TUSITALA

2018
Though the water lily slumbers beneath the frozen pond, it must emerge; its petals must unwrap from their cozy embrace, and spread out to fully blossom under the obsidian sky, where a jellyfish can be seen swimming among the stars.

Thank you for picking up a copy of Tusitala.
~ The Designers and Editors of Tusitala
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The Forest

In a city of gold
Lies a forest.
Though quite old,
It is my nest.

Upon the wind,
My name is sung.
A hand they lend
When life stung.

The sun shines
Through the leaves.
Erased are lines
Allowing growth of seeds.

Louisa Van Akkeren
She Always Wanted to Fly
Down the road,
You’ll find the lake.
Beauty, the sky showed
A new day to awake.

This is where passion burns.
This is where birds sing.
This is where a student learns.
This is what Lake Forest is.

Brett Palmero
Chicago: A Day in the Life

Early afternoon, we travel by train. Our sleepy eyes and disheveled hair suit the downpour and humidity in the air. The teal umbrella I bought months ago is missing from my backpack, so I keep my black hoodie on to shield me from the swarm of droplets. Fortunately, my travel companion, Bree, is kind enough to share her small umbrella coverage with me, so only half of my head is attacked by the stinging cold of rain. My glasses morph into a cascade of water and an occasional burst of fog—the smear left by my eager fingers provides little satisfaction after I attempt to wipe them clean. The morning isn’t starting off so well, but I remind myself that adventures aren’t always entirely pleasant and meditate on the day ahead. Caffeine sustains me in the form of a sixteen-ounce paper cup full of coffee, caramel, and cream. It’s the little things.

gloom in shape of tears
hot fingers wrap sugar sex
forward on slick boots

A southbound Metra tracks us from Lake Forest to downtown Chicago. The ride over supplies us ladies with a chance to converse and learn more about one another. A Latin couple sitting behind us discuss city hotspots and their plans for the evening—they are definitely not locals, but a part of me doesn’t feel like much of a local anymore either. In moments of silence, I stare out the window. My imagination creates elaborate animations that dance along rooftops and telephone pole wires, stopping along to greet pigeons “hello” and design acrobatic, parkour-like movements across storefronts. The friends invented by my innocent mind’s eye have followed me into adulthood, from school bus routes to the here and now.

gaber giggle stop
head tops bounce to city grooves
roll on little blots
We arrive at Ogilvie Transportation Center in West Loop, while our scatterbrains seek the next step in line. The ticket booth attendants offer little help and the Ventra Card machines refuse to accept either of our debit cards. Our ignorance and general naïveté is saved by cell phone apps—how unfortunate to be birthed from a city that I can’t figure out how to navigate; Bree is an out-of-towner, I’m not. Yet I still have no sense of direction and find myself overwhelmed by the city’s grandiosity. It doesn’t help that we are continuously stopped by the homeless. One woman, sallow-faced and wrapped in scarves, asks for “something, anything. Doesn’t have to be a million, trillion, zillion dollars. Just a dollar. Some change. Anything.” Seems convincing enough. I’m too soft, plus the pit bull by her side makes it impossible for me to ignore her suffering.

wrap your dirty neck
cop cars napping on curb side
pregnant purse loose change

We stop for coffee at a nearby Starbucks. A twenty-something in shabby clothes and untied shoes stops Bree to ask for directions—he and his wife traveled by Greyhound from Seattle and plan on returning home. The open sores on his face make me question his motives, but he leaves alongside his wife after purchasing two coffees. I have mixed emotions about the homeless. My older brother is a Chicago transient, sleeps on the city streets, and fits the typical mentally ill stereotype of homelessness. Anything to remind me of this fact leaves me with an array of indefinable feelings. The suburbs shelter me from this reality. Although, quite recently, a homeless man not much older than my brother was found dead in a field near my home. He had been huffing paint cans, walked a short distance, and collapsed. I explain all of this to Bree. There is something about the city streets that forces me to forget the shame of family secrets.
lost souls tread lightly
sing me a sorrowful song
vacant grave welcomes

We take a twenty-minute-long commute on the Blue Line, a straight shot to the Western stop. I take notice of strangers on the train—a man struggling to stay awake, friends chatting about tourist attractions, a little boy stumbling against his father’s knee. Each a victim to the slithering sway of the motion. The lives of unfamiliar faces appeal to me. The interconnectedness of human beings—on this train, in this city, in this world, on this cosmic plane—baffles me. I wonder if the other passengers are plagued by similar thoughts. I wonder if they think at all. What if this is all some kind of simulation and my experiences are illusory? My hunger pangs mixed with the offensive scent of skunk weed confirm reality for the remainder of the train ride. A woman dragging a blue carry-on suitcase interrupts my aimless philosophizing. “Did we pass Damen? Shit! How did I miss it?” Maybe she got caught up in her own web of questioning—I like to think so, anyway.

window smudge sore sky
scattered eyes beats repeated
umbrellas at rest

Once we arrive at our destination, the trek continues in search of some sustenance. Feet hit Buck Town. On the move, surveying the streets and hazy skyline. Our bellies grumble, mouths salivating at the thought of consuming the deliciousness of one of the city’s greatest contributions—The Chicago Diner. Bree annihilates a mushroom melt as I inhale the avocado sandwich masterpiece before me. The area has changed considerably since the early 2000s. There was a level of grit, Latin culture, and desperation that used to run these streets. Now, Logan Square is just another gentrified Chicago neighborhood. Suburbanites drive in to hit the bar scene; Northbrook dives aren’t a thing, I guess.
Couples cross Milwaukee and Western Ave. Leather jackets, beanies, flannels, a waft of putrid bliss from a burnt cigarette hits my face. The vice that got away. Flashes. Brings me back home. I examine myself in the reflections of the shop panes. I’m just the thing that I resent. But deconstructing my neuroses isn’t conducive to this point. The realization that the past is gone forever, only resurfacing in memories and dreams, leaves a wrinkle in my brow. Rainwater puddles christen our feet. The merciless weather refuses to shut off the water or uncover the sun. Forecast suggests an evening of damp clothes, pruney fingers, and frizzy hair. Still, I find little to complain about as I reflect on our impromptu outing. Bree is young and views the city through fresh eyes. I am inspired by her youth. She’s curious about my experiences—I share tidbits of past haunts, like hitting up the corner store for tortilla chips and Mexican Coke. The city permanently resides within me, whether or not I choose to accept it. I make frequent stops to point out random digs, laundromats, clubs, thrift shops. My history cements itself here. It’s the little things.

Vanessa Canibano
For Her

The hotel was old,
And the door creaked as you opened it.
The fan in the bathroom was broken,
And so was the coffee
Machine.
The pool was cold, but the
Manager was very nice.
A fat Hispanic lady gave us our keys.
We drove to the gas station late
At night and grabbed cokes and
Chips
But no dip.
That night we drank and loved.
The next morning we woke and checked out,
I bought lunch and we ate ourselves full.
We had wine on our minds,
But in the moment, we were only
Drunk on each other.
And the old hotel
Was still there,
And the door was still squeaky.

