2024-25 Seattle Colleges Student Literary Contest Awards

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# **Fiction**

## **Peaches**

by Madeleine Buergel

"Let's get one thing straight," said the man with the office and the crooked nose. His teeth stood gray and isolated like monuments to a long-forgotten culture in his mouth, and his tongue wormed its way between them as he spoke, pushing frothy spittle out of the corners of his pallid lips. "I don't want a hack job."

"Yes, sir," said Dennis, the square man with the square gun who had recruited Del, primly. “He’s the best in the business.”

Del watched him idly as he spoke, to see if perhaps his teeth had also decided to get up and wander away from each other, and pressed against a scratch in the desk. He did not object to being spoken about as if he was not there. Such was the nature of things.

The man with the teeth said “I see,” licked his lips, and then added “It won’t be pretty.”

Del nodded, and then smiled, not because he felt like it but because it conveyed the kind of cold-hearted glee he found would-be revolutionaries appreciated.

“I see,” said the man again, the vocal tic of a man who didn’t really see.

And that was that. The office was where it began and, mostly, where it ended. Four weeks later, when Del dug what remained of his pinky into the same crack in the wood of the desk, he would reflect on that.

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Del was born Psychedelic to a family of seven living metaphysically on the border between abject poverty and getting by, and physically on the border between the dust fields and the farmlands. As a consequence, he grew up with the kind of hardscrabble drive being a poor kid with a silly name and a lot of older brothers has always created.

Once, when he was seven, he tore a fingernail off trying to open a stolen can of pre-war peaches, desperate for the sweet sunniness of non-ontagized fruit. It bled for days and never healed quite right, but it was worth every drop. He made twelve dollars a peach and kept one for himself, eating it with a certain disbelief that anything could taste that good.

It was moments like that that had shown Del the truth: the body was a tool and Del’s was shiny-chrome and razor-sharp, ready for whichever revolutionary had managed to scrape together some cash as well as a plan that week. It was a truth which thrived among the tall glass buildings where the government signed their lurid proclamations, and so as soon as he could Del had shed the dirty house, the brothers, and most of his name and moved to the city.

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The bomb was a scary-slick, tangled, breathing thing, iridescent like oil. Del, who had a callus on his trigger finger and another where he held his knife, did not like to be near it. He found it off-putting in the same way one might a dead cow with its eyes bugging out: disgust, and under that a certain fear that you might be next.

The man who sold the bomb, on the other hand, was not scary-slick and, in fact, owing to a long habit of no-bacco, was barely breathing. He had not made the bomb, but had known a man who had known a man who had made the bomb, and in the complicated waltz of underground dealings had come into possession of it.

He coughed at Del, who sympathized. The air in the city was thick with factory smoke, and even after twenty years Del had not gotten used to it. The air in the dust fields was not sweet, exactly, but owing to his childhood home’s proximity to the thin wire mesh protecting the farmlands, it had been at least cleaner.

“How much?” Del asked, eager to get out of the dark alley, seemingly lit only by the light reflecting off the bomb.

“Two thousand,” the man said. “Or a thousand stamps.”

Theoretically, no one should ever be in possession of that many food stamps. Del, of course, had that many plus a few more in insurance tucked into the pouch that hung at his neck. For all you could say about revolutionaries, they were committed, and for many the hope of a future where the farms were out of government control was worth giving up their fresh food rations.

Silently, Del handed over the stamps. The man took with them with a frantic energy, and Del moved to the bomb slowly and anxiously, feeling like a prey animal for the first time in his life.

The bomb sparkled, the shiniest thing in the city, or possibly in the world. Del appraised its sinuous curves, like a man’s intestines bundled in a dirty cloth on the ground in front of him. The man who had sold the bomb lit a cigarette and wandered off, to do whatever it was men who sold bombs did.

It’ll fit, Del thought, staring up at the small sliver of yellow sky he could see between the buildings overhead. It’ll fit.

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It was easy enough to get it into the record office. What was not easy was what happened after. Del remembered it only in bits and pieces, even with his soldier’s memory. There was smoke, and then fire, and screaming. This was according to plan, and thus faded to a kind of grey-ish backdrop in his mind. What stood out was the struggle to breathe, which shouldn’t have happened, and the way the screams seemed to be coming from behind his perch in a building opposite the record’s office.

There were noises, high pitched screeches, the weak sirens of the ambulances and the stronger ones of the police. Squishing, wet noises, which he only attributed later to the way his lungs were trying to crawl up and out of his throat. There were tears, when he had not cried in decades, and stinging in parts of his body he usually couldn’t feel.

He remembered, mostly, betrayal. Betrayal from the man with the cigarettes and the dirty beard, who had clearly sold him a bio-weapon, but mostly betrayal from his own body, which refused to move him from the small and poorly ventilated room he was watching the office from, even as it filled with smoke and became a coffin.

And then he did not remember, except that he found himself awake and alive three blocks from the fire, seven out of ten nails ripped and bleeding and his pinky finger so crushed and broken that it moved with the same fluidity as an earthworm. The strange gap in his memory was not a betrayal but a kindness, perhaps an attempt at making nice, from the part of his brain which remained aware of what was happening.

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The office of the man with the gravestone teeth remained beige and vaguely orthodontic, which Del thought was unfair. What had changed was the man with the gravestone teeth, who had been cremated and left in a clear jar in a government evidence room, and Dennis, who had turned strange and pale in the aftermath.

“They can’t ignore us now,” Dennis said, moving pencils compulsively from one cup on the desk to another.

Del did not respond. His throat had been scarred by the gas, and besides he didn’t see much point in encouraging the delusions of a man clearly destined for the madhouse and that curious kind of assisted euthanasia which seemed only to be available to criminals and malcontents. He, after all, was only here for his pay. The records office had burned and so he was owed his fee.

Dennis’s lips were chapped and red, the area around his eyes crusted with tears and dead skin, his cuticles bleeding: all the parts of his body that interfaced with the outside world were drying up and falling apart, unwilling or unable to continue.

Del held out his hand for his money, thinking of where he would go. Back to the dust, maybe, where the air was cleaner. Anywhere that wasn’t here. The city’s promise to him, of money and a need for his talents, had burned as easily as paper, or as hair and skin and other things which Del did not dwell on.

“Of course,” Dennis said, his voice scratching at Del’s ears. The cool weight of the coins in Del’s palm was calming, and he sketched an enclosed porch on the dusty house in his head.

Violence did pay, Del had found, paid quite well. It just required a good-faith deposit up front: seven nails, a finger, the quick rub against his callused finger as he pulled the trigger.

## **Kid Metal**

by Jasmine Kylmamaa

They wheel my sister into a room that smells like old people. Mild, milky: tenter-hooked on death.

My belly is churning with all I could ask. Her eyes loll to the ceiling. Listless. The doctor backs away from her gurney. I don't say anything.

“My baby.” Mama’s voice cracks on the word.

I’ve been watching Mama cry the entire month she's been missing. The air is hung with the stench of strangers, and Ramiyah looks like nobody I know. She looks tired. When Mama tries to take her hand, she jerks it back.

“Don’t be cruel.” I say. Ramiyah stares at me. She looks in. She looks, and looks, and looks, until she’s in the pith of me, and every question I could ask has been laid bare.

“I’m not.” Ramiyah says. Her voice is cool. She doesn't sound like the victim of a tragedy.

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Ramiyah sucks a lollipop all the way home from the hospital. I hear it dance against her teeth. Click-clack, click-clack. It’s almost 2pm. Mama’s Subaru hums. The daylight whistles above us, kissing our metal head goodbye. I don’t really feel like I’m here. Trees all wag their fingers away at me.

Mama pulls us into a Subway, and the parking lot is dry as desert. “You look after your big sister, okay?” Then she exits the car, her eyebrows furrowed.

When the door slams shut, I glance over at my sister. Ramiyah stares out the window. I wonder where my head is. If it’s with her, or if she’s in the real world, and it’s really me who’s went missing.

“Tommy asked me about you.” I blurt out.

Ramiyah’s lollipop goes click-clack. A metallic heartbeat. She turns her head. Face flat but for her nose. But I've got her eye, I can tell. Her nostrils are flared, that’s her nervous tic. “What did he want?”

I just stare for a minute. Something about her flat affect makes my gut flare. “He told me to tell you to call him when you get home. What does he want?” I flip the question.

I'm half livid she cares more about stupid Tommy than me or Mama. When Ramiyah went missing, I lost her for life. Tommy only lost her for a month.

Ramiyah turns her head back to the window, and resumes the candy dance against her teeth. She sounds like a kid in women’s heels, fumbling over linoleum. “Dunno.”

“Don’t you care?” I ask.

She shrugs. My chest is suddenly tight and hot. It feels hard to swallow. I’m feverish, teeming with fire from all I bite back. I know I’ll cry if I speak too soon.

I want to scoop us back into reality. Back into the secret world of our childhood, which held no one but us.

“Why are you lying?” I bite.

Through the window, a door thumps shut. A baby cries, bounced on his mother's hip. Ramiyah sighs, like she’s tired of me. That’s the worst. Worse than anger. I want her to explode. I want her to yell. I want some proof, any proof, that she's really come home.

“I’m not lying.” Ramiyah tells me simply.

“Your nostrils are flared.” I open my mouth to speak more, but Mama cracks open the driver's door, and sinks into the seat. She breathes heavily.

The car turns warm with the smell of sandwiches.

Mama sniffs, and smooths her hair back. My belly whines. She turns her key in the ignition, white knuckled and bloodless. Then she pulls us out of the parking lot.

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Dinner is tense. I'm brimming with things to say, and no words for them.

