

# The Carson Review

Marymount Manhattan College

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# The Carson Review

The Literary Arts Journal of Marymount Manhattan College  
221 E. 71st Street  
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Literary Award Winners

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## *Submission Guidelines*

*The Carson Review* is published once a year in the Spring. We invite submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and cover photography from current students at Marymount Manhattan College. Selecting material for the next issue will take place in the Fall of 2018. *The deadline is October 15th, 2018.*

All literary submissions should include a cover sheet with the writer's name, address, telephone number, e-mail address, and the titles of all work(s) submitted. The author's name should not appear on the actual pages of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Double-space all prose and single-space all poetry. For such texts, we ask that you send electronic submissions as *Word documents* to [carsonreview@mmm.edu](mailto:carsonreview@mmm.edu). The same cover sheet directions apply to photography submissions, which should be good quality .JPG images. If you have any questions about these guidelines or about working on the *Review* as a student editor, please contact Dr. Jerry Williams at [jwilliams1@mmm.edu](mailto:jwilliams1@mmm.edu) or at (646)393-4118.

## *Editorial Policy*

The editorial staff of *The Carson Review* is an assemblage of students at Marymount Manhattan College. In order to cultivate an atmosphere of integrity and evenhandedness, the staff evaluates all entries without knowing the identity of the author or photographer. To maintain a thriving literary arts journal at MMC, a variety of submissions remains absolutely vital, so please send us your best work.

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Poetry





# Asleep in Ireland

*ETHAN BARKER*

I fear I never came to New York at all.  
Instead, I am merely a projection,  
walking this world as a sliver of myself.  
People glimpse only the fraction I share.  
The rest of the iceberg remains under the North Sea.  
For all they know, I have constructed a polite Frankenstein  
from the parts of myself that I can stomach.  
I wonder if in omitting my lesser personas  
I have forgotten the majority of myself:  
humiliations and fallibilities,  
the money I stole from my mother's purse at sixteen,  
the way confrontation always brings me to tears,  
the sickening, shameful ease of my young life  
which I desperately offset with the few nuggets of hardship  
I have managed to collect.  
I wonder if these omissions have diminished me,  
if one day I will believe they aren't true  
despite their evidence on my body.  
I must be a shambling chimera,  
personality traits dangling off me like old band-aides,  
fooling no one—not even myself.

But that body is just a projection;  
I'm still asleep in Ireland  
on the childhood bed I didn't have to dismantle  
so it would fit out the door of the home I grew up in,  
the home that wasn't left hollow as a crypt  
while I wandered off in search of a new one.  
My accent is still in my throat, thicker by that vital inch,  
and soon I will wake.  
My friends will be where they were.

Their lives will not have changed without me  
and of course, my flaws will still cling to me.  
I will not have been so arrogant as to think I could overpower  
the mighty ocean of truth, the same seat that carried me here  
with palatable lies and a pair of scissors.

# We Are Ugly

*JOSEPH DEFILIPPIS*

We are ugliest in the morning,  
Some of us cough up the phlegm  
from yesterday's pack of smokes,  
only to light up again.

There are some of us who wake up to the rejection  
of liquor in our bodies—  
the pints from last night,  
the glasses of cheap whiskey and vodka.  
We release the poisons  
to make room for libations we'll drink later on.

Or what about the few who wake up feeling the most alone,  
their mothers dead  
or their fathers gone,  
a friend's young life taken?  
This lingers in the mind when they wake up  
to put on a fraudulent mask  
to hide behind all day.

So many people ugly in the morning  
with an infinite number of reasons why—  
for your life and mine  
are not the same.

All of us with method  
in our own madness.

# When the Dogs Wake Up

*JOSEPH DEFILIPPIS*

A beam of light breaks  
through clouds—  
like the soft, mad sun  
has something sweet to say.

The yawning of a new day  
wakes up the dogs,  
and we rush to our bowls  
to be fed.

Recluse children  
fear the feeling  
of an abstract thought  
manifesting itself in daylight

while the warriors on Wall St.  
hustle to make the first bell.

Each of us in the dog race:  
a rat race that deep down—  
none of us really  
cares to win.

# Eye of the Storm

*KALI DELIA*

Floating somewhere inside the eye,  
I don't savor the nausea before the storm.  
There's an earthquake suppressed in my chest and hands,  
rattling my ribs like cheap, plastic wind chimes.  
I know I'm still breathing, but I don't think I am.  
I wait for my body to crack and crumble,  
or at least to combust,  
but it never, ever does.  
Instead, I erode, pelted by a permanent rain.

Lava bubbles and spatters in my esophagus.  
Sometimes this is only in my mind,  
but I need it exorcised regardless.  
Sometimes I run out of class to vomit hot air  
and Diet Coke syrup diluted with stomach acid  
(I don't have an appetite, but I do have a caffeine addiction).  
Or I overwhelm my nerves with weed,  
then throw up later, whenever I let later come.

I bite my nails short enough to bleed,  
just three or four and one more fingertip pink and sore to the touch,  
until I learn my lesson.  
I know why I chew my nails,  
but I wonder why I've taken up chewing my pens.  
Am I a sexual deviant or am I just fidgety?  
Freud would cry fixation, suppose a trauma in my past,  
but the oral stage lasts from birth to eighteen months,  
and those were the best days of my life.

The latency stage went wrong  
in elementary school when I was (more of a) child.  
Lying in bed with a vague but fortified dread rumbling at my core,  
I sensed there was a bomb somewhere set to destroy the world,

a bomb like in cartoons,  
an impractical bowling ball with a wick,  
and Paul McCartney was there.  
Maybe that was a dream,  
watching the earth try to kill itself  
or at least scrub the lice off its face.  
Never good friends to start with,  
my body and mind drift farther apart.  
And here I am again, like a traumatized child  
frozen in time, standing on my fire escape,  
a balcony above a burning civilization,  
staring up at a launched missile  
with a target between my eyes.

# Hamlet (and Ophelia)

KALI DELIA

On Halloween, I painted my face ghost-gray  
with a trickle of fake blood running from my temple to my cheek.  
I'd hit my head on a rock coming down from the bridge.  
After I drowned, my lace eggshell gown was torn and wrinkled,  
adorned with plastic ivy and flowers.

I drove to Hamlet's house in a mood that matched the darkness of the night.  
My prince answered the door in a brand new, bright white tunic.  
We promised we would both be dead, but he was lively and clean,  
no blood stain where my brother should have cut him.  
My prince informed me that Gertrude wouldn't let him soil his royal attire,  
which disrupted the timeline of our macabre fairy tale.  
He was Act I, and I was Act IV.

The night crawled by unexceptionally:  
no partying, no drinking, no last-minute trick-or-treating.  
We went from his basement to mine, eating bite-size Kit-Kats  
and watching *The Nightmare Before Christmas*,  
even though I'd seen it too many times and wanted to watch a horror movie.  
I didn't judge him for being too scared;  
I judged him for pretending not to be when he courted me.  
He set me up for one man and gave me another.

I mourned the childlike excitement of my favorite holiday,  
not realizing my resentment for Hamlet in that moment.  
He was charismatic, seemingly perfect, almost unaffected by me.  
I was gloomy, ultimately driven mad with my love for him.

Just like every other night, I sat idly while he tried to impress me  
by attempting to make sense of the nonsensical world,  
priding himself in pretty words on revelations I'd had ages ago.

Lost in philosophizing about whether or not to be,  
he concluded that our consciousness makes us cowards.  
I bid him speak for himself, for he spoke but rarely acted.  
Time and again I had done what he could not.  
Now I know a noble mind doesn't guarantee a noble heart.



# His First Birthday

*MADDIE DRAGSBAEK*

Autumn

Her long blonde hair grazed the backs of her thighs,  
and her bangs neatly tapped the tips of her brow.  
With her yellow dress pulled down in fistfuls,  
she brought home a self-portrait adorned with a moustache.

Our mother hung the drawing on the fridge and we all smiled  
at our youngest sibling's untamable imagination.  
She buried her head in her hands, pulling eyelashes for wishes,  
and insisted she had a beard we could not see.

Her bright blue eyes always played pretend as she  
scampered around the house with her hat on backwards,  
her locks in knots around her ears,  
red candy goo leaking from the corners of her mouth.

My other sister begged to braid her hair to reveal her face.  
I watched the youngest's skin go warm  
until silence spoke between them and she screamed  
that one day she would have boy hair.

Winter

The brisk Boston air turned every face into a starting line  
for the runny noses that refused to quit racing.  
The youngest let her face get crusty and we begged her to wipe her nose,  
but she insisted she didn't care about being pretty.

Her furry hood encapsulated her face;  
redness spattered her cheek like a birthmark.

Awestruck, we blushed about how adorable she was  
and she told us to shut up.

Back inside the house, we fought over the gingerbread people  
my mother picked up at the store: three girls and one boy.  
My brother screamed as the youngest reached for his treat  
and she shrieked that we should look at her a little harder.

My brother threatened to rebel if he didn't get the one with pants.  
My mother threatened to throw the cookies out if we didn't decide.  
So the youngest grabbed one with a dress and bit the head off,  
sitting at the table, refusing to be touched and withholding a smile.

Spring

Her eyes glazed over as she stared at the dress,  
wrapping words around her throat,  
pulling them tight as we studied her pupils  
to estimate when to expect high tide.

"Please don't make me wear that dress," she said.  
As my mother's youngest daughter, her words held  
an automatic potency that forced their eyes to lock  
together, currents getting stronger as silence ensued.

The youngest started to chew on her own hair, a nervous tick,  
a momentary escape from the body she wanted to drown altogether.  
My mother let one raindrop race down her face and said,  
"I would rather have a son than a dead daughter."

We all stood by the window, watching my mother get in her car and drive down the street; chasing the sunset, she knew this was the last time she'd see her daughter. She returned with a tuxedo and that was the first time we saw him.

### Summer

He marched into the salon with his hair in a low ponytail, positioned down his back like a rope that kept him relentlessly tied to the person we assigned him.

We watched the nine years of his life flash before our eyes, memories passing as quickly as the seasons that came before. Our youngest sister, my parents' last daughter, our final day with the little girl we had taken turns holding in the hospital.

He sat in the chair, buzzing echoing through the room. Every last strand of his hair fell to the ground like remnants of a lifelong war; he stood up smiling and we watched him become himself.

Happiness erupted from his body, roars parading out of his newborn lungs, belly laughing, his skeleton bouncing, unfazed by the selfish fears that surrounded him, trapped him inside of her.

# Hopscotch

*MADDIE DRAGSBAEK*

I have been 10,000 different people,  
all climbing on the monkey bars of my bones,  
throwing memories through my bloodstream,  
skipping across the surface like stones.

There are hearts beating wildly inside me.  
I feel their pull like the wind.  
There's no telling when they got there  
or even how long they've been.

I can taste the howl of a wide-eyed child,  
the only proof of her a scar on my knee.  
A purple permanent trophy for my youth,  
the pain dripping down my leg would agree.

I smell the humiliation  
of disappointment in the fall.  
Empty promises disfiguring my face,  
I wish I'd never felt anything at all.

In the mirror of the full moon, my mother's reflection  
stares back at me as though I were God.  
Her touch lingers on my skin that's since been callused  
as time wraps around my throat, and they applaud.

Their voices echo like a metronome through my lungs,  
chaos keeping tempo so that I'll set them free.  
I open my mouth, hear them shout my full name,  
and somehow they all sound like me.

My skin stretches as they hang on my ribs  
like a jungle gym holding the contents of my past.

A day standing still is still a day moving forward,  
forgiveness is waiting but time won't ask.

And though the clocks won't break,  
these voices will never disappear.  
They'll just stick needles in my brain  
and play hide and seek in my ear.

But I know they'll just keep playing  
hopscotch on my brain,  
each hop a new life of thought,  
but I remain the same.

# Overindulge

*MADDIE DRAGSBAEK*

every time you say i love you,  
the air doesn't taste so acidic anymore.  
i let my shoulders melt off my body  
and settle like candle wax at my feet.

you don't notice, but i don't care.  
a fire will burn regardless of whether  
you look at it long enough  
to burn yourself as well.

you smell like fall and remind me  
of the melancholia that drips  
off my eyes, the residue of past lovers.  
and you look like the type that floods.

i slice the thought of kissing you  
into two even parts.  
i devour mine.  
you lick the frosting off yours.

i date to distract myself  
and you're already oblivious,  
telling me i deserve better  
but why don't i deserve you?

when you said you like girls  
who embolden you to burn  
and admitted that girl  
was me,

why didn't you see  
the conflagration at my feet

when you moved on  
to a name that wasn't mine?

why, as you give yourself to me,  
are you asking for someone else?  
i am self-immolating  
just to get your attention.

and you'll come over and watch me  
blaze as you boast about  
your latest beauty and i pretend i don't  
feel like i'm not enough.

the acidic taste returns to my mouth  
but i continue to broil  
for you,  
kicking myself

for reading into things that don't matter  
to you,  
for letting it matter  
to me.

you'll return to my apartment,  
my eyes flickering shut as you  
watch me fall in love with you  
and somehow believe it's friendship.

you'll inch into my bed sheets  
and lay your head upon my chest  
as you dream of the women you lust after and vaunt,  
and I dream that one day you turn around.

# Being Locked Up Drives a Body to the Edge of Insanity

*ELIZABETH FAHSBENDER*

A dungeon houses seven separate rooms all within decaying walls. The bedrooms have one barred window each, a metal toilet, and four rusty bunks. More flimsy mattresses scatter through the common area; sleepless men lay on the bare floor. Forty-three live in here. Nine tables with plastic chairs sit in the middle as neutral territory. Overhead fluorescent lights blind us 24/7.

At every table, a father sits in one of six chairs next to the metal tables in the humid, white room we all now tightly inhabit. Each man meandered his way through the system of hierarchy to earn his spot. They rest and eat the mystery meat they are served while keeping watch of their prey.

A gaggle of four tattooed brothers group themselves in the room next to mine, only to be seen when something important is happening, like feeding time or a fight breaks out. They exist in a gnat infested cell, the size of a public restroom that is engulfed in the stench of urine and feces.

The other night, a son in one of the rooms killed himself. He wrapped an entire roll of floss around his neck and pulled old blankets over his head, disguising his deed from the guards. The next morning, his face was blue and slack. Forty-two remain.

I hide myself away in this bunk, entangled in my ratted blanket and sweat, scratching days away into the cinder block walls that detain me.



# Journey of a Bullet

*ELIZABETH FAHSBENDER*

In a single moment,  
I feel myself pulled,  
preparing for exposure.  
Hands drag me back  
with one on top  
and the other controlling balance below.

With a single, swift action,  
I am released  
from a safe space of black into a world of color.  
The shelling pieces of my cocoon  
fly fragmented into the atmosphere  
and I head towards the target.

I tear through the air easily  
with my outsides made of copper.  
They all try to avoid me  
but I have no control  
over the location I'm sent in.  
I just go.

They attempt dodging me  
but it's too late.  
I hit a body straight on  
and disturb what was once calm  
and make it disjointed and muddled.  
I've ruptured skin.

Their texture is ductile  
and easy to perforate.  
I slide my way into the layers  
of muscle and fat

creating a trauma wound  
that will be difficult to close.

Before anyone can react,  
the journey is finished.  
It endured a matter of seconds  
to I find myself  
lodged inside an organ  
waiting to be ejected.