Conner Castleberry

Bridget Whited
wanderland

burnt-nutty-bitter-sweet-divine-life
silky smooth, fluffy love
wavy beats emanated
from feline form.
empty spots behind-the-eyes
long breath in and outward
warmth, sun drips, spilt
caffeinated hallucination trip.
creature wanders into the bush,
treetop angels shitting on cars
weekend delights take a sharp turn
leg cramp, wince
my mind goes blank

Vanessa Canibano
Lazy Sunday

Earl grey light filters through window-blind slats and finds us, tangled like sailor knots, dewy skin like salt-sprayed ship masts on a navy mussed-sheet sea. (boungiorno amore mio)
You whisper my name into the peachfuzz curve at the base of my neck. (mi amor)
You whisper my name into the goosebumped flesh in the dip below my sternum. (mon amour)
You whisper without a sound as we sink deeper into the sheets and your fingers trace your words across the slope of my back, across the valley of my hips. (meu amado)
And the sound of your voice, rasping as it shakes off sleep, is like a song sung in foreign tongue that I still know all the words to. and I don't need to look out the window to know that your eyes put the sunrise to shame. (sole mio, mi sol, mon soliel)
Your lips brush mine and we are in bloom with wildflower kisses and ivy trail fingers arch my spine and the colors of the garden burst from my chest and spread to yours like sunflowers to the sky in July and I cannot hear a thing except the dust motes trapped in the everbrightening sunlight around us and your voice ringing in my ears without saying a word. (I love you, my heart, I adore you)

Emily Staufer
Pieces

She grew up broken.
She grew and grew, but her pieces never connected
Anyone she touched,
opened and bled,
fear and discomfort.
She was far too pure and innocent
to know her strength.

She cut them deeper than she could cut herself,
not because her edges were sharp,
but their skin was weak.

The wound waves of silence make her surface crack.
She lied there in her scattered pieces,
trying to put them together but only making it worse.

When does it end.
How does she fix it.
Nobody hears her shatter...

I hear her shatter.

Your edges are never too sharp for my embrace.
You cut me open and I bleed
compassion and love.
I will grow wounds,
but I will heal each time
to continue to put your pieces together.

Showcase you,
as the mosaic you are.

Zora Pullen
Sonatina to an Open Heart

“Entr’acte”

Slice it in half.
Watch as it opens and rips
As you pull apart,
Turning it inside out carefully.
The perfect way the flesh stretches,
Reaching outward,
Blooming elegantly
Like growing daffodils in spring.
Watch the trickles of hot-red blood
Flow peacefully
Through the open flesh,
As cool rivers do between mossy rocks
Pooling at the nadir of your latex-covered palms,
But escaping in drops
Through the open spaces of your fingers.
The ripping sound is softened thunder
Complaining in murmurs,
Cooing for mercy,
And begging for a sewing kit.

Nathali Ibarra
April 4th

You sit on the other side of the room and you weep
While I pretend that I can’t hear you,
Because I know that if you wanted me to reach out,
You would join me on the couch and curl up,
Bury your face into my arm,
And cling to me.

Instead, the air between us is empty,
The TV blaring an episode of Chopped
In the background.
I order you orange chicken and bubble tea
From Joy Yee, don’t even bother to ask
Because I know that you will probably just tell me
That you’re not hungry.

But when the delivery man comes,
I make you scoot over in the chair.
We hardly fit here together anymore, not like we used to,
But you eat your orange chicken,
Sniffles punctuating a dense, heavy silence.
When I put my leftovers down on the ottoman,
Your fingers curl between mine and I’m not surprised.

“My mom could have made that cake better than him,”
You tell me, pointing to the TV,
And I’m not surprised.

Rachel Jones
Silver Star Boy

When the summer sun had set and died down,
I glimpsed a boy drenched in the moonlight.
The night sky slept on his head as a crown,
A dark infinity streaked with starlight.
His hands, so hot, blazed brighter than the sun.
His eyes, though dark, could make anyone melt.
His smile meant danger but I could not run.
His mind was as vast as the ast’roid belt.
When he spoke, the world was brightly flooded,
The galaxy of his mind spilling out.
He spoke in languages so hot blooded,
Full of confidence, without fear or doubt.

As winter progressed, my feelings grew strong,
But moonlight boy left as the days grew long.

Leah Moss

Don’t Let the Sun See Me

Father, don’t let the sun see me today.

Let me lie exposed at mother’s grave. Today I am her shadow, her light. Today, I am living in two worlds, night and day. I’ll welcome the moon soon father, but let me sneak away from the house towards the sunlit rays filtering the colors of my mother’s memories.
I’ll sing the graces and gifts of the moon tonight.

But first, let me provide mother with a chance to see.

Isaac Winter
Emily Murman

The Mallorys
Hag Stones on the Eerie

We drove up to the eerie shore in the milky morning hours
head bumping, breath condensing on the cool windows of the old
van
coming to a soft skidding stop in the gritty gravel lot.

as my cousins take out fishing rods, tackle boxes, nets,
pulling on thick rubber boots all the way up their skinny thighs
I start off along the beach in search of treasure.

my relatives stand like five orange-clad pillars in churning grey-
blue water
as I walk through the sand, backwards, hunched over, dragging my
toes,
pushing aside the powdery top layer to reveal soft silt-sand.

like a monk meticulously drawing mandalas I carve my way across
the shore
stopping every couple of feet to dig into the wet earth and pull up
a smooth cold stone, previously unseen, smelling like lake salt and
dirt and magic.

the pocket of my blue fleece slowly filling with white rocks as the
morning grows long
like a collection of teeth and marbles and crystals, systematic color
preference
suddenly deviating as I stop and stoop for a deceptively plain flat
stone.

through the center of my average rock was a hole, perfectly round,
like a ring
big enough to fit my ring finger all the way through
as though the beach was proposing to me as simply as it could.

standing at the edge of the shore, cool water and little guppies
playing at my toes
I show my gift from the lake to my aunt, holding a catfish by its lip, she bends down and tells me it’s a hag stone, witchcraft, a portal to a dangerous otherworld.

and so I sit on the beach and flip my stone over and over, still cool in my sweaty palms
and when no one is looking I hold the hole up to my eye and peer through
and though the trees still look green and the water blue and the sky grey and the sand brown
I feel the wind change ever so slightly, appearing like visible glittering tendrils in the air.

the hag stone now sits quietly on my shelf
next to a bottle of green beach glass, a jar of white stones, a clear vase full of feathers
and even though my fingers have grown its still a perfect fit
and even though years have passed, it still glitters like water catching the light and still smells like lake salt and dirt and magic.

Emily Staufer
Botanists

The hedgewizard had lived on the corner of the street for as long as anyone could remember.

“I heard he used to be a rockstar.”

“I heard he stole a kid’s bike and used it to build a robot.”

“My sister says he hasn’t even been a human for a long time.”

The children were—as children are—curious more than anything. They wondered how old he was. They wondered if he could speak to animals. They wondered if he ate, and if so, where he bought his groceries. They wondered if he could fly. They did not wonder if he could see them through the cracks in the fence (which he could) or if he heard their small voices drift in through the open window (which he did).

The truth of the matter was that the hedgewizard was a hundred and sixty four years old, owned a very intelligent cat, and had a particular appreciation for ripe cheeses, which he had delivered from the farmer’s market in the adjacent town. He also could, in fact, fly. He often waltzed through the air around midnight—far past anyone’s bedtime—to sit on top of the telephone pole and watch the stars get bright.

Ignorant to all of these truths and privy to many other more and less fantastic truths of their own devising, the children stood across the street from the yard and watched the overflowing flora grow taller and thicker over the years as they themselves grew upwards and outwards. When they left—to a meat market apprenticeship, to pastry school, to a chandlery—they quietly forgot about him, about the shoes hanging by their laces from a telephone wire.

