

2022

the PRISM

LITERARY MAGAZINE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LYNCHBURG

the PRISM
2022

LITERARY MAGAZINE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LYNCHBURG



the

2022 PRISM

LITERARY MAGAZINE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LYNCHBURG

Co-Editors:

Maliyah Harris

Nicole Tolley

Editorial Staff:

Abby Burnett

Abigail Lawrence

Mariah Molina

Ali Morrison

Abigail-Rose Schlotterer

Andrew Wheeler

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. Laura Long

Special thanks to Professor Jeremy Bryant, all English department faculty, English Department Chair Meghan McGuire, Associate Dean Cheryl Coleman, Ms. Julie Williams, Ms. Shelbie Filson, and Provost Allison Jablonski.

Front Cover: “sour feelings of mixed layers” by Jarrett Murano

Back Cover: “nest 2019” by Hailey Bayne

© 2022 University of Lynchburg

First North American Serial Rights, after which rights revert to the author or artist.

The views expressed herein are creative works by the authors and artists and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Lynchburg.

 Text: 10% and 30% post-consumer waste

Table of Contents

Poetry

8	Mariah Molina	Stuck
9	Brianna Fewell	House of Mirrors
10	Alana Compton	Sixteen Wishes
12	Alana Compton	Noise Machine
17	Claire King	Home
18	Claire King	Irises at Sunset
19	Ella Haase	Construction of Night
20	Lindsey Ferreira	Long Island Sound
27	Hannah Belayachi	Quiet in Love
28	Hannah Belayachi	Leto
30	Hannah Belayachi	Broken Sundials
31	Sophie Tully	Ode to Wearing Sunglasses Indoors After a Concussion
33	Sophie Tully	Ode to the Kitchen Towel in My College Apartment
44	Tim Slusser	The Guide
48	Cassandra Matthews	Crackle
53	Andrew Wheeler	Pen to Paper
54	Andrew Wheeler	Unpaved Roads
55	Nicole Tolley	A Bus in Wyoming
59	Maddie Rice	to break myself
66	Maliyah Harris	From the Clouds to the Streets
67	Maliyah Harris	Curses
68	Maliyah Harris	American Song for Peaceful Black Existence

Fiction

37	Abby Burnett	The Carlton House
41	Abby Burnett	Sacrilege
50	Michael Robertson	Existence
60	Anna-Catherine Kueng	Love, Your Bereaved Mother

Creative Nonfiction

13	Ally Crissman	Reunion
14	Sara Oakley	Brookneal, Virginia
16	Patricia Rogers	Shadows
21	Daniel Wilmoth	Babel
34	Shanaya Young	Gingy's Rings
45	Joel Kinnan	Decaying Farm
62	Anna-Catherine Kueng	As We Knew It

*Winners of the 2021-2022
English Department Awards*

Libbie Keeton LaPrade Creative Writing Award
Nicole Tolley

Charles H. Barrett Creative Writing Award
Joel Kinnan and Daniel Wilmoth

Belle M. Hill Creative Poetry Award
Maliyah Harris

Floyd H. and Rowe M. Crews Memorial Award
Abby Burnett

*This issue of the Prism is dedicated to
the memory of Sean Cabot Williams
(May 30, 2000 – May 18, 2021).*

*Sean “Seanyboy” will always be remembered
for his warm attention to everyone he met,
his generous kindness, sparkling wit,
contagious sense of humor,
and his “I love you, dude.”*

Stuck

We had mutated into the decaying, plummeting edifice
that was once the warm, vibrant coffee shop on Main Street.

We were the savor of blossoming jasmine resting in the sunlight
that had now become a sour, fetid fragrance paralyzed in the dirt.

We became the dull, placid pang of stagnant bones after a week
in bed,
avoiding the arduous burden of arising out of the nest of gloom.

The hardest part was not
suffering the destruction of the earthquake caused by two fighting
faults in the Earth.

It was not
drowning in the ocean of sobs and melancholy as the waves trap
you in the depths.

It was not even
falling into the deep, chilling crater of unease and having no way
to climb out.

The cure for this agonizing disease was
ripping myself off the bark of this dead, rotting tree consumed by
moss.

The most challenging voyage ever taken
was opening the front door and traveling to a new existence.

House of Mirrors

As I stand there and stare
Into the mirrors of life,
I can see the person I'm trying
To be, but at the same time
I'm trying to forget the person
I once was. Gradually
Beginning the new me
In this house of mirrors.
I start to wonder why it
Took me so long.

Was it the pain of the past holding
Me back from the real me?
Was I scared to become the new
Me? Or was it the demons of my
Thoughts holding me back?
As I look in the house of mirrors,
I see a new me arising and
Becoming the woman I
Wanna be. I am constantly
Dancing with the shadows that
Haunt me. The house of mirrors
Shows how I am at war with who
I am and once was.

Oh, house of mirrors,
I wish I could throw away
Everything I once was since it caused
All this pain. I've entertained the
Thought of giving up for oh
So long, in this house of mirrors.

Sixteen Wishes

I was in love with a girl I knew
back when I was in high school.
The hallway was her red carpet
as she glided past us all;
I thought I'd die when she smiled at me.
She was dappled roses in a lily field,
a song lyric that echoes your life,
snow on Christmas morning.
The kind of rare moment
that you never want to let go of
once you have it.
The kind of extraordinary
you never forget.
Everyone loved her—
so why shouldn't I?

They threw her a big party
when she turned sixteen,
and I didn't get an invitation.

I was at my house that night,
and I wanted to hate her, but I couldn't;
not even when I was alone in the kitchen,
candles flickering on a cake,
because everyone always forgot
that it was my birthday too.

I thought I was in love with a girl I used to know
but I think I just wanted to be her.
The ease of her life,
the sureness of who she was.
Admired in every moment,
praised with every action;
no one thought to ask
if that's what she wanted,
because why would she want anything else?
A belief that being like her
would make me feel like enough,
would make me happy,
because I couldn't imagine a reason why
she shouldn't be.

Sixteen years, all wasted,
begging to be a girl like her
when I know I never will.

Sixteen wishes,
but I never thought to ask
if they could make me love myself
the way I loved the idea of being her.

Noise Machine

The rain from my noise machine sounds too real,
and at first, it helped me sleep.

Relaxing, calm, soothing.

But now I dread waking up;
what if I still hear the rain?

What if I look out my window
and see a gray sky,
droplets staining the concrete,
thunder rolling from the hills?

What will I do then?

The rain from my noise machine sounds too real,
and I throw it across the room,
watching, smiling

as it smashes against the wall,
telling myself it is better this way.

It reminds me of the love you gave me.

Authentic, encompassing, permanent.

You should have been perfect,
but I am a glutton for the artificial,
for the fake, for the temporary;
your realness scares me.

What if I couldn't live without you?

Reunion

The winding dirt road crawls through the cornfields as the sun greets the moon over the silver truck. The corn stalks dance in the wind, spurred into disarray by the speeding draft of the truck. The gravel crunches and sends pebbles ricocheting into the weeds and the tree trunks. Sprawling for miles in the dusky country evening, the corn rejoices in our presence.

The crickets serenade, the cicadas drone, but nothing can beat down the yells of four raucous girls, hellbent on staying together. We scream silly lyrics from the top of our lungs, not caring that we need to stop in order to breathe. We are drunk on each other's company, ice cream, and fresh, dewy air. Music from our glory days, 2016 and before, pulses from the speakers, mixing with the off-key scream-singing of broken teenagers, and the growl of a 700-horsepower truck.

The sorbet clouds flutter by, collecting round the setting sun, revealing the glittering moon. Greenish glows melt into the blue sky, purple haze encompasses the bright full moon, pastel orange tendrils snake out from the sun. The sky is a mosaic, every detail meant to be soaked in, and tantalizingly temporary. Without our attention, who knows if anyone would have seen that sky?

