The Open Field
Spring 2021 Edition

The Open Field is a literary magazine devoted to publishing poetry, prose, mixed-genre writing, and visual art by the undergraduate community at the University of Maine.

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Content Warning: Some of the work in this edition may contain distressing themes, such as suicide, self-harm, and drug/alcohol use.
The Open Field
Undergraduate Literary Magazine
Iris LeCates

For Ohio

there is a day of rain
that I remember
fleeting—
bikes taken from the
street so as not to become
lightning rods,
5 PM and the flickering
of streetlamps into
an orange sodium vapor glow,
bare feet on rocky ground.
a torrent of summer rain
sliding down the sloping
cul-de-sac and we dipped our
toes into curbside streams
like urban rivers,
we danced and shouted over
the rhythmic pounding
of water, and I never
felt rain that warm
again.
I think about things differently now that it’s him and not me it’s less fog than disease, and I wish to purge it from his body without carving it from his wrists but I see his face and his mouth make words and I wonder where my little brother went, why he doesn’t pick flowers for me anymore why he doesn’t make capes out of trash bags anymore why he doesn’t do anything but sit on the heater with a thermal blanket making a bubble around him like one of those parachutes from P.E. and I wonder if I didn’t love him enough or if I can squeeze his hands until his body is so close to mine that he’ll have to stay, or if doing that would just break his fingers. I thank the pills he took because before I got the overdue text that he’d overdosed on allergy meds I saw his arms, paler than mine, even, soft and torn and bleeding on the white bathroom floor because I forgot my razor at home just left it in the shower he uses behind the shampoo and Mom needed the new bathroom to be white and I saw white skin on white floor silhouetted by a red Mom never would’ve incorporated into her interior design, so I thank the pills because it was bloodless, because they were pumped from his stomach without complaint two days ago when Mom found him lying in bed and took him away before our brother could see so it wouldn’t be etched into his mind the way he looked half dead. I think about his depression as the way his eyes carve holes into his face, so sunken and hollow that I look at him and see only a candle unlit.
I wonder when you crawled from the dirt
in wildness from moments
I felt halved
standing in abandoned campgrounds beside
abandoned trains feeling as a vagabond
in the snow
or lost in lavender mornings in dewy fields
when my skin felt untouched ready for
wrong fingertips
of bodies unmoved by wind or sorrow
thinking they own all including the contents
of my chest
I spent capital of the blood and flesh scratching
the ankles of unnatural beings while
we sought
nevertheless to weather the loneliness of nature’s
arms until I could never sew us back
into one.
Elis had never feared rain—
only its coming.
From his father he’d learned to
taste the air,
to dissolve into the mists.

In his earliest memory, his father
kneels in the yard
eyes fixed on the mountains like heaven,
red Bible open to a page
the wind had chosen.

When his mother dies,
his father wanders in the trees
pleading with dirt for answers. Elis
decides the house has never been lighter, never
more likely to float away.

On a Tuesday his mother lounges
in the kitchen with the church ladies when
one of them asks about her marriage.
She huffs and nearly answers
before catching his eye in the crack of the door.

There is a house on the front of his
father’s newspaper, black and white, cross-hatched,
plain. His mother makes him walk into
town for a new copy when he spills her
pomegranate tea and it leaches into the pages.

That night he angers Morgan le Fay and
water cascades through the streets. The moon
draws back the tide, merciful. Magenta flowers bloom
in cobblestone cracks, winding up the walls of
every house in town.

By moonlight, the town is the color of
pomegranate.
Shania Soler

The Essay

Did you go to the party? I
Heard Brian was there. Mr. Marx is
Collecting the essays he assigned last
Week. Everyone
Was there. Even Sarah?
I’m so glad it’s almost break. Are you ready
For the game on Friday? The
Cheer team has to
Wear leg covers since it’s getting
So cold now. Mr. Marx is a joke.
Did you see the video? She’s
Actually showing her face. I
Just bought these sneakers.
Oh my God, look at her face! I
Didn’t know someone
Could drink that much. Dude,
I’m not ready for this Anatomy exam.
Gross!
Did you see the way she’s
Looking at
Him?
What a great night! That’s what
Brian said, too.
Hey Sarah, looking good.
I forgot about the Essay.
Neily Raymond

Self-Education #1: Love

You’re a fisherman. Wouldn’t you risk your life for the ocean, the palate unbound, the slip-billowed gullet?

Wouldn’t you impale yourself through the gut on its tooth, a reef or some shredding cliff to save its dignity?

The captain goes down with her ship, and the water is proud to digest her. Maybe you’re a horse, and you die on the racetrack, bolted in the face—you shudder in the dirt, giddy. You’re a girl, clutching a tube of mace, and you dream of attack just to glorify that magic tube. You’re a mailbox that throws before snowplows. You’re a match that wants scratching, head up in flames. You’re a writer who can’t write quite right, who misfires and vibrates with desire and disgust. You’re a
cat on a skyscraper
ledge, kissing the air.
Or you’re a pencil
infatuated
with the sharpener.

You’re a warrior
on your knees while
war items tick past, lit
with a puzzled smile,
frozen, caressing

your clean sleeves—you’d kill
to kneel here forever
and commemorate
in verse the long limbs,
flattened grass. You’re a

chickadee rushing
wing-first into that
luscious apparition
of a chickadee
in the window-glass.
Self-Education #3: Nature in the Home

It’s not pin-pointable, spongy or green
or bark-bound or crepuscular or gap-gawed.
Not always oily (butter-dish) or potted
(spider-plant) or moist (frog-fingers through the screen).
It’s not big-breasted Nature with her priestess
hair, a blue-billed scaup hoisted atop,
or mallow-rooting hog or mellow bog
or that ripe-gummed dream—you lose your teeth.

It mosses in the corridor, avoidable.

No one’s home to greet you as you walk in,
the cat drops teeth that glitter in the food bowl—
when you’re not talking to yourself, you’re talking,
little wild type, to the wrong people.

It mosses in the corridor, avoidable.
Zoe Karpman

Because We Can’t Always Send Ourselves

Blue and green
Skies and unkempt fields

We feel a breeze as the grass plays a game
Who can push the furthest from the roots?

The dandelions win, as they’re picked up
With a head start given by children hoping for wishes

Parents squawk that this won’t make dreams come true
“Weeds will mess up my garden.

Please don’t send them towards my flowers.”
The fluff dances between the ground and the sky.

They’re almost clouds.

Except
tangible
simpler
gone too soon
better.

We can touch the dandelions
And send them towards the limitless stars.
The Siren

She lives below the nearest cliff
Abandoning everything bleak and stiff.
It’s there she learns of simple joys.
What once controlled, she now destroys.

Goodbye to structure’s rigid pain—
It won’t be caging her again.
And let there be a brighter day
Once all other voices are cast away.

She won’t be judged by whom she loves,
Nor once for faith (or lack thereof).
Amidst the birds and bugs and fish,
She has naught, but one final wish:

That everyone could find their peace
And rage could end and strife could cease.
A naive dream that becomes real if
You join her below the nearest cliff.
Of Calcium and Marrow

After Mackenzie Coakley’s “Lucid”

What would she be, if not this?

Clicks and pricks of cracking bones
And nerves that are so easy to touch upon

Masquerading as a person

The joints and ribs
and collarbones and vertebrae
and femurs and phalanges

All seem to align for her to exist.
Existing doesn’t make the body her

The skeleton is one among many
Repeated patterns and blueprints that
Never figured out how to function right

Why does this one’s designation
Determine the rules of being alive?

As the skeleton walks in a line between boxes,
The doors to both sides seem locked shut.
Avery Maietta

*Something Lighter*

the last one was sadder than i thought
i’d hate for that to be all i brought
i don't wanna be too sad a writer
this time i'll write something lighter

a friend and i got matching candles
he made us matching swords with matching handles
so i’ll make some words that sound brighter
do i want matches or a zippo lighter?

yeah, i’ll write something nice
about video games, or neowise
this weekend i’ll take a brain-reset-all-nighter
and write for waterfowl while the day gets lighter
Camerin M. Seigars

Lost in the morning
(a sestina)

Waking in the morning
Making coffee for the day
Shaking all about the room
Cracking rays of light
Marking another man
Walking into chaos again

Morning jitters again
Caffeine in the morning
Easing another man
Easing into every day
Bright windows full of light
Illuminating the room

Pacing about the room
Mind racing yet again
Searching for the light
Cursing the morning
Dreading the coming day
Running from fellow man

Thoughts engulfing man
Spiraling in the room
Choking on the day
Smothered all over again
Screaming in the morning
Losing sight of the light

Eyes watery in the light
Emotion bursting the man
Collapsing this morning
Shrouded in the room
Confusion yet again
Fog lifting for the day
Leading into a new day
Lifted up by the light
Only to be let down again
Stabbing remarks of man
Filling the entire room
What will end this morning

Drifting again this day
Stumbling morning of light
Baffled man in the room
Arend Thibodeau

For One Love

A one-sided effort
put forth to ensure that
a semblance remains

A scrap,

a vague remnant

of what once was. Vainly
searching memories for
reason.