# Model Minority

*GYZELLE GARCELLANO*

stare into your bedroom mirror  
and see that your skin glows a dangerous amber  
and you know what waits outside the door

stumble into your bathroom  
take a piss for five seconds  
and frown when even your piss is yellow

hurry drag a toothbrush up down  
in out till your mouth foams white  
rinse make sure all color is gone

you need to get cleaner  
so get in that shower  
hot or cold doesn't matter

lather yourself in that toxic froth  
scrub till your bones show  
white as marble and snow

and rinse  
rinse till all the color goes down the drain  
a spotless smiling skeleton is safer

than a yellow girl  
caking makeup on every visible part  
of flesh that isn't cloaked

you know they won't accept you  
if the melanin appears  
when the makeup runs down your naked cheek

so don't be slick  
your reputation is more important  
than being a confident "chink"

if they skinned you  
bloody and raw  
you'd be more than a carcass to them

you'd be their friend

# Chinaski, I Am Sorry

*MAYA GEORGI*

I want to write a great poem  
pull the words out of my ribcage  
create a masterpiece in the stanzas  
move the waves of the Atlantic

but all I ever write are words that hit the page like fire  
past loves burning my fingers  
boys with matchstick hands  
boys with clouded irises  
everyone I can still taste pouring out of my mouth

all I ever write is sadness  
like it's alive  
like it just drenched the paper and turned it indigo  
just because it pours onto my world doesn't mean it's real

all I ever write is city skylines  
dotted yellow windows skipping along the horizon  
clouds engulfing buildings  
but dreams only shine in the light  
they aren't conjured there  
that's what the darkness is for

all I ever write is not enough  
when the world begs to be noticed  
and I don't bother to look

# Doors

*MAYA GEORGI*

We started where most things do  
at the door inviting us into the pleasure  
of kissing someone with trust  
and looking to find the light where they glow from.

The next door warned us  
but we were too busy stumbling through it  
tasting lust in our cheeks  
the smoke in our lungs confused it all for love.

Then it fell apart as these things do  
slammed doors on the nose  
vodka knocking and screams in between cigarette drags  
the sound became so familiar, the sound of you leaving.

We were shutting and opening till it was only a game  
how many memories you could slip under my door  
how many locks I could change  
doors swinging vehemently like the pendulum  
of a clock that ticked our time away.

Until we were nothing but what  
the dust left behind whispered about us  
destruction in the form of undone hinges  
a chaotic love between the doors.

# Died on Impact

ALEXIS KELLER

I want to see my death approach  
just a few seconds  
before it has time to encroach  
I crave a moment  
to struggle towards a final breath  
look back at the kaleidoscope  
and embrace the unknown  
before I'm shoved into the abyss

Departing unknowingly is the worst way to go  
A spark snuffed out before  
the kindling catches  
To have my last thought be  
"the cable bill is due"  
would be a betrayal to my synapses

Life is too spectacular to end instantaneously  
I want to feel  
the lightning strike me  
the slick knife stick me  
or the salty water fill my lungs because  
there is nothing beautiful in sudden nothingness  
There is only sudden nothingness

I wandered foreign cities as raindrops tangled with tears on my cheek  
I saw the emptied closet and read the writing on the wall  
I wept when a golden moment couldn't stay  
During these times, I felt alive.  
I want to feel alive when I die.

When my heartbeat succumbs to stillness,  
let me say goodbye to it.

—*In honor of Katharine Campbell*

# Lazarus

*JASMINE LEDESMA*

I died on a Tuesday while he was sleeping.  
He found me later, white eyed and empty.  
He only cackled, head flung backwards.

I was buried in wet soil that Thursday.  
He was shivering the whole time and our  
neighbor hugged him, blessed his soul.

He advertised his broken heart, shouted down  
alleyways until he found her, nearly rotted.  
His hands slither on her waist and  
she is ready to be eaten.

I simmer. I wait. I do not float. I do not fly.  
I drudge. I dig. I scrape. Blackened teeth.  
I taste the air and know what to do.

I hear him laughing from the warmth. I go  
inside and do not wait for him to notice me.  
I see his veins snap and his eyes pop.  
He is exactly as he should be: fearful of me.

I only cackle, head flung backwards.



# Putrescence

*NOELLE MATICKE*

She stepped tenderly on the cold linoleum—a putrid green and yellow, a remnant of the seventies. She speculated collapsing right there to rest her aching bones on the sea of faux marble or to keep pushing her living corpse through the habitual day, time slowly passing like molasses dripping, like she's swimming through thick amber goo. She decided to pour a glass of rosé, then sat down against the dark wooden cabinets and counted sips as she smudged her lavish lipstick on the delicate rim of her wine glass. The baseboard heater was decrepit, each hot gust expelled rusty dandruff which settled on the already begrimed tile. The windows were broken and mist seeped in, causing the wallpaper to curl at the edges. Her gaze traveled up the muddled floral wallpaper, its grotesque buds like eyes with faded pink petals that grew out like lashes. She was constantly unsettled, her body tense and rigid—the foreboding flora followed her every movement, the petals never blinked. She slammed the kitchen door with her foot, scraping her heel along the floor where green moss grew in the grout, contrasting the light smear of blood on the rough mortar. All of a sudden she hated rosé.

Morning fog and mourning grog clouded her mind as she grew thirsty for solitude. Her muscles groaned as she tested her strength and tried to stand—she was a newborn foal, clumsy and feeble. Every movement she made in this infestation felt hot and painful, but she romanticized it. She remembered her mother would mutter about how “beauty is pain” as she brushed her daughter's unruly brown hair with a tarnished silver brush, causing contortions of pain as she ripped out the knots. Bristles of coarse horsehair scratched her scalp as she watched her blank reflection in the dull mirror hanging on the wall. She was young and pale, her complexion blotched with red, her skin feverish from the radiator as it belched heat, her dark eyes sunken, her lips bright red and chapped.

Under the kitchen table, dust muted the lambent green and yellow tile. She hallucinated a pastiche of limbs and dark brown hair stuck to a crumpled form clothed in a bunched satin sundress. The congealment

oozed a dark sap and smelled horrific, like old motor oil—if she listened hard enough she could hear the moans and groans humming, radiating, sputtering like an antiquated engine that has had too much to drink. She averted her gaze, pushed herself up against the cabinets and kicked the empty wine glass at the mass of putrescence. When the glass rolled and hit the lurid clot, it burst into black smoke, dissipating in the dank air, expelling malodor.

She moved sluggishly to the front door where beads of raindrops were sliding down slowly on the small pane of glass. She looked through the window to see overdue bills scattered on the top step, some withered and damp from the misty morning. She rolled her eyes and let her head fall forward, her forehead thudding against the hollowed wooden door. Heavy iron locks bolted the door shut, protecting and guarding. Layers and layers of polish coated the mahogany; a pointless barrier, a mask failing to preserve beauty with a thick plank of grime and grit.

# Baby's Breath

*VAUGHN O'CONNOR*

What is it like to breathe as easy as a rose?  
To silently inhale a sweet, silken stream of air,  
and exhale warmly enough to ripen a nearby strawberry on the vine.  
Your breath turns fallen leaves green again  
and would soothe a dragonfly, not scare it away.  
Your breath is the inside of a milkweed plant,  
like crickets along moss-muffled trail in Maine.  
I want to thread together thoughts of forgiveness  
and whisper them to your fontanelle in a kiss;  
so you may always remember that  
your breath is a bird barely balancing  
on the far end of a newly-budded branch.  
Stronger than steel and nuclear bombs,  
your power exists in the absence of your anger,  
in smiling in the face of cold winds and heavy rain,  
in being able to count your own pulse.  
The world is frigid, Evelyn,  
but the inside of your palm is warm.

# Boogeyman

HALLE ROBERTS

In my dream, I eat dinner with your family. Except, they don't look like your family until you sit down across the table. Then, they all grow faces: your mom, your dad, and your three brothers. Their wives are also at the table and, when you say *Mrs. Kennedy*, we all turn to look at you. Now you look at me like I just grew a face, too, then at my hands; I have a diamond ring on every finger of each hand. You grab me by the elbow and drag me away from the table. You pull out a flipbook of all the girls you've slept with, all tall brunettes like me. Then there's actually me, on my back and on my knees and on top of you. *Look*, you finally admit, *I only wanted to fuck you*. I wake up.

In my next dream, we eat lunch at a table outside with your children. There are four of them: a tall Japanese boy, a little black girl, and a set of freckled, white fraternal twins. They are all named John, like your father, even the girls. The boy twin is on a leash but, when he tries to run into oncoming traffic, you let him. They're not really your kids, anyway. They're the babies your ex's carried to term to try to make you stay. *It didn't work*, you say, like it's something to be proud of. *I don't want to have your kids, anyway*, I am reminding you, when the boy comes limping back from the road screaming *Mommy*. I wake up.

In my last dream, you eat breakfast in bed with your new girl. She smiles with her entire mouth. Her face is stuck like that, top teeth cemented to bottom teeth. She laughs at your jokes through the enamel. *Wanna go for round two?* you ask and she answers you like *Yeth*. She gets on her knees and you push her head down to suck you off, your dick banging against those teeth. *Open up, babe*, you say, *open up*. She can't. I sleep through the night.

# Cleaning Up

HALLE ROBERTS

The summer we got together, we had nothing better to do.  
In the autumn, the sun got low and so did I.  
In the winter, you got cold and we froze.  
In the spring my inhibitions melted  
and flooded the apartment.  
I took the trash out in my bare feet.

I came back inside with glass in my toes.  
*If you're going to bleed, you said, bleed out the window.*  
I left bloody footprints all over the carpet.  
You were so angry, you pissed on everything we had  
I put it all in the washer, even our bodies.

When we were clean  
you looked like a stranger  
but I would still leave with you.

# Hide and Seek

KAYLA RYAN

One, two, tie the laces of your shoes because you're heading over to Jenny's house for the third time this week. The static hum of cartoons duke it out with the muffled shouts emitted from your living room back home-- and the static loses.

Three, four, harken the splintered front door and Daddy's brutal stomp down the creaking porch steps. Your heart vibrates in your chest like the engine in his car as he whips out of the driveway. You can't look Jenny in the eyes when you get up to leave. Your hands learn to make fists.

Five, six, calm your trembling lips and drag your feet across the brown, sun-scorched lawn. The other beast awaits, and her nostrils flair in anticipation. She calls your name from the kitchen, clipped and sharp. You wish you could stop time.

Seven, eight, stand up straight, and hide the fear in your eyes. Unclench your fists and try out your ribs instead. Bite your tongue. Don't make matters worse. Bleed like Mommy taught you.

Nine, ten, *when will it end?*



Fiction





# Virgil's Afterlife

*ETHAN BARKER*

It was during one of the last summers of its kind, when the season still meant aimlessness and delinquency for the duration. Most of my good memories come from that Goldilocks period after college started but before my friends and I truly disappeared beneath the wheels of real life and its relentless locomotive. I remember the unquestioned sense of belonging I had in 2017, as I stood there behind the port-a-potties smoking with Will, Keith, Oisín, and Kev. They were the same friends who had carried me through school, and here we were now at Hypnos 17, a summer bacchanal that we didn't yet know would be one of our last. Three music tents stood within earshot, and their music thumped away muffled by the distance as if the bands were sealed inside giant snow globes. The summers in which we could see each other often and only rarely have to commit ourselves to responsibilities we didn't care for were few and far between, though I didn't know it then. It seemed briefly that we had discovered adulthood, and it meant freedom. In reality, we had a fleeting moment between the loneliness of school and the demands of grown-up life. As we loitered around the music festival we enjoyed at least the illusion that we were fully formed, invincible individuals.

I can only explain the man we met that summer by saying that he was one of those people who watched the same fleeting moment go by and latched onto it with the desperation of a drowning man. Virgil had introduced himself on the first night and shared his weed which was all well and good, until he showed up at our tent the next day. In the cold light of day our hungover and un-altered minds could not fathom why the stranger we'd met in the Blind Man tent, a fading memory from a loud and busy dream, had climbed into the uncomfortable reality of the next morning. In his mind, some great connection had been formed which bound us together for at least the rest of the weekend. Virgil was at least ten years older than us judging by his appearance, but possibly even older based on his references and sense of humor. His fingernails were black with dirt, his hair greasy and unkempt, his face unnaturally gaunt, and his habits more irritating than free weed could compensate for. Will had spent the night mostly on a mission to find girls which was to be expected with him, and Virgil had

no problem immediately striking up conversations with the two or three that were buzzing around our tent. Will had gone silent as he always did when something pissed him off and he wanted to give off the impression that he might do something about it. His mood worsened throughout the day as time and time again we would be in the crowd of one of our favorite acts when he would appear in the distance, bobbing high above the sea of heads and smiling in acknowledgement of us as he awkwardly worked his way over. Then we would try and enjoy the mellow vibrations of Finnish indie rock group NOISEBIKE while Virgil shouted in an attempt to keep a conversation going. I remember wondering—as he tried to explain to us which cut of *Blade-Runner* is the best (the final cut)—how his life had come to this. Without the cushion of my own friend group, I would never have had the strength to go out and impose myself on others, but people like him seemed to have no other option. I imagined him sitting in the darkness all day, just staring at the wall in between going off to strike up conversations with people in the line for a club, in the bathroom of a bar, or at a music festival he didn't know anything about. Being around him made me feel like I had only narrowly managed to avoid his life.

As we stood there in a circle, listening to the sound of three different genres mingled together, the conversation turned to the acid we'd brought and when we'd get around to trying it. Will swore under his breath. Someone muttering "Fuck, here he is now" had naturally become the herald of Virgil's presence and sure enough, there he was, sauntering over to us with an impossibly large grin on his face. The mud beneath our boots began to feel like quicksand as another moment got swallowed up by the obligation to politely include a stranger. Our conversation died when he came along and was replaced with tiresome small talk, as if someone's parent had just entered the room. He asked about drugs and girls in such an insufferably coy way that it made both topics dead in the water. I turned back to look longingly at the Mammal Tooth tent. It was the act we had all come to see more than any other and I knew how desperate we were to shake Virgil off before he could come along and ruin that, too.

The conversation died again, so we all watched silently as he lit up a cigarette. He flicked open a Zippo lighter and shut it again with two exaggerated gestures, then held the cigarette like a joint while he sucked on it and let out a lengthy, satisfied exhale.

"I got this six years ago and it lasted just fine," he said when no one asked about the lighter. "I have another one just like it at home except it's signed by Tom Waits. Well not signed but it has his initials engraved in it

because he used to own it. I don't like to bring that around too much in case I lose it. You guys know who Tom Waits is?"

We all immediately answered in the affirmative, as we had been trained to do whenever he asked us anything so that he wouldn't elaborate.

"Hey, Will," I said, something having suddenly occurred to me. "So when are we going to take that acid?"

"Oh, shit, you guys are dropping acid?" Virgil said, using curse words and mentioning drugs with the glee of a child doing something he shouldn't. "Damn man, that's good shit, fuck yeah!"

"No, we're not," Will said, glaring at me. "Don't mind him."

"Yeah, we are, check it out," I said, a plan forming. I pulled out of my pocket a little sheet of tabs, the sheet itself with a psychedelic print and little skulls all over it. Then, making a little show of it, I immediately hid it behind my back and cursed. "That garda just saw me with it."

Sauntering over to us in a hi-vis jacket was a friendly policeman working at the festival who'd struck up a few pleasant conversations with us the day before. I knew perfectly well that he hadn't seen anything and likely wouldn't care even if he had.

"Virge," I said, exploiting a sense of familiarity that Virgil craved. "Hide this and bring it back to our tent!"

A light went on in the others' eyes as they realized what I was doing.

"Yeah, he won't stop you because it doesn't look like you're with us," Will said. "Find us later in the NOISEBIKE tent."

He wouldn't find us there, of course.

"I don't want to be fucking caught with this!" Virgil said.

"He won't think you're with us so he won't try to stop you if you leave. Hurry." Will was desperately trying to do this subtly.

"He's coming over," I said.

Something behind Virgil's eyes seemed to slide into place, and he grabbed the sheet, folded it in half, and shoved it into his mouth. The garda reached us and stood there with his hands in his pockets, a friendly grin on his face. Cold sweat clung to Virgil's temples. Everyone's eyes were trained on him, bulging as if trying to climb out of our sockets, save for Keith who remained impossibly cool and engaged the policeman in a pleasant conversation about football.

