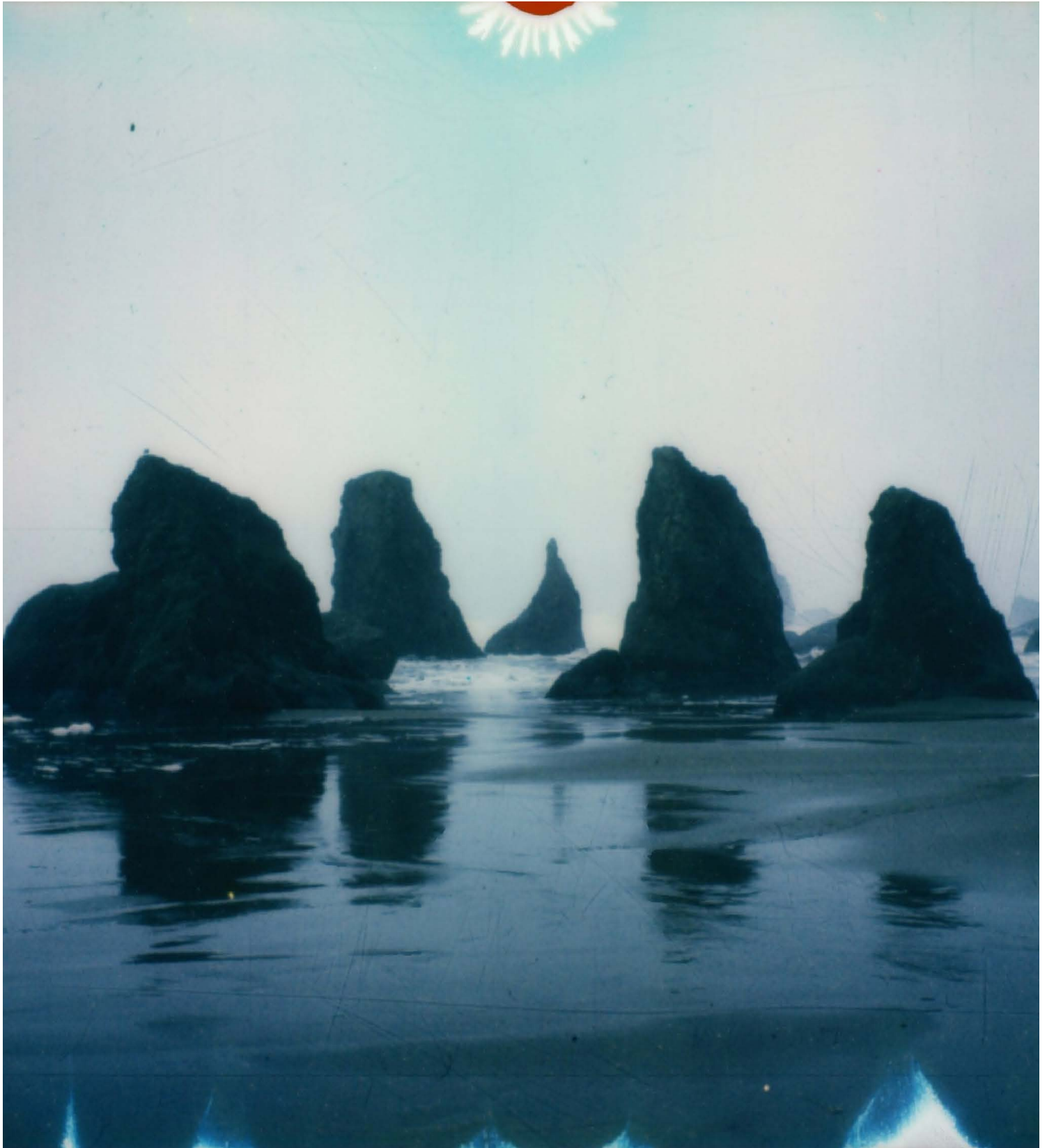


# pathos

LITERARY MAGAZINE

WINTER 2025

VOL. 19, NO. 2



06 REFUGIA  
*Paul Fredrickson*

14 THIRST  
*Tonia Peckover*

26 SAILING A MINDLESS SEA  
*Chloe Empoliti*

41 PROGRAMMED  
*Audrey Nixon*

Dear Reader,

Thank you for opening the first page of Pathos' second issue of 2025. Writers, artists, poetic souls etc.—yes, creative experimentation can be daunting. It's the unknowing that's the worst, not knowing what is going to come out of your mind once you begin, who's going to accept it. You tell yourself it has to be perfect and beautiful, to prove to yourself that it was worth it. To prove to yourself that you're worth it.

But it's never going to be perfect. Perfect and beautiful are two adjectives that I find are more and more antonymous. We are living in a very imperfect time. We step out into the world, and there's beauty everywhere. It has occurred to me, especially right now, that the world needs your work. It is essential for all of us to keep our hearts open, to maintain some tenderness for the world, and to secure our creativity. It is up to us to make sense of what is happening, I hope you find a way to document, through your art and imagination, what you're feeling right now and how you're reacting to this strange time we're living in, so we can show the next generations that yes, this happened, and yes, *we* happened too; we created still, despite it all. Who else will convince them?

I want to express my gratitude to Jenelle De Leon, Haley Hsu, and Charlie Young. The only reason why you're holding this magazine in your hand, dear reader, is because of them. Thank you all for the insight and talent that you bring to the table. I couldn't have asked for a better team. I also want to thank my advisor Reaz Mahmood and the people at SALP who help support our group, and by extension, the literary arts community here at PSU.

Sincerely,



Adriana Stanzione  
Executive Editor

---

## EDITORIAL STAFF

---

**ADRIANA STANZIONE**  
*Executive Editor*

**JENELLE DE LEON**  
*Creative Director*

**CHARLIE YOUNG**  
*Copy Editor*

**HALEY HSU**  
*Social Media Manager*

- 04** TEN MILES TIL' THE NEXT TOWN  
*Katie Bachelor*
- 06** REFUGIA  
*Paul Fredrickson*
- 07** AUSTIN  
*Ryan Douglas*
- 08** MISSING HIM AS HE PASSED BY  
*Jeff Hartnett*
- 12** TAKING FLIGHT  
*Bambi L. Moss*
- 13** LATE AUGUST, 2015, 8A.M.  
*Nick Gatlin*
- 14** THIRST  
*Tonia Peckover*
- 17** REBIRTH  
*Rachel Shubin*
- 18** SAILING A MINDLESS SEA  
*Chloe Empoliti*
- 19** FOUR CYCLOPS  
*Jeff Hartnett*
- 20** DOWNSTREAM  
*Atlas Donnelly*
- 25** DESIRE  
*Audrey Nixon*
- 26** NIGHT AT A MOTEL  
*Amity Cummings*
- 28** FLY TRAPS  
*Beth Simmons*
- 30** FINDING A WINDBORNE SEED IN THE GARDEN BED  
*Paul Fredrickson*
- 31** SOME FARAWAY BEACH  
*Alex Leskovec*
- 32** QUESTIONS OF HEAVEN  
*Paul Fredrickson*
- 33** TRANSPORTATION  
*Alex Leskovec*
- 34** THE TEAPOT  
*Lilli Rudine*
- 37** LET'S LUXURY  
*Lukas Sullins*
- 38** GENESIS  
*Eliza Mortimer*
- 40** CEREBRUM PROPERTY MANAGEMENT WELCOMES YOU  
*Nick Gatlin*
- 41** PROGRAMMED  
*Audrey Nixon*
- 42** SHADOWS ON THE TRAIN  
*Dereck An*
- 43** OLD SMOKER  
*Dereck An*
- 44** I WOULD SADLY STILL TAKE HIM BACK  
*Patrick Reddy*
- 47** PREFACE  
*Sarah Phillips*
- 48** PARK FIRE  
*Allen Myers*
- 49** WORKING REFLECTIONS  
*Allen Myers*
- 50** KINTSUGI OF THE HEART (心の金継ぎ)  
*Matthew D. Albertson*

COVER: SOME FARAWAY BEACH  
*Alex Leskovec | Polaroid Photograph*

# Ten Miles 'Till the Next Town

WRITTEN BY  
KATIE BACHELOR

THE NOMAD WAS DRAPED IN vibrant colors that she wore like stained glass, all light catching even in this gray midday gloom. Her hair and eyes were dark, black and shiny as a wolf's coat. She recognized me as a fellow nomad and I corrected her, *No ma'am. A drifter. But we ain't all that different despite it.*

She met me before the rain started. We both ducked into the same abandoned post. A wooden shack with a barn beside it, firewood chopped and stacked politely by the chimney. A few chairs, one knocked on its side where a spider's web, equally abandoned, had begun its delicate collection of dust. I arrived first, setting the wood to work. When she came I was just as quick to drop my gun as I was to grab it. She hardly took a pause, which pleased me as I wasn't the kind to frighten a woman.