An explanation
why things got
off track

The doors slam shut
after I will them open

I question

how much can be endured
for one love
Paranoid

They’re keeping a list
I know it is true
They write about me
and all that I do

The list it is there
so that all may see
and so all can scheme
of grand plots for me

They are keeping notes
Each time I transgress
The way that I speak
and the way I dress

They’re keeping a list
I know it is true
I’m exiled in place
They keep me from you
April Messier

*make your body an ear*

a crying,
a dream with poison and
a fearful clinging to breath.

a waking,
and a full feeling of
*is this a life? and what is it?*

(squinting up at branches and sky swaying
between chipped paint window panes)

and I know that I’ve felt this many times,
each is a jolt-- heavy limbs sink
into a fresh variation
of my flesh, my being--
floating me into my day
of newborn skin and eyes
untouched by views

then the gradual fading of the clear,
warm, stifling patterns.
how to fill the hours in a way
that staves off--
the silence, the stillness,
that invites the venomous snakes to bite
down and opens up my pushed back--
breath, getting faster and heart
beating, if only I could listen.

to the blood pump,
the lung language, the whisper
of you are okay and
things will unfold
In tune

I’ll look back on these days with such fondness and recall, when I’ve grown weaker and wiser, how my body was July-strong and sun kissed.

Years from now, sitting in stillness, I’ll close my eyes and perhaps shed a tear, remembering what it was like to witness life weaving its way through the nowness.

Sunflowers sparkling with dew, crystal clear. Cool earth home in the furrows, the coziness between rows of corn, sweet lucidness of the first raw mouthfuls, near perfectly ripe. Intertwined instantness of all — from seed, to plant, to fruit — effortless. Each and all has its place, nothing to fear.

I plunge my hands in the soil, the dampness cooling my fingers, dirty and calloused. An equation of life and being together cohere. Nothing can stop me from feeling such fullness, undeniably certain that someday I’ll miss this.

“Memory comes taunting
You pick these things apart, they're not that appealing
You put them together and you'll get a certain feeling
That summer feeling is gonna haunt you one day in your life”

-Jonathan Richman
The News is on TV

I choke on my darling,
Darjeeling, attempting to soothe
My red withering throat.

The blue eyes, monotone
In an Armani suit; he stretches
Life in a 30 second snippet.

My body on the recliner—
A candle tipped and dripping
Wax, spilling puddles on the carpet.

The shag, my one and only
Confidant of this night,
Bouncing off my writhing.

My heels curl up, inwards
Against my bum, a feral
Imitation of the fetus.

The manufactured sounds, pounding,
Echoing in the halls, penetrating,
With a heavy-handed urgency.

My lips warbling your name
Between stuttered breaths, hissing
In the blue light of the television.

The particulars bombarding my eyes,
Head and breast, mixing,
And spilling down my body.

I can hold myself
No longer, your glass face
Beckoning, like a preacher
Hunched over, I reach out with my palms—

Before my fingertips can brush,
Your cheeks fade; the limelight
Pulled away, replaced by dead air.
Suzie Milkowich

*Getting To Know Myself Again.*

Getting to know myself again  
The mask is off and the used makeup cloths are all over the floor  
I am climbing, crawling on my hands and my knees up those spiral carpeted stairs.  
I’m tired, no I’m exhausted.

This tired old circus poodle refuses to jump through those hoops any more  
I need to...take care, take it easy  
People been telling me these powerful phrases all my life  
And I have given this advice to many.

Now I am reclaiming my own instinct  
Not what everyone thinks I should do, wear, eat  
Not what they want  
What do I want?  
What do I need?  
What color will I paint my fence?

My eggs been cracked  
And so was my windshield  
I can see again

Hot Pink!
E.W. Grey

What I would have liked to tell you

did you know that i started school as a history major?
and then english and philosophy, and then english
and anthropology, and then english and folklore.
i would have liked to keep the anthropology major,
but i’m afraid of getting it wrong. i’m afraid of breaking things,
like pots and bones. i’m afraid of bones and dirt and heights and
the swimming pool at night and public transport
and getting things wrong.
the first time i took the bus alone i got things wrong.
i didn’t know that you have to pull the cord for the bus driver
to stop, i thought the stops were scheduled. i ended up two towns over.
i ended up at one of those indie coffee shops. i ordered a drink that tasted
like dirt. i’m a little afraid of dirt, but mostly because of the bugs. i guess the
dirt is fine. it is brown with some green, and those are my favourite colours,
you know. you should know, i should have told you, but you
never asked.
Born anew

were you born of the springtime earth?
uncovered from your bed of moss
in a forest of your own making—
winter's frost melting at your arrival
as the birds return to lay their eyes upon your waking form;
their song a morning prayer to the divinity they see
as you dress in your gown of rue and bay,
and adorn yourself in a crown of sage.
the forest finds itself born anew
along with you
Jacqui Weaver

*His Ultimate Demise*

For he who has puppetered
Let there be no more strings
Let his hands be empty
Let his hands be sawed off.

For he who has seized my neck
Let someone else seize his neck
Let him beg to be released
Let his neck twist until it rots.

For he who has continuously lied
Let his tongue be ripped out
Let his teeth be plucked to none
Let his mouth be sewn with red thread.

For he who has no remorse
Let him cower before me
Let him beg for my forgiveness
Let him cry in pain for all eternity.
John E. Burnell

Where I am At

I’m waiting
Sitting in some chair
Seeing the people of the past
They’re passing,
Bye

Scenes too pass
Trotting through the field of vision
And I breathe in the past
Exhale what’s to come

It passed along
But didn’t come to shore
Are you sure that it’ll come by?
The flesh keeps dripping
I keep sweating
We keep chatting

A prized possession
Or some primed rib
A capitalist’s obsession
A hypnotist’s luxurious wheel
But where to find it
And who to be
What place to sit
Where to seat myself

Oh, that future saga
Fantasy fiasco
Me, a glistening sapling
Being a fully matured hatchling
Gliding by with a gilded swaying of joy
Serendipity keen with my fate enwrapped around the knuckles
Each day enshrouded by a blissful sheen
It’s a labor of love
To keep walking in this body
The future, my hopeless corset
The past, a rucksack
It was set a bit heavy and so I’ve heaved it over my bony back

One step forward, two back
Turned around, swirled a bit
And left for the right
untitled

Fragmented visions
Past future present decisions
Pupils dilate & heart palpitates blinded by a lapse of luxury
Mornings defined by how many curtains drawn
By how much bread leavened
Or stairs ascended
How many slices of the self actualized
How much cheese grated
How many leaves raked
How many lies told
Or bones broken
How am I
Doing?
In the Midst

The past rumble
Came to be
Fell into the predicted mold
And molded over
I’m walking over and over
Again, I’m reminded
The two are not connected
Despite what we’ve been told
The yellow of the pencil, deceiving
What made you smile today?

It’s consistently been about tearing myself into pieces
Those that fit between chopsticks
Put on the tongue, not a tough chew
Consuming myself while I consume me

Lilacs dead, exposed iliac now
Fear of lack, rot fruited, putrid flesh
Barracks on a slope, not reached yet
The clock’s quadrants, constraint
Socially, restrained
Past self advice epically applicable

I’m standing in the midst
Not a second has passed
I haven’t majorly changed
Get it now?
That’s the gist.
Chris Weber

Falling Down in the Woods on a Drunken Evening
Parody of Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

Whose woods these are I do not know.
I think this is my all-time low.
I should have only stuck to beer
‘cuz now I’m laying in the snow

But it’s alright, I’m in the clear
I made friends with a baby deer
We smoked some weed, and fought a snake
And then we stole a chandelier

I cut him off, my man was baked
We went to town to get milkshakes
I asked him if deer counted sheep
He said, “fuck no, we masturbate.”