Come midnight, I flick the light off and we crawl into bed. The forms of my bedroom seem to fantastically morph, metastasizing into figures in motion. Entirely without locus. Reality dissolves.

Ramiyah shifts in the bed next to mine. I can hear her breathing. “You know you can just ask me what happened to me.”

I hold my breath. In the dark, my heart thrums. Accelerating in space. I wait. I clench my toes against each other. I don’t say anything.

My bedroom carries on dreaming.

“Everybody does,” Ramiyah continues, “But it's really not important. It doesn’t matter. Because it's not truth. There is one truth, and it isn’t a memory, it's real. Really, you should ask me what I am. Nobody does. They just want to know about him. But if you ask me, I’ll tell you.”

I swallow. I try to keep up with what she's saying, but my mind whirrs, and fails. She’s said too much and too little, all at once. I don’t know what to tell her. So I ask, “What are you?”

My belly dances.

Ramiyah pauses, then cracks between us. “I don’t have a real heart anymore. I’m all metal where the muscle should be.” Her voice sounds strange. Hushed. “It never speeds up, never slows down. It’s perfect.”

That doesn't make any sense. I worry that the rift between us is a rift in reality. “Like you're… a robot?”

“Not a robot,” she says it like I'm slow. “A cyborg. And I'm not the only one. He fixed our hearts so they wouldn't give out.” I shut my eyes. The internal dark is the same as the external dark: inescapable, endless, blood swathed.

“But how could you survive something like that?”

Her voice drops. “You don’t believe me.”

Beyond our window, the highway moans with multitudes. Lives hurtle toward the future, while we lay still.

I don't know what to believe. Something is undone in her, and whatever it is, was vital. I think of the space between us. I think of the blood that we share. The force it would take to reroute it.

I can't disbelieve her.

“What did you mean, you’re not the only one?”

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Ramiyah convinces me to steal Mama's car. I half don’t want to go. I'm afraid to find the other girls, but I'm afraid not to understand.

I back Mama’s Subaru out of the lot, and I wheel us out of time. On the highway, the woods whirr away from us like memories, chugging toward destiny. Ramiyah looks more like herself. She’s in a sleeveless hoodie, inappropriate for the weather. She told me she always runs hot now.

I don’t know where we’re going, or how far, so I just listen for the way.

“Turn in here,” She points toward an exit I have to swerve not to miss. My nerves twitch, wriggle. “You’re supposed to be watching the road.” I snap.

She doesn't say anything.

I pull us off the highway and spirit us beneath the overpass. We pull onto a dark street, level to earth. Lit by a lonely street lamp. A fluttering eye.

“Park under there.” Ramiyah gestures. She’s waving beneath the overpass, gulped by the night. I can barely see. There’s parking space under there, but there’s no way in hell I’m exiting Mama’s car. My palms stick against the wheel.

“What?” I ask her, “here? What’s here?”

“Don’t be afraid. There’s nothing to be afraid of.” I bristle. Ramiyah’s tone unnerves me. “I’m not afraid.” I say, but I sound petulant to myself. I pull us directly beneath the overpass. We idle between its ribs, our headlights peering into the darkness. The engine growls.

“Ramiyah,” I finally ask, “if there were other girls, why didn’t you tell the cops?”

I can’t see two feet in front of us, even with our high beams burning. My sister is quiet. Whatever's ahead of us has already been realized. It's only waiting. “They were prototypes.” She murmurs.

Then she cracks the door open. Steps into the cold night, swimming into Mama’s Subaru. I’m a coward. I don’t know how to step out with her, how to confront what she wants me to know. Ramiyah rests her elbow against the door. Her eyes are wet bulbs. “Just come and see.”

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I follow her into the dark. We wade into tree spines, meters from the overpass. The sound of our own footfall, crushing October beneath us, unnerves me. We crunch yesterday. I twitch.

The back of my neck is cold. Littered with goosebumps. I glance back into nothingness -- black fistfuls of it.

“Are we going far?”

Ramiyah casts her face over her shoulder. Her brow is tight. Her nostrils flared. “No.”

We keep walking. I can hear the interstate, just beyond us. Singing. Each car wings away from the past, a metal angel, floating toward eternity.

The woods are silent tonight. Uniform in shape, and sparse in density. Our flashlight bounces among white barks. Illuminating only a nickel of light. Preventing my eyes from ever getting used to the darkness. My skin tingles.

Ramiyah said “were prototypes”. I know the other girls are dead. I just hope Ramiyah isn't leading us to their bodies.

It isn’t long before she stops us, and points to the floor. The light points with her. I follow their gaze.

Momentarily, I’m confused by what I’m looking at. Pinecones and fir leaves litter the forest bed. I squint. There’s an object buried in the dirt, half obscured. Flat, rectangular, and metal. I don't understand it. Bits of grey peek through its copper plate. Like blood.

Ramiyah grasps her necklace. She unclips the key fastened to the chain.

I realize that I’m staring at a trapdoor.

Ramiyah shoves our flashlight into the crook of her elbow. The sphere of light rolls around the dirt. “Wait.” I beg.

Whatever is inside, I don’t want to know. I can’t understand. The world of our childhood is dead, I understand that now.

My sister's eyes are flat. My hair stands on end. I cradle my temple with my fingers, instinctively shutting my eyes. My body floats away.

I can hear the sound of the key molesting the lock. Ramiyah’s harsh breathing. The sound of the metal prised open, screeching. And I look.

Our flashlight breathes into the hole, wrenched open. Panting light. Ramiyah kneels over its mouth, her hand on the door. I don't know what I wanted to find.

There's no one inside. There’s nothing inside. It’s just a hole in the dirt, empty and dark. Abandoned. With my big sister knelt above it, supplicated. I stop and start in my mind, unable to think. I want to know what the hole is for, but there isn't an answer in language, and there isn't any answer I want to know.

Ramiyah looks up at me. She's crying. “They’ve all gone away.” She says. I don't understand her.

I want to tell her it’s going to be okay. I stand there, my hand down to my cheekbone. Half cradling my mouth. “Let’s just go home.” I plead.

The wind howls through the firs. “They weren't like me. They were supposed to be able to die,” Her cheeks are wet with tears, glimmering like rivers of metal. “He promised me.”

## **All the Powder in the World**

by Joe Sterling

“This is a complete waste of time. Is that it?”

A veil of dust swept the sunkissed horizon as the lone woman stood defiant in the face of hostile winds. The hazy outline of a town sat as a burnt blob against the golden light - the orphan of a land that forgot civilization.

*“According to records, that’s indeed the waypoint. The locals call it ‘Watertown.’”*

The woman frowned and kicked the dust from her boots. The little voice in her ear, as right as it often was, had an annoying habit of spitting ludicrous information out. Sometimes she wondered if he was just a voice in her head.

“*‘Watertown’?!* Are you joking, Quinoa?”

*“I believe that’s your department, Navigator Engels.”*

“How many times do I have to ask you to call me Jessie, Quinoa?” she rolled her sleeves up as she walked the barren land, soaking up every bit of sun she could. Her last mission, if she *dared* call it that, had her digging around in a sewer for nearly a week. The stink she could stand, but not the ever-present dark.

“We looking at a Class C?” Jessie’s foot struck a bottle sunk halfway into the sand. A fluid grab and she had a grainy label. She recognized the logo, or rather the vein of logos it belonged to. Cora. Coka. Colek. Repeat brands tended to bleed into one another.

*“Affirmative: ‘Barren world with no direct cause.’ The Order requested that Earth 33223298001849-Praxis-V be evaluated in a timely manner.”*

Jessie snorted as she trotted along. Her bosses, a group of fear-mongering seniles called the Order of the Timer-Keeps, were a multidimensional appraisal firm that determined the worth of different Earths. Jessie, a Navigator, was in charge of either figuring out what state a world was in once it reached a certain technological threshold or, in her current case, what had caused its premature end.

*“Wouldn’t it be more prudent to portal to the town?”*

“Yeah, but I like me some sun, Quinoa. Remember the sewers?”

The electronic voice whirred, *“Point taken.”*

Watertown was, surprisingly, dry as a hydrophobic bone. A picturesque western town, people in antiquated clothing milled between poorly-fashioned buildings, leading horses, and trading bags of black powder. Jessie swore she’d seen the same town in a Hollywood picture. In fact, 90% of the main road was made up of structures that looked like they’d started out as wooden cutouts until they were gerryrigged into actual buildings. One wrong wind and Watertown would be a memory.

Realizing her attire was all wrong, Jessie snapped her fingers, causing her standard jumpsuit to turn into a cowgirl outfit in a flash of purple. She only admired her spurs for a brief second before deciding to head to the local saloon. Information flowed freest from drunk highwaymen and vagabonds.

The local watering hole, a joint called the “Wayward Saloon”, stood proudly at the main intersection. Jessie passed by a couple of kids playing jacks, getting a dirty look she didn’t feel she deserved. The sand-soaked bar sung with life as ruffians, hooligans, and nefarious men drank, played cards, and harassed the hardened staff. She slipped by these characters, more interested in drinking than talking.

“Howdy, lass,” the bartender, a wizened old man, greeted from behind a bush of a mustache, “Can I get ya a whiskey?”

“Mm, I’ll take a Tom Collins.” Jessie smiled politely.

“Don’t know any Mr. Collins. You want a whiskey?”

“How about a vodka tonic?”

“I got whiskey.”

Even though she could see the bottle of vodka at the bar, Jessie faked a smile and nodded. No currency of her own, she spotted a small pile of gold on a nearby poker table. With a snap of her fingers, the top coin teleported from the pile and into her hand just as her host turned back around. He smiled, “Mighty pleasure.”