Rebecca Reitemeier
The Lunar Phase

Like an infant in a womb
I take my time to loom.
Waxing crescent—I take a peek.
I see an arena full of stars that reek
of dreams waiting to be portered,
I take another step—first quarter.
Halfway out of the sheet
I now see where the earth and horizon meet.
Concepts and constructs become more clear,
The world encourages me to show it my complete sphere.
Gibbous! I start to flare.
Though I wonder if this is all a snare.

Full moon—uncovered.
I show them my scars and grace,
My craters and crests.
Peculiar looks, careful evaluation.
My beauty standing in a trial
In front of nations.
I question why I revealed
Should’ve kept myself safe and sealed.
Waning, I plan to return.
Weaning, I promise that my sight
Is something that humanity will have to earn.

Sushmeena Parihar
Paris, 1922

It’s a warm night in the summer of 1922. Paris, the immortal city of love, has been struck with a suffocating heat wave, temperatures climbing well into the nineties, breaking several records. The buildings twinkle under a brilliant harvest moon, enchanted with the gentle touch of La Luna. It’s too hot to stay inside, and the citizens of Paris amuse themselves out-of-doors.

Young children run down the hot pavement, burning the soles of their feet in the hope of flagging down the ice-man with his relieving cooler. Old couples silently sway on the sidewalks, lost in their own world, reminiscing about the good days when the world didn’t seem so small and the air didn’t echo with the endless shelling and screams of dying soldiers.

The old feel young in their memories, the young old after the war.

But tonight, it’s okay to forget the past. The future is insistent. The city seems bathed in a fairy tale, a night where everything could happen…and does.

The name of the club is indecipherable, the lead paint peeling away on the swinging sign. But it’s a famous haunt for locals and does a steady business catering to wandering soldiers looking for fast women, to young widows seeking a father for their children, to joking teenagers desperate to lose their innocence.

The air is thick with cigarette smoke, and a band is loud enough to hear from the street outside (not uncommon at this hour, jazz blasting out the windows and doors, all of them thrown open to combat the heat off all the dancing bodies). The dance-floor is thick with excited couples, and there’s a buzz of drunkenness in the air. There’s no need for alcohol in a club like this, though. It’s easy to just get caught up in the moment.

But not everyone’s feeling festive tonight.

There’s a nervous young man in the sidelines of the nightclub, nursing an untouched cocktail and watching the sweaty dancers with a hint of jealousy. He is American, so naturally he is awkward at such parties, and all he wants to do is leave.
“Aren’t you a bit young for a soldier?”
He turns and for a moment, he forgets to breathe. There is a girl beside him, with long legs and cherry lips and catlike eyes watching him in amusement. She’s elegantly sitting on a barstool (was it even possible to sit on a barstool elegantly?) and a cigarette dangles from her hand.

“I’m not a soldier,” he mutters, mentally kicking himself for such a mediocre response.

She raises a thin eyebrow, curiosity piqued. “Oh?”
Her perfect English is accented, he notices. A French girl talking to him? He wishes he tried harder to learn the infernal language.

“I’m a doctor.” Sort of. He’s finishing the final stages of his internship back in New York City, but she doesn’t need to know that. It sounds more impressive this way. But she’s a clever one and seems to sense the lying undertone. Her eyes narrow.

“An American doctor in Paris? Goodness, you are a mystery.” She takes another slow drag on her cigarette, blowing a stream of white smoke out her lips. He stares transfixed. Usually he finds it so objectionable when a girl smokes, but this creature’s an exception.

“What’s your name?” he challenges, drawing himself to his full height.

She smiles with all the coyness of a chessmaster. “Francesca. And yours?”

He feels almost pained to tell her. “Augustus.”

She pauses, the cigarette halfway to her lips. “That’s a cute name.” And somehow, there a tone of sincerity in her voice and he stares, surprised.

“Really?”

“I never say anything I don’t mean,” she says smoothly. Their eyes meet and a genuine smile is passed between. For a moment, there’s a nagging feeling of familiarity as they look at each other, and he suddenly wonders if she’s single. Up on the stage, the band finishes their number to raucous applause. A quiet
piano begins playing and a wave of soft jazz washes over the audience. The atmosphere shifts considerably and the two not-quite-strangers look away, a bit uncomfortable.

He supposes he should make a move now, since there are a few men glancing with interest in her direction, and he extends a hesitant hand. “D’you want to dance?”

She takes it and unfolds from the barstool. Their fingers entwine and her hand feels soft and warm and pleasant. There’s no air of terrifying expectation from Francesca, no expression of boredom, and he begins to feel a bit more confident as he leads her to the dance-floor. A woman on the stage begins crooning a slow love song, as he places his hands on her hips. He can feel himself turning red as they begin to sway.

He isn’t a very good dancer, but at least he’s not stepping on her feet. They’re both silent, but it’s not uncomfortable. It’s a nice sort of silence and he doesn’t feel the need to chatter meaninglessly. He’s got a beautiful girl in his arms, an empty night, and so he relaxes.

They twirl around the dance floor for several minutes, both secretly hoping the song will go a bit longer, but eventually it ends. They pull away from each other reluctantly, but their hands are still entwined and he’s relieved when she doesn’t bring it up. Some things are better left unspoken. He isn’t sure what happened back there, but when he glances at Francesca, he knows he just can’t leave the club now.

It’s nearing midnight when the last dance ends and both Gus and Francesca are tired. They’re pretty much the only couple left in the club now, and they have the floor to themselves. There’s no music playing and the band is packing up. The barman is shining his glasses, the attendees are walking out the door, and there’s a sense of finality to the evening after seven dances. They glance at each other, both a little giddy after drinking a few glasses of cheap wine.

Feeling reckless, he leans over and places a kiss on her red lips. She tastes like wine and sweat and a thousand other flavors.
combining nicely. When he pulls away, his heart is pounding wildly and he stares down at her with an unspoken question written in his eyes. She looks up, her face pinking in a pleasant blush, and nods.

He writes down his number and the hotel he’s staying at on the back of a menu. She writes down her number and her apartment address on the back of a theater brochure and they swap contact information. They don’t talk. There’s no need for words here.

After several more kisses exchanged, each sweeter than the last, they finally part. She goes left, he goes right. He tucks the brochure in his pocket, a smile on his lips and an invigorated spring in his step. It’s raining now, and steam rises from the scorched pavements, and he can’t help but let out a small laugh as the water streams down his face.

Madeleine Mynatt
Dear, um... Geez,
I know we haven’t spoken,
my voice is sounding
dull.
I’ve been trying to squeeze you into my life, but
my life is feeling full.
How is Okinawa?
What do you see with your military mind?
I’ve tried so hard to find you,
but I’m lost each and every time.
How much of yourself would you say has forever changed, seas
away, where foreign is home, where all alone you dutifully stay?
Are you OK?
Can you show me how you mark tempo for your patriotic march?
When you line up in rows, and all the mirrors play their part.
They’re staring ahead, never breaking a sweat, You’re the toughest
of them all, Listen, you’re the toughest, I bet.
But strength beyond bones doesn’t account for your fears, I know
how it’s been, and I wish you were here. You’re fighting a demon
that bullets just won’t destroy.
Depression is a battle I can’t help you fight from Illinois. The mil-
itary mentality has wound you up like a toy, Eagerly marching till
they tell you to stop. Take a moment, breathe. Find a way to come
out on top.
I can’t—
You’re so far away, so what the hell can I do? My tears are beating
patterns, abstractly creating memories of us two.
Don’t let me go.
There’s still so much I have to show you, I know it’s been hard, but
what the hell can I do? Please,
I can’t—
The vision that you’ve created—or now debated—is one I look to
whenever I’m feeling lost, Entailed by what I will and won’t
do. You’ve shaped out an image that I look up to with pride, Walk about the earth—but don’t walk, run—no don’t run, march— Forget marching, glide.

