

Diamond Line Undergraduate Literary Magazine

Volume 1 | Issue 6

Article 1

December 2022

Diamond Line - Fall 2022

Diamond Line Editors

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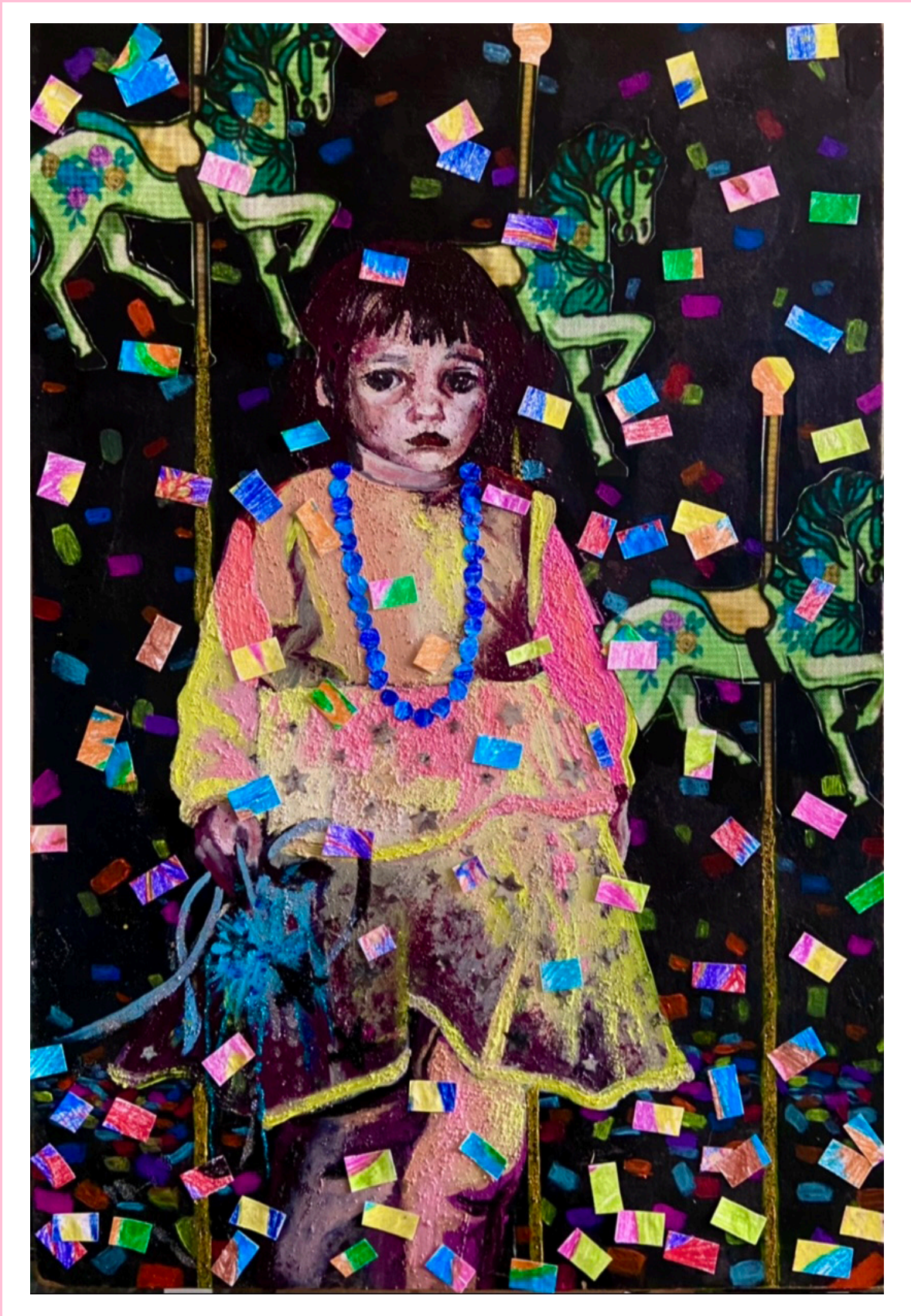
Recommended Citation

Editors, Diamond Line (2022) "Diamond Line - Fall 2022," *Diamond Line Undergraduate Literary Magazine*. Vol. 1: Iss. 6, Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/diamondlinelitmag/vol1/iss6/1>

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THE DIAMOND LINE



VOLUME 6 : THE NOSTALGIA ISSUE

THE DIAMOND LINE

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Acknowledgements

J. William Fulbright College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Arkansas

The University of Arkansas Department of English

The University of Arkansas Program in Creative Writing and Translation

Camilla Shumaker

Sophia Milligan



COLOPHON

The Diamond Line Literary Magazine has been typeset and designed using Adobe InDesign 2022. Work titles are typed in 28 point Baskerville Display PT Italic. Author names, text, and page numbers are typed in 12 point Baskerville Display PT. Devil Town is in 12 point Courier std. Title is in 50 point Baskerville Bold Italic. Contributors' names are in 12 point Baskerville Bold Italic. Stella Greenhill created art for pages 5, 12, 23, 33, and 41. Spread designs were done by editors and members of the staff.

Letter From the Editors

Hello Readers,

Thank you for picking up this special edition of *The Diamond Line*. By doing so, you are supporting the voices of dozens of budding young artists and writers from the University of Arkansas. We hope you enjoy their diverse stories and perspectives as much as we do.

This issue of our magazine focuses on Nostalgia. As students grow and come into their own, they often find themselves looking back on the good, the bad, and the ugly of their lives. Perhaps because it is easier for them to deal with the known, or maybe because they fear what is to come. Either way, the young adults of today are held in nostalgia's grip, stuck in a world that is neither childhood or adulthood.

Through these works, themes of longing, loss, joy, and hope radiate off of the page. Our talented contributors grapple with their feelings towards growing up with works that make you tear up just as much as they make you laugh. Through their art, they give a voice to our generation.

Please enjoy the time you get to spend with these creative pieces, as you can only observe them for the first time once. However, we hope you find yourself thinking nostalgically of these works long after you take them in. We are thrilled to be a part of your past, present, and future.

Sincerely,

Andi Marie Carey
Stella Greenhill

Editors-In-Chief of
The Diamond Line

Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| (cover)Fairy Lights..... | Tori Waters |
| Dog Daze | Sarah Synar |
| Crazy Old Bird Lady..... | Mary Kemp |
| Mohawk..... | David Hays Denney |
| Mountain View No 3, View 2..... | Nan Farrar |
| Bones..... | Sadie McDonald |
| Once Life..... | Brittaney Mann |
| Lakeshore Drive..... | Caroline Grage |
| Aquarium Love..... | Mary Kemp |
| What Source of Meaning..... | Dakota Palmer |
| Celebrity Sentence..... | Payton Willhite |
| Must be Fire..... | Nico Brito-Harp |
| Catherine..... | Meg McCartney |
| Devil Town..... | Jackson Cook |
| Ba Jiao..... | Jasmine Lee |
| Quarantine..... | Macie Hickman |
| Made of Things That Aren't Mine..... | Hadley Adkison |
| Daughter's Window..... | Caroline Grage |
| Graveyard Picnic..... | Jackson Cook |
| Witching Hour at the Supermarket..... | Verna Corinne Bryan |
| Waiting Doors..... | SOC |
| What Stage of Grief..... | Miceala Morano |

Dog Daze

By Sarah Synar

It is summer and yet

I am not a child catching butterflies

Gulping down sour lemonade until my tongue tingles

Running barefoot through the muddy lawn, stumbling into the pool

Water rushing up my nose, burning

Feet flailing as I attempt to handstand

I lose my breath blowing bubbles, coming up for air

It is summer and yet

I am not a child camping in the backyard

Sweating through sleep just to taste adventure

Catching fireflies that slip through clumsy fingers

Plucking flowers to tuck behind my ear

Wishing on weeds and the wishes come true, why wouldn't they?

Squealing as bees land on my sticky hands,

Washing off the watermelon juice

It is summer and yet

I am not a child chasing my brother at the park

Coming home before dark, just in time for dinner

Smelling barbecued 100% Angus Beef Burgers and

Squirting too much ketchup on my plate

It drips down my wrists, onto my new white shirt

Sorry, mom.

It's okay, it'll come out.

It is summer and yet

I am not a child building fairy houses out of moss

Constructing stick roofs and collecting snails

Chewing sunflower seeds like Pa and spitting them out

Into the red dirt

Climbing fences like jungle gyms, jumping over into the neighbor's yard

To bring back the ball that flew over the fence

Ripping my jeans,

Yes, I patched them up myself.

It is summer and yet

The days now, fleeting

I live through the memories collected over the years

Wondering

Where has all the time gone?

Crazy Old Bird Lady

By Mary Kemp

I was scared I was going to become the crazy old bird lady who sat on the steps of St. Augustine's Cathedral.

