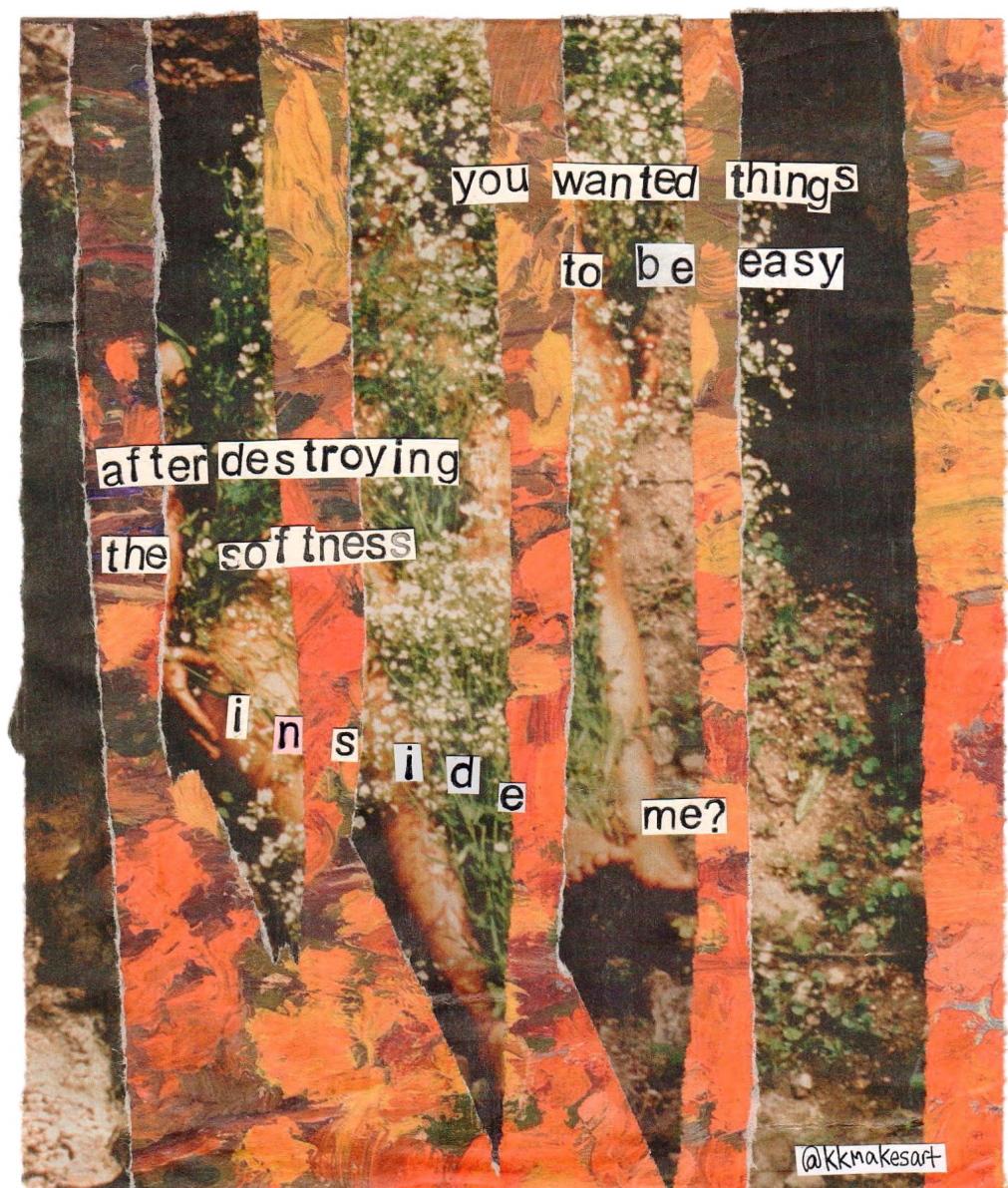
After Odilon Redon's Ophelia among the Flowers

by Jordan Hanson

Footsteps on a lonely street,
wind from a passing bus whips my hair.
Reaching to brush it away,
I see her: Ophelia,
among the flowers,
head rising from water,
or sinking.
A mirage from another life
just months ago
tucked away in a London museum.
Rainy days, one hand on the umbrella
the other warm in his.
I wonder what it's like to drown
to love someone so much
your mind drowns itself
when they are gone
to drown because of drowning.
I wonder if it's peaceful.
I wonder if it hurts, this paradox
of burning lungs in freezing water.
What kind of mind doesn't struggle
to the surface?
It must be quiet under the water
and maybe beautiful, one last glance
at wildflowers,
a willow.

Destruction

by kkmakesart



Kindest Wound

by Emma Hutson

There's something to be said for
the way I bury a dead soul
so deeply beneath an inner child
and behind layers of distraction.
There's a monster in my brain
and my fear is that it's me;
that I'm a thing of scythes
claws hooks guns and grief.
To tear something fragile apart
leaves naught but frayed edges,
to wear something hard down
makes it smooth through removal.
Cuts are by far the kindest wound.
Fraying says we tried to hold on.
Wearing says we wouldn't let go.
It would've been better if
I had the grace to cut myself from you.

A Never Brief History of Everything Lost, or the Lover's Guide to Walking with Ghosts

by Kayla King

Lately, you've been difficult
to deal with. Or maybe it was forever ago.
We don't measure time like others,
only noting one highway for the next.

In such a small space, we practice lenience
instead of lashing out. We don't mention the dust
layered across the dash.

I could never exist in stillness. If I stopped,
I would fall apart. So the day became another tunnel
with no light at the end just yet.

Last week, before we left, my horoscope was only an outline
of functionality and the sky said drink water, take breaths,
survive what you must before you forget the living.

But here I am, off on another tangent,
which you never liked,
and I always found impossible to forgo.

Months from now, I'll understand
I was at my worst.

The silence thinned to a splinter. I never explained
my inability to navigate the quiet flash of forgetting
you were gone, which meant something
beyond the world wearing down
to the size of a marble in my palm.

I hold everything most important to me
the same way, though your hand
was a bit bigger than mine.

Come back to the river and pretend at godliness.
Manipulate the leaves beneath your foot into a sigil
meant to sorrow-bind your burden to this place.
Perhaps it was the end of softness for that city.

You'd loved there too long by this point,
and I was only ever a visitor
pretending at home.

No matter how distracted I became,
you knew the ancient history held in my hip,
the place to trace to make the residual creak of my old self
speak through in a forgotten language.

And those nights, you crafted codices of your own
with a whisper against the vellum of my thigh
at the mark which tells how I died in a past life.
This is a story about grief
if you look close.

Take our tragedy below the magnifier to find the exact
minute you knew we reached our expiration.
You were something temporary, I am afraid to admit.
Though I would've asked you to stay
if I didn't know better.

If anyone examined us then, they might think we were more
in love ten miles ago, but they forget the illusion
of objects like us,
closer than we'll ever appear.

Ghost in the Rain
by Jeremy Fuscaldo



Jeremy
Fuscaldo '23

Water to space

by Divisha Chaudhry

the seawater is running out of my fists
paddling on its own, going where every drop goes/ to meet the ocean /
somewhere within them they carry the memory of you / you alive / within
those waves / I wish I could also meet you/ somewhere in the middle/ even
though, I have never swum that far/ it's only in my dreams that I do try but
somehow always drown/ so I go in the direction of whirlpools/ slip into the
blue hole, a dark blue pit that teleports me to you/ earth water leading me
to the center of the universe/ where I see you waiting for me/ I'm wearing
your brown sweater, it fits me perfectly/ and you say I look more pretty in
your clothes/ even when I want you to wear them again/ come alive into
the collars of your shirts when I pin them on the clothesline/ but instead I
see you here/ in ripples and in vacuum/ in the celestial space of water and
sky/ but never land/ never land again/maybe I'd just have to hold onto the
clothes you left behind then/& the dreams where I travel this far.

grief in calendar reminders

by Keerthana A

D-1

today, my uncle died.

and god didn't let my father grieve. he stepped on the *kolam* that amma made in the morning, snuffed the lights, and told appa to pull the sacred thread on his shoulder. i watched him break the news to paati, who did not yell. who just stood with her head in her hands. the dramatic death-breaking scene happened in two minutes in my house, where there were no wails, no howling women clad in black, no sounds of a head cracking against the floor, no hair as blood running to my feet. the moon overlooked the dim silence that echoed as they all left. in that silence, relief was rampant: it coursed and knifed its way through my sixteen-year-old body to the point where i resisted the urge to laugh. i was relieved that my uncle died. that he escaped an unnecessary life that'd only given him pain. i was relieved.

D-2

yesterday, my uncle died.

and periamma clasped my arm so tight that i could feel the nails. at the *homam* appa refused to open the windows so it was just me, the priests, appa, periamma and the never-ending pillar of smoke that rose from the fire. the place where periamma's nails had bitten through began to bleed—a metallic tinge of part-relief, part-grief, mingled with the air. it is purification, but all i can see is the mirage of my uncle becoming more human as time goes, as fire burns. i felt the urge to flee because every time they put ghee in the fire, i could see him. grief rolled down as blood in my arms instead of tears: my tear ducts still want to laugh in relief, i see. they still want to laugh in relief.

D-5

five days ago, my uncle died.

and all of us are still at the *homam*. the lockdown forces us home so i have to lie

down on the bed my uncle slept in. as i lay down, i could feel the mattress decorated in the contour of his sickened body, his constant sleep. i could even feel the migraines that the cancer gave him at the end through the pillow. it was like he never died, and he lives inside the bed, breathing. i couldn't breathe in that bedroom; gasping and yelling as my legs shoved the blankets and my hands grasped my sister's long hair, pulling. vicious scratches on my neck because i knew he was there, his hands holding me down as vitriolic saliva dribbled down his chin onto my face. his fractured voice saying, informing: **your relief killed me.**

D-7

seven days ago, my uncle died.

and there is shame in my body, shame at the relief of it all. when did obvious sadness turn to this cathartic form of grief? i'm glad he's escaped life. i'm glad he eluded life, and that's why i'm his murderer. i see it in every moment they see me not crying; death is not bombastic, i repeat. death and grief are subtle: death hangs its battered, skinny hands all over the walls and tells you it's your fault they're dead. grief runs its hands down your body and pushes you down the stairs without you even moving from your house. appa amma paati periamma athai all move but they're also bound to the bed where uncle would sleep and cry and undergo spasms—they're slaves to grief in movement. their grief always moves like an eel escaping the mouth of a shark: even though they know that no matter how much they swim, the shark will reach their fins, hungry for more.

D-15

fifteen days ago, my uncle died.

and i'm a slave to grief in solitude. letting the grief settle into my belly like a leech, suckling on my stomach, ready to strike in loneliness. i cannot seem to move myself as lethargy's chokehold pulls me into the chair. i live this catatonic existence as grief keeps whispering and blaming me, my lack of religiosity, at that damned relief brimming. god took his life to take revenge, it said and i

looked at the rising flames of the ceaseless homam. why did grief say he died when he's been here forever? he's always here to remind me that my relief has been a curse from the second it breathed itself in those silence-ridden halls of a funeral. my uncle, a pile of ashed reminders, waking me up in his bed and pushing guilt's sword deep in my chest, pulling me into his catatonia, his motionlessness.

D-30

thirty days ago, my uncle died.

and my sister cried last night as i fled. she cried for him, and i let my words evaporate from the tongue. my voice, stranger of the night, guides itself back down my throat, for i'm afraid that the relief will come before the grief. that my soul is gladdened that death ran to him like a joyous friend. because life was his enemy, i've always thought that. the life in him was an abnormality and his deathly figure was his normalcy at best. i close the door, and the relief dies instantly: the love sours into grief and i howl violently, feeling my larynx scrape blood down my throat.

D-50

fifty days ago, my uncle died.

and i promise you that my phone keeps ringing in his voice. beep-beep, the phone. beep-beep, his hands on the radio. beep-beep, the message. beep-beep, the pounding in his watery brain. beep-beep, the call. beep-beep, the monitors going down and down and down. beep-beep, the Instagram DM. beep-beep, the ECG dropping. beeeeeep, the Whatsapp video call. beeeeeep, the end of his life. i wish grief manifested itself in tears, not these images mixed in with the relief. the relief has worsened; it breaks through whenever i think of his death; and i cannot ever say how grateful i am that life eluded him. that he has freedom, that my parents have no tether keeping them from everything. this cursed relief that blames me for wishing he died when life in his body squeezed itself empty. i wish this relief would go away, i wish these images would go away, i wish his cancer doesn't run him down in the afterlife.

D-100

one hundred days ago, my uncle died.

and fuck this catatonia of grief. it has stopped my pen from moving, the numbness increasing with time. time heals, they say; then why is it hell-bent on destroying everything? instead of tears, there's anger—my brain threatening to throw itself into oblivions. each day, i destroy a hundred halves of myself to complete a year of lonely grief. scratched skin, fallen hair, broken pen: that's how i learnt my grief. anger, and the permeance it offered—the way my soul screams catharsis through my hands unravelling the bedsheets he would sleep in. my parents are afraid of my grief as i run my hands through the pages and rip them on and on, until the monster within me is satiated. until next time.

D-300

three hundred days ago, my uncle died.

and as i sit here and write, i can feel the paralysis of grief arriving down my fingers. he still lives inside my body, writhing. trying to still these fingers from recording him down. his face returns again and again as i write, begging me not to do this. my soul, disguised as him, reminding of the fakeness of my grief. but today, i tell it, i shed my clothing of a liar. i will let my words take my grief out in the open—and lay its hardened body amongst the drying chilis. and i will let the sky take these haunted dreams of his images through the winds; telling him of life. then, at last, will i be able to lie amidst the poppies and cry—deep, pure, ugly, sobbing, howling, violently shuddering him out of my system. then at last, can i walk away from the incessant words i've offered the poppies—so that they can live with fragments of grief. so that he can curl himself amongst the deep lavender of their pallor, breathing his final last, and rising to the skies as i'm freed from catatonia and keep writing, surrounded by the colour of his death.

The Shadow of Life

by Bex Machina



untitled

by Issy Flower

My dad is dead/alive.

I can see the ghost of him floating over his living, breathing body. His breath comes out as coffin nails. He is very close to not being dead at all, except in moments when he sits back on the sofa and stares at the television and I have to check he's still breathing. I think he is. There is a pause, where his eyes sink back into their hollows and his cheeks turn papery and wither and I can see the worms

underneath them: grim little things, making their home, a mausoleum on two legs. Then he lets out another breath and the picture turns opaque again.

He turns to me and I see a headstone.

He turns back and I see my Dad.

deepfake of my mom saying sorry

by Irie Aman

where she presses her hands together
and doesn't quite look me in the eye
when she says sorry, and she tries again
and looks at me intently through the screen
and says, i know sorry isn't enough, i know
more than an apology what you need
is for me to be a better person,
and here she looks down and reaches out,
whispering, i understand, i understand.
i know you are so full with the world
and all it has, and you cannot,
can no longer bear the weight of anything less,
i know that the only apology you will accept
is transformation, a mother who can be honest with
herself, and have feelings that aren't just shame.
i know you don't want an apology
because words are words, but working on myself
to be whole, just like you had to learn how to be
whole that is more than any guilt i can carry
at you leaving and me failing. sorry,
i know, my failures are lifelong and it isn't
just one thing, but a pattern of hurt, of neglect,
and what you need from me is more than an apology
but for me to look inward, to be a person you can
have a conversation with. because sorry is only the
beginning and you want so much more than just
some admission of a mistake, of many mistakes,

you want a mother
to speak to and call and laugh with,
you want a human being to turn to,
a parent to rely on, and i wasn't that parent,
i'm sorry, i know. i know you get frustrated
because you feel everything and it looks like we don't, but we
do, we do, our generation just learnt to push them down low.
i'm sorry i married my husband.
i'm sorry i've ignored you since you were eleven.
i'm sorry i was harsh.
i'm sorry i was demanding. i'm sorry, i'm sorry,
but i am a person now, i don't want to run from it any
longer. i have learnt to be angry without taking it out
on anyone else, and i have learnt to have regrets without
taking it out on me. i know you want so much more for
me. i know you expected
so much from me. i know i can never live up to those
expectations, but i have a therapist now and i am learning
what pronouns are. i know they is like dia. i know you are too
big for your body.
i know your body is yours, i know, i know. i should have
never tried to control that. i know you never got to choose
the way i did, and that was not fair. i know i won't
understand tattoos,
but i promise i won't notice them, and
you can wear whatever you want, and i won't let tok say a
thing. i'm sorry i ever said a thing. i said many things,
and you should never have learnt to think you were stupid
because i was irritable, or impatient, or impossible. i'm sorry
you have to spend a lifetime healing from my mistakes.

i'm sorry you will never feel like you are enough, like you always have to earn your worth, like if only you tried hard enough you could be something. i'm sorry i never showed you how to be gentle and kind, to yourself and others. i'm sorry you are just like me, demanding and exacting and angry. i'm sorry we turned out the same. i'm sorry i was the eldest daughter too, that i never learnt how to break the cycle, that i never thought about the same burdens i gave to you, that i pushed you and pushed you and pushed you. i'm sorry you broke under all those expectations. you never needed to be anything. you just needed to be you.

