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A photograph of a bird, possibly a goldfinch, perched on a thorny plant with several dried, brown flower heads. The background is a soft-focus field of yellow wildflowers. The title 'QUIZ & QUILL' is overlaid in the top right corner.

QUIZ & QUILL



Embraced By Thistles and Birds

Rachel Malek



QUIZ&QUILL

OTTERBEIN UNIVERSITY'S STUDENT MAGAZINE | SPRING 2022

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Submission Policy

Q&Q prides itself on publishing the highest-quality creative work. Therefore, every precaution is taken to assure writers' anonymity during the selection process. Only the advisor of Q&Q knows the identities of those who submit work to the magazine until after staff member's selections are finalized.



Letter from the Editors



Dearest Readers,

The writing of this letter comes at a time of change, renewal, and new beginnings: Spring. As many of us pack up our dorms for apartments or family homes, we are reminded of found families and close friendships we've created for ourselves. College offers a unique environment where our independence is both our greatest challenge and greatest strength. Yet many of us are in flux, transient between small-town memories and new opportunities at Otterbein.

This magazine would not be possible without the positive vision and grounded leadership of our advisor, Professor Jeremy Llorence, and our dedicated Ed Board. Our staff has grown this year, allowing us to hear more voices and publish a magazine of which we are truly proud. And thank you to all of our contributing authors, poets, artists, and creatives; *Quiz & Quill* would not be possible without you.

Our cautious "post"-pandemic lives are returning to normal, but normal means facing new challenges throughout the world and returning to old concerns as well. Spring is a time where we can reflect on how our lives have changed and what we seek from our next chapters. This magazine is full of introspective, speculative, and deeply thoughtful pieces that remind us where we have been, what the future might hold, and what may never come to be. Brew yourself a cup of tea, and let's explore our next chapters.

Your Editors,

Margo D'Agostino and Allison Steele

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Dead Mall

Margo D'Agostino

I saw an old friend. The chance encounter from a coming-of-age tale. Well, I don't know if I would call her a friend. What is the word for someone who terrified you, who you spent hours and days on end with, who knew your deepest secrets and made you face your deepest fears? Someone who leaned in just enough that you think she'd kiss you, whose words made you hate yourself, who you know would stab you in the back but only if she'd stabbed herself first? I don't think there's a word for that.

She was with someone - a man in his thirties or forties. Skinny and angry looking. While she didn't look scared, she didn't look happy. I hated the way she was grinding her teeth and keeping her head down, furtively looking around. Her eyes seemed vacant, vacuous. They didn't hold hands, hers were stuffed in the pockets of her old high-school hoodie and his clenched tightly around a well-worn gym bag. I don't like to think about what might have been inside.

She didn't see me. I'm glad for that.

She was doing something illegal. Like when she stuffed another girl's locker with weed and called the cops on her. Like when she tried to convince me to take photographs - that was all, she promised nothing more - and men would pay through the roof to see me. When she got her white elephant gift via shoplifting and grinned ear to ear when we scoffed at her. Something illegal and while I didn't want her to get caught, maybe calling the police would make her stop and help her... escape? Is that the word?

But I was doing something illegal too. A different vein of offense, sure. But I couldn't explain why I was in an abandoned mall, in Doc Martens and a ripped-up flannel, exploring the dead space that was once thriving. I couldn't explain it to myself, let alone police.

That year, there would be no pinning of boutonnieres, no tossing of caps, no grand send-off into adulthood. There would be no pomp and no circumstance, just growing up. And I needed a moment to catch my breath and recognize that. Maybe visiting an old space would ease the growing pains. I remember the mall - smelling of sweat and waxy floors and popcorn from the cheap movie theater. The carpet that seemed dated even while the mall was still open and the lights were still on. I watched Disney movies here with cousins, got Auntie Anne's with friends. The mall closed when I was in middle school, and I wasn't even sad; I had convinced myself I had outgrown it.

But I was back there, and so was she. I was here for my Breakfast Club moment and I don't want to name or even think about her intentions for being there in that forgotten space. She went down another hallway, where the Claire's was. I got my ears pierced there and felt so brave that I didn't cry. My eyes began tearing up but I desperately wanted to blame the mildew.

As she and the man disappear down the corridor, I take another path. I find an unlocked door to the old parking garage for some fresh air. Feet blistering (I had never worn this pair of Docs before), I climbed to the roof of the mall. It's golden hour, a time of day built for romance and selfies and new beginnings. I breathe, and cry.

Things have changed.

I'm not sure how long I was on the roof. I heard cars from the highway below, their caustic horns and eagerness winding down as rush hour passes. I refused to look down at the crumbling concrete beneath my feet, avoiding two different fears: that this abandoned parking garage would crumble beneath my feet and I would plunge to my death on the asphalt below,... and the way things have changed. Acrophobia and... is there a word for that? The sun warmed my face as I stood on top of my childhood city. I wasn't there too long, though. My parents still wanted me home by dark.

Ceiling Starlight

Harper Wood

There are still stars that retain their faint glow from where I stuck them on the ceiling of my childhood bedroom. When I was nine, I begged you for a bunk bed even though I didn't have a twin to share the room with. Now, my heels press flat against the foot of the bed, and I can feel the springs shifting against my spine from beneath the threadbare mattress quilt.

This room looks empty from up here; all of my belongings are shoved into the bare bottom bunk to keep you from sitting on the mattress and asking me how I'm doing. I know from the years of you being my mother that your gentle first question is only a precursor to the answers you seek and the truth you will eventually yank out from the cavity of my chest.

I lied when I asked you to come and pick me up because my car wouldn't start. My empty wallet and gas tank and eviction notice in my bag tell the truths that I wish would stay as far from your ears as possible. But these stars are not the wishing kind. No matter how many nights I spent trying to will the glossy shapes into more than simple colors, they are still nothing more than a fast-fading dream.

The stars burn so bright it sears my retinas behind closed eyelids. After fifteen years, their glow persists, as long as I do not think about how time has marched on far past dawn. Pressing my hand flat against the ceiling does nothing to stop the glow, but I keep my eyelids closed to delay you a little longer.

I know that you are waiting for me in the kitchen with two mugs of tea. The bags of earl gray will have steeped too long, and no amount of honey will save those drinks from the persistent bitterness. Sitting at the table, where I have only ever had the worst conversations with you, I will take a snapshot memory to replay at another one of my lowest moments.

I Took A Walk

Allison Steele

Through the woods
Covered in snow
On the Lord's Day

I was bundled up in
An undershirt
A sweater
A coat
A scarf
Fingerless gloves
Mittens
And I probably should have put on thicker socks

It wasn't cold
Not to me
It filled my lungs
And made me feel
Alive

I stayed on the path
Even if it was hidden beneath
A blanket of white
But it felt like an adventure

It's a religious experience
Walking through the wood
With The Four Winds echoing
Through my ears

On the return trip
I stop for a moment
By the barely burbling stream
And listen

To the water flowing over smooth stones
And the brave birds singing
And the silence
Of the world
Just breathing

I say a prayer
A proper one
For the first time in forever

Nunca Sabías

Fernando Jose-Chairez

Han pasado unos meses
Que no hemos hablado
La última vez que nos vimos
Me miraste con odio
Cómo se olvida nuestra historia
Si allí estaba mi alegría
Y no la he recuperado
Tu recuerdo me lo impide

Nunca sabías valorar el amor
Que yo siempre te di
Lo dejaste ir de ti
No digas que me amaste
Porque si fuera esa la verdad
Todavía seguirás aquí

Sé que eres mi pasado
Y todo ha cambiado
La vida, tu vida, menos la mía
Sé que debo dejarte
Y tú ya lo hiciste
Fácil, muy fácil, menos para mi
Pero que más se puede esperar
De alguien como tú

Nunca sabías valorar el amor
Que yo siempre te di
Lo dejaste ir de ti
No digas que me amaste
Porque si fuera esa la verdad
Todavía seguirás aquí

Ya quemé tus fotos
Yo no quiero verte
Ya no queda nada
Solo quiero olvidarte

You Never Knew

Fernando Jose-Chairez

A few months have gone by
And we have not spoken
The last time we saw each other
There was hatred in your eyes
How can I forget our time together
If my happiness relied on you
Which I can't recover
The memories don't let me

You never knew
How to value the love that I always gave you
You just let it leave your side
Don't say that you truly loved me because
If that were the truth
You would still be right here

I know that you are my past
And everything has changed
Life, your life, all but mine
I know that I must leave you
Just the way you did
Easily, so easily, but not for me
But what else can be expected
From someone like you

You never knew
How to value the love that I always gave you
You just let it leave your side
Don't say that you truly loved me because
If that were the truth
You would still be right here

I already burned your pictures
I don't want to see you
There is nothing left
But for me to forget you

Left Turn at Intersection

Adam Willis

At what point is someone truly safe?

At first glance, the answer to this question appears to be obvious. We are safe when we are outside of the perceived danger—a moment free from an immediate threat. We are safe when our body—our sensitive system of neurological impulses—drifts idly into a relaxed state, undoing the panic of vigilance, of the sympathetic. We are safe within our trusted structures—a promise of protection and containment. We are safe when unimpeded. We are safe when we follow the rules.