St. Augustine's stood proudly across the street from the city park, a cluster of evergreen trees and brown barren elms that stretched like skeletons against the cold December sky.

I found myself there during my break from the coffee shop where I worked making americanos for the finance men and pretending I was in a simulation. During my breaks I liked to breathe the chilly city air and be near the cathedral. Maybe some of that holiness would seep into me. Like second-hand smoke.

The crazy old bird lady would sit there on the great stone steps outside of the church, with its sky-high spires and hundreds of panes of stained glass, and she'd crochet her little birds. Wrapped in her drapery layers and feathery hat, she resembled the very creatures she made.

Over the years, she had become somewhat of a local legend. That happens when you sit on the steps of a holy place day after day surrounded by little handmade birds scattered on the cold concrete ground. People talk.

The kids had stories and nursery rhymes about the crazy old bird lady. They said she ate the pigeons in the city park. They said she made her crocheted birds to replace all the birds she ate. They said she talked to them and was convinced she herself was a bird. They said worse things too.

The adults weren't any better, though. Most people avoided eye contact as they passed the cathedral. Mothers turned their kids' heads away from her, saying things like, "C'mon, baby, don't stare."

I even heard a rumor that some parents used her as a threat.

If you don't clean your room, I'm gonna tell the crazy old bird lady, and she's gonna get you!

It was well-known dogma that you fix your eyes on the concrete as you pass by St. Augustine's. Wouldn't want to catch the crazy.

Sometimes when I sat with my hot black coffee on the steps of the cathedral, I'd watch her nimble, ancient hands as they danced around the yard. I'd stare, transfixed, as a bird began to take form and come to life right before my eyes.

I would later come to learn that there were robins, crows, sparrows, and pigeons. Each had a distinct crochet pattern that she'd made up for them. They were anatomically correct too. Somehow her weathered, shaking hands could perfectly capture the swoop of each bird's wing, their stubby little dinosaur legs, the shape of their fluffy tummies. They were art and they were friends. And she would sit there surrounded by them – her little birds stitched out of yarn wearing hats and jackets and carrying little yarn umbrellas. Each had a distinct style, their own sense of moxie. They were quite extraordinary, actually.

People are so cruel.

The first time I talked to her, I was sitting on the great stone steps of St. Augustine's, nursing a lukewarm cup of coffee. The early December air was freezing, and I appreciated the warm paper cup in my hands.

I didn't subscribe to any sort of religion, but I appreciated the reverent stillness within a church. It made me feel like I was in outer space. Or an aquarium. It's a kind of serenity that is both confronting and comforting. I felt like my entire life was on display every time I stepped into St. Augustine's, but it was a type of being known that I craved.

I told everyone I didn't believe in love. What I meant was: I don't think I am capable of being loved.

But this – this quiet within and without the stone walls of the church. This silence that blocked out the city sounds and felt warm and still around me – this had to be love.

“How long have you been making them?”

She looked up, gentle surprise on her wrinkly skin. I sat down next to her. Up close, the birds were even more intricate and beautiful.

“Since my college days,” she said, continuing to work on a gray pigeon wearing a little yellow raincoat and holding a red umbrella. I liked him enormously. “Probably around your age, sweets.”

I was twenty-three and feeling like an irreparable void.

“I love them,” I said, staring at a crow wearing a purple witch's hat and holding a tiny, crocheted broom. “I wish I could make something like them.”

“Oh, it's not too hard to learn. You've just got to stick with it.”

“How did you learn?”

“I taught myself. Used to crochet through my professor's lectures. Drove them crazy,” she laughed, and I did too.

I sipped my coffee, and she crocheted, and people passed by us, staring at the concrete, and the bells of St. Augustine's started to ring.

“You know, you're the first person to stop and talk to me in weeks,” she said.

“Really?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Does it bother you that everyone makes fun of you? People think you're crazy. You talk to your birds... they say awful things about you.”

“Oh, I've long outgrown caring what people think of me. Look around – it's a beautiful day. Snow is coming, the kids are playing, Father Michael is ringing the bells. And it's a wonderful day to make a pigeon.”

She made it sound so simple.

“Lots to be joyful for.”

I wanted to hug this woman. Instead, I said, “Do you have a favorite?” still looking at the gathering of yarn avian.

She shook her head. “That'd be like picking a favorite child.”

There was a beat, then she leaned closer, as if conspiring.

“Although – between you and me – I've always had a soft spot for the imperfect ones. I like to keep those ones. They come home with me to my island of misfit toys.”

I smiled.

“I love the wonky ones.”

“Me too. I always pick the wonky ones,” she said. “Even in marriages. A piece of advice though: save your heart the trouble and don't fall in love with the misfits.”

“I don't know if I believe in love,” I told her.

“No? Don't you love?”

I wasn't expecting that question.

Do I love?

Do I love?

“I guess I love some things. I don't know. I don't really know the difference between like and love.”

There was a long, comfortable silence.

I stretched my legs out on the steps. I watched the dead, brown leaves from the elm trees dance in the cold breeze before settling on concrete. Most of them were beyond crushed, turned to powder that would blow in the breeze all over the city and eventually become something else.

“Have you ever been in love?” I asked her.

“Twice,” she smiled, watery eyes watching the real pigeons puttering around the park. “One of them I married for thirty-seven years. Until he decided he didn’t want to be married anymore.”

“And the other one?”

“He never loved me back. But I was smitten. He would’ve been the love of my life if he only wanted me.”

I smiled, but I felt like I was being stabbed a little bit.

“How do you...how do you deal with that?”

The bird lady shrugged happily.

“I make birds.”

I laughed at how absurd it all was, and she laughed too. And it felt like we really were in on some secret language that was only for us.

“If you don’t make birds, you should find something else that you love to do,” she told me.

“Like what?”

She thought for a moment. We listened to the pigeons cooing, dogs barking in the distance, squirrels chattering in the trees.

“Make squirrels?” she said, and we both dissolved into laughter all over again.

She reminded me a bit of the Old Maid from that card game. The one with the most absurd illustration of an ugly old woman surrounded by cats. I realized, sitting with the crazy old bird lady, that from my very genesis, I have been fed the lie that old women who love are crazy.

The truth was, I wanted very much to be a crazy old bird lady.

I smiled, and I walked down the street to make more americanos.



Mohawk

By David Hays Denney

My steamboat of a vehicle crumbled around a street corner, threaded into a mosaic
by the summer sunlight seeping through the canopy, shuddering as if held together by
sinews. I laughed, snowcapping my knuckles on the steering wheel.

Wind slipped its tendrils through the crack in the window, coaxing my hair into my eyes as if
trying to blind me, veer me into the ditch so that it could flow uninterrupted.

The concrete shimmered as the sheer heat throbbed and groped from the earth, cursing the
cement with ants upon dried-up nightcrawlers.

Looming statuesque and constant, my arthritic Chevrolet gurgled over the porous asphalt,
following the faded chalk of the old tires which treaded there before.

I stuck my finger between the duct-tape keeping the foam on my seat together and probed,
maybe for a crusty gum-wrapper or a
lost tooth.

The amber pedestrian warning lights pulsed, and I pitifully squeaked to a stop.

This time a pair of kids with mohawk helmets miserably heaved on their bicycles, tense and furrowed as
they chugged over the crosswalk.

Enviably in that their pain somehow seemed lesser in their youth.

They pedaled further, squinting past the humid, anvil summer sky

Legs burning and pumping as they brushed the thoughtless oak leaves with their thin
shoulders and wanted.



Mountain View No 3, View 2 By Nan Farrar

Bones

By Sadie McDonald

If I passed my bones,
Walking down the street,
Would they stop to say hello?
Would they even recognize me?
And if indeed they did,
Who's to say I them?
Would I greet them with a smile?
Or curse them, spite my limbs?
If you stripped me of my skin,
Would you still like what you see?
If I no longer had bones
Would you still hold onto me?
If I began to rot,
And my bones began to burn,
Would you plant a kiss between my eyes?
Even if it hurt?
And if that kiss grew ugly roots,
Attaching to my brain,
Would you be there to water me?
Or cry that I'm insane?
And if my bones said something cruel,
Would you bash them in?
Or would you let them be unkind,
And help repent their sins?
And when my bones begin to break,
Will you glue them back together?
Or will you sweep them far away,
And lose them, then, forever?

Once Life

By Brittany Mann

I stared into the glass eyes
of a stiff face drooping
with the moment it realized
the admiration of mishappen circles
lasts in the unstitchable
threads of practice of age
the things he did not give

A once life mounted
on the wall of profit
its antlers for pride
a father died
before me, the child
lost hugs unrelenting
as if from a tree
lost a nod to the path
a body in the shape
of midges and sun streaks
glowing orange
pick themselves into
homicidal air

Stale tobacco smells

like a taxidermy smile



Lakeshore Drive By Caroline Grage

Aquarium Love

By Mary Kemp

Max sat in the neon glow from the tropical fish tank, and I could have sworn I was looking at an angel. Something otherworldly filled the dorm room – and maybe it was just the ethereal, electric blue light from the aquarium, or the upper I had taken before visiting my friend’s room – but I was certain it was magic.