"Oh my, a gentleman," she said, gesturing to the fire, not yet kindled. I grinned.

"Well, I admit I would have spruced up the place had I known there would be company." I removed my hat and nodded, a bid of welcome. She smiled and moved with a fluidity not often seen in this rocky terrain. She was next to me before I could resume my task, startling me when she took her fingers to my hair.

"Curls," she said, voice coated with delight.

I laughed and went back to my matchbox. Meanwhile she lifted the fallen chair to sit. A bright yellow flame began its hunger on the matchstick as I laid it on the dry bed of wood for consumption. The rain picked up, plucking chords upon the roof and filling the shack with its dripping melody.

The woman watched me with patient eyes as I pocketed my matches beneath my poncho, set my hat on the fire iron mounted at the side of the chimney, and pulled up a seat next to her.

"You've got a beautiful horse," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am. When I see yours, I'll return the compliment, I'm sure."

"I'm sure," She agreed. She surveyed the room for what it was worth. She seemed drawn to lofty corners and overturned trinkets.

"You from these parts?" I asked. The nomad smiled, one that told me half of everything she said was in her eyes.

"Why? Do I look it?"

"It's a rule of conversation, I suppose."

She nodded as if I had said something wise. If there was one thing I was not, that was it. But it made me proud, like I should keep saying things to make her nod.

"I'm southern come and northern bound. For now," she said at last. Then, without the tact of transition, "How'd you lose that hand?" She pointed to it with a twig I hadn't noticed her acquire. I laughed, the startled kind.

"Lady, you are something else."

She shrugged and said, "I do what I can. When the rain lets up and we part ways I want to remember you." Her eyes told me she wouldn't have to worry about whether I remembered her. She knew I would.

I nodded, it was as convincing an argument as any. I held up my prosthetic and moved my mechanical joints. They muttered in the quiet shack, joining the rain and crackling fire. It was a peaceful sort of noise, that tired whine of metallic flesh stirring in the muted storm.

"I don't know what to say. I was a dumb kid. Still am in some ways, maybe. I played around with the wrong guy. He taught me one thing and luck taught me another. Left me looking stupid at the doc, though, that's certain."

I don't know what I expected from her. A laugh, maybe. She only nodded again, like I had told her an interesting fable and she was sifting for the moral.

We talked for some hours after that, using the old windows like a clock to track the rain. At some point the gray sky cracked open with a brilliant orange that gently flooded the old shack, warmer than the hearth beside us.

The both of us were silent for some time, casting our faces in the descending light. Then, with the same grace she'd used when we'd first met, she was at my side and untying an object from her waist. I watched her as she held out a clean, pure white rabbit's foot in front of me. It dangled, stiff and soft. I looked at the thing and then to her. She thrust it a little closer, and only when I took the silky fur into my hand did she answer.

"So you don't lose the other one. A guy like you needs a little luck." She paused. "And you know what? I think I will remember you." 🍀

## REFUGIA

*Paul Fredrickson*

Blue chicory blur in temple ground  
Sage garden: erronia glow  
Listen to the river now.  
Three crows, night song  
Dark unfurling in the pear leaves  
Listen to the river now.

In cold water,  
strangled life:  
A cricket a human  
a tree a rock  
Listen, humming  
Refugia  
shrinking  
Owls screeching in the night.

*Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate,  
bodhi, svaha.*

Smoke haze travels over ridgeline  
Canopy fire: zigzag  
Listen to the river now.  
Dusklight, moths  
Swallowed in approaching night: the hemlock boughs  
Listen to the river now.

Into the gone, into the gone  
Into the gone beyond  
Into the completely beyond  
Into

## AUSTIN

*Ryan Douglas*

I'm angry  
Sort of like  
How the first thing  
A man  
Does when he gets angry  
Is look for someone to pin with shame

But I don't know who to blame  
I don't know who to shout out:

Hey ChatGPT,  
Why are all the people who look like  
Me sick with HIV?

She's mad  
Unfocused

Doesn't she know there's a condition  
A price you pay for better sex  
Than any straight  
Man?

Would I be crazy  
If I thought the labs generated this disease  
To remove rainbows from textbooks  
Positivism  
Down to the needle point  
And the pills you take when you're sick  
And the pens and pencils  
And the t-cells  
And the woman I met in Manchaca, Texas

Who told me how she buried her sun  
Beneath a cloudless sky

And I was the only gay thing for miles.

# Missing Him as He Passed By

WRITTEN BY  
JEFF HARTNETT



I GOT SIDETRACKED REMEMBERING, YEARS ago, making a series of pieces in my typical stripy style, using identical photographs of my now-yellow father, his younger face mixed with various images. One of them had his black-and-white face interlocking with a drum major's baton, tracing its whirling path across his face in a kind of frozen motion. Another had an engorged tick attached to his cheek. In another, his face had merged with a serene Botticelli portrait, a man of leisure, with soft halfway-closed eyes, who was looking the opposite way from Jack. He was merged with a bearded man with glasses, perhaps a scientist, a smart person. With a tree frog. And a urinal! With a wild, abstract, splashy black-and-blue painting. And with a light gray seated Buddha, his eyes closed and a soft blanket of intensely beautiful snow covering his head. And, finally, with a smiling sock monkey wearing a pirate hat—maybe the best one!

My now-sick father—I so badly wanted to be with him, almost always, even though making all of this art that included him, his image, was also a way for me to avoid *being* with him. For more than twenty years, two decades.

I thought of my formative years at RISD, with intense workdays in the studio, rewarded with

generous Mexican breakfasts every Sunday, with Herman and lots of other artsy friends and strong coffee and our talking about art and life and, hopefully, the good things that would come to each of us. For some reason, a work by Matisse floated into my mind, his *Porte-Fenetre a Collioure*. I used to call it “the darkest painted space of all time”.

One Sunday while we were eating, my school-friend Pat said, “Frank, when we're in our studio, when I watch you, I sometimes notice that you stop breathing when you're working. You forget to breathe. Something to remember, Frank. Seems kinda important.”

To start making my first diptych, I found a dead-on black-and-white photographic portrait, very formal, of dear ol' Jack when he must have been about my age. I just stared at it, my mouth a horizontal line, and felt a soft wind go straight down my spine. I took some 100-pound bristol paper and trimmed it so that it was the same height as Jack's photo and twice as wide. With rubber cement, I secured my old man's portrait on the left side of the bristol paper and carefully masked it off with yellow tracing paper, then fixed it to my work table with painter's tape. *Now, what should I put on the right side of the diptych? What, or better yet, who is Jack's fraternal twin?*

I was feeling a kind of angst, maybe bitter at the same time, for who he had been as my dad and now for being so sick, for turning yellow and shrinking and fading and someday soon leaving me. Leaving me here, down in the basement. I took out the India ink, unscrewing the top of the bottle and setting it aside.

“Tomorrow, or the next day, I’m going to go through all those Life magazines I got at the Hyman’s Everything Store and cut out a bunch more images; I could always use more and I really have nothing much better to do,” I whispered to myself as I sat and pondered what to do next.

A second image—I’ve forgotten now which one it was, only that it was near where I keep my screwdrivers and wrenches and hammers—caught my eye, and I impulsively reached for it. I was lifting it up as my other hand reached up to adjust my lamp, and I *stupidly* knocked over the *stupid* ink jar and the *stupid* ink went everywhere.

“Frank, you’re really something!” I growled as I quickly reached for the nearby paper towels to try to clean things up.

As I calmed myself, I wondered whether I had perhaps made a “happy accident” or just a mess on my beautiful maple table. I unpeeled the blue tape that was holding down the yellow tracing paper and removed it, balled it all up, and tossed it. What I then saw was the photograph of my old man, looking youngish, with potential, on the left side, and a black *stupid* mess on the right side, both of them staring up at me. It was almost the Matisse painting—pure blackishness, but now with my father as its partner or lover or twin—looking up at me. My young and innocent-looking father was staring out, his eyes asking me something that I couldn’t read or hear or see.

My phone chirped in my pocket. The chances that it could be some form of disappointment, or worse, loomed and that led me to let it go to voicemail.

I heard my message, “*This is the phone number of Frank Bond. If you leave a message, I’ll probably call you back, but let’s understand right now that this is not a promise.*” And after a two second pause: *BEEP!* A long silence followed, then a dial tone. Then my phone rang again. I reached into my pocket this time, brushing against my mottled stone as I did so.

My father whispered into my ear, “*Frank, it’s your old man. I need you.*” Then I heard the phone drop and there was silence. It felt like my heart stopped beating.