How is Okinawa? What do you see with your military mind, I’m trying so hard to find you, but this place I do not know. Keep your mind in wonder if you can find it.

I know we haven’t spoken, My voice is choked up, My heart broke and so what? I can’t make sense of anything without you, Please. Find yourself along the way. Find yourself, and don’t let go. You’ve done enough, thank you for your service, Bro.

With Love, Your little brother.

Adrian Perez
“Falling in Love When You’re Young is not a Prerequisite to Living Correctly” — A Portrait of Connor Manning
Waking Life

“I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.”
- Theodore Roethke

My grief, a loaded vessel,
awakened by the snow.
A wake, in remembrance
of an aged man,
nicotine-stained teeth
in the shape of decay,
un-awakened mind.
I arise, waking life
without respect to time.
I wake to dream
the lucid memories
of a once awakened innocence.
Late nights,
crowded bed,
brother and I
warm, in our
ripened bundles,
a wake of loose limbs
and messy heads.
Awake, I ponder,
what makes a man,
what makes a father.
If you were to awaken,
would I awake to morning
at peace.
Frosty windows,
aromas of cinnamon
upon eggy bread, “Wake up, sleepy head.”
Denial, first stage,
I wake to hurt. Achy bones,
heavy heart,
my somber senses surrounded
by a mourning shroud.
What was lost
has since been found.
The Awakening.

Vanessa Canibano

Emily Murman

The Soul
Grab the Gun

There was a thud,
And a cat’s howl outside.
“Grab the gun!”
My dad yelled, so I did.
I walked out the front door, and ran
Around the house to the back deck.
I saw raccoons running to the tree line,
So I aimed and fired.
I don’t think I hit anything,
Although my mother was convinced I did.
The cats were frightened,
But not hurt.
The oldest one, ear already split from fights with strays,
Sat on the railing,
Pupils wide and tail swishing.
I went to pet her,
But she ran.
I couldn’t blame her.
I was just as frightened as she was.

Conner Castleberry
A Partial List of Reasons I’ve Cried

Reasons I’ve cried may be, but aren’t limited to:

ASPCA Commercials
   The majority of humanity can agree on one thing: We hate Sarah McLachlan.

Being Mediocre
   Seems to be my super power sometimes. Averageness. “Not Bad” may as well be tattooed across my forehead.

Couldn’t Properly Pronounce “Spaghetti” After Dental Surgery
   Every time I tried to tell people what I had a craving for, I would say “SPUH” and spit out several bloody cotton balls. This became very frustrating because no one seemed to understand my need for pasta.

Drunkenness
   I’m an emotional drunk. I’m that crying girl in the bathroom. I think this is why I’m not invited to parties…

Elephants Get Depressed and Grieve when A Family Member Dies
   Stupid National Geographic. How dare you? Those elephants were having an intimate moment, and there you are, filming the whole thing. How would you like it if someone brought a camera to your son’s funeral? When I imagined that baby elephant as Dumbo, that’s when shit hit the fan.

Frustrated by my ADD
   Can’t decide when to focus, so most of the time reading goes the way it does for those who are sleep deprived: reading the same passage over and over, and still not absorbing any of it. I promise, I’m not stupid. Or lazy.
“God, Why Are You So Annoying?”
Many People, Circa 1999.

Having the Ability to Say, “I’m fine,” With Perfection
Even when my lungs are burning for oxygen, my skin is
flushed, and there’s no more tears left for my eyes to give. From
the other side of the door, all you’d hear is a perfect, “Yeah, I’m
okay.” And you’d think nothing of it. I’ve had a lot of practice.

Ice Dancers Were Too Beautiful
Don’t start. I know, it was dumb, but let me tell you, those
sequined outfits had an effect on me that no one else will ever be
able to replicate.

Just Needed a Long Cry
Ever felt like having a good cry? I have one (as this list sug-
gests) pretty often. There’s something comforting about letting it
all go. Had a long day? Have a cry, then a nap.

Knew Nothing Would Ever Cure Me
There is currently no medial cure for depression, anxiety,
or attention deficit disorder.

Laughed Myself to Tears Over A Parrot Attempting to Pick Up
A Light While Murmuring, “What The
Fuck”
His little talons were desperately trying to grasp this little
red dot in front of him, but it couldn’t quite get it, so he repeats,
“What the fuck?” several times over, each time getting angrier and
angrier. What really got me was the thought that someone had
taught him this phrase, and how it can be used to express anger.
Missed My Dog
She’s the best friend I’ve ever had and we’ve never had more than a one-sided conversation. Also, she’s super fluffy, and I missed seeing her do dumb things because her hair was in her eyes, such as running into walls, or looking up at you when you call her name in the way a child looks at an adult from under a too-big baseball cap – head lollled back, eyebrows up.

New Prescription
Another pill to pop. Something else to fix me. Not permanently though. This is just a band-aid. I’ll always need fixing.

Old Woman Finished A Marathon
Eighty-years-old, this woman was! Eighty! God, I was proud of her, and her family was waiting at the finish line, cheering her on. It was amazing.

Plane Tickets Were Too Expensive
I had $100 to get me home for the first time in months. Obviously, I didn’t make it.

“Quiet! Shut Up! No One Wants to Hear You Speak!”
Things I hear in my head whenever communicating with another human being.

Realizing No One Will Ever Love Me More Than My Mother
Ain’t nobody else gonna drive twelve hours round trip just to have lunch with me.

Spent Christmas Alone, Hiding in The Bathroom
No one from my family reached out, asked if I was okay. They didn’t seem to mind that I’d disappeared for the past few hours. Things went on, business as usual.
Thirteenth Birthday
My dad got drunk, bad drunk. He tried to drive me home. We almost wrapped around a tree. My mom wouldn’t let me see him for six months after that.

Unrequited Love
Do I even have to explain this one? That shit hurts.

Vile People Told Me “Women Don’t Deserve to Exist”
Okay, thirteen-year-old virgin, tell me again how you came to exist on this planet? Imagine saying that shit to your mother and how hard she’d want to hit you.

Writer’s Block, Unsolved for Months
Nothing I wrote was any good, I wasn’t doing my character’s justice. (See also, Being Mediocre.)

Xenophobia of My Grandparents, Children of Immigrants
This I just don’t understand. My great-grandfather couldn’t find a job because “Irish need not apply,” but you, his son, have the audacity to put that situation on someone else? But it’s okay because they’re brown people? You should be ashamed.

Yawned Too Much
One of those fits where you trigger someone else’s yawn, and their yawn triggers yours again, et cetera, et cetera…

Zoloft was Missed, Resulting In a Week-Long Depressive State
The thing about anti-depressants is missing one pill can trigger a bad day, and a bad day is enough for my motivation to take care of myself to take a hike. One missed pill leads to a week of feeling worthless.

Natalie Briggs
When you visit for the first time, everyone smiles at you. You smile back. You fail to notice how taut their skin is against their perfect identical teeth. You do not see the wires jerking their limbs and the broken irises reflecting none of the horror within.

Cold sunlight is streaming through the dusty window, with the damp smell of mold seeping into your bones. A centipede crawls through the cracks, followed by a vast hoard of grey spiders. There are ants everywhere, leaving small bite marks across your legs, and sometimes in the middle of the night, you swear you hear the faintest buzzing under your blankets.