“Zooney, you wanna help, or are you just gonna keep staring at the fish?”

I startled, catching Max’s polite, amused expression. He definitely caught me staring, but he wasn’t the type to assume he was being looked at. He never seemed to think he was worth the perception of others, and that just made me aggressively want to prove that he was worth it. He was more worth it than all of us.

I think I’m a narcissist, but I happen to love humble people. And I loved Max most of all.

His brow furrowed as he flipped through his essay that I was about to edit for him. I watched his tortoiseshell glasses slipped down his nose, and I wanted to push them back up.

This had been our routine, habitual and comforting, since our freshman year. He’d show me his essays about whatever he was reading in his medieval literature class, and I’d edit them, harshly and lovingly, as I did everything in my life.

I was a severe critic, but that was precisely why Max called upon me.

“Is this thesis stupid? I feel like it’s stupid,” he said, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“It’s not stupid,” I replied.

Max was glowing. He was cerulean and perfect.

I couldn’t stop looking at the fish tank.

We used to visit this local aquarium our freshman year. I always liked the electric blue neon lights, the artificial plants in colors that were anything but natural, the fish swimming, uncaringly, in the cool, blue water. The whole place felt alien and serene. No other place in the world has made me feel true peace except for there.

Aquariums always made me feel like that.

“Is my thesis too broad? I feel like I’m lacking nuance here,” Max said, scratching the back of his neck.

“I think it’s perfect.” I THINK YOU ARE PERFECT TOO.

The fish swimming behind him were neon. There was blue, shimmering light everywhere. The room was starting to fill with water.

I met Max our freshman year in a world literature class. He made an absurdly good joke about *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and I knew I was in the market for a friend.

He liked that I had read the same things as him, and I liked the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled. I liked the way he said my name, like it was just any other word. Max was the first boy to ever make me feel like a regular old human, and that was a feeling I hadn’t known I was longing for.

I crossed through a sentence and scribbled some comments into the margin. Max was a decent writer, but his mind always got ahead of his hands. He was a run-on sentence fiend.

I glanced up at Max, and he was warm and blue, like the sun-soaked ocean. I could practically feel the fluorescent glow of the aquarium. It was inside Max, and it was beginning to get inside me too. Water was filling the dorm room up to our waists.

I kept editing. Max kept watching me edit.

By the end of the night, the rose and sapphire light had seeped inside us, and I saw Max glowing an electric blue. I looked down, and rays of neon purple radiated from within me. I couldn't pin down a source, maybe there wasn't one, I just felt the warm, otherworldly magic pouring out all around us, inside us.

The water from the aquarium was warmer than I expected. I thought it would be harsh, cold, and bracing, but it felt like an extension of my own body heat. Perfectly natural. We were born to swim here.

The aquarium swallowed us up until we were as much a part of it as the fish. Max's dorm room was the fish tank, and the fish tank was Max's dorm room. And there was just us – floating in a blue dreamscape, two hearts beating underwater.

I looked over at Max, and he was treading water, looking at me. He smiled, and I smiled, and I wanted to live in this aquarium love forever.

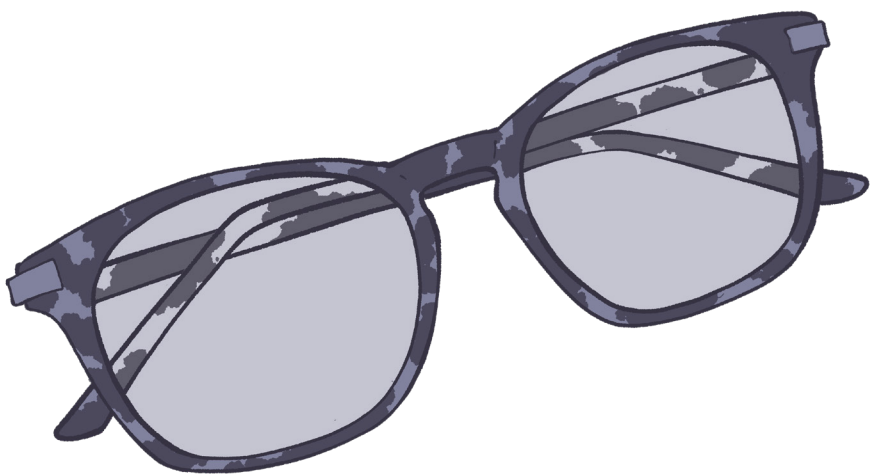
He always elicited my devotion, but something about us existing – suspended together – in the neon water, made me love him even more reverently. The water ebbed and flowed around us, warm ripples against our skin. I reached out and interlocked our fingers together.

Fish passed by, lazily, passively. The rainbowfish with their scales of every color, the little guppies with their feathery tails, the iridescent tetras, all blinked their eyes neutrally at us. They were about as big as our heads. I'd never been inside a fish tank before, and I'd never thought about what it would be to be the size of a goldfish. I found I liked it enormously.

Max winked, and I laughed, accidentally taking the water into my mouth, but it came as easily as air.

It was just us, swimming in his fish tank.

I think I want to stay here forever.



What Source of Meaning

By Dakota Palmer

Memories, when a colorless, yet white, void persists timelessly.
When the Neural Pathways unravel, do they unravel?
Or do I force it into a type of eternal termination?
Before Memories, when two children ungracefully frolic after fireflies.
Again and again, the turquoise crabgrass transitioned to dust and raised
once more.
All throughout, there was no waver in the pursuit.
Memories, who utters linguistical melodies of its own name.
Attempting to be heard, but who is to hear, who is to say?
Or Neurons narrate nothing, deriving words merely through the contem-
plator's madness?
Before Memories, who tried to paint and sculpt, poetry and prose.
An ink pen and paint brush grace the artist's tapestry anxiously.
Searching for a likeness to place on a vacant canvas.
Memories, what of Before Memories persists?
Does mathematics masquerade continually as some form of universal uni-
formity?
Or does the world mean nothing without landmarks to inflict it to?
Before Memories, what families gather, and lifeforms wither.
A familial trifecta shares a moment in a dimmed room.
Bodies sinking into bubbly couches, never ceasing to understand they're
someplace special.

Celebrity Sentence

By Payton Willhite

I think sometimes that
I could be famous.
maybe it's the shape of
my ears or the general
disinterest in having my photo
unexpectedly taken. I have
always craved
for someone to tell me
Exactly who to be. someone
qualified. at least twenty years
experience in being above
a constant fear of rejection.
sometimes I imagine that
the bioluminescent stars
in the corner of my room
form a pattern I can understand.
become predictive.
tell me to fail
and land among them.
another bit of glowing plastic.

Must be Fire

By Nico Brito-Harp

my mother always held me in the palm of her hands
like water cascading down the mountain to reach its destination,
to reach the spring, to reach the levee,
to reach the purity you could only find in reflections.

but I've been gone forever now,
and, instead of palm, all I feel is cracks,
cracks between my mother's tired fingers,
and I don't know how much longer I can fill this container.

*“sana, sana, colita de rana, si no sanas hoy,
sanarás mañana,”*

words whispered to children to make the fear go down easier,
but I've been adult forever now
and the frogs still don't make sense.

at least they didn't,
until 12:03 a.m. hit and the frogs gave their greetings:
ribbit, ribbit, ribbit, stop...

I don't know what's louder –
the silence or the release,
but I've been aware forever now
and I still can't make the pieces fit
as nicely as I need them to.

if my mother is water, then my father
must be fire

beautiful flames only fly at one's expense,
but I've flickered out too many times now to care
about seeing you get better.

I don't know if I mean that,
because giving in is giving up,
I've stuck around forever now
and can't let this linger any longer,

I'm still hung up on frog tails
and we're still inhaling more smoke than air,
but we can make healing a fire,

and although it blares through the night,
we can put it out tomorrow.



Catherine By Meg McCartney

Devil Town

By Jackson Cook

Characters

NAILDUCT: A six thousand year old demon who dreams of what life is like outside of their dead end job in Hell's call center.

SLUGBOX: A younger demon who is career oriented and competitive.

FROGTUBE: An older demon who used to possess shepherds. This job in the call center is their soft retirement.

Setting

A call center in the middle of Hell.

Time

A little after noon.

Devil Town

(A call center in the middle of Hell—three cubicles in a line decorated with novelty posters, tacky trinkets, an outdated desktop computer, and a standard office phone. SLUGBOX and FROGTUBE are both in rolling chairs, talking across their wireless headsets. Next to them, NAILDUCT—their coworker—dials another number and rhythmically taps their pen until the phone clicks.)