The woods have taught me, fuck those sheep.
They never promised me good sleep.
Now I jerk off in Bambi sheets.
Now I jerk off in Bambi sheets.
Dakota Hutchins

The Day a Virus Controlled the World

After “The Day Lady Died” by Frank O’Hara

It is 4:01 in Fairfield (Maine not Connecticut) a Monday exactly five days since we were told that school was shutting down, yes it is 2020 and I am imprisoned in my own home because of the Corona Virus and at 4:27 I go outside play hacky sack with my siblings which incredibly boosts moral until my sister and I go inside at 5:00 to work out because working out helps me keep my sanity

I have taken lots of walks even in the gray cold March making sure to get out and move since you can only pace so much in your house

We wave and say hello to the two ladies on their porch (one with a cigarette and the other a patched smile) the one on the left comments on how she has seen a lot of families being together outside because of this and I think that maybe that is an upside or the chance of one for families to reconnect or become more intolerable of each other I suppose it is up to them and I realize that this may be the longest time my family has altogether for a while

and for my mama I just stroll down to the Circle K gas station and ask for some whole milk and then I walk back up the hill to my house but stop by the bakery and casually ask for a donut and a raspberry square because that’s my papa’s favorite

and I am crying by now and thinking of sitting at a wooden table in the West Market Square café while my friends laugh over a game of Catan and everyone smiles as the barista takes our picture
Are We Human? Or Are We Dancer?

The world up four stories
  Only the tops of the trees are seen
  And in this heightened world they perform
Branches curve gracefully
  Arms outstretched they sweep the sky

Hardwood maples have their costumes
  Brilliant reds and golds
  Individual pieces all stitched together
  Shifting separately, moving freely
  Their bodies a form of lyric

Soft spoken pines wear no flashy clothes
  Simply green velvet dress instead
  Their arms lift in a wide U
  Their bodies gently twist
  A modern form of movement—simple lines and strength

Rain joins in
  Ra ta ta ta ta
     Ra ta ta
  Ra ta ta ta
        Ta

The trees still to listen and watch
  The rain’s routine
As they paradiddle
   Upon metal roofs

In this high top stage it seems
   That in nature’s beings
   The original performers are found
   The best dancers of humankind
   Are only an imitation

Of the lines drawn by a divine hand
"Raw Dough"

Start with the eldest child
Add a gender—female
Add expectation upon expectation
  For body
  For grades
Add financial need
Add perfectionism
Mix

Let her sit
For sixteen years
To rise

When she has
Risen just enough
Punch down

The whole structure
Is different
Such as
When a broken bone heals
Even if it was set perfectly
Hairline cracks exist
And if not set
Correctly
It is forever
changed

Knead until it is elastic
The rules and expectations
Don’t matter much anymore
The break changes things

Much as the reaction
Of yeast and gluten
Transforms dough
To its completion
The dough was delicious
But it was always
Meant to be
Bread
Paige McHatten

purple house

i live in a purple house
our dinnertime conversations marked by red and blue
frequent were disagreements
but underneath the conflict
was civility.

four years ago,
i remember begging my father
not to cast his vote
for someone he wouldn’t
allow me in a room alone with.
he held me in our purple house
the morning i discovered my worst fears had come true.

for four years i’ve lived in fear
as i stepped out of the safety of violet
and entered the unrest of crimson
i counted my steps in vacant hallways
plotting where i would hide
if the sound of gunshots bounced off the chalkboards
if i became yet another victim
of a nation that protected its own trivial interests
rather than its future.

for four years i’ve lived in fear
i watched as the ill became illegitimate
i watched as science became science fiction,
and fiction became alternative facts.
i watched as the milestones my predecessors fought for
seemed to be erased in the name of a greater america
i watched as brown children were forced into cages,
i watched as black lives who fought for justice
were labeled as thugs,
yet those who attempted to destroy our democracy
were loved.
four years living in fear.
but today,
in my purple house,
crying tears of blue, alongside my mother
her beating red heart
today: the end of my fear,
the beginning of my hope.
Samantha Sudol

Unwritten Colors

There are days smoldered in hues of blue
Darkness dancing across the room
Drowning the sun
Thoughts are whirring, then grazing, gone
Hope is full, then fading, wrong

Mumbles, voices, whispers
Words lost
Thoughts unwritten
Stop, and listen

Revel in the glittering spring morning,
Bees buzzing
Red, yellow, and violet kites soaring
Through a cotton candy breeze

Rave in the ominous autumn night,
Ghosts dancing
The full moon shining with delight
In the haunting song of the loon

When the pen runs out of ink
And there is nothing left to say
Pick a new color
Let the words rain
Katelyn Gilcrease

Inequity of Reason

All we have is knowledge of precious self-destruction, yet the brilliance is so immense that I feel that I’m just beginning to embrace it. Through Gale, Deluge, and a taste of Radiation we have finally begun to live. I sat brooding the known world that had come so close to vast obscurity and wandered shadowed beaches cloaked in reminders that we had once existed there. When will we kill our mistakes and salvage what has died, before vast nothingness finally consumes us? When will we heed the mantra screamed into our ears and thrust upon our eyes day by day? Our sins, I fear, will only surface once The Four Horsemen have siphoned our souls and engulfed the earth leaving behind nothing but the things we had once claimed to love.
Katherine Scott

Together

You are the way gasoline and coffee grounds smell at sunrise
a bottle of ocean mist and rose hips cling to the nape of your neck
and the daylight turns your eyes into golden flames that burn my lungs.

I am a winter hike in the morning; crisp, quiet, melting slowly in your arms
a view from roaring cabin fireplace, ash among an afternoon snowfall
and the words of an old bookshelf engraved along your walls.

We are a decade of conversation in an immediate gratification world
a valley traversed together, a hand-built home with no recipe
and the foundation sits with us, settling and shifting all at once, throughout life itself.
Sensations of Suburbia

Warm fresh bread with rosemary garlic insides
and a crisp crust that crackles under soft palms.

Clipped grass with morning dew
aerated by a humming gasoline mower
each green blade strewn like petals at a wedding.

My mother’s hug and whisper you’re home
after a year of existing over calls and texts,
an emptiness still in my arms.

The silence of old library stacks
stretching to the ceiling
with worn spines and relaxed pages
elegantly yellowed at the tips.

Cafes with music at the right decibel
drowning out the hungrier crowd
to hear only pen on paper scribble
and piano-key bliss.

Basil picked from a secret garden
lush soil serenaded
courtesy of nearby birds
on a bright, cloudless day.

A hushed crowd under dimmed lights
dawning suits and gowns, opera house red velvet
envelops us in cultured cabernet notes
and insomnia coffee tannins.

The way my grandmother smiles
as she clutches our shoulders in pictures
with a strength I can only hope to grow.

Waking up to warmth from window panes
pressed ground coffee and pancakes waft
while walking down the stairs
shaking out a Sunday slumber.
Dear Grandma

I hope the flowers are blooming bright enough for you to feel like sunlight is still there after the moon rises.

When it rains do the gardens run and turn the road brown like the coffee you drink at your church group?

The sky here is gray and it reminds me of your hair and how I do not visit enough and I am sorry.
Marla Tanous

“A Midnight Dance”

In the pale moonlight
The pond glistens and glitters
Crystals of ice form across
   Its surface

As the wind whispers
   Ever so softly
It coaxes its reach towards
   Every living soul

And one soul in particular
   Found itself
Tempted by the ice
   And the wind

Beneath the glimmering stars
It glided across the ice
Dancing what would be
   Its grandest dance
   As well as
   Its last

In the pale moonlight
   An echo forms
The twinkling of ice
   And then
   Silence
“Time & Tide”

Time heals all wounds
   But what if
You can’t help,
   But pick at the scab

   Once
   Twice
You watch as the clock goes round
   But as we all know
It’s just a circle
And you end right where you started

   So stop watching the clock
   Find a band-aid
And get the closure you need.

There are plenty of fish in the sea
   But what if
The spot where you fish
   Only has sharks and eels

   Here’s a secret:
   It’s okay to get up
And find a new spot to fish
   So cast another line and
Get the net ready.
“Do You See?”

What do you see
When you look
At me?

Do you see
That I am not quite
Black or White?

Do you see
That I am not blonde
With curls as dark as
Mud?

Do you see
that I do not have
Round eyes
Full like the moon?

Do you see
That I do not have
Fair hair covering
My arms?
For I am cursed
With
This dirt colored
Hair

Do you see
That I do not have
Thin arched brows?
That mine could be mistaken
For caterpillars?

Do you see
That I do not have
a button nose?
A Spartan would be envious
Of mine
Do you see
That I do not have
Petite arms?
Gankly & awkward
They stretch for miles

Do you see
Me?

