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KAMIFICATIONS

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This Fruit Has a Religious Experience

Emma Simmons

Half banana. Wet banana. Make-me-do-a-double-take banana. Two thousand steps into my journey and, for a moment, I forget the rain licking the back of my neck. How long have you been there, banana? Laying on the sidewalk like a make-shift mile marker between where I've been and where I'm going. I've always had a soft spot for environmental storytelling: a torn photograph, flowers in the trash, the ghost of a bonfire leaving soot on my shoes. New banana, sweet banana, discarded-on-the-street banana. Which unlucky son of a gun left you there? I imagine scurvy creeping up on the horizon of whoever that person is... or at least an unbalanced meal. Will they remember that they forgot you? Or did you never matter in the first place? Small banana, round banana, rotting-on-the-ground banana. Does the pitter-patter of this rain remind you of home? Does it spark that longing inside to return to a place you have never been? Were you grown in the shadow of a painting of a place that you were meant to belong? Oh, banana... I must ask: do you feel abandoned by us all? Lone banana. Sad banana. I-think-you're-just-like-me banana. Do the banana gods care that you never had a place or purpose of your own? When the bugs consume your flesh will you finally feel at home? If bananas have an afterlife, I hope yours is kind. Half banana, wet banana... rain soaked and left behind.



Sunday Lunch

Abby Grace Shrader

On a sunshine-rich summer Sunday, my mom and I are wearing aprons, feet bare on the oak. Untamed curls, grown out roots, no makeup. Oil sizzling in a faded copper pot. I am completely and utterly myself. Dancing around the granite island, she slices up a ripe tomato. A shower of juice and seeds sprouts from the blade. Be better if it was from the garden, she says wistfully. The window is propped open, allowing bird songs to mix with the TV's old Baptist hymns. Beulah Land, I'm longing for you. Here, my twang is let out of its cage and is free to stretch out. My tongue is a thick copperhead, slowing down every syllable. She sprinkles corn meal into a cast-iron skillet while I mix the cornbread concoction in the large yellow bowl my great-grandmother left to my mother. I handle her prized possession like a fragile newborn. A splash of buttermilk, a heavy dose of salt. Nothing is measured. Okra is frying on the stove, so alluring it causes my mouth to moisten and my patience to wane. The smell fills the room, and for a moment, I am unsure if I am in my kitchen or my grandma's. My mom speaks of her mom as she combs through her beloved recipe box, packed to the brim with mouth-watering Appalachian meals passed down by apron-wearing, occasionally tobacco-dipping, strong-willed, child-bearing hipped women. My grandpa's corn, frozen to outlive him, thaws on the counter. Handling it takes me back to speeding around his yard in the golf cart and picking apples by placing them in the belly of my Alabama Football t-shirt. When we sit down to eat, my plate is weighed down by bright yellow corn on the cob, reddish-purple slices of tomato, glistening brown pinto beans on top of crumbled up cornbread, crisp green cucumber rounds, green and gold okra, and smokey brown chunks of sausage. It tastes like the whine of a fiddle, the comfort of faded blue jeans, and walking shoe-less down the rows of my grandparents' garden. Nostalgia hangs onto every bite. They were proud of you, my mom says, for leaving the mountain and going off to school. I pass her a slice of onion with tears in my eyes.



February's Spring (Acrylic on Canvas) // Caroline Lord

Heart of Appalachia

Lily Ruppert

Nestled
in the valley, her collarbone,
held fast against her stunning heart-
whether it be midnight folk music
or a morning bird's song,
it remains a constant harmony
among the chaos of it all.

Big warm mountain,
hold me still.
Take a moment to breathe
and tell me about the cricket's cry,
the worms and how they writhe.
Remind me, love,
of what it means to be small.



A Family Portrait (Acrylic on Canvas) // Sarah Agullo

A Series of Random Musings

Hunter Sewell

Peking Duck and the Death of Meaning

So here they are again, sitting in a restaurant, locked in yet another meaningless, soul-draining generational conflict that will solve nothing and leave them both irritable and vaguely nauseous. Phil, 54, wearing a Let's Go Brandon t-shirt that he ordered from Facebook and genuinely believes is the height of satire, is flipping through the sticky, laminated menu of Lucky Dragon, a Chinese restaurant that is neither lucky nor particularly Chinese, given that it's owned by a guy named Steve. Across from him is Sage, 21, home from college, freshly radicalized by a semester of critical theory and fully prepared to burn every remaining bridge between them for the sake of The Discourse. Above them, the massive backlit menu board hums faintly, its bold, faux-Asian lettering advertising the house special: PEKING DUCK. And that's where it happens. That's where Sage's entire body goes rigid, where she suddenly sees, in all its horrific clarity, the problem.

"Oh my God," she says, eyes wide with the horror of fresh discovery. Phil, who has spent the last fifteen minutes griping about how you can't even say Merry Christmas anymore, perks up immediately, thrilled to see that she is about to have An Opinion.

"What."

Sage gestures furiously at the sign. "Peking Duck?! Are you kidding me? I can't believe they still call it that." Phil squints at her like a dog that's just been shown a card trick. "Uh. Yeah? It's a duck. From Peking."

"No, Dad. It's not from Peking, because Peking isn't a place. It's called Beijing now. Peking is outdated colonialist garbage—Westerners just couldn't be bothered to say the name right, so they made up their own version and now we're stuck with it."

Phil leans back in his chair, smirking like a man who knows he is about to ruin her day. "Well well well. Look who's getting all worked up over a duck. Sage exhales through her nose like a dragon about to incinerate a village.

"It's not just a duck. It's the principle. It's Western imperialism erasing native languages and forcing their own names onto things. Like how India was Bombay until the British left. Or how Taiwan was called Formosa because some Portuguese dude thought it sounded pretty. It's a classic example of linguistic hegemony—"

"Linguistic hedge money?" Phil interrupts, deliberately mishearing her in the way he does whenever he thinks she's being too intellectual about something.

Sage's eye twitches. "Hegemony."

"Yeah, well, I think it's dumb."

"Oh wow, incredible counterargument, Dad."

Phil, sensing that he is now winning (winning, in this case, meaning "irritating his daughter into a level of rage where she forgets syntax"), leans forward, steepling his fingers in mock contemplation. "So what should they call it, huh? If Peking Duck is too offensive for the woke crowd, what's the correct term? Oh, let me guess—Beijing Waterfowl?"

"I don't know, just something accurate."