NAILDUCT

Good afternoon. Am I speaking to (consults their call list) Sam Ko-stop-ulos? Yes? Perfect. And just to confirm what we have here, were you recently damned to Hell? Yes? Perfect. Um, well, Mr. Kostopulos, my name is Nailduct the Spider Emperor, and I'm calling on behalf of the Satan Beelzebub Corporation. We are currently conducting research on customer satisfaction and would like to know if you would mind spending a few minutes answering a couple of quest—You're too busy at the moment? What do you mean you're too

You're being tortured for an eternity! You don't have a few minutes? Sir, it would really be very helpful if—

(A humming dial tone marks the end of the conversation. Nailduct hopelessly sets their headset on the table and kicks the wheels of Slugbox's chair. Slugbox raises the microphone on their headset.)

SLUGBOX

One moment. (lowers the microphone on their headset.) So, on a scale of one to ten—one being "torture, suffering, and eternal damnation" and ten being "Hellish"—how would you rate your experience in Hell thus far? One? Perfect—Well, that is the last question I have for you today. Thank you so much for completing the survey today Mr. Reeves; we really appreciate your time. You should be able to see your reward—um, the coupon to TJ Maxx, on our website in the next two or three days. Just be sure to finish making your account. (raises the microphone on their headset.) What's happening?

NAILDUCT

I'm quitting today, Slugbox.

SLUGBOX

I don't have any time for this again. Do you understand that the semi-quarter ends this week and (looks behind himself and then leans in) Frogtube the Duke of Torture is catching up to me. (lowers the microphone on their headset.)

NAILDUCT

I'm serious this time.

SLUGBOX

One second. (faces away from Nailduct) Good afternoon, am I speaking to Rishith Vaddavalli? Yes? Perfect. And were you recently—

(Nailduct reaches across Slugbox's cubicle and hangs up their phone.)

SLUGBOX

HEY!

NAILDUCT

I'm going to quit today. I've made up my mind...for real this time.

SLUGBOX

I don't believe you.

NAILDUCT

I'm going to send Mr. Haborym my resignation right now. It's already typed out.

(Slugbox taps on Frogtube's desk. Frogtube

SLUGBOX

Oh really? Do me a favor real quick and watch this.

(Slugbox taps on Frogtube's desk. Frogtube raises their headset.)

FROGTUBE

One second. (lowers their headset.) Yes, you will need to wait two or three days to see your TJ Maxx coupon pop up on our website. Yep, you're gonna be able to get free shipping on orders over \$89. Perfect! Have a good day now. (raises their headset) Is everything okay? I'm so far behind. The semi-quarter ends this week.

SLUGBOX

There is no way you are gonna catch up to me.

FROGTUBE

Are you trying to distract me right now?

SLUGBOX

Nailduct said that they're going to send Mr. Haborym their resignation today.

FROGTUBE

Was that really the best distraction you could come up with?

NAILDUCT

I'm serious!

FROGTUBE

Sure you are. (lowers their headset) Good afternoon, am I speaking to Keeling—

(Nailduct lunges and hangs up Frogtube's phone.)

FROGTUBE (Cont.)

HEY!

NAILDUCT

I am telling you guys that this is it. I have had it.

SLUGBOX

Dude, you have been threatening to quit for the past six thousand years.

NAILDUCT

And this time I'm serious. I'm tired of the way we get treated.
(Frogtube goes back to working.)

SLUGBOX

It could be worse.

(Slugbox presses a button on their office phone and hellish screams play over speaker-phone)

NAILDUCT

We used to have dreams Slugbox. Aspirations!

SLUGBOX

Oh, believe me, I still have dreams. I still have aspirations. Do you even know what the prize is for this semi-quarter, Nailduct? Whoever gives out the most TJ Maxx coupons is gonna get their own TJ Maxx coupon. I already have a shopping cart full of graphic tees, extra slim jeans, and knit insulated cuff beanies.

NAILDUCT

Those aren't aspirations! You can buy all of those things.

SLUGBOX

But the savings!

NAILDUCT

That's not the point. Look at Frogtube! They used to possess shepherds.
(Slugbox realizes that Frogtube is working and hangs up their phone.)

FROGTUBE

HEY!

SLUGBOX

You do not get to work while I'm explaining to Nailduct that they aren't going to quit.

FROGTUBE

They'll burn themselves out. Just let me get back to work.

NAILDUCT

Frogtube, don't you think there's more to eternity than this?

FROGTUBE

Are you kidding? This is the best job I've ever had. I don't have to smell like sheep all day, there is air conditioning, I have good job security, and if I get back to work I think I really have a shot at winning that TJ Maxx coupon. I have been shopping on their website all morning.

SLUGBOX

Did you see the holiday buffalo plaid notch pj set?

FROGTUBE

Yes I did! And I also saw a review that described them as comfy, coordinated, and stylish.

NAILDUCT

This is torture.

SLUGBOX

Torture is three floors down.

NAILDUCT

That's it. I'm sending Mr. Haborym my resignation.

(Nailduct turns back to their desk and theatrically hits the enter key on their keyboard. WHOOSH! Nailduct stares intensely at the computer.)

FROGTUBE

They actually went through with it!

SLUGBOX

There's no way. (leans over to inspect Nailduct's computer) Dude, no way.

NAILDUCT

Yup.

FROGTUBE

You actually did it...It's already past noon, but Mr. Haborym should still be on his lunch break. We might be able to sneak into his office and delete your resignation before he sees it.

NAILDUCT

No. I did it. I finally did it.

SLUGBOX

What are you gonna do now?

NAILDUCT

For the first time in my existence, I have no idea.

SLUGBOX

I don't think anyone has ever quit before.

FROGTUBE

I've certainly never heard of anyone quitting. I only stopped possessing shepherds when they expanded the customer survey department.

NAILDUCT

You guys should quit too.

SLUGBOX

Now you must be kidding. You are a lunatic. There is no way in Hell that I am quitting right now. The TJ Maxx coupon is in reach Nailduct!

NAILDUCT

Then what? What comes after you win the TJ Maxx coupon? For a long time I have felt like there was a big empty hole inside of me, and if I were to guess, I would say that you have a big empty hole inside of you Slugbox, and you too Frogtube. And sure, the made in italy wool fedora felt hat can fill that hole you have inside of you. But, that hole will just keep getting bigger. Then what? Are you gonna fill it with a three piece reversible belt set? Why not?! Then, after that, when the hole is still growing, you can fill it with a leather woven tote bag. But, eventually, after a long time, you will have to face the real problem and not just keep filling that hole up.

SLUGBOX

That was a great speech, Nailduct, but there's no way that I'm quitting.
(Frogtube presses enter on their keyboard.
WHOOSH!)

FROGTUBE

I sent in my resignation!

SLUGBOX

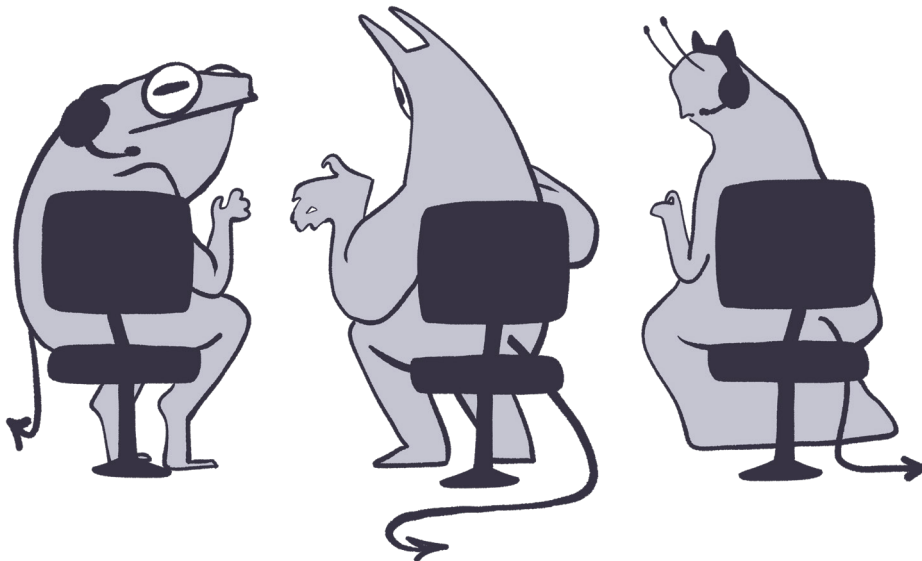
Wh—what?

FROGTUBE

Slugbox, don't you see? Nailduct is right and we have to be a united front on this.

SLUGBOX

That speech was terrible. There is no way that you went for their scheme that easily.



FROGTUBE

That's true, but also, you were right. There was no way I was going to be able to catch up to you this semi-quarter. I was never going to win that TJ Maxx coupon, so what's the point?