Everything in the universe changed, and it felt like there were new dimensions opening up under my feet and above my head. A small part of me didn’t want to go.

I had to go.

Desperate worry flooded me. I high-tailed it over there, barged through the back door that he always left unlocked. He was lying flat on the living room floor, his face clenched so hard that his moist eyes were horizontal slits. He looked stiff as a board, like a broken-down wooden dummy. What that Japanese guy had said to me at Friendly’s about the needles-on-the-tofu came to mind but then those words flew away as fast as lightning. I knelt down. Oh God.

“Where does it hurt?”

“Everywhere. Help me, Frank.”

“Try to breathe. I’ll call an ambulance.”

“No, just be with me.”

Of course, I did call the ambulance about my emergency—I mean *his* emergency! I gave them good directions and hung up quickly, then returned to Jack’s side.

“What can I do?”

“Just lay down next to me, be with me.”

So I placed my body next to his, flat on the floor, side-by-side, both of us looking up at the ceiling, touching along our contours, our edges, on the cheap carpet of his living room, with the blank screen of the TV staring at us—two voyagers through life—and my tears welled up and spilled out. At that moment, it was the easiest thing in the world to do...

...but then the world turned black...

...and the next thing I knew a baby-faced rescue squad guy was shaking me. I must have passed out, I felt completely exhausted, and I didn’t know where I was. I quickly looked down but they had taken him away. His faded yellow shirt and too-short pants had been cut away where the EMTs had been trying to save him and they strangely remained almost in place on the floor, suggesting his form, his ghost. I’d missed everything. His shirtsleeve was just where my shoulder had been seconds ago, touching his. I could still smell his aftershave, the air was filled with him.

But now he was a gone. He was gone. I knew it.

The rest of that horrible day, I have little-to-no memory. I was told by many friends and neighbors that I had been a “good son.” I’d chosen the casket, arranged the funeral, said the right things at the

service, didn't fall apart when people came with their condolences and casseroles, took care of business, didn't lose it. It's all a blur now, and that's okay I guess. I'm still alive, and he's not—but I am.

The next day, and for the next three weeks, I believe, I found myself in bed a lot, under my comforter, reading and thinking and sleeping too much. And staring into space, trying to understand him and myself and to forget what I needed to forget and to remember the good things, as precious as they were.

One day, a group of starlings decided to rest in the limbs of the cedar right outside my east-facing bedroom window with the white curtains that I pulled over. They hung around for about a week. They were noisy and unwelcome intruders, with wicked black eyes and too-sharp wingtips, but I kinda needed their company. There were moments when they puffed out their round breasts—I guess to feel warmer—and talked to me in their harsh avian voices. That afternoon, I gave each of them names. Sometimes, at night, I'd just stare at the stars.

Eventually, I rejoined the world and saw Herman more and dreamed about Barbara and tried to not miss him too damn much. I tried to work it out in my mind. He'd left me twice, but I'd left him too. I wish he could be safe in my pocket.

*He* was the One, and I had forgotten it until it was too late.

Herman, even more my best friend, told me that Cat had remarked at the funeral, "I'll never underestimate Frank again," but I'm not sure what that means. Maybe that I can do necessary things even while being blinded by a dense mental fog—which I found hard to believe but tried to be open to the idea. Akai called and said hello but then just listened to the little I had to say and I appreciated that. Even Earl sent a nice card. The outside had a beautiful watercolor of a sperm whale, cresting above the waves, and on the inside he had written, in very small script, a quote from someone named David Augsburger:

Since nothing we intend is ever faultless, and nothing we attempt ever without error, and nothing we achieve without some measure of finitude and fallibility we call humanness, we are saved by forgiveness.

Most days, everything felt slow-motion. A heavy black curtain had fallen when my old man died. Black, red—I couldn't part that red curtain and walk into that perfect stone of round space like I had parted the red curtain at St. Ivo twenty years ago. The play had ended. The antagonist had left the stage, the audience had eventually shuffled out, the scenery was taken away and stored somewhere, and I started the second half of my life.

One question that kept bouncing around in my head made me lower my gaze in sorrow, or pull over on the side of the road for a few minutes in order to slow down my breathing, or make my mouth go horizontal, or even at times to pick out my images with more care, put the right ones shoulder-to-shoulder.

*I never had an adult conversation with him — how could that be?* 🌀



**TAKING FLIGHT**

*Bambi L. Moss*  
Film Photograph



**LATE AUGUST, 2015, 8A.M.**

*Nick Gatlin*

John Green is on the wall  
feverishly explaining the French  
Revolution & / a senior leans over &  
asks me about caffeine dependency  
(three that morning) & / down the street  
my mother is dying / & I can't stop  
thinking about how for men it's widow  
*er*, like *farmer* or *waiter*, like it's  
something you do.

Styrofoam pad thai  
gives me the hiccups which is awkward  
for a hospital waiting room but then  
so is everything // no one tells you  
how to wait & / yes, *that* clock,  
the one above reception, it's  
indescribably loud, will *someone*  
please shut it the hell up she's  
supposed to be out by now &

this place smells like a shoe.

13

# Thirst

WRITTEN BY  
TONIA PECKOVER

THE TRAIN RIDE FROM ST Louis to Morrow was supposed to be four days, but somewhere around Utah, a cow wandered onto the tracks and nearly derailed us. We were delayed for two days while the crew worked to untangle cow and train. The days were hot, the air stank of rot and shit, oil and sweat. I should have taken it as a sign. It's been 40 years since I boarded that train, fresh and green, dumb as a newborn kitten. It would have been better if my mother had tied me in a sack and drowned me.

When we finally arrived in Morrow, it was midday, a white sun bearing down on the isolated station. I stood on the top step of the train looking out at the wide mouth of the valley. A ring of low hills surrounded it, ridged and regular as a row of teeth. In the center lay the narrow green tongue of farmland where the river ran through. John's farm – my new home – would be there, I thought. It was a pretty place, or at least it had all the designations that should make it so: blue sky, rolling hills, those cool green fields. But a sense of dread came over me when I went to step off the train, as if the land might be waiting to swallow me whole. I flinched as my foot touched the ground.

John was not there to greet me, but I soothed myself with the assurance that he could hardly be

expected to know the moment a long-delayed train would arrive. I smoothed my hair back and shook out my skirts, rubbed the dirt from the toes of my boots and tried to ignore the thirst that had begun to overtake me while I sat waiting on the bench.

It was evening before he arrived, driving a pair of splay-footed mules attached to an equally worn wagon. He was nothing like what his letters had suggested, but I was nearly dizzy with thirst by then and the dust of the place had made my eyes gritty and tired. I took his hand, let him haul me up into the wagon, accepted gratefully the offer of water from a dented jug that hung from the seat. The ride was long, the road ridged as a rib cage. I had no strength left to resist it and so I shuddered and sifted in my seat until I felt loose and dry as a bag of stones. We rode right past those green fields and out toward the tooth-like hills.

The so-called farm was not much more than a splintery cabin and a garden run to thistles. The only green around the place was a row of elms, whose roots had found shelter in a shallow gully. Behind the house, a thin sow rooted in a wooden pen, her pale skin sunburned, the tips of her ears crusted and black. There was a well, miraculously, with an iron handle that groaned plaintively when I gave it an experimental

pump. All around, the land was flat and dusty until it ran up into the hills about a mile distant. The place looked like it had been accidentally dropped from above by some divine hand and left behind, forgotten. John opened the door to the cabin and went inside without looking back at me.

Parched. That's the word for all the years that followed. I have said I was green before I came here, you must see how true that is now. Hope stains our vision. Back at home with my mother, I'd no idea how desperate an old man could be for anything that might bring him back to life. I could not see the possibility that John would lie to get me there, that he might not be the hale and happy young husband I was expecting. He had already been on this land for so long by the time I came. The place had sucked him dry, left him lean and withered, brittle-boned and calloused.

I was still stunned with the shock of this, still aching with that strange thirst, when the preacher and his wife arrived the next morning to marry us. They did their deed while I stood swaying on my feet, barely able to connect my thoughts, then scurried out the door quick as they could, the preacher's wife stealing a shamed glance at me on the way out. When I realized what had been done, I felt my stomach turn and ran outside myself. I worked the iron arm of the pump until it released a dreadful wail and a rusted stream of water, but none of it was enough to slake my terrible thirst.

I will not tell of the rawboned years that passed after the preacher pronounced us bound till death do us part. I will only tell you that death can come swiftly and slowly all at the same time. One day, those

ramshackle mules stumbled, and John fell under the wheels of his own wagon. He was carried home without his senses by that same preacher, laid out in our bed where he stayed, keening and complaining, the wind scouring him slowly away until one morning I woke to find a handful of pebbles on the sheets where once he had lay.