After a short chat, the garda went off about his business and we all exploded the second he went out of sight. They started poking Virgil and asking him how he was feeling. Will's irritation had all evaporated and turned into manic laughter. Meanwhile, I felt panic snake up my spine.

“Guys, I’ve never seen anyone take that much.” I’d never seen anyone take any, to be honest. “He could die.”

“He’ll be grand.” Will laughed. “Just put him in one of the tents and let him wait it out. Give him some water.”

Virgil smiled stupidly as they ruffled his hair and called him a legend. He had stopped making any sense and simply started repeating over and over that he would be alright and that he’d had this much before, both of which were transparently untrue. When I told him I would stay with him, however, I felt a clammy hand tighten around mine and his long shaggy hair tickled my ear as he whispered his thanks.

“Suit yourself, man,” Will said. “We’ll be at Mammal Tooth when you get bored.”

I took Virgil back to one of our one-man tents and closed the door. Rain clouds had begun to rumble overhead just as we made it back, typical of an Irish summer. Watching him wobble awkwardly onto his back, I felt guilt claw at my insides. My experience with drugs up to that point was limited to occasional marijuana and so I had exaggerated and impossible ideas of what more powerful substances could do to you. All I knew was that when he lay on his back, mouth agape, his pupils were like big hairy black tarantulas nesting in his irises, and his skin had turned a pale green to match the walls of the tent. It only became genuinely frightening when the rain started and prompted his screaming. As drops of water pelted the sides of the tent, he begged me not to let them in, and I silently prayed that he wouldn’t tell me what he thought the rain was. When a particularly strong gust of wind shook the walls of the tent, he appeared to sober up abruptly. He looked me right in the eyes and put his hands on my shoulders.

“I don’t know anyone anymore,” he said.

“I know.”

“I only know you and you won’t even tell me your name.”

“I will. I did. It’s Sean.”

“I wish you’d tell me, so we could message each other and become friends.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. There was that vague sense of truth that often lurked behind the words of someone who was freed from their inhibitions by one substance or another and I knew that, to him at least, I had somehow lied by telling him my name.

“I wish you’d come with me.” He said this over and over, like a chant or a lullaby. Eventually I realized what he was asking and took out my own tab. I’d avoided giving him our entire supply in case he did something

stupid with it, which of course had proven a wise decision. I looked into his eyes as I popped the little psychedelic square into my mouth.

It might have been just what I needed, despite being a profoundly stupid idea. But gradually I started to forget about how worrying Virgil's reactions to the acid were and got on with the pressing matter of spilling out of my body like an amoeba. I could make a rough and vague estimation of what was happening to Virgil by multiplying my minor distortions and wobbling hallucinations by twenty. I was splashing about in a puddle and enjoying myself, but Virgil was smaller than my thumb and to him the puddle was an ocean.

"This is wild. It's like. . . ." I searched for words that sounded like something a stoner would say "It's like I'm in a threesome with Escher and Kafka right now. You know?"

"It's not like that," Virgil said. "You're full of shit for saying that."

I was stunned. "You're full of shit. You're the single most full of shit person I've ever met."

"No, that was before," Virgil said. "That was the old me, before the trip. I'm changed now, but I'm not pretending this is anything more than it is. This is just another night and we're just lying in a tent."

I didn't know what to say to that. He was talking as if he was lucid and sounded sincere somehow. I wondered if he was right about it being night. It felt like no time at all had passed. He took my hand then, carefully, and placed it on his stomach. I thought he had started to hate me but in fact he was grinning broadly, the kind of smile that was so warm and welcoming I was afraid I would fall into it.

"Can you feel us kicking?" he asked.

To my surprise, I could. There were two irregular drumbeats in his stomach, and while I felt those I felt the slight tickle of his treasure trail on my palm. I liked the feeling of my hand sandwiched between his and his body, wrapped in the twin heartbeats of his wrist's pulse and whatever was in his pregnant gut, thumping away for me. It occurred to me then that I was the heaviest one in my group of friends, and probably the least cool and the least impressive. Without them around me, Virgil was no longer a remora on our stomach. In fact, I could see that he was profoundly cooler than me. He had stubble where I only wished I did; his eyes were a rare kind of green where mine were a vague and unimpressive hue of something or other. As he took a breath and I felt his toned stomach ripple under my hand, I realized I'd been mistaking my attraction to him for pity, or disdain, or both.

“Did you say that was us kicking?” I asked, not knowing what else to say.

He nodded, looking at something past my head that I couldn't see. “What will it be like when we're back on the other side?”

“Other side of what?”

He touched the wall of the tent and repeated himself. Then he gently kicked against it and I understood. I did the same, and we lay on our backs kicking against the roof of our mother's stomach together.

I would have always imagined the womb as a fleshy pink, but now I realized that it was always the very same green as the nylon walls of the tent. I don't remember which of us began stripping down first and part of me thinks it was something we decided to do at the very same second, but the process seemed to last a lifetime. We both struggled in removing our layers and giggled as we watched each other flop around desperately, like escape artists without any actual bondage. As trousers slowly got peeled off and hoodies were finally shaken loose, it felt like we were dumping big strips of our flesh, and with it our age and maturity. We became teenagers, children, until we were fetuses lying naked opposite each other in the shape of the Yin and Yang symbol, forming a complete whole with our separate selves. We rotated, swirling around in the warm and thick womb water that had filled the tent and felt like warm baby oil against my skin and tickled my feet. I was vaguely aware of the passage of time as I heard the different music acts start and end in the distance, the pounding of both song and cheers transformed into soothing, muffled vibrations against the membrane of the tent and the thick psychic soup we were floating in. My ears would focus on one song or another and the stage appeared on the roof of the tent. I could see the crowds, the performers; I could even see my friends dancing in religious ecstasy before the music they had pilgrimaged so far to see. I realized now that I could worship them easily, as Virgil does—not the music but the people listening to it. The young revelers, though their faces may change, live eternally young in the moment of time that he missed out on. I wished I could give him my body so that he would walk among them and feel for the first time what I had always taken for granted.

“I don't think I want to be born all over again,” he said, suddenly. Just those few words in a space like this seemed to reverberate forever, rippling through my body tirelessly.

“It'll be good. We can be whole new people. We can fix our mistakes,” I said.

“I'll live the exact same way, I know I will. I could be born a million

different times, over and over again, and I'd still be this sad gangly thing," he said.

We watched each other then, as we continued to float in circles like a top spinning in treacle, until eventually I moved in that unsettling way in which your limbs have responded before you've even decided to move them. I was up and at the opening of the tent, struggling to unzip it. Eventually, I forced myself head-first through the gap and squeezed out, naked and dripping with sweat into the day. The sun blinded me, burning the retinas that expected the dead of night. There was the sickening realization that I had no idea how much time had passed. My mind swam with anxious speculation. Had it been a day? A week? Or was this another festival that had been erected around the tent while I tripped, in some uncanny future where my friends had all become Virgils in the sea of young faces that replaced them.

I wobbled around and looked at Virgil, who lay wet and depleted on the ground like a discarded placenta. He was breathing, but he looked dead. I met up with my friends that day and shared the story. It makes a hallmark, an iconic tale, shared many more times. At the end of each telling, the listener asks what happened and something tightens around my throat. I can only say that he was gone when we came back and didn't stop by our tent again. We both must have wondered, during the night of the trip, what it would be like if you could get back to the womb, to the space where you are programmed and make some crucial changes to the basic code of your identity. If you could fix it so there was nothing useless or flabby about you, nothing hanging off or poking out. The answer is, of course, that you cannot; you can only hope to divert your course in time or divert the course of another on your path. The truth of the experience I had that night, though it shames me, is that I would not have had the strength to force my head through that opening if I hadn't eaten my twin.

# Another Day in Paradise

*JOSEPH DEFILIPPIS*

TUESDAY

The sun penetrated the broken blinds of my motel room window like Big Birch used to ram asses back in the county jail. It hurt my eyes and I moaned while turning over onto the rolling tray in bed next to me. The tobacco smell stuck to my clothes while I lay there in thought, wondering what Big Birch was up to now. For a sick sonofabitch he always treated me well; he never came at me like he did the other guys in jail. Maybe he just saw that look in my eyes and knew I was too much of a sick bastard for him to have his way with. I'd bite a dick right off of a man before I let him try and make me his bitch.

I usually didn't drink on Tuesdays, nor sit around either. An old neighbor of mine, Ed Kiel, ran the biggest mulch yard in Hoboken just about a mile from my place that sold the shit wholesale. So, every Tuesday morning, I was supposed to wake up fresh and motivated to work and then head down to Kiel's yard and wait in line. Ed always chose me—as long as I showed up on time.

This morning instead of waking up fresh and motivated, I woke up drunk and in despair, only to drink some more, and since work was out of the question, I had nothing better to do than battle with the page. I sat at the edge of my bed and pulled my dresser close to me and began plucking away at the typewriter:

Another morning reveling in wine and pussy. A woman wrapped in my blanket, a woman whose name I think was either Jessica or Josephine. Any memories I have are trapped in a cloud of intoxication and lost youth. My routine the same; the sun shines through the blinds waking me up in a rage as I run to the toilet to release the poison from my body only to realize I don't have any toothpaste to brush my teeth. I haven't picked up a paintbrush in two months, and it seems the only art I've come to perfect is pounding a fifth of whiskey and



a pack of Marlboro Lights before the clock strikes midnight. While I sit here and embrace the slump my life is in, millions of idiots roam the streets outside texting and tweeting, turning the beautiful English language into some sort of pseudo-language filled with Lol's and Lmao's rather than meeting one another and having a real human interaction—a real experience. Am I the hero for sitting here, sweaty with my balls hanging out of my briefs chipping away at a typewriter while the *New York Times* Best Sellers are typing their prose on a Macbook Pro? I don't know. But if there's one thing I do know, it's that the clock reads 10:00 AM and I'm parched.

Oh, it's just another day in paradise.

—Jackson Poland

I put my cigarette out and got up to raise the blinds. The light was a dagger stabbing away at my corneas, so I quickly closed them. I could feel the paleness of my skin, cold to the touch like ice. I decided I ought to have myself a double whiskey for breakfast and then leave the motel to grab the paper and maybe another drink too.

I took my time walking down Washington St. My body ached, and I was walking real slow. It probably looked so graceful to the group of chinks staring at me like a flock of horny degenerate men looking at a broad with tits coming out of her ass. My clothes were ripped all over and soon enough my toes would start showing through my shoes. Quite honestly, I didn't give a damn if any of these idiots in town saw me like this. They were losers; slaves to mediocrity. I walked into the bodega and grabbed a tall boy of Budweiser from the refrigerator. When I got to the counter I figured I might as well buy a few shooters of Evan Williams. Good ole Evan. I feel like him and I really would've gotten along. I probably had no business buying Budweiser considering how broke I was but God dammit I wanted to drink a good beer. Is that too much for a guy to ask?

Not to mention the bodega smelled like old cheese and sweaty balls. Right on the floor in front of me was a tiny cat lying on its back, purring quite loudly. I bent down and gave it a little tummy rub. It purred and ground its head into my wrist—affection. I have nothing but sex anymore.

There's no more affection, no more love. And to think that I was able to get my fix of affection from a little bodega cat scared me. I scratched the back of its ear and then it scratched me. It must've smelt my stench, or fear.

"You little fuck!" I snapped at it.

"My friend, you told me you were done drinking last week," said the man at the counter.

I always forgot the guy's fucking name. I think it was Ravi, but I didn't want to fuck it up. He was one of the few people that actually liked me. He stood staring at me, waiting to see what I'd fix my lips to say. I slammed my wallet down on the counter or, better yet, my two pieces of leather held together by a few threads.

"Well, bud," I said. "Anyone who starts drinking knows you'll never stop until you either run out of liquor or the liquor kills you," I told him. "I'm going for the second option." I pointed at the shooters of Evan Williams behind the counter and began counting out the usual \$4.21 cents I'd give him for the three drinks.

He looked at me like I was a mad man. But I didn't care because I really was a mad man. There was a time when I used to really get on myself for what these people thought about me. But as you grow older, you learn more. And once you learn more, you think more and once you start thinking a lot, you really start to see the world for how fake it is. It's a charade, a fucking game—the big club. The big club that you and I aren't welcome in.

I made the transaction and walked out of the bodega. Ravi or Kavi or whatever the fuck his name is didn't have anything else to say to me, and I didn't have any more to say to him. So, I immediately devoured two shooters, leaving the third for lunch time. After walking a few blocks, it dawned on me. I got so enticed by the liquor that I totally forgot to buy what I left my motel room for—the morning paper.

I got back to my room around two because I made a wrong turn on my way back to the bodega to get the paper and ended up inside some shitty little dive bar. The bartender seemed to want to fuck me, but she was old and fat. Sometimes I can lower my standards to have some fun, but I couldn't find it in myself to make an exception for her—she was hideous. I like me a woman with some class. She had on red lipstick that would drive any sane man away. Not to mention the extra make-up all over her forehead and under her eyes to hide her wrinkles. She looked like a beat-up clown. I never appreciated a woman who over-did her make-up. Make-up, in my opinion, was fucking pointless. It was as if everyone went and got afraid of growing old like it wasn't a part of life. No matter how

much make-up a woman puts on, you can always see her for who she really is the moment words start flying out of her mouth. Don't get me wrong, I'm no pretty boy myself, but my smooth words and style make up for my beer belly and my crooked nose.

I had a new voicemail; this was a big deal considering no one ever called me unless I owed them money or if somebody died. It was Bianca, a woman I used to mess around with a few months back. She was a Puerto Rican chick I met at a dive one night and shacked up with for a few months. She was most definitely a gem. Gorgeous ass, nice legs, and a heart of gold. I've realized now that having gorgeous legs or a gorgeous ass isn't anything special; there are millions of women with those assets. But that heart—that heart of gold only comes around every so often. I mean, the woman used to bring me breakfast in bed for fuck's sake. Bianca really never did anything wrong for me to end things with her but hiding the fact that I was an unemployed, self-loathing, starving artist started becoming too much of a chore. I'm not the type of man who's afraid to show the world who he really is, but there was something about her that made me want to hide myself. I felt guilty. The woman was *too good* for me, so I broke it off. What a shame it is when a man makes a decision with the head of his dick rather than with his actual head.

Growing up, my father always told me to stay away from Latinas for this same reason. "You'll fall in love and they'll take everything you got. Your money, your heart, and your soul," he'd tell me. Then: "An Italian woman, as crazy as she may be, will never let you down. She'll love you till the end of time and will always have a hot plate waiting for you when you come home every night." Some philosophy he had. He divorced my mother a year after that conversation. She was Italian.

Unfortunately, I didn't heed his advice. I made the mistake, and now this bitch was stuck on me like a fucking tick—sucking the life and blood out of me even though there wasn't much left.

I made a drink and sat on the end of my bed listening to her voicemail: "Jackson, I haven't heard from you in a long time. I hope you're okay. You always told me you're a 'broken man' but I want to be the woman to fix that. You have a huge heart. If only you'd quit being so hard on yourself, you'd realize it. I miss you, and I'd really love to see—"

I cut off the machine and grabbed my cigarettes. I could hear the tears being held back in her voice. Fuck. Half of me really wanted to see her, but the other half had no desire. This was my life—a game of right and wrong, except there was a devil on each of my shoulders. It had been a long time

since an angel came to talk to me. I couldn't let Bianca see me like this. You may think she'd turn around and run away once she saw what was behind my motel room door, but she had the kind of heart where she'd probably take me back to her place to bathe and feed me. That's embarrassment I could not bear. So I left her a message inviting her over at 7pm. Little did she know I wouldn't be at my room when she arrived; instead I'd be annihilated in a pool hall or bar somewhere, maybe getting into a fist fight or meeting some bitch. Bianca's kindness terrified me. It constantly made me second guess myself, and it made me think I was being set up and that through all the amazing moments and memories one day I'd wake up and she'd be gone.