"Oh, oh, I got it—Oppressed Indigenous Chinese Avian Dish." Sage's hands grip the table like she's resisting the urge to flip it.

"Dad—"

"No, no, wait—Anti-Colonialist Roast Quacker." Sage inhales sharply, eyes wide in absolute, cosmic horror.

"You are—"

"—the reason nothing ever gets better and the planet is dying and my generation is going to inherit a flaming husk of a world because people like you refuse to change literally anything—"

"—just because you think being an asshole is principled—"

"—and now I have to sit here and eat fucking LO MEIN like I'm not watching civilization crumble in real time—"

"—and all you care about is making sure no one takes away your goddamn racist duck!"

At this precise moment, the waiter arrives, looking profoundly tired. Not just work tired, but deeply existentially tired, the kind of tired that comes from years of serving people who have absolutely no idea what they're talking about. "Are you ready to order?" he asks. Sage exhales through her nose. "Just rice." Phil, grinning like a man who thinks he has just Won A Debate instead of simply exhausted another human being into submission, slaps the menu closed.

“I’ll have the Peking Duck.” He says it extra loud, like he’s making some kind of political statement. The waiter does not react. The waiter does not care. As he walks away, Sage glares at her father with the force of a thousand dying suns.

“You did that on purpose.”

“Absolutely.”

And then, just as Phil is settling into his smugness, just as he thinks he has achieved the perfect fatherly victory, Sage—without breaking eye contact, without blinking—picks up a soy sauce packet, peels it open, and dumps it directly onto his hat.

It is the most satisfying thing she has ever done.



Lucky Dragon Blues

It’s cold in that Midwestern way that isn’t just a temperature but a feeling, a deep marrow-seep of loneliness and exposed nerves, the kind of cold that makes you talk to yourself just to prove you still exist. The neon sign above Lucky Dragon flickers in a sickly red, casting halfhearted reflections on the wet pavement, and Mark—32, unemployed, unshaven, vaguely contemplating the metaphysical implications of his own breath in the air—steps out into the street, holding a large brown paper bag filled with way too much Chinese takeout for one person but exactly the right amount for someone whose primary method of emotional processing involves fried food and solitude. He is carrying this meal, his meal, with the reverence of a holy object, a last vestige of human kindness in a world that is entirely indifferent to his suffering. Inside the bag: sesame chicken, egg rolls, crab rangoons, extra rice (which he hadn’t needed but ordered anyway, a knee-jerk decision made in the moment when the waiter looked at him a little too long, a little too knowingly). He had not wanted to admit, through the transaction of ordering, that he was, in fact, alone.

The couple inside the restaurant, the loud girl and the man in the stupid shirt, were still going at it when he left. Some argument about Peking Duck. He had watched, in that vaguely detached way people watch reality TV, as the girl’s entire body radiated fury and the dad—definitely a dad, the dadliest kind of dad, a Dad as Concept—smirked the smirk of a man whose entire existence was a power struggle with his own offspring. Mark had envied them. Not because he wanted to be them, but because they had something to fight about. Because now, outside in the freezing dark, carrying an absurd quantity of food meant for no one but himself, Mark had nothing but silence.

It had been 47 days since she left. (He knew this number with the same certainty that a prisoner knows how long they’ve been locked up. Not that he had been counting, exactly, but the number was there, lodged in his brain, undeniable and unmovable, like the high-score on an arcade game no one has beaten in years.)

The ending had been, in retrospect, inevitable. If you charted the last few months, the little snags, the slow accumulation of tiny withdrawals from the emotional bank account, it was obvious. But the thing about breakups is that knowing doesn’t stop it from hurting. He had been an idiot. That was the thing. Not in some grand, dramatic way. Not in a cheated-on-her, wrecked-the-car, ruined-her-life way. Just in the small ways. The ways that add up. The forgetting to ask about her day, the half-listening, the way he would default to his phone when she was talking because, deep down, he had assumed she would always be there.

Except, she wasn’t.

And now it was just him, in this city that he did not belong to, carrying his Too Much Food in a brown bag that was already starting to leak at the bottom, the oil soaking through like an accusation. He walked down Main Street, past the same sad buildings, past the empty dive bar that still had a Bud Light Presents: NFL Sunday Ticket! sign in the window even though football season had been over for weeks. His breath curled in front of him, a tangible thing in a world where nothing else seemed to be.

It wasn’t just her leaving. It was what her leaving revealed.

Because the thing is, when you’re in a relationship, you can kind of ignore the larger existential horrors of life. You can, for a time, pretend that there’s some structure, some meaning. There are inside jokes. There are traditions. There are good morning texts and What do you want for dinner? conversations and all the mundane, miraculous things that make the days feel less like a countdown to oblivion.

But when that’s gone? When it’s just you, and the weight of your own consciousness is suddenly all there is?

Mark had always considered himself a realist. He wasn’t religious. He didn’t believe in fate or destiny or cosmic order. But that also meant there was no safety net, no way to avoid the brutal, unyielding reality that life is just things happening, one after another, until it stops. And if that was the case—if life was just a series of meals and walks home and endless, looping thoughts—then what the fuck was the point? He turned the corner onto his street, where the streetlights flickered like they, too, were on the verge of giving up. His apartment, second floor, a space that still had her things in it because he couldn’t bring himself to remove them, was waiting for him, waiting with all its terrible silence. The bag in his hands was growing heavier. He imagined, briefly, the version of himself from a year ago, the version who had once walked home with takeout for two, who had once carried a bag like this knowing that, inside, there was a meal they would share, curled up together in the glow of the TV, making fun of some bad Netflix show.

And now it was just him. Him, and the food, and the cold, and the relentless passage of time. At the door to his building, he hesitated. Just for a second. Just long enough to register the quiet, the absence of a text from her saying hey, are you home yet?

And then, because there was nothing else to do, he went inside.



Catalytic Crop Top

Grace Sorrells

He told me a year and a half ago I looked good in crop tops; now, I am standing in his living room with his hands filling the distance between my jeans and my shirt.

I usually avoid wearing cropped shirts around him as we inevitably exchange glances with far too many implications behind them. My reasoning for risking the implications tonight is unexplainable, even to myself. It might have to do with the endless notifications on my phone from someone who claims to “love me like no other” and “only has eyes for me,” yet has never respected me enough to give me a moment alone. That someone is also the only reason we are vertical rather than horizontal.

“I hate you with every fiber of my being right now.” His forehead is pressed up against mine as he says it, our lips just an inch apart.

“No, you don’t.”