You might be wondering why I didn't go back to my mother then. She was still living, my brothers too; they would have welcomed me. But I was caught, swallowed by pride and regret, half dust and stone myself by then. How could I go back to the soft, cool place of my memory, see them all thriving and know what might have been?

I stayed on. Without John to care for, I scratched out a living, growing corn and chickens, selling the eggs in town. It was hard work. I grew thin, my skin dried and cracked, the color leached from my hair, my joints twisted and swelled. I could hardly remember a time when I wasn't thirsty. I began to understand John then, to pity him. The temptation to scribble out lies on a sheet of paper in order to call forth something clean and sweet, something young and green to himself, must have been unendurable. I pity him, but I am not John. I am not a man. Already, I have lived forever among these stones, this parched earth. The girl who arrived on that long ago train is only a story I tell myself sometimes. I have always been here, dust and bone, made for the slow, patient burnishing of this white sun. I crack and fissure, open myself so that it can have more of me. Already, I have never tasted water. ☉



## REBIRTH

*Rachel Shubin*

Unfixed we begin  
Hover along the lines  
Marble silent waits

\*

Angles chart the shape  
Mark pins in solitude  
Frame the empty space

17

\*

Chisel solid block  
Strike off the barren slag

Unbind the waking form

\*

Trace the mapward edge  
Caress each sculpted groove  
From outside in reborn

## SAILING A MINDLESS SEA

*Chloe Empoliti*

*ARTICLE IV - 'The lights and candles should be put out at eight at night, and if any of the crew desire to drink after that hour they shall sit upon the open deck without lights.' - Pirates Code of Conduct. It was famously used by Bartholomew Roberts, an infamous captain in the Golden Age of Piracy, amongst many other pirate crews. The Pirates Code of Conduct was a sort of law amongst the sea, and not many dared try breaking it. At least, those that lived.*

A lonesome chair,  
That's where I sit most days,  
Most nights.

Though outside my window grow the shrubs of the forest  
My mind lay amongst the blues of the sea.

18

The AC might as well be autumn's cool breeze  
Dimming lights are candles I had lit  
The tea in my cup forms into rich rum, bronze liquid warms the soul.

As rain soaks into aging mahogany, I can't help but dread the distance  
Between my self  
And this place.

All are in one  
But this ship always loses its way  
Lost in the sea of mind.

Sailing to nowhere, lulled by nautical melodies  
I put out my candles,  
the final light taken by night's harsh gust.

In hopes the Captain didn't catch glimpse of the glowing flame,  
So I may sit in this place a while longer.

I still have a swallow of rum left to burn.



**FOUR CYCLOPS**

*Jeff Hartnett*  
Collage

# Downstream

WRITTEN BY  
ATLAS DONNELLY

THE STORM WAS CLOSING IN, making it difficult for Mårle to return home as winds ravaged the familiar waters. It was dark, murky with mud the storm pulled from the bottom of the river, as she tried to find her nest among the many others. She dove headfirst with all her might when she finally spotted the pretty pink Yllejo, cozily nestled between a large rock and a fallen tree, and with one final mighty whip of her tail through the water, Mårle was home.

She joined Yllejo in the little slot where she lay, the two of them comfortably snuggled together as the waters around them became colder and colder.

"Where've you been?" Yllejo asked sleepily, tired eyes barely meeting Mårle's fond gaze.

"Y'know. Around," Mårle answered vaguely. "You seem tired."

"I'm always tired," Yllejo replied. She leaned her head against the rock beside her and closed her eyes. "Especially during storm season."

"Does the current affect you that much?" Mårle asked. Yllejo didn't answer, having already fallen asleep.

Granted, the current's sudden speed from the storm above the water's surface had affected Mårle as well. Her hunt had started off as any other, but when the storm hit, her prey had scattered, and she'd returned home without a catch. She wondered if Yllejo was hungry as well as tired, but hiding it because she'd seen Mårle returning empty-handed.

Mårle looked out over the collection of nests, watching the mud dilute the usually-clear water of her riverbed home. Through the blur, she could see the faint silhouettes of others who lived here at the bottom of the river. Brea was the only mer with whiskers in their community, and Mårle could recognize Fron from the long, elegant silhouette of his tail that matched her beloved Yllejo's.

She noticed that Fron's silhouette was growing, slowly becoming clearer as the merman approached. He also looked tired as he swam near, the blue edges of his tail accentuating the heavy bags under his eyes.

"Storm water taking its toll?" Mårle joked as Fron lay down on top of the rock beside her.

"Yeah," he answered, sighing. "How's Yllejo holding up?"

"Tired," Mårle answered. "She's always tired these days."

"Yeah, that happens with bettas," Fron said. "But she's okay otherwise? Not drifting or anything?"

Mårle looked up at him, confused.

"Are you trying to imply something?" She asked. "You know I'm not good at subtlety."

"Oh. You don't know, do you?" Fron said quietly. "Her lifespan's almost up, y'know. Yllejo's dying."

Mårle's only response was a wave of bubbles rushing out of her gills.

"Just... Keep an eye on her," Fron said, pushing himself up and lazily swimming back towards his own nest, a patch of mud lined with plants and a few collected trinkets that had washed in from upstream.

*Yllejo's dying?* Mårle turned awkwardly to rest her head on Yllejo's shoulder. The stream of bubbles from her gills was rhythmic and constant as she slept. Mårle opened her mouth and lightly bit down on the skin at the join of Yllejo's neck and shoulder, an affectionate piranha nibble to symbolize her love. *No, she's not. She's always tired during storm season. That's all it is, she's just tired from the change in current.* Mårle released her and snuggled closer, closing her eyes. *Tomorrow, I'll find prey and we'll feast. Fron won't be invited- Actually, no one's invited. Just us two.*

Yllejo was the first of the two to wake. She yawned, air escaping from her gills as she stretched her tired arms. She curled her flowing pink and red tail under her, careful not to move too much since Mårle was still sleeping on her shoulder. Yllejo smiled to herself, reaching up to run her fingers through her protector's long red hair.

*She'll probably want to go hunt again as soon as she wakes up. ...Is the storm over yet?* Yllejo looked out into the distance, still seeing streaks of mud shooting through the clear water. *Almost. Soon.*

She giggled as a bubble from Mårle's sleeping breath popped against her cheek. The sound must've woken Mårle, because she opened one eye tiredly. She stared at Yllejo for a moment, taking in the betta's beauty. Before Yllejo had found her, Mårle had never met a betta merperson. She'd since decided they were the most beautiful type of fish she'd ever seen.

Yllejo had found Mårle tangled in a fishing net, and somehow, the piranha girl's sharp teeth and even sharper stare hadn't scared her away. Instead, Yllejo had freed Mårle from the net and welcomed her into her nest, far, far downstream from where Mårle had come from. Before falling in love with the little pink betta, Mårle had fully intended to make the journey home and return to her sisters.

"What's so funny?" Mårle asked tiredly. She yawned, sending bubbles from her gills and again, Yllejo giggled as one popped against her cheek.

"It tickles!" She explained cheerfully. Her teeth were far less sharp than Mårle's as she nestled her face into the crook of her lover's neck, gently reciprocating the little piranha nibbles Mårle often gave her.

Mårle smiled. What a way to wake up.

"Are you hungry, Llejy?" She asked sweetly. "There's a gourami nest not far from where—"

"The storm is affecting the water," Yllejo said calmly, wrapping her arms around Mårle. "Stop thinking about hunting for now and just stay with me."

Mårle hadn't thought about her sisters in quite some time. Meeting Yllejo, being rescued by something she probably would've killed under different circumstances, had been a major turning point in her life. She'd never seen a betta before, but she knew from an older sister, a great hunter, that they were brightly colored, elegant, and delicious. Her sister had described them to her as "dinner and a show" and until meeting Yllejo, Mårle had dreamed of hunting bettas.

"I'll always stay with you," Mårle replied, curling her shiny tail around Yllejo's. Awkwardly, because Yllejo's arms were still around her, Mårle reached for the long braid cascading down Yllejo's back and wrapped it around the both of them like a scarf. "Are you cold at all? Does the storm bother you?"

"I'm never cold when you're here," Yllejo said sweetly. She smiled, resting her head against Mårle's chest. "I'm tired."

"Go back to sleep, then," Mårle said softly. "I'm here. I'll stay."

Yllejo closed her eyes again and snuggled impossibly closer to Mårle, arms still embracing the huntress she was bound to. The end of her pink braid swayed freely in the current, and Mårle watched it silently as Yllejo drifted off again. Fron's words from earlier echoed in her mind— *her lifespan's almost up.*

*How long do bettas live for?*

Mårle knew precisely three things about betta fish: Firstly, they were as delicious as they were colorful. Secondly, they were small, but they could be as vicious as a shark. Thirdly, they were territorial creatures— more than three bettas to a single community, and they'd fight each other. How long they lived was a mystery to Mårle.