“Mm.” Keeping her ears open, Jessie listened for any juicy morsels she could grab onto. Most of it was foolishness about cattle drives, bandits, and water rations. No one talked history unless it was about their family. Her attention wandered to the photographs above the bar, stopping on one.

“Is that… *John Wayne?*” Jessie mumbled. The poster’s pictures and words were faded, leaving only the hazy impression of the American actor on the front.

*“Affirmative. The closest analogue film would be ‘El Dorado’, though the picture matches no known alternates.”*

One of Jessie’s violet rings clinked upon the glass's rim, “Excuse me, bartender, what movie is that poster from?”

Alternates were the hardest part of her job. Certain items of culture would emulate between worlds, appealing to a common design 99.9% of the time. But the names were never quite the same. Jessie smirked. Humans weren’t nearly as creative as they believed themselves to be.

“Movie?” The Bartender’s mustache wiggled in humor, “Why, Miss, we ain’t had moving pictures in, Cash, 90 years? What place you think you’re living in? El Dorado?”

The Bartender fanned the array of disheveled posters, “These represent Watertown’s history. Stark tales of brave men and dark hardship that define who we are today. Cash, without legends like Clint and John, we’d be as drowned in sand as the rest of ‘em.”

Jessie gratuitously grinned and hid behind her whiskey, “Quinoa, this dump *is* a movie set. They must’ve been raised on stories of actors-”

“You tryin’ to breathe through your stomach?”

A shadow loomed over her, cast by a man who’d never learned what a bath was. Dirt cascaded out of his shaggy, red beard as he ragefully heaved.

Jessie shrugged, “I mean, there’s nothing wrong with my lungs-”

“Then why in the name of Cash are you wearin’ a false brow?” The accoster’s leather duster whipped as he snagged Jessie’s hat clean off her head, flapping it in her face.

“‘*False* brow?!’” Jessie snapped the hat back, clawing it from his meaty arms, “It’s the *real-deal.* A Stelton, if you will.”

Alarm bells rang as a frown deepened the Man’s rage.

“Er, Staton. Stercan? Straton! Yeah, that’s the one.”

That was *not* the one. The black barrel of a revolver stuck itself in Jessie’s face. tracing gunpowder down her chin.

*“Navigator Engles, perhaps we should consider porting out of here?”* But Quinoa’s words fell on deaf ears.

In a snap of her fingers, Jessie appeared behind her attacker and stuck a boot at the square of his back. He hit the barstool in one fluid motion, spinning right round until he was thrown at the feet of the town’s Sheriff. The revolver skidded across the floorboards.

“That *ain’t* a real Stetson.” the Sheriff lobbed, hitting the spitoon, “Deputy Kent, round this outlaw up.”

Jessie swore under her breath, “Damn alternates.”

The Watertown Jail was just as crudely depressing as Jessie imagined. Decaying bricks, rotting wood, and disintegrating skeletons served as her only decor. She could taste the bone marrow.

Dim lamps lit the room as the Sheriff paced back and forth in front of Jessie’s cell. She’d willingly gone with the man, certain that causing an incident would just pile on more unnecessary work.

“Such disrespect for our devout customs will not go unpunished! I'll assure you that, young lady!” barked the Sheriff, a man by the name of Westbark, “Cash, even my dimwitted deputy here knows well enough not to wear a fake!”

Deputy Kent, hunched over a stack of paperwork, nodded his head, “Yessir.”

“By golly, it's like the sky is falling out from this town left and right! Why, just last week, my dearly beloved Belle had the wayside notion that she no longer loves me! Can you even believe such nonsense?!”

“Oh no, that's terrible.” Jessie mocked, nodding along as the Sheriff fell into the wrongs of monologuing. The Order hadn't given this Earth a date, but most cases inhabited the same 300 year time frame that most worlds fell. The skeleton was her best bet for answers.

“Tells me that I'm no good a Sheriff anymore. Tells me that I'm all work and no fun! I mean, what does that lady expect when we're dealing with trash like the Atomica Cartel running everything west of the mountains! Damn mushroom worshippers.”

“Tell me about it.” From Jessie's wrists hung a series of bracelets, each half an inch in depth and colored eggplant. She held her arm over the skull, allowing the discs’ violet light to scan the crumbling remains.

*“Carbon dating suggests these bones are 300 years old, the same as the posters in the saloon.”* Quinoa said in her ear, *“My estimate is the year 2389.”*

That didn't mean as much as one would think. Most Earths operated on different time scales. Some even measured a year differently than others. She'd once stumbled upon a tribe of psychedelic-dependent foragers who had long lost the notion of time.

“Then of course, none of that hurts as much as when my brother walked out on me and my momma! I ain't ever seen a woman cry as hard as she did when Tyson took off into the night.” Westbark shook his head, a solemn pain cocooning him from the others, “My soul ain't ever been the same.”

“Uh-huh.” Jessie raised her arm, aiming for the cell keys hanging off a stand in the corner of the room. One of her bracelets came off and started spinning in the air, slowly growing until a portal formed before her. She could easily snap herself outside, but walls had a habit of making her nervous. Her old mentor had ended his tenure halfway through a brick building.

“And if there already wasn't enough burning oil on my life, I got that nasty Señor Dinamita causing havoc across the territory!” Westbark, oblivious to the fact that his prisoner's arm was halfway across the room, wrung his hat in his hands as angry heat scorched the surrounding air, “Ol’ Dirtmound, lovely town, blown to smithereens over a couple of wizzin’ sticks-”

“Uh, Sheriff?” Unlike Westbark, Kent was not ignorant to Jessie's antics, watching as her hand came out from a dish-sized portal and snatched the golden keys off their chain. “The prisoner, she's-”

“Being a respectful listener,” Westbark snapped, waving his hand as his trusted deputy, “Now use your noggin and get back to those reports. I don't need the Marshal breathing down my neck again.”

As Jessie fiddled with the lock, Westbark resumed his pacing, “Now, I know where Dinamita is. Damn coward's hiding out in the mountains, thinking he's so clever. If I had the manpower, I’d pin him, but he's got the whole cartel at his fingertips. I know he's up there, tauntin’ me after what happened in Dirtmound-”

Deputy Kent stood at Sheriff Westbark’s sleeve, “Uh, sir, she's-”

Westbark's face turned mahogany as he whipped at Kent, “What did I tell ya about the yappin’, Deputy? I can't hear myself think when I got you talking in my ear!”

“Really? Because *all* I can hear is your thinking.” Jessie said as she closed the cell door behind her, “Oh, I think you dropped these.”

Westbark spun around just in time to catch the ring of keys Jessie tossed over. Both men's mouths hit the ground as Jessie clapped the dust from her hands.

“H-how didja get out?” The Sheriff whispered.

“Magic,” Jessie wiggled her fingers and straightened her hat, “Sounds like you got yourself an explosive problem, Sheriff. I'd like to help.”

“As if!” The Sheriff swung his revolver out of his holster, squaring it up to Jessie's chest. As soon as it was visible, it was snapped out of his hand, hung where the keys once stayed.

“Okay,” Westbark nodded absentmindedly, unable to peel his eyes from his seized gun, “You can help.”

The truth: Jessie was bored.

She hadn't needed to ride along with the Sheriff and his motley crew of cowardly men. She could’ve done without all the whispered prayers and shaking knees. But the alternative, digging around in the dirt until she knew what killed this world, just didn't sound like fun.

The mountains stuck out as the land’s decaying teeth, chewing up the horizon into a plume of dust. The weakest of clouds drifted across the sky, breaking the monotonous brown with just the slightest hint of moisture.

“You do a lot of horseback riding in your traveling ma'am?” Deputy Kent rode next to Jessie, wheeling his Arabian without any trouble.

Jessie shrugged, “It's been a few years, I'll admit. Last time I was on horseback was, uh…”

*“Earth 7773992847289-Bellum-E,”* answered Quinoa, *“Equestriell.”*

“Right, the planet of the horse people.” Jessie remembered fondly.

Kent furrowed his brow, “Pardon?”

“You know what a centaur is? The horse people, the Equells, were kinda like that. Except instead of the human torso, it's just more horse with horse arms and hoof hands. Opposable thumbs with mini hooves on the end.”

Deputy Kent stared at Jessie, “You pulling my leg, ma'am?”

“Y'know, the weird thing was that despite never meeting an ape person such as myself, they were perfectly fine with me riding one of them. Considered it an honor.” Jessie chuckled, “They had some odd customs, though. Never kiss a horse. It's all teeth.”

An awkward moment passed as the Deputy exchanged a glance with his steed, before favoring the view of the horizon. Jessie took it as means to trot ahead, matching Westbark's pace.

“Heard from your wife?” Jessie asked, tilting her head towards the sun.

“Afraid not. Ain't like Belle, either. Not the first time she's left, and when she does, she always sends her sister to give me an earful,” Westbark stroked the thick bristles of his mustache, “I'm afraid she's gotten herself into some real trouble this time.”

Nodding, Jessie eyed a piece of charred, twisted metal rupturing from the ground, “You think this cartel got her hands on her?”

“On Ol’ Belle? Heavens, no! That lady was meaner with a weapon than any bandito I've met. She'd more likely send them to Hell herself. Cash, she liked powder almost as much as the Cartel.”

Decidedly finished with the conversation, the Sheriff flicked the reins and sent his horse running, encouraging the rest to hurry along. Jessie smiled to herself as the mountains came ever closer. Nothing made a good mission like some tense, family drama.

The party had reached the mountains just before evening. Shades of orange so starkly brilliant lit the peaks up in a neon mesh, eclipsing even the broadest of details. As they tied up their horses, Jessie took a moment to close her eyes and absorb the sun. Who knew when she'd get another chance.