“Of course I don’t. I hate having to have the self-control of a god, so I don’t—” he cuts himself off, not daring to verbalize his thoughts further as he pulls me closer.

I laugh. “For the record, I hate you too.”

He makes a noise somewhere between a groan and a giggle and grips me tighter.

“If you’re not careful, you’ll bruise me,” I say, audible only to him.

I don’t actually care. I want him to pull me in and give me the first good first kiss I’ve ever had and bruise my hips until they feel so sore that I can’t move without thinking of him. I want him to destroy me and stay long enough afterward to put me back together again. I want him, and I think he’s the only person I’ve ever wanted.

body count

Samantha Russell

I'm not sure if I lived out my teenage fantasy
Of getting with a guy and being wanted
The right way.
Research can't prepare you for the way a man looks when the lights are off
Or how they all look the same if I take my glasses off.

Charm
And a few pretty words were all
it seemed to take.
I wasn't anything to them.
Just a body.
That's not so bad, it can't be.
Another tally for the wall
Another niche in the handle of a loaded gun.
Maybe we meant nothing
To each other.
Is that the way its supposed to go?

I'd always watch
The great pine sway through the blinds
Against a bright blue sky
To distract from his
Underwhelming and inexperienced affections.
I never had the patience to educate
Or the heart to tell him
That I took acting classes back in high school.

Man-made machine makes men obsolete
And so I took the love out of making it.
Efficiency for intimacy
A fair enough trade.
Make believe was a better friend than he ever could be.
If I'm going to feel empty
Even when I'm with him,
Why not cut out the middleman?
Alone I no longer have to say
'I'm tired, baby
Let's kiss each other goodnight
And dream of other people."

I'd be lying if I said that I hated every second of it
But the wine turned sour
And now I'm alone in a communal shower
Wishing I'd listened
to my Sunday School teacher
Tell me I shouldn't give myself
away too early
And to someone who didn't even think
I was ever that pretty.

There's Hope
I wanted you
sshy. It's
out
m
for



All Around the Ouroboros (Digital Art) // Mackenzie May



The Song of Gratitude is a Heart Overflowing (Sculpture) // Allie Patterson

in a different life

Lennon James

in a different life i let my hair grow out long
without any care for how you perceived it
my patchy beard finally filled in
and i swam where i couldn't feel the oceans floor beneath my feet

i kissed my friends just to show them
that i cared
and i would listen more than i spoke

i wore those rings that stained my fingers
and watched as the geese flew north above me
content in the silence

in a different life i moved across the country
as i couldn't stand being away from you
we eloped in a place we had never been to
and told nobody of our secret

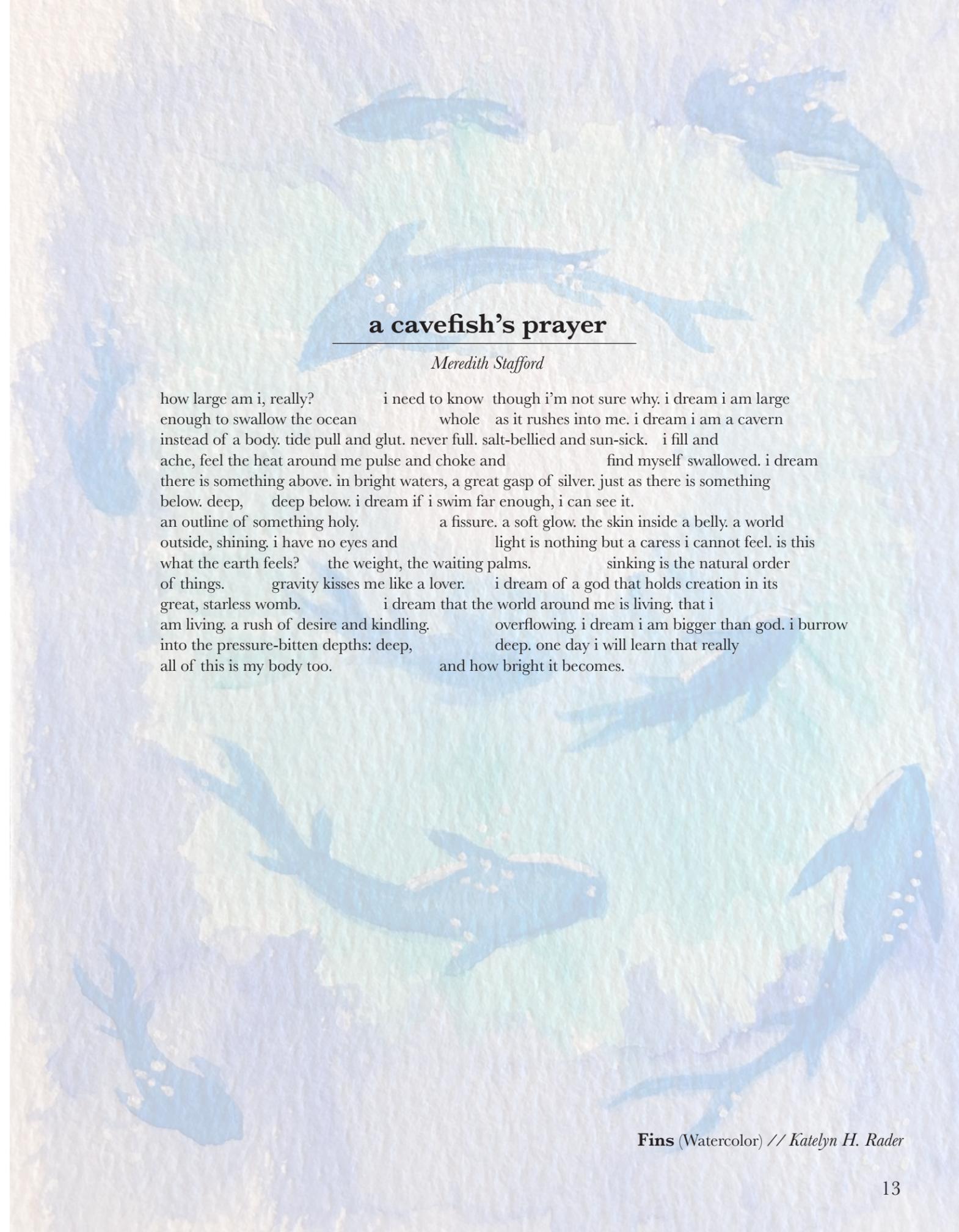
in a different life i never left home
i never had to call my parents to tell them
how i missed them
my first dog never died