I really had a problem on my hands. I'm a fucked-up man—a fucked-up man with vices. There are a lot of people like me, and the only thing that separates me from them is that they have a lot of money and I'm broke. Being a degenerate isn't frowned upon as much when you can support your habits and keep the ship afloat.

It was now a quarter to three, and the liquor was starting to make me drowsy. I decided I'd take a nap. My alarm was set for 6:30 PM; that way I'd have a full half-hour to get out of my room before Bianca came by.

At 7:00 PM Bianca knocked on my door. And for ten minutes she probably stood there expecting me to answer. I was such an asshole, but it was necessary. After years and years of being a self-loathing prick, I had forgotten how to act otherwise. I was in no position to have any type of serious relationship nor begin a family, and I knew that's what she was looking for. The poor woman was looking for it in the wrong man, but she was still hell-bent on making me hers.

I checked out of the room as soon as I woke up from my nap. Something dawned on me while I packed up my things. To move away, I needed a change of scenery. Halfway to the bar, I changed my mind about going there to drink. Honestly, I didn't feel like sitting in there looking at all the sorry sons of bitches like myself drinking and complaining like a bunch of whiny pricks. I decided a nice fifth of Evan and some beers by the river would do me just fine.

The sun was starting to set in the west, and although I was facing east, the view was still nice. There was a tree stump near the edge of the water calling my name. I took a load off and took a hit off the Evan, then I cracked open a beer and took in the view. The towering city skyscrapers seemed to wave at me, but I didn't wave back.

The sunset made me think of this one time during dinner long ago

when I was about sixteen years old. My younger brother Terry was ranting and raving about a sunset he witnessed while throwing the football around on the beach with a few of his buddies. My father immediately shot him down.

“If you weren’t throwing no football around, I’d think you were a damn queer. Only pussies and queers got time to waste watching the damn sunset,” my father said to him. “No man is wasting his time doing that. It happens every day; it ain’t nothing special.”

I remember Terry sitting at the table holding tears back and just staring into his lap. He hated my father. I never got it as bad as he did, but even when I did, I wouldn’t take my father’s shit. I’d stand my ground (and end up catching a beating). Dad never said anything about it before he died, but I think deep down, he respected it.

To me, the sunset was just a reminder that no matter how shitty your day was, you got a fresh start in the morning. It was the last beautiful thing you’d see until the darkness came. Then it was time to sin. Something about this particular sunset was special, though. It was colorful and more vibrant than usual. It was probably because of the heavy rain that ensued the past two days. The oranges and yellows in the sky bounced off the windows of the skyscrapers and made them all appear as if they were glowing gold. Figures, the big buildings downtown in the Financial District were glowing gold. I sat on the stump, drunk, staring out into the sky, thinking of a simpler time when I lived a more *normal* life.

I had a family: a son named Robert and a wife named Trish. We were happy; *I was happy*. Complacency was my downfall. I was painting full-time while Trish worked for a law firm. The two of us met a few years prior at an art show in the East Village. Trish was finishing up law school at Columbia, and I was the typical knee-jerk liberal artist trying to change the world. She was fascinated by one of my portraits hanging on the wall. It was my own take on the Death of Socrates. An abstract portrait of him drinking the hemlock while being sentenced to death. My twenties were a strange time. Trish asked me questions about it and eventually noticed that it was mine. We hit it off, and a short year later, I married her. Her complexion, her smile—that face kept me prisoner forever. Some would say we rushed into things and maybe we did, but I never saw it that way. That first year was something magical; she became my best friend. Up until meeting Trish, I really had never been friends with many women in my life. The only ones I spent time with were out of pure sexual attraction. With Trish, the sex was the least I cared about. I loved her company, her personality, and

everything else in between. There was a strong connection between us. She made me start to think about the idea of marriage and maybe that it's not about marrying the person you love to fuck, but rather marrying your best friend and letting everything else fall into place.

One of my close friends, Chuck, once told me, "I look at a woman and I think do I hate her already or is she worth the wait? Because if I hate her already, then I might as well fuck her and get it over with. But if I don't, then I'll wait and end up fucking her and hating her anyway." I used to always disagree because I had more faith in women.

Trish and I had our son Robert about two years after we married. For a freelance artist I was doing well. I had money coming in almost every month, and with her salary at the law firm we lived comfortably in a little house in the suburbs. I had it all. And just when you have it all, it's time for you to lose, since you can't win forever. I began painting less and less, and soon enough I took up a new art—drinking. I'd drink all day while she worked, and all night while she slept. I'd throw fits when she disagreed with me, and I'd constantly threaten her if she tried to leave me. It was as if we loved nothing more than dancing in the light and one day I just decided to turn the switch off. It was chaos from there on.

Growing up, the whole idea of a family and the white picket fence seemed so lame to me, but as I've grown older I've realized that the joke's on me. And then one day, I woke up to an empty house. No Trish. No Robert. Just emptiness—empty bottles, empty drawers, and my empty heart. Since that day, I've never gotten attached to anyone. I fear that as soon as we get close, I'll drive them away. There was a point I considered getting my shit back together and winning them over, but my vices got the best of me. I became a man of nothing but mere words and no action—and I became comfortable with a solitary life. The two of them were somewhere living out their lives, and I'd never again be a part of it. Money stopped coming in. Eventually I went on to lose the house, too, but I was okay with it. A house for a family is no good without the ones you love.

I finished my beer and looked across the river at the city. Should I move there? Shit, I'm struggling in Hoboken; the city wouldn't be much different. It wouldn't cost much to get there either, considering I live across the Hudson and it was my type of place. Full of bums just like me: the dreamers who were broken and never got fixed. The decision only made me feel more confident about sunsets. It was the one time during the day I felt I could make a decision without second guessing myself, and as the sun continued to set behind me, I stood up and walked to the PATH train station.

Hammered off beer and liquor, I stumbled down the stairs and onto the platform. This was me. I made sudden and abrupt choices that dictated so much in my life and this immediate move to New York was one of them. I stripped myself of my expectations and spent the last of my money on a one-way PATH train ticket. Beneath the roaring streets of downtown Hoboken, New Jersey, in the humid and repulsive PATH station, I waited for the train, broke and fresh ready for new humble beginnings.

Next stop, 33rd Street, Manhattan.

# Excerpt from *Residue*

Noelle Maticke

Within the hour, Darren and I had torn apart my room, recklessly balling up my clothes and stuffing toiletries into a duffle I haven't touched in years.

"How about this?" Darren held up an old Beach Boys t-shirt which was three sizes too big.

All I could do was gaze at the cracked, faded logo stuck to the paper-thin cotton. The ache in my chest made me swallow, over and over, until Darren finally folded it neatly and dropped it in the bag. He pushed up the sleeves of his grey Henley, knelt down on the shabby carpet, and zippered the duffle. My eyes dry—I blinked hard and sat on my bed. I took one last glance, then focused on him. "That shirt was my dad's."

All Darren did was nod, his gaze down deep in thought, though his tapping foot said otherwise. His brown hair appeared auburn in the dimly lit room.

I reminisced about my bedroom as melancholia settled in the form of a lump in my throat. I nervously gnawed my cheek, remembering lounging in ridiculous positions on my bed. I would prop my feet up on the headboard as I read or talked on the scuffed landline phone that rested on my night table, the cord twisted into deformed ringlets. My eyes bore into the same spot of my bedroom until everything around me vanished.

Anxiety propelled me through a fog of memories—memories of my dad and I playing Scrabble in bed when I caught the flu and how he'd always tease me, placing words I didn't know. I recalled my mom tip-toeing across the tan carpet, rubbing my back and waking me in the early hours during the summer. Each morning the air was crisp but warm as I felt her soft good mornings against my ear.

My breathing turned shallow and quick, the reminiscences becoming distant and out of reach; I knew I'd miss the smell of burning vanilla candles lingering in the breeze that billowed my curtains and made them dance. These memories were locked away in a safe place, but they still tickled my brain late at night, causing me to toss and turn in my sheets. This light, fluttery room suddenly grew sunken and dreary, but still faintly smelled



of vanilla masked by the scent of stale sleep. Darren slung the duffle over his broad shoulder and waited in the doorway.

The ancient mattress' springs whined as I leaned down to pull on my boots and stare at the worn carpet where the dense piles were matted from my standing in the same spot every morning. I hastily tied the laces of my trainers together, keeping them in a pair, and I opted for boots since they'd be too heavy to carry around. An ominous aura floated around the room and my thoughts wandered. They made my head spin and enveloped my reality. My gaze locked on a small golden frame on my night table. It contained a photo of my parents and myself, faded in some spots from the rays of every morning's sunrise.

Darren turned off the painted porcelain lamp that sat dangerously close to the edge of my dresser, his dark eyes begging me to hurry. His cushioned steps on the carpet trailed out my bedroom door, but before I could follow, I grabbed the dainty frame and pushed it down into my pocket, deep down, so it wouldn't fall out.

When I walked down the front steps, I thought twice and locked the door. Something about turning the lock made me think everything in the house was protected—nothing would be touched or bothered—an eerily still and dead structure made only of memories now.

Darren had already started his station wagon; the passenger door was ajar and the engine rattled in the dusk of the street. He was beckoning me to hurry. I jogged across the front lawn, careful not to slip as the toes of my boots turned a darker brown and became wet from the sprinklers that quenched the lawn's thirst earlier. I slung my backpack in and plopped myself down onto the passenger seat. Darren's foot was already on the gas before I could shut the door or look back.

We spent a good chunk of the night driving, and Darren and I were beginning to feel worn out and stiff. It was past ten o'clock and our stomachs were protesting against adrenaline. Darren had pulled off I-90 in Perrysburg, Ohio, finally showing his mortality through his rumbling stomach and bloodshot eyes. We agreed on the least popular of the motels in the area to stay out of the public eye. The roof of the building was a dark, crusty red to match the bricks. Old rusted doors lined the broken sidewalk and led to a smaller brick building adorned with a sign that read LOBBY in sputtering luminous lights and a smaller sign underneath that indicated vacancy.

Darren parked the car in a corner of the motel's cracked lot. There were no street lights shining on us and no view from the main road.

“Keep your head down,” Darren murmured under his breath as he pulled his baseball cap down over my eyes.

“Why? Darren I—” I was only halfway out of the passenger side when he walked away.

He went to the back of the banged-up station wagon and I followed. “I don’t see why I have to wear this.” He started to pull out the duffle I packed earlier, ignoring my comments. “*Nobody’s* here. It’s an old motel, Darren.”

We both panned the parking lot nonchalantly as he closed the rusted trunk.

He shoved his hands into the back pockets of his worn jeans. “Anyone involved with the Astral File could be in there, Andie.” He kept his voice low but made sure his tone was hard. “You know they’re looking for you.” He leaned against the wood paneled car door. “They took your dad.”

“I know.” My voice sounded harsh as I grabbed my bag from him, my gaze on the black gravel pavement. Fatigue was threatening my temperament and my bones felt like concrete, solid and numb. With fear and anxiety both taking turns, I hadn’t been able to sleep the entire ride.

Locking the station wagon’s doors, not once but twice, and surveying our surroundings, we agreed it was safe and made our way to the motel lobby. I noticed Darren taking strange precautions, like locking the doors more than once, switching license plates he collected in the trunk of the wagon to throw off any followers, and this stupid baseball cap he forced me to wear.

We entered the dilapidated lobby. My only view was of the broken black and white tile floor as we walked towards the abused concierge desk. The floor was cracked and worn out where most of the traffic came, from the automatic sliding doors to the clunky and highly glossed wooden counter. I pulled the worn gray cap further down as I listened to Darren’s conversation with the attendant whose cologne was cheap and too strong. The dump apparently had a working hot tub and thirty-eight cable channels. All I wanted to do was curl up in a bed, no matter how grimy, and close my eyes.

“Come on.” Darren touched the small of my back, leading me away.

I walked with him out of the building and to our room a short way down a sidewalk. I pulled my arm free from his fingers and adjusted my backpack on my shoulder. He frowned and walked a little bit quicker then stopped when he got to our door—number seventeen. He slid the key in, jiggled it, and leaned against the door as he turned the knob. He had to use extra force to push the old dented metal door open.

I sighed in relief when I saw the two queen-sized beds from the doorway. After I dropped my bag on one of the armchairs by the radiator, I crawled achingly into the closest bed and stretched out. The pillow against my cheek felt cool from the air-conditioning vent above. Darren's bag made a heavy thud on the flattened shag rug that still maintained its crisp cream color. My duffle slumped against a banged-up mini-fridge topped with an out-of-date microwave. Darren opened cabinets, rummaged through the bathroom, walked back to the front door and locked it, then surveilled the parking lot from the window and pulled the bent metal blinds shut. The sound made me wince against the pillow. Darren's dark eyebrows were scrunched up in thought; dark shadows painted the creases of his forehead.

"What?" I sat up.

Darren waved me away as he walked over to the other bed and sat down. I searched for the television remote, then turned it on to make the room seem less eerie. I flipped onto my stomach and mindlessly clicked through game shows and Hispanic soap operas.

I looked over to Darren, his head in his hands. His golden-brown hair flipped up at the ends and his skin was slightly pale. He was exhausted, but I couldn't say anything, not yet. His mood was too unpredictable; I couldn't tell if he was angry or just grumpy from lack of rest.

"I'm gonna get something to eat," Darren muttered. As he slowly stood up, the bedsprings groaned. Darren's voice was hard. "Don't open this door for anyone, I mean it. Keep it locked and don't open the blinds."

"Alright," I whispered.

He nodded, content with my position and surroundings and walked toward the door. He back-peddled and planted a light but firm kiss on my forehead. I don't remember opening my eyes after that.

It must have been only an hour later, but it already felt like morning. What woke me was a consistent annoyance bouncing around in my head, like an alarm clock. I was still in the fog of deep sleep, struggling to push myself fully awake.

There was a distant tapping echoing off the yellowed floral-papered walls in the motel room. It was a whisper of a tap, repetitive and soft.

I opened one eye very slowly, my vision blurred from my lashes.

The house I lived in growing up always made weird noises—the tapping usually came from our ancient heater. Old buildings with dripping and leaky faucets, screechy rusted door hinges, and cracking floors came with their own unique odds and ends, just like this motel. The television sat in a makeshift plywood cabinet stained black; the volume was off, and

the screen depicted black and white fuzz. Lines traveled up and down, pushing through the static and humming low. I pushed myself up from the bed, weary and sleepy-eyed. I had fallen asleep on the remote and probably pressed on the buttons by accident, tossing and turning; something I had always done before. My dad used to wake me up at night when he noticed light coming from the living room. The tapping started again. It was faint but loud enough to get on my nerves.

I sat up all the way in the bed and looked around the room; the small lamp in the corner was still on, sending a warm yellow shine of light across the room. Darren must have been gone for almost an hour. I patted the duvet around me, reaching for my cell phone. My heart dropped into my stomach as I recalled that we both had tossed our phones away earlier. They weren't safe for either us right now. With no sort of communication to reach Darren, I felt alone and helpless.

The tapping grew louder, like fingertips drumming on a table top.

It made me shiver and I curled the satin comforter around me. I closed my eyes and tried to block out the noise. Though Darren told me not to move the blinds, I figured I should glance between them to see if anyone was out there. Just as I was about to get up and look out the motel window, I froze. The clawing grew louder now and it was coming from inside the room.

Cold panic settled in the pit of my stomach, like I had swallowed an ice cube. Scratching trailed along the wall in front of me. It sounded like someone scraping their fingernails along a chalk board; I winced as goosebumps covered my skin. My thoughts went straight to the unthinkable, what I needed to block out, what every person denounces right away when something unnatural happens. Nothing in here but me. Those five words I repeated, over and over and over.

The fingernails scratched against the heavily polished headboard of the bed and I jumped, cringing. Now I was sure this wasn't some quirk that came with the old motel room.