You are a freshman in Lois Hall and you are afraid.

It is Brain Awareness Week. You are aware of brains, as you touch and caress them with rubber fingers and cracked smiles. You are very aware of the brains, and they are aware of your sleepless nights, your scribbled homework, your backbreaking exhaustion. You are nearly done in the lab—one more hour slowly ticking by, just one more hour until you can rest—but this is Brain Awareness week and you are a Neuroscience major.

You will always be aware of brains, and they will always be watching.

It is winter and you are cold. Food is scarce and the heater sputtered out, leaving you with nothing but darkness and a keen awareness of your own mortality. White walkers roam the quad, searching for unwary students to devour. The blizzard howls like a tortured wolf as you pile another log onto the makeshift fire.

Blinking back tears, you shiver as your breath turns to frost.
All the colleges in the Chicagoland area have canceled—rescue missions have been made for those unlucky souls trapped in the mountains of Lake Shore Drive. You glance at your e-mail, hoping for class to be canceled and still, there is nothing but silence and your looming Chemistry homework.

The cafeteria is filled with people. The shattering of a glass prompts mocking laughter and cheering. People stand on tables, their smiles frozen and their eyes glassy. Why are we cheering? Who are we cheering for? Why can’t we stop clapping?

Madeleine Mynatt
Distorted Dogma

All the quiet sounds of a Tuesday afternoon were lost to the ruckus of yips and thuds coming from my son’s room. I held a roll of duct tape in one hand and a spray bottle in the other. Leashes were banned now, so I had to improvise. I stood in front of my son’s door and heard a growl that desperately tried to be menacing, but it was just too cute to take seriously. However, I could hear his frustration and restlessness through his violent movements, and I understood his desire to break free of his room. Or maybe it was just mother’s intuition, I don’t know. My fingers pinched the doorknob, gave a twist and pushed the door open. The banging had stopped and it was quiet.

He looked at me, his doe eyes tiny, gleaming reflectors in the dark, as he stood poised on his doggy bed, his finger and thumb squeezing the life out of a plush squeaky toy. His tongue hung out to the side of his mouth and his dog ear twitched slightly while his human ear sat poised and still. He shifted his weight from one leg to another nervously. His tail stuck up like the rest of the small clumps of hair that littered his body like islands in an ocean of smooth, white skin.

“C’mon Toby, let’s go buddy, let’s go,” I said in an energetic, baiting way. “I gotta let you out now so I have some time to start dinner before your dad gets home.”

A moment passed. He stood frozen as if his room would camouflage him if he remained still. My words lingered in the air before silently, like smoke, slipped away. His nostrils flared and his bulb of a nose gleamed shiny with sweat. I grew tense and held out the spray bottle, pointing it towards him.

“We aren’t going to get into this again, are we Toby,” I asked. “The tape hurt your ankles last time, huh? And the spray got in your eyes, remember? Let’s go now, ok? C’mon boy, let’s go.”

He turned his head quickly towards the window and suddenly launched off his hind legs like a little gremlin. I dove after him and snagged his ankles, pulling his feet out from under him. I wrapped the tape wildly around his ankles with swift precision.
The boy yelped and jolted his body to slither out of his reigns, throwing his elbows down on my hands to break my grip. I grabbed him underneath his armpits and dragged his limp and squirming body out of the room and through the front door.

He stopped moving once the breeze licked his skin. The rays lit up the neighborhood like the sun itself. I kept pulling him through the grass before I sat him down in the sandbox.

“All right bud, go ahead, do your business,” I said. He stuck his tongue out and ran at me, pinching the air with his finger and thumb like little claws. I laughed and pushed him away playfully.

“Go do your business you little devil, go on,” I said, chuckling. “You gotta go quick now, you need to be in the bath before your dad comes home.”

He pulled down his pants and crouched. I turned my back to him, giving him some privacy, and looked out on the neighborhood. Some of the husbands were already arriving home, their bunny ears poking through baseball caps and their cat claws protruding through leather gloves. A few mothers walked their children down the street and would playfully pinch their sons’ cottontail or flay out their daughters’ whiskers while the children stood in a circle, playing thumb war games for squeaky toys and Disney blankets. The mothers wore flowery dresses and lipstick, waving elegantly when they passed. They found some way to control their squirming, rambunctious kids while also bragging about which of their husbands was the cutest or the most adorable or the softest. Their voices rose over the crying and screaming of a dirt-caked human child dressed in rags, which knelt next to a disemboweled man (most likely killed by another man). They can be such savages, humans. Well, except for me of course and the other mothers. We have some decency compared to those heartless, selfish savages. I wished the Newfoundland would show up soon to shut up that screeching human child. I won’t be able to put Toby down for a nap with that thing bawling outside the house like that.

I took Toby inside and chased him down the hall and into the bathroom. He turned on the water, and I adjusted it in tiny
increments between hot and cold, with the smallest of centimeters making the biggest of differences. I poured in the bubble bath soap and gave him a couple tennis balls.

“Now Toby, don’t shake the water off like you did last time ok? It got the whole bathroom wet,” I said. “Make sure to use this towel ok? This green one right here. Be a good little boy now, all right? You’re such a good boy.”

Closing the door, I heard the water swaying and splashing behind me. I walked down the hall and went into the kitchen, reaching high into the cabinets, my fingers feeling around for a box when I heard the doggy door flap open. A deep, rumbling WOOF brought a smile to my face.

“Maxey! Oh Maxey poo, hey there boy,” I said ecstatically, rushing over and squeezing him tightly, his fur tickling my nose. “Honey honey honey,” he repeated, his tongue licking behind my ear. “I thought about you and those Purina bacon strips all day.”

We laughed and he pushed me down to the ground, licking my face and my neck and slobbering a little on my shirt. I could feel his tail smacking my knees over and over again and I grabbed it playfully as I looked down underneath him, noticing his red rocket was fully erect.

“Later,” I told him, letting go of his tail. “Toby is in the bath right now so we wouldn’t have much time.”

“That’s fine by me,” he said, panting. “I’m just excited to see you, that’s all.”

I slipped out from under him and went back into the kitchen. I grabbed the box of Purina from the shelf and poured him a bowl. He went over and nibbled at it, pecking away at his kibble.

“You know, even as a puppy you weren’t a fast eater,” I said, watching him take his time. “You just ate little bits at a time. The bowl was almost too big for you.”

“I like savoring it,” he said. “I think other dogs eat too quickly and don’t even taste the food they’re eating. Besides, I learned by watching you eat. I don’t see anything wrong with
eating daintily like a human."

“I'm not saying it's a bad thing honey, I think it's actually quite adorable.”

I knelt down and pet his head, smoothing his fur over as he ate. His tail began to wag a little and he quickened his eating pace before suddenly stopping.

“I almost forgot;” he said with a mouthful. “There was a fetus stand outside work today and I bought a couple packs. Think we can mix it with bacon?”

“Oh come on Max, you know how I feel about using pig products,” I said, opening the back door to let the breeze in. “We shouldn't feel like it’s ok to eat them just because someone labeled them as ugly animals.”

“Well, first off, they’re undoubtedly ugly and second, they taste good, so I don’t see an issue with it.”

“I think some pigs can be very cute,” I said, picking up his bowl and putting it in the sink. “I just don’t want to eat anything that I can see myself cuddling with.”

“Okay honey, that’s fine, we don’t have to have any pig tonight. I just don’t know what to mix these fetuses with.”

“Are they free roaming or caged?”

“Probably caged. I don’t know. They’re humans so I don’t give a shit.”