SLUGBOX

They'll never actually let you quit. There's no way.

FROGTUBE

We have nothing to lose but our pitchforks Slugbox.

SLUGBOX

You're crazy. You're both crazy. Where will you even go?

NAILDUCT

I'll tell you where we'll go. We'll go to Massachusetts.

FROGTUBE

Massachusetts?

SLUGBOX

What's in Massachusetts?

NAILDUCT

Plenty of things. They have cape cod, Fenway Park, clam chowder.

SLUGBOX

None of this is really convincing me.

NAILDUCT

And they have the TJ Maxx headquarters.

(Slugbox presses enter on their keyboard.
WHOOSH!)

SLUGBOX

I'm in.

FROGTUBE

Perfect!

NAILDUCT

You guys actually sent the email?

FROGTUBE

Yeah!

SLUGBOX

Wait, why did you send me an email Nailduct?

FROGTUBE

Yeah, I got it too. Why did you send us your resignation?

NAILDUCT

Because I never sent my resignation to Mr. Haborym.

SLUGBOX

Why did you not send in your resignation??

NAILDUCT

Because the TJ Maxx coupon was too big to leave to chance. I couldn't risk either of you outperforming me again. Do you realize how far behind you guys I've been this semi-quarter? The semi-quarter ends this week! And you guys thought I wasn't even trying? I have a whole shopping cart FULL OF CLOTHES Slugbox. But, not just clothes, I've got chairs, fall decor, spring decor, christmas decor, bedsheets, and lamps. I've got HUNDREDS OF ITEMS. I had to ensure victory. This plan was my way of doing that. I haven't even been calling anyone. This phone isn't plugged in! All I've been doing is shopping on TJMaxx.com. I need those savings, Slugbox. I need the coupon. And the only way I was going to win is if neither of you were in the race anymore.

FROGTUBE

You are the spawn of satan.

SLUGBOX

I can't believe you would do this to us.

NAILDUCT

Would you not do the same thing in my position?

SLUGBOX

Obviously not!

FROGTUBE

I might have if I thought of it.

SLUGBOX

Frogtube, Mr. Haborym might still be at lunch. If we hurry we can go delete those emails.

(Frogtube and Slugbox EXIT. Nailduct leans back in their chair. Frogtube's phone rings. Nailduct wheels over and answers it.)

NAILDUCT

Hello? Who is this? Well, good afternoon to you too Mr. Moore, but no. I do not have time to take a survey. I don't care if this is to conduct research on customer satisfaction. No, I specifically remember checking the box on your website that said I would not receive calls like this. (hangs the phone up) The nerve of some people.

End.

Ba Jiao

By Jasmine Lee

After: Omakase - Weike Wang & The Thing Around Your Neck - Chimamanda Adichie

Content Warning: discrimination, sexual coercion, abuse

Thank you Mama, the little girl squealed when her mother set dinner down onto the table, immediately pushing her face into the steam rising from the bowls. From her mouth erupted a constant string of questions: what's this what's this what's this what's this wha—

Hush, her mother scolded, gently pushing the girl's head away from her food before sitting down next to her. Are you ready to say your prayers?

Yes, the girl shrieked, clapping her hands together and squeezing her eyes shut. Dear Mister Kitchen God, thank you for... for... blessing this table... and for helping Mama cook food! Thank you! After this exclamation the little girl snatched up her fork and immediately shoveled a monstrous bite into her tiny mouth, nodding enthusiastically to her mother between swallows. Mama this is so goo—

Suddenly the girl's teeth clamped down on something hard and a horrible taste immediately flooded her tastebuds. Bone? No, bone doesn't taste like... this! Her spoon fell out of her hand and into the bowl with a clatter as she spat out everything into her mouth with a wail. Mama what was that!!! Mama it tastes so BAD!

Her mother could only chuckle softly as her little girl hopped out of her chair and into her lap, offering up a corner of her apron for her to dry her tears with. Oh, my dramatic girl, she murmured in between head kisses. Watch what you are eating, ah? Look here. She pulled the girl's bowl towards them and fished out the horrible-tasting object with her spoon, holding it up for her to see. This is called ba jiao. "Eight horns". It is a spice that makes food taste good, but you cannot eat it by itself. It tastes really bitter, right? She waited until the girl stopped crying to repeat the Chinese word for "bitter" with her—ku. It sounds like "cry", the little girl giggled between snuffles, and her mother nodded. Yes, she affirmed, but

the tone is different. This ku also means “painful”. Like work, school, even love...

Love is bitter, the little girl would remember years after this ba jiao incident and years after she outgrew her girlhood. Love is bitter, and sometimes the best moments come disguised as painful packages.

Unlike addition... The old teacher at the front of the classroom droned in tune with the air conditioning unit. ...Multiplication is where you take a number and add it together a number of times. He moved to scrawl an almost-illegible equation onto the board. Four times two.

EIGHT! He didn't even ask for the answer, but something inside her compelled her to screech it out anyways. Eight is a lucky number. Ba jiao.

Her cheeks radiated red as the entire class craned their necks to ogle at her, and time slowed to a crawl as her teacher merely stared at her, expressionless, before nodding slightly and turning back to his lesson. That familiar bitter taste filled her mouth again, but there was nothing in her mouth. What was hard to swallow this time was not spice, but shame.

Listen to that nerd scream, she heard someone mutter to his friend faintly behind her back, snickers erupting after. I'm surprised she can even see the board with those eyes of hers. Her entire face was burning now, and her eyes kept sneaking glances at the clock on the wall.

Tick. Tick. The minutes couldn't go by fast enough. She looked away and then looked again and swore the second hand was stuck on eight. Eight. Eight.

Finally, finally, it was time to leave, and the girl had never flown out of her seat as fast as she did in that moment. She rushed to the bathroom and locked herself into a stall, hanging her head above the disgusting toilet bowl in hopes of hacking that bitterness away. Tears stung the corners of her eyes and bore into her cheeks as she kept coughing, but nothing came out of her. After some time she admitted defeat, collapsing onto her knees as sobs wracked her body. The taste of the ba jiao nauseated her to the point of handicap, yet it seemed to plague her at the worst of times. Eight may not be such a lucky number after all.

Her path to freedom behind the bathroom door was blocked by a gangly brunet, a nightmarish smirk spread across his pale face. You know, I think you're cute for a chink. So nonchalant, as if such slurs were a part of his everyday speech. Before she could realize she was angry, he jabbed a note into her chest and stalked off.

It fell onto the ground by her feet, and she couldn't help but spare it a tiny glance before smashing

it into the tile and leaving for home.

A phone number, within it nestled three perfect eights.

For years down the line that phone number was etched into the dark crevices of her mind. Within those years that gangly brunet slowly cleaned up his act, dropping the language and picking up etiquette, class, and, as hard as it was for her to admit, charm. No longer were they naïve children, but personable young adults on their way to post-secondary education. No longer was the girl a girl on the outside, but a full-figured, sharp-tongued woman. A constant voice inside her head, however, accompanied the bitterness that periodically emerged from her throat, telling her on the inside that she still had quite a lot to learn.

It was during this time of confusion that she began to regard the gangly brunet in a different light. Now that he was somewhat likable enough to approach, the phone number with the three perfect eights called to her, and his first greeting took her aback—nowhere had she ever heard a man with a voice so soft, unsure, so unlike the malicious youth she knew him so well as.

Hello, she spoke. You were the boy who bullied me in grade school.

His laughter aroused her and disgusted her all at once. Where did the humor lie in that singular sentence she spoke? Suddenly she felt an overwhelming urge to hang up on him, not give him another minute of her time, but the everlasting voice in her head commanded her otherwise.

And so she stayed. She listened to him introduce himself, entranced by him with the help of her own post-adolescent desperation. Somehow between their primary school time and then they had grown into similar interests, lifestyles, and aligned more along with each other than she ever had with anyone else. Perhaps, she thought, things had changed. This could be good.

For once in her life, the taste in her mouth was not bitter, but sweet.

Who is this RAT inside my home! Her mother groaned when the woman walked through the door, arm-in-arm with the gangly brunet with the perfect-eight phone number. Despite her exclamation she moved to embrace her daughter warmly, giving her man a playful swat on the thigh with the back of her spatula. Dinner is almost ready. Make sure your hands are washed. She waited until he obliged and pulled her daughter aside, speaking to her in the Mandarin they had grown to affectionately call their “secret code”. Is he one of... those white boys?

The woman's first instinct was to recoil in shock, but she stayed in place knowing her man's eyes were most likely on them talking. Her second instinct was calmer, understanding that no matter how friendly or good a white man was in word, his true colors were found in the unspoken, his actions. It's okay, Ma, the woman assured, patting her mother's arm gently with a smile. He's different. You already like him enough, right?

I am your mother, she responded airily. I do not like people as much as you think I do.