This version of my mother can't touch me through the screen, but she tries, and her voice is breaking, and her eyes are red, and I nod, and I delete the video, I delete her number, and I tip the site which made this, and I go about my day, not quite light, but free, knowing I never have to visit my mother's grave, not now that I have this.

Found

by Katie Charpentier



Xiomara

by Nina Valero

The receptionist at my gynecologist's office types with her nose up so her glasses don't slide down while she reads her screen. She reminds me of my aunt, a serious, but cute woman with short black curls and that headband. She always calls me, "dear," and tells me not to worry when I'm running late. A woman about my age walks up to the back counter after being seen, looking tired but happy in a black cotton dress and denim jacket.

"Does she want to see you for a follow-up, dear?"

"Just for my incisions."

"All right. Same time next week?"

"Yes. Wanna see baby?" She smiles, already scrolling through her phone for a good picture, and the receptionist is just as quick to get up from her chair. She even goes around the counter to stand next to her.

"Isn't he cute?"

"Perfect."

"Yeah, he's got the stuff on his mouth for the oxygen. But he's okay. He's better now. He's home."

"Good."

She opens the door to the lobby and her belly is as deflated as I thought it'd be, but there's also a tube running down her right leg that I wasn't expecting—a Foley catheter, I learn later in the day—and it's taped to her inner thigh with baby blue strips. And though she is no longer pregnant, she still cradles her belly, for the pain, for the comfort. The tremors in my fingers intensify.

Her husband rises with his arms out, ready to support her, just as my

own husband rests his hand on top of mine. Another patient walks in, older than me this time and with a 13-year-old daughter by her side.

“What brings you in on short notice?”

“We’re pregnant, just found out Saturday.” She’s blushing, thrilled.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. We’re hoping it’s a boy,” she says, right in front of her daughter. They sit down in silence on the other side of the lobby.

“Xiomara?”

I leave my purse with my husband and follow the OB/GYN nurse through the door to the scale. “Your third and final Gardasil shot!” She cheers like it’s my third trimester. I remember a year and a half ago, showing my gynecologist the picture I secretly snapped of my ultrasound.

Yep. There’s the string of pearls on your left ovary. And then you have some there, in your cervix, and then there, too. In your right ovary.

Polycystic ovarian syndrome, which my M.D. was adamant about letting me know that even with the cysts in both my ovaries and cervix, I can still have children, like his sister-in-law. But the women in my family have had miscarriages and ovarian cancer, have even almost died in labor, and when their obstetricians asked their husbands out in the hallway, *Who should we save, your wife or your baby, because we can only save one*, their husbands tell them without hesitation that they need to save them both, that it’s their job to save them both. And so, they do save them, and then *their* babies have problems, and then their babies have problems, and then my doctor slips in that there is still a possibility that I may die, or the baby might die, or we both could die, or if the baby lives, they may have health problems immediately or maybe later down the line or maybe not at all, but chances are worse if I happen to pop out a little girl. *So, no*, I tell him, *I can’t have children.*

And that has to be fine—it *was* fine, I *swear*—because I never wanted kids in the first place. That’s why I was so desperate to ask my gynecologist as soon as I saw her—*Why am I so fucking sad?*

It’s your hormones. Every month, your body will go through what it thinks is a pregnancy, Xiomara. You will feel morning sickness, you will even feel contractions. It’s going to feel physically and emotionally like you really are having a baby, down to the pain you mentioned in your back—the shocks—those are labor pains. But when there is no baby, your body will feel like it’s miscarried. And it’ll grieve and grieve, and though you feel disconnected from that grief, like you don’t identify with it today, it’s important that you acknowledge that you are grieving, and that you will grieve every time for a long time, you understand?

I never wanted kids, yet I felt like a part of myself has been taken from me. A part of my core has been ripped from my body and I was grasping for it futilely like grains of golden sand, sobbing like they mean anything to me. I found myself staring up emotionlessly at white popcorn ceilings in the middle of night, remembering when I was little and I’d find pictures in the patterns as I put off sleep. I had these glowing stars and flowers that stuck to the walls because I was afraid of the dark, and I used to think that I’d get the same kind of things for my own kid when I had one. Even when I never wanted them. Not really. Not seriously, not totally, though I’d had a name picked out for years if I were to ever have a girl. Just in case.

The harsh needle in my arm hurts and I laugh through the pain.

“I’m sorrrrry!” She says so sweetly, like a kindergarten teacher, and I remember the years I worked with children. “But you’re all done! Have a good rest of your day!”

My husband meets me in the lobby, his hand awaiting mine, and we walk back to the car. I try to relax on the drive to the mall, try not to think about babies or the birth centers on the way or all my fucking cysts and it feels like I can’t see straight anymore when we reach the parking lot, where a very

pregnant woman walks alone with her red cart. Alone, but not really, because she rubs her stomach and croons and laughs. My husband rubs my back and we walk in silence past the mannequins in maternity clothes, beyond the shelves and shelves of diapers and the babies' faces on their boxes, and we hold hands until we find ourselves in the toy section where I point out the dolls, their beautiful hair and their lovely dresses, and I pet a blue stuffed dog. A cyst ruptures and I clutch my belly, for the pain, for the comfort.

And I feel the world shatter inside my body.

Albatross

by Julia Schorr

I have dreams where I'm reaching
for you but when I reel my arms back
into my stubborn body I get my mother

who I haven't reached for in decades,
the barista from the coffee
shop on the corner whose creases and constellations
are unfamiliar territory, a cigarette

to ease the withdrawals I'll wake
to. My elastic arms outstretch
for the spiraled cord of a landline that
lives in my basement, but there's no phone

attached, only the stubs of wires curling
into themselves like naive hedgehogs
burrowing into a warmer world. When my fingers

finally find themselves wrapped
around your wrist, I pull your stiffness
into me. I press my cheek against your iceberg

chest, stone still. I clutch you too tightly
and you turn back to dust. I always wake
to my empty apartment, remembering—

Enough Carnations to Forget Him

by Alanna Duffield

Ten arrive on the step of the door
I bring them in but I still need more.
Stacked to my chin, I lay in the bath
but there aren't enough to drown out his laugh.
I eat them for dinner, petals between teeth
"You're sure this is the cure for grief?"
Now, when I weep, my tears taste like sap
but it's still no replacement for having him back.
My bed is a blossom, my breath a spring day
I'm promised, unlike him, they'll never decay.
But even as they stay pristine and unfurled
there are not enough carnations in the world.

What We Carry

by Sarah Fletchins

Your small, fragile weight
was a heavy thing to carry,
but it was gladly done
and when I have become light
as driftwood tossed on the evening tide
Know this –
I am still carrying you.
Your weight has only shifted
to rest gently
inside my heart.

Empty Hands, Open Hearts

by Sarah Fletchins



Untitled (for Brian)

by Bea Goodwin

Mr. Coroner –

Will you place the horn of a phonograph between his lips so he can sing to me again?

Words for worms to kiss to

While I press my ear to hear you

On the golden green ground

I wet with tears while no one is around.

Trapped beneath the earth is not the same as trapped below the bedding...

I can't keep you warm when the snow begins to fall.

to pluck maggots from the orange

by Taylor Moore

She says, "That's when I broke my elbow."

"You're lucky."

I've never broken a bone. She stuck band-aids to
baby wounds and did not kiss boo-boos.

Instead,

she held me down and cleansed me

before the doctor came to look.

When the cops came, I opened the door to tell them
my mother was not home. They stuck their
fingers inside my mouth and diagnosed
me departed. She cried

and took a shovel to the backyard.

"This is where we'll bury you," she
did not say. "You better make sure you kill me."

The tests say my blood is thinning. I thought
it was the only thing that kept us.

To cauterize the wound, she feeds me
communion, bread and

the blood of Christ her apology.

But I've never broken a bone, so when

I tell her I am doing well,

she calls to say,

"You're lucky."

going to work in november

by j.l.

I have to leave by eight thirty in the morning. At night, while I prevent this timely event from happening as I've loosely instructed, I lay awake fixated on technicolor screens and music of angst and guilt and wonder how I will slice avocado upon toast. How I will get said sourdough bread into the gentle cave of the toaster, how I will push the button down, how I will shampoo my hair or rub white coconut mixture across my compromised skin. There are red marks everywhere, raised bumps and imperfections, some that hurt and some that don't. How will I gently fry an egg in an old blue pan, how will I gauge whether there's rain outside, melodically hitting the sidewalk and threatening to curl my hair? How will I get a cup of coffee gone cold by the time I'm at my desk? How will I forget the past? How will I undo the three glasses of white wine before bed? How will I claw back the slumber? How will I bring my dead father back to life?

The past is the future, as far as I'm concerned. It's also the present. Time has never been linear, nor soft— spoken words live on the chapped, carmine bubbles of my lips. Feelings felt are always felt again, with varying degrees of harshness or strength. I walk into that funeral every morning, sit in the assembled audience, and don't remember when I've left, don't remember the opportunities of reprise before the time comes to return to the mourners in their rigid silence.

I leave the house late, and I rush without needing to rush. There isn't anyone accounting for my presence, but the invisible strings are there, spun like the white silk of hunting spiders. I have moral obligations to meet, despite nobody waiting at the finish line. The pressure of the moral obligation surmounts the more I contemplate basic needs, my stomach humming sounds, my organs straining against each other as my anxious heart beats against them. It's cold in the morning now. My jacket feels restrictive, like I'm hiding my body. My body is the last thing I want to hide. I show everything but a few inches of my waist, the length of my vagina hunched beneath a skirt without

modesty. The rest is there, bare, with so much exposure it stops feeling like exposure. My braless chest in a thin cotton shirt, relenting to be covered by a blazer. I fail to show so much within so my body can be a museum, a gallery for the urine-soaked street as I rush to my moral obligations, to be seen but not heard in a building where my name is a matter of integrity. Where my life is a byproduct of theirs. Where my voice is heard but not weighed, and I am comfortable with this social standing. I am not relied upon.

I prepare a coffee in silence. I pack my lunch away into the fridge with everyone else's. It is all just need. The need for caffeine creating a hole in the need to open my computer to yet another screen asking something of me. The need to eat eventually, within a few hours of the demands of the computer screen, within a few hours of the first memories and their dead animal weight.

Maybe today is the day I run away. The only option for running away is to a building just like this one, gently rippling with the movement of people just like this, with newly constructed faces. They'll eat miso soup in closed groups and talk about the weather by the oversized windows where the cars can drive by and we can't go with them. They'll comment on herbal tea over coffee. I'll tell them I like coffee more. I can't explain my like or dislike for one thing over the other. There's no need and there's no meaning, and most of the time I don't even know what I like. Sometimes I just lie because I like to make your expression change.

If I were to run away, I wouldn't have to explain my down time to these people anymore. I could construct fake down times for people that can't account for them anyway. If I were to run away, new people would have to learn my social twitches and the way I place things in the refrigerator. Maybe someone would have something to say. Nobody would close their door when they hear my voice trailing into the hallway, a song with an unmatched harmony.

Maybe the memories would leave me alone in a new building. Maybe they would retire themselves, or become less pressurized, keeping my mind from foaming with the past and leaving no air for the present. There's no room for new memories. Everything is taken, every inch of space accounted for, just

like my skirt, just like my exposed legs. They all look at them. The older women don't like me. When they look at me, I don't like myself either. I can see myself through their eyes and I understand. I don't bother with what I think of them. It doesn't matter, just like tea and coffee.

At three o'clock in the afternoon the symphony of horns begins. Everyone below the windows wants to go home, and I want the same for them as much as I want things for myself. They honk at each other in lieu of emerald green lights. The traffic lights are unforgiving. Everything feels stuck and all hunched together, an animal waiting to strike in the woods.

Where did the entire day go?

My days are all carved out in front of me. They never used to be. My life used to differ in its skeletal structure and I used to wonder about events and time and people, who would reach out with need and who I would succumb to. A discussion, an argument, a difference of opinion, a laugh with someone I want to laugh with. Even the alcohol felt different, lime vodka you can only drink when you're young, things that only taste good when you're young. It's all dull and lost in the gloomy pale nothing. I wonder if this is getting older, if we all just get older and accept the repetition or if some people don't have it, some can escape it, or if they don't know about it, if I always just want what I can't have. What if we all want what we can't have? What if it's an endless snake pit of want and everything goes dark before you realize you had any excitement at all? I worry about the rest of my life. I need to know if someone else wonders about their days.

At four o'clock, I can relax. How tremendously melancholy. Four o'clock is the birth of escape. I consider necessity and it all feels like a film I've watched, so ingrained, so calculated. My hair usually feels heavy by now, weighted with the oils of my hands. I touch it so often, my body always itching for movement. I think I'm always sitting in the same place. Do you ever think about how much you're really moving? People tell me I should run, I should lift heavy weights in the gym, that my body won't last forever. I think, it already isn't lasting. My health is declining in small ways. I took for granted the currency of youth and now it is no longer. I get older every day. The clock

flushes time into a place I can't see and I think of wasted water every time I run the tap too long, grazing my teeth now conceding to cavities. I have two. I've never had one in my life. How do these things happen? When does your body begin to betray you? When it's the beginning, there will never be an end. I know that from my memories.

Soon it will be five and I itch in the uncomfortable chair. It doesn't support the full weight of my body. I can't remember the last time I felt supported. I cried emptily at the funeral. My sister was there but she's been in her own head since the day she was born. Even if I tried to reach her, I would need to find her in the celestial silence of space. She isn't for anyone. Maybe I should extract more advice from her. I don't think she's getting older yet, I don't think any of my friends are. Even if they are, perhaps they see peace in it. Perhaps I'm the only one that feels I've lost something I can't remember, and it can never be found.

I can hear my neighbors having sex. They don't know that I can hear, and if they did, what is it to them? I am a black housefly on the wall. I am the coffee table in the room.

Five o'clock.

Getting home is a tragedy. I will open wine, play my music too loud in my ears, compromise the value of my senses. I will eat the dinner I always eat. I will think of you, and him, and I will worry about tomorrow as if today hadn't happened, as if there is no need to note that my body is decaying, a corpse in the window, lost in afternoon rush hour.

sometimes father

by Violeta Woolywhisp Joy

he's under a midnight tree shoes slung like wooden cradles arms
outstretched in white satin the sweetest caterpillars humming
his favorite grammar rules and saddest insults i bar him from my
doorways, remember the way he'd corner me, voice like ear drum banging
and no wind no breath no peace i see the faraway fog of waking him
from sleep the crinkly look of jester of rocker of silly boy just happy
to be here under wide moon there is no more to feel than knee slap to white
bathtub when they tell me it's getting worse, man i've exiled, man i last saw
standing alone downtown sick cancer ripped through his chest and a weird half smile
as we embraced, the know it all face the sick truth twister and every kindred
heartbeat of watching vitamix DVDs, music in the car, debating things
in a laugh i want to open up his brain and scrub and scrub and yell there are
golden lights in sunken days and open honest zealous fights holes of metal
in full body love and warm wild days where nothing is blowing
everything is right

House of Flames

by kkmakesart



Spring Cleaning

by Aubrianna Snow

There is nowhere for my grief in this house
she sits boxed up in the hallway, to-do: sweep away the years
to toss, to keep, to save for later
a tug on the leg of my pants, “up,” she is both infant and mother to me
sentimentality locked in time and space
throw her away and clear room for what’s to come
she does not help with the bills, but this is her house too
a box empty and full, a small crate of ocean in her ebbs and flows
my grief in tired hands, lovingly dusted off
don’t shatter her against the new beginnings
paint over cracks, stick fingers in grooves
so much about her is familiar, so much of her brand new
an orange price tag and a spot on the step
to be sun-bleached
she waits to be held, loved, seen for what she is
a girl skips up the driveway
and walks away with the grief
like the collapse of a galaxy outside my front door
I don’t save her
I mix my bleach, mop up the change

ritual for self-protection

by Nissie Arcega

1. purification.

turn the gas on and subject this fragile
shoulder to open fire. the burns will give birth
to a language that can finally bear the thought,

*nothing will ever prepare you
for when you lose
your body
to someone else.*

2. reanimation.

use what doesn't burn to pull me from the ground. pulverize the rest.
let me inhabit flesh, whatever's there

i will put things on the wrong way,

and with my voice,
the creature will spit
up the shrapnel from

my shattering

while a jury cross-examines the pulp.

they say,

swallow all of it, back down your bruised
throat, rearrange the parts correctly this time,

because god is listening.

it's January and i cry because a wish on a red candle can't kill you.