Because I’ll tell you
What I see

My olive skin is kissed
By the sunlight

My curls are not dirt
But the darkest chocolate
Rich and sweet

These almond eyes speak volumes
Mysterious,
Yet
Inviting

My dark arm hair
Has taught me
To walk with
Confident

My brows are strong and expressive
In the way
Blondes aren’t
(And guess what? They’re trending)

My nose is like a Roman’s
But that makes me
Strong, Powerful
A Warrior
These arms reach
   For the sky
   Up to the Lord

I do not need you
   To see
   Me

   Why?

Because I see Me
   And
   Beauty
   Is in the eye
   of the
   Beholder
Liron D. Estrach

A Captain’s Oath

I have roamed with sails full-bellied
And all the lead and cannons readied.
Ne’er as often have their spirits broken
As we have taken our victory token.

But in the last heat of battle’s pain
When the mast fell on a leaking prow
My crew I faced to fearlessly exclaim,
“I will not part with my sacred vow!”

And bound forever to the deep
Unburdened from my earthly ties
I listen to the silent ocean drum
deaf to their triumphant cries.

I lie, ever smiling at the sun;
For a free man never dies.
“Zeus! A spirit of too bloat’d worth!
Surely fumes stained with hated shades,
Who, to creatures of mortal Earth
Blare allegiance to pride soaked braids,
Wrap and embalm thy ruthless frame!
Still beams of anger ring about thy throne
Who to my poor tract wildly came,
And confined me to prison of dim tone:
But lessen their dire, piercing, slash,
Which in floods of moanful depth fell,
And abused my flesh in one dense splash!
Since I too have, as my mind can tell,
Man-like pity and life filled breaths,
A heart who owns loving passions
And a soul who still evades deaths
Dark shadow: here dense emotions
And imaginative strains leak
From my beaten and trodden brain,
Which thou wouldst still desire to speak
Of, to all divine gods, in cruel vain!

But cover now thy blue spacious skies,
Zeus, as I still uprightly thrive,
And not suffer fully that demise,
Which thou didst swiftly contrive:
To bolster now that tasteless pride,
Which swallows that title of thine,
No god should see who thou didst chide
Too harshly, but lives with mirth divine!
And when that thick blanket is laid,
Over thy heavens startling length,
My youthful visage shall not shade
Thy thoughts with horrors of strength
Robust: I shall not (longer) pierce thy sight!
Thus soothing the ills thou didst capture
When thy vision to rule, in height
Too severe, succumbed to a rapture!

Yes, Yes! Fleshly pain may still bind
And taint my beautiful days,
But imagination from my mind,
Entwined with purest love, still blaze
And eagerly sere the heavy gloom:
By desiring to bear what upholds
Thy identity, and any plume
Of gaiety far better for our molds,
When ailments assault the mort’l flesh,
Than breaking to this Earthly sorrow:
Which thus forces thy frame to not mesh
With any misery arrow,
Which may gnaw thy gaieties?
I know I still behold what dearly
Costumes me in mirthful deities:
Thus thy girding chains harm not me!

Those gowns of fire who casted hope-
Whose flakes did parade in thy hall
Still drenched in layers of gold, broad in scope-
By my merit dripping palm did fall
To abused and forgotten spheres,
Which signaled by their dim shawl
Like skies, which shed nauseous fears,
That they contained mortal life:
Thus I spared them from brutal harm,
Which often presented much strife,
And licensed their tracts gaudy charm!

Thus, Zeus, though I be costumed here
In thick silver rings designed for pain,
My idea of fire for each sphere
Cannot be wrapped in one tight strain
Of metallic wire, and pushed abroad:
It is not limited to (only) one man
And one verdant region of sod,
Each soul who (now) frightens bleak death can
Bear this philosophical load
And drip it upon barren lands,
Which cowered when thy grasp sowed
Sharp terror in too broad of brands.”
Visual Art
“The Glowing Maiden”

Haid Tanous
“Varda”

Haid Tanous
“Corner Table Still Life”

Donald Patten
“Fruit Bowl Still Life”
Donald Patten

“Pears on a Striped Surface”
Donald Patten
Fiction
It smelled of sunflower and gooseberries. Her touch was warm, her kisses sweet. “My brave soldier,” she whispered. “My knight.”

I smiled at her. The grass beneath us was soft, and the sky above was blue. “Tell me of your stories,” she said. “Tell me how brave you have been.”

I told her stories, but most were a lie—I had never fought a dragon, or slain a troll. Only men.

And I was too ashamed to tell her of those. “Tell me,” she asked softly, “is it bad?”

I swallowed, thinking of my brothers, of the mud and blood, and the fever that had taken most. “Yes,” I said. “It is.”

The sky darkened, and I shivered. “Then why won’t you come home?” she asked. “Because—”

She blurred to smoke, and her warmth was gone. I huddled against the mud wall, my rifle beside me. Someone was gently kicking me awake, as gently as he was able to. “Wake up, soldier. The war isn’t over yet.”
Bad Apples

The streetlights were turning on just as Jonny made his rounds. From the radio came a voice like crumbling newspapers. A white vehicle moving south, followed by the passengers’ descriptions.

He was supposed to go on break soon, but just then a white BMW passed him. He turned the signal without thinking and followed the vehicle until it stopped. He was always suspicious of nice cars in neighbourhoods like these. He had a knack for this, an instinct.

When he was close enough to see the driver through the side mirror he gave his response, “Zero-two-zero-one, this is Walker. Responding to call. Running a code nine on a white BMW at Fifth and Central, matching description.”

“This is Brent, proceed on code zero, suspect might be armed.”

Excitement leaped up inside him. Armed. And there he thought something good would never happen. He swallowed. “Copy.”

This is it, Jonny thought. This is what he had trained for. He was going to get that bastard. Some bad guy with a gun. Some drug dealer. If he caught him, there would probably be a bigger fish, a bigger investigation like in one of those movies he had watched when he was a kid. Bang-bang—he’d take on the Cartel all by himself; chase them across the border back to where they belong. Nothing to stop a bad guy but a good guy with a gun. This was his chance. Maybe he’d even make detective.

He stepped out of his car, his hand ready on his hip. On his Glock 22. He undid the holster, just in case. You never know with these criminals. They are unpredictable.

The window to the car was down and he saw the man in the driver’s seat. A black male in his thirties, a black female ion the passenger’s seat. He bent forward carefully.

“Can I help you, Officer? Did I do something wrong?”

Jonny didn’t like the tone in the man’s voice, there seemed something fake in it, something nervous. He peered at the young woman, her face was tight like a raisin. They must be hiding something, he thought. Drugs, probably.

“License and registration please,” Jonny said.
The man fumbled nervously through his back pocket. For a moment Jonny’s hand was a vice around his gun. He was both relieved and disappointed when the man only produced a wallet and handed over his license. Terry Brown was his name.

“Uhm… Officer?” Terry said.

“Something wrong?” Jonny asked, caressing his gun with the palm of his hand.

“Well, sir. Yes, I… I’ve got to tell you… there… there’s a firearm in the car.”

“Okay, then don’t reach for it.”

“I’m not,” Terry said, yet he was moving.

Fear struck Jonny. This was dangerous. But then he also felt exhilarated by the idea that it really was dangerous. Ever since he was a boy he hoped something like this would happen, that it would be more like the movies. Finally something good would happen. Something exciting. Jonny felt his blood pumping right through to his ears. Suddenly he was like Martin Riggs in “Lethal Weapon.” This was what he signed up for, why he wore a badge. Action. Like in the movies. Pictures of police shootouts flashed before him. Him taking out a band of thugs. Bang-bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Confidently, Jonny moved a step away from the car, his gun half liberated from its holster. “Hey, don’t do anything stupid!”

“He’s not!” cried the girl on the passenger seat.

“I’m not!”

“I said, don’t reach for it!” Jonny warned, though secretly he hoped Terry would ignore his advice.

“I’m not!” Terry said hastily, but his hand was moving. Moving somewhere. To his gun, Jonny was willing to bet.

“Hey, don’t fucking move!”

Yes, this was it. This was his moment! Taking down the bad guy. There’ll be a big case coming from this. Some human trafficking ring he would stop and then be a hero. A good guy.

Terry was still, trembling, yet Jonny was sure of his motion, that he was reaching for the gun. The girl was crying, shrieking, “He’s not! He’s—”

Bang-bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Jonny didn’t even feel the recoil of his gun when he pulled the trigger. The girl cried out, her hands reaching for Terry—reaching for the gun.
“DON’T PULL IT OUT!!!” Jonny screamed. His heart was pounding, his breath heavy as rocks.

At his booming voice the girl recoiled against the door of her car, and wailed, “Oh my God! Oh my God! Officer, you… you just killed my boyfriend! Oh God no, please!”