in a different life it was enough
you were always
i was only close





Balancing Blackbird (Digital Photography) // *Mads Muraoka*



a cavefish's prayer

Meredith Stafford

how large am i, really? i need to know though i'm not sure why. i dream i am large
enough to swallow the ocean whole as it rushes into me. i dream i am a cavern
instead of a body. tide pull and glut. never full. salt-bellied and sun-sick. i fill and
ache, feel the heat around me pulse and choke and find myself swallowed. i dream
there is something above. in bright waters, a great gasp of silver. just as there is something
below. deep, deep below. i dream if i swim far enough, i can see it.
an outline of something holy. a fissure. a soft glow. the skin inside a belly. a world
outside, shining. i have no eyes and light is nothing but a caress i cannot feel. is this
what the earth feels? the weight, the waiting palms. sinking is the natural order
of things. gravity kisses me like a lover. i dream of a god that holds creation in its
great, starless womb. i dream that the world around me is living. that i
am living a rush of desire and kindling. overflowing. i dream i am bigger than god. i burrow
into the pressure-bitten depths: deep, deep. one day i will learn that really
all of this is my body too. and how bright it becomes.

Fins (Watercolor) // *Katelyn H. Rader*



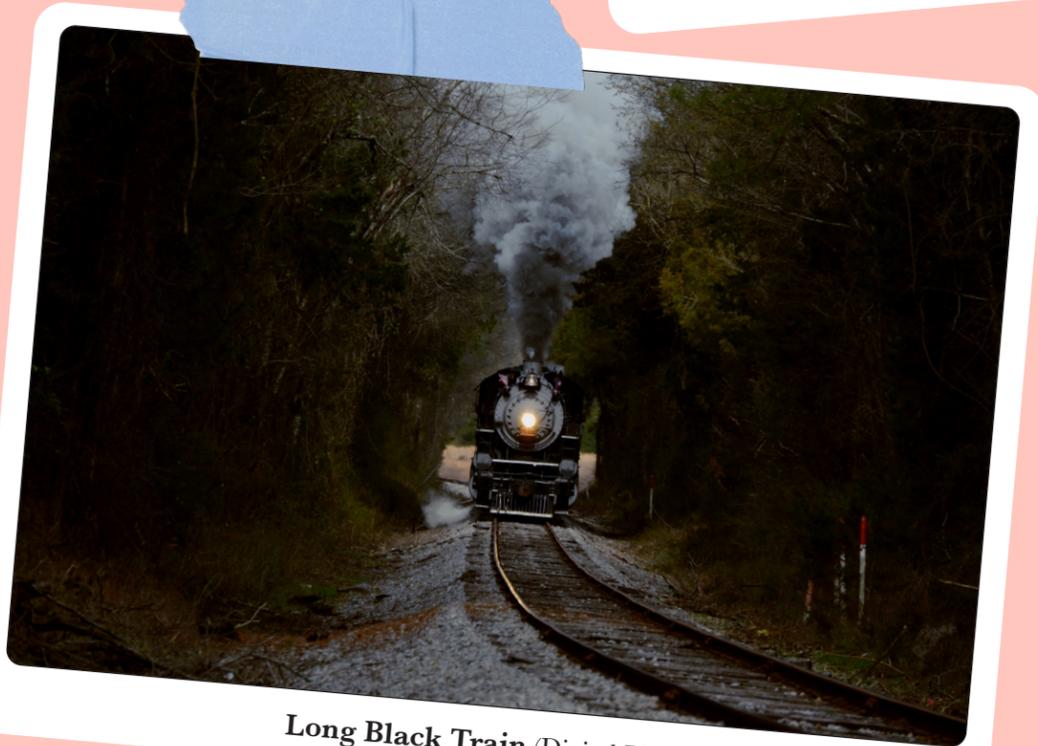
Floating in a Dream (Digital Photography)
// Camille Schmied & Addicyn Reece



Annie's Dress (Digital Photography)
// Ellie Hartley



In Bloom (Digital Photography) // Emma Risinger



Long Black Train (Digital Photography) // Olivia Tierce

Fish Eyes, Spaghettis, and the Nature of Bruised Hands

Cole Alexander

I remember her hands the most. They were doll hands, smooth and false. Yellow-blue bruises painted her palms. Her hands were surgical and method and brutal. She taught me how to descale and fillet a fish on the dock behind her grandfather's trailer. I was afraid of the knife and what it could do. I threw up twice the first time she showed me. Little scales freckled the backs of her hands and the bends of her fingers. I tried to walk away from it. I wanted my father to do it for me, someone who had killed things. But she gripped my wrists and pulled me back to the cooler lid where she performed for the both of us. Her hands cradled the back of mine, she moved them to the knife and worked my fingers around the blade. I never looked at what I was doing with the knife; she did it all from the backs of my hands. My eyes were hooked on the fish's eye.

The eye was serene. It told me I had no reason to feel sorry for it. It knew its purpose in the end was this, and there was nothing either of us could do. I thought about that eye after the two of us finished slicing out the meat and seared it over the campfire. I thought about that eye while we devoured the fish and licked the grease from our hands. It was our first and only meal of the day.

Meals were like that when we stayed at her grandfather's. We built shelters under the pines that cradled the lake and slept under swollen stars. We woke up to the sounds of Warblers and Woodpeckers. We ran along the shell sand beach until our feet were cut to hell. We howled back at the creatures that danced outside the light of campfire flickers. We never set foot in that trailer of his.

Moss covered the tin roof and damp green plants hung from the mangled gutter. Three of the windows were cardboard and duct tape. I never saw the inside, but I smelled the inside from the screen door when we walked close. It smelled like the carpet was patchy and crusty in spots. It smelled like the kitchen linoleum was sticky to walk on. It smelled like beer and ketchup and sliced ham were the only things in the fridge. It smelled like he did; it smelled like he was.

He had mechanic's hands that felt like vice grips when they squeezed your shoulder. His stubble could scratch the paint off a school bus. But his eyes were the worst because they were alive. They were alive like fever dreams. I looked in his eyes once and saw rain lurking in the clouds before it fell and flooded the lake.

My father saved us that night when the lake bloated with rain. He knew how she and I would've slept under a tarp before sleeping in that trailer. He drove us away to his apartment by the bay. My father's apartment was red and cinnamon. Paintings of little men in silly hats doing extraordinary things littered the walls. His chunky rugs smelled like cherry tobacco and the smoke from old cigars.