3. incantation.

the scapula snaps in half, right at the scorch marks, and god gives me the smaller
piece.

there is no blood
going down the drain
the third time
you cry in the shower.

make a wish anyway.

it will never have happened

to you, at least.

Sustained Burn

by C.M. Scott

What I love about fall is perishability. When death is expected, what remains is appreciated over what soon won't be. Glory fires burst through outstretched branches, singing a hallelujah to today, and today only—*The End*, in gold script on repeat.

I suppose that whole summer, I knew my relationship with my dad was dying. Nothing about that death was glorious because knowing is not acceptance. Without that closure, I existed in a partially removed stasis. Beyond the classic "it's complicated" line, there isn't a designation for living through losing a parent by being disowned. You can't be half fatherless. You have or you have not. Our binary language is so concerned with the destination that it misses the fading snapshots along the way down.

Was it about politics? In a way, I guess, but that was just the mousehole to every other explosion, insult, and criticism he'd refused to apologize for—even acknowledge—throughout the years. Suddenly, I was his enemy, and nothing would change that unless I once again cut myself in pieces, hiding whatever didn't resemble him. The week before I moved away to grad school, I got my closure. He rejected me, this messy, loud child, for the artificial version I refused to continue playing. Shutting the door, dropping the act; those were the right decisions. But no one ever tells you how hard the right choices are, or that the agency to make wrong choices can be more liberating than the destruction itself.

I was in so much pain and all of it was emotional. It wasn't the intensity or the sudden bursts of agony that disoriented me so much as it was pain's insistence at accompanying me everywhere I wandered. I'd like to think that I've got a great tolerance for discomfort. I'd also like to think I'm strong enough to weather falling mountains and pour honeyed patience over my crackling rage, but I'm trying to be honest with myself. I'm also trying to be kind, and I haven't decided which is harder yet.

I keep going back to that summer—that summer soaked in smoke, the forest fires on the west coast, the steam of sun-baked pavement, and the fevered

mirages in the distance like shimmers in the oiled sky. Everywhere, the heat was hard on my back and mind, and my grief gnawed my bones like red-hot termites. The restaurant I worked in turned into a backyard barbeque overnight just to stay above water, and I spent my weekends sitting in a folding chair beside a grill. I'd take my notebook with me hoping to write. I'd leave it open on the table until heat waves curled the blank pages. I knew I had so much to say, but it was all ugly, and the kind of bitter that grows roots the more attention you give it.

Lifetimes ago when the restaurant was just a restaurant, I singed my arm on an oven pan. The skin was puffy and shiny like pink satin pillows in an antique window display. Of course, I tried not to touch it, but after a few days it slipped open like wet toilet paper and scabbed. Burns are a whiny sort of pain. The heat slithers into your skin between the layers like spackle between bricks, and it stays there until your body builds it up and out in ever-rising skin cell canopies. While I can't recreate the pain's exact sensation, I remember the ache, and that's the only reason worth listening to the scar.

Running gentle, cold water over newborn burns helps the skin adjust to its conditions, but what relief is there for grief, especially the kind in movement? The skin knows itself as worthy of healing. The skin moves on. But who am I to grant myself the same assurance when so much of this pain is tangled with guilt? When brokenness is demanded by the broken parts of me, healing is the highest rebellion.

I've always needed more than to touch the stove. I've always needed to burn away in a crucible until I was a molten glow, and even now I am still smoldering away my impurities. I will never arrive at what I could be. I know this. And despite my inevitable failure, I will continue to draw in flames on braided cords and pull, and pull, and pull.

On the last day of the whole dreaded year, I put on dark lipstick for the first time since the world stopped spinning. Standing on my crooked porch, I watched the fireworks shriek, then shatter through the winter-bare lattice of backyard trees. And I wished on every explosion that the sparks would catch in branches like little sparrows, that they'd build nests and lay their glowing eggs, that they'd stay and chatter with me in the springtime when the earth dared to shed its terminal slumber.

This story starts in your book / I will have no home if I burn it

by Diane Athena

the words falling out of my being

are sometimes me and I alter

the sound to make me memorable

to live engraved in curves of the art in carats

of the lines editing my story with density

of strikethroughs across the past living

only in my head as I fall next to

my desire to knit myself into his life

in synapses so he never closes

the book anticipation half way snapped

with forceful intention I am a part

of these words as you are a part of me & I

started speaking to erase your smell

from my blood floating in syllables

the resonance of the cords flooding

the sky with essence unlacing you

from my life in threads of wet ink whisking

memories into whispers of defense only

to find my image torn in two pieces

corpus callosum cut & I am a spirit

instead of the whole dripping apathy

craving damp petals of platonic attraction

to hide my breath to masquerade my brain
to still my search for instant gratification
of roman strokes dancing inside
my wheels I reach underneath the page
tentative fingers willing to graze
the bordeaux poured into the fancy shapes
of the last century swirling wisdom
with musk of ripe grapes land
on my lips lurk in my pupils
loose pulse forgotten I inhale you
into my presence the broken edges
melt together in the story you started
the daughter you loved

The Scream

by Laura Marie Bailey

December 2022

twitter thread

healthcare workers comparing notes

on a phenomenon

they call

The Scream

their memories travel

across borders

and oceans

and lifetimes

recalling the wail

that still rings in their ears,

the tremors in their bones

and the chill in their veins

every time it drifts across their minds

‘This is grief,’

they say-

‘This is the sound

of a heart cracking open

and spilling all over

the hospital floor’

I wish I had screamed.

I wonder if they know

that the world can end

in silence, too.

Do they know

that for every Scream

there is a silence
just as haunting?

I wish I had screamed.

I wish I could have keened for her
made sure her memory
rang in their ears
forever

I wish I'd made their
bones quake
with how loud

I loved her

I wish some poor nurse
was posting tonight
about how she still carries
some part of my heartbreak
so I wouldn't have to
hold it all
alone

I wish I had screamed.

Do they remember us too?

The ones who
can't grab hold
of enough air
to choke out?

The ones who know
that letting it out
means letting go?

I wish I had screamed.

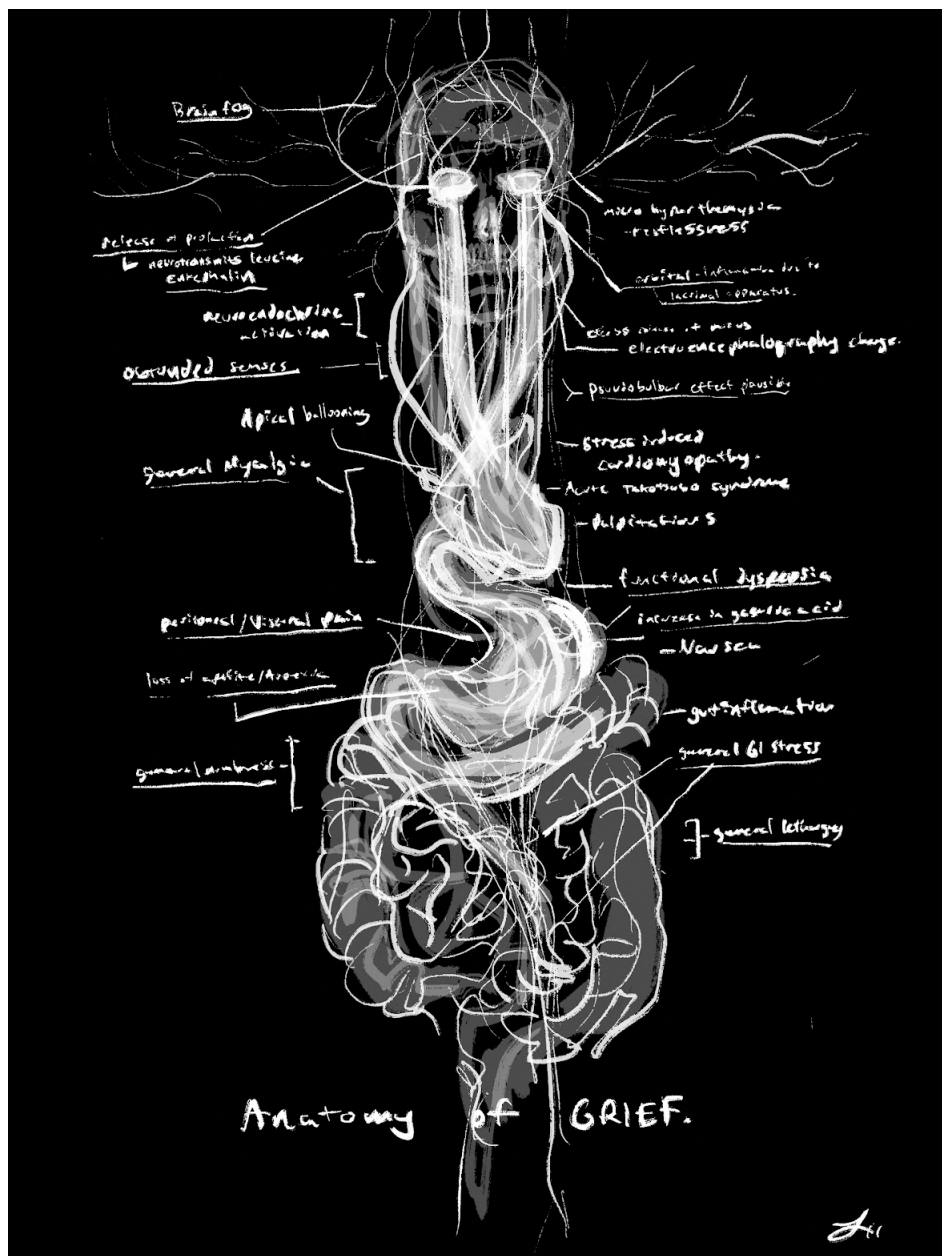
Because that sound
is still in here
eighteen months later
thrashing around
the fragile cage
of my chest
clawing its way
up my gasping throat
I'll be choking
on The Scream
for a lifetime

I wish I had screamed.

Because the only sound worse
than that momentous wail
is the silence
where there should be
a heartbeat

Anatomy of Grief

by Lorenzo Hall



clean

by Jess Roses

starvation still lingers in my lockjaw bites
smoke stains on bathrobe
mirror, mirror, streaked with crocodile tears.

chaos breathes hot and heavy down my neck
clock ticks, noose slips like a necklace
in the mess of my heaven.

you wash away, my hair grows
roses in the night as it fans
across the whole bed.

you wouldn't recognize me,
i have let the bloodstains
sit in bleach for 10 months
my entrails reeking in the bathtub
salt in the wound is nothing
to this.

now, they are clean
and your love still hurt worse than the healing.

the voices in my head have always
been this loud, you didn't
make them quiet, the noise of you
just drowned them out.

it's time i start to listen
to myself again

more flesh for the pound,
pride dying with the proud
as i'm washed
clean;
colors bleeding
stain the sheets, it is my bed
and my mess
and my hells and heavens tearing me apart
it was never your job to wrestle
with the sutures - you taught me
that i sew myself up
better than anyone in the hundreds of small ways
you failed.

bathrobe nights mirror crying noose
around my necklace
pretty baby torture chamber
body hatred headache
i keep washing my hands of this
only to see the blood smeared across me
crimson in my cuticles
future scars and one-day stories
about propane and broken glass
on the floor.

wash it clean
again and again. it is a small rosary
against our cosmic appetites
and hunger for the satellites
bite down for this, metal
on ivory
the blood runs red forever.

5 dead in Colorado Springs

by Connor Beeman

and again, I am staring at the blank page
as if it has the answers.

as if there are answers.

as if there is anything other than the pain,
than the loss,

than that feeling eating through my gut,
hollowing me out, clawing out from my eyes, my throat –

demanding my entirety, because
what else can loss demand?

my body, doing what bodies cannot help
but do when they are grieving.

I have spent six years trying
to write a poem about Pulse.

I never finished it, only for the
next tragedy to appear.

so few promises are made
to people like us.

we are told that this space,
this one solitary club, the bar

on the edge of town with the shoddy
lights and sticky floor, the drag show
with the local queens on Tuesdays,

is our safety.

is our refuge.

only if we are willing,

only if we make it so.

even this

can be taken.

even here,

we cannot save all of our own.

drowning my father

after Aftersun (2022), dir. Charlotte Wells

by Becca Fang

I drown my father. I drown
my father in Tenerife. I lob

him off a deckchair into the deep
end then swim off to play

mermaids in the shallow. I drown
my father in Euro Disney. I throw

him overboard in Pirates of the
Caribbean. His Mickey ears drift

off in bromine. I drown
my father at Whiterocks, in the moat

of my sandcastle. I drown
my father in an inflatable paddling

pool in the back garden. I drown
my father in the kitchen basin

with dull knives and chipped
glasses. I drown

my father in a puddle, then I drown
him in the Aegean. Centuries

later, he'll be dredged up for display
in the Acropolis Museum. The gift

shop will sell postcards of every place
I drown him. Best Wishes

from the Blue Danube. Greetings
from the Seine. Wish You Were Here

at the River Styx where I drown
my father until he, like Heracles, emerges

on land again.

Sleeping Dog: A Father's Recipe

by Sophia Joan

Adapted from childhood.

Serves 2-5

Estimated Time: 9+ years

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 beagle basset hound with dark eyes and a loud snore
- 1 old bed sheet, color may vary
- 8 kitchen tiles
- Small handful of goodbyes
- Your youngest child's tears

DIRECTIONS:

1. Prepare for the moment your child's kindergarten teacher convinces your wife to adopt her dirty dog.
2. Remove the excess ticks from the dog's fur in a large bathtub and add her to your household. Change her name from Juniveve to Junie B due to pronunciation. Set aside an old bed sheet, and let the relationship between the dog and your youngest child simmer for 9+ years.
3. After the dog and your youngest form a deep love, cool 8 kitchen tiles with a ceiling fan over the summer.
4. When the dog settles on the tile for good, wait until the sound of her breathing stops.
5. Take the old sheet from the closet, and drape the dog.
6. Arrange the remaining family members around the 8 tiles and old sheet.
7. Sprinkle a handful of goodbyes over the dead dog. Pour your youngest child's tears last.
8. Notice as a family how empty the house now feels without the sound of her snoring.
9. Resume your day until the kitchen tiles are room temperature, and it's time to discard the breathless body. *

NOTE:

**In the case of unexpected revival, watch in silence from the counter as the dog moves locations and dies again. If she stays awake for over an hour, call back your family. If not, place the sheet over the dead dog in her new spot, and avoid telling your youngest child for 1 to 3 years. Grief is too hard to experience twice.*

Jupiter

by Grace Aurora

It is September twenty-sixth and these are the things that are true.

Jupiter is the closest to Earth that it's been in fifty-nine years. It is in direct opposition to Earth, which happens every thirteen months, but it is also approaching its perihelion. I only understand what one of these things mean. Usually, Jupiter is 600 million miles away from our planet. Tonight, at its apex, Jupiter will be a meager 367,413,405 miles from Earth. It will not be this close again until the year 2129. For a brief moment, it will settle itself within the Pisces constellation, and with a good pair of binoculars, you will be able to see three of its moons, and the carnelian-white-blue bands that make up our solar system's largest planet.

September twenty-sixth. These are the things that are true. And this is also true.

My great-grandmother is dying. She is one hundred years old, just a few months shy of one-oh-one. She is what I think about when I go to look at Jupiter.

I asked a handful of people if they wanted to look at Jupiter with me. Each one said no. So, I went to the top of the parking garage alone, clutching my pepper spray in a fist, because the enormity of it all far outweighed the fear of danger, made me crave to bare my teeth at anyone who might've dared to fuck with me tonight. I hated them all for turning me down, at the time. But it's not their fault that they didn't know I was shaking apart.

It's been raining. It's cold out, and the sleep shorts I am wearing negate the chill that might've been kept out by my jacket. I am the only one on the top level of the garage. I walk to the barrier and lean forward, heedless of the way the wet concrete soaks my sleeves.

I stare into the sky and Jupiter stares back at me through stubborn, lazy rain clouds. I am unimpressed. Jupiter just looks like a big star. I can see Saturn better than I can see Jupiter, and I am unmoved by either of them.