Brookneal, Virginia

I never knew that I could be so overwhelmed with contentment. As I began my trek down an overused dirt road, I was aware that my feelings were a contradiction. I was surrounded by unfamiliar land, the same land whose primary use was hunting when the season was right. I couldn't stop myself from stumbling over stray rocks and branches; my eyes were more focused on the colorful leaves than the jagged path in front of me. The oaks and maples were well into their fall transition, which is why they held my attention for so long. I was almost hypnotized by the deep shades of red, yellow, and orange that painted the forest. This change was appreciated since I had become slightly tired of the abundant blends of green brought by the spring and summer.

In a way, the leaves seemed proud of their changing colors, as if they were flaunting a new outfit, too bold to go unnoticed. Each tree sported its own collection of new tones. Some only wore hues of crimson and scarlet, while others were clothed in a mixture of lemony-yellow and orange. The deep, dark grays and browns of the tree bark acted as mediators to the distinct colors, helping tie them all together to form a harmonious autumn forest.

In my mind, I correlated this distinct combination of shades with festive fall events, but small, insignificant events rather than ones the average person tends to remember. Being completely surrounded by the lush colors of autumn reminded me of sitting in my second-grade classroom, painting those exact colors on my hand to make a turkey on construction paper, a piece of art that I would proudly show my mother when she arrived to pick me up.

While pausing to admire the view ahead of me, I concluded that these colors, the ones that were impossible to ignore, were the reason I feel so at peace during this time of year. I bridge them with the memories of simpler times. Now as I stood in a field of tall, itchy, overgrown grass, looking out into the picturesque woods ahead of me, I believed that although I had grown, my excitement for this season had not changed.

I made my way deep into the forest, knowing that the more steps I took, the higher my chances of getting lost in the confusing web of trails. As I began the process of detangling a thorn vine from my shoelaces, I caught sight of something towards my left. I turned to see a large doe looking back at me, less than 100 feet away. The staring contest we engaged in allowed me to observe the small details of the doe, an animal that I had never closely observed before.

She stood tall, but not proud. With her size, she carried the potential to be powerful, but the skittish look in her eyes told me she lacked the confidence to do so. Her wide eyes were hard to miss: black, shiny, and practically glowing with fear. In between the two of us stood a thin layer of brush. Small vines, bushes, and shrubs were in my way of having a good view of my company. Despite this, I could still make out her smooth, tan fur and white underbelly. The fur on her tail stirred slightly with the cool breeze that danced in the air, causing her to twitch. It was the only sign I had to convince myself she was real and not a statue.

I continued to think about her, long after my small step forward sent her running deeply into the woods. I imagined hunters finding her instead of me, a possibility that was likely to happen soon, given the time of year. Although I'm not one to be against deer hunting, putting a bullet through the creature I had just met seemed sinful. She had told me that she meant no harm, with her innocent eyes and rigid, tense stature. It amazed me how such a large animal, one that could do damage if it had the desire to, could be so frightened.

Shadows

I just started to notice it: the noise. Despite being out here for an hour, I never paid much attention to the others out here as well. The cicadas' constant buzzing, the crickets' incessant chirping. The frogs and birds adding in harmonies here and there. And the moon whose soft light dances off the pages of my book and scares away the eerie shadows. But that was not what stopped me from finishing my chapter. No, it was the crunching. I could hear it coming from the nearby forest to my left. The moon's light was not strong enough to penetrate the dark forest and identify the figure, but I saw its shadowy outline. It was big and strong. With horns sprouting out from its head. It looked terrifying. I was half a thought away to scream for my mother when it finally emerged. First its head then its body. The moon's glow reflecting off its coarse hair. This creature didn't have pointy teeth or an appetite for pretty young women. No, it was a beautiful buck going for a midnight stroll through my backyard. I have seen many deer before, none so majestic. It was like it stepped out of the pages of my book. The enormous antlers sprouting from his head reflected the moon's light, giving him the illusion of glowing antlers. I watched as he walked through the high grass, looking for something to eat. He dipped his head low in search of fallen fruit or nuts. I was hypnotized by this magnificent creature and all he did. He lifted his head quickly as if he heard something. As he looked around his big eyes landed on me and we stared at each other in wonder. I don't know what spooked him, but just as soon as he came he left. I watched as he sprinted off into the woods, but before he reached the tree line he looked back to me, and I knew I would see him again.

Home

I have spent my entire life
Searching
For somewhere to call
Home
As I moved
From place to place
I found belonging
In my words
Writing compassion
Composing the peace
I did not have
But as life beats on
I have realized
My truth
And I know now
I deserve more than rhetoric
As I run
Bare feet against the sand
Home
To myself

Claire King

Irises at Sunset

Sienna sun
Sets on the irises
You planted
The warmth of your touch
Still lingering
Violet, lilac, and cream
Mixing on petals
The beauty of their being
Coaxing the moon
To rise
Like this
Sunset
I will remember you
Longer
Than I have known you
But even as the moon
Kisses the stars
Like irises at sunset
Still I will rise

Construction of Night

I am silent in the forest,
letting the wind guide me to the trees.
Watching, I drink away another cloudy midnight.
Eternal souls trembling, lost moon calling.
Am I the only one who hears it?

Dance if I die
but leave if I'm stuck.
You simply stroll away when the thunder rolls in.
Storm clouds invite me into the sky
and the river no longer reflects silver.

I will warn you—leave before I decide—
run and don't look back
if it is the wrong choice
as it always is
or you will see the shadows under my eyes.
I will sit in my room to cry
and listen to the trees yelling.

I regret learning to think
because once I began to think I never stopped,
and I am addicted to my thoughts.

Long Island Sound

Pushed down and popping up into the air
feeling free for a moment
before entering an endless black hole.
Receive a hug from the water
that traps you like the aunt that no one likes.
Coming up to see the destruction you caused,
knowing it can and will correct itself.
As soon as you catch a breath,
kicking back to play starfish for a little while
letting the wakes from boats passing carry you
into a state of bliss.
The waves roll over you like
a rolling pin stretching out a fresh pizza.
No sound but the emptiness of noise isn't scary,
it's protecting you from life intruding.
Laying there you could be for eternity
but an unexpected splash from
an annoying big sister
ruins the moment by
starting a war.

Babel

My first morning in Japan begins much like my mornings do back home in Virginia— at just a bit past noon. Jet-lagged and exhausted after three days of sleepless travel, I'd opted to ignore my 10:30 am alarm, but now the lust for exploration has won out against the allure of sleep. I roll out of the surprisingly comfortable futon provided for me by my absent host and climb down from the tiny loft into the tiny room making up the majority of my Airbnb rental and head towards the bathroom for a shower. After brushing my teeth and combing the tangles out of my wet hair, I retrieve some *onigiri* (rice balls) I had stashed in the apartment's mini-fridge the night before and plop myself down on the floor for a quick lunch. It's quite common for Japanese living spaces to lack any sort of waist-high tables or chairs to sit on, and this apartment is one such place. The shin-high table in the center of the room and some thin cushions around it are supplied instead. I pull out my phone and open Google Maps looking for some nearby attractions to visit.

I bookmark every remotely interesting museum, store, park, and shrine that I find, eventually deciding that my first stop of the day will be the nearby Hikawa Shrine, a supposedly 2400-year-old Shinto shrine here in Saitama. I gather up my belongings, lace up my shoes, and head out the front door. Greeting me as I exit is the manager of these apartments. He's a small, aged man who hunches over as he walks. Short gray hairs dot his balding head, and the

many wrinkles on his face stretch as he smiles, casting shadows over his eyes. He notices my presence and extends a hand upwards to wave hello before returning to his sweeping. I wave back and offer a “Good morning!” as I walk by. He had shown me to my apartment the night I arrived, explaining everything about the room to me in Japanese, unfazed by my inability to understand a single word. I assume he won’t take any note of the *faux pas* in my greeting, as it is now well past one p.m.