Come to think of it, hadn't she once asked Yllejo

how long her people live? Yes, she had, not long after their first meeting, back when Yllejo was still tending a wound Mårle had sustained thrashing against the net she'd been caught in. What had Yllejo said then?

*Long enough, huntress. Now rest.*

Now Yllejo was the one resting, and Mårle was thinking bettas *don't* live "long enough". Yllejo's response had irked Mårle when she'd asked. She'd contemplated tearing the pretty pink scales from Yllejo's tail, but the betta mer's kindness had already overtaken her by then. Mårle was a different fish than she'd once been, and it was all because of Yllejo's constant kindness. Mårle's family had taught her the violent traditions of piranhas, but miles downstream, Mårle had learned compromise, community, and she'd learned the love of another. The idea of Yllejo dying was anguish.

Another cold wave washed through their river, brought in by the above-water winds. Yllejo's braid continued swaying, but a scent on the current caught Mårle's attention. The faint scent of iron in the water filled her gills and she squirmed out of Yllejo's embrace.

*If there's blood in the water, something's injured— If it's injured, it's easy prey, and we can eat.* Mårle only hesitated for a moment. Yllejo was asleep, she wouldn't miss Mårle if the hunt was quick. As Mårle was about to begin the hunt, a neighbor swam up to her.

"You smell it too, don't you?" Brea asked, her long whiskers twitching. "Are you going out to find it?"

"I'm about to," Mårle said simply. Brea nodded.

"Can I join you?" She asked. "I won't take from the spoils, I'm just curious what it is. It's coming from upstream, but nothing lives upstream for miles."

"...Sure," Mårle said reluctantly. Once a solo hunter, her precious Yllejo had been encouraging her to make friends with the other mers in their vicinity.

*"Stay still." Yllejo said, unfazed by the stranger's glare. The water around the woman's shimmery tail was stained with red ribbons and the water smelled like metal.*

*"Leave me," the stranger demanded, flashing a sharp set of teeth as she sneered.*

*Yllejo ignored her, instead grabbing a sharp rock from the riverbed and using it to cut the net the stranger was caught in.*

Yllejo woke with a start. She looked around for a moment, confused. Mårle has said she wouldn't leave, so why was she gone? Yllejo sank further between the rock and the tree.

"Morning, sleepyhead."

"Fron?" Yllejo asked, looking around.

"Up here."

Yllejo looked up, seeing Fron smiling down at her from above the rock that formed her and Mårle's nest.

"Hello," Yllejo said. "Have you seen Mårle?"

"She's with Brea," Fron said. His smile faltered.

"They just got back a few minutes ago."

"Can you take me to them?" Yllejo asked. Fron nodded.

*"Why did you save me? The day you found me.*

*Didn't you know I was dangerous?"*

*"Piranhas shimmer in a way I'd never seen before.*

*Your scales are beautiful, Mårle."*

*"That's not an answer, Llejy!"*

"You're certain?" Brea asked. Mårle nodded.

"Yes," she said. "And it would've been easy for her to get here. Nothing lives upstream for miles, you said that, but the first nest upstream from here is my old home. It's all piranhas, all family. I got washed downstream during a storm, so it's not unlikely the same thing happened to her."

"Only, you survived," Brea pointed out. "It seems your sister didn't."

"Well, yes, obviously," Mårle stated flatly. "You said you didn't want the spoils, so would you mind if I took her back to my nest now?"

"You— you're going to treat your own sister like a regular hunt?" Brea asked, surprised.

Two figures approached the hunters, swimming slowly.

"You said what now?" Fron asked. "That fish you found is someone's sister?"

"Yes, mine," Mårle said. "Well. She was, when she was alive."

Fron looked at the dead piranha laying on the bed of the river. She had the same shimmery tail as Mårle, and though her hair was short, it was the same red as hers, too. He figured she must be hiding the same deadly fangs as Mårle as well.

"How do piranhas mourn death?" Fron asked curiously. "It must be hard to lose a sister like this."

"Not really," Mårle said simply. Brea looked her up and down before looking back at Mårle's sister.

"Yeah, sure, I don't mind if you take her back," Brea said finally.

Yllejo didn't say a thing.

*"Can I stay with you?"*

*"Well, that's new," Yllejo joked. "You've practically been begging to go home the whole time you've been here!"*

*"...I want to stay with you. You're nice."*

*"Give me one good reason I should let you stay.*

*After all, you said yourself you dream about eating me."*

*"I love you, Llejy."*

Mårle let Yllejo go first, wedging herself between the tree and the rock. Mårle's sister's body was between them.

"You've been quiet, Llejy, are you okay?" Mårle asked worriedly. Yllejo nodded.

"I'm just tired," she said. "I'm sorry about your sister. Why are you keeping her corpse?"

"The storm scares off all the prey," Mårle said. "We have to eat *something*."

"Are you really okay with eating your own sister?" Yllejo asked gently. "Mårle, most fish here don't look kindly on that sort of thing."

"I'm fine, Llejy," Mårle assured her. "Piranhas are tasty anyway, you don't want to miss out."

"I'm tired."

"You just woke up!"

"I know," Yllejo giggled. "Still tired, though."

"When the storm is over, I'd better not catch you hiding in shadows taking naps," Mårle scolded playfully. "You've been taking enough naps for a lifetime! ... You can get some rest, I'm going to talk to Fron a bit."

"Okay," Yllejo said, grinning. "I'll see you later, then."

"Yeah," Mårle said, smiling. She took her lover's hand in hers, giving it a squeeze and affectionately biting a knuckle before swimming away.

Fron's nest was a neatly arranged lean-to of washed up debris propped up against the other side of the rock that formed Mårle and Yllejo's nest. It took the piranha all of ten seconds to arrive.

"Fron."

The betta looked up at his visitor.

"You look real serious, Mårle," he noted.

"You said Yllejo's going to die soon," Mårle said, skipping straight to the point. "Tell me more."

"Well— I mean, you took your sister's death pretty well, I think you can handle Yllejo's," Fron said. "I mean, I know that's two different relationships, but you don't seem like a mourner."

Mårle paused for a moment. "Piranhas don't mourn," she said. "But I think I would, for Yllejo. ... How do bettas mourn death?"

"We mourn in silence," Fron said softly. "The longer your silence, the closer you were to the person who died. I know bettas who decided to be mute after a loved one

died. I don't think Yllejo would want that for you, though.  
...She told me you two ate your dead sister."

"We did," Mårle said.

"Usually cannibalism is bad, Mårle," Fron scolded.  
"I mean, bettas'll do it sometimes, during territory  
fights, but anyone else here would be sickened if—"

"Is Llejy really going to die soon?" Mårle asked.

*It's dark. The storm keeps the water so cloudy. I want  
to see the sun. I wish Mårle was here.*

Mårle went around the rock, returning to the crevice  
between the rock and the fallen tree. Yllejo was carefully  
nestled where she'd been when Mårle left, her eyes closed  
as she napped the day away as she usually did. Only—  
There were no bubbles coming from her gills. Her chest  
didn't rise and fall with her breath.

"Llejy?" Mårle called out. Yllejo didn't stir. Mårle  
reached out and took Yllejo's hand like she had earlier.  
The betta's arm was heavy and limp.

*"Is Llejy really going to die soon?"*

*"To be honest, I'm surprised she hasn't already."*

Mårle collected her lover in her arms, holding her  
close. Yllejo was never very warm during storm season,  
but she seemed colder than usual now. Mårle bowed  
her head solemnly into the crook of Yllejo's neck, fangs  
bared to gently bite at the betta's skin.

24

No giggle, no hum, no response whatsoever.

Mårle bit down fractionally harder.

Still nothing.

Mårle bit down even more.

The taste of blood began to fill her mouth, but still,  
Yllejo didn't react.

Mårle's top teeth finally met the bottom ones, and  
as she pulled away from Yelljo, a mouthful of flesh came  
away with her. Ribbons of red began to leak into the  
water, staining Mårle's soul and smelling of iron.