College campuses are never quiet, but right now, there is silence. No sirens or car alarms, no laughter or blasting music. I can't even hear the trees rustling in the scathing wind. I can't tell if this is the universe granting me pity or having a laugh at my expense.

It is stupid to grieve, I think, when she's not gone yet. By all means, she could make it through. Five years ago was the first time we'd been told she wasn't doing too well, and thrice more after that. Every time, she came out the other side like it hadn't happened at all.

Something, though, feels different now. For better or worse, my gut instinct has always been too accurate.

Maybe it was in the way my mother responded to my cheery wakeup text that morning with "Can I call you?" Maybe it was the way I felt close to tears as soon as I picked up the phone, before she'd even said anything. Something had shifted before I got the chance to learn what it was.

I stare at Jupiter. Jupiter stares back.

It occurs to me that this Jupiter is the exact same Jupiter as it was when my grandmother was born. She stared up at the same sky I'm staring at when she was my age, though it's hard to fathom her ever looking sharp-edged and sly, when I've only ever known her to be soft and gentle.

It's the same sky she had my grandfather and great-aunt and great-uncle under. It's the same sky from which the bombs fell over Italy during World War II, while she got married in a pitch-black church, too afraid to light candles or take

pictures and risk being found. It's the same sky that hung above the boat she took to America, her children in tow.

We were both born under the same sky. And now she'll never see it again, while I'm stuck here. The thought guts me.

I want to show her Jupiter. I want to sit in her lap like I did when I was young and light enough not to risk damaging her birdlike bones. I want her to slip me money under the table like she used to, not at all secretive, barely trying to be. I want to hear her sing the Italian songs she remembered from her childhood, the ones she still knows by heart even now, when some days she forgets the names of her own family.

Pieces of her linger within me even now, before she disappears. My mother carries her first name, and I carry her surname as my middle name. I dread the day when people I don't even know will repeat the same paltry sayings like they'll start to mean something if I hear them enough.

I realize a day will come when I forget what her voice sounds like, and then Jupiter disappears from my vision along with the breath in my lungs. I heave over the side of the railing. Only three stories up and the air feels too thin.

I know the feeling of the skin of her hands in mine like I know my own name. I never want it to disappear from my memory. I know it has to anyway.

I've skipped a step, right past denial into anger. In silence— the loudest kind—I rage into the night. This grief is so loud it doesn't need me to voice it. I want to tear things to shreds and sit in the ruins. I want to scream into the wind until it turns itself around, and takes time with it.

I wish her body was as strong as her mind. I wish time wasn't such an incorrigible thief. I wish the quiet would stop eating me alive.

Fuck, right now, I just wish Jupiter felt like it meant something.

And still, I know that after this, I will just go home. I will write a paper, and stare at the walls like they'll give me the answers, and I will make the grocery list like the world isn't ending. I will clean myself like it'll change the fact that my head feels heavy and soaked with blood that's not mine.

I will wake up tomorrow, even though she might not.

And Jupiter will leave me once more.

world will suck u dry

by Leora Mosman

I made this piece in early 2023, honestly without much deep thought, aside from sitting within a depressive phase where I felt mostly annoyed and exhausted by being alive. "world will suck u dry" was created from this flippant irritation. How much has changed since then.

When Palestinian journalist Wael Al-Dahdouh's son, Hamza, was killed on January 7th, I saw a video clip of him speaking at his son's funeral. Someone on social media wrote about how one of the most powerful things about Wael is his refusal to exceptionalize his own grief—his very personal, insurmountable grief—and instead he steadfastly insists on relating his grief back to the entirety of the suffering and grief of his people, always.

I think of this now as I witness and share this grief, as I think about and create art—how do I refuse to make myself exceptional, how do I tie myself to others? "We are each other's harvest/we are each other's magnitude and bond," as Gwendolyn Brooks wrote. Our grief belongs to each other. Our grief must move us forward. Our grief must destroy the forces that are destroying life. I think many of us like to think of our art as political, and indeed it always is. But from our seats at the heart of the empire, what does that mean? How often is the political nature of our art just a reflection of the status quo from our seats at the imperial core, depicting our unconscious complicity from within? How often does our art insist on reckoning with the status quo, insist on imagining and demanding a different world?

I am changed by the Palestinian photographers, writers, poets, artists, creatives, and visionaries, whose art, so much a threat to their occupiers, were targeted, sought out, and murdered for it. Art has the power to demand an end to occupation, to empire. May our art learn how to do this as well. May the world one day be deserving of the martyrs and their memory.



Counting Roses

by Tia Kessler

I tried to count the roses at her funeral
but I lost track between
two hundred and tears—
and there was no room to sit—
not with the family
or with the grief
or with the anger
that came in waves
over every person who filled that place—
we all said
“how could he?”
Knowing damn well
it happened every day
to another girl
another woman
another mother
daughter
sister
aunt
lover
friend
and the tides of violence
showed no signs of slowing
or stopping
even though I felt the ground move
and crack open and swallow Time
at the inhuman wailing sound
that is a mother's grief
when there are 2 detectives on your porch

holding a notepad
but not your daughter—
and she already knew
she knew.
loss has a smell.
it smells like roses and rain
and dirt in the church graveyard.
Grief has a taste.
It tastes like metal and saline
and the sour of cottonmouth
because you forgot to swallow for so long.
Despair has a sound.
It is the high warbling keening
scream wail emptying your insides
into space until you
are hollow inside
and collapse from the weight
of all her unreached dreams.
They say time heals all wounds,
but that's a lie.
Time does not heal grief.
It does not heal the bullet hole
of ultimate loss.
It does not bring back that which once was,
and now will never be again.

a metaphor for grieving

by Bleah B. Patterson

When I pick up kombucha in the refrigerated section at the front of the grocery store I rotate it / in my palm, an act subconsciously meant to look like I am scanning the nutrition label, the sugar, the calories, the first three ingredients listed, / but my mind is blank and my stomach is churning and it's not until for the dozenth time I inexplicably decide not to buy the vinegary probiotic bottled beverage and I walk away, / that I remember for the dozenth time that my grandmother died drinking kombucha, / sitting in that chair she'd owned for the last twenty-five years sitting in the middle of the living room / facing her boxy television purchased in the very early 2000s when Dr. Phil was still new on the air / and Oprah was still regularly scheduled programming and Dr. Oz was telling everyone to just drink kombucha. / She died drinking kombucha instead of going to the doctor because at 69 years old with underlying conditions / like atrial fibrillation and high blood pressure and a family history of breast cancer / her insurance cost more than the mortgage, / and when my uncle finally took her to the hospital she kept asking

for that tart lightly fermented drink, /
ginger and turmeric was her favorite
flavor because she was convinced that
the more it tasted like the earth the more
quickly it would heal her. / When my
grandmother died of stage four ovarian
cancer no one, not even the doctors,
knew that she had stage four ovarian
cancer / and three months before she was
fine, attending ladies meetings at our
church of nearly twenty years, grocery
shopping, / and coming home alone,
commenting on my Facebook posts
telling me that god will forgive me /
even if I vote for a democrat, but not if I
get the abortion myself, posting articles
about the president that were later
removed for misinformation. / She was
fine. And after she died they went into
the house she bought twenty years
before I was born, / the house we
decorated with white icicle lights every
Christmas and rainbow lights that one
year, regretted it, / but were too tired to
take down, just another mistake we said
we wouldn't repeat, / the house the
Easter Bunny and the Toothfairy visited in
my sleep, / the house my cousin pushed
me up against my bedframe and touched
me and said if I told anyone he'd just say
it was my idea and they'd believe him
because I was two years older, / the

house I started filling journals and hiding
them between my mattress and my box
spring, / in the pockets of coats in the
back of my closet, the house I left at
seventeen and was never invited back to. /
When they went back into the house it
smelled. When they went back into the
house there were so many fleas in the
mauve carpet / that they nipped and
struck at the ankles of anyone who
walked through the living and dining
room, up the stairs, and through the
bedrooms where the carpet turned a stark
brown, / a sign of the times. When they
went back into the house they found holes
in everything, / the dead rats who had
chewed them and died happily of old
age, roaches crawling up and down the
walls and in and out of the drawers, /
they realized she had been sitting in that
chair drinking kombucha while she
became infested, and I remember
walking downstairs hungry at 2 am / after
being sent to bed without dinner and
finding my grandmother crying in her
chair in the middle of the living room /
facing the boxy television while an
Oxyclean commercial played on mute. /
She sat in silence with tears streaming
down her face and I asked her what was
wrong, / crawled into her lap, and she
held me and said she had a bad dream. /

She dreamed she was alone and
everyone had forgotten about her and her
home didn't belong to her anymore, /
strangers just let her live there but she
wasn't allowed to leave her chair, / and
she made me promise if I ever left, I'd
take her with me, / and I wouldn't forget
about her.

Threads

by Bex Machina



loss of a childhood (plastic grief)

by Natalie D.C.

i'm chewing through the plastic of my retainers // biting back the grief of a
childhood gone bitter // grief of an adolescence peered through a summery
haze // naiveté percolating through the canopy of a place called home //
grief of a teenagehood composed of vignettes recklessly penned // grief of
defining moments that weren't laced in bitter blood // grief of core
memories that don't ache to relive // grief of a girl unleashed into the
world // a girl raised by question marks rather than hard dots //
expletives // & exclamations // grief of no explanations for the *why* behind
the girlhood i was given // instead of not-so-silent reminders that i should
be grateful for what wasn't missing // grief of developmental decades
unmarred by shouting // silence // sheltered violence // & the kind of
denial that kills // grief that i'll never laugh as easily as the other girls // that
i'll never smile without remembering the times when happiness was
nothing but an impossibility.

The Endless Understanding of Being Absolutely Alone

by Grayson Micaela

Growing up, they tell you that you will eventually feel pain, that it's normal.

They tell you that death sucks, that it's going to happen, that you'll understand when you get older. They make it sound like such a mystery, a future collision just waiting to happen.

They tell you that it's better on the other side, whichever other side they believe in, better for the person who has departed. They tell you that it's beautiful, that it's peaceful, that it's infinitely better than whatever they had on this floating rock of heartache and confusion that keeps on spinning regardless.

They tell you that you must be happy that they are no longer suffering. That it's not about you. That they're healed. They're whole. They tell you that they'll always be with you.

They tell you so many things.

Dripping in placation and well-meaning love
but what they don't tell you?

Once it happens to you, you will forever feel alone.

My grandfather died when I was 14. His heart gave out. Ironically, that set the pace for my teenage years, each death closer and closer to my own failing heart, beating to the names of those who I had lost.

I had my first close encounter with death in when I was 16, when a friend of mine committed suicide on Thanksgiving. She was well known, popular, loved. She was everything a person wanted to be. She was radiant. She was incredible. She was an angel on earth, and she gained her wings through a bullet from her own hand and an unmatched resolve.

We were both 16. But the difference was, I wanted her alive. I didn't want to feel pain, but I knew nothing of the pain that she was feeling. I didn't want her to feel it, I didn't want any of it. And neither did she, so she did something

about it.

I lost my other grandfather at 17, the very next year, to a cancer that was invisible until he was as well. I don't remember much of it, I tucked that misery away, as far into the crevices of my mind as I could. I didn't want him to go, but I didn't want him to suffer anymore. But, his lack of suffering brought its own suffering, one that I was not able to tuck away.

A year later, another friend died from drugs. I felt as if I had been taking them myself, as I watched his body be lowered into the ground. I skipped school for the first time after the funeral. If he was gonna skip, I might as well join him.

Another year passed and my grandma died, alone in a nursing home. I hadn't seen her in a year, I didn't so much as cry when my dad woke me up to tell me. I felt as if I didn't know her. But I did. My heart knew she was gone. The pieces of it that I had left inside of me, at least.

An entire year passed and no death was found. An entire year passed and I cried and screamed and broke and choked and patched myself up with any piece of anything to cover the holes that were gaping inside of me.

An entire year passed, with a pandemic, and a blizzard, and a heartbreak and a betrayal. And the world kept spinning.

I momentarily forgot about the holes. As they were filled with other problems. Other vices.

And then, I woke up alone.

I woke up to the last remaining tether of my childhood gone, from one hour to the next. My other grandma was gone, the only memory of her? A few mismatched belongings and the final aching in my bones.

They tell you that you will eventually feel pain, that it's normal.

They tell you that it's better for those departed.

They will tell you all sorts of things.

But I'm here to tell you that I have spent half of my life chasing ghosts.
Begging them to come back. To make me whole. Feeling shame that I even had to ask.

Chasing ghosts, because I'm half the person I used to be without them.

They tell you all sorts of thing, but they don't tell you that feeling alone, feeling numb, feeling grief, feeling ghosts around you, feeling misery because of the aches, feeling shame that you are here breathing and aching, feeling at all ~

Is the biggest indicator that you are alive.

the marks that losses have left

by Erin Batali



the enormity of tragedy is a hard act to follow

by BEE LB

there is a bathroom in the crook of the highway
that holds more potential for life than any birth.

i mean only, they sold me condoms at twelve
—the workers, less than a decade ahead of me

already uncircumspect, unlikely to outgrow—
and at eighteen, upon returning, they spoke to me

of life and medicine and the structures
that would deny us both.

*they'd let us die if it saved them
enough of an insurance payout.*

but this isn't about that / this is about the pool
after the fire, the chlorine inhaled and spat back out.

the warm water and grown bodies that gathered
around the feast of my body / they had no business
making a home in my chest so young.

this is about the party taking place in the water,
but not even / it's about the blood in the water.

it's about jailbait becoming shark bait
just waiting to draw in.

the change from tempestuous to temptress,
unwilling participant to active manipulation.

it's about coming up from under the water,
lungs wrung out and filling with effort.

not even / it's about the fire, the heat lit
and spread / lungs choked by the haze

driving the bodies out / of the house
and into the water, but not yet / first

the cat under the stairs
being thrown out by the neck

and the desperate, hot
protection that led to nothing.

that led to a body abandoned and / the stains
we came to notice / the damage undone by time

when i say my urges lead nowhere
i mean only this / i named the needing body

i watched as it was thrown / out
with disuse / thrown out as a burden
and believe me / the message internalized

past its voice / past its need
past its sorry excuse
for protection.

but it's not about that / it's about
the emptiness my urges were attempting
to fill / it's about the men i found to
fill the hollow / it's about them digging
in and pulling out what little i had found / to fit

it's about me finding you and now too late
my body used to the feasting / the emptying

now the emptiness i know you long to fill is unfillable
and this is not a lack of truth i long to make known
but you already know / how could you not

my lazy tongue not guarding secrets.
my lazy tongue only yours to bear.
my lazy tongue yours to handle.

grip tight and pull close / remind me
the dangers of truth.

my own fault resembling nothing to do
with you.
it's not you i'm thinking of / not ever.
another tongue / another hand /
another warning not felt.

Weeping Angels

by Isabella H



Create//Destroy

After Lovis Corinth's Cain (1895)

by Skye Cowley

I never know where you end and I begin
but I think it must be here.

The fracture bleached in the moonlight
dripping ink slipping from curled fingers
painting the both of us out of the story.

The blood of my blood
laying waste; a feast for the vultures
descending like archangels
Witnesses to the creation of tragedy

I know God as I know myself
and He is just as terrible as Me
for crafting these hands
with every intention of abandoning them
when He should have held them instead.

Sparkling, Sad Magic

by Danny Fantom

Sprawled over an air mattress in my partly broken-down living room, I drank wine and watched *Encanto*, and felt a gentle wave of grief wash over my chest and make my shoulders tingle. It was slow, feeling out the hills and cliffs of my body, cataloging the changes in me since the last time I'd fucked up.

It was recognized yet not entirely familiar. The grief of loss, but a loss within myself. A grief that I felt keenly in my early twenties when most of the dreams I'd had for myself faded away like cheap ink. When all I wanted to be, and all I wanted, were flipped unceremoniously into a pit of lava, and I couldn't recognize the sad, hollowed out girl staring at me. The grief during those years could either be weeks long marathons of self-loathing and bleakness, or little stinging bullets that gutted me out of nowhere, while scrolling curated Instagram stories or watching others live out the dreams and fantasies I'd had.

Now approaching the final stages of my twenties, I was miffed to see its return. I had to reluctantly conclude that perhaps my 20's would just be awful in general. I repeatedly, slowly, clenched and unclenched my hands. I smoothed fingertips along the curves of the wine bottle. I ignored the boxes stacked in the corner by the patio door, and boxes tucked into the corner of the tiny kitchen, with fastidious care. Pushed out the peripheral misery to focus very hard on the message of generational trauma and best intentions so that I wouldn't have to feel another pulse of grief looking at them. The boxes, not the Madrigals. They were lovely.