I search for directions to the nearest train station on my phone. It’s about a 20- minute walk away. While it was a pain in the ass to carry my luggage the whole way the night before, today I see it as a boon. The suburbs of Tokyo themselves make for an interesting landscape to trek through. I call them suburbs because functionally that’s what they are, but they are nothing like the suburbs I know back home in the States. While American suburbs are known for their elongation and much lower population densities than the cities they surround, the greater Tokyo area—that is, Tokyo’s urban center and suburbs combined—contains a population of about 38.1 million people, just edging out the entirety of Canada at 38 million. In terms of landmass, the greater Tokyo area is about on par with Los Angeles County, which harbors nearly one-fourth of the population that Tokyo does.

As a result, Tokyo’s suburbs are much more tightly packed together. Homes and apartments are quite small compared to the types one might find in the suburbs of LA. And yet, walking through the narrow streets, past the children playing in parks, past the schools with their speaker systems announcing the change in period, across the bridges hanging above the man-made rivers, it is quiet and peaceful. I pass by a young woman in an apron leading a line of children, each one walking hand-in-hand with the ones ahead and behind. Their light blue sweaters and bright yellow caps indicate that they are kindergarteners, and the young woman is their teacher. She smiles and bows her head at me as we pass each

other by. The children stare up at me blank-faced. I smile at them. A few smile back.

Arriving at the train station, I open my phone again and flip through my bookmarked locations for the one I've decided to go to first. I click on the bookmark and the app on my phone spits out all the information I need on how to get there, including which train to take from which platform and the time of the next train's arrival. I purchase a reloadable train pass and wait with excitement. A bus had taken me to my rental from the airport, so this will be my first time taking the train in Japan. While I never dedicated any of my childhood to building model train sets, I am a fan of public transit in general, and Tokyo's trains rank among the best in the world. Sure enough, the train arrives right on time. Most of the seats are taken, so I opt to lean against the door where I can remain out of the way of locals and watch the foreign scenery pass me by.

A half-hour into the train ride a thought dawns on me. *The Hikawa Shrine shouldn't be this far away.* I check the ETA on my app: another half hour. I had specifically chosen that shrine because of how close it was, but instead I'm being taken in a completely opposite direction. *Oops.* I had chosen the wrong bookmark. Instead of the humble Hikawa shrine out in the suburbs, I was on my way towards the Sensō-ji, the oldest and by far the largest temple in Tokyo, located right in the heart of one of the city's busiest districts. I briefly consider offboarding at the next stop and finding my way back before shrugging my shoulders and continuing on my way. I never had much of a plan to begin with anyway, and regardless, exploration is much more fun when one doesn't quite know where they'll be going.

My sense of blind exploration is soon interrupted by my phone telling me that it's time to get off the train. I've entered the Asakusa district of Tokyo. I follow the English-language signs out of the much busier train station and find myself standing on the street in front of a man selling *yakitori* (fried chicken on a stick). The

middle-aged man behind the stall sees me eyeing his wares and extends a hand towards them, inviting me to partake. For the first time, I become acutely aware of how hungry the single rice ball I've eaten today has left me. Each skewer costs me 160 yen (I'll save you a quick Google search, that's around \$1.50 USD). I buy a handful and gorge myself right in front of the man. He smiles at the sight of the foreigner in front of him, who has no doubt trekked across half the globe to sample his master craftsmanship.

One surprisingly brief stroll later I arrive at Sensō-ji. The ancient and ornate Buddhist temple is packed with visitors this afternoon, and I feel awkwardly out of place among them. I keep my phone at the ready, cataloging everything I see with my camera. I approach the temple's main building and go through the proper rituals, cleansing my hands with water and lighting some incense so that the smoke too may purify my soul. I take my place at the back of the line of tourists waiting to enter the temple. Once inside, signs in multiple languages warn me against taking any photographs. It dawns on me that I am at once inside both a holy, sacred place and a massive tourist attraction with rows upon rows of shops only a few meters away.

I'm reminded of a story from the Bible. Jesus Christ enters a temple of the Lord, his father. Inside the temple he finds shopkeepers selling objects for worship and animals for sacrifice. He becomes enraged that anyone would dare desecrate such a holy place by engaging in the act of capitalism within its walls. He leaves and constructs for himself a makeshift whip, then returns to brandish it against the shopkeepers and drive them away. It is the sole instance in the Gospels of him acting in a violent rage. There are theories that the legend of Jesus Christ originated with legends of the Buddha exported from Eastern Asia and altered over time. Would Buddha feel the same way Christ felt if he were here now? As I ponder this, I toss a few yen into the offering box and pull a long cord hanging from a bell above me. I bow in the ceremonial

fashion and offer a prayer. It's customary to ask the Buddha for something as one might make a wish on a shooting star. What do I wish for, then? Well, that's between myself and the Enlightened One.

I exit the interior of the temple and look towards my right. A giant tower looms over the tops of nearby buildings. It is large and gray, rising towards a single point in the heavens. I know from my bookmarks that it is called the Tokyo Skytree, and at 2,080 feet tall it is the tallest tower in the world. My whole life I have been handicapped by a dilapidating fear of heights, unable to bring myself to lean on the second-story ledges overlooking the school gym as a child. But it beckons to me, so I must go. I put away my phone because I no longer need directions. I will simply walk forwards until I finally stand at its feet.

And what mighty feet it has! My total awareness of the nature of size versus distance does nothing to prevent me from standing here, neck craned upwards, jaw agape struggling to comprehend the sheer size of the structure in front of me. While the majority of the tower juts upwards like a massive pencil, the base is a much wider structure filled with all sorts of shops, restaurants, cafes, and even an aquarium. I feast on some black-colored *yakisoba* (fried noodles) for dinner and browse the shops, ultimately buying a keychain that at some point in the evening will fall off my backpack. I waltz through the aquarium, browsing every exhibit. A Japanese mother and her child—who appears even younger than the kindergartners from earlier—stand beside me in front of a tank filled with Blue Tangs. The mother points to the fish and speaks to him in Japanese. None of it registers save for one name I recognize: “Dory.” I smile to myself, thinking of my two-year-old nephew sound asleep on the other side of the world.

By now the sun has set on my first day in Tokyo, and so the Skytree's lookout will soon be closing for the night. I purchase my ticket for the final group heading to floor 350, for the 350 meters

one must ascend to arrive there. I'm packed into a neon-lit elevator with tourists foreign and Japanese alike. Our attention is directed towards a short informational video on the tower distracting us from the gentle pull of gravity while the lift speeds upwards. The elevator comes to a stop and we disembark. It's much more crowded up here than I expected. We shuffle forwards slowly in a line until the windows appear. Glass encases the lookout in all directions. I pace around the tower, waiting for a spot at the edge to open up. My patience is rewarded and I step forward, gazing at the view in front of me.

No stars are present in the night sky. Tonight, they rest on the earth. Bright lights extend in all directions in front of me. I walk along the guardrail in a full loop around the tower and find nothing but lights in every direction as far as the eye can see. I strain my mind to think of the largest city I have ever been to before this. Many cities come to mind and all of them pale in comparison to the earth-shattering sight before me. My knees weaken. My hands grip the guard rail tightly. I take a picture with my phone but the result is too flat. The sheer scale in front of me is impossible to record. Underneath each and every single one of those lights are people living out another day in their lives, wholly unaware of my awestruck gaze. Underneath those lights 38.1 million people are eating dinner, doing homework, working overtime, hugging their parents, experiencing their first break up, fantasizing about a life that is not their own. Every single one of them is made up entirely of memories, experiences, and lessons unique to themselves and themselves alone. I am struck by an uncontrollable hunger. I want to jump down from this tower and go to them. I want to understand what has led them to this moment. I want them to tell me everything they've done, everything they will do, every single thought they'll ever have. I want to spend a lifetime in their shoes. I want to see through their eyes and finally understand what it means to be someone I am not.