When these conditions are met, we are safe. This is the consensus: I am in my unbroken bubble; I am disconnected from the entropy of the moving system; I am unmarked by the chaotic force that wants to see me break; I am untouchable.

I believed in this certainty when I was walking to my car. It hung in my mind when I twisted the key in the ignition, my actions sparking metal, starting motion. It stood in my immovable thoughts—infinite weight, a concrete block—as headlights pierced the black wall before the road, carving a tunnel through the looming forest for my car and mine alone. And as I slowed at that unlit intersection—a barren road terminating into a two-lane highway—I allowed this sense of security to remain. The absence of a stop light was a failed deterrent. The lone stop sign guaranteed no safe turn, yet my confidence in crossing those wide lanes told me otherwise. I've driven this route dozens of times; there was no logic in fear.

I looked both ways.

I took the turn.

The following second: Two lights break the darkness. An invisible form—the amorphous metal thing blending into the unfathomable black—closes the gap between us. A distant horn grows closer and louder, closer and louder, before ending abruptly. The space fills with sounds of destruction. Glass shatters. Metal shrieks. Chunks of engine skid across asphalt. Wheels twist off axles. The steering wheel explodes into a white balloon. My skull slams hard against the headrest. I look up; I'm forty feet from where I remember. Silence returns. The smell of gasoline—static and smoke. Glass shards glisten like diamonds on the floor. I haven't had a chance to blink.

A few seconds passed before I realized I was not dead. I screamed—a raw, hysterical scream. Visceral terror—throbbing veins, nerves firing, neck muscles tightening, heart slamming against bone. I jump from the car, fearing an explosion, and run across the unlit highway. I'm dressed in dark clothing—black jeans and a leather jacket. The night surrounds me, and I am invisible. A truck going eighty

or over speeds past like a silver bullet three feet from my soft body. Its horn blares in my ear from a distance so close I could almost feel the impact – bones crushing under 7,000 pounds of steel, internal meat spread like bloody paste on the road. But the truck misses me, and I fall to my side, clutching my chest, my legs, my head, as if doing so undid the imagined dismemberment. I had somehow landed on the grassy divider – the gray-green patch of dying weeds that split the highway in two; a no-mans-land that no human ever touches, no deer ever roams. It's from this position that I view the brunt of the wreckage: two piles of amalgamated machinery, almost unrecognizable. My eyes fall on a puddle of gasoline. In its reflection, brake lights discharged their pulsating crimson. My mind plays tricks on me; it resembles blood.

The prior illusion has been shattered – a privilege no longer available. That sense of security I felt only moments before had snapped during the cascading violence, and from it, I had finally realized the true nature of vulnerability. The uniform red of the puddle is soon polluted by the flashing blue lights. Sirens echo, yet I've come out unscathed.

Death surrounds me, and I'm alive by random chance.

Portrait of the Poet in Middlefield Tavern

Madison Newman

Sitting on a wobbly stool between two vacant-faced deer heads, I am an imposter: all oak and long hair and good, panicked smile. The bartender is a woman who is beautiful in the way that she is a bullet I do not startle away from. When she tells me, *you've got those big brown doe eyes, bet the boys all love 'em*, I spill out a laugh and listen to her fire off across the bar about her ex-husband, shaking a drink like she's imagining pulling a trigger. Reloading, she says again, *look at those eyes, you're sittin' there lookin' like a deer in headlights*. In this light, I could be mesmerized, frozen, run-down. In this light, I become a hit-and-run at dawn. The bartender tells me the bar owner shot the deer on the wall himself; the rifle bounces on his knee in a framed picture like his child. They stare down at me like judgmental gods, marble eyes like trapped black pools, pulling me under their water. They do not belong here, just as I don't. I beg the deer for mercy as I step out into the dark, away, out of range: *Please forgive me. Please forgive me for being able to make it out.*

Reluctant Light

Jonas Blake

Strike once, twice, three times, and four
Off and on and again, but no alteration to the dark
The alternation does not break the gloom with blinking
A sudden start and the lazy light provides a spark
Proof the lightning is finally linking

Strike once, twice, three times, and four
The reluctant light switch can only show
It's easier to darken a room than provide it light
And I finally begin to know
The meaning of your words for my sight

Strike once, twice, three times, and four
We know it will work; we know it should
We repair what can harness the fruit of your words
Harness what you made; use what you called good
All we believe in is inventions, flickering, feeble lords

Strike once, twice, three times, and four
All it took was two words, *yehi* or
And there was light, on command, no regret
And yet we take for granted or adore
The work of our hands and our Lord forget

Giraffe

Rachel Malek



My Suitemate's Cat

Abi Sinclair

has eyes of green and fur of black
He is curious
but not very brave
so when he ventures over to my room
I have to turn my back

I am still
He is liquid shadow

I am quiet
He is investigative presence

I shift
Chair squeaks
The cat is gone

We will do this three more times today
each the same
our ritual

A Stranger Sestina

Adam Willis

Hours have passed now. The rain won't stop.
Dimes and nickels—silver against the darkness—pelt the glass
windshield as the neon glow of the city swims like colored koi fish—like memories
in the eternal liberation of a perfectly black mirror.
People who idle past in their stick shifts aren't tangible—they aren't real;
they come into being when I stare at them, and even then, I see a stranger.

I started reading this novella by Camus titled *The Stranger*.
Quotes are always popping into my head; I can't get them to stop.
"That doesn't mean anything" means a lot to me—it feels real
and rational—clear and crystalline, like glass—
reflective, like the fresh polish on a mirror;
it outlines the absurdness of my memories.

And I've come to understand the volatile nature of those memories:
Listening to that album by Joel—*The Stranger*,
analyzing every imperfection—every freckle, mole, burn scar—for hours in the mirror,
pounding headaches that never seem to stop,
midnight, drinking Diet Coke out of a frosted glass—
that all doesn't feel real.

And you can't convince me that I am real.
What tactile quality legitimizes my memories?
What about this existence prevents my mind from fracturing like glass?
I am, in every way, the stranger—
it makes no difference if my life continues or comes to an abrupt stop.
Eternity is an endless hallway in both directions—a mirror within a mirror.

Speaking of reflections—I'm looking now in my rearview mirror;
traffic lights flash on the wet pavement. For a moment, they feel real.
I hope that the reds and yellows and greens will never stop
their beautiful glow—they give me hope for my memories.
Maybe I'm not a stranger—
maybe my dream isn't fragile like glass?

I remember August – we were beyond this wall of glass.
The warm feeling you gave allowed me to finally look in the mirror.
I never knew the definition of the word “stranger”
and everything was undoubtedly real.
There’s hot wind and monarchs and dandelions somewhere in my memories;
there’s that lightning smell – the thunder – the hunger to never stop...

But now the rain will never stop. Now, I’ll always be a stranger
to myself – and to you, I’m transparent, like glass. I’m ashamed to be real –
to have these memories – to reflect nothing, like a broken mirror.

Thoughts of a Sheltered Minority

Amaya Serrano

1. I forget the definition of culture shock although the words ricochet off my body and it brings me to the fact
2. I am not in Florida.
- 2a. I am in Ohio.
- 2b. I miss the feel of sea salt and the smell of ludicrous crime. At least the Orlando Eye looked at everyone the same there.
- 1a. Culture shock definition according to Merriam-Webster:
- 1b. A sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation.
3. I am a Mexican American in the United States.
4. Background about my family:
- 4a. My mother was born and raised in the dirt in my Great Grandmother's front yard.
Fruit grows from her name and she roots
my sisters into the ground. The never-ending rain overflows and
our family makes angels in the puddles. And then there was my father,
on the opposite side of the coast. Although born in Mexico, he found the
American
street lights and they led him to a new home.
- 4b. The archives on my father are short and brief. Most information
is unknown except he passed in a gruesome car accident.
- 3a. I am a Mexican American in the United States with a bloodline I can no
longer trace.
5. The difference between Florida and Ohio:
- 5a. I never had to prepare myself for anyone,
I never had to face the consequences of being myself.
- 5b. In Florida people see it as Florida and the people there are
a part of Florida, making them a Floridian, and even if you are not a part
of Florida,
it does not matter, Florida is Florida, and people are still people.
6. I am a microaggression, aggression, to you and your family,
to the state of Ohio, and the bones buried underneath it.
It took me a while to learn this.
- 6a. This doesn't mean everyone.
Yet, when I touch the edge of Columbus I can feel
my size shrink, and suddenly I am speechless,
the old habits of my ancestors trying to survive
come back to me, hoping I live.

7. Microaggression definition according to Dictionary.com:
- 7a. A subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a member of a marginalized group, especially a racial minority, that is unintentionally offensive or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype.
- 3b. I am a Mexican American that has been taught that certain microaggressions are okay.
8. Microaggressions are not okay, in fact, they are not real.
- 8a. A microaggression is still an act of exclusionary behavior, it still hurts, intentional or not. Why are my feelings the cost of your ignorance?
9. I am Mexican and an American.