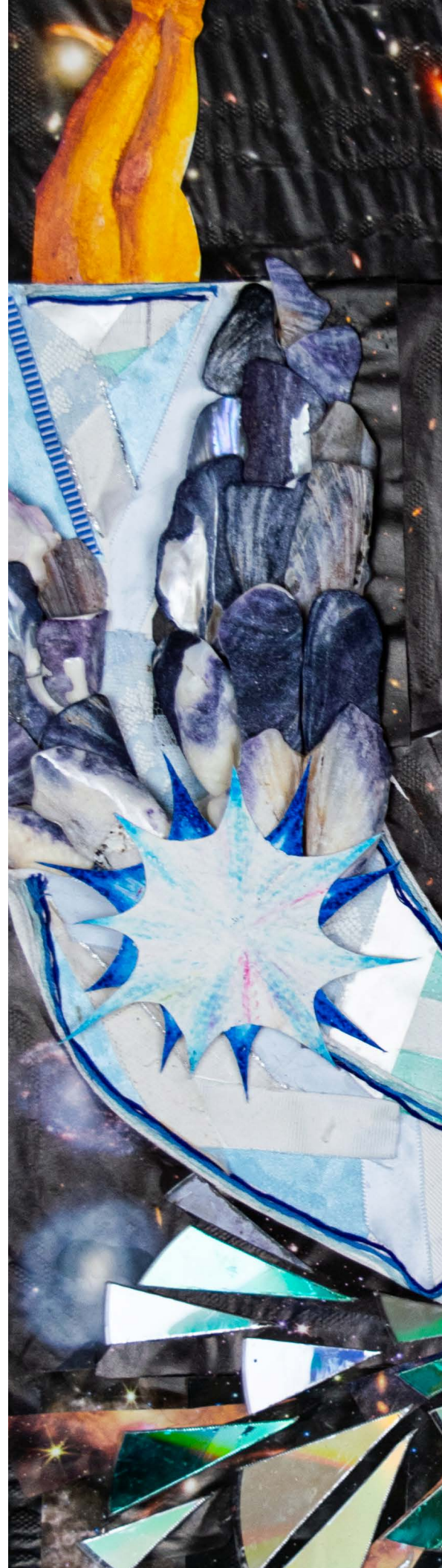
Mårle chewed slowly, thinking back on the many  
memories she'd shared with her meal, and the one before.  
The sister she'd found was the same sister who'd de-  
scribed betta fish to her. As Mårle swallowed her bite of  
meat, she realized her sister was right. Bettas were small  
but meaty. Their flesh was tender and rich, and tasted of  
passion. Mårle stared at the open wound on Yllejo's neck  
for a while before diving back in for more.

*The storm won't let up and I don't want to starve. My  
mouth is full of Llejy, that's not unusual, but if bettas mourn  
with silence, I'll never speak again. My mouth is full of Llejy  
and I will never fill my mouth with another word. ☹*

**DESIRE →**

*Audrey Nixon*

Mixed Media Collage | 25"x25"











**NIGHT AT A MOTEL**

*Amity Cummings*  
Digital Photograph

# Fly Traps

WRITTEN BY  
**BETH SIMMONS**

THE ROOM IS QUIET EXCEPT for the loud light from the TV. It is night, but it doesn't matter one way or another. The blinds are never open in here.

Smoke hangs around, nowhere to go, no windows to flow out of. I love it here. My lungs rot in here. I rot in here. It's yellow, it's dim, it's home.

This apartment is a non-smoking apartment but they don't care. They literally don't give a fuck.

I am just staying here. I pay in Pall Malls and soda pop...and other things they like. My fiancé and I sleep on the couch we found outside on the curb. Well, sometimes we sleep.

Mostly we don't. Mostly we stay up, people filter in and out. We run our business and manage our finances from this very couch. I sit here now, in silence, my cigarette burning like ceremonial incense.

The back porch is a bike graveyard. Skeletons of every bike that's ever been made fill the tiny outside area of this townhouse apartment. I can't see them now, but I know they are there.

I don't know where he is, my fiancé. He went

out hours ago. I don't know where he is and it makes my brain hurt. I can't think about it. He's gone, I'm here, what's next.

The guinea pig squeaks from its metal cage on top of the TV. I'll take that as sympathetic.

They're quiet upstairs. We used to live up there too but now their daughter is back. She lives in the room we lived in before.

6 of us live here now. The son in the living room with us. His internet history frightens me. I stay awake when he's here.

Wish I had a friend. Wish that friend was a substance. Wish that substance was in my possession. The nasty glasses case I've repurposed into a home for my joke of a pipe sits beside me, scratched, scraped, dry.

Alone. Who ever felt so alone.

Fly traps hang all around like birthday streamers from the ceiling. They are completely black with the corpses of insects. They never come down, never get changed.

Careful, you really might just walk into one. 🐜

## FINDING A WINDBORNE SEED IN THE GARDEN BED

*Paul Fredrickson*

30 Take this apple, late from the eyes of leaves and full of worms. I see my grandmother sitting in a purple chair, wearing a purple jumpsuit, her white hair stiff before the unlit fireplace. Closing the car door, hearing a crow sing despite robin laughter. The house grows quieter these days, festering in despair or some other sickness. Red barn swallowed in green ivy. Are you listening to the night crickets eating night, eating dawn? Last autumn's rain, sifting through the hand-written documents grandma left behind and discovering a single page with a single question: "Who will remember me?" But once I saw a blind man getting off the bus on Milwaukee Ave, tapping the street with his seeing eye cane while the cars behind me swerved to the other lane, passing the bus with a "stop" light in the blue rain night. The tallgrass prairie used to be buried under a shallow ocean: just look at the crumbling layers of limestone and shale cut through the hills. When visiting the old farmhouse where grandma grew up, robins spilled out of the yellow forsythia bush at the sound of tires on gravel. And this is where she buried her marbles, beads of glass in the dry earth, between cottonwoods "older than the Missouri hills." Slicing the stem of a calendula flower in the garden and thinking of the possibility linking fresh throats. She once taught me the names of the plants and creatures of the hills and woods walking barefoot over crab apples. Because below the empty harvest of the wheatfield is a recent mass grave and above is the rain patter of a throatless sky passing through pomegranate leaves. "My Cottonwood Tree House gave me a place to pretend I was living long

ago on the prairie; when I wanted to make pies I mixed mud, Iris leaves, and water and baked them in a small iron replica of a wood cooking stove; they became my food staple when I traveled in the Corn Wagon across the prairie..." The last time I ever spoke to her was in her little garden on her birthday in June with her white hair shining in the light and the cicadas roaring in the trees and with the cancer already consuming her ovaries, though nobody knew it. So everyone has a hidden name. Dark birds silhouette a pink sky now when some leaves remain on the autumn trees and others have already disappeared into winter. In music I'm drawn to the melancholy, when the melody seems out of a place of growth or healing after great suffering. Because grandma's life story was full of contradictions, and it became clear at the end of her life that it would be impossible to disentangle the lies and poor memories of my step-father from the truth of her body running through wheatfields on her way to the train slicing through the farmland. In my dream a woman wore a crown of orange blossoms made of wax and behind the back of my head were several oranges crusted with blue mold shaped like human eyes. Needing to find the meaning of disparate events and like a child full of love and curiosity for the miraculous texture of hair. In winter the leafless bramble is exposed so I can see the hidden structure. Like when the deer came to the edge of the forest where it touched the yard and stood still under hanging honeysuckle branches. Or when the disaster of suffering somehow transmutes into a fresh wonder, like rain breaking the surface of water, breaking the surface of moving water.



**SOME FARAWAY BEACH**

*Alex Leskovec*  
Polaroid Photograph

## QUESTIONS OF HEAVEN

*Paul Fredrickson*

1.

Confined to an empty house  
I watch peach leaves turn gold

Dust in the palm:  
basil leaves wilt

Why can't I release this old tightness?  
A white butterfly loves overgrown weeds

Dandelions fly in the north wind:  
after apple blossoms, no fruit

How could that happen?  
Ask first how a child runs to his mother.

2.

How do we know the chaos  
of insubstantial forms?

How did the mother star  
get her nine children?

How should I sit here  
listening to her sigh?

What else clings to the swan's wing  
drifting now under night sky?

What remains in the air when  
winter geese dissolve in miracle light—  
cormorants rising from river water?

How does pregnant emptiness  
weave original  
mother?

How can robins weep  
when the whole world is burning?

3.

Sparrow chatter  
disappearing now

Hawk song silent  
cutting clear blue air

Within hibiscus, clusters of  
pollen, leaves

Now she sits in silence—  
cold glass on flesh in  
radiation clinic

I can't sit here and worry  
about what blossom now grows  
inside her breasts.





**TRANSPORTATION**

*Alex Leskovec*  
Digital Photograph

# The Teapot

WRITTEN BY  
LILLI RUDINE

YOU COULD FIND IT IN the sitting room. The black antique teapot, with robins and white tulips painted on it, waited—the oldest thing in the room. An object passed down from generation to generation. It sat on a metal tea tray placed on the dark wood sitting table with red cushions that complemented the chairs. The table also held a heart-shaped, red box carrying dark chocolates inside. Beside that lay a pear-shaped amethyst pendant. Just off of the tea tray burned lemongrass incense in a purple ceramic burner bought from a shopping market overseas three decades ago.