Quiet in Love

We took a road trip once,
Up to Canada to see the falls.
13 years old.
Young and impressionable.
I never thought that anyone would know my secrets,
But they forced themselves through the tomb of my heart to get
to them.
They had seen the words that I wrote,
The words that I thought were safe,
In the small screen that I held so close.
I had been scolded for writing them,
For being bold with how I felt
And encouraged to shut the world out instead.
“You don’t know love,” they said. “You’re just a child.”
But I knew what I’ve always felt
And still feel to this day.
The world simply seemed to be telling me that
It wasn’t ready for me
To love out loud
Just yet.

Leto

You told me that God made me
Just as I am,
So I shouldn't say sorry
For having size 12 feet
Or for being better at
Telling stories than solving math problems.
So then why did you open the front door
And tell me to leave forever
When you found out
The person I loved
Wasn't who you wanted them to be?
You told us that our will
Is under that of God's,
And that we can't help what happens to us
Or what we do.
So then why did you abandon your son,
Who was drowning in his sorrows from the pain that you caused
him
If you truly believed that was a part of his destiny?
He needed support to survive
And not only did you cut the lifeline
But you sped off,
Left him to drown,
Claiming "he could have chosen to do better."

It took the two of us,
Both at the age of 20,
Both lost and alone
Abandoned by family when we needed it the most.
Why did the two of us have to lose our minds
For you to find yours,
Even though you were always supposed to be Mom.

Broken Sundials

One of the first keepers of time
Was the sundial;
Its shadow correlating with the hour of the day.
But the minute it loses its light
It no longer serves its purpose.
Could you even call it a sundial anymore?
The human condition faces the same dilemma:
We go entire years believing we know what we want,
Chasing after the light
That will give us purpose.
But the world doesn't revolve around our dreams,
Leaving some of us lost
Not knowing what to do
In order to find the light,
Like a broken sundial.

Sophie Tully

Ode to Wearing Sunglasses Indoors After a Concussion

They didn't tell me
About the drunkenness.
That slamming my
Forehead into
The Earth's skin
Would leave me dizzy.
How it isn't fun if
You didn't drink anything.
It's lights out,
And the rest of the world
Keeps moving.

You who shade
The blinding glare of
Artificial light,
The judging face above
Telling my brain to scream.

Socrates said that on the road to Larissa,
Two people could either reach their destination
Through true belief
Or knowledge,
That the person who made it by guessing the route
Is somehow worse

Than the person who had a map,
That the sheer luck it took to make it there without a guide
Is sure to fade.

They say I need to
Block it out entirely
To return to normal life.
How the Sun will never stop
Searing unless I turn off
The universe.

You, my armor:
Shield me from this Hell.
Let the noise fade.
Let the sun set if just for a moment.
Give me the map.
Until then,
Show me the way.
Until then.

Sophie Tully

Ode to the Kitchen Towel in My College Apartment

You who have witnessed
The toughest of messes

Ramen
Marinara
Coffee
Vomit
Breakup
Breakdown

Somehow still a soft
Shade of white
Through three months
Of nonstop use

Not a wash beyond an accidental
Splash of water
Left out from this week's load

Forgotten
And yet
Always ready to wipe away
The flood

Gingy's Rings

Her rings adorn my fingers some four years later and yet I want more of her to carry with me. The rings are indented, scratched, imperfect, but still uphold the classy chic of the mid-century design that many still love today. The gold is worn and mismatched but the diamond glimmers brightly still. Once upon a time and not long ago I thought her rings were “old lady,” and now they are one of my most prized possessions. I once looked at them on her aging hand and didn't think much of them. Then, they weren't beautiful or powerful or comforting. They just existed and they belonged to her. When I tried them on as a child and even as a teen I thought they looked bulky and made my fingers look orange. I saw them as crusty and unbecoming on me. They hung off my finger and clinked gently with every movement.

When I was younger she cared for me because my mother couldn't. We played dress-up, baby dolls, and she even let me wear her emerald gardening clogs and dig around in her flower beds. We sang “Winnie-the-Pooh” and danced along and wiggled along to the “Goodnight” song in *Bear in the Big Blue House*. She bought both of my prom dresses and held me close when my mother didn't show up when she promised she would. She taught me to match my purse to my belt to my shoes and not to wear white after Labor Day. She was both the mother and the crone in my

life. She taught me how to drive in her green Honda Accord, the same one she bought the day after I was born and the same one I drive today. The leather has begun to crack and it still smells faintly of Marlboros. Her hands had made indents into the leather steering wheel and I'm careful to place my hands in the same spots.

Today, at twenty-three years old, I can't leave my house before putting on the rings. They now blend in with my aura and radiate my own energy instead of hers. For the first month or so after I got them I couldn't wear them all day. They looked like her, smelled like her, felt like her and it was too much. It made my heart ache whenever my eyes caught a glimpse of the dancing light that caught the diamond across the room. I could hear her voice and smell her perfume as if she was sitting next to me at the coffee table again. The smell of fried apples bubbling on the stove radiated from my memory and into my nostrils. I took the rings off halfway through the day but then was terrified of losing them. What if they fell out of my pocket? What if someone stole them? What if the fae hid them from me? Eventually, the terror of losing this small part of her became a normal part of life and I learned to cope with it. I have designated spots around my house now that I can put them; if they aren't in one of those places my heart rate speeds up and I feel the panic just below the surface of my chest.

Her rings have become a crutch; a replacement for her warmth. She may not be here but her rings serve as a protection charm. I appreciate all the cracks and imperfections in the gold now because they represent the twists and turns of life that her hands, and now mine, experience. I cannot leave my home in the morning without putting them on. They complete me and give me a sense of identity. I am part of her. They are a piece of my aura just as they were a piece of hers. They sit perfectly poised on my fingers now, balanced in such a way that no audible noise is made when they

touch. They belong on my fingers and glisten like the sun through an orchard on a sunny day. The gold doesn't look awkward and orange with my skin anymore. These rings were made for me to bear. The gentle curve of them suits me, and I am comforted by them. Together we have created something new out of something old and worn long after her hands have ceased to move.

The rings sit in a clear glass dish filled with pink sea salt every night. The crystals envelop the rings and polish away the metaphysical impurities incurred during the day. A few years ago I misplaced them. I hadn't put them in the dish and I panicked. I meditated and pleaded with myself to remember where I had put them. When I opened my eyes they were sitting in front of me on the floor. I believed she had returned them to me from wherever they were. The rings are part of her and still call on her when they need guidance. I was humbled at the thought of this. I have found that they always return to me. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust, grandmother to granddaughter; aura to aura and soul to soul. Long after I am gone my children will wear them. Perhaps they will clink against their fingers just as they did mine.

The Carlton House

There is a man who lives on my street that no one has seen in almost forty years. He has kept himself locked away in his home since my mother was a small child. With his groceries delivered once a week and left on the stoop, he has had no reason to venture into the world. My mother calls him a recluse, says that he's always been this way, but my grandmother tells a different tale. She remembers him before he shut himself up. She says he was a kind man and a fixed public figure. He was so integral to the life of the town that my grandmother says they couldn't imagine life without him. Though kind, she said, he could still be a little strange. He always wore his long beige coat and slacks, even in the peak of summer. He wouldn't take them off for anything. He was going to run for mayor. He had just announced his run for candidacy before he disappeared.

People came knocking at his door for weeks to see him, but he sent each away with endless patience. Concern for him was mounting in the community until one day they just stopped coming. Rumors spread quickly, and their concern for him was replaced with fear and resentment. Why had he always worn that coat? What was he trying to hide from them? Rumors flew from one housewife to another. He was a criminal, wanted in twelve states. He had a secret family he kept locked in the house. He was

a famous movie star from a foreign country looking for a quiet life. These were just some of the things that were spread about him.