She picked the movie that night because my father said it was good practice to celebrate guests that way. She told him she only ever watched Spaghettis because they made her brave. She wanted to be Annie Oakley and shoot the cowards. My father put on a movie with a whistle track after every stare-down and a hero with a name that punched harder than bruised fists. We fell asleep on the big brown couch in a pile of arms and legs.

That became our weekend routine during the early years while her grandfather was around. Friday nights were dust-brown and filled with wild Mustangs and bank robberies and pistol shot echoes. I found it hard to believe then that the pistol shot sound brought death. The crack that rings out from gun barrels made me think about life as it should be, life where couches are big and brown and hug you and hold your shapes when you leave. But the pistol shot is as the fish eye.

I know that now, after her grandfather ate the bullet and there were no whistle tracks or wild Mustangs. He looked down the eye one night after the bottles were empty. I expected her to cry when the musty man in a grey suit played the organ. Or when the big photo of him was taken down from the easel. Or when she poked his cheek at the casket to see what the morticians made him into. Or when the first clump of dirt thudded the casket and made me jump. But she was Annie Oakley. She might have been the gun he ate. She might have been the bottom of the bottles that put him here. Her hands were tombstones, and her eyes were alive like his.

We only visited his trailer once to pick up the things she kept inside. My father cleared out the trunk, but she only threw a backpack into the back seat after the screen door slammed shut. We drove all of the road there is that day. The windows of my father's truck shivered when the speed got to them. Each time they shook she would point out at the blurry trees and say they were bound to be paper now. She liked to think that the trees were running beside us and when the window shook the trees fell. She thought that way about fallen trees, she never worried about the sound they made after they fell. She worried about them becoming paper. I wonder if she has ever held a newspaper and thought of that day we dropped her off at her cousin's ranch and the shaking of the trees as we drove.

Her cousin was a red-cheeked man with lead in his boots. His voice culled silence and whipped the air like a pistol shot. But he mostly spoke in grunts and nods. What set him back on the ground like the rest of us was his smile. It was coffee white and made us all family. I've never met someone since with his force of gravity. It pulled the hate right from your bones and baptized you in his ways.

My father shook his hand and talked about things she and I weren't supposed to hear so she grabbed my wrists and led me to a hole in a chicken-wire fence and the pasture beyond it. I think that pasture went on until the air was thin and the clouds nipped at your toes. She yanked my arm again and we ran into the tall grass. Her eyes were the color of mine and I saw her honest smile for the first time. She had fox teeth and her lips seemed to curl away from them so as not to be bitten. We matted the tall grass into warm and human shapes and laid there until the sun became too heavy for the sky to hold.

We ate dinner in her cousin's living room that night. The steak was thick and barely dead and soaked in the canned carrot water but we ate every bite. We were afraid not to clean our plates because the house was watching us. Stuffed animals and their heads stared us down from the walls. My father and her cousin got the recliners and ate on their laps; she and I got the shag carpet floor and ate on the coffee table.

Her cousin's carpet was made of a trillion tiny fingers that tickled at your ankles and the underside of your knee. It clung to me in a comfortable way that made me feel like the house wanted to hold me inside it and make me scrambled eggs in the morning. I ran my hands along it and watched her do the same between mouthfuls of steak. Her cousin told funny stories about funny people that lived along the gravel roads nearby. The stories always ended with a man who wears overalls not being able to sit right for weeks or a woman with patches in her dress threatening to hang ornery kids on clotheslines by their ears.

After dinner he pointed at the stuffed animals and asked if we wanted to see the gun that he called his interior decorator. My father declined the offer, but she vetoed him. The rifle was mostly barrel, and little wooden deer pranced along the side of the cork brown stock. The cold trigger made me think of her grandfather. I looked at the eyes of the animals on the wall, but they didn't speak the same way. Their eyes were collective and unending.

Her cousin asked us if we wanted to shoot it in the morning. My father looked at me, but she spoke for us. The morning sun was larger at the ranch. It beat the dew off the grass and mist lulled over the hills. Her cousin taught us how to load it and how to hold it like a man who decorates his walls with animals. He showed us how to look down the sights and to aim it as if what we wanted to shoot was already dead.

Her hands were quick with the pattern and held the rifle as if she were nursing it back to health. Her first shot went wild. But the second obliterated one of the beer bottle targets. I refused to shoot. I saw the rifle for what it really was. I saw the trigger pull and the smoking barrel. I saw the sound break the air around us. I saw her grandfather's trailer windows shatter every time a bullet struck home and busted a bottle. I saw her grandfather's hands holding the gun when she shot. She saw him there too. He stood behind her and held her hands in his as he guided her fingers to the trigger. I looked into her eyes and saw rain. We said goodbye the way children do. We didn't know this would be the last goodbye; we didn't know that our minds would grow, and we would forget the details of each other's faces. My father told me on the drive home that she was where she needed to be, and I believed him. I still believe him. People like her don't live well amongst the rest of us. I don't believe the yellow-blue bruises on her hands ever faded. She is Annie Oakley with rain eyes and fox smiles. I remember her hands the most. I feel them cup mine as I wrestle with the creatures that dance in the dark parts of my mind. I feel them grab my fingers and guide them to a heavy trigger when bottles must break. I feel them guide the knife into soft flesh when all I see are fish eyes.



What Stares Back (Pen on Paper) // *Hunter Sewell*



Remembering Joyce (Oil Paint) // *Alana Hennon*

When She Gets a Talkin

Pen Name Pending

After "Black Southern Gothic" by Hakeem Furious

There ain't no point,
of trying to escape a box by moving to the other side of the box.
It's all the same cardboard flap
duck-tapin you down,
we all part of the same package.
Signed, sealed, delivered,
postage stamped into their
pocketbooks.
Ain't no blue state
gonna keep you safe.
Ain't no "people's politician"
gonna return to sender.
Ain't none of this shit
changed in a damn million years,
we still lettin yuppies
get power, keep power,
rinse, repeat.
Ain't none but three wars
had a good point in fightin,
but we still failed to choke
the chicken before it started cluckin.

There ain't no point
anymore in you not learnin ya some.
You's lookin a fool
by actin a fool
on that stage tryin to rewrite history.
Missin the days where
smackin some sense and beatin ass
what'n nothin to bat an eye at—
these grown ones need it.
Their mommas oughta be ashamed of em.
Lord knows,
if that was my chile,
he would'n've made it past the porch steps
much less the Capitol steps.