Óyeme Claro...

Fernando Jose-Chairez

Otoño 2010

Niño de ilusiones
Buscaste por un amigo con quien jugar
Nadie te escogió
En el juego de futbol
Es una herida que nunca sanó
Sigue abierta

Por tanto tiempo
Buscaste en quien confiar
A pesar de no saber quién eras aun
Te enamoraste de quienes
Solo te quieran usar
Y en pedazos ahora estas
Con un hueco en tu corazón

Nunca encajaste
Sabias que eras diferente
Que tus sueños eran grandes
Buscaste por un hogar en mil lugares
Solo para recibir decepciones
Óyeme claro, todo saldrá bien

Año 22
Hay tanto por que vivir
Se que las cosas no han sido buenas
Pero algo me dice
"Esto será diferente"
Sigue escribiendo y ya veras
Tu sueño será cumplido

Nunca encajaste
Sabias que eras diferente
Tus miedos son tus inspiraciones
Buscaste por un hogar en mil lugares
Solo para construir uno propio
Óyeme claro, todo saldrá bien

Nunca encajaste
Sabias que eras diferente
Soñaste cada día por estar aquí
Lloraste y trabajaste hasta cansancio
Fuiste la burla de todo el mundo
Pero tú sabias lo que querías

Tienes tanto por reconstruir
Después del diluvio que visite
Perdiste amigos y amores
Pero al menos te enseñaron
Las lecciones duras de la vida
Aprecia a los que tienes ahora
Disfruta el presente y hazlo tuyo
Sin tener miedo

Óyeme claro, puedes relajarte
Óyeme claro, todo saldrá bien

Hear Me Out...

Fernando Jose-Chairez

Fall of 2010
Remember your excitement?
You were looking for a friend to play with
No one chose you
For the soccer game
It's a wound that never healed
Even to this day

For the longest time
You looked for who to trust
Even when you didn't know who you were
You fell in love with 'The Ones'
Who ended up using you
Now you are left shattered
With a hole in your heart

You never fit in
You knew you were different
Your dreams were just too damn big
You looked for a home anywhere and everywhere
Only to find disappointment
Here me out though, it will all be alright

Year 22 of life
There is so much to live through
I know things haven't been good
But something tells me
"This will be different"
Keep on writing, just wait and see
Your dreams will come true

You never fit in
You knew you were different
Your fears became your inspirations
You looked for a home anywhere and everywhere
Only to slowly build your own
Here me out though, it will all be alright

You never fitted in
You knew you were different
You dreamed every day to be right here
You cried and worked hard
There was even a time you lost yourself completely
You were the a joke for to many people
But you always knew what you wanted

There is so much to rebuild
After the flood you went through
You lost friends and lovers
But at least they taught you
Hard life lessons along the way
So, appreciate those you have now
Enjoy the present and make it yours
Without being too scared

Here me out, you can relax now
Here me out, everything will be alright

The Butterfly Effect

Allison Steele

Time is a butterfly. It is born in the breath between the last second of eleven fifty-nine and the clock striking midnight. It climbs out of its chrysalis and slowly beats its wings, airing out the delicate things that will carry it through its short life.

By the time the sun rises, the butterfly floats by bedroom windows, watching as grown-ups angrily shut off alarms and gently wake their children. It flaps its wings in time with the early morning joggers and then slows to keep pace with the elderly couple out for their morning stroll.

The sun warms the delicate thing called Time as it finds itself outside with the children at recess, racing about up and down across the mulched playground through games of war and political intrigue that is only charming coming from the mouths of lives so young. It drags its feet along with them when the bell rings to return to class.

It will follow a young couple on a date, to a park, a beach, a nice restaurant, a theme park if it's lucky, and flutter just enough to keep afloat. It will rest itself, finally, and the couple finds themselves enraptured in a moment of intimacy, staring into each other's eyes, a lingering squeeze of the hand. And they know.

The butterfly alights on bedroom windowsills as children are tucked into bed and read a bedtime story. It stills as it listens to the words, wanting to stay and listen for as long as possible. The butterfly knows it must go, however, and the parents breathe a sigh of relief as their children finally fall asleep.

Midnight creeps ever closer, and the butterfly grows tired. Its paper-thin wings have carried it every which way and now it just seeks rest. It finds somewhere quiet, a park or forest more often than not, and it finds somewhere to land, flowers are a favorite among its kind. It's a burdensome job, being a butterfly, although the poor creature itself would never know it, and a day's work is a lifetime. The little butterfly watches the last bit of life it will see. With each beat of its wings, it watches as leaves rustle in the warm night wind, frame-by-frame, like the pages of a child's flipbook. How beautiful, the butterfly will think, that I got to exist for even just a day. Then the butterfly closes its eyes, and the world goes still. Frozen in the second after eleven fifty-nine and the clock striking midnight.

Then a butterfly is born.

George Sebastian

Alexis Sheets

Mourn those big green eyes
And wonder if he parted
When I feel him close

His whiskers tickle
My dreams so gently I breathe
And feel his weight there

The Doctor had asked
Me should his body be gassed
An empty shell gone

The pits of my mind
That evil subconsciousness
Leave with empty hands

To mourn he who left
His soul journeys through light and
Death carries him home

Barn

Adam Willis



Coda of Youth

Wrenne Grone

The autumn air rushed to my lungs as I tumbled outside to my backyard play set, my mind mimicking a light, playful *scherzo*. My sister, who followed closely behind, was just as eager as I to play in the leaves, her light *minuet* of a mind matching my *scherzo*. It was not until our eyes drifted from the huge pile of leaves that we noticed a bit of fluff on the ground. Curiosity seeped into our eyes as we had never seen a squirrel this close up before. Our tiny, warm hands pressed gently into the soft earth as we leaned nearer to the gray squirrel's body. We could see that it was not breathing, and my inner *scherzo* rested for a moment.

"Sleepy Squirrel?" My little sister asked, her eyes widening, letting her cadences sweep into a gentler melody. Knowing that momma would yell at us if we touched to see if its body was cold, I nodded, holding onto the false reality that it might still be alive. Its lifeless eyes did nothing to hinder us from trying to save it.

"It must be hungry." I said, pressing berries in the squirrel's mouth, my paused *scherzo* giving rise to a flighty *ballade*.

"Here, a blankey." My little sister murmured, her light curly hair bouncing behind her as she handed me a warm, large, leaf to drape over the squirrel like a light *nocturne*.

We even brought it a stick so we could try to poke it back to life—all to no avail, because it was dead. A gentle breath left me, giving the downbeat of my inner *requiem* flight to a deeper, softer melody. Daddy had always told us that death was a part of life and that once something was dead it would never come back. So, taking that truth under myself, I whispered to the squirrel, "I hope you had a good life."

Succulents

Adam Willis

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live”
—Joan Didion

Sitting at my mahogany desk; I check my phone: five minutes till one. Outside, black clouds melt into a sunless morning. I look across the room. On my windowsill sits a reminder: two succulents — one is stubby, cactus-looking; the other is a slender, three-limbed kalanchoe devoid of flowers. They rest in tiny pots, sipping shadows. Three months ago, they drank sunlight in my grandmother’s apartment.

My grandmother is a member of a dying generation. She was born when most Americans didn’t have enough money to buy a loaf of bread; now — at ninety-one — she’s a fragile creature in a world that won’t stand still. I visited her last Mother’s Day at my mother’s request. Initially, I didn’t care to go, especially when two of my overbearing aunts — Margo and Sharen — would be there too. The only reason I tagged along was so my mother wouldn’t have to go alone.

When we ring the doorbell of the apartment, a jingle plays. In the hallway, tacky lights glow across the cream-colored walls. The other doors in the hallway are decorated with crucifixes and Kroger cards — “*wish-you-well*” or “*get-well-soon.*” When grandmother opens the door, I see pale-paper skin, silver-silk hair, violet tubes slithering up thin arms. She’s hunched over because scoliosis has made her a foot shorter. She struggles to smile.

Margo and Sharen arrive after us and it’s decided that we’ll go to Cracker Barrel for lunch. Grandmother feels horrible during the meal; she’s in extreme discomfort because she can’t sit down without jolts of pain shooting up her spine. We ask the waitress for a pillow or a cushion or something, but they don’t have anything. All four of us watch as this elderly woman nearly cries from the soreness. The whole meal lasted twenty minutes, and none of us — except Margo — finished our plates. Grandmother ordered meatloaf. I got shrimp.

We take a detour to pick up her prescription. Sharen goes into Kroger, comes out five minutes later to tell us the pharmacy is closed. I felt a rock drop down my throat; the thought of my grandmother’s prolonged suffering induces nausea. I sip my watered-down Diet Coke and try not to think.

My aunts play executors of my grandmother’s property. They rummage through cabinets, pull out mason jars and tea cups, ask my grandmother, “*Can we throw this out?*” What terrifies me the most is that ninety percent of the time, grandmother says yes. I look at the cardboard box by the door — in it, her dwindling possessions. I survey the tiny apartment; I take note of the pictures she has of her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren; I see myself as a newborn, a six-year-old, a sophomore in high school — decades become grains of sand in a vast desert.