“I said, don’t fucking move!”

Like in the movies, Jonny thought wildly, just like in the movies! He felt so powerful, invincible, untouchable, unbeatable… He was Harry Callahan, Frank Serpico and Ben Shockley. He was a hero. A badass.

With numb fingers he reached for the radio scanner on his shoulder, “Code three! Armed suspect down. Fuck! I repeat, armed suspect down! We need a ten-fifty-two immediately.” He was shaking, and his gun was unsteady in his hand, his knuckles white. “Holy fuck! Holy fuck!”

“Ten-fifty-two is en route. Dispatching additional units.”

“C–copy,” he panted.

Terry’s eyes were open, staring blankly through him. The man’s chest was red and wet. He heard a baby cry in the back of the car. The girl on the passenger seat had tears rolling down her cheeks.

Jonny reached down to Terry’s hand, for the gun. But there was no gun, only insurance papers, splattered with red. This wasn’t like the movies at all, he realised. Only the sound was the same.

Bang-Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!
Acting for so long, as I had done (the result of the dreams of another man), I had come to think of it as my dull little profession, my immurement, my sentence for pursuing the arts and the general, varied acts of cowardice I had committed over the years to excuse myself from the stultifying mundanities that I believed fully were not only inimical to myself as an artist but were a type of tyranny created solely for the purpose of destroying me and molding my reanimated corpse into the image of God the Father (the American one, the one that rises and rests within the machine, turns this way and that only insomuch as his boss allows, breathes on command, listens to his wife, pets his children, eats with gusto, cannot remember childhood, a demiurge, or that stray thought he once had that let him know he was immortal).

The interviewer asked, “Why here?” Lenses, cameras, grips, producers, technicians all awaited my answer. My vocalizations would be televised in the States and in Britain, seen online all over the world. The man who pretends to be many men is retiring. The man who is pleasant to look at, with both a softness and a roughness to him. The man who is envied, ruminated on for hours by children and adults alike imagining they were him or could be him. The strut, the gait, the turn of the mouth that is like a sneer, like a playful grin; the way he moves about with such ease, such grace, the world making way for him. I could answer, “Why not?,” though Prague is a strange place to demand an interview and requires further explanation. How pretentious, how grandiose. Who does this guy think he is? Many men, endless emanations. For every scene rehearsed, a new character is erected out of the ashes of so many other characters who were too maladroit or fragile to stand on two legs and exist in three-dimensional space with the forcefulness of others. So many names. What got you into acting? This teacher, that, a story my mother once told about how her grandmother would be a different person every day and so remained happy for never tiring of herself, the way I recited a line from a sitcom and made the girls in class laugh. All lies. The truth? All of them and none, the cavern that I was building for myself in the deepening night of another winter, the solemnity of open faces, the inability to know myself, reading of the traveling Yiddish troupes in the diaries of Franz Kafka. Reading of rumored Kabbalistic rituals, reading of Max Brod, of Kafka’s odd but honest—startlingly honest, incisive—descriptions of people, his encounters, his family, his dreams. What specificity. What
imagination. And so I am now in the Theological Hall, obscure volumes surrounding me, shelves and shelves of mental states, expansive passageways and portals. I fell into Kafka’s dull little book once, twice, three times over the past week. I mean this literally. This is what I came to tell the interviewer, this remarkable instance, and to pull it off again.

“Why now?” he asked. I said, “When you get to the end of the song, you stop dancing. You don’t ask why.” I had no idea why I said this. Sweat formed on my brow, causing a chill to ripple through my craven self. I could not remember now if I had literally fallen into the book or if I had mistaken a reverie for the actual.

The interview ended abruptly, for there was an argument that had escalated into violence out in the hallway. A new interview was scheduled for the following week, cancelled again just as it started because of one of the grips having a heart attack. This went on, interruptions and cancellations, postponements of one kind or another, for an entire year. I feared I was in the daydream of another man. Finally, twelve months and an unknown amount of rescheduling later, the interview commenced. Halfway through, I decided to interrupt it myself. I stood up and went to a book at random. It dropped on the carpet of the immense library, echoing. There were murmurs from the assembled. The book laid open, astride the left page a creature unfurled a prodigious, serpentine mouth with vivid red tongue. Dancing on the tongue in agony were naked men, their heads and limbs contorting from the infernal pain. Resting upon the edge of the tongue was a bed, to which I could rest, start this life again, forget I had done this before, achieve the illusory sense of self again, only to lose it again. The interviewer cleared his throat.

When I stepped onto the page, my foot sunk in only slightly, as if stepping into a very shallow pool of water. The supernatural mechanism at play I had yet to understand, knew intuitively that any witness would think the rubber of my boot disappearing as it had was a kind of optical illusion, and indeed they would be correct in this analysis, so to speak, for that which is not provable must be deemed illusory for all ordered minds to go in living in orderliness, ordinariness. I did not speak, did not move, only exerted force onto my foot to make it go in further.

A faint hissing noise from the lights, the warmth of them, added to my sense of impending infernal torture, like the image before me. I would not have chosen this picture, wondered if it had chosen me. The creature stared at me, mouth open, which I was certain had grown at least a quarter of an inch since my boot had been placed atop it.
The interviewer came up behind me, dawdling, reticent. He slipped a hand into the pocket of his trousers, took it out. He smelled of shaving cream, restless nights. He asked if I was all right. I pulled my boot level with the floor and assured him that I was fine, in a matter of speaking. He asked if I would like to continue. I peered again at the bed in the picture. There was both a softness and a roughness to it. I knew that the rest which I sought would be brief, ephemeral. I knew too that there was no torturous element in the bed, as I had previously surmised. I knew also that the cycle would start over if I were to simply will this to be the reality of things. I could taste the choice of human significance even as I bent down and closed the book.
“Your wife has passed away,” the officer watches me with large, dark brown orbs. The fine hairs on the back of my neck and arms stand on end as all sound around me fades to a high-pitched ringing. His fat lips continue to move but no sound travels to my ears.

The cigarette that was dangling from between my lips takes its final leap and falls to the ground below. My eyes follow its path, watching as the black ashes speckle the off-tan sidewalk. Smoke curls above it, swept away by a breeze.

“Mr. Evette? Sir,” his hand enters my vision, drawing my gaze from the dying poison on the sidewalk. Why is he here? Something about my wife; about Michaela. Did something happen to her?

Passed away

What does he mean by that? Passed away as in died? Michaela died? But that doesn’t make sense. She’s at home, probably in the kitchen looking out the window above the sink; her hair will be up in a high ponytail. The light from the sun will catch on the strands the way it usually does, making them look like black silk.

If she isn’t there, she’ll be in the living room, sitting in the wooden rocker she received as a gift from her mother back in Hong-Kong, showcasing intricate designs of Chinese mandalas carved over the back of it on both sides and on the armrests. She’d always run her fingers over the carvings. We’d situated the chair right beside the window that looks out onto our front yard. Sometimes, I’ll see her small features in the glass pane. I’ll wave, but she won’t respond to it. She never does.

If she’s not there, the officer probably didn’t check our room. Michaela likes to sit up there from time to time. She says that even though it’s the same front yard, the same driveway, the same sidewalk, and the same nosey neighbors across the street, the view changes with the height. But she would be there,

Looking out the window.

A chill sweeps over my body, realization wrapping every thin, bony finger around my body. I knock the officer’s hand away before digging into the navy-blue pocket of my suit pants. One cigarette left. I’ll have to run to the gas station tonight.
“Let me guess,” I say, eyes traveling down to the metal badge that catches in the light like my wife’s earrings. “Officer Rogan,” I place the end of the fresh poison between my lips. My hand trembles as I grab the lighter, the small object weighing like a brick in my pocket. Cool metal burns my skin like the flame that catches on the cigarette. One attempt. Two attempts. Third time’s the charm and the click echoes like an eerie turn between us. I take in a long pull and blow out the smoke with little care of the direction it goes in. The officer bats in front of his face, nose crinkling at the white smoke. He bites his tongue, swallowing any remark he has as I say, “The neighbor found her hanging in the window?”

~

“Where is it?” I pat down the pockets of my black suit pants. My friend, Austin, had gotten the suit for me this past week, insistent on my attendance at the funeral no matter my protests or wants. Now, here I was, left on my own while he was off dealing with the other grieving guests.

Just as I thought it would be, the funeral had been as silent as the house when I’d entered it after my meeting with Officer Rogan. Even with all the condolences, the speeches, the crying, it was just quiet. Something that left me numb as I pictured the old rocker lying on its side.