He pushed the package towards me and I glanced down at the four frozen human fetuses, huddled in succession next to one another. The package didn’t say if they were free roaming or not. It didn’t say much at all. All it had was a label and a faded price tag in the corner.

“Maybe I can mix them with sliced bat or something,” I said to myself as Max began to sniff around the house, sticking his snout towards the ceiling.

“Can you smell that?” he asked.

The quiet that followed his words was interrupted by the crescendo of thuds coming closer down the hallway. Toby sprung
past me, butt naked, his fur spitting soapy water as he went. He howled like a beast and flew out the through already open back door.

I frantically called out to him to come back. He was sprinting, nose tilted up to the sky, at a small bush where a human child, boney and covered in muck, stumbled out and ran into the trees. Toby gave chase, half-mad, and his white, naked butt disappeared into the trees. Harmless yips and childish howls grew and burst into ravishing barks and throaty snarls that tore viciously through the pines.

Jonathan Call

Bridget Whited
An Existential Crisis With A Specimen

The ooey-gooiest specimen stood on Dylan’s patio one night, “You and me, pal, we got blue eyes; we’re from up there,” pointing at the stars. Dylan reflected on that moment, concluding that perhaps all seem to be suffering from one psychic affliction or another. Then Dylan stood up from his hammock. He scoped the ooey-gooiest specimen once more; its green skin seemed to illuminate in the moonlight. Dylan realized that the ooey-gooiest specimen was right—they both did share the same shade of blue eyes, as well as very similar eye shapes. He also realized that, despite looking like an alien, the ooey-gooiest specimen spoke perfect English. He began to ponder about lifeforms from other planets, but then thought he was being stupid because aliens don’t exist! The ooey-gooiest specimen, however, was evidence that extraterrestrials were very much real and alive and somehow accessed Earth and were here to skin him alive and take his organs back to their home planet and display them in glass vaults for centuries to come. Or something like that. Dylan continued to stare at the ooey-gooiest specimen and pondered about both their existences on the same planet. Do aliens share a similar brain structure as humans? Are they more intelligent? Do they suffer like humans do (not like Dylan was depressed, per se, but the dreadful pit in the bottom of his stomach never seemed to go away lately)? Dylan finally mustered up the strength to speak to the ooey-gooiest specimen, then looked down to notice the skin on his arm was melting from his body. Exasperated from the ooey-gooiest specimen’s appearance and life itself, Dylan closed his eyes and murmured, “What the fuck.”

Sophia Roumeliotis
Strawberry Cheesecake

I freeze.
My heart seems to stop for way too long, and then it begins to pound, unbearably loud in my chest. The blood that it sends circulating around my system is slushy and cold, full of icy shards that threaten to tear me apart from the inside. I know that sometime soon, those shards are going to make their way back to my heart and utterly destroy it. Hell, it might be happening already.

My eyes, frozen and fixed, haven’t moved from Dustin. He’s still sitting there next to Marina, one hand on her thigh, the other holding a forkful of strawberry cheesecake to her lips. She smiles at him and parts her red lips to allow for him to feed her. She takes the bite, chews, and then swallows it all down. Dustin takes a sip of wine, and then offers the glass to her to wash down the dessert. She declines it, instead opting to sample an even sweeter dessert.

This time, the dessert is my husband’s lips.
She leans in toward him, and he shows no sign of backing down. And then they’re together, their lips fusing, their pulses racing, their affection crescendoing.
The shards finally reach my heart, and the ice shatters.
I am no longer a woman incased in ice, forced to watch her husband’s infidelity. I am a fireball, a blaze, an uncontrollable inferno.
I storm back into the fancy dining hall, my heels clicking loudly against the floor. I stop a mere inches away from where they’re locking lips.
Dustin immediately jerks away from Marina, springing to his feet. “Christine! I swear, I can explain,” he says, holding up both hands cautiously. He gently guides me away from Marina, back outside of the dining room. “I swear, it’s not what it looks like.”

“Oh really? Because it looks like my husband was making out with someone who is not his wife.” I keep my voice calm and
professional to avoid causing a scene, but in my head everything is spinning out of control. The battle between the ice and the fire is raging within me, keeping me sane in the meantime, but one is going to win out in the end. It’s just a matter of which. Should I shut down and let this play out, or play by my own rules?

“Christine, please. Marina is just a coworker. She’s just a coworker. There’s absolutely nothing going on.”

“Dustin, I’m not an idiot. You kissed her.”

“Technically, she kissed me.”

The fire begins to win the battle, melting the ice a bit.

“And you didn’t stop her,” I counter. “You didn’t push her away.”

“I didn’t want to be rude.”

Did the ice ever stand a chance? The flames roar, hotter and hotter.

“So you let another woman kiss you? While you knew your own wife was just around the corner?”

He sighs and places a hand on my shoulder. “Listen, Christine. You’re my wife, and I love you. I’ll always love you. It’s just… Marina is just…”

“She’s just what, Dustin?”

He abruptly turns away, tugging at his hair. “God, she’s just…”

I glance back at where they kissed, but Marina is nowhere to be seen.

“How long?” I ask, my lips twitching into a slight smile. Dustin fidgets with the cuffs of the sleeves. “It hasn’t been long…”

“Dustin.” At the tone of my voice, he turns around again. “Uh, around a month? It wasn’t my idea, I swear. It just… happened. But I swear I still love you, Christine. You’re the only one who matters, love. Marina is the past. I swear…”

That ice? Non-existent. I am a living flame, my whole body alight, fueled by his lies. I glance around the hallway he’s pulled me
to and notice a rolling cart loaded with dirty dishes from the dining room. Atop the pile of porcelain platters and silver spoons is a knife, which is still stained red with the remnants of the strawberry cheesecake. My hand reaches out for it almost automatically, propelled by the fire burning within me. The moment my fingers make contact, the knife seems to burn red hot, but I hold strong, feeling no pain aside from that of my destroyed heart.

Dustin notices, his eyes widening. “What are you doing with that? Put that down, Christine.”

Maybe if I were still frozen, ruled by passive ice I would, but nothing about me is cold anymore. I curl my fingers around the hilt of the knife and flash him a tight smile.

“Hey Dustin?”

He looks terrified. Absolutely terrified.

Good.

My smile breaks loose and I lunge forward, the burning hot knife leading the way.

In the end, he only ends up with a single stab wound in his right bicep. As much as I wanted to aim for his chest and show him exactly how much pain he had caused me, I restrained myself. As soon as that knife buried itself in his skin, the fire within me was extinguished. I guess that I don’t need it anymore, since Marina left the state and Dustin moved out of our apartment. Everything has fallen apart, but they can only get better, I suppose.

Leah Moss
The Ditch

Surrounded by the dirty walls with faith in the sky above, alone with my thoughts until the gracious sun falls.

Each morn I pray for good company in this hole, for each morn was pain until that fateful day.

Emotions impair my speech, the jarring memories resurface once the towering figure before me stuck to me like a leech.

Gently wrapped my trust with care, like a fragile gift, and time dissects it carefully until it dissolves into dust.

We uncaged our imaginations, hoping they would fuse together, only to nibble on our reasoning and consume us with our frustrations.

My empty promises to blame, I hoped one of us would cut the vein but the truth aided your escape and so I remain, shrouded in shame.