My grandmother doesn't buy any of it. She thinks the stress of it all had finally gotten to him, and that he'd had a nervous breakdown thinking about all the responsibility on his shoulders. She's always been of the opinion that he was a great man but very timid. Though my grandmother comes the closest, they're all wrong. I know better. I've seen him.

It was a dumb, drunken night near the tail end of my senior year. I'd been out way too late with my friends, and we'd come staggering home. I've never been particularly brave, but booze made me tougher than my grandmother when I've screwed something up. I was staggering across the pavement of the empty road, my arm slung around Emily and Vance for support as I tripped over nothing. One wrong step and we all went down in a pile of limbs and laughter. Vance looked up, his eyes narrowed and his eyebrows drawn in tightly together.

"Hey...isn't that the Carlton house? Yeah, it is. I forgot you lived in the same neighborhood as him, Lizzie."

"Yeah, it's usually pretty quiet. My grandma says all those rumors are B.S."

"Ever seen him?" Emily giggled, pushing herself up.

"No, nobody has."

"Do you want to?"

Vance's eyes spelled trouble as I looked at him. This was going somewhere bad.

"No, Vance, no way. My grandma would kill me. She hates it when people try to mess with Mr. Carlton."

"What, your grandma's going to come walking down the road at four in the morning and yell at us? C'mon, Lizzie, we're not eight anymore. Don't be such a baby."

That was it. No one called me chicken, especially not when I was drunk, and before I realized it I was halfway across his lawn. I turned to look back, but Emily and Vance still sat where I left them.

“Are you guys coming?”

“No way, someone’s got to stay here and play lookout.”

“You guys, suck. You’re gonna make me bother an old man, and you’re not even going to come?”

They stared back at me, identical grins on their lips. I hated them. I turned back around and pressed on, tripping on the porch. I threw my hands out to break my fall and grunted as I scraped my palms on the rough wood. I crawled along the porch, reaching a hand up and trying the doorknob. To my surprise, it opened. I hoisted myself to my feet and ventured inside.

I was surprised to see how clean the house was on the inside. Where the paint on the outer walls peeled from the wood, the inner walls looked as though their paint was fresh. There wasn’t a trace of dust anywhere. Nothing cluttered the floors, and there seemed to be nothing out of place. What was even more surprising was the fire lit in the living room beside me. A soft cough grabbed my attention.

“I’m sorry, this is so wrong, please forgive me. My friends are outside, this was so stupid, I’ll just be going now—”

“Please, don’t. Stay. My time is almost gone, and I need someone to know. I need someone to understand.”

His voice was paper-thin but desperate. I stopped where I was and crept back to the living room. He was much smaller than I imagined him being. His feet barely touched the ground from where he sat in a large, comfortable looking chair. He was nearly bald, and a pair of ancient looking glasses balanced on the tip of his nose. He would have looked like any old man from a cartoon

if he weren't covered in those scars. His long tan coat that I had heard so many stories about was hanging on a rack behind his chair. I inched closer to him, reaching out a hand to touch the scarred skin of his arm.

“What happened to you?”

He gestured for me to sit in the seat beside him, and I did. Speaking seemed to be difficult for him, as he took a long time before he opened his mouth again. He looked sad, like he was in pain.

“I know what you've heard about me. None of it is the truth. I've never hurt another person in my life. My kindness was my downfall,” he was interrupted by a dry cough that shook his entire frame. “I thought I could continue on as I was, but I was growing weaker and weaker. What happened to me? If only it were that easy. I was born this way. Cursed. With only my desire to take the bad from the world, I worked in my town. This one was from the butcher who'd accidentally sliced his knuckle to the bone.”

He pointed to the third finger on his right hand. His finger moved to his leg, pointing to a horrible scar on his knee.

“This, from Sarah Kullmen. She fell from her bike in my driveway when she was eight. And so many more. By ending Gladys's pain, I am too tired now, and I can no longer take it. I cannot end my suffering though I wish to.”

My heart dropped. Gladys, my grandmother, had been diagnosed with cancer the year before. Nothing was working, she was going to die within six months. Then, one day when she went in, it was all gone. She was as healthy as a horse. Was Mr. Carlton telling me he'd done that?

“How can I help you?” I asked without thinking.

“Take my hand.”

Sacrilege

Fog curled around the twisted, moss-covered trees, caressing the creatures skittering through the undergrowth. The sun had finally sunk below the horizon only minutes earlier, and the ever-present moon shed her borrowed light on their nightly revelries. Heavy footsteps scattered the nervous creatures, their eyes watching from the cover of the long grasses as boots passed them on the trail. Zephyr, unaware of these hidden watchers, tromped closer to the cemetery.

Tall iron gates, twisted like the ivy that climbed them, were open in welcome, and Zephyr passed through without hesitation. The fog spread over the ground in a thick blanket, hiding the perils that may lay there. They wandered, careful and alone, through the hillocks and grave markers, making their way deeper into the old cemetery toward their destination. They knew they were getting close when the grave markers became harder to read, the names of those resting below all but lost to the elements that weathered down their stones. Zephyr found her there, exactly where she said she would be.

Zephyr had met her in that very cemetery months before. They were bent over a newer slab of marble, collecting the day's grave rubbings for a larger project, when she seemed to materialize out of the mist that clung to the graveyard. Her sudden appearance made Zephyr drop the stack of rubbings they had just picked up, but she didn't seem surprised. She only smiled and leaned over, handing Zephyr the now neat pile with a wink.

“Zephyr.” They stuttered, then cleared their throat when she tilted her head. “My name. My name is Zephyr.”

“Aries,” she had answered coolly, a coy grin pulling up her lips to reveal a row of sharp teeth under them. “Can I help you with these?”

Now Aries was stretched out across a grave marker in the shape of a seat, her legs hanging over the cool marble as if it were the old armchair in Zephyr’s room back home. She was just as beautiful as the first time they’d met, and this made it hard for Zephyr to be annoyed. Zephyr stopped a few feet away and crossed their arms, taking her in as they settled their weight on one leg. Aries only opened her eyes to roll them before she fixed Zephyr with a languid stare.

“I thought you might not come.”

Aries’ voice was pure honey as it doused Zephyr’s ears and short-circuited their brain.

“Isn’t that, I don’t know, sacrilegious or something?”

Zephyr nodded to the grave marker, and Aries laughed.

“I don’t think so. It’s called the Devil’s chair, after all.”

“It’s a *mourning bench*, you sicko,” Zephyr grouched. Their shoulders relaxed as a warm feeling crept over them, a frown wrestling with a smile across their face before they snapped. “Stop doing that!”

The warmth disappeared with a shrug of Aries’ shoulders, and she pouted at her cuticles.

“Sorry, Zeph, you just seem so tense. Wouldn’t it be nice to just relax a little?”

“You know I hate it when you do that,” Zephyr scuffed their boots against the dirt.

“I’m *sorry*, baby,” Aries crooned and lithely pushed herself off of the grave marker to take Zephyr’s hands. “I’m trying to be better, it’s just so hard to be good when you’re mad at me.”

Zephyr looked down at their linked fingers, frustration and adoration battling with each other in the back of their mind. Aries stood six inches taller than them, even in their Doc Martens, and

Zephyr knew that frustration had lost as soon as their eyes turned up to meet Aries' stare. Though the frustration was melting away, it only served to make room for the hurt that was hiding behind it.

"You've been hiding from me," Zephyr pouted. "What am I supposed to feel? I've been here every day this week waiting hours for you, and all I got was that note saying you'd be here tonight. What's going on? What aren't you telling me?"