The scratching stopped, and silence held the room, my heartbeat pulsing in my ears. I began to feel relief settle in my chest and I slumped on the bed, hugging my arms to myself. A deep grumble hissed through the air, so low I could barely hear it.

"Go away," I whispered over and over. The scratching was harsh on the wall.

A voice growled as it floated around the room, like puffs of smoke dissipating in the air. The scratching moved across the covers on the bed

and I saw indents in the cheap satin. Sharp grooves, pressured and unnatural, appeared on the slept-in sheets. The hair on the back of my neck rose.

“Stop, please stop,” I begged, barely audible in the empty room.

I stayed still when the scratching ceased, then closed my eyes and drank in the silence. Then, faintly, I heard slow scraping behind me, but when I turned around it went away, like it was a figment of my imagination. I moved across the bed and let my feet hang down, but froze as I felt cold fingertips, sharp talon-like nails, gliding down my back. I was too scared to move, too scared to breathe, let alone scream.

Then everything moved in slow motion.

The jingle of keys outside sent my heartbeat flying. My pulse was the loudest sound in the room; I was convinced even Darren could hear it outside the door.

The fingers swept up the back of my neck then down to the waist of my jeans. They scratched circles and other shapes on my back. I was petrified, and fear solidified in my nerves.

I heard keys being dropped on concrete; Darren’s muffled swear.

I began to cry, overwhelmed with fear, tears leaking from my eyes.

I barely heard the key being pushed into the lock. When the door opened, the scent of sweet grease puffed into the room, along with a cool breeze. When Darren stepped inside, his face turned from relief to absolute panic when he saw the expression on my wet face. My vision was blurry, but I could feel my hair being pulled just as claws etched my collarbone. I tried to call out Darren’s name, but all that came out was a croaked whimper.

All in one motion, Darren threw what he was holding down onto the heavily used wooden table next to the doorway, slammed the door with his boot-clad foot, and then moved next to me. He gently jostled me to the other bed, the rough movement forcing me out of deep thought. I blinked hard. I was too dazed to comprehend what had actually happened, as I could still feel the fingers lingering on my back. All that was left were indentations and raised, red welts on my back, chest, and arms. It was my imagination; it had to be.

Subconsciously, I rubbed the back of my neck, lightly, barely feathering my skin with my fingertips. Breathing deeply, I began to feel my muscles slowly loosen up. I stared at my arms, at my hands, my fingers, my nails—daintily painted, but chipped.

There was a dip in the bed a few moments later. “It’s gone, Andie.”

I nodded, numb to everything he was saying. I could still feel the tracing on my back; I sat up, letting the feeling go, forcing it off my skin.

“What happened?” Darren asked me in the gentlest voice.

I didn't really want to say anything. There was nothing I *could* say. I sat for minutes on end—processing. The sensation of nails dragging along my back started to fade as I felt myself begin to warm up. I felt safe again.

If Darren hadn't come at the time he did, I don't know what would've happened. I slowly opened my eyes, blinked to set my vision straight and glanced at Darren. He was staring at the spot where I was sitting when he walked in. He was angry, but when he turned to me, all I saw was pained relief. Sitting up, I repeated the scene in my head and propped up my head with my hand. I knew Darren wanted to know.

He waited patiently, not forcing eye contact, as he watched me fidget, lost and deep in thought. I had to say my sentence in my head first; over and over, after almost five different constructions of words, I spat out, “Darren, what the hell?”

My voice cracked on *hell*.

He slid a little closer to me, his thigh touching mine, “Tell me what happened?”

I looked at my hands again, picking off the pink nail polish. “I heard something in the room,” I breathed. “It was like an impatient drum of fingers at first; I thought it was the radiator.”

He urged me on; he already knew what happened next. He knew I wouldn't keep talking but encouraged me to go through the motions. I sat still, silent and tense, trying to relax each muscle. My mind was blank, blocking the events of the night. The blank black space behind my eyes swallowed my anxiety.

I never felt Darren get up; he was delving into a soft paper bag that sat on the table by the window. It had grotesque red lettering printed all over it, along with yellow arches. The dingy microwave in the corner exhaled an aroma of fast food hamburgers. The salty, greasy sweetness filled the air and my stomach growled.

“I put the shakes in the freezer; they should be fine for after dinner,” Darren stated, as if I had a preference, but in reality, I'd down that milk shake whether it was frozen thick or lukewarm and runny.

I felt a gnawing hunger for the first time all night. Something about it makes you not feel physically empty, but mentally unsatisfied, an extreme void which encourages the nagging of emptiness.

As I was dipping a fry into my chocolate shake, Darren was the first to lay down on the bed, completely drained out and I sat perched on a wooden chair next to the small table we moved from the window towards

the TV. I dumped the rest of my fries into the shake and crawled in next to him. The warmth of his shoulder against mine was more comforting than I could have hoped for.

That night, I slept soundly. I woke up when the sunlight peaked through the metal blinds as they slowly swayed back and forth from an inconsistent stream of air emitted from the vent above the window. It must have only been around six in the morning; I groaned lightly. I stretched my arm out on impulse to pat the duvet for my phone, careful not to disturb Darren. After a couple seconds of being in an early morning trance, I remembered my phone was gone, for good, in the trashcan of a park in Galesburg. Darren wasn't in the bed next to me. I pushed myself up onto my elbows and surveyed the room around me. My muscles relaxed when I heard the water running in the bathroom, like a muffled rain storm behind the wall.

I sat up straight and crossed my aching legs as I rubbed my face, trying to wake myself up completely. The sunlight cast geometric beams on the wall next to the bed. The milky faux-satin covers on the other bed were still made, partially neat, but crinkled and still tucked under the mattress.

The room smelled sweet with sleep and my throat ached. Just as I dropped my head in my hands, Darren walked out of the bathroom, his chestnut hair dark and still dripping water, not bothering to use the coarse towel to dry it. His hair curled up at the ends, the neck of his t-shirt damp from his hair dripping on the towel draped over his shoulder.

His heavy footsteps, mostly muted by the carpet, stopped. "Did you get some sleep?" His voice was rough, raspy.

"I did, and I had no nightmares, thank God." I met his eyes and finally noticed: they were completely bloodshot, and the puffy violet bags appeared painful to the touch. He looked like he had two shiners.

"I know I look like crap." Darren tousled his hair with the towel.

I was suddenly concerned. "You didn't sleep last night, did you?"

Darren shrugged his broad shoulders in an I-can't-help-it way. "I had a lot on my mind, I guess." He paused. "I'm worried they caught up with us. They're not going to stop, Andie; they won't call it quits until they find you." His voice lowered, and he whispered, "We need to go somewhere safe before they get too close—isolate ourselves."

I closed my eyes and silence filled the room, drowning us in our own overwhelming anxieties. "We should leave, okay?" Guilt washed over me. "You need sleep, Darren. You should've woken me up, you know."

Darren stared at me. "You finally got to sleep without any sort of paralysis or nightmare waking you up. How many days has it been since

you finally got a decent night's sleep, Andie?" He turned away from me and walked over to where our duffels were. "I couldn't do that."

I stared at the blank TV, the distorted room reflected in its black screen, the messy covers, grey satin waves surrounding my body, and then me, worn but full of life. My golden hair, knotted and indented from the ponytail it had been in all of yesterday, was what made me turn away, embarrassed and vulnerable.

"I'm taking a shower," I muttered and slid out of the bed. I padded across the stiff carpet and locked myself in the hot steamy bathroom. Pink and baby-blue tile covered the small room, accented with a matching pink tub, sink, and toilet. Thin white towels hung off a rod on the door.

The warm water sputtered from the showerhead when I turned the tarnished knob and I stepped in, immediately underwhelmed by motel plumbing. This thought made me look to my bare feet standing in the mildew of the porcelain tub with a ring of grime halfway up the sides. Immediately my stomach churned, and I closed my eyes tight as I lathered up my hair and scrubbed my body clean.

I recoiled at the feel of the waxy layer left on my skin and the "fresh" scent, like baby powder and synthetic flowers. I longed for my mom's rose and chamomile soap that sat in a small white dish on the corner of our bath tub at home. Little petals would expose themselves from the soap and fall out every now and then. I always treasured the beauty of the pink suds and scent. The rusted shower head screamed at me as I turned it off. I swallowed the lump in my throat hard and could feel my face getting hot from the swelling of emotion in my chest. I needed to relax somehow. And God, I needed to shave my legs.

The small bathroom became humid and I quickly wrapped myself up in a rough white towel. I forcefully pulled on my jeans—they kept getting caught on my damp legs. I took a smaller towel from the woven basket on top of the grotesque bubble gum pink toilet and twisted my hair up into it.

I felt refreshed as I opened the door to a gust of cool air. Darren immediately stopped pacing when his eyes met mine.

"Stop thinking so much; talk to me about this." I motioned to him, his posture completely tense and rigid. His chocolate brown eyes bore into mine so deeply, it felt too intimate of a moment and made me look away, suddenly irrationally self-conscious.

"Andie, I can just feel the distance between us and them closing each



minute we sit in this room.” Darren opened his mouth to continue, closed it, then took a deep breath and sat down on the bed.

“I know, I know. Let’s get out of here.” I brushed my fingers along the welted lines that ran down the back of my neck, still unsettled from the memory.

Pulling the towel off my hair and tossing it on the thrift store arm chair across from the bathroom, I rubbed my fingers across my scalp, rumpling my hair from wet to damp. After we both had our shoes on, I shook the covers of the bed, making sure I hadn’t left any trace of myself behind, and as I did, I caught a glimpse of the crappy, barely-lit digital clock on the night table. It was 6:42 in the morning. The door screeched open and sunlight poured into the room, making dust dance in its wake. The deepness of my sigh made Darren turn around as he lugged both duffle bags through the dented door frame, which he added to when his got stuck and had to force it through. I tossed the room keys on the over-waxed wooden table by the window, the rattled thud echoing in my mind as I shut the door.

The station wagon was still sitting where we left it, dried mud caked on the tires and splashes up the sides. It looked sad, almost tired. Darren walked to the driver’s side and glanced over his shoulder; I did the same, and when he nodded to me, I opened the door quickly and slid inside. The vinyl seats were cold, but much more comforting than the motel room. I propped my feet up on the dashboard and let my head fall back onto the torn headrest as Darren started the engine.

Hours passed while we cut through different states and towns along the Canadian border. My body begged me to stretch and walk around, but we needed the miles. Out the window, a large, blue sign stated, “Pennsylvania Welcomes You.” Out of the corner of my eye I saw Darren tense up; his shoulders went up slightly and he held the steering wheel so tight his knuckles turned white.

Something was wrong.

I turned to look outside the steamed-up window. Even when I wiped it with the sleeve of my sweatshirt, the world was still unclear. Fog was settling around the trees that lined the edge of the road; the bright sun behind the clouds illuminated the highest leaves and turned them yellow. Ahead, there was a dirt path cut out in the median that separated both directions of the interstate. It was blurry through the windshield and fog laced the pavement, damp like a black river. Darren eased his boot-clad foot off the

gas, letting the wagon slow down as we made our way through the weather. The road was slick and small puddles sent rain water splashing up when we drove through them. I turned in my seat and glanced at Darren; he was staring straight ahead, jaw locked, temple pulsing. Everything that happened next was in slow motion.

A horn blared.

Lights shone into the windows of our car, bright and intimidating. Darren jerked the wheel to the left, hoping the wagon would miraculously sputter across the wet pavement, away from the truck coming towards us. Tires screeched as the windshield shattered. Darren threw his arm across my chest, holding me tight against the passenger seat. I flinched as bits and pieces of safety glass flew into my hair, scraping my cheeks and neck.

Our car had been rammed by a heavy, black SUV.

I was violently heaved into the passenger door and my head hit the window. Pain shot through me as I struggled to face Darren. When I looked up, the wagon smashed into the median and jolted us, and the seatbelt dug into my skin. Darren resembled a rag doll; he was thrown into the door, head smashing the window. We weren't done moving yet.

All of a sudden, the air bags expelled, and I was powerfully shoved back into my seat. All I heard was crunching, crunching of metal on metal and metal on concrete. A loud wailing noise scraped solidly on the wet pavement. Sparks rose.

Tears started streaming down my face.

The station wagon was being pushed against the railing by the still moving SUV; its front hood was crushed into itself. I tried to move around the deflated air bag, smearing blood on the white nylon as I pushed it away with my forearm. I only caught a glimpse of Darren next to me, whose eyes were steady, trying to calm me down. Blood trailed down his cheek, the tips of his hair wet and congealed. I whimpered when he shut his eyes.

Everything was suddenly silent and too still. I looked down at myself, bloody from a gash in my right arm. I felt my head throb as something warm trickled down my neck. I didn't want to take in the scene around me, but my eyes scanned the broken car.

I craned my head to the left. "Darren?" My voice cracked.

Then, pain overtook me.

"No, no, no," I panicked.

My head spun and the world around fractured as sirens wailed in the distance.

Tires screeched to a stop on the wet pavement. Men clothed in black

body armor walked around the station wagon and a policeman peered through the window. Their radios blurted incoherent commands. I began to feel overwhelmingly dizzy. The passenger door opened, even though it was misshapen, crushed as if a giant had squeezed it. Someone was calling out for paramedics. Chopped up radio sequences sputtered from walkie-talkies, loud and obnoxious. My head pounded, and I heard my pulse pumping. I felt rough hands yank the locked seatbelt around me and I opened my eyes to the driver's side door missing and an unconscious Darren being pulled out.

"Andie!" Darren's panic made me jump. "Shit, wake up!"

His hand was heavy on my shoulder while he shook me from my nightmare. He'd pulled the wagon over on the side of the road; trees surrounded us and dirt from the woods floated up in puffs as cars passed by.

Gingerly, I ran my fingers over my cheeks. Fresh tears ran down my face and I looked to Darren, "What happened?"

"Andie, you were convulsing." He paused. His shirt was clean, wrinkled but blood-free. "You started shaking really bad and you were crying and mumbling." His eyes were wide with worry. "I've been trying to wake you out of it for a while now."

I nodded as I stared out of the smooth glass windshield, intact.

"It was just a nightmare," I whispered to myself. "It was the accident." I stared at the faint scar above his left eyebrow. "We were hit by an SUV, and—" I swallowed hard, eyes wide in terror.

That's what suddenly caused Darren to turn the engine back on. He didn't look at me, just stared, wide-eyed, at his calloused hands on the steering wheel. "I think we should rest. Like actually rest somewhere safe."

Darren slowly pulled away from the dirt inlet and continued on the road. I didn't relax the rest of the ride, and we didn't talk. The only thing Darren said was that we'd be driving to a house in upstate New York and that it was safe because the man who lived there, Jackson, knew my dad. I counted the hours, and nine of them gripped us tight in silence. I was completely numb from exhaustion and Darren was on edge and determined. He was tapping on the steering wheel unnervingly, constantly glancing in the rearview mirror to check if anyone was following us. We drove for a long time, only stopping once for a bathroom break, crappy gas station coffee, and to refuel the wagon. Out of the actual context of being on the run, the scenery was pretty nice.

We drove through rolling hills and wooded roads that gave the old wagon hell. But watching the slow sunset over Oneida Lake as we drove

north on 81 was the highlight. We parked the wagon along the shore at around 7:30 in the evening to stretch our legs. We weren't necessarily talking yet, but we silently agreed it wouldn't hurt to take a break. The sun was cresting over the dark water and trees were illuminated across the lake—as if the sun was a drop of watercolor, dripping down the paper and fading into a gorgeous range of bright yellow, orange, and deep rich pink. It gently floated down the cloudless sky into the water. Darren and I sat against the dense leaf-filled trees that grew tall close to the shore of Oneida, taking in the beauty. It felt like the sun was setting only for us. We leaned against each other, appreciating the moment of serenity. A while later, the hum of motorboats and kids splashing in the lake dissipated. Dusk settled around us, cool and damp, and we decided to leave.