It's impossible to avoid this suffocating feeling: my grandmother's life fading right in front of me and I can do nothing but stare with glossy eyes at the inevitable, drowning in premeditated grief.

She lays her glass-like hands on my fingers. I jolt at the sudden touch, turn to see her eyes fixed on my gnarled fingertips.

"Are you biting your nails?" she asks.

I'm silent.

"You shouldn't do that," she says softly, *"that doesn't look good."*

In that moment, my brain blossoms like a golden flower in the honeydew light of morning – even when facing the irreversible, she shows concern for the future, a pressing desire for things to be better. I hold her hand for a moment and promise to quit my habit.

When we leave, grandmother asks if I want to take any of her plants home with me. I scan the windowsill; in the yellow glow, I spot those two succulents. They're vibrant, lively, eager. I hold them in my hand: when I hug her close, when I walk down the hall, on the two-hour drive home. When I'm finally in my bedroom, I break down crying. I imagine the pain my grandmother was in, how guilty I felt, how kind she was to me. My mother steps in the doorway; she tells me everything is going to be okay, that we can visit her together in the summer. This calms me down, gives me hope for the future.

On my windowsill sits a reminder: an example of cross-generational empathy – a subtle expression of love, compassion, concern. One is taller than the other, but that doesn't matter to me. I get up from my desk. I fill a cup with water; their hearty roots drink the kindness of generations.

In spite of the darkness, they grow.

Sheets Don't Talk

Catharina Le

Sheets

Don't
Talk

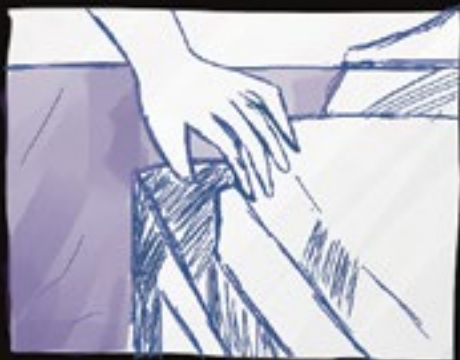




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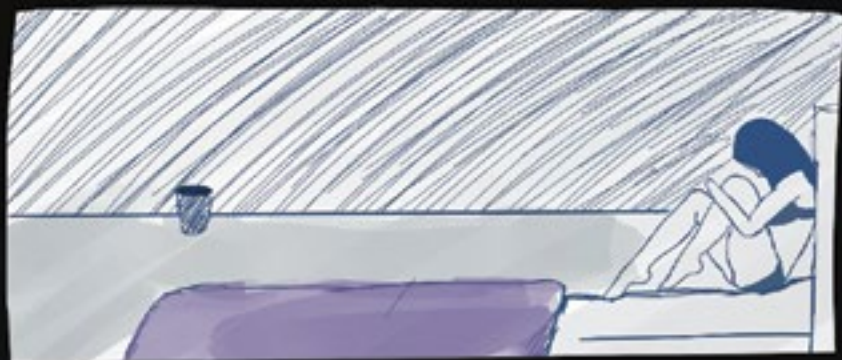


CLOSE









STOPS





A Fly in a Familiar Web

Harper Wood

Casper couldn't stop staring at the waitress as she moved through the diner. She wove between tables with the kind of ease brought on by years of working at the same dead-end job. Her apron was wrinkled and stained at the hems; the pockets were almost overflowing with rolls of silverware, straws, and her order pad. Two, maybe three pens poked out from inside of the bun of ashy brown hair that sat atop her head, long strands falling down around her soft jawline.

She raised an eyebrow as she approached his table, and they made eye contact. The waitress wasn't holding his gaze with disgust or contempt, just a warmth that lingered on familiarity. "Hey, decided on an order yet? You're sure you don't want the usual?"

With a grimace, Casper dragged his eyes back to the menu that hadn't changed since the diner opened decades ago. "How do you know what my usual is?" he challenged, tapping one index finger against the plastic cover. "I've never seen you before."

The waitress clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth sharply. She laughed, but the sound was strained with confusion, as if she wasn't getting the joke Casper was making. "Aw, Casp, that's no kind of thing to say to an old friend. Didn't you miss me, being gone all that time?"

"Hard to miss you when I don't know you." He wished he were joking.

Swallowing, Casper checked the brassy name tag affixed to the lapel of her uniform one more time, praying that this time it would show a different combination of letters. But the four faded letters were still plenty legible, and continued to show the name of Casper's best friend, June.

But June didn't look a thing like the woman standing at his table. June had hair that was much darker than that, and it had always been curly in a way she hadn't figured out how to tame until they were both approaching their senior year. Casper would have been able to forgive the differences in color and texture, though, if it hadn't been for everything else. June's once-brown eyes were much wider than they ever had been, and softened to a fainter hazel. Her nose was distinctly smaller than Casper had known it to be, and there was a mole by her chin that hadn't been there until just now. Even her height had changed. When she had greeted Casper at the entrance to the diner she had stood a good few inches shorter than him, even though for most of their adolescence she had lorded her several extra inches over him.

June was, in a word, unrecognizable from the next-door neighbor Casper had known growing up. Beyond the changes young adulthood brings, it was as though every molecule of her being had been tossed up, rearranged, and settled back down into a new form.

Casper hadn't realized how loudly his finger was tapping against the menu until June plucked it right out of his hand with a sympathetic sigh. "Hey. I know it wasn't easy coming back here. Especially for your mom. I'm really sorry about her, Casp. I'm just— I'm sorry."

His hand was still frozen in midair, finger twitching against the empty space. A sudden lurch of grief washed away all the furious words he had been about to hurl June's way, leaving his throat dry and chin jerking in an approximation of a nod. His arm finally lowered, bringing his fingers back down to rest on the scratched-up table

June's lips twitched with a sad smile. "I'll just get you your usual, alright? You don't need to be worrying about anything else today. I've got you, Casp. You know I've always got you."

Casper stared at the beige table for a long time after she walked away. His hand slipped underneath the table, feeling for the crude expletives that the two of them had carved into the lacquered wood back when they had thought that their subtle graffiti would be the ultimate rebellion.

Sure enough, it was all still there. Like everything else in this town, it hadn't changed a bit.

The same couldn't be said, however, for the people here.

It had been less than an hour since Casper had driven into Hollow Rock. He was sure the hood of his car was still searing to the touch from how far he had pushed the engine to drive the hundreds of miles from Chicago to the middle of nowhere, Tennessee. The drive had been a blur to him; it was a nothing short of a miracle that he hadn't gotten into an accident while speeding down the monotonous interstates. The only thing on Casper's mind, until he had set his eyes on June in the diner, had been the sound of his brother's voice echoing the imparting words of their mother's death.

His brother's name had flashed on the phone while Casper had been in the middle of cooking dinner. Casper tried to pinch the phone between his shoulder and ear so it wouldn't get in the way while he strained the pasta, failing to anticipate anything out of the ordinary despite the random time of calling.

Ian's voice sounded completely torn up, deeper and rougher than Casper had ever heard him sound before. And once Casper registered the words *sudden death, we didn't see it coming, and the funeral will be Saturday, we think*, all control he had on his body was lost.

Hot water splashed on his hands from the half-empty pot, and Casper's phone slipped from between his skin to fall right onto the dirty linoleum tiles, creating a spiderweb of cracks that Casper still feared would cut his thumb if he held it the wrong way. Even after all that, he waited until Saturday to start the drive here.

Everything had been the same when he drove into Hollow Rock, from the cracked sign embedded on the actual rock that served as the only real entrance into this town, to the cramped streets with their still-struggling stores. Casper hadn't paused to see anyone on his way in, only diverted from driving straight to his mother's house by the growling in his stomach, and a desire to see June again.

Only, it hadn't been June who came over to his table to see him. It had been her name there, sure. But it wasn't her.

Some hopeful part of Casper wondered if this was a prank. June, telling a new employee everything about him and then switching name tags. Maybe she was still mad at Casper, in her own silent way, for the way he had gotten a scholarship and she had gotten stuck with two young sisters who still needed care after her dad fell ill. It wasn't anything either of them could have controlled, but Casper still felt guilty about leaving her behind.

So, maybe it was a mean-spirited prank that Casper probably deserved. Casper would be willing to believe that, if June was the only stranger in this diner.

But it wasn't just her. Everybody in the diner was a stranger to him.

It felt as though Casper had walked onto a movie set modeled after his town. Everything was the exact same all around him, except the people he had known all his life had been replaced by a brand new set of extras without warning. He could hear the murmuring conversation swirling around him and all the way back in the kitchen, snippets of gossip that Casper recognized well, even if he was a few years behind.

Rosie Gretson, a girl a few years younger than Casper, was apparently training to be a lifeguard at the community pool this summer. But when asked if she was proud of her daughter, Casper didn't recognize the blond woman's affirmative response as she commented on her daughter's kind heart.

"Here you go, Casp. Your usual."