But this was a whole new version of the grief I'd once felt. More passionate, more insistent, and it punched me in the stomach with enough force that I blocked out "Dos Oruguitas" as I tried to weather the rush. My ears rang, my stomach cramped, and a hot flush threatened to soak my blanket with sweat. I stared hard at the TV and watched Alma's head tip back, Mirabel's face crumble with the truth. Another hot burst of shame filled me— hadn't connecting more to fiction than reality gotten me in this mess in the first place?

Would I always grieve the possibility of better, so long as I remained this pathetic fool? I opened my mouth in a loud gasp as I attempted to breathe in deep—*I kept thinking It has to get better, It can get better, Won't it get better, OhGodOhGod—*

So what does it mean when you still dare to hope, but it feels like you're dying inside?

I guess that's the stage of grief called "Bargaining".

Marry Me, Archie

by Ava Kosluchar

The street light in my alley may as well be a UFO:
you always spawn there.

Climbing down the telephone pole as though you are every missing pet,
everything the neighbors have been looking for.

You hop my fence like it's nothing in your platform heels,
knees seemingly bending backwards in your ripped tights and slim red dress,
perhaps a trick of the glowing snowfall.

You protect yourself with a thick fur coat: you must have
skinned yourself for it.

Sauntering through the flurry as if you can't feel the cold, as if
the moisture can't stick to your freshly colored hair; they're right by the way,
it's the only thing that grows now that you're dead.
And when you extend your hand for a cigarette, I count the wrong number of
fingers.

I always ignore the red flags,

I'll take you even if you come back wrong.

The Surface of the Maine

by Bex Machina



**Elegy for Young Adulthood While Taking US-60 at
4 AM to a Minimum-Wage Job During the Apocalypse**

by Daren Colbert

I drive towards the edge
of nothingness most days—
an endless echoing of memories forgotten,
of dreams laid to rest.

I say a prayer for this silent journey,
that maybe God will cup my tears within His palms
and turn my sorrows into something
sweeter, but these cries are only swallowed
by the garbage truck rumbling down this lonely road.

I try to make peace with the pain,
find solace in standing, still in this life, but

what do you do when home
doesn't mean what it did. When the word
itself slips from your tongue
without a second thought or taste
of every curve and edge.

I don't want to be here anymore

feels more familiar these days—
like a secret buried beneath bone
or the language of an old friend.

I want to leave, but I don't know how
to say goodbye without it feeling
like a death I am not yet ready to mourn.

Tell me, is change always this hard.
Or does the heart grow thicker in skin
with each wound.

My Love

by Lyssa Stevens

I heard your voice again. My coffee cup thudded against the dining room table when it happened. I sat in my usual seat – the one across from yours. I couldn't bring myself to look up from the stagnant reflection of my face. Seeing the space you left would break my heart all over again. I should start adding milk to my coffee, just so I don't have to look at myself.

By now, you would have gotten dressed in that green vest that you love and put your hair up because you hate when it brushed the back of your neck. We would dance around each other as we rushed to leave for work. You would skip your way down the street as I trailed behind you. Before parting ways, you would blow me a kiss. I would catch it and put it in my pocket. I wish I had told you I did that. By the time I caught it you would have already turned away from me.

I'm still sitting here but my cup is empty now. It's days like this that are the hardest. When my soul is calling out for you but yours is nowhere to be found. It searches in every nook and cranny of this house. It calls into every room and out of every window. But it always comes back to me, feet dragging behind.

I wish you would stop talking to me. I hope to wake up one day and realize I haven't heard your voice in a long time. It would mean that you are at peace. It's what you deserve. Peace. I know I'm being a bit of a hypocrite by responding but I promise, I will no longer hold on to you. It has been far too long.

You deserve to venture into your next life. You deserve to experience the world with that wide-eyed wonder once again. To stomp through autumn leaves and skip down the street even if it is to work. To re-discover your love for that old, knitted vest.

I hope, in my next life, that we cross paths one more time. To have the privilege of calling myself yours once again. But if I am not honoured that privilege, that's alright too. I would still love to see you again. Even if it's for a brief moment. A smile. A bump of shoulders. A conversation. I don't mind. As long as it's you.

Rose Pink

by kkmakesart



You became the god of absence that my empty prays to.

by Tove Verstrepen

Take me to where forgiveness lives:
a creak where each skipped stone comes
home. A place that we all find

because every street-turned-painful
has a guide. An after-
noon with you: reading me

the lyrics of a Bob Dylan song.
Take me to where goodbye doesn't
hit as hard as those mornings, our mornings, were soft.

Where the only thing I told you was "*I am glad we met*".
Where the only thing you told me was "*You are a poet*".
Take me to yesterday; we are still holding

hands in the snow. Forgiveness lives
where the first grandmother's house
still stands, with a sun loved hard-

wood porch and wicker rocking
chairs. Here, we lean back into
compassion. Here, I lose you

and still feel something.

[Emulsification as a state of body in motion]

by Rebekah Hallman

It was past three in the morning and you picked me
up from nannying your nieces and nephew. I'd made
them spaghetti with sauce from a tin, put enough
oregano in to kill a dog but could still taste
metal in my mouth; you were high and I was naïve,
didn't know what the shift gear crank of your jaw meant,
just hopped in and watched your knee bounce, neck pulse.
foolish to think kin could keep you clean.

I know now that war emulsifies with meth in the
blood, like water and oil, shake a body with enough
pressure and it'll hold it all; that a tire screech can
sound like firearms, how some men never
return, how they will roadkill themselves over and
over, how a self can shatter— then crystallize.

Acid Rain

by Anonniks



In Remembrance

by Madeline Topp

The queer
Queer poet
reading
Queer poetry
at night
under the black
moonless sky
5 queers killed
in a gay bar in
Colorado Springs
this morning
This trans day
of remembrance
The night sky holds
her breath and
cradles
the souls of the
lost
like that boy who
overdosed on fentanyl
tonight
Like my dad
But that boy lived

And lived
It's good when the young
live
and i hope he makes
it through the night

Falling asleep
to the sound of
the wood floors
creaking
My roommate
playing blue velvet
As she opens
The fridge for
something she
hasn't
remembered
yet

Bea
by Kayla



Mimay

by Julianne Bautista

in July,
there were floods of
bouquets at your doorstep
you should have seen it
the house is quiet
without you here

empty

miserable

unfamiliar

it's strange how quickly
a childhood home can disappear
I tried to call your name out through the hallway
for some reason, I couldn't hear a thing

in July,
I waited to wake up to your voice
and how you'd sing along
to Crystal Gayle's love songs
every morning
you'd hum while making breakfast
warm cornbread, bacon, and eggs
all for those you care for

in July,
that famous scent of yours that we
somehow can't describe
but call
"Mimay"
lingers in the air
like a warm hug
so we press our faces down
in your wool sweaters
and clutch your purses
beneath our arms
to remember what it was like
to hold you

An Accounting of Coldbrew

by Emmy Teague

2 cups whole coffee beans

Water

Clean Pitcher

Wire Strainer

Cheesecloth

Glass

1. Measure out exactly two cups of coffee beans. Run them through your fingers. Name each one. Fear. Catharsis. Rage. Lust. Joy. Whisper their names to them so they know them and accept the fate you've given each.
2. Pour the unground beans into a grinder and spin it on the coarsest setting. As each bean flies into pieces, remind yourself of what makes you unworthy and that which sparks life in your veins. Alternate so you are not too kind to yourself.
3. Dump the grounds into a pitcher and fill to the top with water. If tap water, speak your sins aloud. If purified or filtered water, speak your virtues. When the pitcher is full, stir with the wooden spoon that brings back the punishments you earned as a child. Maybe text your mother and apologize for always being the one who broke things.
4. Put your coffee-water mixture in the fridge and leave overnight. If you have nightmares, pour into the garden upon waking and pray over the grounds to whatever god you think may have the time to listen to someone like yourself. If you have good dreams, call your mother and do the apologizing for the aforementioned breakings.
5. Put your glass bowl on the counter, place the wire strainer over it, and cut cheesecloth to cover the wire strainer. Feel the silky texture of the cloth against

your fingers and think about the dress you wore when he broke your heart.

6. Pour the coffee-water mixture through the cheesecloth, into the wire strainer, and into the glass bowl. As the liquid separates from the grounds, think about how good things in life take time, but bad things always happen too quickly to stop.

7. When the pitcher is empty, rinse out the grounds that cling to the sides and try not to think about how you clung to him the same way.

Throw away the grounds in the cheesecloth and pour the coffee-water into the pitcher. Fill the pitcher to the top again with water and repeat the earlier process — tap water, speak your sins, purified or filtered, speak your virtues.

8. Stir the water and coffee together, and say a blessing from the religion of your choice. Pray as you do that Fear, Catharsis, Rage, Lust, and Joy have been pulverized, prayed over, and blessed enough that you won't take them back into yourself. You carry enough of each already.

9. Pour however much you want into one of the mugs he left behind and add sugar and cream to try and sweeten the bitter taste he left in your mouth. It won't work, but it's worth the effort.

10. If you're lucky enough that it rains soon, sit on your back porch while the water falls and hope that the rainwater that slips into the mug can wash all of this away.

peace

by Irina Tall Novikova



Preserve(s)

by Keisha Cassel

A mist forms, the first frost approaches.

I want to take the winds of change in my hands

And tear them apart. I want to look inside and see,

could I exist during this time of year without sinking into myself?

Maybe if I was in a small apartment in a mid-size city

with fruits and veggies lining the countertop.

On the stove, pots filled to the top with water

coming to a boil. I am not alone. Someone whispers,

“Cleanliness is next to godliness.” Dropping jars into water,

my glasses fog. Our arms are sticky with remnants of syrup

That will encase future delights. As the kitchen fills with humidity,

my heart propels my mind into the future. The wind burns my skin.

A mist forms, the first frost approaches. I want to take the winds

of change in my hands and tear them apart.

Overstaying My Welcome

by Comfort A.

A strand of your hair
in the bathroom drawer
wrapped in all its curled glory
around an old cotton swab

That cigarette butt in the planter
outside the front door
from 9 months ago
that I can't seem to dispose of

The photo I took of you
with my black and white film,
masked, leaning into my car
with a book in hand
I stare at it a lot

Water on the kitchen floor
soaking through my sock
as I wash the surviving dish
from that set you accidentally blew up
in the microwave

Your birthday card to me, still on the fridge
20 cut out faces of the perfect dog
and hidden behind it
the profession of your love
that's been ripped from me
under the cloak of Mary Oliver's spirit

No one feels it in the moment
At least I can't

The bath water gets cold so slowly
and in it
I have always overstayed my welcome

Without Being Taught

by Rhiannon Davis



untitled

by Irina Tall Novikova



Three Dead Birds, in Reverse Chronological Order

by Sage E. Magnus

3.

Eden's chicken died today. It was young and soft and had not been laying eggs for a few months. It was fed well; it was warm and comfortable in a yard where no foxes could get it. It was held and had a friend. The vet said it had a sickness and nothing they could have done would have averted its death. It had a name, which few birds ever get to have, but that didn't save it in the end.

2.

In the grass behind the library, I found a bird's wing. Its feathers were intact, black and gray and fluffy white, a wing you might still fly with. Lined up neatly next to it was a bone, white and clean. Ten meters away I found the second wing, just as intact, the bone placed next to it just as neatly, picked just as clean. The two wings were inconsistencies in a yard with torn-up feathers strewn all over. There was a sense of purpose to them. This was not the natural violence of predatory animals, this was orchestrated. This bird died because something wanted to kill it just to take it apart.

1.

When I went to the dumpster to throw out rotten peaches from my fridge, I saw a dead pigeon with its chest split open and flies circling around it. I looked at it and pushed thoughts of bad omens aside. A day later you called me at 2 am to tell me she had gone to the hospital. You were panicking, and I stayed awake by my phone all night while the storm outside howled like a banshee. I listened to it and pushed thoughts of bad omens aside. Two days later her chest was cut open. Three days later she was dead.

Rites: An Epitaph

by K.R.

I do not remember the service but I remember the green plastic tablecloth. I remember the curtains (red) and the walls (powder blue). Someone brought homemade cookies (dry) but I do not remember that those were his favourites. I remember the crowd (large) and the celery sticks (stringy) and how warm it was with all those bodies packed in a small-town church gymnasium. I remember my shoes (pinching) and my dress (itching). I do not remember the faces that offered consolation. I remember his collection of National Geographics, a wall of faded yellow spines he never had the heart to get rid of. I remember his hands, cupping a small injured bird that he found in his garden one summer. I remember his reading chair (leather) in his corner (in the sun) by the window. I do not remember the books he liked, or remember if I ever got the chance to learn what books he liked. I remember the final days. I remember the bed (tidy), his body (small), his hands (pale). I remember standing there thinking, *keep this, this is so very important, somehow. This will be the only thing you take with you*, only to feel a hand on my shoulder and realize I did not remember the last words he'd ever say to me at all.

Aggregated Platelets Form a Plug

by Elizabeth Kate Switaj

the birthday when your death became
half my life
I spent alone—that isn't strange, but
now we're all in loneliness together
and so much of this grief
pressing from other windows across what should be green
comes from clots
now everyone speaks occlusion, d-dimer, fibrinogen chains
and all this loss I've carried seems the world's
and all this fear of genetic antithrombin deficiency—nothing
to fear of infection
I've worn this grief two decades—what's a mask?
now we're getting back to normal
you died the last year the Mariners made the playoffs
your Yankees eliminated them shortly thereafter
we've finally made it back—a walkoff homer, two outs, full count
the second perfect baseball moment of my life
and middle-aged, childless I
still long to see it through my father's eyes
as I will never again see someone who loves me

war

by Irina Tall Novikova



Coral from Kolkata

by Britni Newton

Sometimes I wear his ring.

Coral from Kolkata, platinum band, whiskey stained.

Coral from Kolkata, platinum band, whiskey stained.

Fingers that mistake my finely tuned heart for broken guitar strings.

Guilt, locked inside of your guitar case with 3 fingers of stale bourbon.

Guilt, locked inside of my bedroom with a hand gently against my throat.

Hiding inside of my skin, a skeleton key stuck in the back of my throat.

I swallow it whole, until my sins disappear, digested.

I want to disappear, like you did, no investments.

Reminiscent of my father, lost illusionist.

Reminiscent of my father, lost illusionist.

Broken promises saw the girl in the box in half.

Nameless girl, torn in two, a box of broken promises.

I wore a ring for him.

Still here, 2022.

by Mayrques



Songbird

by Robin Kocherhans

I hold in my hands too many
afters, and they spill
between my fingertips, little
slippery drops of rain

or tears. They are things to be
mourned. I count them
as they fall, my lips stumbling
over the syllables dribbling

down my chin. And if my sorrows
spill out of my body, become
too big for the universe
spinning inside me,

then I will release them
like the song a bird sings
in January. It's the unseen
made seen. Notes recorded

as trilling puffs of air. Round
bellies with slender stems
printed against the sky.
So I will sing my griefs

because in my frozen,
splintered heart, the cold
let's you see the song.

Notes on Leaving the Body

by S.P.

Your phantom's been lingering— I wake up to the sun piercing light through the center of my chest and think of you. The spot on the couch where you used to sit. The age in my sister's face. The crease in the middle of my forehead. Your dried roses decorating a crucifix. Years don't feel like years living from a calendar marked in memoriam. Impermanence taught us something about ache. 624 days and we've repainted your bedroom from the white it was before to a lively sage green. We even added some saints. In October, we drove out to the ocean. You were there too. Sea water pulling in the sand. The sun. The slow crash of the waves against the cove. Seashells and gypsum iridescent beneath the water. There, I saw parts of myself decayed. I crawled out of my own skin. Vultures fighting outside our hotel window woke us up in the mourning. The cicadas left their bodies on the front porch. The moths tore off their own wings. Even in their world, one not concerned with remembrance, there was grief.

Untitled

by Risopotamia



Trickle

by Izzy Amber Wyskiel

When Demi Greenwood comes back to herself after a long bout of suicidal ideation, she grieves. Mourns the slices of the multiverse in which she followed through with it. Sometimes, drunk, double-inebriated by thin rooftop air, she laughs and thinks of those slices as baklava. As a book. Many, many, many, many, many, but with an ending all the same. A hard stop. Digested and done.