“Uh, for a lady that's seen so many strange things, you seem real at ease.” Deputy Kent noted, tying his horse next to hers. “Lord would have me believe you'd be getting bored by nonsense like this.”

Cracking a smile, Jessie stretched and shook out her aching bones, “It's about the simple things, Deputy. You gotta learn to enjoy ‘em, otherwise life's a big, empty nothing.”

With the horses secured, the small group hiked along the ridge, careful not to misstep to their deaths below. Sheriff Westbark had iterated that Señor Dinamita was hiding out in one of the mountainous caves, stockpiling all sorts of resources and men. The only problem was the range was known as the “Mountains of a Thousand Caves.” Unless luck favored them, they'd be searching for days.

“ALRIGHT, BOYS!” Westbark stood at the front of the men, his wide stance accentuated by his chicken wing arms clasping his belt, “WE'RE GONNA SEARCH THESE CAVES ONE BY ONE UNTIL WE FIND THESE BASTARDS. I AIN'T LETTING DINAMITA GET THE SLIP ON ME AGAIN! ROUND ‘EM UP!”

“Fool.” Kent muttered as the other men dispersed.

“Sorry?” Jessie turned to look at him.

“Westbark's a damn fool. If the Cartel didn't know we were here yet, his shouting sure clued them in.” Deputy Kent shook his head, “I’ve got a better idea. Follow me.” He separated from the rest of the crew following the falling slope to another row of openings. His eyes methodically scanned through the red dust.

“What are you looking for?” Jessie whispered.

“Gunpowder. Cartel always leaves a mess wherever they go.”

“Makes them easy to track. You think they'd be smarter than that.”

Kent smirked, “Ain't no reason to be. Westbark's the only one stupid enough to challenge them. Gonna get himself blown up like the last sheriff.”

“What's the deal with the gunpowder, anyways?” Jessie asked as the decline slowly leveled out,

“Only thing anyone ever talks about.”

“That's ‘cause it's worth its weight in gold.” Kent stopped abruptly and toed the sand near the foliated rock. A small pile of blackish powder revealed itself, hinting a trail of the stuff meters before them. “Go get Westbark. There’s probably piles of this stuff.”

Jessie retraced her steps and found the Sheriff sniffing at a cave. When she filled him in on what happened, he stroked his mustache, tilted his hat three times, then broke out in deep, booming laughter before saying, “Ain't no way that dimwit found Dinamita before I did. Cash, you a funny lady!”

Only when Westbark and present company were teleported to Kent's location was Jessie taken seriously. The Deputy was hiding beneath a boulder near the entrance of the cave and motioned at them to get low and be quiet. The six of them crowded near the edge, unable to peer in.

“How the hell did you find this place, dummy?” Westbark hissed, “We've only been at it five minutes!”

“Dumb luck, sir. There's tons of powder in that cave, maybe twenty men. I think the best course of action-”

Westbark scoffed and quickly shushed the Deputy, “Aw, screw what you think! It's time to finally make a name for myself! Boys! Witch! Let's ride!”

Without warning, Westbark palmed his revolver and strutted into the cave. Morbidly curious to see how it would all play down, Jessie followed closely behind, letting the other men trail after her. It was immediately clear that the Sheriff had made a huge mistake.

The cave, only about twenty meters deep, was stocked from floor to ceiling with hundreds of crates of dynamite. Small oil lamps cast a reddish glow on the already orange cave, giving a hellish aura to the men that milled about. Posters of movies about cartels hung off the wooden boxes, faded like their companions from the saloon. Jessie was really beginning to wonder if these people had a lick of real history left.

At the center of the cave stood a man with a red and black cape, hands wrapped snugly around a woman leaning into him and ignorant to the party’s arrival. Westbark fired once at the ceiling, silencing the room.

“Alright Señor Dinamita, time's up!” Westbark announced, “Put em up and come quietly. No tricks.”

Slowly, Dinamita turned around and the Sheriff nearly dropped his gun.

“T-tyson?! I-I thought you… Momma thought you dead!” Westbark wheezed until he saw who it was his brother was kissing, “Belle?!”

“That's right, Harold, I've finally taken everything from you!” Dinamita laughed as his men slowly gathered around and drew their guns, “No longer will I be second fiddle to my Sheriff brother! I’ve got the entire territory under my thumb with this stockpile of whizz sticks!”

“But, but why? And Belle? I thought we had something special?”

Belle, dressed in bandito gear, shrugged, “You're a yellow-bellied coward crybaby. Always whining about how no one takes you seriously. Your brother’s promised me all the powder I want.”

“Don't make a single move, *Sheriff,*” Dinamita hissed, drawing his gun, “There’s nothing you can do. It's time to please the Lord with another sacrifice, for this sacred powder is their gift!”

“Not this time, brother. I ain't letting you get nowhere.” In a flash, Westbark drew his revolver, aiming at the center of Dinamita’s chest. Before she even heard the revolver fire, Jessie opened a portal and pushed Kent through.

Jessie felt a twinge of guilt as she watched the mountainous ruins demolish everything in their way, bringing an avalanche of dust down on Watertown.

“What a bunch of idiots.” Jessie shook her head as boulders and debris tore the town to shreds,

“Worshipping gunpowder? How else could this have turned out?”

Kent, a tear in his eye, held his hat over his heart, “They knew what was gonna happen, ma'am. The same thing happened to all the cities of old.”

“They *blew* them up?!”

“With dynamite. It's what the Lord requested.”

“Unbelievable.” Jessie turned around, having witnessed enough, “This *was* a complete waste of time.”

“You gotta do what ya believe in. Sometimes that means starting from scratch. Sometimes that means taking a breather, loving the sun, and enjoying the simple things. Right ma'am?” Kent looked behind himself, only to see a flash of violet as he was left alone, “Ma'am?”

# **Essay**

## **Christmas in Afghanistan**

by Matthew Forster

The decision to climb some mountains is followed by a flurry of planning and logistical preparation. For others the sight of a peak casting a shadow over a city and the clothes worn in the spur of the moment are all you need. Bukhansan is one such mountain. Piquing at just 800 meters over Seoul it scarcely discourages a reasonably fit hiker, let alone a serious alpinist. Counting myself somewhere in between, and with all the confidence of fresh independence, I decided to attempt it. I had been in country for two months by this point, and had a firm grasp of the country’s transit system. One train, one transfer, and a few metro stops brought me within walking distance of the base of the mountain. The road to the trail was well lit, and packed beginning to end with the sort of shop that caters to those trying to cultivate more outdoor aesthetic than fitness. But at this hour they were closed, and the odd streetlight and sign left on were all that lit the way forward. Nearing the end of the road I passed a small grill restaurant, packed at this hour with the purveyors of all the shuttered shops I had passed before. They paid me no mind their nightly revelry, nor I them, and continued on.

The gate to the trail was by some fortune open and I began my ascent. Under a night sky sparsely dotted with clouds the moon easily lit the trail, and I walked on with confidence. Footswept dirt gave way to footworn cut stone, until I reach an unmarked divergence. Straight ahead continued the summit path. To my left was a clearing, cast gentle white in the moonlight. The tranquility of the scene called me. To my intrigue a fence guarded it, a tall flimsy chain-link, but strong enough to support my weight. Slipping down the other side I landed in the clearing was met with a more somber silence than I’d felt on the path before. The clearing gave way to earth, rising in a gentle mound taller than I. Behind it was a small shrine, flanked by grey carved pillars. I was struck quite suddenly by a feeling of intrusion, and turned back toward the summit path. Back up and over the fence, but not before one of the barbed twists atop the fence caught my pant leg, taking a few loose fibers with it and leaving me with a parting gift.

Joining the summit path anew I continue up and on. I came to a section cut straight up, over, and through the trees, their canopy giving way to a night bleached black by the light of the city. The chill of the air was more intense at this height, and the forest no longer shielded me from the wind. The rock underfoot here and there came spotted with ice, and each step became a bit more confidence wearing. Suddenly I saw a flash, and a woman’s voice was broadcast over me. Had I tripped some security system? Was I inadvertently breaking some unpublished rule? I knelt down on the slick, cold, rock for a moment, and waited. For another flash. For another message. Definitive proof that what I’d seen and heard was law, and moreover, that it was real. After a few minutes, with no such confirmation, I stood back up, and soon reached the stone lip of the forest where the final ascent began.

Here the magnitude of the mountain became more apparent. Far below was the glowing metropolis bright enough to put out even the stars. The wind whipped through my jacket, but raw nerves and exertion brought sweat to my skin. The final few dozen meters were the most precarious of the night. Speckled grey granite washed clean by the moon rose above me. The climbing path was marked by braided steel cables, support by thick rods sunk into the slippery rock. The tread of my shoes had long since worn off, and I slid up the face, hand over hand, pulling myself along. The view was better than I could have imagined- air clear from the cold, with a slight industrial haze softening the edges of details in the distance. This, however, was little comfort in the precarious position I had put myself in. Near the very end I slipped free of all support for breathless moments, before grabbing hold of one of the iron rods. It was weatherbeaten, almost painfully cold, but it was safe. For a moment I laid there to catch my breath and gather my nerves, before gingerly standing once again. Taking even greater care from here I crept up to the peak, past the cables and over an icy crux.

The peak was inscribed with its name and height, and the red and blue taegeuk flag flew above. I checked my phone: 00:30. Christmas in Seoul, still Christmas eve in Afghanistan. I called a classmate from Texas on rotation there, working the same job I had longed for when we both graduated. He did not pick up before my phone died, but this wasn't surprising. Both overseas, our mission sets couldn't have been more different. I, in a shop looking north, eight hours a day, five days a week. A small crew watching and waiting for a war that will never come, but which demanded our full attention nonetheless. He had been selected for a very different assignment; six months at Bagram Air Force Base, working 12-hour shifts without end, supporting the very point of our most surgical operations in the region. I'd longed desperately for such an assignment myself, and was for a long time envious of his. But looking back now, to what end? What value was there in either of our toils? Mine, the war that would never start; his, the war that would never end. These thoughts and others crossed my mind, and I considered the scene a while longer, but the cold bested my desire to gaze over the city and brood.