As we walked back to the car, our shoes crunching on the gravel parking lot, Darren said, "Jackson's place is only another three hours."

We both climbed into our seats, "Dinner for the road then?" I shut the wagon door with a thud and locked it, out of habit.

"Guess so," Darren said, turning his key and smirking. The wagon rumbled as he pulled out of the parking lot.

Darren turned onto Interstate 81, and we cruised along until we spotted a mainstream fast food place. Ten minutes later I was dipping fries into a chocolate shake for the second night in a row and didn't regret it at all. Darren gulped his down inhumanly fast, which made me raise an eyebrow at him; he replied with a loud slurp, indicating his shake was finished. I giggled when he popped open the lid with his thumb and let out a disappointed sigh.

I dangled the cherry from my shake in front of him when we came to a red light. It was coated with a whipped cream film.

"Don't tease me, Andie." His voice was serious.

"I'm not!" I laughed and let him bite it from the stem as his eyes stayed locked on the road. "I don't like them anyway."

"You're weird."

I opened the windows a crack, careful not to let the car get too cold. The car smelled of grease and crisp night air. The next couple hours passed by quicker than I realized as I counted the street lights along I-81 and dozed against the window.

I sat up when Darren told me we were there. But when I looked out the window, I didn't see anything, just the wagon's high beams exposing the dry brown bark of the closely knitted trees which encompassed the house. The wheels crunched upon the gravel, shooting some pebbles into

the woods and causing an owl to hoot and fly away into the night, rustling the leaves. A large white barn house came into view, with a small lantern lighting up the front porch. To the right, in the distance, stood a red silo; two tractors were parked along the chipped white picket fence. The driveway was matted down grass and damp mud, which forced Darren to step on the gas a little harder to get over the small hill that led to the house.

As he turned off the ignition, a stocky man bounded out the ripped screen door wearing soft worn denim pants and an untucked plaid flannel. The man's hair was salt and pepper grey, but his face was young and welcoming.

"That's Jackson." Darren's voice was quiet as he rubbed my knuckles with his thumb.

Jackson made his way to us and the lantern's light above the door faded, quickly covering him in shadow. Darren got out of the car and shook Jackson's hand as he closed the door with his hip. They talked quietly, and Darren handed him his duffle and tossed mine over his own shoulder.

I slid out from the vinyl seat and tried to quietly close the squeaky door. Carefully walking along the muddy ground, I heard a soft whine come from the porch, then saw a swish of a yellow blonde tail. When I walked towards the men, I noticed a golden retriever standing protectively next to her owner.

"You must be Andie." Jackson warmed up to me and put a large rough hand on my arm. "You have your dad's eyes."

# Another Morning

ANGELA SCIRE

I woke up to the touch of my mother's soft hand on my back. She sat on the edge of my bed and patted me gently. "Come on, bud. Time to go," she whispered, followed by a sigh that seemed bigger than those of the days before. Just because we had been getting up this early for the past five years didn't mean we weren't exhausted. I sat up and stretched out my back. My mother stood in the dim light with a faint smile that tried too hard.

Her daily question: "How'd you sleep?"

"Fine." I let out a yawn that seemed to last forever. "Go ahead; I'll be right down," I said.

She ran her hand through my tangled hair and looked me in the eyes. It was the first time she realized I was just as accustomed to this as she was.

"I'll be downstairs. Meet me in the car," she said when she finally got up and walked out of the room.

My toys were scattered all over the floor. I was always the typical messy little boy. My desk and dresser were buried in books, games, toys, and Captain Crunch boxes. When I found the strength to do so, I climbed out of bed. It was a little after four in the morning, right on schedule. I put on my slippers and an overcoat, and I walked out of my room and down the stairs to the front door resting open.

My mom was already in the car, heating it up as snow fell onto the hood. I stood there and watched her for a moment. Her blank expression. I could now imagine all the old memories that she must have been thinking of when looking at the house every morning. The first day they brought me home from the hospital and carried me up the driveway. My father painting the hallway leading up the stairs just to save a few bucks. The big Christmas dinners they used to host every year in our reserved dining room with the plastic covers on all the chairs.

That particular morning, however, as I watched her from the doorway, I was only eight years old. I had no idea what she was thinking.

It was cold that morning. My toes were all curled up in my slippers to keep them from shaking. But I was in no position to complain. It wasn't like she wanted to do this anymore than I did. I walked out the door and locked it behind me with the key that she left sticking in the lock. As I made

my way down the driveway, I pushed the snow to the side with my feet, getting colder and colder with every step. There were only a few inches on the ground. But the holes in my slippers didn't help the situation.

"How many times do I have to tell you to put your boots on before we leave," my mother said once I climbed into the backseat. I ignored her and grabbed the pillow and blanket that waited for me.

"Seatbelt," she said.

I arranged the seatbelt over my waist and behind my head. Next, I pulled the blanket on top of me, and then put the pillow between my head and the door of the car. My toes finally stopped shaking as the vent on the back of the front armrest blew warm air on them. The engine shook as my mother pulled out of the driveway. It wasn't exactly what anyone would call a luxury car. The radio didn't work, and the heat blew just well enough to keep us from getting frostbite. I maneuvered my hand into my jacket pocket under the blanket. My notebook and pencil were just where I left them yesterday. I set the notebook on my lap with my pencil in hand.

My head rested on the pillow as my eyes followed the passing trees on the side of the road. It was pitch black outside. Nothing but streetlights and occasional storefronts consumed the area. I knew that if I looked closely, I would see deer in between the trees. That was always my favorite part. I stared into the darkness every single morning wondering what was living beyond what I could see. After a few minutes of no deer, I opened the small notebook and turned to the next blank page. The notebook was old with various pages spilling out of it. The eraser on my pencil was worn out so most of the pages were darkened to a grey color. Whenever my mother tried to look inside of it, I had to quickly erase most of the words. Not because I was hiding something, but because I knew it would hurt her to see the things I was thinking.

Once I counted the fourth street light, I knew we were getting close to our first stop. My mother slowed down the car and turned into a parking lot on the right. The road became bumpy and the car started to shake and sway from side to side. We pulled up to a small building with a flashing neon sign that said *Pat's Joint*. On more than one previous occasion, the letters had been broken so the words didn't make any sense. I turned my notebook to one of the first pages. Variations of the sign were listed down the page: *At's Joint*, *Pat oint*, *Pa Join*, *Pat's Jon*. My mother turned around in her seat and I quickly shut the notebook.

"I'll be right back," she said.

I nodded in response. Half of her mouth curled upward as she tried to

seem okay. But we both knew nothing was okay about this. She unbuckled and opened the door. The cold air rushed into the car and made me cringe under my blanket. My toes scrunched up once again. She shut the door behind her. I watched her walk to the front door. Snow came down harder now, sticking to the ground quickly. The wind didn't help either. The snow collided into my mother's side with a vengeance as she struggled through it. When she reached the entrance, Jack met her at the door.

I don't actually know if his name is Jack. I just call him that. I remember seeing him for the first time a few years ago and immediately thinking he looked like a pirate. He always wore a dark bandana around his head and had a tough look to him. He was missing a few teeth and he had a twitch in his left eye. He would usually close it when he spoke to people in order to keep it under control. Jack Sparrow was my favorite pirate.

Jack locked up the doors of the building and shook his head at my mother. She looked down at the ground and then back at me. After a few minutes, she nodded at Jack and then started back toward the car. I looked at the clock on the dashboard and then opened my notebook and pressed my pencil to the paper. 4:28 – *Not at Jack's*. When I looked back to the window, Jack smiled and waved to me. I hid my face behind the pillow and bowed my head. My mother got back into the car.

Our next stop came ten minutes down the road, further into town. The trees gave way to dark storefronts and apartment buildings. I always hated going into town. I had always been more of an open space kind of kid. Our backyard was my favorite place in the world. A green fence closed in a huge grass area with a swing set and slide. I played soccer almost every day after school. It was my favorite thing to do. I remember one summer my father kicked the ball right into the slide and it bounced back and hit him in the forehead. I don't think I've ever laughed so hard in my life.

My mother pulled over to a storefront with the words *Straight Up* printed on a green awning above it. I peeked out the window and watched the snow fall. I could see a few men in the building cleaning up. Two were turning chairs over onto tables as another began to close the shades of the front windows. He stopped when he saw us pull up, and I realized it was Willy. Once again, not his real name. Willy was super tall. I remember whenever I saw him I would hurt my neck looking up at him. He was about a foot taller than my mother, and she was already pretty tall. I first met Willy the morning after Christmas on this same journey. That Christmas morning, I had woken up to a giant stuffed giraffe lying underneath the tree. Giraffes were my favorite animal. I ran right up to it and gave it a



squeeze. That afternoon, when my family came over for dinner, my cousin William was so jealous of my giraffe that he didn't talk to me all night. My giraffe was one of the few things in my childhood that I was proud of. I named my giraffe Willy. The next day, when I had to crane my neck up to look at this guy coming out of the *Straight Up*, I knew Willy fit him well.

As my mom unbuckled her seatbelt to get out of the car, Willy walked toward us and raised his hand. She shifted in her seat a bit and rolled down the window as he approached.

"Hey, how ya doin, Helen?" he said, disappointedly.

"Do I have to answer that?"

Willy rested both of his hands on the door and leaned in a little. He looked in my direction and offered one of those half-smiles my mother was famous for. I pulled my blanket closer to me and looked down. Adults.

"He's not here, is he?" my mother said.

"No, ma'am. He passed through a while ago. Maybe ten or eleven last night. He walked out after I cut him off. I figured he was headed home."

My mom shook her head and closed her eyes. "Thanks, anyway," she said as she shifted the car back into drive.

Willy immediately backed off the car and took a few steps away. "Sorry, Helen," he yelled as we pulled away.

I pressed my pencil down on the same page as my last entry. 4:46 – *Not at Willy's*.

We stopped at two more places before my stomach growled so loud my mom insisted we stop somewhere. Two more disappointments. Two more notebook entries. 4:57 – *Not at John's*. 5:11 – *Not at Pete's*.

My mother pulled into the parking lot of a CVS. It was around 5:30 in the morning and there was only one other car in the lot. She told me to wrap myself in the blanket and come in with her. I wobbled into the store with the blanket tight around my body. My mother guided us down the aisles. It was so bright in there; it took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust. I followed her silently as she led the way. We were the only two in the store: she with her winter coat and Christmas tree pajama pants and me in my blanket cocoon.

The floors were shining from the recent wax. It smelt like Clorox and my feet stuck to the floor with every step. She finally grabbed something off one of the shelves. An individual pack of Cheerios.

"Is this okay?" she asked.

I nodded. I didn't even want to stop anywhere for food. I could have waited until we got home. I guess this meant she knew we weren't going

to be home any time soon. She walked toward the back of the store with the cereal in hand. I followed slowly behind her. When she reached the refrigerators, she opened one and took out a small carton of milk. When we got to the register there was one girl working. She looked me and my mother up and down before scanning the two items. I put my head down and tugged my blanket closer. It felt like we had been in there for hours.

After we settled back into the car, my mother poured some of the milk into the cereal container. She then sealed the carton of milk back up and put it in between the two front seats.

“Here, honey,” she said handing me my breakfast. I accepted it and stared down at it for a long while. I watched the Cheerios float in the white milk. With every second, they got softer and softer. Despite my hunger, I had no interest in eating, but when my mother turned again, I poured the cereal into my mouth. Two thin, white lines formed on each side of my mouth as the milk overflowed. I wiped them off with my sleeve and looked down at the cereal again. It was unsteady. I hadn’t even noticed that we were already on our way to our next stop.

When I finished my breakfast, I set the empty container on the seat next to me and pulled out my notebook. According to my records, there was only one more place to look for my father. One more bar at the end of the road. Our last hope before we headed back home and just waited for him to show up. It’s happened before. Plenty of times, actually. So when we pulled into the last parking lot and the lights were all shut inside the building, we both looked at each other and knew it was time to go home.

Once in the house, my mother threw the car keys on the little table by the front door. We took off our coats and deposited them onto the couch in the living room. I walked down the hall and up the stairs. Framed pictures lined the walls leading to my bedroom. My mother and I at the park. My mother and I at Ciro’s Diner for my fifth birthday. Me in last year’s Halloween costume, Spongebob Squarepants. He wasn’t in any of them.

I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling. After a few minutes, my mother walked in the room. She stood by the doorway and watched me.

“He’ll come home; he always does,” she said.

“I know,” I said, quietly.

“Come on, get dressed.”

I didn’t move.

“I’ll videotape it, I promise,” she said.

It was the morning of my school’s talent show. I played drums on stage. It was the instrument my father taught me how to play.



# Creative Nonfiction



# Through the Fog

*LAUREN L'HEUREUX*

I was sitting at one of the classier bars on Estero Bay sipping a fancy glass of lemon infused water while yachts passed by. The five o'clock sun grazed the windows with sprinkles of light that danced upon the granite of the bar. The bar was in the tourist area of my hometown in Southwest Florida, taking up a portion of the lobby of the very expensive Hyatt Hotel. My former teacher and I, who savored her ten-dollar glass of wine, sat discussing my new fear. I remember watching the bartender pour red wine for another customer into a goblet and then re-cork the bottle. The color of the wine must have reminded me of blood and I blurted out: "I'm afraid to die!" Over the last eighteen months, death had surrounded me, overwhelming my life. I had never before been afraid of death. Now, however, it consumed my every thought.

I sat with the woman who inspired me to move to New York and follow my dream of becoming a writer. Although I had seen her multiple times since I'd graduated, I hadn't seen her speechless since my former peers spoke their illiterate minds in my AP English class senior year. I didn't realize my comment would have that effect on her. Despite her front row view to all the tragic events in my life, she knew that I held out for the good. I don't think she was expecting me to say something of that nature about death. She knew what I had been through, what I was going through, but for her, it was never about the past, but reminding yourself to move forward.

Despite the former teacher-student relationship, after graduating, our bond had turned into a friendship. Ms. O'Donnell had watched me grow every year of high school, not as just a writer, but as a person. Every time I came home from New York for the holidays or to visit my family, we met. It's a routine I expected; her advice didn't just resonate with me, but often changed the way I approached events and obstacles in my life. I consistently walked away from our time together feeling like a stronger person.

She remained quiet for seconds, looking at me, gauging my reaction. I looked around the bar, watching the people surrounding us go on about life. There were men in suits and women in cocktail dresses, some laughing and some with their eyes glued to their phones. All of the twenty or so

people at the bar seemed completely oblivious to the two women discussing death mere feet away from them. As I traced my finger over the lines of the gray granite bar a few times, she moved to pull out a small notebook and pen from her bag, taking up the chair next to her.

“Here. Take a few minutes and write down the reason or reasons why you think you’re afraid to die or of death.”

There was one specific reason: an all-consuming and vertigo-inducing thought. I was never afraid of death before a certain life altering event, but now I see it around every corner. I felt it like a smothering effect, rather than a hug, like when a plane I’m on is taking off. I hear it in car horns, a pretense to two enormous pieces of aluminum slamming together. I saw the metaphor of death looming all around me, but never directly in front; taunting me that it was always near but reminding me that I would never know when it was to come.

I wrote down names of people and actions that could bring me closer to my end, but I eventually crossed them all out and looked at her. She knew I was struggling to create a concrete reason why I am afraid, a reason we would be able to discuss and work through, so I could begin to move on. The reason was anything but concrete. She looked at me for another moment before speaking: “Lauren, death is a part of life, and to be scared of death, is to never live.” I smiled at her and looked down to my wrist. My right hand encompassed the tattoo that serves as a bracelet on my left arm that reads “My Brother’s Keeper / Joshua Michael / 02-26-1994, as I contemplated what she said. She asked me why, fourteen months after my brother’s death, I was suddenly afraid to die.