As Aries squeezed their hands an uneasy look crossed her face that made Zephyr almost regret asking.

"I had some. . . trouble with the big guy downstairs this week," Aries said before Zephyr could stop her. "I tried to get away sooner to see you, I promise, but he's had us working double time getting ready for something big."

"Oh—is that all? You were just working?"

Aries laughed and shook her head, bringing Zephyr's hands up to her lips.

"You humans are always so silly. Do you really think anything else could have kept me away from you?"

Looking into her eyes, Zephyr could feel it was true. They tried to smile but frowned instead.

"What was it that you were working on?"

Aries took a step away from them but did not release their hands.

"You know I can't tell you that." She sounded almost disappointed as she shook her head. "I'd get in trouble, and it's out of the realm of human comprehension anyway."

Zephyr snorted and rolled their eyes.

"C'mon, baby," Aries crooned, gently pulling them back over to the grave marker she had been sitting on previously. "Isn't it enough to just be together? Can't we just be happy with the time we have?"

As Zephyr sat next to her and put their arms around her waist, they pondered the answer to that question. They stuck their head under their chin with a little sigh and they finally came to an answer. Yes, it was enough. It was more than enough.

The Guide

Working on the river,
a truly unique fraternity—
waking up with the sun,
coffee, thick and dark as pitch tar,
banter in the dilapidated boat barn.
The old guides nurse their injuries
and the new guides nurse their hangovers.
The smell of diesel fumes,
the monstrous bus roars.
Caustic smoke, billowing from the exhaust stacks.
Through the dark rhododendron-choked forest,
the bus pulls its load down.
In the gorge, the river guides don their equipment,
knights in brightly colored armor,
full-time bums, and occasionally obligated heroes.
At the put-in,
they mill about,
smoking their cigarettes, and lashing down stowage.
Tourists flock from the bus,
like panicked pigeons, and are herded into the guide's care.
In the shallows,
the great blue heron hunts.
The river surges,
calm, cool, and powerful.
Never-ceasing,
dropping through a maelstrom,
a raging torrent, waves, sun, and sky.
Nothing else, but the moment.

Decaying Farm

Penny was such an amazing dog: we'd run laps around and around the barn, dodging fence posts, avoiding stirring up the horses in the field. For a boxer, she sure was sweet. The blisters don't make digging her grave any easier, and of course, all the work gloves have dry-rotted since my dad's absence. Six feet deep quickly becomes eight when I remind myself that the cancer made her an extra two feet wide. Each chop through a root rattles my weakened arms. I like to tell myself I'm struggling to dig this hole because I'm only a few pounds over what's considered anorexia, but part of me doesn't want to admit it's the lack of sleep, loss of appetite, and low energy I've felt recently. I have been preparing myself for the day Penny's cancer wins, but I imagined my dad being here to help.

The big old tractor he left in the hay barn taunts me as I agonize over digging this hole. I feel like the headlights are watching me. I know that in minutes the backhoe could remove the hard dirt and roots I'm only knee-deep in. Only my dad knew the trick to getting it running.

“Use the flathead to jump the starter solenoid.”

He taught me enough to know what that meant, but I still can't make it cough to life. Step two?

“Pull the choke all the way out, these old diesels need to breathe.”

Again, these attempts feel futile. Chances are it'll never run again, I don't have the magic touch that my dad does. I remember the days of riding on the backhoe while my dad drove it around. Getting shit done together was kinda our thing. He would throw me pocket change for helping him keep the barn in order. I never did it for the money. I loved to learn about the machines on the farm. Thanks to him, I can tear any car apart with the right tools. If I didn't have the right tools, he taught me how to make them.

But this god damn tractor stumps me.

Last time I saw it work was to build the fire pit my mom had been begging my dad to make for us. Before we ever got the chance to use it together, he backed the tractor into our farm truck, well my farm truck now. It was worth a lot while he and I spent hours a night restoring it. We had to drink cheap lukewarm beer because if my mom heard us opening the fridge over and over she'd lecture us. The stale air of the garage makes it taste better, or at least easier to drink. Sometimes he would get us an IPA to try. "It's Poopy Ass" as I like to call it. I don't know how he convinced me to pretend to like it, maybe I saw it as an opportunity to seem more mature in front of him.

Regardless, the farm truck has found its resting place along the overgrown woodline, rust forming where the tractor met the truck exposing the metal under the paint. It hasn't moved since I last used it to get hay for my mom, even though it's for her horses. As much as I hated it when I had my dad to help, now I hate it even more. Dad would drive slowly along the rows of baled hay in the field while I walked next to the truck, tossing the bales into the bed one by one. Nowadays I don't have a driver, Mom doesn't dare sit in that "pile" as she calls it. I even got seat covers for the truck but she still won't drive it. For now, I'm stuck driving between the rows of hay bales alone, put it in park, toss a bale in, drive a few seconds to the next, repeat. Easier said than done, I got stuck with

a broken drive selector column before dad and I got the chance to fix it, making it move is a battle of its own.

Seems like now the truck and tractor aren't worth the shade they bask under.

I would kill for a lukewarm beer right now, maybe digging all this manually wouldn't be so bad after a few. If my mom heard me say that I would be due for another lecture.

What does she know about drinking? She only started drinking anything besides Pinot Noir when my dad left me with all this farm equipment. Although I'll admit the cheap liquor that keeps finding its way onto the grocery list every week isn't exactly better than the IPA's.

I know any minute these blisters are bound to burst. Hours I've been here just digging and digging. The overgrown branches seem to perfectly cast over me, if I had the time to trim them like I've been meaning to maybe it wouldn't be so shady.

The shadow of the barn shifts as the earth rotates. I've been digging long enough for the fancy lights my mom had my dad and me install to flick on. Not as grand of a sight as it used to be. Now it seems like every other light either flickers or doesn't work at all, looking like a hockey player's teeth, the occasional buzz of the light indicating another is about to tap out.

Taking care of all this alone can make anyone feel the need to put themselves out, give up, I mean. No one can prepare you to be what your mom calls the "Man of the House." As I stand here digging Penny's grave, it's awakened how much time is passing. That shiny white barn is now stained yellow with neglect. Birds make their homes along the rafters of the barn, just like my mom always hated. And now, a disturbed ground under the tree. Penny rests as I carry over her still warm body, wrapped in her favorite blanket, which happens to be my comforter. I leave part of myself in the grave too.

Crackle

Crackle

The campfire illuminates her face;
Smoke stings her eyes as she waits
In this crisp black night.

Crackle

From chocolate wrappers and blankets.
A shiver,
Another,
She sits on her hands to warm them.

Crackle

As the withered branches meet the breeze
And carry away the embers
Now long disappeared.

Crackle

Or so she hears.
Is it him,
The figure amid the trees?

Click

From the rifle;
Catching her
Last breath.

The stag
Leaps over the hunter's mistaken prize.
Vanishes into the pines:
The epitome of grace

A cry
Not far off in the distance,
The hunter freezes then runs.
Her lost lover is nearing.

He drops to her side,
Lifts her from the sodden leaves,
Hands warm with blood,
Now his heart is ice.

Silence.

Existence

“All rise,” the bailiff says as we walk into the courtroom. I am with my lawyer, a young public defender. We spoke for the first time just two hours ago. He seemed tired at the time and has even less energy now. We had reviewed the case against me matter-of-factly. He did not seem particularly interested; I was one of hundreds on his list. “All right, Mr. Jones, they say you held up the River Street 7-11 and made off with \$37 after shooting the store clerk. The clerk is in the hospital in critical condition. How do you plead?”

What do I say? No one cares. Do I say that I did not do it? Do I say I was hungry? Do I say I am sorry the clerk was hit, that I only wanted to scare him? Who cares what I have to say? This is not my first time in court.