There ain't no point
in thinkin that any
rich son-of-a-bitch
is for you.
How you think you got here—
on the bottom rung of society,
this backwood backroom
to the rest of the world.
Vote for em all you want,
they ain't gonna remember you here.
They ain't never heard of here,
cept when they lookin at the Welfare list.
Remind me what they wanna do with your
foodstamps.

There ain't no point
harpin on this
when you ain't gonna listen.
Got all those
woolen lies in your ears.
Bless your heart.



Stolen Data (Silkscreen Print) // *Nancy Daniel*



Fall at Gibbs Garden (Digital Photography) // *Lillian Grace Benefield*

LETTERS TO MY ESTRANGED COUSIN

Julianne Kim

Unsent Letter To My Estranged Cousin

2/10/25

Dear -----,

I'm angry with you. I'm sad when I think of you. Sometimes I stare into nothingness and wonder if we'd even get along now. When we were together, you were my idol, my favorite person. I wanted to be like you.

You were creative and silly, sometimes violent in that childish way when we were roughhousing. You were also sensitive.

I remember when we were young and they started fighting, so you herded us into the basement and turned on the TV. We could watch and ignore. Watch and forget. You got in trouble, though. You got into trouble by giving us the thing we needed in the moment.

You actually got in trouble a lot. Like I said, you were silly. But also, rude and sarcastic. We all were at that age, just you more than most.

You loved animals. You loved baby dolls.

The last time I saw you, you loved makeup and straightening your straight hair. You had grown up.

I wasn't quite there yet. And before I could get there, and be as beautiful and cool as you were, you left me.

It would be dramatic to say I'd never forgive you for that. But I would. The second you come back to me, I will.

Sincerely,

JK

Another Letter To My Estranged Cousin

2/17/25

Dear -----,

The last time I saw you was the summer before seventh grade. The last time I talked to you was on my thirteenth birthday, in seventh grade.

I had gotten my first phone, and you were one of, if not the top, person on my list to contact. My sister gave me your number.

I texted you. I was so excited. I don't remember your response, but I do remember how lackluster it was. And how you then stopped responding altogether a few days later.

At first, I was sad. Then I thought nothing of it. Then it made me sad again. And then, I raged.

Knowing what I know now, I understand why you didn't respond.

But why?

Why did you have to cut me off? I didn't do anything to you. When our families were together, you were my best friend. I would've done anything to trade the sister I had for you.

But apparently summers at the beach and Christmases spent together mean shit amid family drama.

So, I wrote you a letter. I took pictures of the pages upon pages of writing in my journal and sent them to you. No response.

That's when I figured out you had blocked my number. And Instagram. WTF.

I didn't stop, though. I wrote you another letter. Didn't send that one. And another. It never left my desk. And then I finally did send you one. No response.

After many more unsent missives, I got the courage to send you another one. I even went to the extent of sleuthing what summer camp you would be counseling at and sent the letter to your P.O. box. It was probably all for nothing. Because, once again, I literally have no idea if the letter reached your hands and if it did whether you ripped it to shreds or not.

I was a very angry child. You got a front row seat to many of my performances. I'm more tame now, which I hope I'd be, given that was eight compared to nineteen. Yet, I still feel that rage. It's flowing from my pen right now, potent and cutting the paper.

Do you know how many other things I could be doing right now, should be doing right now? Surprise, I'm in college. Yes, it's been that long, if you hadn't noticed. Life is screaming at me right now, to get off my ass, to complete this, to start that. But no. I'm here. Writing letter No. 5,631. To you.

I hope you're happy. Because I'm not.

I hope you're sleeping well. Because I go to bed too late and then get up too early, with feverish dreams full of faces I know and completely improbable events. And then there are those dreams. With you. And me. You completely ignoring me. My inability to reach you and be seen. Or heard.

Girly, I'm depressed. No, scratch that, I'm bipolar. Imagine spending your first week back home after your disastrous first semester of college crying your eyes out after feeling unloved and unlovable. Then being told you're bipolar, and

they've known since you were thirteen. Oh, look at that! Thirteen marks my year of abandonment. By you.

The rage is truly flowing now, but my face is completely blank. I'm sitting alone in a quiet dorm, a bleak sky outside with nothing happening besides the rapid scratchings of a pen and the hum of an AC...

Sincerely,
JK

One More Letter To My Estranged Cousin

2/25/25

Dear -----,

I'm thinking of you again. Not in an angry, vengeful way. Or a nostalgic, overjoyed way.

I was just alone. And thinking. I do far too much of both those activities.

Either way, I was thinking, and that thinking led to you.

You.

You were a disastrous bob cut thrust upon you by a controlling mother. You were a piercing shriek released when wrestling with your father and things stopped going your way. You were the jaws of an avid gum chewer, you were the hands that kidnapped the cat from the garage so we could dress him up in pink, frilly fabrics and ribbons. There is a photo of him with a Build-a-Bear crown perched atop his head. This girl in the Princess Aurora dress holding him is anonymous; but had the late 2000s digital camera's lens zoomed out, it would've been your face, grinning wildly.

I guess I am waxing nostalgic now.

We would stay up late drawing *Rainbow Magic* fairies, we played with the excessive amounts of Beanie Boos I possessed. We put on costumes, stood on a stool, and performed exclusive concerts to the family using your *High School Musical 2* plastic microphone.

You watched Disney Channel; I was not allowed to. You wore fun and trendy tops; I felt like a sack in Crazy 8 clothing picked by my mother.

You were beauty, you were grace. You'd go barefoot outside all day.

I was the youngest cousin. I chased after you on the little legs that carried me.

Those little legs are longer now. Stronger now. However, I guarantee they're still not as long and strong as yours.

I'm tired of chasing you with my thoughts. I stalk your Instagram using friend's phones. There is nothing to see, though. Just a beachy profile pic of a girl I barely know, and a big, fat lock in the middle of the screen.

All these letters make me feel like a crazy ex-girlfriend begging you to take me back, or a crazy claimed relation begging for money. But I'm begging for time.

My little legs are tired of chasing you.

But they won't stop.

I don't think they ever will.

I love you.