I think it’s more so my brother’s sudden death than just simply his passing that spurred this thought to enter my mind. Although this conversation took place about a year and a few months after Josh’s motorcycle accident, I was only then in a place where I was ready to address this new factoid of my life. On the morning of March 14th, 2016, living in the college dorms in Manhattan, my life was going on “normal.” I went to class that day, followed by work and got home around 11 p.m. followed by my head hitting the pillow and sleep consuming me.

Within eight hours of falling asleep, blissfully ignorant to how much my life had already changed, I got the call and I boarded and de-boarded a plane where I landed in Florida feet away from where Josh’s motorcycle crashed on airport property. Once my family and I got through the “normalcies” that come with any loved one’s death—the service, the cremation, the calls to insurance agencies and former friends—I traveled back to New

York to finish my Spring semester. Once I got back to New York, where the closest family I had was hours away, it was the feeling of isolation and loneliness that brought on the fear of death. After I had explained all of this to Ms. O'Donnell, we began to unpack my feelings of despondency. It's not that I was being overly emotional, it's more so that being terrified of death had become one of my main emotions.

I think it's common for people my age to experience excessive amounts of emotion. I say people because at this point in my life, I'm not sure if I'm a child or an adult—but stuck in the limbo years where I still experience euphoric exhilaration and consuming sadness. I feel like an adult when I consider the amount of heartache I've been through, but I think of myself as a child when I'm attempting to buy beer under the legal drinking age. Adults that consider us “children” tell us we're too sensitive and too emotional. But people my age consider our generation to be strong and assertive in our beliefs. In this moment, I was both child and adult. I was an adult sitting at a bar discussing death as we continued to live; I was a child, sitting at a bar for people over twenty-one.

The last few times we met it was frequently at one of our local Starbucks halfway between the two of us. We would often discuss one of the many topics she had a wide range of knowledge on, like a therapy technique known as Bodytalk. The last time we met, she explained to me the concept of Bodytalk and a therapist's ability to understand one's feeling through this technique.

She told me: “It combines wisdom, energy and clinical techniques to construct an accurate and skillful analysis of what your body is saying about your stress.”

After she went into more detail, I wasn't sure I was convinced that this approach to therapy could be executed to a standard that would define my stress followed by an analysis of how I could get through that stress. However, what she did afterwards certainly convinced me.

“Sit forward with your hands and elbows on the counter, uncross your feet, and close your eyes,” she said.

I did so with a small smirk on my face. I don't remember the exact details of the few minutes that followed; she asked me questions and instructed actions for me to perform like nod my head and wiggle my toes. I know it sounds slightly silly, but after those few minutes of movement, she told me to remain still and open my eyes.

She then preceded to close her eyes and do her own set of movements. After about two minutes she opened her eyes and asked me how long I've

had a thyroid condition. I've had an enlarged thyroid for my entire life and have taken medication for as long as I can remember. The impact of her question was jolting. I explained to her first my shock followed by my thyroid diagnosis.

She told me about a medication I should start taking and within six months or so, my thyroid had been at its most normal size. In this moment, at the bar, I was sitting there wondering if there was a way she could Bodytalk me out of my fear. There wasn't. I felt as though in these last few months I had stopped living my life the way I had before. I was walking on eggshells in all parts of my life. I felt like a child scared of the monsters under my bed. But, in this case, I had monsters, real and very scary monsters.

After I explained to Ms. O'Donnell my thoughts of feeling child-like for being afraid of death, she explained to me: "Everyone at some point in their life is afraid to die or is afraid to see someone they love die. This is a part of life and all we can do is recognize death as a friend and welcome it when it comes, but until then, we must live."

Did this mean that I was avoiding life? Was I turning corners with a wider radius? Was I seeking safer ways from Point A to Point B? I asked her, "How do I welcome death when I haven't even lived yet? I'm not ready to die. My parents can't survive life without me." I began tearing up thinking about my parents and how we cannot afford to lose one another, not now and not for a long time.

She sat there rubbing my back and consoling me, while people at the bar watched me cry, most likely wondering what I was doing sobbing at a bar. I wiped at my tears with the 4x4 napkin that sits under every glass at a bar to catch the condensation sliding off. The already wet piece dampened my cheeks but still soaked up most of my tears. I lifted my head and looked at her. Her appearance told me she was comforting me without pity, and that's why I looked up to her. She knew I didn't need pity; I simply needed advice on how to continue.

After a few moments of silence, while the bar continued to bustle around us, she said to me: "Lauren, death is like fog—it comes into our lives briefly, obscuring our image of the world around us, but when it disappears, life becomes clear."

It's amazing how influential another human being can be on your life. Her words resonated with me while I shook from the impact of their meaning. Death was a part of my life briefly when my brother passed away; it was the recovery and the moving on that will be with me forever. Josh's



death was my fog, but once it cleared, I was able to see the light of the sun again, the light of the future. I was able to imagine moving on while keeping Joshua's memory alive and moving beyond his death.

We sat for another hour or so discussing my summer plans and what my near future held. She then told me she needed to leave to meet her parents for dinner. We paid for our drinks and stood up. She looked at me with a warm smile and said, "You'll get through the fog, Lauren. I have faith in you."

# My Reflections

KATHRYN MILEWSKI

Stomach hollow and twisting itself into acidic knots, I groggily trudge into a square room. They are all clad in mint attire, masks and nets shielding their lips and hair while they check glowing instruments and converse in a secret language. Surprisingly, every one of them is vivacious and laughing, despite the momentous event about to transpire. Then again, this is just another day for them. I am jealous of their robes—far more sophisticated and *much* warmer than the paper-thin gown curtained over my frail, shivering shoulders. Alabaster goosebumps rise upon the edges of my skin as the surgeons soundlessly encircle me, pointing to a blue table in the center of the room. Like a set on a stage, it is illuminated by artificial light. It is the early morning, and I am barely awake. Nevertheless, my feet find a way to carry me over to the cushioned plateau where this procedure will take place. With a shaky release of air from my chapped lips, I lie down, dead cold yet comfortable. Both eyelids close. Finally, after seven long years, this is where I will be cured.

A corpulent man with baggy eyes presses a circular patch to my chest. There is the faintest whiff of lavender as his anesthetic courses through every surrounding vein. I hold my breath. Both legs become paralyzed, but I am not afraid. He sticks another patch onto the crook of my arm. Sleep tugs me into its soft embrace. “Sweet dreams, Kathryn,” whispers a gentle, feminine voice as a warm blanket envelops my immobile body. My apprehension dissolves like ink in water. It is incredible to know that once I awaken, I will finally return to the girl I once was. Before the madness. Before the curse.

*But how on earth have I managed to get this far?*

The world goes black, and my soul tenderly sinks into a dark, swirling trench.

I. I continue to drown until my back reaches rock bottom. I pant and gurgle, pressing for oxygen as two blonde friends gawk at me from the surface. As the rules of the game dictate, my deepest, darkest secret has just been revealed.

“But Katy, you *are* pretty,” Gabi coos, an empty smile gracing her

rosy lips. She sits back on the couch like a queen, moonlight pouring over her hair and chest.

Brie adjusts a velvet blanket over her knees and lays a hand over my shoulder, sniffing.

“No, I think you misheard me.” My eyes are trained on the carpeted floor as though it were the only safe place to look. “I don’t want to be pretty. It’s just that I’m not . . . well, I’m not *me*. There’s something inside me. Something that isn’t supposed to be there. It’s like I’m bewitched and someone else is living inside my body. My reflection isn’t mine. Does that make any sense?”

A long wave of uncomfortable silence. Finally, Gabi snorts as though she were gazing down upon a four-year-old who has just proclaimed that pigs can fly. “Oh, Katy,” she giggles, her cheekbones rising high, “God doesn’t make mistakes. You know that! It’s a sin to think so.”

Brie wraps her arms around me, stroking my knotted hair and holding me until I’m numb. “You may be sinking, dear,” she says, scooting away from the window so midnight luminescence can shine upon my skin, too. “But you should know you are the anchor of us all: you help us stay grounded and keep our friendships intact.”

I copy her gloom-tinged grin. She has good intentions, but she has not responded to my cry for help. They have both left me to die in this ocean. I swallow, gravity pushing me down until I fall through the gritty seabed, which feels more like quicksand than silt. “Okay,” I choke, postponing tears while pressing a hand to my jutting chin. “You’re right. I am pretty.”

II. I fall into a high chair, fidgeting and drifting off into space while my orthodontist opens and closes my mouth. What a waste of a Thursday afternoon! A twelve-year-old girl should be outside shooting hoops and riding her scooter instead of sitting in such a depressing office. I look out the window to my left, humming while admiring the blue sky and puffy clouds that are much more majestic than the ones in my daydreams.

I barely hear my mother and Dr. Lopez, who are conversing right next to me.

“It’s called an underbite,” he sighs, removing his glasses, “or more officially, a malocclusion. Your daughter’s is class three, meaning she has an overgrowth in her lower jaw bone instead of a simple tooth problem. Braces won’t do anything for her.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice my mother crossing her arms. But I am not focused on my mother. Instead, I am sending silly glances to my

pudgy marshmallow of a brother in an attempt to provoke him. He sticks his tongue out at me, cross-eyed. At least we are missing school for this.

“Well, if braces won’t help, what will?” Mom asks, a trifle of fear in her voice.

Dr. Lopez shakes his head, propping himself up in a rolling chair. “It’s hard to say. Normally, I’d suggest a face mask, which looks like a catcher’s mask only it would push her lower jaw back. Unfortunately, she’s too old for it and there’s no guarantee it will work. Therefore, I think it’s best to leave it be, and if she wants to, she can get orthognathic surgery when she’s older.”

My body freezes. Eyes popping out of their sockets, I imagine knives and needles pricking through my gums while I’m strapped to a seat, struggling for dear life.

“No-o-o,” I neigh like a horse, “I am *not* getting surgery!”

Knowing I’m worried sick, my mother laughs. “Don’t fret dear, you’re not getting it.” She smiles, looking over at Dr. Lopez for reassurance. He places his glasses back over his honest brown eyes.

“It’s optional,” he states. “If you find your jaw causing problems in the future, then you can consider it.”

He beams at all of us, even my brother. “But honestly, Katy, you may just outgrow it.”

III. My mouth moves differently when I sing. I replay the video clip from the beginning, finding myself in the chorus of students and realizing that yes, I am not hallucinating. My mouth *definitely* moves differently when I sing. How odd. Two years later, I remember what Dr. Lopez said during that Thursday afternoon checkup. I have that jaw problem: an underbite.

Curious, I look up the nine-letter word on the internet, and here are the related results:

*Severe*

*Deformity*

*Ugly*

*Bulldog*

A knife twists through my heart. I’ve never felt this kind of pain before. Are those really the words that describe my face?

I slog over to the vanity in my bedroom, noticing my normal reflection has disappeared. In its place stands a red-eyed demon—stoic, dark, smirking. Black chills sweep through my soul. This monster looks just like

me, only scarier, more sinister, and beyond twisted. With indulgence, she laughs at me while I recoil in horror. My eyes are unable to look away.

Both hands fly to my chin, pushing it back in an attempt to make my teeth touch. If I try hard enough, maybe I can squeeze her out of my body. Instead, the inside of my mouth burns like wildfire. The demon laughs even louder, causing a void to swirl in my brain.

Chin red like a scarlet letter, I hopelessly stare at myself for three long hours.

IV. “CRIMSON CHIN!” the boys jeer while my back is turned. Months later, the bones in my jaw grow longer. There is a wide gap in my mouth now. I don’t even recognize myself anymore. *Click, click, click.* I rub the sides of my misaligned face to soothe the ache, but the TMJ never stops. This is all her fault. With devilish grins, she throws me while I’m washing my hands in the bathroom. I know that malevolent demon has poisoned my chances of living through this mess. I try to distract myself by hanging out with schoolmates, but they’re all occupied with their much prettier boyfriends.

*Pop, pop, pop.*

Food gets harder to chew. My parents continuously point out that I’m always the last one to finish a meal, and not by a measly couple of minutes. The first time I choke in public is at a Japanese restaurant. Before I even swallow, I know the seaweed from my sushi has evaded the pathetic grip of my skewed molars. When it lodges into my throat, all I can feel is the life slowly being sucked out of me while I cough and desperately squeeze my fingers around my neck. Just as my dad rises from his seat to perform the Heimlich maneuver, the piece of seaweed shoots from my throat back onto my plate. Everyone in the restaurant stares at me. I’ve never been so embarrassed.

Crying myself to sleep becomes a normal occurrence. Happiness is a foreign concept. And the TMJ still continues.

*Snap, snap.*

*Crack.*

V. The demon has now convinced me that she and I are the same. One day, she decides to play a little game.

“Since your parents have determined you are overreacting, I want you to always remember who you are, even when I’m not in your sight,” she hisses. Handing me a Sharpie, she tells me to tattoo some very important words and phrases onto my body. Hypnotized, I remove my shirt. “Ugly

bitch” goes across my stomach. “Monster” is etched into my collarbone, and the sentence “No one will ever love you” rolls across both of my arms. Staring at the collage of black shame across my upper body, I snap out of the trance and ignore her request to cover up the hate speech with a long-sleeved shirt.

“No!” I scream, banging my fist into the mirror with every ounce of strength I’ve got left. “I need to wash this off!”

I run into the bathroom, tripping over my own two feet. I turn the water on and wait for the shower to grow warm. While I’m standing there, she is inside the mirror just behind the sink. Her needle-like teeth come together in a lopsided smile. She’s not willing to let me go.

“What’s the matter! Can’t face the truth?” she spits. “I’m always going to be here, so you might as well give up!”

Pressing my hands to both ears, I remove my clothes and jump into the shower, furiously scrubbing soap against my inky skin.

“CRIMSON CHIN!” I hear her chant from the mirror.

“CRIMSON CHIN!” That time, we both said it.

She can control me even when I’m not looking into her flaring red eyes. Suddenly, she jerks around, forcing my skin to thrash. Hysterical, I press the shaving razor to my left wrist, swiping it back and forth in a final attempt to break free.

“GET OUT, GET OUT, GET OUT!!!”

And just like that, my flesh burns in the hot water. The skin tears open and out pours beautiful white daisies, floating to the bottom of the tub and sinking down the drain. My breath catches in my throat. I desperately reach for them, but they fall through my fingertips. Although the demon’s voice has finally gone, I know she has won this battle. Ashamed, I watch as all of the flowers flow through my wrist and down the drain, leaving a painful reminder in the form of a scar. They have disappeared forever. I will never be able to get them back.

VI. There is a black hole inside me now. It is so devastating, so intoxicating, I run out of the library in panic. I drag one of my friends along with me, and we trudge out into the afternoon rain.

Bogged and broken, I utter dangerous words to him in confidence.

He stops in his tracks, silently pulling me into an embrace while heavy drops swirl around us like a cyclone.

I am cold, but for a moment, he keeps me warm.

VII. "You missed the turn," I remark, my varied voice now a monotone hum. Mom shakes her head and stares attentively into the night. Her fingers are digging into the steering wheel with an apprehension I've never seen before.

"Mrs. Krenek called this afternoon," she reveals. My heart slides into my stomach. I know what this is about. "She said she wants to have a chat with the two of us. If we get out of it early, maybe we can catch that movie."

She pulls into the school parking lot, and for a second it seems as though there is no one inside the building. Then suddenly my school librarian and theatre director, Mrs. Krenek, comes running out onto the pavement. She knocks on our car door, my mother unlocks it, and she leaps inside. "Heya, Katy, Sue." A tender smile glows on her face, despite the gravity of the situation. She's known for her motherly prattling, but this time she gets right to the point.

"So, Katy," she struggles, "this afternoon I got a very concerning message from your good friend Will." I swallow in dread. She continues, "he waited until everyone left the library, and then he approached me and told me that you said you didn't want to live anymore."