I look at my lawyer. Does he look at me? He sees hundreds of “me’s,” and it is all the same. He does not see the infant who waited up for his mommy, hoping she would kiss him before he went to sleep. He doesn’t see how I longed for that kiss, that “I love you” signal. She would usually come home many hours after work and wobble into bed. “Mommy, I am here,” my heart would scream, but my heart was not loud enough. Maybe there never was a connection.

He does not see the child, scared to go to school, knowing that he would be scolded again by his teacher for being late and not completing his homework. She would not care if he had had to ride the subway himself and the train was late. She would not care if he had to make his own dinner, and by the time he looked at the homework, he realized he did not understand it. His teacher dealt with all students the same way. He tried to convince her that he had tried, that he mattered. She never heard him.

He does not see the young boy who could not even be laughed at by the other young boys. At least being laughed at signified some sort of existence. I ate at the table of indifference. This was not enough to satisfy my hunger, but it was all I had.

He does not see the young man attending his mother's funeral. No father and now no mother. I mourned the loss of the idea of a mother. I cannot say I had a mother. I cannot say I lost a relationship. Perhaps her death was a relief of effort. I mourned the loss of hope.

What should I say?

Two hours earlier, when I had my first visit with my court-appointed lawyer, he had asked, "Did you do it? If so, why did you do it?"

Why do I do anything? I first tried to restrict my actions to what I understood was right. There were morals. There were laws. I wanted to be good. But what does being good mean? Good is my enemy. Good keeps me cold. Good keeps me hungry. Good matters only if I matter. Good matters if anyone knows me, and no one knows me. I do not know me. How do I explain why I did it when I cannot explain me?

I stare at my lawyer. Maybe, if I look long enough, he will see me. I concentrate my eyes on his eyes. Nothing else matters. I am unaware of everything around me. I see every minute aspect of his

visage. His eyes are green. His eyebrows are thin and brown. He has shaved, but there is a slight nick on his chin. His hair is slicked back. I try to put this all together, I try to paint a character in my mind and, in so doing, bring him into my soul, make a connection. But he blinks indifferently, gives a slight puff, and asks again, “Did you do it?”

Why should I expect anything different? Like all people, he is doing his job. His job is to defend me. Rather, his job is to submit his bill for going through the expected actions known as pleading a defense. I am a thing. I am an object. He cannot defend me, he can only defend an object.

“Yes,” I said to him two hours ago. And, “yes,” I say to the judge now. It will be easier to accept whatever punishment I am dealt than to exhaustively, futilely try to introduce them to the imaginary me.

Pen to Paper

A couple hundred pages
One cover to the next;
Countless scribbled sentences
In the journal that he left.

Nothing but a jumbled mess
Of both his thoughts and fears.
Pen to paper, mind to rest,
A narrative laced in tears.

Those weathered yellowed pages,
That unique written style.
Ending not with a “goodbye”
But “see you in a while.”

The simple daily logging
Of each joy and regret,
Assisted me in learning of
The brother I never met.

Unpaved Roads

I used to see life like a one-way mirror,
Always looking inside but never being seen—
Funny how mirrors trick our eyes.

I used to believe I was the blind one
When others never opened their eyes,
But perhaps it's hard to see what you don't want to.

I once thought that life was predetermined,
Passing by us on its own schedule
And I just missed the ride.

I once thought we had no choice at all,
That the hand we were dealt couldn't be refused
And would only punish us if we tried.

I used to act as if life served no purpose
With nothing to pursue except death
And nothing to live for except life.

I used to pretend existence was just a one-way street
Instead of an endless selection of unpaved roads
And the freedom to follow the one we choose.

A Bus in Wyoming

The Driver

His name tag:

“Henry” in worn, fading red thread.

His shirt is cream white,
ironed last night.

His cup of black coffee is settling in his stomach,
along with the scrambled eggs.

He smiles at every passenger,
even if they:

never look up from their phones,
are mad that the bus is three minutes late,
look back at him without a hint of a smile,
have tears in their eyes.

He doesn't talk to them.

He knows no one has time anymore.

It is exhausting.

Same routine:

Every
Single
Day.

But there is comfort in Henry's routine.
Something constant.

Even so, today his eggs had hot sauce.
The ghosts of Margie's protests were only heard in his mind
But fading.

The Crying Girl

She sits at the back of the bus,
picking at the leather on her seat,
looking out the window
with earbuds shoved into her ears.
Her music can be heard by the people around her.
"Walking on Sunshine,"
"Good Vibrations,"
"Here Comes the Sun,"
"Happy."

She tries to discreetly wipe her tears away,
quick movements,
as if she can erase the tear streaks,
the swollen eyes,
the smeared mascara,
the hoarseness of her voice as she says, "Excuse me."

She gets off the bus.

The Old Man

He smiles,
looking out the dirty window.
His wrinkled hands are folded in his lap.
He's in his Sunday best—
(on a Tuesday):
a faded light blue gingham shirt,
matching his eyes and
his best pair of black slacks.
He hums to himself:
“Isn't She Lovely?”
Checks his scratched watch
every few tedious seconds.

Starts to pick at the softened leather of his watchband.
Folds his hands again.
Spots his destination a few feet away, starts to rise.
Pushes away the people who try to help him.
Steps off the bus.
His black shoes (needing to be shined)
meet the pavement.
He pulls out a teddy bear,
“It's a boy!” in light blue thread
stitched onto its light brown stomach.

Makes his slow trek
to the door of Ivinson Memorial Hospital.
Ready to meet the *seventeenth* addition to the family.

The Oblivious Passenger

He rushes to get a seat in the middle of the bus.
Flops down,
stretches out his legs,
pulls out a book,
rips out the bookmark with a (cheesy) motivational quote—
holds it in his left hand.
Eyes crawl over the pages:
he isn't on the bus anymore.

He is in Ketterdam,
watching Kaz Brekker and the crew
taking in all the details of the captivating city.
His heart starts to accelerate
as he flips to the last chapter of the book.
His reading starts to slow down
(but not too slow).

He never looks up to see:
the old driver's silent smile,
the tears of the girl,
the old (happy) man, dropped off at the hospital.

He finishes the book just in time
to step back into the real world,
arriving at his nine to five job.

Maddie Rice

to break myself

as the days and nights pass
we're wrapped in each other
and I wonder
if it's better
to give you my heart all at once
or
if I should break it myself
and give it to you
piece by piece

Love, Your Bereaved Mother

My Daughter,

You should've seen the lily pink sunrise today, felt the post-hurricane breeze, tasted healing on the porch swing, dipped your toes in cold mud, felt the magic of the universe. You were the center of mine. We should be laying in fields of sunflowers, mesmerized by dazzling stars, your body warm from the summer heat. I should be holding you, but you flowed through my hands like sand.

Why didn't I know you were living in a seemingly endless winter? Your foundation inside cracked, crumbled. You weren't okay, but that would've been okay. I could have held your hand, not let go until you saw life's light again. You weren't alone. I hate that you thought you were alone.

You spoke in an irreversible way; but, there were other languages, baby. Better languages, baby. You could've let the name of that cursed diagnosis, *depression*, roll off your tongue. I would've felt all ten letters with you, held you while you had a pulse. Now, my pulsating frustrations are making accusations, but you don't deserve shame.

You should've seen the sunrise today. We could've spoken in magical tongues, been starry-eyed for just a moment. I would've told you of the taste of your future wedding cake, the sounds of

synchronized breathing with a lover on lavender-scented sheets, the applause of crowds when they read your sweet name at graduation, your first baby's coo, and a cicada's evening song. We could've had a barefaced, barefoot breakfast by the bayside with eggs scrambled just right, cinnamon rolls oozing with icing. I would've kissed you on the cheek, tasted the salt of your tears (life's seasoning), twirled you in the kitchen, sat you on the sink, bowed down to you. We could have painted self-portraits at noon, though I was never a good artist. Now, I'm only a lousy sketch of mourning.