When the uneasy goldfish of her heart palpitations calm, she begins to rematerialize. She thinks of the times she watched the Vaux's Swift chimney reunion with her family, in light fall layers with a picnic spread out, hunched backs and awed silences, hushed cheers from the people of the town. Families colorful and dotting the damp grass.

That cloud of loud little birds, like all the pieces of her life, cutting brash, graceful swirls through the air and returning to a small opening. She thinks, too, of the black mouth of the big, round coin-eater she loved as a child, the one that sat at the center of the near-abandoned mall. The numb, sleepy, vaguely melancholic feeling of watching her departed copper disk dance dizzy into darkness.

A funneling, a magnetization, a gravity, a settling— this return to awake living.

The bottlenecking of banality.

When joy returns, it is petrifying. Sometimes she feels a thrashing at her core, at her neck, like turning away from a medicine arriving at her lips.

But other times, it's a hug from a many-limbed thing. Something like a caterpillar and a sloth she's seen at the edges of a childhood dream.

She wants to live. She wants to live. It's an extubation. A choir peak. Rolling down a hill.

She thinks frantically- *I want to pull apart another dumpling and see the steam, and I want to remain a container that can hold safe the memory of the time my first girlfriend whispered in my ear "let's leave this party and walk to the*

grocery store and get cake, the gaudier and brighter, the better” and I want to use these hands, to dial my older sister, ask her about biology stuff, listen while I’m on mute, eating my first real meal in weeks– a hummus and cucumber toast with black pepper, and sea salt like dulled stars; co-op potato salad a worker lovingly cut green onions slant-ways for, speckled with gorgeous peppercorns {thank you, human, thank you}

When she comes back to herself and no longer wants to die, her existence is like cold milk trickling down her esophagus. Like waterfall mist; clear pins marking every spot on her body, topographisizing her.

Emphasizing her. Empathizing with her.

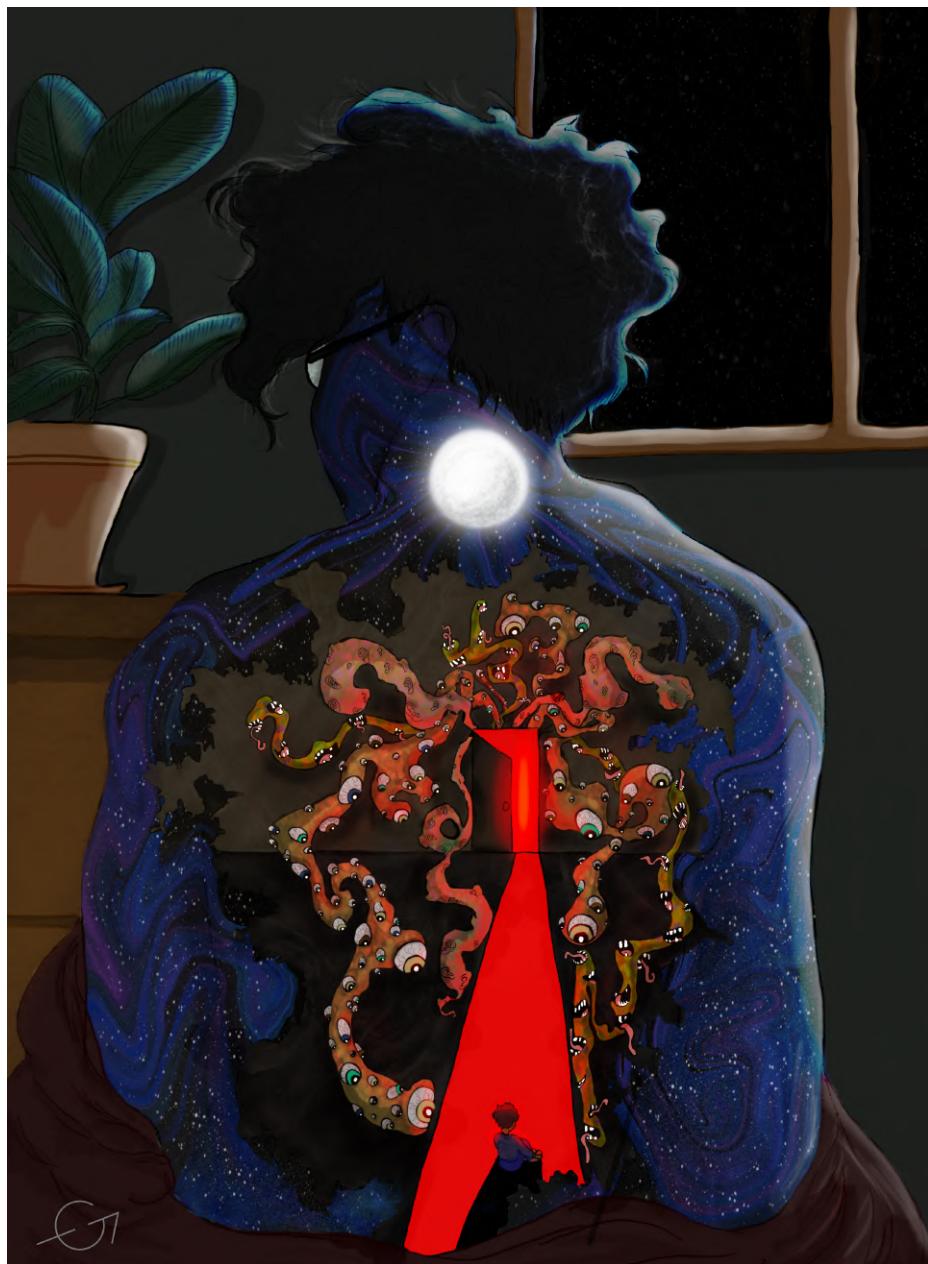
untitled

by Ally Tyra

I take the closest thing I can describe as a breath and feel my chest heave. Stones rattle around inside my rib cage, the same ones I forced myself to swallow the day I heard the news that you were gone – I thought feeling anything would distract me from the numbness, but now all it does is remind me that I am empty, like a shell that its owner has grown too big for. Lately it feels as though I am drowning in the pond that rested behind your house, the same one your son said an octopus lived in; I am trying my best to float in the water but the eight-legged grief wants to drag me down with it. All I know is that even the stinging from a serrated blade of grass would be welcome now. What I mean is that I have to swim so far to get back, and I hope that I learn to breathe normally again, but I can't help but be afraid that even when my lips can finally touch the earth, I will still be coughing up dirt from your grave.

Where the Light Cannot Reach (My Inner Child, Part One)

by Camille Escareal-Garcia



Five Billboards

by Mari

I merge onto the highway, shifting the car into a higher gear. My eyes dart between the left lane and the long stretch of road ahead of me, as if there would be anybody out at this hour, save for a drifting trucker or two. I officially got my license two days ago — gun to the head, might I add — and old habits never die easily, or however you say it.

ROGER'S FIREWORKS EMPORIUM: BIG BLASTS LOW PRICES

I see the classic fireworks billboard, bulbs casting a shadow on a cartoon of who I assume to be Roger. Who is this for? Are there that many people who suddenly want to buy a firework batch while on their way to the suburbs? Who buys fireworks, anyway, besides the neighborhood idiots who light one on every holiday for a week straight? To be honest, I always assumed they spawned out the back of someone's truck.

Drumming my fingers on the fraying edges of the steering wheel, I hum to myself off-key. Tinnitus doesn't help your musicality. Being the car it is, there's no aux cord, CD player, functioning radio stations. Tape deck, yes, but where do you even buy cassettes these days? Needless to say, the reality of having none of these features means someone actively haggled with the dealer to remove them; that's how cheap he had to be.

The car — functioning death trap on wheels — has all the necessities, Tristan always said: A/C that runs sweetly cool, roll down windows (most embarrassing to use at the busy McDonald's drive-thru in the winter) and a large trunk, perfect for activities. He added a signature eyebrow wiggle with the word "activities" to let me know how multifunctional it was.

GENTLEMAN'S CLUB — HOT GIRLS ALL NIGHT

I had to ask my friend Claire's dad what a "gentlemen's club" was while he drove me and her to homecoming (Tristan was too cool to go) and saw this advertisement for the first time. He sort of stammered out an answer about money and women and dinner (??), to which I replied, "Are there ladies' clubs then?" He half laughed, said there weren't, then quickly raised the radio volume to shut me up.

Imagine working at a strip club you have to advertise on the highway. Is it the same clients as Roger's? You take Exit 51B to get some fireworks then get your rocks off down the street? Two-for-one deal? A marketing major could be in my future if I would just pass some classes.

Either way, that's the only thing vaguely resembling a sex talk I've ever gotten from any parental figure. Unlike my other classmates, I came to a rude awakening in seventh grade, when I learned how to use a tampon and what America's obesity epidemic was and how boys have anatomy girls don't all in the same muggy classroom once a week. Tristan, three grades wiser, refused to say anything to me about the subject, for what it's worth. The only thing I was allowed to know was that he "pulled."

It never occurred to me these were things one could talk about with family. Sex is for discussion with friends. Sex was giggling about with your friends in between high school passing periods as you vaguely gestured what you'd like to do with this guy or that one. Sex was code names you made up to associate with each potential suitor — fire hydrant, who peed outside during a party once, or 76, who inexplicably wore the same jersey to school every day.

Sex was when you get your first kiss on someone's little sister's mattress at a party junior year, and Fire Hydrant puts his hand down your jeans and you're not really sure that you like it but you don't hate it either so you say nothing and then he asks if you want to "go all the way" with his best sultry face but you panic and run to the bathroom and throw up all four shots you've consumed that night and you have to call Tristan to come pick you up.

Sex is not for lightweights.

HE IS RISEN. — MATTHEW 28:6

A harsh truck horn blasts me out of the clouds, its blare foggy in my ears. I blink to stay awake, then realize I missed my exit — I haven't driven this route before, of course. The Google Maps lady orders me to take another highway, so I do, swallowing my nerves at my near-collision earlier.

As I merge, I spot a giant yellow billboard, nearly invisible in the now twilight blue hours. Too cheap to light it, even for Jesus, huh? When my dad was learning English, he would immediately point out the poor grammar. “‘He is risen!’” he would exclaim to no one, laughing to himself. “It’s, ‘He are risen,’ isn’t it?” Then he would chuckle again, a little louder, to show he got his own joke.

After my grandma died, my dad was beside himself. The laughs stopped. Then a Chinese church opened up down the street. He already barely had anyone to speak to in Mandarin, let alone Yuebei, so the fact that there were other people around who understood him on the lingual plane made it much easier to transition into the religious one.

Maybe I should have learned Mandarin after all. Clearly, he isn't fazed by bad grammar.

Soon, I barely saw him at all. Me and Tristan fended for ourselves most nights, with him handling all the cup noodle-making and rice-steaming duties after the rest of our money went to the church. It was rare that the three of us sat at the table together. When we did, it was to help our dad figure out how to barely keep the lights on while that building down the road's inner yellow glow lasted deep into the night, beaconing all lost souls to be born again.

*TAX PROBLEMS? WE'LL FIX THEM LICKETY-SPLIT! CALL SPELT
TAX ASSOC. TODAY*

The only lights I can see now are from the billboards and from my Google Maps, which is clearly trying to lead me into a haunted part of the state covered in shadows. My beamers can't help, since the blue light setting got messed up two years ago. I should feel lucky the car even runs anymore.

To calm my shaky breath, I start repeating lines instead of flatly humming like before. "Lickety-split, lick-et-ee-split," I say, feeling each syllable against my teeth. Remember when Brenda pretended I couldn't speak proper English? "Rih-kuh-tee-sprit." All third-graders are assholes, I guess, but adding racism definitely doesn't help.

I don't know where the phrase comes from. Tristan would have. He knew why wine glasses were shaped the way they were and how come fireflies' butts lit up and the best ways to entertain yourself when your dad's been gone for three days straight.

And when he didn't know, he just made it up. Where do moths in closets come from? They're on winter vacation. How does the ATM work? There's a man living inside who hands us the correct amount of money. Why don't we have a mom? She joined the circus.

I'm sure the answer for "lickety-split" would be something equally entertaining.

*FABLEMAN AND SON'S FUNERAL PARLOR: FOR YOUR END OF
LIFE NEEDS*

Despite my mantra, my lungs close up again and the wind leaves my sails. Soon, the syllables die in my mouth as I concentrate on breathing, hoping to get rid of

the block in my throat and the ringing in my ears. I always hated driving stick, and hated him for making me drive stick, but especially in the dark and especially when I barely know where I'm going and especially when I'm going where I'm going. I can barely make out the billboards at this point. But it'll be dawn soon enough.

Is this how he felt?

Driving is the only thing Tristan tried to teach me to do myself. Not how to talk to guys, how to use a skateboard, how to light ants on fire like he and his friends did behind the church building back in its broken-down days. He was definitely much smarter than I (than me?). He got to go to college out-of-state — so out-out-of-state it was six hours away — for free and the only reason he didn't become a lit major was because computer science paid better after graduation. Clearly, it did. His friends were the ones who paid for his plot since I sure couldn't afford it.

The shadows of my brother are all over, but he got to go and I had to stay.

He bought this car with his own money — all the good features removed, remember — and taught me three summers ago, before he went to school. I didn't want a license, but he made me practice, just in case, as I ground the gears to pulp every Sunday. The last time we spoke, we sat in his trunk while I complained that I shouldn't have to drive at all, much less this dinosaur of a vehicle. I wanted to be a passenger forever.

"You never know when you'll have to leave, Lisa," he said vaguely, leaning back onto his forearms.

He knew. When my dad cleaned out his room and found all the money he'd saved away for me, amid all the empty vodka bottles and weed jars, Tristan had already long vanished from our house, leaving me alone with the man who

screams at me until he goes hoarse and his forehead veins burst and the ringing gets so loud death would be an escape. Last night, a vase was what burst by my head instead, beauty already long absent from its insides.

I pull up to the locked iron gates, forcing the gears into place one last time before stopping the car, the car that sent him here. I've really wrecked it now.

I hop the gate and crunch through the fallen leaves, each step a firework in my pounding ears until I make out the tiny cement block under a weeping willow I've only seen in a photo. I can barely hear myself breathe; ears clogged with the hollow sound of church gongs.

"Sorry I haven't visited yet," I feel myself whisper to my shadow. "It's hard to make the drive."

microgrief

by Lorenzo Hall



alexa play nobody by mitski

by Mel Tang

i had a dream that we were different than we are.

how do you grieve something that was never alive? how do you bury
something that isn't dead?

my hands are tired of being empty.

just once i want to write a love poem i believe in.

Grieving Ghost Girl in the City

by Jeremy Fuscaldo



it was my sacrifice, but what else would it be

by Caitlin McCarthy

mom walked in on me last night, curled up and full-body sobbing
in bed to a creed song while jinx whipped my back with his tail
and matilda chewed on her toes next to my head.

she rolled her eyes, told me my fan wasn't enough to cover up
my whimpering, and went to throw up chinese food in the bathroom.
we must go about missing you differently.

when I think back to the last time I saw you

by Louie Leyson

the coiled tinsel like starlight everywhere
disappears. so do the half-empty glasses of
cheap merlot, precariously left atop transparent

coffee tables, top of the black piano. stems in
grips of tipsy cousins swaying to santa baby
in pressed button downs & hip-hugging dresses.

so does the thump of rain on curtained windows
and the scent of filipino dishes: lumpia dipped
in jewel-red sauce, chicharron, sinigang, ube cake

gone away and replaced with the faint
rose notes of your western perfume.
the house adorned in red string lights,

slow-melting whiteness clinging to the roof,
falls away like a collapsing dock and leaves
only you: sitting on a pillowed dining chair,

cane resting at its arm, eating puto from
a paper plate with creased, brown hands.
bent-backed and narrow, you took

a crumpled food court napkin out of
a beaded clutch (spilled a tube of
chanel lipstick onto a shrinking lap),

had brought it to your mouth, wiped the oil
and english off. you kept outstretching your
tongue to offer words in a language

I only half-understood. apo,
they tumbled off my ears
like avalanche debris—but softer,

gone airless. wind falling instead of cliff
parts. in place of speaking, I watched the
yellow kitchen lightbulb wind haloes through

your smoke-hair. watched pearls flashing
beneath a tweed blazer sleeve, circling a
wrist half-blue with veins. staying with you

only briefly. all I have now is naïve memory
— all of this meandering dissection
of a moment, alive like a snow globe

shaken until its landscape is a blur,
until the entrapped snow becomes
the only decipherable thing.