They shared a laugh and the woman helped her mother move dinner onto the table, not noticing the small black fragments nestled between the pieces of braised pork.

Perhaps she should have known better. Perhaps she shouldn't have told her mother that everything with her man would be okay, because the way he wrinkled his nose at the ba jiao she didn't see in the dish triggered that bitter taste even before she took her first bite. As guilty as she felt, she couldn't make eye contact with her poor mother across the table, trying her damn hardest to keep a cheery smile on her face.

Is everything alright?

What... the man scooped out a ba jiao with his spoon, narrowing his eyes at it as if it were poisonous. What the hell is this?

Before the woman could chastise him for his language, his straightforwardness, her mother cleared her throat softly. This is called ba jiao, she nodded to him. It means "eight horns". A spice. We put it in many of our dishes.

Despite the woman's mother graciously offering her culture to him, the man was not thankful. His face remained twisted in disgust, his eyes fixated on the single bit of spice in the middle of his spoon. It smells weird. Why do you people put gross stuff like this in your food and call it "spices" like that helps?

This manner of speech, the woman would grow to understand, was what Americans described as "two-faced".

Neither the woman nor her mother had a plausible answer for his outburst, and the man treated their silence as a smack on the palm with no other punishment. Dinner was tense for the rest of that evening, and somehow the man flipped from insulting to charismatic faster than the woman could blink. As he babbled on and on about himself she snuck occasional glances at her mother, who was listening intently, but whose offense was nestled between the wrinkles on the outer corners of her eyes. The woman tried her best to play along with her boyfriend's antics long after the food was cleared off the table, but

the bitterness inside her stayed. As much as she hated to admit it, she found comfort in imagining him not being there.

He ended up overstaying his welcome. The woman had to all but physically shoo him out the door. He bade her and her mother goodbye too many times, and when the door finally shut the silence inside the house was embarrassingly relieving. The chance to apologize to her mother came, but the emotion in her chest dissolved quietly when her mother stopped her with only a look of sadness. The moment went away as she silently padded to her room, and the rift that opened between them both sliced a gash in her heart deeper than any resentment she had for that gangly brunet she thought she knew so well.

As time ticked by and the woman faced post-secondary life head-on, the arguments became so common she often wondered why she remained in his space in the first place. Time after time he would degrade her right to the cusp of physical violence, and time after time she would beg for his forgiveness like she was nothing but a lowly dog. Her mother's guidance became annoying gossip that she wrongly tuned out, almost against her own will.

There were still moments, however, that did not taste bitter.

What she could recall the clearest were the flowers. Flowers by the dozens. They would wait for her to awaken in the early mornings, delicately laid by the foot of her bed, or greet her at the door after long days of work. Her man would buy blooms of all colors, bouquets so lush they were almost nauseating to smell, all for her, and she would fall in love with him all over again.

The rose looks fair, but fairer it we deem / For that sweet odour which doth in it live.

Somewhere along the line she got lost within the roses, and the more his she became, the less her she was to herself.

Over time the flowers began to wilt. The sweetness in her mouth faded back to that familiar bitterness she had grown to tolerate. He became comfortable, too comfortable, and fell back into his old habits of evil. This evil, however, brought upon a new level of depth: self-satisfaction.

The woman was not aware of the concept of "makeup sex" until he came along, and soon knew all the ins and outs of it. Makeup sex was not a term to describe casual arguments, but ones that warranted violence, torrents of emotion—ones that could only be resolved with pleasure. As troubled and dark her man was at times, his lovemaking brushed over all his flaws like thin coats of paint. My little China doll, he

would grunt into her ear, and she would involuntarily shudder as he used her.

Somewhere in time, she realized one day after this “makeup sex” happened, he had stopped giving but kept taking. He had worn her down like a wood carving, shaping her into the woman he wished she was, manipulating her to love what she hated most about him. Somewhere in time she forgot what sweetness tasted like, welcoming the bitterness like it was her oldest friend. How sorry she felt for herself when her reflection in the bathroom mirror caught her eye—sallow skin, sunken eyes, permanent frown. Where was that bright little girl her mother used to dote on?

Perhaps she died along with that sweetness she yearned for so.

You’re my perfect little lotus, the man crooned to her after another night of conquest, and the sleeping peace in her abdomen suddenly awoke into something like disgust. Her body stiffened when his arm snaked around her waist, refusing to soften when he pulled her in and nuzzled the crook of her neck. Only when he relaxed into immediate sleep did she realize she was trapped in his embrace.

No, she seethed at him beneath her skin, the feeling in her belly growing horns and expanding. I am ba jiao. Sharp. Earthly. Bitter. You do not know me as much as you think you do. You do not understand me at all.

Enough.

She wrenched her left side out from under his body, scoffing when his only reaction was rolling away from her with a grunt. She swung herself out from the bed and hastily gathered everything she could fit in the biggest duffle bag she owned. Clothes, toiletries, pictures of herself. When nothing else could be stuffed inside the bag she heaved it over her shoulder and slipped out of the room without a second glance back.

The walk across the house to the front door felt like an eternity; every step seemed to root her firmly into the ground where she stood. Finally, finally, she reached the kitchen, and on full autopilot she grabbed the jar of ba jiao she stowed away in the back of the spice cabinet and spilled its contents across the room. Counters, the island, the stove, the floor, even the sink, all covered with the thing he hated the most, the thing she hated the most. Once the jar was empty she tossed it onto the floor along with the ba jiao, not caring that the glass shards bit and tore at her heels.

For the first time in her life, she discovered as she started her car and drove off into the night, there was no taste in her mouth at all.

A few faint voices chattered away on the radio, gossiping about drugs or men or both. She paid them no mind, paid nothing any mind, and just thought about driving as far away from the man she thought she loved as possible.

When the woman moved to shift gears, her hand brushed against something plastic, the crinkly noise snapping her out of her haze. A fortune cookie, perhaps weeks old, sat by her stick, and she pulled off to the side of the highway to open it. The first bite she took was so heavenly the fortune inside fell into her lap, ignored. She savored the sweetness of the cookie, watching the occasional car disturb the ambience outside her car window. Finally she looked down at the fortune in her lap, askew just enough for her to not be able to read, and decided right then and there to never know what it said.

Fortune and wrapper flew out the window at 100 miles per hour as she raced down the highway once more, hair streaming away from her face by the wind. The litter flew through the night and found refuge in a dead bush, and if one were to stop and inspect the fortune, they'd read the lucky number on the back of the slip first.

Three perfect eights.



Quarantine

By Macie Hickman

My bald-headed father
wears a pink wig

His karaoke mic screams
apple bottom jeans

I wear my rainbow snakeskin bell bottoms
and sing back up

Made of Things That Aren't Mine

By Hadley Adkison

There is nothing of me
That is solely me
Each crinkle of my eye
And knowledge of each bird
Comes from my family
I harbor in me
Their hopes, dreams, and desires
Made up of their love and obsessions
My laugh belongs to my mother
And my sneeze to my grandfather
I was imbued with my aunt's love for books
And my uncle's infinite thirst for knowledge
I speak to every person I meet
Like my father before me
I am a collection of other people's parts
I was shaped by many people
Like my unwillingness to back down from a fight
Taught to me by a woman
Who wandered into my life
My thoughts are at home in other's minds
My toothy smile is mirrored on my Mimi's face
And each eyeliner wing was hard won
By watching my sister's skilled hands
I am not my own
But I was shaped by the people I love



Daughter's Window By Caroline Grage

Graveyard Picnic

By Jackson Cook

When Aldous Beaumont, Sr., kicked the bucket in a scorching motorcycle accident at the age of seventy-three, there weren't many kind words to say about his time on Earth. He was a rotten troublemaker whose only gift seemed to be causing havoc in the lives he came into contact with. Anyone foolish enough to ever trust Aldous Beaumont, Sr., would find themselves robbed and cheated. He even went so far as to steal every penny from his disabled mother, Emmeline Beaumont, leaving her penniless for the last twenty years of her life.

The job of disposing of Aldous Beaumont, Sr., was initially given to his eldest son, Aldous Beaumont, Jr., who didn't feel that his father deserved any of the dignity or attention that a traditional burial ceremony might offer. Instead, he had his father cremated. The crematorium places the remains in a vacuum-sealed bag inside a black container that snapped shut. Aldous, Jr., put that container in an old Amazon cardboard box and shipped him off through the U.S. Postal Service to his father's cousins, Dwayne and Rose Laurent, who still lived by Aldous, Sr.'s hometown, Madison, Arkansas.