I slipped back down the way I came, before finding another easier path down the back side of the mountain. After a mercifully fast taxi ride, and a stint in a net cafe, I found the train back down south. I was home, just in time for another shift, watching, listening, waiting.

## **Listen for Her Voice**

By Rexie Rex

A piano played a soft melody beside a hospital bed, as gentle hands glided along the keys like ice skates. A young woman’s humming reverberated through the room, sounding familiar, but not quite clear enough to put my finger on.

How do we find our way in such a large, yet intricately connected world? Where our lives spindle together, then fracture off into separate directions unexpectedly and without warning.

Frozen, lying on the hospital bed, was myself at age eight. After unexpectedly suffering a brain hemorrhage, my mother urgently carried me on her back to the emergency room. My eyes involuntarily shook rapidly back and forth, a condition called nystagmus. As I saw my family weep on the other side of the room, I couldn’t hold back my tears, allowing them to crystallize onto my face.

I heard the nurses say I had a brain tumor, and that I would need emergency surgery. It was difficult to comprehend the severity at the time, when I had just been playing hopscotch at the playground earlier that day. Was it even possible for things to change this quickly? Apparently, it was, as later that day it was discovered that I had no such brain tumor at all. And to this day, no one knows the exact cause. I made a swift recovery, doing cartwheels around the room a couple weeks later, never shedding a tear over the event again.

At such a young age, who thinks that life would be so fragile and impermanent? The false sense of invincibility was stripped away, and what was left was a sense of urgency. Passion melted the stiff ice off my body, igniting my soul and numbing the pain with the force of the flame. I wouldn’t always survive, but I did this time. If life granted me another chance, who was I to deny it? I went home, playing frisbee with my sisters with a newfound vigor. Shortly afterwards, I returned to school. My peers asked about my stay in the hospital with concern in their eyes, and I assured them that I was excited to get back to normalcy. The school lunch which I once abhorred now tasted like three Michelin star cuisine. It was nice to be back.

I fell in love with exploring every aspect of life. If life was a river, I would drown myself in it; drink it until I reached the abyssal plain. Intense desire guided my actions, leading me to immerse myself in the arts. I taught myself the piano and sang till my voice became hoarse. Music represented something so incorporeal about the world. Those feelings we can’t put into words, the times when our tears turn to tunes. The first song I learned to play was Gone Away by the Offspring, a song about the loss of a loved one. Playing it became second nature. The days were overcome with a vibrant hue, almost as if I really had died and come back to life.

All these little desires led me to apply to submit my personal essay on this day. How can I say I’ll write my essay tomorrow, when the present is all I have? A filter on life was placed over my cornea, like a filter on a camera lens, except life’s filter was always there. I took care to notice it, as it shapes how I see every situation. Before I let the water turn to hail and strike my head, I had to add some heat. This heat was my hope.

And as I sat down in the middle of the night, watching the snow drift outside my window, my fingers landed on the keys that once again played a somber melody. I see an eight-year-old girl peacefully lying on the bed with a capeline bandage wrapped around her head, unaware as to who was playing the lullaby before her.

# **Poetry**

## **Evidence For and Against Solipsism**

by Ramsey Jester

God-endorsing billboard stands over a dilapidated liquor store. Across

the street, an auto-shop employee is shitting behind dumpsters. Jesus,

says the billboard.

The morning sun bleeds out

of an overcast sky like a wound

through bandage. The Olympics,

the Cascades, clumsy sutures

of landscape. Pain without origin

becomes its own medicine.

The email subject line from Taco Bell reads “We miss you”.

If opened, you’d not find a coded letter from an ex-lover. The disappointment

would hurt more than you would’ve guessed. But as consolation,

you’d see that a Crunchwrap Supreme is only a few clicks away. Thank goodness

we’ve discovered the science necessary to keep human interaction

minimal. You'd type LEAVE OUTSIDE, CONDITION CONTAGIOUS

for delivery instructions. The doorbell camera would tell you

when the coast was clear. Let the food get cold, just in case.

How then bring to scale this loneliness?

A dying insect in the other room.

Breath of rotted fig fogging up the bell jar.

If a tree falls and falls and falls and falls...

Another evening at the dive bar is happy hour. Pour

a round for the regulars, those volunteer amnesiacs.

Small talk in past tense. Eyeball the hourglass. Hold out

hope for a 2 am kiss, Suckerfish,

hold your breath, hold on

for dear life. When it comes

Dim light of a foreign room, the stranger's

bed is an amphitheater. You perform

for snoring applause from a cold quarry floor.

Even more naked now, you exit.

take a walk instead. Listen to the soft rattle

of leaves and distant dog's bark. Rows of homes

sticking chimney smoke to your lips.

Let nocturnal creatures hold you

in medallion eyes. Arrive

at a lake when it’s late and moonless,

imagine the truth of the world. Cry

because it is your first language. Our

myth and our history will be dissolved equally.

When light again rises from that horizon— dusk still

bruising out west, the sky a melancholy spectrum

in panorama— with your sensorium in rawest form, please,

the birds will not sing if you are not there to hear them.

## **Snow Day**

by Lisa Robertson

At the house across the street

Where they fight all the time

3 a.m. litanies of obscenities

They are outside in the snow

In the driveway

Bundled and mittened

Sheepishly gathering the snow

And laughing as they gently toss the snowballs at one another

## **Biophilia**

by Audrey Snider

I’ll return there I think,

To the green days,

To the places that meet the blues –

I’ll move in and pet moss and squish mud

And roam barefoot among the hillsides

Like I used to

Yeah, I’ll fall asleep in direct sun

And wake at the dove’s song

All warmed and wrapped in an orange

Tone melting into eggplant night

I think I’ll build me a cabin nestled

In the pinewoods

And know every herb by its name and

Hum “Wildflowers” or Fleetwood Mac tunes

While I delve in holistic, indigenous, or

Witchy knowledge depending on the day

I’ll change my name –

Declare myself a

Citizen of the wood,

No longer a parasite,

But a biotic constituent

Of the boondocks and the hinterlands

Maybe it’s just forest dreaming

On such a city’s day,

But damn I am

Longing –

## **Category unknown**

by Eva Peng

Aerogel

The most confusing substance

Not a liquid

Not a gas

And most certainly not a solid

Or is it?

Category unknown

It

Sounds like a brick

Breaks like ceramic

Shines like tinted air

Looks like jell-o

Weight like a feather

Takes heat

Like no other

In its paradoxical existence

it’s in our sight

To grasp it is to clutch thin air

Yet, it’s very much no different

Then a rock

So what is it?

It’s a substance destined

For the abnormality of society

Where conformity ceases to exist

## **H3aRt bR3@k**

by Rosalinde Weiss

six hundred and fifty nights

thirteen hundred meals

14,410,000 breaths

crystalline tears and quiet moments

an eternity, side-by-side

a limb, a phantom

ghosts cry out from within

the hollow of my stomach

unaware that they have died

if love was quantifiable

if romance were a constant

I’d re-run the numbers

rescind my calculations

shred them to confetti

and throw a ticker-tape parade

so you could take me

underneath the falling ashes

like a spoil of war

the object of your affection

polished and displayed

watching life from a high shelf

but I have fallen

shattered and glimmering

into jumbled fragments of myself

you look down in disgust

and I slither into darkness

exactly where you found me

stars whisper your name

the moon turns its pallid face

bathing me in shadow

nothing here remains

a vessel, cracked and broken

warm, but empty

time, our nurse and coroner

despite the vernal sun

we wither to dust

# **Drama**

## **Miso Soup**

by Matthew Forster

**Cast of Characters**

CAPTAIN JOHN MAJOR: A man, late 20s-mid 30s, in an army uniform with nametape

MAJOR RUPERT: A man in his 30s, the Australian liaison, wearing camouflage pants, sandals, and a hoodie

COLONEL LACKEY: A man late 40s-50s, in an army uniform with nametape

**Setting:** Three walls of a windowless conference room, with a heavy door stage right, and a digital sign above. The walls are drab and bare, save a large format map of the indopacific on the wall stage left, with key military installations marked by pins. Above this is a red digital clock, displaying in a row the local time zone, Eastern Standard Time, Zulu time, and Taipei Standard Time. The set is lit as though by cold fluorescent office strip bulbs. In the center of the stage is a conference table surrounded by office chairs. Some paper from a previous meeting has been left strewn about on the table, along with teleconferencing equipment, and an ornate table clock with midnight marked up and over the case by electrical tape.

At rise: The faint ticking of the table clock can be heard, and the door is closed. The sign above it reads MEETING IN PROGRESS but is unlit.

(A single set of footsteps can be heard approaching, before stopping at the door. The sign clicks on and the door swings open. Enter JOHN, who takes a moment to survey the scene before moving to tidy up the room)

JOHN

God this is such bullshit, who schedules a meeting this late? The boss may hate his family but I don’t.

(Stands to survey the now neat conference room)

Could’ve been an email. Oh well.

(Looks up briefly at the digital clock)

Might as well grab a coffee before the show starts.

(Exit JOHN. Off stage the sounds of a Keurig working can be heard)

(Enter RUPERT, whistling Waltzing Matilda. He makes a circuit of the room, before picking a chair and sitting down. He examines the table clock briefly, fingering the tape, before lounging back and closing his eyes for a moment’s rest.)