-Julianne



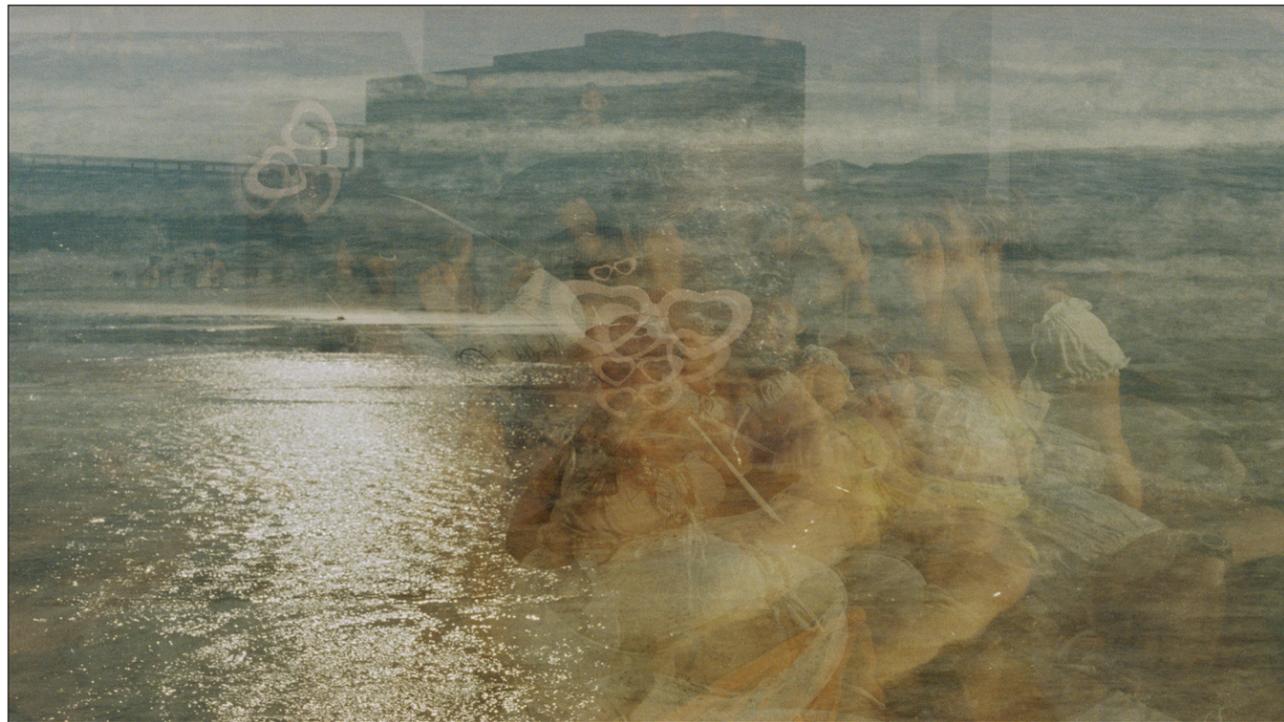
II - The High Priestess (Graphite on Paper) // Sam San Miguel

Casa Vacía

Elizabeth Risinger

Picture frames scatter
across popcorn walls,
the young girl drowning
in iridescence, smiles ear to ear in a crown almost
too big
for her curls; su corazón
shines in her eyes.
Next to her, is a canvas of spiraling
violets and maroons reaching
for la cruz seated center on the wall of family.
Pero la casa esta vacía.
Masa harina coats the air, hoja de elote lying
on the kitchen counter in its package, pleading
to be released.
Un sartén on el refri eagerly
ready to heat
la tortillas sitting al lado del pan dulce shoved
a top la tostadora, begging
to be dipped
into sweet tazas de cafecito,
pero la casa esta vacía.

I tell them scatter,
run past popcorn walls.
We are all drowning
in the punishment of who we are, hoping for the almost.
Too big
a problem: mi corazón
breaks with closed eyes
so I do not see the fall, the spiraling
do not see my people reaching
and never receiving paz, I pray for my family.
Mi casa esta vacía.
Tried to hide, bajo floorboards, wait in the silence, in the
lying.
Dije, “mi familia, mis hijos,” no pleading
gets you released.
They say “warrent” and we wait eagerly
in the heat,
it is hours until we see sky, see others they shoved,
escuchar a los niños begging
as men dipped
their stolen pan into cafecito
Mi casa esta vacía.



Charleston (Film Photography) // *Joey Fletcher*



Ceilings (Digital Mixed Media) // *Sara Alexander*

Inspired by Mural del Palacio
de Gobierno de Hermosillo

Pyroclasm

M. Lamar Berry

My Stingray skids to a stop in a smoking heap just at the bottom of a cliff, the metal scraped and torn to crimson ribbons after tumbling like a Corvette-branded boulder for a few dozen feet. I hang upside down in the driver's seat, somehow still gripping the wheel in midair after it had been snapped off its axis like the bones of baby bird that left the nest a little too early. Like my bones should've been, but instead I'm hanging, whole and unbroken, though cut open. A leaky wound above my eyebrow sends crimson rain down past the crown of my head, towards the searing metal beneath. I can smell the iron in wisps of steam rising to become stardust for the universe dancing in my eyes.

I sit there in a daze, replaying the last 30 seconds for what feels like 30 years. The fireball with 18 wheels that suddenly jerked into my lane, the driver's screams inaudible as his hair singed. Maybe he was on his way to make a delivery at a Kroger or Whole Foods before his truck caught fire and he ran me off the side of a mountain. Maybe he was just running too, but in a different, equally doomed direction.

The sound of distant sirens blaring eventually brings me out of it. I haven't moved, I haven't so much as relaxed a muscle, despite willing the change for so long. I am just here, upside down in my wreck of a car, gripping the wheel. My limbs aren't listening to a single command, but I'm oddly comfortable. It's warm here—granted warm was default in California—but this is an odd, localized warmth running from my temple to my shoulder.

My left shoulder being devoured by flames.

Now I can't tell if I'm lightheaded because I'm upside down, or if blood loss is starting to work its magic, but either way I'm certain I'm seeing things. Because fire is supposed to hurt and people are supposed to panic when their things are burning, but here I am sitting calm in a burning corvette.

The corvette is burning.

An unatble electric engine is burning.

Crackle. Crackle. Boom.

Flames erupt from the hood, pushing into the chassis and shunting shards of glass on a straight shot to my face. Funny thing is though, the glass never makes it. I see it all launching away before I get so much as a scratch.

It's just like that. Glass one instant, empty air the next. The first blast has somehow been cancelled out by a second, and I'm left there effectively blind. And deaf. But somehow, I'm not dizzy anymore.

I blink myself back to focus in a small, blackened crater, the corpses of surrounding shrubs all uniformly charred to perfection on whichever side was facing me. I can see everything so clearly. My suit is alight and curling away from hands brighter than a lit barrel of kerosene. It's mystifying to watch. It's euphoric. I can't feel the heat, but I've become unstoppable.