Casper flinched as June set down a tray of steaming food in front of him. The scent that hit his nose was an instant surge nostalgia, mouth immediately watering at the sight of what was indeed his usual order at the Hollow Diner. A tuna

melt with extra tomatoes squeezed between the bread and melted cheese, and a large helping of fries with extra cheese melted on top of that. Next to the food, a chocolate milkshake spilled some froth down the side of the glass, topped with whipped cream and chopped peanuts sprinkled on top of that.

It was perfect. It was just as he remembered it.

Casper looked over to the person who had brought it to him, and felt his stomach twist all over again. June looked at him expectantly, eyebrows raised with a slight air of impatience the longer Casper continued to allow the silence to hang between them.

“Thanks,” Casper choked out at last. His tone of voice must have come across as mournful, because June’s expression immediately softened.

“On the house.” June quickly checked behind her, a familiar motion that Casper recognized as her looking for Penny’s watchful eye, even if he didn’t recognize the person turning back to wink before sliding into the seat across from him. “Seriously, Casper, it’s on me, alright? Don’t worry about that stuff right now.”

Casper hadn’t been worried about his empty wallet until she brought it up, but his gratefulness was undercut by June’s unrecognizable voice. “Why are you doing this?” he asked. His chest tightened like a warning, but it didn’t do enough to stop his voice from ruining everything again. “I don’t— can you just stop?”

June’s eyebrows creased together. “Stop what?”

“Stop pretending to be my friend,” Casper insisted, squeezing hand against the top of the table. “I don’t know if June put you up to this, or what’s going on, but you aren’t her.”

As her lips pressed tight together, June’s voice took on a sudden sharp tone. She kept her voice quiet, but each word was a shard of ice flung at Casper’s heart. “Okay. If anyone’s pretending to be a friend, it’s you, Casper. I’m trying to be nice here because of your mom, alright, and I really am sorry about that. But I’m also still pissed at you. You’ve barely even bothered to text me since you left, I feel like I don’t have a clue what’s going on with you anymore. It’s like you think I just stopped caring about you after you left. Well, newsflash, Casp, I still care. Everyone here still cares about you.”

“You don’t get to know what’s going on with me,” Casper spat. Guilt gnawed away at the roof of his mouth, two confusing conflicts rising up in tidal waves of nausea. “Okay? I’m sorry that I didn’t message June. That’s— yeah, that’s on me. But you’re not June. I’ve known June since we were little kids, and I know for a fact that she looks nothing like you.”

June took a deep breath, and reached out to place her hand over his with a gentle smile. Casper tried to snatch it back, but June held on tight. Her short, blunt nails dug into Casper's skin. "Hey. Casp, take a breath. I forgive you, okay? That might have been the weirdest, most roundabout way you could have apologized, but it's alright."

Casper's chest felt like a tightly pressed spring, a mechanism wound up so tight it had nothing to do but burst. He tried, again, to pull his hand away, but June clung to it with a new intensity.

"And," she continued, in a much softer tone. "Careful with your words, alright? Because I really don't know what you're talking about. I'm the same as I've always been."

Casper followed her darting eyes to the right, slowly sliding his gaze over to see the pair of women who had been talking about Rosie Gretson staring at him. His blood ran cold as the sudden silence of the diner hit Casper's ears. Only the sizzling of the grill persisted far back in the kitchen. The rest of the room was silent. And every eye was on him.

"The funeral's going to be starting pretty soon, right?" June finally released Casper's hand, leaving it limp and trembling on the table. She was still smiling kindly at him, like she really had forgiven him. "I know Penny said we were going to be closing up early so the rest of us could head over there. You should eat. I'm sure Ian could use your help over there getting things ready."

Casper's throat felt like it was full of glass. One word, and his throat would begin to bleed words he couldn't take back, creating an even bigger scene than what he's already caused.

So, he did as June suggested, and he ate his perfect meal. Gradually, the conversations in the diner resumed, until Casper could no longer hear the sound of his own unsteady breathing around his next mouthful of tasteless tuna. He could still feel the gazes that lingered on his back, and that knowledge only made every bite taste like mud in his mouth and in his stomach, weighing him to the seat until he couldn't stand the eyes any longer.

He left the milkshake untouched, and as the whipped cream continued to melt, the peanuts sunk until they were trapped at the bottom of the glass.

The church where the funeral was being held was a short drive away, as was everything in this town. By the time Casper arrived, there were already signs set out, flowers arranged, everything prepared.

In the time Casper had taken to collect himself between leaving the diner and driving here, he was starting to feel guilty again for not arriving earlier to help

with all this. It was awful of him to have left Ian to arrange all this himself, and worse that Casper had lied about being unable to get off work to drive down earlier to help.

Casper's hands trembled around the steering wheel for a long time before he was able to let go. He had texted Ian before he started driving, and his shaking hands had nicked the cracked screen in the process. Some distant part of him hoped that miraculously, his brother would be untouched by whatever strangeness had changed June and everyone else.

But the larger part of him, the part already filled with dread and reluctant acceptance, knew that the stranger descending the stairs of the church toward his car was someone who knew him by name.

"Got through the drive alright, Casper?" The stranger sounded just like Ian had on the phone, a deeper voice than Casper could recognize. Casper's throat was too dry to say anything as he stared at the man who would surely call himself his brother. Ian stood even taller than him, now, his skin now several shades lighter than either of them had been as kids. Like with June, everything Casper could recognize about his brother from the intimacy of knowing him their whole lives was gone, mixed up, replaced by something unrecognizable.

"Hey. You alright?" Eyes rimmed red with tears, Ian stepped forward and embraced Casper, and his unfamiliar bony elbows dug into Casper's shoulders. After all these hours of traveling, Casper wanted nothing more than to collapse into this shared grief with his brother. His body, however, was as stiff as a board, alert, trembling, terrified for the scene unfolding around him as a stranger with his brother's name hugged him tight. "Come on. Let's get you inside and find you a glass of water."

"Can I see her?" Casper rasped, at last finding something to say other than the endless scream he so desperately wanted to let out. With his chin pressed against the opposite shoulder, it was easier to pretend he was really talking to his brother. "Is she — I need to see her."

Ian kept one hand on Casper's back as he led the two of them up into the church. There were people milling around, no doubt helping get everything set up for today. All of them looked at Casper with soft familiarity, and Casper couldn't recognize a single soul.

His body was tingling with a numbness that steadily worked its way up through his legs and into his chest as Casper walked down the center aisle of the church. He passed by the pew he had sat in every Sunday of his life until he turned eighteen. An older woman was kneeling there, affixing flowers to the end of the row.

"Thanks, Reverend Beatrice," Ian hummed as they walked by. Another shiver ran violently down Casper's spine at the realization that she was another unfamiliar face he should have recognized.

The casket was open at the end of the sanctuary. Casper stumbled to a stop at the foot of the stairs, body unwilling to take him a step farther.

He had to see for himself. He had to know, even if doing so would kill him.

Leaving Ian behind, Casper ascended the steps, bracing his hands on the edge of the casket. The cut on his thumb stung as it dug into the polished wood. He looked down, and saw exactly what he expected:

A stranger's face in his mother's favorite paisley blouse.

"That's not her."

The words were out of his mouth before he could take them back. He stumbled back and would have fallen down the steps if it weren't for Ian's hand on his back, steadying his trembling body.

"What are you talking about?" Ian asked, deep concern threading his voice. "Casper, are you alright?"

"That's not Mom," Casper stressed, pointing down at the body. His skin was on fire, pins and needles racing along his limbs as he fought the urge to turn on his heel and run, to hop back in his car and drive north. "That's not— it isn't—"

Ian gave his shoulder a squeeze, gentle, but enough to seize Casper's words in his chest again. He could feel the eyes on him now, all of them staring at him like they were trying to burn holes in his back and leave him for dead on the floor. There was nowhere to run, now.

"Why don't we go and get you some water?" Ian asked. It wasn't really a question. He was already directing Casper away from the casket.

Casper's mouth moved soundlessly as he was led down the steps and into the gathered crowd. He wanted to scream so badly, but he couldn't make a sound. All around him, the staring strangers professed their sorrows, as they placed their hands on his shoulders, his head, his back.

With his head tipped up toward the brilliant stained-glass ceiling of the sanctuary, Casper's skin burned as every unfamiliar eye in the town was turned on him.

Storm

Abi Sinclair

I was born free, loud, and bold
I laughed, yelled, danced, fought
I ran like I was the wind
whipping over the sea
I was glorious

But people captured me in their sails
used me for themselves
convinced me to quiet down
and turned me from Wild Thing
to girl

Untouchable to vulnerable
Roaring hurricane to broken whisper
I made myself into what others asked of me
rather than what I needed me
to be

But flesh is too tight
bones are too rigid
wind howls behind my eyes
chases itself through my ribcage
I can feel the bones rattling
and I am getting tired of fighting
the storm inside

Morning Hours Are For Night Owls

Jonas Blake

At the ripe old age of 12
The day tells me that it is through
The time has flown and night is due
Now it is black, what once was blue

At the infantile time of 1
The morning claims that it has come
But no one rises to greet it, although some
Are awake to laugh at it as something dumb

At the pleasant time of 2
The night alone seems to reign so deep
Those that stir have secrets to keep
And those that don't, enjoy the peace of sleep

At the frightful time of 3
Morning has certainly begun
But the sky is still lacking the sun
And whoever was waking, is probably done

At the maturing hour of 4
I hope to be asleep for hours more
The sky is blushing behind the door
And I try not to think what the day has in store

When the clock declares it's 5
The sun is starting to appear
It's still too early, that should be clear
How can some people wake, without a tear?