The rope had been gone, and so was her body, but the police hadn’t cared to tidy up the chair. I reached down, lifting it and setting it by its rightful place beside the window, fingers absently stroking the nameless carvings. The wooden seat rocked back and forth, every small groan like a cry for her, for Michaela.

Her family was at the funeral, so was mine; friends from both our groups were there. She was more popular in death than she was in life. No one laughed when I said this. She would have found it funny, but then, she always found cruel humor and satirical irony funny.

“What? Did you run out of cigs? I can spot you one,” Austin asked, stopping beside me. He’d been dealing with the aftermath of the burial, but the finishing apparently took less time than I thought it would. He reaches into his pocket, no doubt ready to produce a pack of cigarettes but I shake my head.

“It’s not the cigarettes. It’s my lighter. I can’t find it,” a growl rises at the back of my throat and I stop walking, not caring that the crowd of grieving gets further and further away from us. Everyone is on their way to Stevies. It was Michaela’s favorite restaurant.
Had been mine, too, until it was decided that’s where we’d eat after the service.

“The shitty lighter with the leopard print?”

I nod and Austin snorts, shoving his hand into his pocket and pulling out the black lighter he carried around. “About time you got rid of that tacky thing. Get a new one,” I swat his hand away, not taking the offer. The cigarette won’t taste the same with that piece of junk.

“You don’t understand,” I say, reaching into my pockets and turning them inside out. Nothing; not even a speck of lint, and my mind jumped to five years ago, her voice washing over the inside of my thoughts…

~

“What? You forgot your lighter?” Her voice was tinkling, like a sterling silver bell, polished to perfection. It pulled me from the pointless search of my backpack and pockets. Eyes the same color of the honey I stir into my evening tea shimmer in the nighttime street lamps, a slight tilt to the ends of each.

I sighed, “So it would seem. Not a huge deal though,” I pulled the cigarette from my mouth. “There’s a gas station along this street. I’ll pick up another.” I nod towards the end of the road, illuminated by large lights and cars. A small, chilly hand wrapped around my bicep; it stopped me from taking another step forward and drew my attention to the small woman.

“I have one you can use.” The glistening of her lips captured my eyes, and it took all I had to focus my attention on hers once more. I registered the words she’d spoken, and my brows lifted as my gaze traveled along her small, athletic frame.

“You smoke?”

“Oh God, no,” she chuckled, releasing my arm and tucking a few black strands behind her ear. Three metal piercings caught in the light: an elephant, a vine, and a dangling sun. “My father did, and my mother does on occasion, but I know what they are. Poison, through and through. I just carry a lighter around for forgetful old men.” The teasing look she sent my way said it all. I took the lighter from her outstretched hand; a grin turned up the corners of my mouth.

“You smoke?”

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“Old men? I’m only thirty.”

“That’s three years older than me, old man.”

I grunted in response as I lit the poison between my lips. “Well,” I said, blowing out a stream of white smoke, careful to send it in a direction away from the intriguing and
beautiful woman that stood beside me. “Care to join this old man for dinner?”

Her peach tinted lips expanded into a smile that left my heart stuttering in my chest. “I thought you’d never ask.” She extended her hand forward once more, those black strands pulling loose from behind her ear and brushing against her cheek, making it apparent just how pale she is. “My name’s Michaela.”

“Jacob,” I took her hand, awe-struck at the way we fit together like pieces of a puzzle. Perfect.

“You can keep the lighter,” she said. “It was only one in a pack I bought.” I glanced down at the small metal object I’d just received. It’s one of those cheap refillable ones. A leopard print pattern wrapped around the sleek body; the color, purple or violet or whatever strange name some nutcase had deemed for this different shade of purple, paints the tacky design. It’s something I would toss out if anyone gave it to me. Something that I would never dream of owning or being caught dead with.

I placed it in my pocket.

~

I blink away the memory and look to Austin. My throat closes up as my gaze sticks to his suit jacket. It would match my own if I were still wearing it, but I’d taken it off, lying it on top of Michaela’s small body in the casket.

She’d looked so frail and beautiful, surrounded by the white of the interior, dressed in her peach-colored gown. Her mother had insisted on choosing it because it brought out Michaela’s beauty. Her skin was a stark contrast to the black strands that framed her face. Long, black lashes had cast vague shadows against her cheeks, and her lips had been tinted the same color as the night we’d met.

My head whips around to where they’re covering the hole they’d lowered her into moments ago with cold, damp dirt. I’d smoked poison before it was time to give my speech in front of the casket; say my goodbyes in front of my friends and family. Dad had rushed me, and I’d pocketed the lighter in a different place from usual.

“I just carry a lighter around for forgetful old men.”

The breeze carries her voice to me, wrapping the words around my throat like the noose they’d found around hers two weeks ago.
My body seemed to melt into every last step I took. The trailer that stood in front of me was poorly kept, it was obvious it had been beaten by too many winds as it tilted slightly to the right. The grass was unmown and scratched at my bare shins as I walked towards the shedding deck. I kept on my toes to avoid the scrape of my tight sneakers against my blistered ankles. Pausing, I took a deep breath before turning the squeaky handle, I didn’t know whether I should be angry or concerned towards what lay on the other side of the trailer door. Walking through the threshold I was encased within darkness and attacked by the smell of days old garbage. I stepped on the back of my shoes and relieved my feet of their pressure. Dropping the heavy duffle that had been cutting its sling into my shoulder onto the unswept floor, my eyes, not quite adjusted to the darkness, scanned the small room.

“Mom?” I asked, “You home?”

In the middle of the room a mass of piled blankets began to rise in front of me. “Yes?” said the mass.

“Are you sleeping?”

“No, I’m awake. Wha...what’s wrong?”

“You’re serious?”

“I must’ve got tired and fell asleep.”

“It looks like you’ve been here all day.” I crossed my arms and looked down at my mother, who was surrounded by dirty dishes and torn wrappers.

“Oh no. Shit...shit...shit…” A banana clip was caught in her gray half-fallen hair. She began fumbling around the blankets, shaking them out vigorously until the clip finally lost it’s grip and landed among the mess on the floor. With a sharp clunk, a phone appeared, “Eleven missed calls, oh my god.”

My eyes gave an uncontrollable roll, “Why am I not surprised?”

“It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“Like you promised last week and the week before that?”

“Please. You know how hard it is.”

“Yah, so is walking home after playing an entire game.”
I began to walk away as she got up, accidentally kicking a purse and spilling its contents. Pill bottles rolled in every direction, clattering down the tilted floorboards.

“Shit!” An open bottle had spilled, and the small oval-shaped pieces scurried away. My mother stumbled to her knees, trying to stop them from rolling out of sight. “I can’t be off my count again.” The panic in her face was thickening.

“Why were you off your count in the first place?”

“Well, sometimes I’m just in so much pain and then I take one and forget I took it, and then I take another one..”

“Funny...seems like you forget a lot of things.” I turned my back to her, setting a dead pace towards my bedroom, my place away from all the mess.

“I said sorry! What else do you want from me?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe a parent who actually shows up and doesn’t just sleep all day.”

“Well I would if you would even tell me when your games are!” she paused from gathering her pills.

“You really think you can just lie to me and pretend like I won’t know. Those pills shouldn’t make you sleep all day.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” She didn’t look up at me but continued to gather the bottles and pills that had fallen from her purse.

“Oh really? Today you slept through my soccer game, last week it was my parent-teacher conference, tomorrow who knows… maybe it’ll even be my graduation.”

“It’s not the end of the world, I’ll go to your next game.”

“That was the last one. I told you that last week when you promised to be there.”

Her brow furrowed, “You never told me that.”

“Yah I did. Maybe you’d remember if you didn’t make yourself forget so much.”

I hoped she would say something else, something I could yell at her again for. I watched as my mother struggled to see the pills that had escaped beneath the couch...

~

I remember I awoke to the sound of thunder, the kind that shakes your home. My dog, Max, was barking as if there was a clumsy intruder in my bedroom.

“Mom!” I screamed.
I heard her feet as they galloped up the stairs. She arrived at my bedroom door short of breath, wheezing. I could hear her stop right before entering, she never did want me to see her so weak.

She opened the door, “What’s wrong?” she asked. She walked over to my bed, trying to slow her breathing through her nose. She sat down on the edge of my pink and purple striped bedspread and tried to calm Max.

“The storm,” I said, squeezing my stuffed bunny to my chest. She took a deep breath in and released it, seeming to have finally caught up to her lungs. There was a flash of light that illuminated my room and reflected off my mother’s bald head. Max barked at the thunder again, telling it to go away. I began to cry, and my mother gave me her hand. Her eyes were so tired, but her grip was so strong.