Only a few yards outside the city limits of Madison was a peaceful farmhouse. At the end of a winding gravel driveway was a screened-in porch. Inside the white front door was an expansive living room with four chairs and a couch. It was a room designed to host company. The back of the living room lead to the kitchen, a space covered in red linoleum with pots hanging from hooks on the ceiling. Wooded cabinets held a variety of culinary gadgets collected from catalogues and general stores. The fridge was a vessel for dozens of jars filled with homemade strawberry jam made by Rose Laurent. Rose was a former English teacher and a militant grammarian. Her hair curled above her head, and her glasses rested on the end of her nose. She was often overcome with a hankering for sugary, gooey strawberry jam on buttered toast. This came into direct conflict with the seemingly never-ending diet she was on. So, instead of eating any of the jars in her fridge, she simply made more. She would explain to anyone wondering (or, more accurately, anyone willing to listen) that this always seemed to cure whatever temptations she had. People would sometimes consider reasoning with her, but everyone knew it would be a useless gesture to argue with Rose.

Her husband, Dwayne Laurent, was a recently retired farmer dressed for work, except for his shoes. Dwayne had recently purchased a pair of black Air Force 1's. Anyone under the age of twenty-five knew that it was a sign someone was lawless and violent if they were wearing black Air Force 1's. However, to him, they were a durable sneaker and a more comfortable alternative to his old muddy work boots. The fireplace at the end of his feet, smoking to an end, made the room smell like pine needles and newspaper. He was half asleep leaning back in his recliner when Rose woke him up.

Rose shook Dwayne, "Go get some more wood to keep the fire going."

"Yes, dear," Dwayne responded out of obligation. Under normal circumstances, Dwayne Laurent would not be caught dead going outside in the middle of a January freeze. However, the stash of firewood on the screened-in porch was entirely depleted. He was okay with bundling up inside, but his beloved wife, Rose, insisted on a fire. When the mail truck arrived, Dwayne was wrapped up in his heaviest camouflage hunting jacket, walking to the barn, which had been falling apart for the past eight years, for his last load of wood.

Dwayne paused to watch as the mailman, Cletus Burks, rolled past the mailbox and into the winding gravel driveway. He raised his gloved hand in the air as a motionless wave as the mail truck pulled in next to him. Cletus leaped out of the truck armed with his clipboard and an old Amazon box.

Dwayne greeted, "Staying safe on the roads, Cletus?"

"Yessir, Mr. Dwayne. I'm trying to, at least. They've got chains for our tires today," he replied, "I have a package that you need to sign here for." Dwayne accepted the clipboard from Cletus. He dug his reading glasses from deep inside his pocket and looked over the document.

Without looking up, Dwayne announced, "I don't recall ordering anything off Amazon."

"Mr. Dwayne, I don't believe it's from Amazon. There's no return address on there," Cletus responded. Dwayne exchanged the clipboard with the beaten-up box. He studied the amateur taping and an original label hiding beneath the new one.

"Well, suppose it's something dangerous? I hate to keep you out here in the cold, but would you mind standing here for a moment while I open it?" asked Dwayne. Before getting an answer, Dwayne ripped into the box and discovered the little black container with a note taped onto it. Cletus tried to decipher it from upside down as Dwayne read the letter aloud.

Dear Cousin Dwayne and Cousin Rose,

Inside this box, you will find the ashes of Aldous Beaumont, Sr. I apologize that I did not call first to ask if you would do this. Honestly, I didn't want to be accountable for my father's ashes a moment longer. Although I never thought much of my father, it would be nice if his ashes were spread at the family plot in the Madison Baptist Church Cemetery. If it is not any extra trouble, a video of the casting would be appreciated. Hope y'all are staying healthy and safe. I still appreciate everything y'all did for my grandmother before she passed away.

Thank you,

Aldous Beaumont, Jr.

"Mr. Dwayne, sending ashes through the U.S. Postal service is a federal offense," Cletus looked down at Dwayne's black Air Force 1's. "I'm not going to say anything, of course, but y'all shouldn't be doing this again."

Dwayne assured Cletus, "I believe this is probably going to be a one-time deal. It's fitting that a crime was committed to deal with Aldous's remains anyway. He was a uniquely disgusting dirtbag." Dwayne finished signing the clipboard and waved Cletus off.

The roads were too dangerous to spread Aldous, Sr., that day. Dwayne walked down to the barn and stuck the remains in a safe place away from any small animals finding shelter. He grabbed the last load of firewood, then returned to the house. There was never any intention to retain Aldous in the barn. He told Rose precisely what happened and let her read the letter. Surely, they would have time tomorrow to go spread Aldous. However, the roads were too dangerous for another week. Once the weather finally warmed up, the Laurents had forgotten that Aldous was still in the barn. It wouldn't be until a different funeral when somebody asked Rose if she knew where they could go say some final words to Aldous, Sr., that she remembered he had been in the barn for months.

During the summer, Dwayne and Rose were frequently joined by their grandson, Hucksley Laurent. Almost every weekend, he would make the hour drive from Little Rock to hunt and fish on the family's property in Madison. The first Saturday of July, Hucksley spent the entire morning cleaning Dwayne's red Chevrolet truck after caking it in a layer of mud the previous day. He was wearing dusty pair of his uncle's red swim trunks that Rose still kept in a drawer. They were decorated in seagulls and pineapples. Hucksley had hoped to be done before lunchtime. Which was to be whenever Dwayne and Rose returned from the funeral they had left to attend that morning. Rose had explained how Hucksley knew the deceased during breakfast, but he had already forgotten.

He was standing in the bed of the truck when Rose's Chevrolet Suburban peeled into the driveway, throwing up gravel behind it. Dwayne threw on the parking brake inches away from the truck, swung the car door open, and ran towards the barn faster than Hucksley had ever seen him move.

He looked at Rose right as she screamed, "WE FORGOT ALDOUS!"

Hucksley balanced the black box of Aldous's ashes between the legs of his swim trunks in the back seat of the Suburban. He had not been allowed to change out of them before their trip to the graveyard. Rose had explained to him that there was not enough time. It did make him feel a little silly because Rose and Dwayne were still dressed up for the funeral they had just attended. Dwayne had asked Hucksley at breakfast if his all-black suit made him look like Johnny Cash. Rose thought it made him look like a Catholic Priest. They passed by the fast-food restaurants by the interstate and headed to town.

On their way to spread Aldous, Rose insisted on picking up their niece, Valorie, to have an additional witness at the casting. They stopped at her store, a combination boutique, café, and antique store; It was one of the few remaining stores in the area. The space itself used to be home to the local newspaper, and the smell of ink hadn't left the walls yet. The shop was painted a garish shade of bright green. The technical term for Hucksley's relationship with Valorie had always eluded him. But, even if he knew it, he would end up calling her Cousin Valorie either way.

Dwayne and Rose got out of the car and invited Hucksley to go in. He was unsure of whether he should leave Aldous in the vehicle. It seemed a little rude to carry around human remains inside a store. Especially one where food was prepared and sold. However, what if Aldous was stolen out of the car? There was absolutely no protocol for this situation. Hucksley decided he should bring the black box with him into the store but try and be tasteful. If he was lucky, he could get himself a pimento cheese sandwich out of this stop. It was the most popular item at Valorie's café, and the time was beginning to get past a comfortable lunchtime. Hucksley was unsure how long this adventure was going to last.

Immediately inside the store, in the part sectioned off as a boutique, was Valorie's father, J.W. (pronounced Jay-Dubyah), one of the final remaining "Arkies." His family had been one of those depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*. J.W.'s parents were farmers who had gone out of work during the dustbowl and migrated to California to become fruit pickers. After bouncing around the country, he landed back in Arkansas and got hitched with Rose's sister. J.W. was the greeter inside Valorie's. However, it was unimaginable to not find him asleep in his giant overstuffed Lay-Z-Boy recliner.

Rose scrambled to the antique section to locate Valorie. Hucksley wondered how someone would start an antique store. He imagined having a few relatives that died close together and getting stuck with their old belongings. He wouldn't have any use for it, but it would be difficult to toss away what felt like a loved one's entire life. So, it seemed like a logical next step to open up a small shop to put all of those loved one's personalities and consumerism on display. All while attracting young, out-of-town couples and moms with an irrational obsession with broken lamps to come spend their money on some of it.

Dwayne kicked the Lay-Z-Boy into the sitting-up position, startling J.W. out of his dream.

"Morning, J.W.," said Dwayne.

J.W. adjusted to his new surroundings and responded, "Hey, Dwayne! Got your grandson with you today?"

"Yup, we've got to go over to the graveyard and spread Aldous. Rose wanted to stop by and talk to Valorie about something or other."

"Now, didn't that piece of work pass a couple of months ago?"

"Sure did, but you know how it is with cremations and such. Not as much of a rush when you don't have a decomposing body to get in the ground," Dwayne insisted.

"I suppose so. Is the boy holding Aldous right there?"

Hucksley snapped back into the conversation, "Yessir. Would you like to hold him?"

"That's alright, boy."

Rose came back to the front of the store, dragging Valorie behind her. Valorie was dressed in a work shirt covered with drying dish soap from working in the kitchen and block heels. Her eyes doubled in size when she saw Hucksley holding Aldous against his chest.