The backs of my eyes grow prickly. My mind replays the scene of Will and I walking in the rain. Mrs. Krenek reveals that when he told her about how I wanted to kill myself, he actually cried in front of her, something completely uncharacteristic of him.

And that image of him weeping completely destroys me.

The tears stream down my face in a violent patter much more powerful than the heavy afternoon rain. I tell Mrs. Krenek and my mother about the demon I see in the mirror, the sinking, the hatred, the possession. It all comes out. Nothing is held back.

And to my surprise, they don't call me crazy.

"My son faced the same thing you're going through," Mrs. Krenek whimpers, teary-eyed herself. "Couldn't stand his reflection in the mirror. I tried to tell him there was nothing wrong with him, but he'd never listen. I know your case is different because of your jaw, but I implore you, Katy . . . don't let this beat you. You have to realize you exist on this planet for a reason. You have to learn to love yourself, because there are many people in your life that love you."

Those words were the turning point for me. That was the moment when I was so overcome with shame, I knew I had to change my perspective. If not for my own happiness, then for the happiness of those who cared for me.

Five hours later, after the exorcism, I awake in a hospital bed. Everything set aright, the past becomes prologue.

# The Ring of Kerry

JASWIN “BILLIE” SANGHA

I'm so frustrated. The moisture in the air has deemed my forty-five-minute attempt at straightening my hair this morning completely futile. Worse, the cheap international adapter I bought off Amazon short-circuited in the hotel bathroom, frying the one appliance I rely on to not look like a blow-dried version of Scar from *The Lion King*. It doesn't matter anyways. Ireland is going to continue to be wet, and I'm going to continue to hate myself for not having packed appropriate clothing for this trip.

“An Irish summer is a California winter,” I explain to Eileen at breakfast. Eileen is the daughter of the couple who is hosting me in a small town in County Kerry for the semester. She listens to me complain and laughs at all my jokes, so she's my favorite person here right now.

“You didn't do your research before you came here?” She chuckles as she watches me stab at my hash browns. I look at her, offended by her assumption that I am an ignorant American. I'm more offended that this is an accurate assumption that reminds me of how I shamelessly applied for this study abroad program without fully diving into the information I sporadically mentioned in the essay that got me here.

“Of course, I did,” I tell her, trying to convince myself as well. I pick up a piece of black sausage and take a bite, gasping as a dark, red liquid gushes out of it. Horrified, I drop the piece of meat onto my plate and stare at Eileen, who is in stitches, laughing at me. “What the hell is this?!”

“It's black pudding,” she answers, when she's able to catch her breath. She clarifies: “Blood sausage?”

Angry at the misnomer and Eileen's sense of humor, I set my fork down and scoot my chair back. “That's not funny.”

She leans forward and grabs my hand, endearingly. “Love, it wasn't a prank I just pulled on you for kicks. That's genuinely part of a traditional Irish breakfast.”

I'm mad at her, but something about her grip on me and the way green eyes and a nose with freckles scattered along the bridge look up close gets me.

“You girls all done with breakfast?” asks Maura, Eileen's mother, as



she enters the kitchen. Eileen swipes her hand away from mine, abruptly, returning to her plate of food.

“About so,” she says, and I try not to over-analyze her recoil. It’s not like I’m going to develop feelings for her over the course of the semester and embark on some pathetic, painful journey of unrequited love with an Irish-Catholic girl who probably could never return my longing glances across the garden patio, even if she did feel the same way.

But that’s kind of what happens anyways, and I almost blame myself for thinking it into existence.

One day, after class, I decide to walk home instead of taking the bus. I stop in a bookshop, and it’s raining, and I decide I’m going to make my misery cinematic and write poems about Eileen’s messy hair and the flecks of gold in her eyes that only seem visible when she’s talking about the most recent plant that has started thriving in her garden. I want so badly and sadly to be something she talks about like that, to just exist in her garden and to be taken care of by someone who does it so well.

A woman is walking around with a tray of coffee, offering it to seated university students, bookworms, writers, professors. She makes her way to me, and I’ve seen that everyone else has taken one. But it’s in a glass, and I’ve never seen hot coffee served in a glass. Before I finish contorting my face into an expression that tells her I have no idea what is going on, the waitress explains, “It’s an Irish coffee.”

“Oh,” I say, taking it graciously and not wanting to further isolate myself as uncultured. Besides, I could use coffee to stay up if I’m going to write a proper ode to stupid Eileen. I take a sip, and it tastes odd. It’s hot, but with a slightly cooler center when I feel it in my throat. I take more sips, thinking it’s an acquired taste, and three Irish coffees later, I am feeling anything but caffeinated and alert. My eyelids feel heavy, and I’ve lost my train of thought despite having written so much. I look up at the time, steadying my head to read it properly, and if I’m correct, which is alarming if I am, Eileen’s parents must be worried. The storm hasn’t let up, and I know I can’t walk home. At least I’m not so inebriated that I’ve lost my ability to discern that much.

I shuffle through my backpack for the host family contact card and call Eileen’s father Dermott, who picks me up within twenty minutes and doesn’t give me any of the shame or disappointment or lecturing I would’ve gotten from my own father. But then again, I’m not his daughter to worry about.

Eileen and I share a room, and for some reason, I decide to pass out in her bed. I think I've been wanting to do that for a while but being stupid enough not to know that Irish coffee is just coffee with whiskey in it (Irish anything is anything with whiskey in it) seems like a proper enough excuse to finally do it.

She re-enters the room after brushing her teeth, and through my drunken astigmatism (and actual astigmatism), I see her smile at me, like I'm a pitiful thing. But without protest or scolding, she scoots in beside me in her bed, and I've never been so close to a face that I wasn't about to kiss. I feel so warm, and I can't tell if it's the alcohol, the wool blanket, or Eileen herself.

"I don't like this," I whisper. She blinks at me, confused. "Not you being here, just . . ." I pause, willing something cohesive to come out of my mouth. "I'm not sure if you are . . . and if you are, it seems like your parents don't know you're . . ."

She shakes her head. I hear her hair rustling against the pillow as she does. "Everyone's really traditional here."

I nod, understanding, but still feeling sad and selfish. "There's nobody traditional here right now," I tell her, preparing to feel embarrassed, a nearly guaranteed expense of being vulnerable while drunk.

She smiles, like I finally said the thing that unlocked whatever heteronormative dungeon she'd been in for nineteen years.

Our relationship is inconvenient but exciting from then on. We telepathically announce competitions to see how many kisses we can sneak in throughout the day, and I have to be strategic with the times I get in and out of her bed.

"I haven't seen Eileen so bright and bubbly," Dermott says at Sunday dinner one night, and I glance over to his daughter who would never let me get so smug by assuming I have anything to do with it.

I smirk, keeping to myself, and sip my water.

"It's nice to have some different female company around," Maura adds. "You two have become proper mates, yeah?"

I choke on my drink, entering one of those coughing fits where you don't know if it's more or less awkward to just ride it out in front of everyone or excuse yourself and risk stumbling while you try not to die elsewhere. Maura looks at me, worried. I wave the concern away. "Sorry . . . what?"

"You alright?"

"I'm fine. I just . . ."

"Yes, mum. We're pretty close mates now," Eileen affirms. She shoots

me a look, and I'm flushed, either from the choking or the casual outing of our relationship. *Mates means friends, you twit*, I remember. I look down, feeling stupid. She runs her thumb over my hand, under the table, consoling me and my ego.

"How about we show her the Ring of Kerry tomorrow?" Dermott suggests to his wife and daughter before turning to me. "The weather's clearing up in Waterville, and I'm sure you'd love it. I can pop into work a bit later."

"That would be awesome," I say, graciously.

"That was really close," I say later, anxiously.

Eileen ties her hair up and shrugs at me. "You just forgot is all. Besides, my mother would never be so nonchalant about me being a lesbian, let alone having a live-in girlfriend." She gets in bed and is about to switch her lamp light off when she catches me staring at her from my bed across from her. "What?" she says.

"You said girlfriend."

"Oh." She pauses. "I suppose I did."

I sit up, dormant thoughts erupting into brazen confessions. "Eileen, I don't want to be a secret anymore. I mean, if you're calling me that, then I'm not crazy for thinking we have something that could last longer than a study abroad semester. But I don't want to play games or hide it."

Eileen sighs, sinking into her bed. "It's not that easy for me."

"It's not easy for either of us. And I'm not threatening you or demanding you come out for me. I would never do something like that." She looks over to me, and my eyes are pleading. "I just need to know this isn't something you're going to end and put behind you when the summer's over."

She props herself up on her elbow. "Neither of us knows if this'll last that long, whether or not we're out or serious."

How okay she is with the possibility of this not working out, with us separating and resuming our lives in different corners of the world as if we weren't sharing a bed and sharing monumental firsts with each other just days before my flight back home, breaks me. "Yeah, you're right," I agree, my voice shaking as I shuffle the bed sheets to hide my unsteady tone. "And actually, you shouldn't come out," I add, sharply, just wanting to throw one dagger that hits like the one she flung at me. She looks at me, confused. "Not because you're gay or anything. But just so no other lesbian has to be subjected to the torture of dating you." I switch my light off abruptly and turn over in my bed.

I don't get in her bed after her parents go to sleep, like I usually do.

I don't kiss her at the breakfast table before they come down, like I usually do.

I don't reach for her hand in the back of Dermott and Maura's car, like I usually do.

I'm unprepared for the long, winding road up the Ring of Kerry mountaintop; it's like the geography is exaggerating how upset I am and how I just need these days to go by, so I can get on a plane back to California. It's so green, and the air is so crisp and refreshing, something the scorched hills of the Bay Area haven't known for a while. I try to appreciate it.

There are rocky cliffs and small goats and cottages all around the area, and suddenly I feel so small and insignificant. When we finally get out of the car at the top, overlooking the seemingly endless Atlantic Ocean, my problems feel small and insignificant too. And I'm so grateful for that. All the colors of the scenery run deep and rich; I have to blink several times just to process that this kind of beauty is real and happened all on its own. The ocean waves colliding with the mountain top are the only thing I can hear. Until Dermott suggests Eileen and I take a photo together.

Saying no after weeks of canoodling and giggling and spending every waking hour outside of class together would be suspicious. Eileen isn't refusing, which seems like more of a move to avoid drama than to signal that she even wants a photo with me. I surrender to sentimentality and walk over to Dermott and Maura, who are smiling admiringly behind the camera, as I stand, awkwardly (and angrily) beside Eileen.

"Now, come on! Hug a little! Show some love," he encourages. I almost scoff, but Eileen beats me to breaking the silence.

"This is the part where I'd kiss you," she announces quietly, looking straight ahead. "And they'd catch it on camera and be shocked. They'd have to remember the moment and lecture me about it for months after you leave to go back to America." I look at her, as she snakes her arm around my waist. Dermott calls out my name to face the camera again, and Eileen grins at her father. I force a smile, hearing her speak through her teeth. "And I would have to torture myself with the fantasies of what you staying here would've been like." She stops smiling and faces me again. "Meanwhile, they call me a sinner and call themselves failures as parents."

Dermott and Maura are scrolling through photos, deliberating which ones to frame for me or mail me for Christmas. I'm staring at Eileen, stand-

ing between her and a cliff, and I try so hard not to make a cliffhanger joke because I know if I ruin a rare moment in which Eileen actually considers me a long-term partner, I'll regret it for the entire sixteen-hour journey back home and for months after. "It's complicated, I know."

"It's not that I don't want this. I didn't even know how badly I wanted this. But right now, I can't give you a Facebook relationship status or a date in broad daylight at Dooley's. And I can't expect you to sneak around forever or wait forever. Even if we do this for ten years, I can't even give you an engagement ring." She drops her hands to her sides, defeated.

I sigh. It's not that we had discussed any of that, but we both knew that being long-distance or too young was the smallest controversy within our relationship. "I know," I repeat. Because I don't really have much else to say. And then what she confesses next really leaves me speechless.

"And I know I don't talk about it much, but I was thinking I might love you." My eyebrows raise before the rest of my body can even catch up with what she's just said. "It made me nervous to think I was maybe just going to be a fun summer fling for a cool, California girl."

"But you're wrong—" I begin to argue, and she cuts me off, laughing as she wipes away a tear.

"I know! You're not cool at all."

My eyebrows lower almost immediately. "Okay, well." I look over to her parents, who are walking along the other path, arm in arm. "You can't give me an engagement ring, and we'll probably never be like them." I look back to her. "But you gave me the Ring of Kerry. And honesty. You let me be myself but also showed me where I had room to be better, you never made me feel unwelcome or like a burden, and you've taught me so much about Ireland, and that's exactly what I came here for."

Eileen smiles at me, and I'm relieved I didn't have to leave without experiencing that sight again.

I fly out two days later. Missed FaceTime calls because of misaligned time zones and failed attempts at being pen pals devolves into something simpler and easier to commit to, like Snapchats and Instagram to let each other know we still acknowledge and "like" each other's existence. Then, interaction becomes less and less frequent, as we grow up and get involved with other people, places, and ideas.

It's May 2015, and I am just finishing my sophomore year of college before taking some time off to re-center myself. I had also ended a relation-

ship with a man, after trying to settle myself comfortable into a straight relationship and deciding I wasn't that good of an actress or that dishonest of a person. Still habitually eighteen and wayward in many ways, I research schools or programs in Ireland again. I need fresh air.

Not even thinking of Eileen (though I'm sure my train of thought is well on its way to her), her name pops up on my laptop in the middle of my internet perusal as an incoming FaceTime call. I click accept, and it's a pixelated view of the ocean and the scratchy sound of wind, breaking in and out.

"Eileen?" I say. It's the first time I've said her name out loud in two years, not counting the times I've drunkenly sung "Come On, Eileen". She flips the camera to face her, and her hair is short and shaved, and her nose is pierced, and she's dressed like—Dermott? "Whoa, you look so . . ."

"Gay?" she asks, laughing. Her smile is so big and bright. I can't help but match it in my response.

"I mean, sure. There isn't really a dress code, but you're really rocking the hot dad look. How are you?"

"Gay!"

"Okay," I say, like I'm responding to a small child who has just learned a new word.

"Sorry, I thought you'd heard because it was all over social media."

"That you're gay? No, I've known that since before the internet did, I'm sure. But you're out, I'm assuming? That's awesome. Good for you."

"I've been out for a while," she says. "But Ireland literally just became the first country to legalize gay marriage by popular vote!" She laughs, and a gust of wind catches her off guard.

"Are you near a cliff? What are you doing?" I ask. I see a giant body of water in the background as she nearly drops her phone.

"No, I'm just celebrating. This is like, historical, babe." She calls me babe like I've woken up in her bed this morning and not two years ago. "I don't know why; I guess I just wanted to tell you. Sorry if I'm interrupting something."

"No, you're not. I wouldn't have picked up if I was busy with something else," I lie, knowing full well I have a paper to write. "Where are you?" I ask, as the picture clears up.

"Guess," she grins.

I gasp when I see the water again. "Ring of Kerry?"

"Yes!" She laughs.

"Oh, my God, it looks just as amazing as it did when I was there!" I

say, although I want to add “and so do you” but I’m not ready to rip open the stitches of that wound yet. The hot dad compliment is as far as I am willing to go.

“Yeah,” she sighs, turning the camera back to her. “I was thinking, you know, if you’re ever back in County Kerry for some reason, and if it’s still or back on the table, you could actually have both now.”

I’m confused. “What do you mean?”

She positions her camera to a panoramic view as she says, “The Ring of Kerry . . .” My heart stops, but she continues. “And if in ten years or whatever, we’ve still got what we had . . . and because you know, it’s legal now . . . you *could* get that other ring, too.”

I don’t say anything, and I don’t know how much time has passed since I picked up the call that very quickly sounded like a proposal. She faces the camera again and says my name, and I forget how I liked it best when it was said back to me in an Irish accent. She looks bashful and nineteen again.

So do I.





## Contributors' Notes

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