(Enter JOHN, speaking as he sits down and places his coffee on the table)

JOHN

Oh Rupert, how’s it going? Enjoying the weather?

RUPERT

Alright John? Flight over was bloody freezing, could’ve put me on something nicer, I know you travel comfortably when you want to.

JOHN

That bad? A tanker was the quickest flight out, and I figured the crew would hook you up with a seat up front at least.

RUPERT

Nah ‘salright, you did what you could, but I haven’t gotten a good night’s sleep since leaving Singapore, I hope this is important.

JOHN

You and me both. You know what’s going on?

RUPERT

Nah, they just said they wanted SASR looped in for some reason.

JOHN

Well the boss probably won’t say anything, but thanks for coming out. Can I get you something for the trouble? Coffee? Tea? Nothing good, but it’s free.

RUPERT

Yeah could you run and grab me a bevvie?

JOHN

Yeah what kind? I think we’ve also got some sodas around.

RUPERT

A beer mate, if I’m going to be here and awake it’s the least you could do.

JOHN

Uhhh.. I don’t think that’s a good idea.

RUPERT

John, I’ve been round before, I know you lot have something here. There’s a full keg in the operations center for chrisake. I’m not trying to get munted but it’s been a long day.

JOHN

You got it, but if someone asks you didn’t get it from me

RUPERT

You’re a saint

(JOHN exits briefly, returning with a beer and a unit water bottle. He hands both to RUPERT who pours the beer into the water bottle and hands the empty back to JOHN, who disposes of it off stage.)

Cheers

(JOHN take a sip of coffee)

JOHN

Already cold. Figures. Hope we start soon.

(Enter LACKEY)

LACKEY

Evening team, all ready? And I believe we’ve only emailed, remind me of who’s who?

JOHN

Captain John Major sir, intelligence. And this is Major Rupert, SAS.

RUPERT

SAS-R. ‘Stralian, not British. Military intelligence for you.

JOHN

Same difference

RUPERT

(grinning)

Fuck off

LACKEY

Language gents, I know y’all do things a bit differently but we play good clean ball here.

RUPERT

Apologies sir, won’t happen again tonight.

LACKEY

(stares at RUPERT for a moment)

Well thanks for joining us. I’m the boss’ adjutant, the big man’s running late but he’ll be in soon.

RUPERT

(takes another sip from his water bottle and smiles)

An adjutant named Lackey? Bit on the nose yeah?

LACKEY

It’s pronounced Lacey. It’s French.

RUPERT

Ouis chef.

(salutes lazily)

So what’s all this about anyway?

LACKEY

I thought someone sent you a brief before coming, but we’ve got a hot plan, straight from the nerds back east. A psyop that’ll knock your socks off.

RUPERT

(Kicks his feet up on the table while taking another sip)

Not wearing any mate.

LACKEY

(Perplexed)

Well in any case we’ve got psychological operations we want to run.

RUPERT

(Stretches and begins to stand)

Great, best of luck to you, I’m going to go take a nap.

LACKEY

(Curtly, visibly annoyed)

And why’s that?

RUPERT

Not my job sir. We deliver bullets, not mail.

LACKEY

(somewhat excited)

Exactly. What if I told you that we have developed the first mirth-based bioweapon?

RUPERT

(sitting back down, annoyed and confused)

Is this a fucking joke?

LACKEY

Yes. Well no, but yes. We want your diggers to test it out. Can’t do it here, civil rights and all that legal mumbo jumbo. Any thoughts John?

JOHN

That sounds all good and well, but again, intel, not psyops. I don’t see what I’m here for.

LACKEY

Targeting experience for one, and a promotion straight from the top if this works. How do you like the sound of Major Major?

RUPERT

Sounds better than Lackey

LACKEY

Lacey

JOHN

Well I suppose I don’t have much of a choice. Is that all? Can we wrap this up?

(idly moves the clock around the table)

LACKEY

Still waiting on the boss. Should be here any minute.

RUPERT

Grand. John, where’d you get that water from? I’m running dry.

JOHN

Out and to the left, minifridge by the water cooler.

LACKEY

The beer fridge?

JOHN

No sir, someone must’ve stocked it with some sodas and stuff by mistake. I could grab you one if you like.

LACKEY

Too bad. If you could get me a coffee with your next round I’d appreciate it.

JOHN

No problem sir.

(Exit JOHN and RUPERT. Another beer opened can be heard, and the Keurig runs twice more. LACKEY stands up to pace the room, examining the points on the map, before straightening out the items on the table anew, and fingering the tape on the table clock. Enter RUPERT and JOHN, carrying two coffee cups.)

LACKEY

(Blows and takes a small sip of his coffee)

Thanks John.

(Pulls a flask out of his cargo pocket and adds a generous splash to the mug)

JOHN

Sir?

LACKEY

It’s late, I don’t want to be here, you don’t want to be here, let’s just be adults. Care for a dram?

JOHN

Ah, I appreciate the generosity sir, but I’m driving.

LACKEY

Suit yourself. Major Rupert was it?

RUPERT

Just water for me

(takes a long drink with a straight face)

LACKEY

Fair enough

(Takes another few sips while looking at the clocks)

I’m going to run upstairs and make a call, see what’s going on with the big man.

RUPERT

Righto chef, we’ll be here.

(Exit LACKEY)

RUPERT

(Turns to JOHN)

What are we doing? That’s mad!

JOHN

Not my circus man, not my monkey.

RUPERT

You can’t call my diggers monkey mate.

JOHN

Fine, my circus, your monkeys. Point stands.

RUPERT

Thank you.

JOHN

But really, you think he’s for real?

RUPERT

I don’t care, but whatever this psychoweapon or whatever it is can’t be a worse joke than the 88.

JOHN

The AUG? I like those quite a bit.

RUPERT

Ever shoot one?

JOHN

I’ve got a few thousand hours in counter strike, so kinda.

RUPERT

Bloody nerds.

(drains bottle)

I’m due for another round, fancy one?

JOHN

What the hell, sure.

(RUPERT leaves and returns noticeably rosier with two bottles)

RUPERT

One for you, and another water for me.

(Wiggles his eyebrows and winks)

JOHN

Gan bei

(drinks)

RUPERT

You a china man?

JOHN

I’ve mostly worked pacific assignments, yes.

RUPERT

Top stuff, couldn’t be me. Too many characters.

JOHN

Yeah that’s the problem isn’t it, who are we supposed to use this thing on?

RUPERT

That’s your problem mate, I just work here.

JOHN

No you don’t

RUPERT

Yeah nah I don’t, but my boss wants a promotion. C’est la vie.

JOHN

You ever work with REPIMA?

RUPERT

A bit

JOHN

What I wouldn’t give to be there now. Good food, good wine, sunshine-

RUPERT

French and Spanish birds

JOHN

-museums, art, real culture you know?

RUPERT

I’ll drink to that.

(Enter LACKEY)

LACKEY

Toasting with water? That’s a shame.

(Moves closer and sniffs a bit)

Is that beer?

RUPERT

(opens water bottle and feigns surprise. In an American accent)

By the Lord, a miracle.

LACKEY

Hmph. Well glad you’re making yourself at home. Anyway I’ve got good news and bad news.

JOHN

Wo cao *(pinyin)*

RUPERT

What he said. ‘Sgoin on?

LACKEY

Well the boss can’t make it tonight.

JOHN

Figures

RUPERT

Excellent, I’ll be off then.

LACKEY

But

RUPERT

Merde

LACKEY

We’ve got a green light. You have cartee-blanch.

RUPERT

Carte blanche.

LACKEY

Yes whatever. Toys, money, air, name it, you got it.

JOHN

Thank you sir, but I still don’t really get what we’re supposed to do here.

LACKEY

You have my utmost confidence John. Message to Garcia.

JOHN

Sir, have you actually read that?

LACKEY

No, have you?

JOHN

No

LACKEY

Great, then give me a book report with the operation plan on Monday.

JOHN

Yes sir.

LACKEY

Well gents, sounds like we’re all settled here. I’ve got a tee time in the morning so I’ll be off, enjoy the beers and your weekend.

RUPERT

See you Lackey

JOHN

Have a good night sir

LACKEY

(irate)

It’s Lacey. John, I have high hopes for you, and an oak leaf with your name on it.

(exit LACKEY)

RUPERT

Well this has been grand, but I need a nap. Let’s give this another go tomorrow.

(drains bottle)

Night John.

JOHN

(with a tired smile)

See you Rupert. Don’t add to the population, don’t subtract from it, etcetera etcetera.

RUPERT

(Snaps to attention and renders a crisp salute)

Ouis, commandant.

(Exit RUPERT, whistling Le Boudin)

(JOHN swivels back around to consider the room, before settling on the table clock again.)

JOHN

What a joke.

(He raises his beer to a lips before pausing, and putting it back down. He stands, stretches, and ponders the map for a moment before turning and slowly walking to the door.)

God help us all.

(Exit JOHN)

(As the door closes the sign over the top turns off. The ticking of the clock on the table becomes the focal point as JOHN’s steps fade. The lighting fades simultaneously, but the clock remains.)