The Last Year My Dad Lived

After i am running into a new year by Lucille Clifton

by Madeline Topp

I am running into the new year
like a fox lost in the forest
I am running with the wind in my hair,
yes,
But not the faintest clue of where
I'm running to
To the anniversary, to commemorating
the dead again
I'm running into the new year not
with love and courage
but fear and indifference
Like the numb in my hand
after holding my phone too long
After holding it the way I am right now,
After writing this poem—
That's what grief feels like
I run into the new year and I keep
on running
Past every holiday in the future
without you
And past every holiday in the
past you missed
Past all the guilt of before
and the guilt of present
the guilt of relief
I am running into a new year,
she said,
And that's why I wrote this poem

Wish You Were Here

by Frances Fish



Mercy-kill

by Courtney Reed

My grandfather often got us lost on hikes; I kept seeing the same chipped-away-at tree, its branches tearing away from themselves; it was beautiful, and broken, and each was dependent on the other. My grandfather ran his hands just above the moss, only a splice of air between it and his fingers, and told me how it grows, in which way, and why. How something could breathe instead of speak, and guide us north.

He raised you on a farm: you are no stranger to growth; nor any less acquainted with loss. You know how to lose things. You know how hay looks separating itself from the bale, pieces caught in the wind and exhaust from the truck, how it feels to sit in the bed of the truck, still moving forward; you know how to love the living things and you know what dead things don't need to be mourned; you know how not to mourn.

You say your father is the one to call if you need a dog mercy-killed; you say *he has the stomach for it*. His face is gentle and grooved by a hard life: the harvest sun on his skin, the dry seasons, the poor seasons, the fire that should have killed him, the dogs he's had to kill. His face is indiscernible from rough-barked hiking trees.

You say that this is harder on me than my sisters, because they have husbands who can hold them. You have your husband, too, and God, and moss growing out of the scar on your chest, pointing you north.

My grandfather called me once, when it had spread to your brain. He asked *are you taken care of?* which meant *have you eaten?* I was house-sitting for you while your body was touched by doctor-hands. It was me, the dog, the cat, and the wailing in my bones, the wailing deep in the marrow. When I didn't answer, he asked *what are you doing for dinner?* He's the one who taught you to take in

strays, to keep the lonely things closest to your heart.

On those hikes my grandfather and I would stop at streams. If the water was clear we'd bow at its brink, cup our hands and capture it; take off our sneakers, sit and cool our feet, breathe without speaking. There are many things to hear in water, if you know how to listen.

On those hikes, lost and with cooled feet, I thought my grandfather was God. I don't pray anymore, except for you. When I hold my palms up, wanting you to fill them, it is my grandfather's river-flowing-away-from-itself voice I hear. It is his rough-barked face I see.

When you die, your father will ferry you where you need to go: to heaven, or to a place where you don't have to breathe anymore. I know you aren't afraid; I know he isn't either. He will carry you well. He has a harvest strength and unwailing bones.

He has the stomach for it.

THE PROCESS OF RECOVERING THE BODY

by Rose McCoy

1. when they find her she is dead, but her body retains the slap-in-the-face essence it always had when she was alive—or maybe that's just the nature of a suicide.
2. the body is curled on a dark ocean of gas station concrete where its blood mixes, red, with the rain.
3. emergency personnel pass messages to one another like a game of telephone until the chief deputy is handed a body bag. two EMTs lift the body on a stretcher and the chief zips the black bag around it.
4. someone sends the officers-in-training to relay the bad news to the family. they heave rugged sighs before knocking heavy-handed on the wood of a rotting front door.
5. the announcement comes quick and expected like a cuff to the head of a child. it hurts and then does not; a sick, sweet relief takes the place of the pain. you're strangely glad she didn't warn you.
6. in your dreams they leave the body, let it rot right in the rain. winter weather sees its bones blend in with snow, the spring melt giving way to fleshless feast for dogs. the day before it ends her last bone's dug into the ground, and the pit bulls hold a vigil at each grave.

My Grief is a Continuous Loop

by Bex Machina



Go Ahead Chrysanthemums

by Robert McDonald

and break my heart open
all over again. I've not forgotten,
October, that you
are the last season my mother
was alive and eating breakfast
in this world. It's the brilliancy,
chrysanthemums. Why
did we plant
you right on the back deck,
one story
up, so you could blaze
in spite or most especially because
of this dark morning, after a night
of biblical deluge, the sky not yet cleared
or recovered, our window box plantings
battered, a parade of fluttered greenery
surrounding
your burnt amber
cabbagey blossoms; I want
to take one in my mouth
like a pill
that will make me
imagine new doors to and from
this same stupid world, that will
make me feel this autumn light
as something other
than a knife
of loss—chrysanthemums, when
did you become representative

and reminder, when did you turn
from the sadness of the seasons
into my specific grief?

Oh you gathering of soft autumn moons, when
did you become the hard
absence
of my mother? I could open
the sliding glass door.
I could walk right out, I could drop
this pen, set aside
my notebook, push my beard
into one hundred of your
rain-soaked faces.

Loss

by Vivien Solveig



Dominoes

by Simone Parker

Your final breath cracked my world
opened me
like a dahlia or—no,
like a bag of bread.
Now mortality, like a mold,
infects me;

the spores
creeping through my life, making mycelium of my memory.
Playback: my dad losing his dad,
my mom losing her mom.
Why wasn't I watching?
Why didn't I collect the details of these memories like breadcrumbs?
Put them in my pocket for future study on the subject:
how do you keep living?

My father sat shiva. Covered the mirrors
unshaven, unwashed.
My mother sent me the check and bonds I was owed,
dividing up my grandmother's wishes for us in neat paperwork with hand-
scrawled pen notes dropped into blue mailboxes.
I don't think I heard about it again.

These are the types of parents I had: ones who do not show their hand.

When I was a child, I was afraid of children dying;
unnatural tragedies that threaten to swallow one's youth.
Now, outside the thick glass windows of childhood
I am afraid of everyone dying.

What they don't tell you about
grief: the first death
is a domino in slow motion.

half gone girl

by Autumn Durand

the plants hanging in her bedroom
window are curling in on themselves,
roots withered, leaves limp.
she ignores the dust spilling from
the sill onto the floor, and apologizes
to them when she finally drags herself
out of bed to water, visions of
bathtub blood and cement swan dives
swim in her head and catch
behind teeth just snapped shut.

shades of gray stitch themselves
together in the shape of a girl,
as she sits on a couch,
cardboard dinner date,
and pretends she is anything other
than 2 dimensional,
a half-finished sketch smudged
on the back of a fast-food napkin.

she wonders if she will always be a ghost in
someone else's house, as miles long trails
of black silk slither behind her,
unraveling,
around and around and around and around
the 4 corners of her bedroom and down
the hallway of someone else's apartment,
wrap 6 times around the wooden chair legs
of the scratched-up blue armchair,

until she is no longer anything
but something
that can't be put back together.

she is driving in the town she loves,
an ocean and a charmingly mismatched
coastal city spilling out in front of her,
teeming with glowing, messy love,
always just out of reach,
when she forgets, just for a minute,
and thinks *I should ask her*
about the time she lived here.
when she remembers you can't answer,
she turns up the radio, loud,
and makes her way home.

On the Unfathomable Loyalty of Pain

by Abigail E. Sims

At the bottom of the clock
when all the love's run out:
when grief.

You remain.

You're a good lover. Faithful and true.
(Better than me.)

How does it go? This thing between us.

Iron up, iron down. Knuckles connect. Take it,
take the gut-punch, again, again, again—
strength in breathing out and going, bruised—again.

You don't leave. Don't run.

Take me as I am.

(Broken.)

What goes in is what comes out, always. Neither more nor less.
The bag unyielding. Throw, armbar, choke:
it's honest.

Another round? Let's go.

When I have nothing, you give, generous,
on the mat, over and over, dripping
sweat: the body tears.

The work goes on in spite.

Raw, comforting in hardship and enormity,
endless:

You remain.

to eurydice

by Jennifer Edwards

that summer we lived in oblivious splendour
drenched in sun rays.
balmy nights; lavender scented fingertips
haberlea crown
cheeks ablaze with freckles.
we feasted on pomegranates and peaches
like gods
under a sky filled with birds.
we woke to the mourning dove
and fell asleep in each other's arms.



Scenes From an Iranian Funeral

by Leyla Hamedí

My grandmother was dying for the last twenty years of my life. “The only thing I am living for is to see you get married.” That’s a lot of pressure for a first-grader. I got married at the end of 2011. My darling, loud, eccentric Iranian grandmother passed away just four months before my wedding.

Dyed jet-black hair and matching Revlon Red nails and lipstick, that was my grandmother Faranak. I have a clear image of her dressed to the nines, sitting with her friends playing poker, with a cigarette hanging out of her mouth. She always went by her nickname, the French word for dear; Cheri. She was a cultural attaché, a minister of education, and a lady, and she never let God or religion dictate her personal style or beliefs despite living her entire life in Iran.

My sister and I were home for the summer, in Istanbul. My mom is Turkish and my dad didn’t want his daughters growing up oppressed and silenced because of our gender, so we lived in Turkey. My grandmother understood, though she missed her son and us her entire life. Neither of us brought anything appropriate to wear, it was summer and why would we pack, let alone own, anything that would suit an Iranian funeral in July? Cue us running to the mall to find modestly-cut, long-sleeved black shirts, black pants, black stockings, black dresses, black socks, and black shoes. Oh, and black overcoats because it is Iran and we’re women and God wouldn’t approve if the shape of our bodies could be seen, even in silhouette, even slightly, even while we’re grieving. I had some choice words for God but I had shopping to do so the bitterness stayed in the back of my throat and in the hastily flung clothes my sister and I didn’t even bother to try on at the nearest mall. But, it might’ve been our need for rebellion that inspired us to each buy dresses that were cut high on the leg and low on the neckline, too, along with everything else. We figured the stockings and cardigans could disguise them. Cheri would’ve been proud. She believed in being strong, independent, and still managing to look your best on your own terms.

We hurriedly shopped for clothes we'd never wear again, barely paying attention to what we bought, which included pants that were two sizes too big for me. I was in a rush; all I knew was I needed black pants and I snatched the first pair I saw in Zara, or H&M, or some store I can't even remember now. I had to tie them with a headscarf to get them to stay on. Like I was making a statement but in reality, the statement was: who thinks of belts at a moment like this? Speaking of; the headscarves. In the midst of this spending frenzy, my sister and I may have had simultaneous nervous breakdowns in the mall. Where do you buy headscarves? Are there headscarf stores? There were certainly a lot of women wearing them around us in Turkey, too, should we ask them? This world that we were going to was so foreign to us and yet, here it existed in our motherland, as well as being a part of our own heritage, and we had no idea how to connect with it or even access it. Even if it was temporary. Especially because we wanted to honor our grandmother who despised rules and restrictions and would basically rip off her coat and headscarf the moment she could. How do you find the balance between tradition and ritual and respecting the person it's for?

We did eventually find a headscarf store in the mall. Silks, wools, every fabric imaginable, printed, embroidered, or beaded with every design or flower that existed. Nothing black. The vendor tried in vain to tempt us but no, we needed black. Just like the hosiery store saleswoman asked us: wouldn't we want some fun tights in different colors and patterns? Nope, sorry, we're going to a funeral. That was almost worth the look on her face. That's how we respected our grandmother every step of the way; by scandalizing every person we encountered in our path.

Our mom ended our misery by lending us some headscarves she had from a past visit. We needed them on us because you had to put them on before the plane landed. Two in the morning and there we were as the plane prepared for descent; trying to figure out how to keep the slippery bits of cloth on our heads. The funeral was in the morning because in Islam, the body needs to be buried within a few days of death. There is no wake, no embalming. You lay the body to its final rest as soon as you can.

In Iran, cemeteries are a mass of headstones laid flat on the ground. There's an area where the body is washed and purified before burial and family members can do the duty, women for women, men for men, if they wish. This is also where you can take one last look at your loved one. No coffin, no clothes, the body is wrapped in white cloth, a simple clean shroud, and put directly into the earth as prayers are recited. No distance between the earth and the body; they become one, especially as time passes and the natural breakdown occurs. You can bury someone right on top of their spouse or another loved one if seven years have elapsed between their deaths. My grandmother was laid above my grandfather who passed away when I was younger.

My sister and I sat in the back with our mother and watched as our father lifted the slight, small form of his mother, now wrapped in her last outfit, one that she would have absolutely hated for its simplicity, and gently laid it into the hollow. Because the gravestones are like a huge chessboard, spanning miles of ground outside the city proper, people can walk on them as they get to the sites of their own loved ones. This did not sit well with my sister and I, so we spent the entire service placing one foot in front of the other to walk in the slim paths between the headstones. It felt disrespectful to step on someone's mother's, father's, another grandmother's name. In the grief hysteria where you don't know whether to laugh or cry, we managed to amuse our relatives by attempting tight-rope walking in our billowing overcoats. In the dead, desert heat of Tehran in July, we wore our black pants and black shirts and black trenches and black headscarves and said good-bye to our grandmother.

After the funeral, there's a function back at the house. There's food and refreshments and prayer. Somber people dressed in black, remembering the great lady herself. Coming up to her grieving granddaughters and—
“*Azizem* which one of you is the bride?!”

...

In the five days we were in Tehran, I got a new name. Aroos. Bride. People who were vaguely related to me, people who were vaguely acquainted with my grandmother, people who had absolutely no ties to any of us, all

seemingly thousands of them approached me in shrill excitement. First, they would ask me if I was the bride. Then the squawking, excited hell would break loose.

I'd never been to a funeral. After the funeral there are prayers. Prayers are led by the imam, the holy man, and happen on the first, third, seventh, and fortieth days after burial. When the prayer was happening, you sit down, be very quiet and still, and listen. Especially for this particular imam who fake cried and keened all the way through prayers like a professional mourner of yore. I guess to set the mood, but he may have overshot it judging by my dad and his sisters' sour looks. I can still remember his wails about how this poor woman's three children were now orphans and whatever would they do now? Well, two of the children were in their 60s, and one in his 50s with grown children of their own, so we all valiantly pushed on.

But not even death slows down the social life of Iranian ladies, especially with the prospect of a wedding on the horizon. This one woman refused to leave me alone. When was it? Who was the groom? How long where we together? Where was it going to take place? I, who have never *ever* been rude or disrespectful to an elder or a guest, actually shushed an old lady who kept talking to me through the prayers.

I speak Farsi pretty well and I can understand everything. So even when I was tuning everyone out, that persistent question would push forcefully into my brain, "Where is the aroos?" Then I'd have to smile and introduce myself and go through the whole thing again. And get judged because I was in public with no make-up and messy hair. Headscarves do not stop the intrepid women of Iran from doing their hair and every single one had their faces on.

It was absolute chaos. I can't say if this was the traditional machinations of a family funeral, or just my family's, but I don't think my grandmother would've had it any other way. I think she was secretly showing me off, even though she couldn't be there, the way she had always wanted to. Her granddaughter, the aroos, finally. On our last day, my sister and I layered on the Revlon Red nails and lips in her honor. We wore our pretty, and pretty bare, dresses with no cardigans and fixed our hair. After all, death is no excuse to not look your best.

Gandalf the Grieving

by Linea Jantz

One day on the trail, I met a man
Stark white beard and a veteran's hat
And in his hand a polished wooden staff
He walked alone.

"I bet you'll be surprised to hear. But I'm on a walk with my wife."
Politely, I looked behind him down the trail
He paused. Voice roughening like sand between his fingers

"She died a year ago."

"She always loved to hike
So now whenever I come out in the woods
I always bring her walking stick.
So I bring her with me
You know, I just realized that.

I'm on a hike with my wife.
I'm bringing her with me."

So this trip
I brought you with me
Legs burning on a steep mountain climb that would have made your dear old
hips ache
We loped along together, teeth playfully bared and panting, through forests the
sun warmed to autumn scarlet and gold
Like we used to when you were young
We were so young. We grew up together, didn't we?

We stopped a bit by trails we used to follow the kids down
I lifted my face to the sun and hoped you could feel it too
The kids laughed and splashed in the lake
And I laughed to picture your annoyance
How you would have been trying to herd them to shore
Mama shepherd

I drank my tea and listened to the frogs and crickets clamor along the shore
Watched the full moon shatter the night, spotlight bright on the water
Watched the clouds blush at sunrise
I let the floodgate of how much I loved you pour from my eyes

How I've cried

I don't know if I just have an exceptional imagination
Or if God smiled and let you come and play
But either way...I'm grateful.