“Shhh,” she said, “It’s just the angels bowling in the sky.” She smiled, and I gazed back up at her lightless eyes, confused. I always used to think this was such a weird way to describe something so terrifying. “Come downstairs, I want to show you something.” She stood up and began to walk to the door, I jumped out of bed, too scared to lose her. Max followed close behind, protecting me from the threat of the storm. I followed her outside to the porch, strangling my stuffed bunny with my arm.

“Mom?” I hesitated at the door frame. The floor was a flattened down old blue carpet that was mistaken for having been waterproof, too many years ago. Its brown threads from underneath had been revealed and were flattened to the floor.

“Come on, we will be safe, it’s all closed in.” She plopped down in her prized white wicker chair, and I joined her sitting in its sister. The porch was indeed enclosed, but the old window panes creaked in the wind, and the wind screamed through the screens while they clinked against the dirty glass. White light filled the porch and immediately after, the skies roared. I froze.

She laughed, “Woo! Looks like that one just got a strike!” Her smile was as infectious as the cancer moving through her bones. I laughed with her as I thought about how silly she always was. “I want to teach you a neat trick. The next time you see lightning I want you to count from one, and then stop once you hear thunder, okay?” She looked at me to see if I understood.

“Why?” I asked.
“Well, the shorter you count the closer the storm is, but the longer you count, the storm is farther away. Do you understand?” I nodded in return. It was not long before I saw a jagged light escape the clouds.

My mother counted with me, “One...Two...” BOOM! I squeezed my bunny tight and looked up at her with wide eyes, she smiled again.

“No just give it some time,” she said. We sat there together, for a few years it seemed, in silence. The only intruder was the rumble coming from the panicking rain on the porch roof. I watched as my mother’s favorite rose-bush flooded. All that work to keep it so beautiful, gone in a gust of wind. The wind was cruel, beating down on her roses until they retreated behind their thorns.

The lightning dimmed and the thunder dulled, and my mother looked at me, “Let’s count again when we see another flash.”

There was a dim light and we counted, “One...Two...Three...Four...Five...” boom.

“See,” she said, “Not as scary as it was before, huh?” I shook my head. “Just give it time, I promise. This storm will pass.” Soon, she grabbed my hand and led me back up the stairs to my bed. Tucking me in, she kissed my cheek and Max jumped back up to the foot of the mattress. She walked to the door and began to close it; darkness began to consume me as she left.

“Wait!” I screamed, she stopped. “Leave it open?” She nodded, and the light from the hallway streamed in to defend me against the dark. Little did I know, it had already swallowed me whole...

~

“...we really need to work on our communication. See, you’re not listening! You never do.”

“What?”

“You just never listen, you’re just like your father. He never listened...”

~

I woke up staring at the glowing stars struggling to keep their grip on the dusty white ceiling. They provided just enough light to reflect off the fluorescent yellow duck tape that divided the room into two halves.

“Pssst, you awake?” I asked.
“Ugh. What?” she mumbled through her pillow. My sister’s bed was on the opposite side of the duck tape, on her side of the room. Nervous for my voice to break the boundary, I hesitated, and the voices came again.

“Screw you! I work all day, someone in this house has to make money, I can do whatever the fuck I want when I get home…” my father yelled.

“They’re fighting again,” I said.

She groaned and twisted in her sky-shaded sheets. “I know, just try to go to bed.” She turned around and seemed to fall back asleep, but something told me she was listening too. We were always listening, every night, all night it felt like sometimes. Nothing to stare at but those peeling ceiling stickers, I laid with eyes wide open.

“I can’t work, you know that! You are so arrogant, I can’t believe you!” my mother yelled.

“Yeah well boo-hoo! Why don’t you just leave me alone.” my father said.

“Fine!”

“Fine!”

There was a brief silence until the sound of my mother’s footsteps carried through the hallway. She opened the door to our room and the light flooded in, washing away the glow from the ceiling constellations. For some ashamed reason, I closed my eyes fast and tried to pretend that I was sleeping.

“You girls awake?” She said, coming towards and sitting down on the side of my low mattress. “I know you girls are always listening.”

I turned my head to her as she tucked her dark hair away, behind her ear.

“Yeah, I am, sorry mom.”

“It’s not your fault. You awake?” She got up and walked over to the other bed.

My sister slowly sat up and nodded her head.

“I want to let you girls know that your father and I aren’t going to work out, we are going to get a divorce.” She sat down and looked at her hands, peeling at the skin around her thumbnail…

~

The divorce took years to actually happen. By the time it did, my family was gone. My siblings were grown and moved out on their own; Father absent and away, consumed in his
work; and Mother infected by rage towards my father that she took out on me, the only part of
him left.

“You are just like him!” she screamed at me. “You never think about anyone but
yourself!”

I looked around at the bright room infested with full cardboard boxes. The one in my
hands was getting heavier as my arms ached to surrender to gravity.

“All I said was that I wanted to spend the weekend with dad.” I put the box down on the
staircase.

“You know he totally screwed me over in the divorce, and it’s like you don’t even care at
all!” she said.

“Nope. Not really.” I made my way back to the UHaul truck full of the fragments that
used to make up my home.

“Are you serious? You know what he does to me affects you too!”

“Mom I don’t care! Just leave me out of it. I won’t tell you anything anymore if you’re
gonna act like this every time.”

She picked up the box labeled ‘dishes’, and the bottom broke open. Gravity had claimed
another victim. The mismatched plates broke onto the gravel driveway, creating a mosaic of dirt
and stoneware.

“Shit!” she threw the limp cardboard to the ground and walked away. “I’m done. I’ll pick
them up later.”

I grabbed the last box for my room and walked around the broken plates, wondering how
long it would take my mother to pick up the pieces she had left behind...

～

My mind came back into focus onto my mother, in the dark small room where we had
existed, for what seemed like forever and a day.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said all those things. I just get so angry sometimes.” There
was no blame in her voice, no blame directed at anyone but herself. It was as if she was
apologizing for a lifetime of guilt.

Holding back my breath, I walked towards the chaos and began to gather the lost pieces.
Laying on my stomach, I reached under the couch and with a sweep of my arm collected a series
of dust, pills, and wrappers alike. My mother winced as she got up and sank back into the couch.
“Thank you,” she said.

“Why is it so dark in here anyway?” I got up and walked to the light switch. I flipped the switch up, but nothing happened.

“My social security didn’t come as planned.” she looked down at her hands, her gray hair blocking her eyes from sight. She began to peel at the skin that hung off her thumbnail. “Look at it this way, we can light some candles, and instead of watching T.V., you can tell me all about how your game went.” She looked up and tried to smile.

I watched as my mother began desperately lighting the candles that were on the coffee table, the flame was quivering as the lighter trembled in her hand. Letting go of my breath, I walked back toward the couch and sat down.

“So did you guys win?” she smiled at me now sitting beside her.

Her smile was infectious, “Of course we did.” I took the lighter from her hands and steadily lit the candles which began to surround us in a dim, but warm light.
Blinding lights hurt like truth in abundance.

When I first discovered that the world wasn’t meant to be seen as through television static, I believe I was thirteen. My vision had begun to crackle and pop with flashes of light like miniature bombs, glaring white and then gone, and my mother had taken me to a doctor, who sent me to a specialist, who sent me to another specialist, and so on down the line a couple more times until I met Dr. Leibowitz.

“Look at that wall,” she’d said, pointing at the clean, white wall of the doctor’s office. “What do you see?”

“A wall,” I responded, resting my chin in my hands.

“Is the color flat? Even all across?”

“Is it not supposed to be?”

Dr. Leibowitz cast me a sideways glance. “Well, it is. But is there anything in your visual field that keeps you from sensing or perceiving it as plain white?”

And so I stared at the wall, expecting that she, like the others, would make some insane diagnosis that would quickly be ruled out with labs or an MRI. As I stared, though, I realized that while I knew in my heart that the wall was white, it was like I was watching a channel our cable couldn’t quite pick up.

“There’s just the static,” I said.

“Have you always seen the static?” Dr. Leibowitz asked.

“Haven’t you?”

“No.”

Dr. Leibowitz rose and flipped the light switch. “What do you see now?” she asked.

The static seemed to glow, incandescent in the dark. I could make out rippling shades of blue and purple, flecks of red among the whites and greys. Somehow I knew that although nothing had changed, although this was not unlike what I saw staring at the ceiling in my bedroom late at night, that I would no longer be able to see the world the same way from there on out.
I was correct.