Valorie let out a shrill scream, "Oh my GOD, I know that you did not bring him in my store."

"I couldn't leave him in the car," Hucksley retorted. "What if someone were to steal him?"

Valorie shook her head, "Why would someone steal ashes? What would they even do with them, Hucksley?" Hucksley hadn't arrived that far in his thought process. It was a valid point.

Hucksley asked, "Could I maybe go into the café and grab a pimento cheese sandwich?"

Valorie pointed, "Get out!"

He let Valorie win this argument and excused himself and Aldous before walking out the front of the store. He sat outside on a bench and looked around town. According to his grandfather, there used to be a bustling social scene in Madison. However, these days it resembled ruins more than shops. Broken glass and graffiti decorated the sidewalks. Some buildings had collapsed on themselves so long ago that trees are growing inside them. By the time Hucksley was Dwayne's age, perhaps a meadow will have grown on top of the decomposing city.

Rose, Dwayne, J.W., and Valorie walked out of the store. Hucksley held the Suburban door open to allow J.W. and Valorie to climb in the back.

Before he could join them, Valorie announced, "I don't want Aldous sitting by my feet. What if he spills? I'm wearing open-toed shoes!"

"There's a bag inside the box," replied Rose.

"That could still come open. Hucksley, could you put him in the back of the car?" Valorie retorted.

"Well, I don't want him going all over the back of my car," Rose snapped.

Hucksley suggested, "What if I just keep holding onto him?" Rose and Valorie agreed that this was good enough. Valorie buckled her seatbelt. J.W. sat in the middle seat crushing Hucksley against the door. He laid his chin on the black box and kept telling himself that it was only a five-minute drive to the graveyard.

The Madison Baptist Church Cemetery had significantly expanded in the past thirty years. You could see how the headstones were nearly falling apart next to the tree line but were almost brand new the closer you got to the creek. The Beaumont family plot was almost in the middle of all of it. They occupied a prime part of the cemetery underneath a giant crepe myrtle tree. The newest headstone in their plot was Aldous's mother. Hucksley and his family arrived in Rose's Suburban.

"Dwayne, do you remember where we buried Emmeline?"

"I think I remember it being underneath that tree," Dwayne answered.

"No, I don't recall ever even seeing that tree. I think it was closer to those trees over there," Valorie added while gazing outside the window, trying to remember. J.W. was snoring in the backseat next to Hucksley.

"I remember the tree because a branch almost hit J.W.," Dwayne asserted.

J.W. heard his name and snapped awake, "Hey, there! What's going on?"

"We're trying to find Emmeline, J.W.," Rose groaned.

"I remember her being beneath a tree. The branch almost hit me," J.W. yawned. Dwayne smirked at Rose as he parked the car opposite the crepe myrtle. She rolled her eyes. They unloaded themselves from the Suburban and walked over to Emmeline. Rose walked around and took two pairs of gardening gloves out of the trunk. Dwayne took Aldous out of Hucksley's hands.

Rose asked, "Hucksley, do you know how to take a video on your phone?"

"Ma'am?"

Rose pulled her phone out of her purse and handed it to Hucksley, "It's like taking a picture, but just hold the camera in place. It'll take a video."

"I know," Hucksley replied.

He grabbed the phone from Rose and set himself up, leaning against the tree. Dwayne took out a pocket knife and cut through the bag of ashes inside the black box. He yelped as a layer of ash flew out of the box.

“Hush, Dwayne, it’ll be alright,” Rose insisted. Dwayne kept blinking to try and get the ash out of his eyes.

Valorie asked, “Which way is the wind blowing?” The group looked around. After years of outdoor experience between the five of them, nobody wanted to confidently say which way the wind was going. If they were wrong, it would be an unforgivable mistake.

“Have y’all ever seen *The Lebow-ski*?” Valorie incorrectly questioned. Hucksley understood what she meant. The movie had a scene where Steve Buscemi’s ashes were thrown into the wind and immediately returned back onto the faces of his two best friends. Hucksley was glad to be over by the tree taking a video.

J.W. pointed to the tree, “Leaves are going north, so y’all stand on the other side of Emmeline’s grave.” Dwayne walked over and set the black box on the ground next to the headstone of Aldous’s mother.

Valorie asked, “Wait, are we spreading the ashes over a grave? Is that allowed?”

“That’s what Aldous, Jr., requested in his letter. If you have a better idea, say it,” Rose snapped back.

“I suppose this works,” Valorie yielded. Valorie and Rose put on the gardening gloves and stood south of Emmeline’s grave.

“Hucksley, I don’t think we need to film this whole thing. When I give you the signal, stop filming,” Rose told him. Before Hucksley could respond, Rose shoved her gloved hand into the bag and took out a fistful of ashes. He started recording right as she scattered Aldous close to the ground. Then Valorie took her turn and threw the ashes a little too high. They flew through the wind and landed on Dwayne’s black Air Force 1 sneakers.

She mouthed, “Sorry.”

About halfway through the bag, Rose turned to Hucksley and said, “Alright, that’s enough.” Rose lifted the box and poured the remaining ashes on the Beaumont plot.

Valorie looked over at Hucksley, “Have you been wearing swim trunks this whole time?” Hucksley nodded his head.

Walking away, Dwayne rubbed his eyes with his fist and said, “I think I still got some Aldous in my eye.” Next to Emmeline’s grave and the fresh pile of Aldous, Sr., was a noticeably blank gap of land where a plot should be.

Hucksley asked Rose, “Why is that there?”

“That’s where they’re going to bury Emmeline’s sister when she dies,” Rose explained. It had never occurred to Hucksley that you had to buy a plot of land before you die. He was curious if his grandparents had purchased their plots already but thought better of it.



Witching Hour at the Supermarket

By Verna Corinne Bryan

behold! the beauty of fluorescent light in the dead of night.
this place is a refuge of restless evenings,
this fortress in all its sterile beauty, this shining beast of modernity.

on sleepless nights, i walk its aisles like a ghost.
i read the labels of every brand of peanut butter on the shelves
because i've got all the time in the world.

WAITING DOORS

DON'T RUN, WALK;
SHINE AND RISE.
SHINE IN YOUR SKIN AND DON'T AVOID THE SPIN OF THIS LIFE
THAT IS YOURS.

ALL THE DOORS WAITING
TO BE FOUND, TO BE OPENED.

NEVER GIVE INTO THE MOPIN',
FOR HOPIN'
WILL GIVE YOU ALL YOU NEED.

TRUCK ON AND FEED
INTO THE LOVE
THIS LIFE HAS TO OFFER.

EAT A GOBSTOPPER AND LISTEN TO
CYNDI LAUPER.

JUST HAVE FUN IN EACH
PRECIOUS MOMENT.

MOVE WITH INTENT LIKE A DANCIN'
PRAYIN' MANTIS. PRANCIN'
AND DANCIN'

AS IF NO
OTHER
EYES
EXIST IN
THE WORLD EXCEPT YOURS.

APPRECIATE THE BORES OF LIFE AND STAY
OPEN TO POSSIBILITIES.

EVEN THE ONES
YOU THOUGHT WERE OUTSIDE OF YOUR ABILITIES.
BECAUSE IT IS
ALL POSSIBLE AND BEHIND THE

SOC-



What Stage of Grief

By Miceala Morano

Gasolines a body into flame with its tears?
Sends birds flying into windows, slick red feathers
rust-burnished in the light? I made this torch of me
to keep myself warm, to prove that matter
cannot be destroyed. What stage of grief
is burning? I think you are still here with me.
Tell me there's a way from pieces to peace.
if i burn long enough do I become
a beacon of light, guiding you back home?
In case of emergency, do not touch the glass.
Allow me to break alone. In case there is a light in me
that dares to go out, tell me the fire was necessary.
Show me the new growth. Forgive me all that comes
After. Forgive me all the ways I failed, your candle
going dark in broad daylight. I wish I could
turn off the sun to bring you back.

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Sarah Synar- Sarah Kate Synar is a sophomore journalism student. She grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She began writing poetry as a way to give back to the people, places, and things that have inspired and encouraged her in her life's journey so far. Writing has always been a way of better appreciating and understanding her life experiences. She commonly writes about themes regarding the natural world around her, growing up in the Midwest, and the musings of her subconscious.

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Nan Farrar- Nan Farrar (they/them) is a queer trans artist born and raised in Rudy, Arkansas. They are pursuing a BFA in Studio Art with a concentration in Ceramics with Departmental Honors. Their artistic and poetry practice both deal with ideas of identity and connection through a queer lens told through hyperbolized stories or images, taking a common image or moment and altering it past recognizable.

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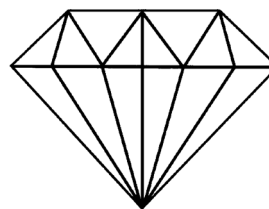
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