CURTAIN

# **Spoken Word**

## **BAD HABITS**

by Ubah Farah

The generation of crack babies,

Most were born in the 1980's,

Raised by grandparents and single ladies,

Watching reruns of Sanford and Son plus the Brady's,

Fathers were never around,

Too busy spreading more seeds throughout town,

Don’t know him, so you can’t miss him,

Or maybe he’s locked down in the penal system,

Public schools, free lunch, and new pairs of Air Jordans,

Project homes, ghetto streets, but looking rich is more important,

Welfare checks, boosted clothes, and bus passes,

Smoking weed and drinking while cutting classes,

Written off and dismissed to the side,

Overlooked, underestimated, oblivious to what lies inside,

No babysitter when you get home from school,

The key is under the doormat, stay in the house and be cool,

Hours upon hours of television shows too see,

But no one to help with homework or tutor me,

All I see; are addicts, poverty, and teen-age pregnancy,

Nobody owns; everybody rents,

We look real good, but all our money is spent,

Empty designer bags, some are counterfeit,

I know I should change, but bad habits are hardest to quit,

I kill my hunger with fast-food and sugary snack-food,

Without my sweets and chemicals I get into bad moods,

No, I can't explain my nasty attitude,

Or why I try to be hard all the time by being rude,

I'm left to grow up on my own,

Papa is not the only rolling stone,

I don't have a hat--let alone a home,

These streets I roam, these streets I roam,

Most of my friends are inside the house at night,

They run really fast when they see the street lights,

Not me, my mother is out searching for a hot date,

I'm out here in the cold searching for a hot plate,

It's one thing to be raised right and do well,

It's another thing to raise yourself and maneuver through hell,

School was a waste of time, so I dropped out,

Or did I waste my time in school, and that excuse is a cop out?

Besides, there's a baby on the way now,

So I gotta hustle and get paid somehow,

My grandparents are too old to raise teen-age kids,

My mother doesn't care--who knows where my father is?

In my generation, we were each born an addict,

I know I should change, but bad habits are hardest to quit.

## **Supply and Unhinged Demand**

by Clarissa McCloud

transcript not available

## **Disability**

by MVS

Disability a way they assign me

They say it defines me

Limits me

But there the ones who inhibit me

Dismiss me

Wish for me

Have bliss in ignorance of me

Difference is a hindrance

Deny my entrance

Structural indifference

Lack of remembrance

Hence my dependence

Left in a dance

Blamed for misstepping

Cruelly temping

Lack of interjecting

Unless it affects them

They don’t understand em

Can’t stand em

Rather ban them

I’m blind but i see

But they don’t see me

## **Wrenched Heart**

by Joann Nguyen

They say you’ll know when you meet your other person

Some of them

Your the one

To say that you’re the one

You’ll feel it

Well, I didn’t

Because you took me by surprise, that’s all

Not more

Around you, I’m a kid again

Hearing your name makes me grin

Where do I even begin?

It’s paradise or something akin

When I looked into your eyes

I swear I could see a bit of mine

You walk with your head down and shoulders hunched

But I’d always wonder why

Because if you saw you the way that I do

I know you

I knew you

I feel you

My stomach drops

And I fidget

My heart beats

I’m nervous

Thoughts of you parade my mind

But I don’t even mind

I take it as a sign

By design

I shouldn’t, though

I should’ve known

That this

It wasn’t good for me

I don’t know,

You and yet,

You’re just like me, aren’t you?