I hope to ignore that it's already 6
The morning chill of the room drives me deeper in bed
I curl up tighter, adjust the pillow beneath my head
If I get up now, the whole day I'll feel dead

It means little to me when the clock says 7
Why is this a time when people rise?
The sun is up, but I just shut my eyes
I'll see it later, if there's clear skies

Now finally the hour is 8
At this point I can consider waking
Or else this sleep I can keep faking
The alarm I snooze again, despite the rules I'm breaking

At the terminal hour of 9
Even I'll admit it's finally time
The day must start, and so from bed I climb
The morning hours, have been sublime

Panic

Alexis Sheets

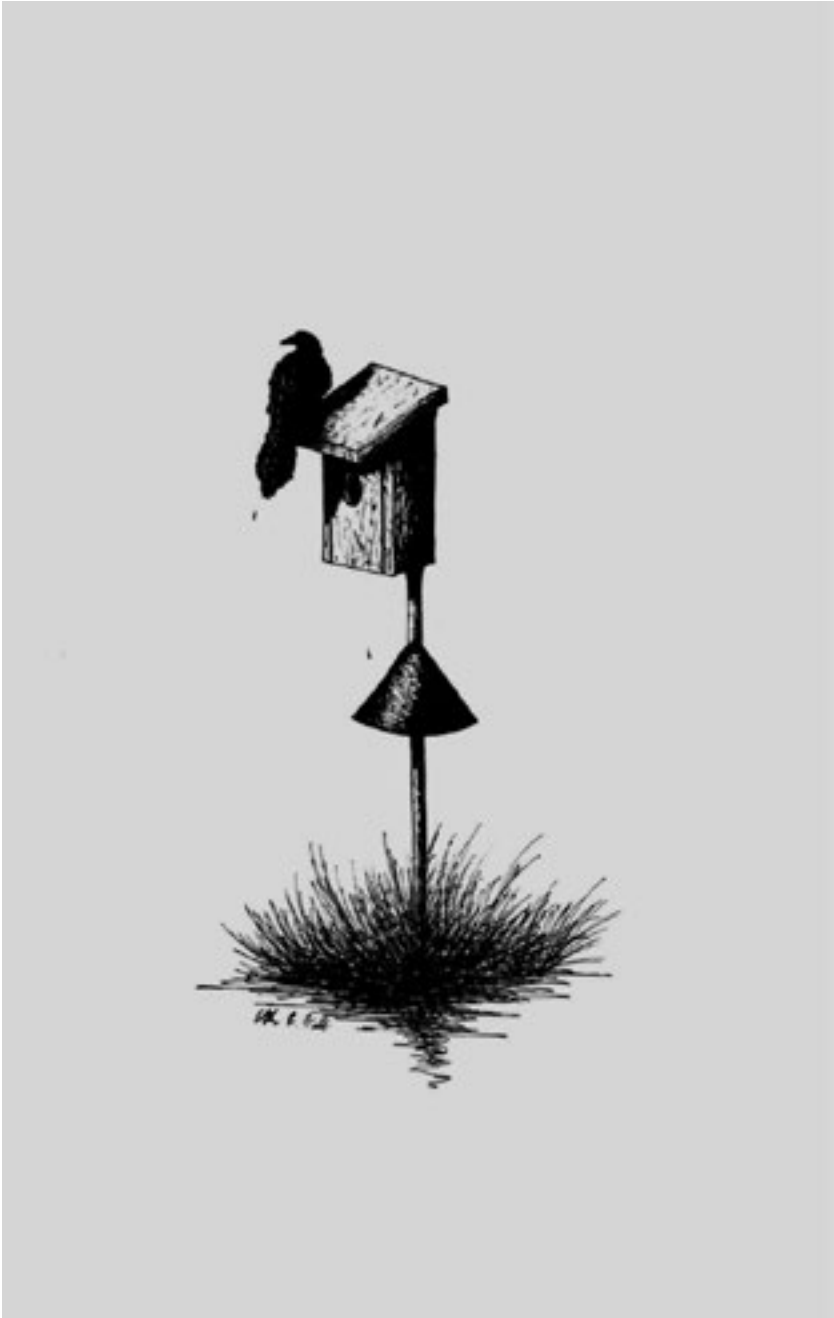
It starts with a shiver up my spine
My fingers in my hair pull out complete follicles
My nails run down my cheeks like streaking red rain
Panic shakes and rattles my arms like snake skin
The rattlesnakes beneath my muscles hiss and pull their heads back in warning

They tell me to breathe
But I breathe and breathe until my lungs are bulbous and strained
It's funny how words laced with good intentions
Pile in the pit of my stomach like weights
And sink my flailing body further beneath the depth of water

They tell me to take a deep breath. In and out. Easy.
I try to swim, but the bubbles from my lips float sideways
I easily lose my direction surrounded by such heavy and suffocating darkness
I breathe more rapidly with each passing second
I breathe until I explode

Bluebird Box

Adam Willis



Blue

Makenzie McDonald

I was born blue.

Suffocation within the womb.

Blue, like the Smurfs that played across the television set.

The hue that dyes your mouth, every time you suck on that damn blue lollipop.

The phthalo blue that Bob Ross made crisscross strokes with to form that happy little sky.

The type of blue people revolve their personalities around.

When I was blue, I was dying.

Not even five seconds into this world and I had already decided to check out.

Five seconds.

Every 60 seconds, someone is murdered.

Every 39 seconds, someone commits suicide.

Every 27 seconds, someone dies in a car crash.

Every three seconds, someone starves to death.

Every second, I die.

Should I fear the color blue?

Should I check in the mirror every morning to see if I have asphyxiated in my sleep?

Gasping for air as my lungs ooze salty bile.

My eyes turn white.

No, I do not do this.

Because I know where the blue lies.

It does not prick my skin anymore.

There is no nurse who will pitifully strap a breathing machine to my face as I'm surrounded by

hundreds of healthy babies who are not begging for a release from the humiliation of a

disgustingly drunk man who cannot even spell my name right.

Let alone see that I'm dying.

Those who go out and lead lives full of passion, love, beauty, fear, and sadness while I am stuck

to the gurney of my mother's chest

What is it like to be the baby who was born with a name, a face, a good head on her shoulders?

She wears her set of morals proudly,

instead of opening them up to the world like the trashy whore she is.

When will she be like her father wants?

Put on her blue stockings and swipe around her little blue handkerchief to pick up all the

black dust and grime that has set in the corners of the house?

Or how will she learn to apply that icy blue lipstick in such a way that her mother will not call
her a slut
but the boy next door will take that blue for just a moment of reprieve only to
force it down her
throat the next?
I pity those who do not reside within the blue, for they do not know how to live
with it.

The blue that echoes on the wall through a broken window.
The blue that forms on the hand after it slams into the counter.
while your father yells at your mother for his own bruised skin.
The blue that runs from your eyes while you lie stiffly awake to protect your
brother and
mother from the guns downstairs.
The blue that twists around your neck while the pillow sinks further and further
into your nose.
The blue of the parasite that's in your mind.
The blue that silences your voice.
The blue I have lived with, ever since I was born.

Gold Foil

Isaac Jones

A tall man in a hospital gown stood below a shelf that was inaccessible if not for his tipped toes. A long-awaited reunion was just over the precipice of this shelf amidst the mire of wool sweaters and other oddities. His hand tore through the clothing, books, and his late grandfather's cowboy boots that hit the floor with a crash. He was beginning to worry he had been too late or lost it altogether. Moments passed and meandered to the present, when, from the shelf he produced an item entombed in gold foil.

The man peeled back the crinkling corners of the envelope to expose a single picture of him and another man whose head rested in the bow of his shoulder. The shorter man's impregnable arms were round the taller's waist, capable of tearing his other half in two. His caress was gentle, but his touch was incendiary. The arms he identified as his own adhered to the width of the other's shoulders with abandon.

From the picture it was clear the infirmed man had just woken up, the bleary fog of morning round his head like a halo. His clothes were a pair of checkered pants, his hair bedraggled. His counterpart was dressed and lucid. A quiet stirring would make him blink into consciousness, the clicking of a pen or the flipping of a page. Most often, his companion was reading philosophy but sometimes he would make his foray into rudimentary pencil drawings amongst his notes. This best expressed the lattice of contradictions the reminiscing man had come to care for.

First went the words and meanings they had made together, jokes, insults, and what lies between. Then went the sound of each other's voices sharp with anger or flat with dejection both muffled in their widening space. Their passions for one another were not magnetic, rather, they sped toward each other like adversarial trains on a single track. The picture was tranquil and romantic, but their meeting could only produce tragedy. Their desire may consume them both as they longed from afar, just as the fire in his belly was consuming him now. He flushed red.