There's a brief moment of wonder there, a moment of "why am I still breathing?" But then I rise to my feet and the sky gives me clarity.

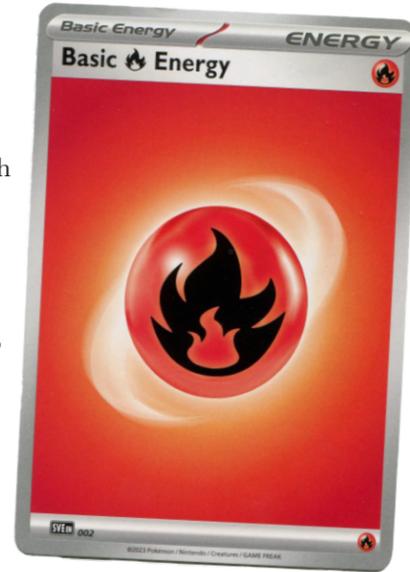
The skies were already turning hours before, but *something* had changed, giving way to a whirling storm of embers and ash, falling from an angry sky like blazing spittle from the maw of a beast whose innards glow in a slowly darkening bronze. This sky looks like it was just about ready to swallow the world, and I take this as a go-ahead from the universe to feed the last of my humanity into the flames.

I run from that pit, harder and faster than I ever had before. The world is melting around me and if I stop, the hail of ash will bury me like that car crash should've, like those explosions should've, like the burns I was racking up undoubtably would.

But I'm not hurting.

I realize I'm not hurting anymore despite running through an active wildfire. I didn't feel *close* to tired. In this moment I could carry torch light in a sprint across the entire state. All powerful, all consuming, I am the wildfire and this heat is the means to my end.

The thoughts carry a sort of lucidity with it and for the first time since the accident, I really take in what was happening around me. Take in all the trees were dyed in fall colors well before the season, the grass beneath my feet was covered in black and white, ash charred and self-replicating. In this hellscape I am home, breathing smoke better than the purest air and the fires raging around me passed over like a breeze. It is ecstasy.



I'm gliding like an ex-man possessed. Though I can't see more than three feet ahead of me, I could vaguely follow the sound of the sirens, trying their hardest to drown out my inferno's symphony. People with their sirens and their hoses, so desperate to stop the burn, but I wasn't ready to let my flame be put down.

Through waist-high piles of burnt material I glide, the waste seeming to take on life all their own as the steadily worsening wind scatter the ash and heat even more. Eventually I come to the base of a hill, with the red-hot concrete barriers of a highway peaking just over the top, haloed by a set of muted lights alternating red and blue. The silt begins to smoke and sizzle as I dig into it, clawing my way up the hill with my bare hands. Their water is up there, and their water is worth my life.

But the only thing waiting up top to greet me at this final site is a dead sea. Cars clogging the roads in either direction, losing their way in the haze of smoke of mirage lines. I can't see the drivers past the debris in their windows, but I can tell that there's nothing of theirs left for me to take and burn. So, after all that I just . . . sit—a lone supernova shining on an eclipsed highway. I sit and lean my burning back into a sign just off the road.



Witch's House Color Key No.2 (Digital Art) // Connor Johnson

A murmuration

Vivianne Rumble

of repetition. Hurdling
together in sync, the curves
and bends of angles strike
the stormbound sky.
Sweeping streaks of ink blot the
permeated heaven, a movement
so careless and in tandem like pieces
of a puzzle. They don't need any direction,
an instinct and knowledge rooted into
their rustling wings, their beaks head fast
to unify. Their synchronization
is frames of time, a shuttered speed
of changing images with the sound of
the ruffling sea. A single chirp stirs
the flock against the collective batting of
feathers, dancing together
up and down, side to side, and swarming with
likeness to waves. Plague of locusts, school of fish;
they are just another set of creatures in the animal
kingdom coming together to become
shape-shifting clouds. A billowing
smoke of hundreds or thousands catching
the eye, noticing the giant ripple of attention drawn
up to the phantom spirit of the starlings. Their mask
of mysterious behavior is continuously
unknown as they soar through
apricot and lavender filled
sunsets.



Flown the Coop (Film Photography) // *Cole Alexander*

Meet the Staff

About Us

Ramifications is an arts and literary magazine. We showcase student talent through our publication and strive to reflect the Berry community through our selections. We have been publishing our magazine for over 50 years, including genres such as poetry, fiction, non-fiction, essays, musical compositions, drama, and all types of visual art.

Review Process

All submissions are compiled into one anonymous word document and given to staff members to vote on. Staff will vote on a scale of 1 to 5 and submit their scores to the Editor-in-Chief. From there, the Editor-in-Chief tallies the votes and presents them to the staff during a selection meeting. The highest voted pieces are discussed and final selections are made.

We are also supported by Sigma Tau Delta, English Honors Society.

We are honored and grateful for their help and support.



Editor's Note

It is wild to think that a period of my life has come to an end. What is even more wild is that I have already accepted this and am ready to walk across the stage to finalize it. Though, what I have accepted is being finished with all the courses and requirements. What I am still in the process of accepting is actually leaving the Berry environment. Here, I have my friends at my finger tips, as well as the overall Berry community. To be very honest, I would not be the same person I am today without having come to Berry college, and I think that can be said for all of us — for better or for worse. The ground here is soaked with my tears and the forests echos my laughs. Unimaginable growth has happened over these past four years in some places I least expected.

What I wanted for this issue was to emulate the feeling of memories. With my time at Berry coming to end, it felt only right to basically make a Ramifications journal to represent the array of emotions and experiences that happen when we are in college. My staff is who truly made this idea come to life with their baby pictures and found ephemera, as well as the amazing Berry artists whose work was used on the covers and the anonymous notes written by Berry students. At the end of the day, I hope this issue resonates with all who read it and that your emotions are validated in what you have experienced in college. I found some of my community here, but I know there will be so many more friends, places and experiences to come. I'm looking forward to that. With love <3

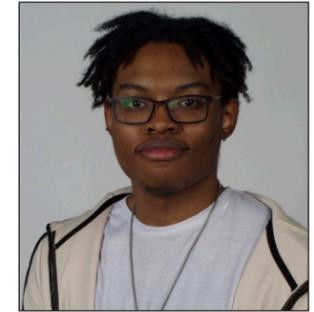
— *Grace Todd*



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Sigma Tau Delta members are denoted by an asterick next to their name