How could one person make me feel this way?

~~~

I see the time pass

In the loss of your shine

In the rust of your mind

You were never mine

What I saw earlier? Never mind

I can’t believe I wanted you to be

It’s funny to me

I laugh at it now

Cried about it before

I grieve who I was with you

I missed my implanted memories of us

Who knew

That it was made up in surplus

Was it just me?

That made you out of reach?

Was that why we couldn’t meet?

Because I’d let it be?

I’m not the same

But you are

You still could care less

You’re carefree

The weight you carry

It breaks my heart how much I cared

The way of which we’d pair

Now you’re…just there

I finally know the feeling

What lovers talk about

I would never say aloud

Only it took this long to find out

I loved the feeling

Not you

# **Creative Nonfiction**

## **A Joke, a Chrysalis, and a Goodbye**

by Ashleigh Dunn

It is a strange and disorienting experience to watch a parent succumb to illness. The last time I spoke to my mother was the first time I fully comprehended the inevitability of it all. Her cancer had returned with a ruthless certainty, and this time, there was no illusion of a fight left to be won. The outcome had already been decided. It was no longer if but when.

My mother had a natural inclination for dramatics, so when she told me the news, I struggled to internalize it. Perhaps as a form of self-preservation, or perhaps out of sheer denial, I assumed there would be more time. When she texted me last week to tell me she had been moved from the hospital to hospice, I responded, I’m sick, but I’ll call you in a day or two. It was a reflex. An old pattern of ours. Our relationship had always been fraught, and I had long since mastered the art of constructing distance as a defense, convincing myself that detachment was strength and independence a virtue of self sufficiency.

I called her on Saturday. She sounded mostly like herself, though her voice carried the telltale weightlessness of pain medication, giving her speech a slightly unmoored quality. We spoke about my life, my ambitions, all the men I was not dating. She humored me with stories about her days in hospice, about the nurses who assured her that she was “doing great” and had plenty of time left. I believed her. I allowed myself to believe her. I told her I loved her and asked her to call me if she felt up to it the next day. It was an awkward, unpracticed intimacy, but I left the conversation mentally preparing for a visit in March.

The next day, my brother called. “You need to talk to Mom.”

In the span of twenty-four hours, she had become nearly unrecognizable. Her voice was fragile, distant. The warmth that made her her, the softness in her tone, the gentle way she carried a conversation, had begun to fade. She was breathless and subdued, but when she heard my

voice, she cried.

There wasn’t much left to say. She told me she loved me. I told her the same.

My brother, standing watch by her bedside, instructed me: *Tell her you love her. Make her laugh.*

How exactly does one summon levity in a moment of absolute collapse? Ordinarily, humor was my default mode, a role I assumed easily and instinctively. But here, now, I had nothing. I was silent, searching.

And then, through the haze of failing breath and heavy medication, it was my mother with the first punchline.

“You were… just a little girl… in a toilet.”

I laughed, unexpectedly, involuntarily. A true laugh.

To an outsider, it would have sounded like a nonsensical fragment, the confused ramblings of a mind loosened by morphine. But I knew exactly what she meant.

One of my mother’s favorite stories from my childhood was of me, at two or three years old, shunned by my older brother and the neighborhood kids, denied entry into the big-kid pool. Undeterred, and unwilling to let my poolsafe Pampers go to waste, I went off in search of my own solution. By the time my mother found me, I had hoisted my toddler-sized body into the toilet, feet tucked firmly down the flush hole, gleefully splashing around, hosting my own personal waterpark.

It was absurd, but also, on some level, perfectly emblematic of how I had always navigated the world.

I have often said that I do not exist before the age at which my own memory begins. The fractures within my family left enormous absences in my personal history, as though I were an emotional orphan within the landscape of my own lineage. The past was fragmented, unreliable, so I became the author of my own narrative. I built myself with meticulous intention, designing a version of myself that stood in contrast to my mother. Where she was soft, I was resolute. Where she was flighty, I was disciplined. Where she was emotionally transparent, I was impenetrable.

And yet, in our final conversation, I saw the futility of it.

Her insistence that I would always be her little girl was never an act of theatrics. It was not a ploy to breach my walls, nor an attempt to summon sentimentality where none existed. It was, in its purest form, love. Steadfast, unshaken by time or distance. And as much as I had once dismissed her vulnerability as weakness, I now saw that it had been her quiet, persistent strength all along.

“You were just a little girl in a toilet,” she reminded me.

“Well, Mom… if it makes you feel any better, I still feel that way pretty much all of the time.”

She laughed. That thing I had been certain was impossible.

By Monday, she was no longer responsive. By Wednesday, her breathing was mechanical, sustained

only by an oxygen machine as her lungs filled with fluid.

This morning, I got the news.

I do not think I have fully grasped what that means yet.

My mother was a deeply complex woman. But in the end, all my efforts to shield myself from her love proved meaningless. She loved me whether I said it back or not. She loved me despite the fact that I deliberately ruined family photos with ridiculous faces. She loved me when I argued with her questionable political beliefs from my soapbox, when I rolled my eyes at her questions, when I

condescended to her in ways I am now ashamed to recall. Her love was unwavering, impervious to my resistance. And to my great surprise, I loved her back.

Her ashes are now being sent to me in a butterfly-shaped vial. Apparently, she had been thinking about butterflies often.

I am not a religious person, nor do I particularly like butterflies, but I am choosing, in this moment, to view

her illness as a chrysalis.

And today, my mother was released.

## **Without You I’m Nothing**

By Brit Guenthard

When I was a sophomore in high school I fell in love for the first time. We went to different schools. My algebra teacher was new and after I taught the class how to solve a warmup problem that she had written on the white board but didn’t know how to answer she pretty much let me do whatever I wanted. I would listen to Placebo’s Without You I’m Nothing album on my iPod mini on repeat while texting Albert on my silver LG mirror flip phone. At night I would sit in the living room, my feet pressed into the seat of my dad's

wooden rolling desk chair., my toes hanging over the edge, wiggling, talking, while I scrolled MySpace waiting for Albert to call. When the landline finally rang, I would run to the kitchen and grab the phone off its charging cradle. “Hello?”

“Hi. It’s good to hear your voice.” It was the best part of my entire day. My door would slam and I would glue myself to the phone, having to switch hands after pressing my ear too hard into the receiver, sneaking in and out of my bedroom to swap out phones before the batteries died. He called almost every single night. He got into the habit of falling asleep with me on the phone.

“Albert, are you still there?” but all I would hear were his small, quiet breaths. I think the pharmaceuticals he was on made him tired. I would stay on the phone and listen to him breathing. Sometimes I would

whisper to him, “Albert, are you asleep? I love you so much. I will always love you.”

His house was full of instruments his father collected. When I told Albert that the violin was my favorite

he had his parents buy him one and taught himself how to play. He learned all our favorite tunes. We would walk around his neighborhood singing Arcade Fire and Devendra Banhart songs together. On our way back to his house we always passed Doug’s house.

Doug didn’t live there anymore. Albert and I would stop and talk to his sister unloading groceries from her car, or his father working in the garage with the door open, but I never met Doug. I only saw one or two pictures of him. In one, Albert, younger, a guitar hung over his shoulder, his hand cradling its neck, his face turned away from the camera, Ren, friend, bandmate, hunched over a set of drums, eyes on the floor, and Doug holding a bass, smiling, his pudgy young face hiding behind his brown hair, waiting to be

grown into. But Doug never got to grow into himself, he never got to look back at that photo of the three of them and think about how his life could have turned out differently. When Doug was in 8th or 9th grade he was hit by a truck while skateboarding. His head trauma was exacerbated by the fact that he wasn’t wearing a helmet. It was fatal. I never knew what to say to Doug’s father. I would just stand nearby and nod along while he and Albert talked.

Albert liked to cut my hair, bangs straight across my forehead to make me look like an indie rock singer. He convinced his mom to take me shopping at the mall, styling me in coats and dresses and cable knit tights. His mom paid for it all. I was so grateful that I didn’t know how to thank her. Saying “Thank you” six times just felt empty handed. On top of that I felt embarrassed for being so poor. They were the newest clothes I had owned since before 8th grade, when my mother took me back to school shopping

using a credit card she would never pay off.

Sometimes Albert’s mother would disappear for days at a time. When I asked where she was, he would tell me she was at the casino. “She bipolar” he would explain “she just does this sometimes.” Her returns were always silent, like our steps up the stairs past her bedroom when she would finally come home. For junior year of high school my dad and I agreed it would be better if I went to the school closer to our house. It meant I could walk home if he couldn’t pick me up and it meant I would be going to the same school as Albert. His parents regularly drove me home after school, or else I would go to Albert’s and eat dinner with them. Nights when I stayed over too late, when the buses weren’t running anymore and his parents had gone to bed, Albert’s older sister would give me a ride home. She would blast music and the AC to stay awake while Albert and I would sit in the back seat holding hands. I would roll the windows down and breathe in, the orange glow of the streetlights overhead and the cold air, thick and sweet.

Some weekends I would join his family on their trips to Sam’s Club. Albert and I would pick out food for lunch. He would make us sandwiches, packing two of everything, making sure I ate. Later, I would sit outside of Albert’s house in my dads car, weeping in the passenger’s seat before my dad went in to talk to Albert’s parents. I would yell at him that if we have to break up he needs to give me lunch money. “He’s the only one who feeds me, what am I going to eat for lunch?”, I would cry, my face burning with tears. My dad handed me one $20 bill before starting the car and driving home.

Sometime in our Junior year of high school Albert attempted to end his life. He had a shadow self, a part of himself that would take over, which he named Julian. One night he took more of his prescribed medication than he was supposed to. He told me later that he knew it wouldn’t have killed him, he just wanted to see what it felt like. Perhaps he was trying to rid himself of Julian. After the

incident Albert told me he would fight this shadow of himself, this part of himself that wanted him dead. His psychiatrist and his therapist would help, they would change his medication, fix his brain with SSRIs, and Julian would go away.

Not long after I got an email from Albert on September 29th, three days before my 16th birthday. In the

email Albert told me he was scared; Julian had returned. Albert told me he was going away, to a where he didn’t say. But he told me he would call me every day he was there. He told me he would love me, always. He asked me to remember him, always. On October 2nd, my sweet sixteen, his parents picked me up from my house and we drove down to Aurora, the inpatient psychiatric ward. I sat in an open room filled with empty tables and chairs. Everything was white, off white, beige, gray. Everything was wipeable.

Albert had painted a box for me. It was blue on the outside, little rudimentary waves, and green on the inside, a sharp green the color of sweet peas. He painted words inside the lid, words that read “For everything the sea could not contain. Love, Albert". I cried and held his hand. We talked about the hospital, the people he had met, how he was feeling. I told him I missed him. I loved him so much it hurt.

Didn’t that mean I was holding some of his pain? Didn’t that mean I was helping? His parents drove me home. We didn’t say a single word to each other until I unbuckled my seatbelt in my driveway. “Thank you. Good night.”

I believed that I could take all his pain away if I gave all of myself to him. Like surrendering to God at church on Sundays as a child. He gave my life purpose. But I was moody and hormonal. I would yell when I was upset. I would fight when there was no attacker. Like a wounded animal, or a scab over burned skin. I was defensive. I was afraid. In January, he told me he wanted a break, from us, from our relationship. I was devastated. My heart ripped into pieces, scattered and bleeding on a concrete floor. I needed him. I told him how much I loved him, I told him I could change. In February we got back together. A Valentine's Day card kept long in a box that reads “You will always be my epiphany.”

It was a month, maybe two, of love and laughter, singing songs and playing video games, staying up

watching movies on his laptop in bed and sneaking sex in his bedroom while his parents were downstairs. But Julian came back.

This time he took the scissors he used to cut my hair. He locked the bathroom door. He left the sink running. I wasn’t there when it happened but I went into his bathroom a few days later and my brain laid images over everything as if I was watching it unfold in front of me. Roses blooming in the tub, shadows in the corners of the ceiling waiting to carry him away. I imagined his mother cleaning it all up, crying like I did. After the hospital he came back with bandages over his wrists. The white gauze like ghosts of our past, or maybe ghosts of the future I wanted with him but felt impossible here in this alien world.

I cried. Why wasn’t I enough? What was wrong with me? I broke out in a rash that covered my entire body. I cried on the phone and alone in my bed. The entire time Albert and I had been together I hadn’t told my family about him. I was afraid of what they would say to me if they knew. I was afraid they wouldn’t understand. After his third attempt at taking his own life I decided I would tell my sister everything. I needed someone I could talk to, who I could trust. Immediately after telling her she told my dad. At first

he was confused, he didn’t even know I had a boyfriend, the person I talked to on the phone every night, the person I spent my entire life thinking about, living for. After the confusion, my dad was mad. Together he, my sister and her boyfriend all sat me down at the kitchen table. I was to take a break from Albert. They sat with me and watched as I dialed his phone number. They watched as it rang. They watched as I talked.

“Albert, I love you so much, but I hurt so much too. I don’t feel like I know who I am anymore. I’ve lost myself in you, in us. I need a break, from us, from this.” They watched as tears rolled down my face. I looked at my sister nodding across the table as it grew to be 100 yards wide.

“No” he said. At first his voice splintered and fractured, sadness, grief, love, anger. Then nothing. “I am

breaking up with you,” he replied. He had flipped a switch, turned himself off, to me, to loving me, anymore. I begged him, no, I just need some space, to think, to find myself. There was nothing I could say. He was done.

The next day my dad told me he was going to talk to Albert’s parents. After nine months of us dating, my dad drove me to Albert’s house for the first time. My dad made me wait in the car as I watched him walk up to the door, knock, and disappear for a short while. I don’t know what he told Albert’s parents or what they talked about. When he got back in the car he looked at me and said “I don’t want you around him anymore. It's done.”

I tried staying friends with Albert, hanging out at school, or going over to his house with mutual friends for

band practice, but he was short with me. He was removing me from his life in little chunks. Our mutual friend would tell me that Albert hated me being around, that I annoyed him, that he pitied me. I would leave the garage while they practiced their songs, sit down at the piano by the front door and play Neil Young’s Sugar Mountain while I waited for a ride home. When he started seeing someone new I befriended her. In an effort to protect him I told her about his mental illness. I wanted to make sure she was ready to take care of him, I wanted her to know what she was diving into. When he found out, he told me he never wanted to speak to me again. He switched classes and avoided me in the hallways. I would see him and her sitting on the concrete wall after school, waiting for his parents to pick them up before walking home, alone.

I cried myself to sleep at night and would wake up with my eyes still stinging and puffy. A few months after he removed me from his life I dreamed I was 30 stories up in a dirty, abandoned building. I looked out a window and down, in a body of water, was Albert floating on a raft. I was so far away from him. He was so far away. I ran to the elevator, I was going to go down to him, I was going to help him. I pressed the buttons and the doors closed. Suddenly the elevator was full of stacks of literature, magazines, books, newspapers, journals, all the way up to the ceiling, they kept growing, higher and higher. They came crashing down on me, a wave of paper, and I tried to swim out of the mass, but couldn’t rise above. I suffocated under the weight of the literature.

I haven’t spoken to Albert in over 15 years. He sent me an email over a year after we graduated high school. He sent one to Ren too, his old bandmate. He wanted to tell me he was better, and to apologize. I didn’t know what to say. I don’t think I ever responded. I think I deleted it. Now I find myself reading old email correspondences from the days of being his epiphany. I stalk his social media, look through his flikr, lurk his Instagram, always holding my breath, hoping to see new photos of him, hoping to see him enjoying his life. I scour the internet for proof that he is ok, proof that he and Julian finally melded into one integrated being, searching for a sign that he is no longer haunted by his past, shadows in ceiling corners, white bandages and late bass players. After all this time my fear is no longer of me losing him but of the world losing him, all the love of him, all the beauty of him. Late at night, when the house is quiet, when I find myself all alone, when my ghosts come back to see how I’ve been, I cry, holding my heart as if it has once again fallen into pieces, or never having healed. I know what codependency is now, I know the reasons I wanted to stay with him, to love him, so deeply. Love, to me, was supposed to hurt. Now I know it isn’t, it doesn’t. Safety, trust, grace; you can’t tell which pieces are missing when you hold the puzzle box so close to your chest. But knowing doesn’t heal or fix hearts worn on sleeves through battlefields, nor does time. Maybe only love can do that.