The man in patient's attire had felt the two had been dancers but they were never so concerted. Perhaps painters, but none of their abstractions resembled what they were. Many times, he had felt like a poet, but quickly found his words insufficient. Not once in the many encounters between his pen and passions did he create something that felt as he did. Love was too mild a word. Its repetition, nullifying. In writing every letter he lingered on the tightrope of his transcendent and unspeakable emotion. Falling from it, he would walk away, resolute in his melancholy.

Space like death divided them. Wrapped in gold, their embrace is memorialized, malleable and cold to the immediate touch.

Self-Care

Madison Newman

after Solmaz Sharif

Have you tried lavender oil? Eucalyptus?
A mix of the two? Standing
with your face over the cracked-open mouth
of the dishwasher as it powers down, letting the steam erase
your nose's memory of how to take in a breath?
Have you tried pomegranate juice?
Kale chips? Chicken liver?
Screaming in downward dog
into the sliver of air between your face and the floor mat?
Throwing a glass? Watching it shatter into tiny pieces
of lethal confetti?
Have you tried therapy – cryo-, massage-, retail?
Filling the bathtub with amethyst and rose quartz
that's sat out under the moon for a while, letting yourself drown
in the sparkle of your own weight?
Have you tried emptying your bank account, licking up the pennies
like crumbs on a dessert plate? Inhaling a cloud
of perfume, painting on a gash
of red lipstick? Pacing the room in stilettos
until your heels convince themselves they've never known
the ground? Have you tried convincing your conscience
you're someone worth siding with?
Have you tried staring down your own face in the mirror, figuring out
how to welcome every part of yourself home?
Have you tried forgiving it all?
Starting again?

Adam Willis

I met a wise man
at the Kroger Marketplace on Houk Road.
He entered when I was leaving –
that nameless man with no home or job or clean clothes or sunscreen,
wearing the same moth-dust shirt I've always seen him wear
when he walked the leaf-strewn sidewalks in snow and rain,
heading nowhere –

the one that looks like Jesus because he doesn't have
enough money for a straight razor –
and he pulled Lincoln out of his pocket and walked up to the bright red box
by the self-checkout – that flashing wall
of buttons promises infinite prosperity –
and I saw the machine swallow the bill –
money that could have bought him lunch

or toilet paper or a haircut or something –
down its metallic throat.

He pulled out his lottery ticket and
my brain opened like the petals of a pink tulip in the sun drop light of morning;
I couldn't help but think that –
if owning nothing myself –
I too would put my faith in triple 7s.

The Understudy

Jane Cook

The grandeur of the music began to simmer and I listened for pointe shoes clipping against the marley. The sounds grew nearer until her silhouette emerged from the warm glow as she met the wing. Applause settled into a steady roar as she disappeared into this backstage dimness. I was inches from her; so close that I was forced to subdue my breath so it would not dance against her skin. I was so close, but I was nowhere. Our only light was blue and it was not enough to illuminate me—not enough to reveal my creeping. To her, I was nothing but a curtain, a scrim, a wall, a prop, a cyc.

Until I was hands on her back—her warm, dripping, heaving back. Her coarse bodice met my angry palms so suddenly, and the soft feathers of her skirt kissed my wrists. I sent her spiraling down the concrete steps that were long ago painted a now chipping maroon. Mesmerized by her flight—her flurry of feathers and tights, I stayed to watch this final bow. At last, silence fell over her chest, and I fled as purposefully as I had pushed.

“She must have lost her footing”

“How tragic.”

“Poor thing.”

Lights flickered out in the house; intermission was almost spent.

“You’re up.”

“The show must go on.”

I scrambled for my own shoes and tied their ribbons gracefully around my ankles. I pressed my crimson lips together and blew my reflection a kiss. A job well done.

Someone told me the curtain was itching to rise. I raced, itching to finally feel myself fly. Red and blue began to twinkle in the nearest warped and foggy window, distracting the corner of my eye. A pair emerged from an official car; with stern eyebrows shading their tired eyes, they meandered towards the stage door.

“Wait,” I muttered to the badgering stage manager, “Let me wash my hands.”

An Explanation

Allison Steele

(Lights up on MARGARET's living room. A couch sits about center stage with a matching armchair sitting stage right beside it. There is a low coffee table in front of the couch with a fake plant on it. The stage is silent until we hear a slam from stage right and MARGARET enters, clearly angry.)

MARGARET

I can't believe he would do this to me. You think you know someone and then it turns out they've been faking everything about themselves because they think you're too shallow a person to ever see past material possessions.

(Crosses to the couch and falls on to it dramatically, kicking off her shoes.)

If I never see him again it would still be too soon.

(The doorbell rings. MARGARET sits up and looks towards stage right. She is suspicious of who it is. She does not immediately get up to see who it is, rather she waits until it rings a second time.)

MARGARET

Ugh! Coming!

(MARGARET exits stage right in a huff, only to storm back on stage seconds later with LOUIS in tow.)

No! I'm not going to listen to whatever bullshit excuse you've come up with, so get the Hell out of my house.

LOUIS

I know you're angry, you have every reason to be angry, but please just listen to me. I know I messed up, and I regret it, so, so much.

(MARGARET picks up one of her discarded shoes and throws it at LOUIS, barely missing him.)

Ok, assault isn't going to make this any better.

MARGARET

It's not assault, it's self-defense! Haven't you ever heard of "stand your ground," dickhead?

(MARGARET picks up her other shoe and LOUIS preemptively takes cover behind the chair.)

LOUIS

Ok! Ok! I'll leave as soon as you let me say one thing! Please, just give me a couple minutes to explain and I'll be out of your hair, forever, if that's what you want.

(MARGARET lowers the shoe and LOUIS slowly comes out from his hiding spot.)

MARGARET

One.

LOUIS

What?

MARGARET

You get 60 seconds to explain yourself. And then this shoe goes straight through your teeth.

(LOUIS looks a little worried, then straightens himself out.)

LOUIS

Ok, well. First, I know that was a stupid thing to do. In hindsight, it was a terrible decision and I never should have done it. But I had just been watching you for weeks-

MARGARET

Not helping your case there, bud.

LOUIS

I had noticed you at the club a while ago but I always thought you were way too out of my league to ever actually walk over and talk to you. I mean, you're beautiful, everyone there knew it. Margaret, you light up the room when you walk in. Without even realizing it you enthrall an audience, and they would do anything to get the chance to talk to you. I know because I was one of them. If I wanted that chance to talk to you I knew I would have to stand out from the crowd. It

was a stupid decision, but, Maggie, I was desperate. It sounds stupid, but it was love at first sight. I mean it, I saw you for the first time and I knew that I lived my entire life up until that moment in order to see you, and I had to do whatever it takes to be the one who could make you happy for the rest of your life. Although, I guess, I kind of fucked that up, huh.

(A pause, neither move, MARGARET keeps watching LOUIS but LOUIS never looks at MARGARET. He's tired and ashamed, he rubs at his face and turns towards the door.)

If I could do it all over again, I would. I never wanted to hurt you. It just got too big too fast and I had no idea how to back out. I know I lied about a lot, Maggie, but I never lied about how I felt about you. I love you, Margaret, and I probably always will. I understand if you could never forgive me, but I'll always be here for you. I promise.

(LOUIS begins to exit stage right, but MARGARET runs over and grabs on to his arm before he can leave. They stand there for a moment.)

MARGARET

You're an asshole. And this isn't something you can make better with a few flowery words. You really hurt me, Louis. I can't believe you would think I would be so self-centered to only want to date-

(LOUIS turns back towards MARGARET.)

LOUIS

No! Maggie, no! That wasn't why I did it. I just... I just wanted to be someone worthy of being by your side! Someone you could be proud of!

MARGARET

And you thought Louis Miller wouldn't be enough? Because I thought he was. Nothing about your persona made me like you. I went on that first date with you because I was excited to get a free meal out of it, nothing more. I was planning on never talking to you again until you let your walls down. When I got to see you. I liked that person, I wanted to know more about that person. I've never wanted you to be anything except yourself, Louis.

LOUIS

I know, I-

MARGARET

No, you clearly don't. Otherwise, we wouldn't be in this mess.

LOUIS

Well, I know that now. But I was so, so desperate. Maggie, I was ready to do just about anything to get you to notice me. Be glad it didn't come to that.

MARGARET

I don't know whether or not that was supposed to be a joke.

(LOUIS shrugs.)

LOUIS

It was kind of a joke?

(MARGARET crosses back over to the couch, laying down on it much like she had when she first entered.)

MARGARET

Jesus Christ, Louis, did being normal really never cross your mind?

LOUIS

Oh, like you could ever be happy with someone "normal."

MARGARET

Now what was that supposed to mean?

LOUIS

(Crosses back to the chair and tentatively takes a seat.)

Maggie, no one who is "normal" could ever deal with waking up at three in the morning in order to help you hunt down this super specific bug-

MARGARET

Arachnid!