So, the night that I spun off the road into the rocky sands of the southern Arizona desert, I blinked the dizzied haze from my eyes before scanning the road. There were three options for the source of the lights: car headlights, the reflection of my headlights on some metal, or a misfiring in my brain. There seemed to be no other car, and it was too dark to determine whether there’d been some metal junk on the side of the road. My head ached.

As I sat in the front seat, eyes scanning the pavement, I became suddenly aware of the static, as I often do when I would least like to. Static muddied the colors of the mountains and of the sand, and I could not tell if cacti jutted from distant mountaintops or if the static was crackling just enough to produce a lying shadow. I got out of the car, slamming the door. The night was so hot that I could feel sweat clinging to my skin.

The land before me sloped up into a rugged mountainside dotted with dry brush and saguaro, the rock slicing into a sky glittering with so many stars that I felt the anxiety of the wreck dissipate as if it were rising off my skin like steam into the sky. Between the night and I, as always, unfortunately, was the thin layer of static. A burst of light popped up in the sky as if to remind me that there would always be this imperceptible divide between the world and me— we would never quite see eye to eye.

A creaking in the distance broke my spell of self-pity. Along the mountaintop, I saw a figure move. I scrambled to find my keys in my pocket, clenching them between my fingers so they stuck out from my knuckles like claws. The darkness suddenly felt hostile. I blinked over and over to try and distinguish between static and the world, and it began to seem as if the figure had three arms— or possibly four— or possibly was not a figure at all, but a saguaro, its arms delicately twisting in the moonlight. The saguaro reached out, the tip of one arm touching the saguaro beside it, and that one, too, began to move, the creaking of its joints echoing through the canyon. So this went down the mountainside, saguaro to saguaro, until I found myself staring into an expanse of saguaro writhing— no— dancing, long spines glinting in the light of the moon.

I took a step forward, and then another, finding the courage to slip my keys from a clenched fist into my pocket. I stood in front of the nearest saguaro and it came to a creaking stop as the wind began to rise. I felt the hairs raise on my thighs.

*Up.*
I sucked in a breath.

Up.

One of the saguaro’s arms moved as if to direct me up the mountainside, so I stumbled along, watching the ground so as to avoid low-lying cacti. I forced the words “Thank you” from the back of my throat. The saguaro in front of me continued their odd dance, arms carefully avoiding my path.

Up.
The saguaro seemed to whisper.

Sky.

Ward.

I wished that I had brought a jacket.

Up.

I wished that I had kept driving straight.

Uhhh

P.

Static would be the least of my problems if I was going mad.

Sky.

Or if I was dead.

ward.

I found myself at the top of the mountain, standing beside the largest saguaro I’d ever seen. The wind whipped my hair and stung the tip of my nose with cold. Above it all I could hear the creaking as every saguaro turned its arms skyward. The wind calmed. The night was still—

Until it wasn’t. The stars seemed to implode in bright flashes of light like the hundreds of thousands I’d seen before, but these hung in the sky like lightbulbs rather than flickering out as quickly as they’d come. They emanated a soothing warmth, more docile than the intrusive heat of the desert summer. Something within me stirred and I reached into the sky, pulling from the darkness an orb of light, a star. The large saguaro beside me extended an arm. “I want to hold it,” I argued, clutching the star to my chest.

The saguaro was still.

“I like this one.”

Stillness.
“I want to hold it a little longer.”

Against my chest, I felt the star pressing gently toward the saguaro. I gave in, holding it out so that the saguaro might grab it. The star floated into the saguaro’s arm and seemed to be absorbed by it before a bud grew and bloomed into a flower as white as starlight right where the star had entered. I hoped I understood.

Plucking stars from the sky, I carried them in my arms to each saguaro, allowing every arm to take what it might like. Each star bloomed into a new and pristine blossom, and before long it seemed that the stars were catching on, first falling into my arms on their own, and then finding a saguaro with merely the motioning of my finger. I walked until the sky was empty. The wind picked up.

*What do you see?*

“Darkness.”

*All across?*

I knew in my heart that the sky was empty, but nonetheless it glowed with static—incandescent, even in the dark.

“I see too much.”

*Better than not at all.*

So I sat, and I looked out at the white saguaro blossoms. I watched the sky grow lighter, because it’s not true when they say that it’s darkest before the dawn, since really it gets lighter and lighter and you just never realize that there was a time when it wasn’t as light as it is at that moment, until it becomes so undeniably bright that you must assume that there was a moment darker than the one you’ve now found yourself in. That’s around when the saguaro blossoms tuck themselves back into their buds, little blossoming stars winking out one by one until all is light.
Creative Nonfiction
People will tell you that I am not right in the head. And frankly, I have to agree. At times I do things a little differently. Like, take my newly deceased cat: I had a talk with her one evening after we concluded that she was beginning the active dying process. I asked her if, when she died, I could have her fur coat. “Meow,” she responded, which always indicated to me that the answer was yes. She was silent if the answer was no.

I have always been drawn to dead things, whether it be a hospice patient or some fresh roadkill. I have never wanted to skin a human, but I have skinned a red fox. I gingerly sliced him from his balls to his ears, without cutting through his pelt. As a wannabe taxidermist, I thought about skinning Kadie but didn’t know if I could do the deed. So, I went on a google search, and after calling five taxidermists, I found one guy in Austin, Texas, who would do the job for a small fortune.

Enter Martinez Brothers Taxidermy. The one brother, Alex, is the master at skinning pelts. He sent me an email detailing the exact process for getting Kadie’s body there in one piece. This is where I should add that I sometimes lack comprehension skills and read every other sentence. Not following the instructions can make for a hair-raising experience.

First, I was to obtain a small styrofoam box, like the kind that you would ship a fresh, live lobster, or Omaha Steaks. Second, I was to pick up Kadie from the veterinarian’s freezer and then drive an hour to purchase dry ice. So far, so good, right? Someone suggested that I make sure, double sure that nothing will leak out of the box, or they will just toss Kadie’s remains in the garbage. So, I took it upon myself to place the securely taped styrofoam box inside not one but two large garbage bags-- without, as I mentioned, checking the mailing instructions. I tied the first one, then the second one, and then shoved it inside the mailing box. Now there would be no chance in hell that this box was going to leak.

As I carried my fur baby into the empty FedEx store, the box was beginning to swell. It was growing as I was holding it right before my eyes. I quickly placed it on the counter, and I stood back. I told the sales gal that I wanted to ship this package overnight. As I was standing there, the tape on the box began to peel open spontaneously. Beads of sweat were pouring down my temples and into my mask. Oh shit. The sales clerk called for the manager, who was new in
this position. The manager said, “I am trying to locate this in the shipping manual. I don’t think we can ship this pet of yours.”

In less than a minute, the tape on the box had popped entirely open, and out came the two black garbage bags, which were inflating like balloons right before my eyes.

I knew that this was not a good sign.

The brave manager sneaked over to the box, and as she carefully reached her fingers towards the super taut bag. IT POPPED. We all jumped back, and now the second bag was also inflating. Shit. The sales clerk handed me a box cutter, and I reached as far as I could and swiped the blade against the bag. Hiss, the bag immediately released the air. Oh no, my heart was beating really fast and I had no idea what was about to happen.

All I could do was see my frozen little Kadie, flying out of the box and in the air with me trying to catch her like a football. The manager then quipped, “And this is why we do not ship animals via FedEx. “I’d suggest,” said the manager, “taking it to UPS.” And that’s just what I did. At the time I had no clue what was causing this scary event. A Facebook friend inquiry revealed, “Oh you need to have some air holes in the box, to accommodate the release of the carbon dioxide from the melting dry ice. Who knew? I do now. I stopped in a large empty parking lot and took over half of the dry ice out. Then repackaged Kadie for flight, leaving some air holes..

The UPS shipping center was packed with people so I waited for the female clerk who was covered in tattoos, a large circle nose ring, and giant gages in her ears. Surely this young gal would help me. She took the box, entered the shipping information and Kadie was shipped overnight to a tune of $224.00. I received a call the next day from Alex of Martinez Brothers Taxidermy in Austin, Texas. He, the master of pet taxidermy, called me the next day to report my kitty cat arrived in perfect frozen condition.

Yesterday I received a call from Alex, Kadie’s pelt turned out beautiful and will be arriving back to me vs USPS in a few days. I can’t wait to have her fur in my hands and maybe even add an alligator clip or two to her feet, so I can wear her around my neck. I may not be right in the head according to some. But to others I am just Suzie Milkowich.
Kadie Lynn Milkowich, was the runt of the Ocicat litter and was very petite and svelte. She adored me but loved heat more. She was 16 when she stopped eating and drinking. And it was time to say goodbye. RIP my fur baby.
The Open Field