The smell of chocolate, dust, and sandalwood mixed into the smoke blooming from the incense stick. In the sitting room, there was dark polished wood furniture, a red and gray Persian carpet, red silk curtains tied to the sides of the windows, white and purple spotted orchids sitting on the window sill furthest from direct sunlight, and plants hanging from the ceiling, stretching down over the edges of their pots. Old paintings adorned the walls, among them was a large family portrait painted over a decade ago with the intention of replacing it in time.

There were two velvet arm sofas facing each other. A cello perched next to one of the sofas. Kept in good condition, but a relic nonetheless. On the other side of the sofa, on the floor, sat a basket of yarn

with knitting utensils poking out of them. On the end tables were vintage lamps with painted pictures on the ceramic bodies. Even if they were loud, ugly sights in the sitting room, they were family heirlooms and were worthy of a place there.

Behind one of the sofas stood a tall glass cabinet holding wedding china, pottery, and other trinkets. Favorites were ones shaped into animals such as a cross fox, a moss frog, and a downy woodpecker neatly displayed out in front of the others.

Next to the glass cabinet, book shelves spread across two walls meeting at a corner of the room. Dusty and untouched, these were collectibles. Works of a classical nature. Books of literature, history, and disciplines so antiquated nothing but dust would touch them. Some even in different languages, and about languages, and about those languages' origins. Oh, yes. This room cultivated the origins of at least a hundred years, of knowledge and wealth passed down from generation to generation.

There were no tea cups to go with the teapot. Those were neglected in a cupboard in the kitchen. Forsaken as the rest of the house. Not much of the silent house could compare to the dedication and care the sitting room received. Nothing from the rest of the house was allowed to compromise all the work it took

to preserve this space. The only thing that came close was the vague smell of banana nut muffins coming from the kitchen, down the hall from the sitting room.

Clean, pristine, laced with nobility, and shrouded in legacy, the sitting room exemplified a family history. Unblemished and perfectly arranged into something nothing could break.

But in the room sat a camera. The latest Canon model—recently purchased and abandoned there, lazily on the end table. The glare of its lens stood out in the room. You could feel the air seeth in fury at its presence. Each little piece of the room seemed to stiffen at the insult. It lay at the mercy of the room, pointed at the antique black teapot, painted with its robins and white tulips.

Dust dispersed as flames roared across the bookshelves, burning ashes into the screaming pages. The glass cabinet exploded in a ringing passion, destroying all the wedding china, pottery, and trinkets. Even the ugly vintage lamps shattered into the unforgiving fire. The yarn shriveled up, curling tighter into each ball before they burned. Each cello string snapped with a sharp ring, its polished wood cracked and peeled off, crumbling into the flames.

The velvet of the sofas burned into flaking ashes, shedding into dust. The old paintings and family portraits peeled and the fire rippled through in corrupting

char and bright orange, snapping sparks. Hanging plants became molded over before the chain broke and the pots crashed onto the floor.

The fire raged up the walls, ripping ribbons into the silk curtains. Withering in, the orchids shriveled inward before burning with a rancid smell of rot. Flames engulfed the Persian carpet, turning into a charred black as they bit and cried at the ankles of the furniture. All of the smells of lemongrass, sandalwood, chocolate, and dust suffocated in the invasive smoke.

The tea tray rusted into an oily bronze color in the wake of the flames. Bursting into magenta shards, the remains of the incense burner scattered onto the burning floor. While snapping off its clasp, the amethyst pendant was corrupted with a stained discoloration. A sweet, rotten smell erupted from the fire burning through the heart-shaped box. The red cushions on the chairs tore away before they, too, burned. Once the fire wore them down, the table legs gave way and the table's hard surface crashed to the floor.

The black antique teapot fell with the table, creating a delicate crack in its clean shell of robins and white tulips. Bitter and moldy, floral-tasting tea spilled onto the fallen camera, seeping deep into the circuits. With a final striking snap from the camera releasing a small simmer of black curving smoke, the room fell silent. ☹

## LET'S LUXURY

*Lukas Sullins*

My legs turning over at the  
Knees, folding up, contorting limbs like

An elaborate quilt elapsed into pocket-  
Squares, small enough to carry  
Always, commonplace to lose

Some day — But  
Either way, no worries.

You, at least,  
Are flexible  
Enough to pocket

Another. And  
Another.

# Genesis

WRITTEN BY  
ELIZA MORTIMER

WHEN THEIR DAUGHTER WAS BORN, Mark tried to convince Gen to name her after herself. He always loved the tradition of a junior. Gen did too, when it was a son, but they had a daughter. Gen hated her name, anyway. It was foreign and fanciful. Her family didn't have a drop of French in their blood. What were her parents thinking? She was reasonable, though, and willing to compromise. They could still call their daughter Gen, but she would be Genesis, not Genevieve. Perhaps more uncommon, but a biblical name. A good name.

Mark fell instantly in love with Genesis. He always had so much love to give. He constantly sighed "she looks so much like you," as if it were a compliment. Gen did her best to hide her displeasure. Genesis had her mousy hair, her unremarkably brown eyes, her sallow skin. Gen tried to see the Mark in her but didn't know where to find it. She hoped he would shine through in her personality one day.

When Mark passed, Gen resented her features in her daughter even more. She wanted so desperately to see her husband again, even just a flicker of him, in that little face. Yet with every passing day, Genesis looked more and more like herself.

"Stop it," she would say to her baby in a voice she pretended was playful. "You don't want to be me. I am no good. Be like your daddy." Genesis would cry and cry, frustrating Gen even more.

Gen knew her highest calling, the crown of her womanhood, was supposed to be motherhood. Yet it just didn't suit her, to her despair. She needed Mark more than ever. He was twice the parent she was. The only thing she felt confident in was her ability to feed.

Gen knew before they started trying for a baby, before she even met Mark, that she wanted to breast-feed. It was the right way, the natural way, to provide for a child. Though Genesis seemed to hate her mother in every other moment, when Gen unbuttoned her blouse, her daughter was instantly calmed. The baleful tears only abated when the baby's mouth was full. Gen told herself she was serving her child, not silencing her, when she fed her. She almost believed it.

The days blurred into one. Crying, defecating, eating, over and over. Eating and eating and eating. As the baby drew the milk from her breast, the words repeated in Gen's head: "take and eat; this is my body." She felt different when they nursed—hazy, gossamer, like the vestige of a dream. Her eyes rolled back in her head while Genesis sucked harder and harder, as if trying to empty her completely.

Genesis grew quickly. Gen didn't have enough experience with infants to know whether it was normal. It almost seemed like she was an inch taller every day. It was hard to tell. It was hard to see her clearly. The hazy feeling bled from the nursing into every other moment.

Genesis's hatred for her mother grew with her stature. Her cries, strong and shrill, pierced Gen's ears so incessantly that they nearly ceased to exist, disappearing into white noise. Only when Gen fought to focus her cloudy mind did the sharp pain of her baby's wails return. She much preferred the mindless silence.

When Gen's last moment of lucidity came, she didn't know how long it had been. She didn't know the date or the time, perhaps even the year. Genesis was so big, perhaps impossibly so. Still, she sucked, insistently, voraciously. Consciousness struck Gen like a stray lightning bolt. Her head split with pain, every nerve electrified, and she looked down upon her baby with pure malice.

Wrenching Genesis off her breast, she flung the child to the floor. Hot crimson blood spurted from her freed nipple and dribbled down Genesis's screaming mouth. The screams were deafening and the blood continued to spray, quick and concentrated, bathing everything in red. Gen slumped to the floor, fading fast. In her final moments, she watched in horror as Genesis, with Gen's own adult face, lapped up her blood like breastmilk.

"This is my blood," the words came to her mind unbidden. Finding a morbid humor in her dying delirium, she looked at her daughter, her clone, and thought "I am the resurrection and the life." 🍀

## CEREBRUM PROPERTY MANAGEMENT WELCOMES YOU

*Nick Gatlin*

Cerebrum Property Management Welcomes You!

Good evening, Mr... Monster Under-the-Bed—seriously, that’s your legal name?—I’ve been reading your rental agreement, & this subletting situation is a little odd: you seem to be grandfathered in—via prior tenant, all good there—well, not *good*, but, a fact—*however*, if you’d like to maintain residency, the owner requests your agreement to the following conditions:

1. All Terrors, Frights, and other petrifications shall be reserved for designated holidays, namely: Halloween, Father’s Day, and certain anniversaries as detailed in Appendix 1-A, attached.
2. Quiet hours shall be enforced 9am–5pm M–F, subject to exception with 48 hours written notice OR if it’s, you know, a bad week.
3. The owner shall not be interrupted, distracted or otherwise disturbed when he is watching his stories.