LOUIS

Thank you for proving my point. Not just any guy is going to wake up at three in the morning and hunt down an "arachnid" with you. In fact, I don't think most "weird" guys would do that either! Most would go running for the hill when they hear "pet tarantula."

(MARGARET sits up and repositions herself on the couch so that she's sitting closer to LOUIS.)

MARGARET

Well, you didn't.

LOUIS

No, I didn't

MARGARET

Why didn't you? I'm perfectly aware that most girls hate bugs and spiders. I know that it weirds most people out. So why did you stay?

LOUIS

Because I realized that the bug thing didn't weird me out. It just made me like you more. Sure, I didn't necessarily like what you were talking about, but the way you talked about it, how excited you were about it, made me fall in love with you a little bit more.

MARGARET

God, you're weird.

LOUIS

Yeah.

MARGARET

And I'm still super pissed about you lying to me.

LOUIS

Yeah.

MARGARET

And I'd really love to kick your ass.

LOUIS

Yeah.

MARGARET

But I really don't want to lose you. You really fucked this up, Louis, but you're still someone I care about. I can't trust you, and I don't think I'll be able to for a long time.

LOUIS

But maybe someday?

MARGARET

Maybe someday, but you're really going to have to earn it, Louis.

(LOUIS is content with this response. He lets out a sigh of relief. MARGARET reaches over and grabs hold of LOUIS's hand and gives it a squeeze.)

I'll be rooting for you.

END OF SCENE

Dawn

Mckenzie Bray

On the bus leaving Heaven, they shared one garishly patterned row. Two people, both more doll than human; their features flat and glassy, bodies like the branches of a wintertime tree.

"Do you think anyone's followed us?" He was nearest the window and treated it like the sun, never once looking directly outside. It was morning then. When they had left, the moon was in full reign. Now, daylight let them see their sins.

"I don't know." She looked like a ghost against the headrest, pale and gaunt and soft around the edges. There was yellow on her skin. Blue beneath the eyes. "They must've noticed by now."

"If it even took them this long." He'd call his parents once the means were available. They needed a place to stay while the sky fell. He told her this in the same voice he read scripture, authoritative and convinced beyond measure.

"I'm not going."

"Of course you are." When she didn't look his way, he added, "I'm your husband." Then, "I'm meant to lead you through this."

"I don't think that was real." Her own words were paper in the wind, fluttering from quivery lips. "I don't think any of it was real."

Unsure whether she meant the mass wedding or sex roles or the whole damned doctrine, he said nothing. There hadn't been time to discuss beliefs, just that it was all a little much, wasn't it? The isolation. The punishments. The begging for money to keep utopia afloat.

"Then where are you headed?" She had no family on the outside. It'd be a dangerous world, he knew, for someone who couldn't even spell it.

"I don't have to tell you. The ocean." Her submission was swift. Despite everything, they were united in both marriage and iconoclasm. "I want to know what it feels like to be small."

"You are small." They'd come from small. A small church with tight pews. The thin stretch of land dotted with small, uniform shanties. Small minds toward defection and small hearts when encountering —

Well, people like them.

"Where will you stay?"

"I'm not sure yet." She finally looked at him, those wide eyes seeking assurance. He knew better than to not give it.

"Okay."

"Is it?"

"It must be. It's all up to us now."

Their hands sought one another. The last time they'd touched, it was between her shoe and his palms, hoisting her over the fence. "This is good," she said.

He wasn't as certain, but she had only smiled at him like this once before; when they both thought the world was ending. Now, those same bruises were nearly historical. The scarring had gone white. He could almost picture her as a worldly woman, the kind who liked caffeine and taking pictures of herself and the ocean.

The kind who may not need him anymore.

"This is good," he echoed, and upon looking outside, the sun ducked behind a tree.

Before Arizona

Adam Willis

We knew each other.
Yes, we sure did.

I read you poems
while we rested on that bed of pine needles—
the sunlight gracing us through the gaps above.
Even now, as much as before,
I recall the sunset on your honey face—
the orange light falling on your cheekbones.

We sat near the shallow waters
and told each other secrets that sprung willingly
from the depth of our being,
like catfish in the moonlight.

I told you I tried to kill myself.
You told me you were raped by your uncle.

I still remember that painful expression—
the silence.
We made each other uncomfortable,
but it mellowed when the other person listened.

When the sunlight hit my eyes,
turning the world opal—
like an overexposed Polaroid—
you trekked across the bank and plucked a lily from the water,
handing it to me.
I saw the heavenly glow encircle your scarlet locks—
that friendly smile
I trusted.

Once you said that Blue jays were cruel to other birds.
You said they'd raid nests and viciously decapitate
unsuspecting young.
I believed you in that moment.
I never doubted that—
and then,
on the river,
I asked you what you loved most,
"My grandma, my banjo, and my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."
I hated this response,
but I tucked it away
to preserve that image
of you.

The rain painted our skin—
don't you think about that when you're caught in a storm?
Do you feel the warmth in every drop—
the humidity in the air—
the lightning shooting through your ribs?
Do you smell the static in our memory,
or has this also been forgotten?

I doubt I'll ever know.
It doesn't rain in the desert—
not our kind of rain.
It storms heavily during monsoon season,
but it was dry on the day of your departure.
The sky was a golden sheet mantling the neighborhood.
I saw no foreboding—
No, I sure didn't.

Looking back on it now, it's easy to say that
I never really knew you,
but doing so would be naive.
You drove off long before I even knew it—
Yes, you sure did—

You left *before* Arizona.

Barn Owl

Rachel Malek



Tracing Bloodlines

Amaya Serrano

-Dedicated to my Grandpa

From Florida to the end of Mexico,
I will swim to my Grandpa.
This is to prove skin is skin
and although he hated water,
God made us mermaids.

In a different lifetime, my Grandpa
would fish for them.
Scaling the skin of dead bodies he found at the
bottom of the lake.
They are a trail to a memory of La Bestia
or the Coyote who has disappeared from memory.

When we reunite, I will kill all the birds,
pluck their feathers and glue them to his back and arms.
He will no longer be bound to any soil.
This is a reminder I am brutal
with the mercy of my ancestors.
If I talk about it enough, I can hear
echoes of stories told.
Listen to how my grandpa would tell me
I am both Mayan and Aztec

and no matter what this world tells me,
I am gold.

Contributor Biographies

Jonas Blake is a Math and Actuarial Science major at Otterbein University with plans to minor in Finance, Data Science, and Creative Writing.

Mckenzie Bray is a literary studies student at Otterbein University. She writes to feel better about the world.

Jane Cook is a first year BFA Creative Writing student with a minor in Dance. She particularly enjoys writing fiction, but is curious to explore anything and everything there is to write.

Margo D'Agostino is graduating in May with a double major in English and Political Science and a minor in legal studies and a concentration in English literature. When not focusing on studying or her work at the Rodriguez Bell & DiFranco law firm, she enjoys collecting vinyl and baking bread from scratch.

Wrenne Grone is a creative writing and pre-vet major. In her spare time, she enjoys being spontaneous and reading Lewis Carroll's riddles to match her whimsical writing style.

Isaac Jones is a first year majoring in Creative Writing, Literary Studies, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. They are involved in student government, URGE, and the editing boards of Aegis and Quiz and Quill.

Fernando Jose-Chairez is a senior with a Spanish and Latin American Studies major at Otterbein University. When not in class, he likes to immerse himself in music, languages/cultures, literature, film, and theatre. His writings are both in Spanish and English in hopes they reach as much as an audience as possible.

Catharina Le is an English major at Otterbein. A person just trying to be creative and tell some stories.

Rachel Malek is a first-year student, majoring in art and psychology. She is passionate about drawing, painting, and photography. She is inspired by nature and emphasizes Ohio's native birds in many of her pieces. She enjoys experimenting with various mediums and materials. One of her goals is to explore making more fun and comical pieces.

Madison Newman (she/her) uses her triple major in English, Sociology, and Gender Studies to encompass her passions for writing and advocacy. When she's not writing or in the classroom, Madison enjoys reading, cooking, making art, being outside, and hanging out with her cat Zelda.

Amaya Serrano is a double major in Creative Writing and Political Science, with minors in Public Relations, and Race & Ethnic Studies. Amaya is from central Florida and has been writing since middle school. She has won a Silver Key and earned an Honorable Mention for her poetry in the 2021 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards.

Alexis Sheets is a senior double major in English Creative Writing and Communications with a minor in WGSS. She is secretary of the Cardinal Singers choral ensemble and president of the Epsilon Kappa Tau sorority.

Abi Sinclair is a student at Otterbein University pursuing degrees in Zoo and Conservation science and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality studies (a mouthful, really). They enjoy working with animals, playing Animal Crossing, crocheting, and (of course) writing poetry.

Allison Steele is a Senior BFA Creative Writing student at Otterbein. She loves to write about the everyday and mundane parts of life with a magical, whimsical twist.

Adam Willis loves writing and Diet Coke...or does he like Pepsi better...?

Harper Wood is working toward their BFA in Creative Writing. When they are procrastinating writing, as they often do, they can be found playing with their cat Chai, dying in video games, or reading a good book.



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