You thought this was everything; that there was nothing left to see. But your Daddy and I could've shown you the Grand Canyon, unconditional love, *It's A Wonderful Life*, a surprise 19th birthday party. I would've taught you that your beauty transcended everything for me. You were so close to the summit, the pinnacle, the pinky-promise giggles under the light of a thousand stars. I could've warmed your cold world, taught you the paradox of happiness, taken you to a petting zoo to see a cute elephant.

If only you'd known: life's air isn't always acidic, the weight of being alive gets easier with age, and sometimes, the sunrises are lily pink.

Love,
Your Bereaved Mother

As We Knew It

I didn't want to turn 20. Somehow, I imagined I'd never make it out of my teenage years--not that I would die, no, not that. But that time would never get that far.

We sat in Cracker Barrel, the seven of us, at a round table. It was February 11, 2020. There was life all around us. A little girl, probably turning seven, was at the table behind me with her family. Her balloon and my balloon would rub against each other sometimes, and she would look at me then giggle. I wanted to tell her that I'd never forget her, that I would think of my birthday twin with big brown eyes the next year, and all the years after that.

Instead, I just smiled back at her, knowing that one day she'd grow to understand the sacredness of that day. I thought I understood everything there was to understand that warm February night. It was one of those rare evenings when everything made sense: like there was so much goodness that suffering could never overshadow anything again.

My parents smiled across the table as we all ate corn biscuits. My best friend of ten years was to the left of me, and my boyfriend of seven months was to the right. Beside them were my radiant sister and her boyfriend of one month. Approximately 51 miles south of that Cracker Barrel was my Granny, who was probably reading the newspaper or baking a blueberry pie for me.

It was my first birthday with my future husband. I couldn't tell anyone back then because everyone would've thought we were crazy; but, as his hand rested gently on mine, I knew my Februarys would never be the same again. I don't remember how many corn biscuits I ate that night. I just remember the laughter and my mom buying me sparkly earrings and a stuffed elephant from the gift shop. After dinner, we took family pictures on Cracker Barrel's porch, posing with the rocking chairs as I got distracted by the pretty string lights hanging above us.

I used to dream about what I had then. During my senior year of high school, the idea of being in Lynchburg seemed magical. I wanted to go there all the time. Maybe it was because Lynchburg was the home of a cardiologist who saved my life at 15. Maybe it was because Lynchburg had the closest Cracker Barrel to my hometown (and I was *obsessed* with Cracker Barrel). Maybe it was just because it was a new start, something different than everything I'd ever known.

Once I got through my first year of college, and Lynchburg lost some of its shimmer, my next dream began unfolding. This one was tangible, something I could touch. I was completely in love and starry-eyed by my 20th birthday. My dream could speak; he'd write me letters, buy me flowers, make me feel things I thought were only possible in heaven.

Though I didn't want to turn 20, because somehow I thought the end of my unbearably long teenage years meant losing who I was, I was completely happy that February evening. And in my naivety, I believed that everybody else in that Cracker Barrel was too.

Maybe they were. Maybe, when they look back on what would transpire in the world a few weeks later, they remembered February 11, 2020 as pure bliss.

Everything was perfectly, profoundly human back then. I wasn't afraid of what strangers were carrying. People weren't one thing or the other thing. They weren't something to be feared, something to stay away from. They were just people. That little girl, beaming as her parents sang to her, was a reflection of me; I was a reflection of her. We both blew out our candles with simple wishes; mine being that time could stay like that forever.

I should've known it wouldn't. I should've felt it the first time, on New Year's Day of 2020, when I saw the alarming headline on the world news. But, I was utterly happy that day, too. I told myself China was another world. *That'll never happen to us*, I said, as I watched my unfolding dream's chest rise and fall beside me.

But, three weeks after my 20th birthday, schools shut down. And five months later, my Granny could no longer fix me blueberry pies. She didn't get a proper funeral, just an outdoor burial where nobody hugged, nobody smiled. Just a sea of people in masks, people who didn't even seem like people anymore.

Eventually, things became okay again though. My sister ended up marrying that boyfriend at my birthday table 16 months later. And by my 21st birthday, my left hand was decorated with a diamond too. School is back to normal now (or whatever 'normal' is these days), and Lynchburg is still alright on the days I'm not homesick.

I still think about my birthday twin though. I guess she's nine years old now. Sometimes, I wonder about her family and all the other families at Cracker Barrel on February 11, 2020. How would time later unravel them?

Back then, I didn't wonder what strangers carried. But, now I know. Everyone is divided these days--on what should have been, what will never be, and where man is headed. I see past their facades though. We speak the same language now. Everyone is

saying, dreaming the same thing: to go back to life as we knew it. *It's too heavy now, it's too heavy.*

On my 20th birthday, I only loved those people sitting directly at my table. I knew their stories, what they had been through--they were my family. But now, I wish I could celebrate with every person in that restaurant again because, in at least one way, I know their stories. And for that, I love them. When the world hurts, we all carry the burden.

If only we could have one more chance to soak in the freedom of life as it was that day. We wouldn't have to talk about that at least one person in the restaurant would be taken away so suddenly, so tragically, by the next year. We wouldn't talk about it because we didn't know of numbers, ventilators, trucks with bodies, parking lot clinics, dwindling hospital beds back then.

More than anything, I wish I could take my birthday twin to that Cracker Barrel again. I'd take her outside. I would show her the stars in the black sky, how the string lights pierced the otherwise dark porch on what I believe was her seventh birthday. I'd whisper to her this bizarre secret, the secret that gives hope even now: sometimes, the darkness makes it easier to recognize the brilliance of light.

From the Clouds to the Streets

A black soul weeps when a black angel falls from the clouds to
the streets,
not because of the tragedy but the repetition of numbness,
the same cries
the same whys
the same circle of questions that remain unanswered between
weeps.

We weep for the caged bird that didn't sing for freedom anymore
because the system clipped his wings and shattered his dreams
when they put him in a cage that only led to a bigger cage.

The caged bird didn't sing for freedom anymore
because it sat and realized that we gave it the tunes but no tools,
in fact the bird silences when it realizes we never had the tools to
begin with.

A black soul weeps when a black angel falls from the clouds to
the streets,
not because of the tragedy but the repetition of numbness—
The numbness that yearns for
the caged bird to sing again.

Curses

The idea of family
Didn't come in a "how to" for the 400-year illiterate.
Those never allowed to birth without
Being womb-stripped by green paper hands
Could never nit-pick family dynamics
When freedom seemed so far.

Family became father figures missing from lynching,
Dirty dishes since Mom sat at the front of the bus,
There was no time for housekeeping
When freedom seemed so close
And whether the dinner table was full or not
Everyone showed up on perfect time
To discuss the plan,
To make sure their kids didn't end up
Like Emmett Till.

That state of panic became the season of
Anxious obsession,
Entire childhoods spent on edge about Trayvon,
So much so that we didn't even see
Breonna Taylor coming.
And now families are so traumatized it seems
Normal, but who do we talk to? Generations of
Bottling up pain with no release
Because the 400-year illiterate couldn't pass down how.

American Song for Peaceful Black Existence

Probably the 400-year illiterate
Didn't know to pass down peaceful black
Existence
Like the stars didn't know to pass down the
Drinking gourd
Or Toni Morrison didn't know the white gaze.

Probably the 400-year illiterate
Couldn't know peaceful black existence realistically.
What's peace to God-troubled water? Probably
Mom, Dad, Dick and Jane live in a green and
White house.

Probably the perhaps-half-literate will catch
Great-grand misery inevitably. Maybe
Peace is allergic to black existence. Surely
The half-literate realistically are.

Probably the drinking gourd spilled the peaceful black
Existence before it reached the green and white house.



University of Lynchburg

lynchburg.edu