I love you
I'll bring you with me.

epitaph instructions

by Kathleen Walker

My poetry needs me to get lost in this. The lyricists want me to wallow. When you died, someone told me to make a meal out of it. I don't know who. I don't know when. But I remember the method: think of the elegies. Art is the fruit of bruises. It's what gets the blossoms out of cemetery shrubs. I used to get dreadfully frightened. Frightened that I had been made too whole to be an artist. I needed more chunks taken out of me before the good writing happened. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Did I wish you away? I don't want the good writing anymore. To hell with the Romantics. All it is: sadness, sadness, the lust for the grave. I want to enshrine you. Carry you. It's not lyrical to get better. It's pretty to say *she was undone by her love*. But I won't be. I won't be. I'm going to break icicles off of car bumpers and let the melt drip down my tongue. I'm going to look both ways before I cross the street. I'm going to eat rich fistfuls of cake. I'm going to check locks twice. I'm going to remember you so tenderly that I weep with the sweetness.

I'm not a poet. I'm not. I renounce it, I don't need it. I was yours first. I was yours before. Thank you, thank you. For a baseline to come back to. My book of Genesis. I'll bear you with a strong spine. I'll bear you for a good long time. When they marry my body to the Earth, tell them to put a stone over the spot. Tell them there's no need to dig up your urn from my closet. You're with me. You're burned down deeper than the bones I've shed. Tell them to carve me up an epitaph. *She loved, she outlived*. Slap an exclamation point on the end. *She loved, she outlived!* Yell it like a jubilee. I outlived you! I outlived you by a lifetime! As people stroll past my grave, I hope they see my dates and think, *what a long time to have stayed here!* Let them say I went on as long as I could, to carry you as far as I'd go. That's love, that's love. I have to believe it. To have loved you is to choose you even after you're gone. I held your death in my lap and whispered, *I'll love you forever*. I meant it, I mean it. Love belongs to the living. I won't let it out of my sight. Tell them to bury me with that promise. *She outlived what she loved! She held it tightly all the while!*

Heart for Tommye
by Emily Bodet



What's Left Behind

by Zoe Davis

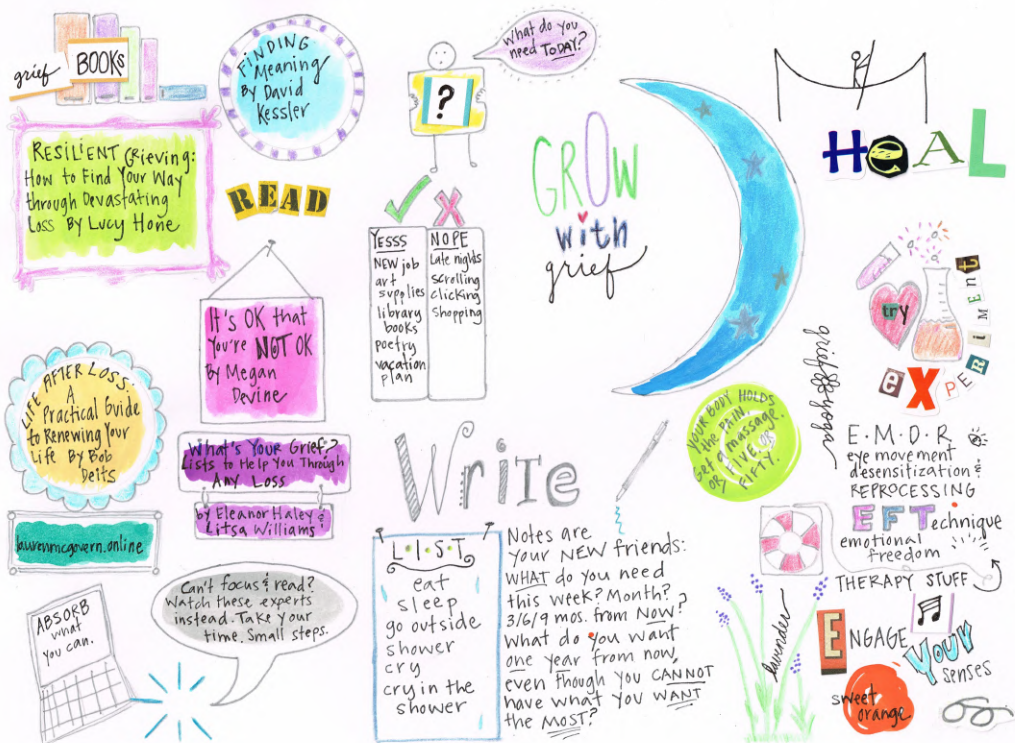
I didn't cry when my grandmother died. I just nodded, accepting that it had been quick, that it had been peaceful, and she had gone in her sleep. Phrased as if she had simply packed up her belongings and escaped in a VW Camper, to live a better life elsewhere. It was believable. Especially if you'd known her. I suppose this was her final adventure.

The funeral was packed. Matinee performance, where flowers were carefully placed, not thrown— sadly. She would have enjoyed the applause. Memories were passed around like crumpled bags of spice— her words, not mine. I always loved how she made the mundane exotic. Cleethorpes could have been Peru, for all I knew.

We wore black, but not in our hearts. She'd gone out in her favourite hat, dressed for the occasion, feather bopping in fuchsia zeal. I read Eliot, my mother, John. Both her favourites. Emotion steered me to a gentle mooring at her coffin side, eyes still dry as I offered rosemary goodbyes, believing she *had* gone quietly, leaving only love behind.

An Infographic for the Bereaved: Read, Write, & Heal

by Lauren McGovern



Blood Brothers

by M.J. Schwartz

Notes of cinnamon and fried dough linger, full and expectant, in the humid air, so heavily sugared that my tongue is sweet before I've bought anything to eat. I've been waiting all year for a funnel cake. But first, I'll eat some fry bread piled high with refried beans, taco meat, cheese, salsa, and sour cream, so that when my mom asks if I ate dinner first, I'll be able to say yes. Solomon and I pool our money, figure out how much we can buy if we split everything, then make a pact that we'll only share with each other. We decide to skateboard first. Soon enough, the sun will go down, and then we'll be able to eat more without throwing up. We learned the hard way last year with the cotton candy and corn dogs in the midday sun.

This is the first year we've been allowed to go off alone together without any grownups. The fair is held in a small park, in the center of our small town, and we know our way around. We'll find our moms in the Lutheran Church's pork tenderloin sandwich tent at seven sharp. We are nine years old, a gang of two, with our matching skateboards, matching fingerless leather gloves that we ordered out of the back of Circus magazine (we pooled our money for a pair and each wear one), and matching rattail haircuts. We are *best*-best friends, which is a level above ordinary best friends, which aren't really that special. We poked our fingers with a needle on the last day of third grade and smeared them together to make it official. We share the same blood now, and that's forever.

We've been practicing skateboarding all summer and we're getting pretty good. We zoom around and around the parameter of the park, being careful not to get too close to any of the old ladies on their way to the fair. We wouldn't want to make them fall down.

As we ride, we make our way through all the different fair smells. Pig shit. The horse barn. The campfire smoke from the pioneer reenactments. Cotton candy. Caramel apples. Gyros. The mechanical smells of motor oil and mystery as we pass the Ferris wheel and Tilt-a-Whirl. We've made it all the way back to the funnel cake zone when we notice a lone tent across the street, down by the river.

This tent is separate from the fair. It isn't in the park. It's just a massive white tent with cars all around it. Our curiosity piqued; we slow down.

We hear someone preaching. He sounds angry. We slow down even more and hear people speaking an incomprehensible language. We giggle. Instead of continuing our circuit around the park, we start riding up and down the sidewalk across the street from the tent revival, trying to get a good peek at whatever is happening in there. We see people hopping up and down and flailing on the ground. We giggle some more. We ride up and down, up and down, two giddy spies, high on cinnamon and sugar fumes.

Suddenly, a boy in a suit appears outside the tent. He looks about our age. "Hey!" he yells. We ignore him and keep riding up and down. "Hey!" he yells again. Now he's pointing at me. "Are you a boy or a girl?"

I would have just ignored him. I swear I would have. I'm used to it. But then the rock hits me in the back of the knee. I've missed my stride and my skateboard is flying out from under my feet. I am not going to cry. I am not going to cry. At least I didn't fall down. I am not going to cry. I turn around and face the little fucker.

I force a smile and say, "Come here and find out."

He's crossing the street! I can't believe it! He's really coming here to find out. Stupid boy. Does he think I'm going to pull down my pants? The moment he's close enough I spring forward and shove him to the ground. We're rolling in the dirt. I'm smacking and punching and he's trying to punch, but mostly he's just guarding his face with his arms and bawling.

Solly is yelling, "Hit him harder! Hit him harder! Hit him harder!" I think my lip is bleeding. His nose is definitely bleeding. Someone's blood is in my mouth. We share the same blood now, and that's forever.

Suddenly, a big girl, maybe twelve or thirteen, comes running. Her hair is long and parted down the middle. Her denim skirt goes all the way down to her ankles. She must be the boy's sister. She's pulling me off of him and screaming about Satan and Sodom and Gomorrah and something about whores. What's a whore? I can't remember. She is screaming that we are bad, evil children and to go away right now and that we should be praying for our souls, which are surely damned for eternity. The boy's suit is ruined.

I stand up. Solomon gives me my skateboard and takes my hand in his. He says, "Let's go to the boys' room. I'll help you clean off your face."

The earthy scent of blood and dirt mingles with the cinnamon sugar on my tongue. The sun is going down. Eating our fry bread, we recount the money we pooled earlier in the day. We still have enough for funnel cake.

Penumbra

by Bex Machina



You'll be Alone after the Bad Thing Happens

by Devin Buie

And then one day you are walking down the street and you are smiling at the woman waiting at the crosswalk in her monochromatic outfit, and she smiles back at you. You will look up at the sky as it spills over itself in soft colors that don't want to turn to blue, and you will see your breath like a ghost in the early morning air. You will know your nose is turning pink like the sky and sense the blood in your fingertips fighting against the freeze.

And you will feel it, this thing that you are carrying around with you.

You will go to your job, the one you got in an effort to "move forward". You will pour steamed milk into a cup of deep caramel-colored espresso and feel a jolt of excitement at the white flower you have created. The woman you give it to will smile down at it, tell you how lovely it looks. She'll pull out her phone and take a picture of it before she brings the mug to her lips. You'll think how *funny* people are, that they put their phones right up near their chins and don't even realize that their mouths have formed goofy little half-smiles as they look at their cappuccinos through their phone screen. Your own lips will look just as goofy as you watch from afar.

Someone else will come in from the front door looking flawlessly disheveled, their eyes darting around the small space before catching onto long-awaited familiarity. You will watch two strangers in a dance you've seen a million times, exclaiming *hello, how nice to see you, it's been too long, you look amazing* and hold one another right there for everyone to see.

A boy will be laughing in the corner as he takes a picture of the girl he's sitting with. She notices, blushing, and then her embarrassment melts into playful posing. Another two people will be facing one another nervously, their knees intentionally inches apart. You'll make up a story of them in your mind, how

they are on a first date or maybe a second and, either way, much too nervous to touch even in the little ways.

And the thing you are carrying around with you will tug on your sleeve like a small child, reminding you that it's still there. It will beg you, dully, for attention. Like a hollow knock on the door to an empty house. You will kneel down and whisper soft *shhs* to it, tell it everything is okay and not to fret. The people are just being silly little people right now and you need to watch. You'll get to it later.

You'll be alone, for a bit. Not in the way you used to, though. You'll walk through bookshelves and watch as other people do the same. How they gently touch the spines of the used books, take them down and read the back covers. It's so clear in the lines formed on their foreheads, how they are mulling over whether to open up and read fully. You'll wonder which titles catch their eyes, how they might be vastly different from the ones you reach for, or maybe not so different at all. You'll buy yourself one as an act of small kindness, and your hands will hold the ghosts of everyone who picked this book, too, right before they put it back in the stacks.

You'll go to the grocery store next door and sit and watch as people spoon soup into paper cups, going to pay the \$2 at checkout even though the sliding doors are out of sight and they could just as easily have walked out without a word. Your eyes will burn with tears at this little act of trust, and how people who have so much capacity to disappoint one another choose not to. You'll see children outside, screaming in delight as they roll around in cold grass with other children who were strangers but not anymore. Rolling around in the cold grass outside of the grocery store makes fast friends of all of us.

And it will want you to look at it, the bad thing. It will try and poke and prod at you in your quiet, but it's not really that sharp anymore. Where it tries to draw blood, you only bruise. You will see it from the corner of your eye, and

remember how it used to be everywhere. Now, it merely slinks around in the shadows and follows you like a puppy. But it's harmless, really. Not so world-ending, so apocalyptic. So you tip your hat to it as you sit down at dinner with your friends and they light candles that keep it cowering. It will sit at the foot of your bed when you fall asleep and try to crawl in the covers. Some nights, you will let it. In a slow victory, most nights you won't.

And then there will be someone new to take its spot and you'll briefly forget that it was ever there. You'll learn about their favorite things, memorize the way new limbs feel against yours. You'll stay out til 2 am and drink cocktails you've never had before, ones with ginger beer and lime that make your head feel airy and light. You'll smile into your pillow, and send silly messages that make you laugh, and think about how weird it is to get to know new people. You'll be reminded that it can be easy. You'll spin and dance warmly in dim light, learn to kiss someone new. You won't wonder when the floor might drop away, not when you are giddy in the arms of someone who you didn't know before, but can't imagine not knowing now.

You'll flirt, and you'll fall, and then you'll do it again. It will end, perhaps, but your edges won't be so blurred this time. They'll be drawn back in pen where there used to be graphite smudges.

You'll text someone you miss, tell them about something that made you think of them.

You won't text someone else, even though you miss them just the same. Even though you miss them the most.

People will tell you things like *you're grieving*. They will tell you things like *it's not your fault* and try and reassure you, *it's so much harder to lose something that doesn't die*. But you'll feel like something did, something that was a part of you and then wasn't anymore. You'll wake up in the middle of the night gasping

with terrified fingers at something invisible. You'll re-read old letters, things you wrote in your journal months ago. You'll feel the absence of something when it was still good, wonder when it walked off without you and returned as something so bleak. You'll try and bargain with memories, committing imaginary acts of desperation for answers to questions you know you can't ask. You won't smash and shatter things the way you want to. You'll keep yourself busy the way you have become accustomed to. Walking, smiling, pouring, sleeping, eating, loving.

It will not kill you to keep living, even if it hurts more than you wish it would. That familiar dullness. Knock, knock, knocking on your house. Only one day it won't be so hollow. You'll be filling the rooms with the stories you invent of strangers you meet. The stories you know of friends. There will be bouquets full of new memories on tables and paintings where you look like yourself again on every wall. And outside there will be trees that sway in the wind but never break the windows, and crows will bring you shiny things, and you will enter staring contests with the deer that come to have breakfast on your lawn. You will bask in the light patches like a cat, light candles in the dark places when they become scary. Dishes will break and you will get new ones, dust will collect and you'll let it until you have it in you to wipe it away. And you'll wake up in the house you've built, in the life you're making, and you'll continue to be okay.

You never asked to have to rebuild this new home in yourself, to have to sew up your own wounds, mending the heart you didn't ask to be broken. But you will do it anyways.

Because here you are again walking down the sidewalk and smiling at more strangers as they pass you, and you're watching people close their eyes softly when they drink the coffee you make them, and you're thinking about the things that make us happiest in the moments where we are the saddest. The silliness of being a person in this world and being hurt, and going to pay

another person who has been hurt to make a latte for you. All the while knowing so little.

The woman at the counter doesn't know you are thinking this when you tell her you love her scarf, and you see the surprise entering her face as if through revolving doors before it enters and she grins. She won't know what is turning over inside you, she won't see the bad thing creeping around you. She'll only thank you, sharing an anecdote about her scarf before leaving you with your heart cracked open and a speck of knowledge about a woman you may never meet again.

And then you ask someone else how they're doing and when they sigh, looking at you through a tired smile and say *what an odd question that is*, you will sigh too. *It is, isn't it*. And you'll give them their cappuccino with oat milk and intentionally make the heart on top extra clear. You'll turn all gooey inside when they lift their phone up to their chin and make that little face as they snap a picture.

You'll find a moth in your living room, and you'll catch it in your hands instead of asking for someone else to do it because they aren't around to catch your moths anymore. You'll feel it fluttering against your shaking palms like a tiny heartbeat, and you'll feel overwhelmed with how much life can live in something so small. You'll watch it disappear when you release it into the inky night sky, and then see how it flies back into the screaming golden porch light. Its survival instinct is so innate, how it finds this island of brightness among the boundless night.

This is how you will live with the thing you never thought you would live with.

Maybe it doesn't live in your house anymore, but when it comes around knocking, you'll learn to offer it a cup of coffee.