Additionally, all efforts should be made to obtain gainful employment at an establishment suitable to the lessee’s ability, including, but not limited to: haunted house, theme park,<sup>1</sup> peculiarium, Chuck-E-Cheese,<sup>2</sup> or any church.

40

*What about dreams?*

What *about* them?

- 
- 1 Many have horror- and/or terror-themed attractions; however, any fright-inducing ride is appropriate.
  - 2 Or similar animatronic-based children’s restaurant.





**PROGRAMMED**  
*Audrey Nixon*  
Paper Collage | 9"x9"



**SHADOWS ON THE TRAIN**

*Dereck An*  
Digital Photograph



**OLD SMOKER**

*Dereck An*  
Digital Photograph

# I Would Sadly Still Take Him Back

WRITTEN BY  
PATRICK REDDY

“GATHER ROUND, GATHER ROUND, EVERYBODY.

Ciara, turn the lights off.”

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Something special. Every time we hang out, we do the same thing. Go to McDonald’s or maybe Walmart if we’re feeling extra adventurous, and then come back here and watch ‘Try Not to Twerk’ challenges on YouTube. Don’t push your limits; these are my friends.”

“No, Ciara’s also our friend.”

“Can we just do this, please? I’ll go first, of course.

When you’re 19, you’re especially prone to a very universal and horrific tragedy. I think it has to do with Jupiter’s placement or the development of the frontal lobe. Whatever forces are at play, they’re constantly working against you, not in any obvious way but through mind-fucking manipulation. Non-discriminatory.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Listen and find out.

There once was a guy who was universally beautiful and lusted after. Many accounts say he looked like the male version of Lily-Rose Depp. Some say he had a strange, awkward presence, but it was the kind of awkward that was cool, sexy even. Most critically, he was 19.

Technically, the groundwork for this tragedy started when he was still 18. He was from a small town,

preparing to go to university in the fall, a gay guy who felt a bit of a late bloomer, dreaming of that first kiss. Practicing in the mirror every night is kind of gross, but it also teaches you the proper etiquette of closing your eyes. When you’re gay and have all this desire, there’s a place you go to find other guys who feel the same, a secret place they would only know about, a path they would dare to tread. That’s how he met Ethan.

The first time they hung out, it was good, really good. The mirror had done its job. Our sexy 19-year-old, who was 18 at the time, the protagonist, got attached rather quickly. Ethan was all he could think about and talk about, and his friends got so tired of it that they’d hit him with shoes. But this attraction was mutual. Ethan would ask to hang out almost every day. After a week of hanging out, Ethan asked if they could get dinner and go to a movie. Ethan was still battling his demons, not fully grasping his own attractions.

The date was full of PDA, something quite taboo. If someone was not involved in this specific situation, they’d be grossed out by the thought, but it’s much different in action. The dates and PDA continued all summer. Secrets were told, and some were created that only God would know.

At the end of the summer, they parted ways, not

because of our hot, sexy, soon-to-be 19-year-old's choice but because Ethan stopped responding. He called and texted every day, no response. Even after he went to college, he tried to reach out, wondering what had happened and worried about Ethan, who, once you got to know him, was a fragile guy. But this was just the beginning of the pain.

Then he turned 19, came back for a month-long winter break, and his heart returned. A couple of days after returning home, he got a text apologizing and asking if they could hang out. The notification left his heart sinking. Of course, he agreed, and of course, he forgave.

Ethan's life had circumstances that only pity could explain. He was doing his best. Ethan had these sentimental moments where he'd tell our guy he was the only one he cared about, the only one he trusted, the only one who understood him. There was no reason not to trust his words. Ethan would push his truck down a dirt road to sneak out and see him, bring him hand-picked flowers, and just seem to genuinely enjoy their time together. He even introduced Ethan to his friends. Then, the pattern began.

Randomly, Ethan stopped responding again.

Heartbroken, devastated—words can't capture the pain. He tried to soothe it by checking Ethan's mom's Facebook, looking at pictures of him. It was a dark time.

Then the sexy 19-year-old came home, maybe for spring break or Memorial Day. Again, another text and another apology. This time, it felt like the most important words anyone could say: "I love you." It was

a feeling the sexy 19-year-old had experienced for a while, but it felt crazy to have it validated. Ethan also told him, "I wish you could have my baby," which was still flattering, even though...

Outside of the biological impossibility, it was a little weird because they'd never engaged in anything remotely related to that. And if they did, it definitely wouldn't be the other way around. If the sexy 19-year-old was a real guy, he also wouldn't admit to this in front of his sister.

But, as mentioned earlier, they were stuck in a pattern, and it happened again. Just as painful and out of nowhere as before. But this time, it was also the last time.

It sucks because he still feels some justification. It wasn't anything wrong with him, and he definitely loved him. But sexuality is hard to navigate, especially when your family is directly against it. So is 85% of the triple-digit population in his town. And on top of that, Ethan had no clue what he was going to do with his life."

"I thought you were better."

"What do you mean? That was a story."

"No, it was a messed-up way of speaking about your situation from when you were 19."

"No, it was a very made-up story about a very strange and evil phenomenon that disproportionately affects those aged 19. Just wait until you're 19. Right, Zoey? It doesn't matter whether gay, straight, whatever you are, you're susceptible."

"Yeah, if I were you, I'd stay single at 19." 🌐

## PREFACE

*Sarah Phillips*

Something about a spirit or a wolf.  
A curse placed upon a lineage.  
Or the makeup around her mouth missing.  
Something that feels like a loose tooth

chomped on. Or the way your dad leaves  
the Christmas tree up all year, but  
removes the ornaments. The year  
you learn the term death rattle.

The year you fall in love. Something  
like finally getting over yourself.  
Like blackmail. Like winning position.  
Carrot on string lead yourself to the good life.

Something that smells fishy, but feels dense  
like a rock. Weighty. Corporeal body in  
the reflection. Like lines you can understand.  
A smile you can post on Facebook.

Something that you don't believe,  
but draws breath just the same.

Your whole life could be sweet.

47

## PARK FIRE

*Allen Myers*

I'm safe, I tell myself  
and yet anxiety wraps around me like tendrils of smoke  
Just be still, I tell myself  
yet my body pulses with the heat of a blaze.

A column of smoke rises five miles high,  
an ominous tower blotting out the sun.  
It must be quiet up there, I think,  
in the lifeless, silent canopy of ash and shadow.

A man pushed a burning car into the bushes,  
that spawned a sea of flames.

Far below, homes are swallowed whole by fiery jaws,  
people scatter like leaves in a storm,  
embers rain down,  
burning constellations into clothes and hair.  
Flames lick in fervor like unwanted kisses.  
The roar, the heat, the suffocating smoke—  
They chase and consume.

48 People move like all the other creatures of the forest  
move,  
eyes wide, searching for a way out.  
Each one,  
in their own way,  
praying to survive.

From up here, I see some pierce through the curtain  
of smoke and fire.  
The world out here churns on.  
Each one, chasing the dream of material success  
keeping the machine fed.  
The one burning Car.  
The fire will go out, they think,  
they always do,  
right?

Here, ashen-faced, survivors stand still,  
wondering why the world doesn't halt.  
The machine.  
One burning car.

My family has been here before.  
What have we learned?

They tell us the fires will get worse  
They have.

I've seen the picture of the man hundreds of times.  
He did it.  
He pushed the burning car into the brush.  
Make him pay, the chorus cries.

A burning car pushed into water dies out.  
Where is the water?

It could have been a mower's blade sparking stone,  
a carelessly flicked cigarette,  
patriotic fireworks set in celebration,  
a spark from a utility line.  
A spark from a utility line.  
A spark from a....

It doesn't matter in the end.  
A spark into water can't catch hold,  
cannot build seas of flames.  
The water is gone.

We're told to stop burning fossil fuels,  
to avert the worst of climate's wrath.  
Yet our rage fixates on the man,  
the one who pushed the burning car.  
We're told to treat the forests with fire,  
to rekindle our bond with nature,  
to reharmonize with the Earth.  
Yet we see only the man  
who pushed the burning car.

We remain separate,  
feeding the machine,  
All pushing the burning car.

So, I sit with anxiety,  
my home no longer a refuge.  
The flames are at our door.







**WORKING REFLECTIONS**

*Allen Myers*

Digital Photograph

**KINTSUGI OF THE HEART (心の金継ぎ)**

*Matthew D. Albertson*

cast bones fuse and mend  
resplendent pottery, yet  
cast hearts calcify  
the fossils of love sleep still  
defined by absence in stone



# pathos

Submit your writing, art, & photography to Pathos Literary Magazine, Portland State University's student-run lit mag, exclusively publishing student work.

We publish three issues each year (Fall, Winter, Spring) and our submissions are open for the first five weeks of each term. The next submission window closes May 4th. Visit [pathoslitmag.com](http://pathoslitmag.com) to submit.