Shannon Dacey
And it’s this suffocating self-absorption—dragging with it its correlative, self-doubt—when you’re just trying to get through your day. But instead of boycotting the chaos, nightmares revisited and you read several stories by a male student that imagined your death and funeral. And you know that this male student is still writing the gruesome stories about the way flies will eat from your rotting body, about the exact moment you die, and what you’ll wear in your coffin. The male student laughs at his desk and you see his eyes turn completely black as he continues to write. You know you’re obsessed with your looks and thoughts, but you’ve never taken the time to think about ugly moments in your life. The doubt about your clouded future is driven by the ideas given to you by this one male student. The male student who everyone else thought was either too quiet or too troubled or “like, needs serious help ASAP.” The same male student who came to your side when you were found crying in the bathroom when no one else was there. The same male student whose eyes lit up with excitement and wonder when you walked past him. You stare at your reflection from your handheld mirror and try to adjust your image because you’re self-absorbed and full of self-doubt, and you just want to look nice so people will like and compliment you. You’re staring at your reflection, but cannot quite see anything in particular and your life flashes before your eyes as you imagine the male student writing your cause of death over and over again.

Sophia Roumeliotis
Burial

Disclaimer: This piece of prose contains sensitive material

It’s not that I didn’t care that they were looking for me. I did but there was nothing I could do. I tried to speak but your sock was too far into my throat that I couldn’t quite get the words out. I tried to raise my hands but my arms were stiff in a way I had never known. My body, a fucked up collage of small twigs and dead leaves buried near the ravine. My body, an abstract painting of violent blotches in shades of deep violet and streaky strokes of crimson; a drip painting of sludge and cum on a smooth canvas. Lying face down I am the twisted deity you pray for and about because my holy temple has been destroyed.

If only I hadn’t worn that mini skirt you like. You know, the black one I wore with knee high socks. “Great legs. What time do they open?” you said. I wore it because it was hot. I look away and pretend not to hear. If only I hadn’t taken the subway that day, at that exact time. “Hey, are you butt dialing? Because I swear that ass is calling me.” My palms begin to sweat and the subway car is over a hundred degrees. Looking in the opposite direction, I focus on my reflection. Amongst the whoosh that blurs the graffiti subway walls, a ghost of a frightened girl stares back. The humiliation that emits from her body is enough to asphyxiate the entire subway car. Like an all too familiar old friend, in the depths of my guts an ocean of revulsion boils, it stings, it roars of shut the fuck up medley stew. If only I hadn’t accidentally smiled at a you on the subway because now you’re getting the wrong idea, I can see it in your eyes. “That’s a nice shirt, can I take you out of it?” You laugh. You think that the way I dress is meant specifically for you to fantasize your wicked and perverted fantasies over because all my life you have taught your ape brethren to sexualize every inch of my body, leaving no say for me. I begin to dislike my body and every curve that’s been so perfectly molded to my skin because to
you my body is a wonderland that you don’t need permission to. So, I, uncomfortably, count down the number of stops left; I can feel your eyes penetrating my body and grasping more than my skin, but less than my bones. Like a starved beast, you crave my flesh and the very thing that make my eyes glimmer.

At 33rd Street, after what feels like an eternity, I finally step off of the large suffocating tin can. Without looking back, I begin to walk. The crowd of people create a loud roar and I find solace in being able to blend in. As I reach the last couple of steps, the once radiating yellow dot in the sky is now a bare charcoal indigo ocean. The first few blocks were a piece of cake. It’s when you knock over a trash can that I begin to worry.

The concrete pavement stops being a sidewalk and more of a treadmill. The oxygen supply is diminishing, so before my lungs run out of air I take my cellphone out. But you see, before I can dial for help, the screen stays dark because in my teenage daydream bullshit I had forgotten to charge my phone because stuff like this isn’t supposed to happen. Not on my way home from school. Not when my family is waiting for me to get home. And not when I’m sixteen and have my whole life ahead of me.

As I’m making my way through the forested byway, I can feel myself getting engulfed further, deeper into the night’s charcoal dark abyss. The moonlight, a crescent reminder that I didn’t indeed fall into the underbelly of the beast, casts an eerie shadow all over the unkempt landscape. I can feel a centipede of apprehension twist and crawl throughout my insides. The sudden smell of damp and musty dirt slithers into my nostrils. I try to convince myself that there aren’t any monsters hiding in the dark, so my anxiety and fright are just simply stupid figments of my imagination. And yet. And yet, I can hear your heartbeat in the darkness counting down the minutes before… And I can sense the seismic pulsating waves radiating from your cock, tightening their strong vibrations over my body like chains. Smolder. Dense. Shrill.
The air is thick and I can hear my screeching thoughts bouncing back to me from the leaves. Everything in my body tells me to run, but the fear is paralyzing, and I’m scared to even look, to confirm, but I do.

You’re taller than I thought, and look older. Much, much older. My voice, you take it away. It’s not a fucking compliment. Your hands are rough and wrapped around my head to cover my mouth—they hurt. I hear you whisper in my ear, “shh… shh…shut up… I’m not going to hurt you… I just want to love you… A lot, baby girl.” You pull me close to your body and gyrate behind me, your hand slightly touching my breast. By now, everything looks like a devilish blur. The howling wind makes the trees sway like waves in the ocean during a wild storm. And amongst the tall grass, I could have sworn I saw ghoulish creatures perform the ritual dance of a thousand deaths. I want to stop crying, but I can’t. I want to wiggle free and call out for help, but you just won’t let me. The fact of the matter is, you’re too strong and thirsty for me.

You taste like cheap cigarettes and a revolting pathetic must. You whisper in my ear that my wispy pixie breath brings you back to life. My nails try and scrape you off my body, but like a parasite you will not latch off. The tears roll down my cheeks into the soiled ground. And when I don’t look at you, you force my face with your tainted hands to stare into your eyes. “Look at me when I fuck you,” you said. It’s like you need me to see deep into your soul and know who you were, like really know. But all I see is nothing. I just feel your rough hands gripping my arms desperately like you want me to find you an answer. And when I can’t do that for you, you take your fist and strike my face. The more I cry and scream the angrier you get. So you take my hair and start to pull tight. The more force you use the more you think you can control me and it makes you go wild. When you’re done making me your prey, I can’t keep quiet like you want me to. So you decide to help me out.

I don’t remember exactly how it happened, but I do know
that it was quick. I feel the blood leave my body rapidly. I try to get up and run, but my legs won’t hold me up. The taste of warm iron fills my throat and the world starts to spin. I don’t know which pain hurts the most, the fact that you jabbed your switchblade into my fragile torso five times or the fact that my first time happened somewhere in the woods with a man who I don’t know. And you did not softly caress the goosebumps on my skin with your velvety lips; nor did you look into my eyes with a love so tender so true, equating that of a thousand scintillating constellations; and you most certainly did not warm my body, or nurture my soul with your voice. I try to turn my head, but I’m not in control of my body anymore. In the distance, I hear your heavy breathing getting farther and farther away. The darkness engulfs me and there is a profound silence.

Your right hand, covered in dirt and small rocks, wipes the sweat off your face. The fingers on your left hand toss and pull at your black hair. I stare. I stare too long. A little too long. A lot too long. The madness of hiding the evidence engulfs you. It is a burning itch that squirms, burrows, and eats at your insides. So you look away and get your switchblade.

Frantically digging into the earth’s beaten down soil, you plan to make a hole big enough for my body. And when a stupid switchblade can only lift centimeters from the ground, and instead a swarm of worms and ants start to crawl out, you dig deeper with your hands. You claw at the ground in a frenzy. Dirt is stuck to the bottom of your nails. Sometimes you use both hands to dig at the same time, and sometimes you only use one because your other hand reaches over to try and close my eyes, but it’s too late for that. When your nail buds are bloody and fingers are cut in tiny places, you still continue because the reflection in my eyes of the moon moving across the sky is a reminder that you’re running out of time. Off in the distance, a tree branch cracks, so you freeze with horror. You can hear your heart beat in your ears and drops
of sweat run down your forehead, creating an icy tingle slither up your spine. “Fuck this shit, man. Good enough…”

As my body is thrown into a pathetic, cracked, uneven and shallow hole, my arms can’t help but stick out. The leaves won’t cover them up completely, so you take your foot and place it on my arm. As you twist and twist counterclockwise, like a dead tree branch, my bone snaps and a stream of blood seeps into the ground; a sacrilegious ritual that happens not once, but twice. By the time you’re done making me your rag doll, the last thing you see are my eyes open wide, burning straight through your bones. “Creepy bitch.” And so, you kick filthy soil onto my face to conceal the girl who once was.

Sometime at around 3:00 am, when the forest is dead silent and the moon is parallel to the sun, there is a loud cracking noise ascending from the ground. It makes my body shake and a fire within the depths of my stomach begins to boil. My eyes—filled with dirt—water as I try to blink through the dry, shard-like rocks that infest my once chocolate brown eyes. My arms once broken, splintered, and dislocated begin to unfold and quiver back to their original shape. A blistering agony quakes throughout my whole body. A trail of fire scorches brightly throughout every nerve in my body. My toes curl at the smell of damp earth jabbing into my nostrils, shredding the delicate nerve fibers woven intricately within. I begin to cough and writhe as the sock that is shoved down my throat begins to asphyxiate me once more. My lungs constrict and a sharp pain pierces through my chest. I reach into my mouth and pull out the brown-gray sock that had been blocking my airway passage. Once it is completely out, I throw it to the side and with the force of a thousand hurricanes I throw up.

Howling into the dark, I can’t contain my shrieks anymore and so gallons of black ooze with chunks of red stew spill from my mouth. The smell of smoke and putrid sewage fill the air. For the next three minutes, all I can do is violently move my head back and
forth and wait for the horrendous frenzy to stop. I begin to sob at the sight of myself sitting in my own shit vomit and the memories of what has happened only a couple of hours before pummel my brain.

They come in blurry scratches. The images. They feel like a hazy dream and the more I think, the angrier I get. It is a rage I have never felt before, it is bubbling, festering, lava spitting into the sun. My mouth begins to foam and my neck spins around a whole 360. The arch of my back and neck crack like the ripping of the earth, a demon escaping the gates of hell on Lucifer’s orders. And into the twilight darkness, a piercing squeal is exorcised.

Your scent it lingers. It lingers. Lingers, lingers, lingers… all the way to town.

Genesis Silva
Living Among the Flowers

I yearn for the life
my family builds together
among the flowers.

They cut out my face
from every family picture:
a holiday at the beach, celebrating birthdays, Christmas.
I remain visible in the fragments
in-between their smiling teeth.

They examine me with scrutiny,
take apart my bones,
and organize them into
someone whose love they can remember.

I stare at
my mother’s mixing bowl
and see how she blends
my anxieties, worries, and fears.

My father gives me a stern look,
grabs a scalpel,
and cuts me open.
He commands:
“Look inside yourself.
Let your heart breathe.
Tell me what you see.”
I know what I see:
horrifying wretched
demonic creatures
lurking in the house
and in church,
preaching a gospel
only my family understands.

It is in the pews
my family thinks they’re holy.
It is with the Lord,
they think they’ve won
acceptance with the heavens.
It is at home
they believe the devil
is leaking from my veins.

My family tells me they’ve planned my wedding.
Mom and Dad lead me
to the burning altar underground.
My bride’s beauty is nothing but a delicate veil
she hides her fears under.
I do not know she
is waiting for me
in my grave,
where we lay sweetly
with the lustful devils,
emblazoned for eternity.

Isaac Winter
A Blurred Portrait of an Uncle

It was during my work shift
when I received news of your death,

and afterwards I tried so hard
to accept and move on quickly

because I had to stay focused,
but I couldn’t do it. It wasn’t right.

So I dedicate this poem to you,
an uncle whom I barely conversed with

because you mostly lived in Kentucky.
Even when you did stop by

on those family gatherings,
you’d say things like

“Hey kiddo—how’s school going?”
and I’d just smile and nod

knowing fully well
that whatever I said

would soon fade from your memory
because you were looking after yourself.

The last time I spoke with you
was at your mother’s funeral.

On that day, I believe it was you,
you with your heart problems,
who decided to step outside and light a cigarette,

just to watch the smoke carry the grief away.

I wonder if your habit also stripped a year off your life?

But it is possible that I am mistaken

because when I close my eyes and try to remember that day

all I see is a blurred, aged face in a wrinkled, black suit.

I read your obituary today and I saw a different person.

I never knew your hobby until I saw your photograph.

You were holding a fish you caught, and your humble smile reassured me.

You were also a picture framer who thought that your wife

was the best catch of your life, and in short, I felt very guilty
because I suddenly realized
that there was more to you

than the name I knew by heart
for writing on gift tags.

Shannon Dacey
The Gravedigger

He buttoned up his shirt and laced his boots. They were still covered in mud from the day before, but Frank didn’t mind. He was used to all the dirt. The floor of his trailer was so thoroughly covered in boot prints that he didn’t even remember what it was supposed to look like. Digging was okay work; it got him food and a place to sleep, even though it meant spending most of his time throwing dirt on top of dead people.

Once he reached the office of the cemetery, he took his shovel from the supply closet. His had “FRANK” written on it in faded ink. He and the other diggers were particular about their shovels. His had a dented scoop, but it was from knocking out a raccoon during a nighttime dig, so he never got it fixed.

The family was just arriving. He stood by the pile of dirt next to the empty grave and looked at the people gathered for the service. They looked back at him.

“Frank?” a woman asked.

“Huh?”

“Why aren’t you sitting down?” she asked.

“I don’ sit, ma’am. Chairs ‘re for mourners.”

The woman looked into Frank’s eyes. She reached out and patted his arm, and returned to the others.

Frank plunged his shovel into the dirt pile and leaned on the handle, waiting for the service to end. The family members walked up to throw in their own small shovelfuls of dirt, and soon enough, most of them had departed. The woman and a few others stayed behind, talking to each other and looking back at Frank as he filled in the rest of the hole.

They approached him.

“Frank, honey, are you okay?” the woman asked.

A man reached for Frank’s shovel. “You don’t need to do this, bud.”

Frank yanked his shovel away from the man and hurriedly returned to filling in the hole.
“Don’ touch my shovel,” Frank muttered as he worked.
The woman put a hand on his shoulder. “Why are you doing this?”

Frank stared blankly back at her. “I’ve got to finish, ma’am. It gets cold out ‘ere real quick.”
The remaining family members shook their heads at him and started to leave. The woman watched until Frank had finished and started on a new hole a few plots away.

While she watched, a stout man ran up to her, panting.
“You know Frank?” he asked.
“Yes,” she said.
“He’s not scheduled to dig today. Why’s he here?”
The woman sighed. “I invited him to our brother’s funeral, but he’s convinced he has to dig.”
The man ran a hand through his thinning hair. “I’m not paying him for this today.”

Rachel Kaplan
At the End of the Road

The sunset breathes with me—
Or doesn’t—
As it holds its bitter breath
Throughout the newborn dark.

At the end of the road
Is a waning streetlamp—
Like myself—
And suddenly it’s dark.

Nathali Ibarra
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