

PIEDMONT VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

# THE FALL LINE



LITERARY MAGAZINE · SPRING 2021, VOL. 13





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**ABOUT**

*The Fall Line*, Spring 2021, is the thirteenth volume selected, edited, and produced by Writers Unite, the PVCC Creative Writing Club.

The fall line in Virginia is the line separating the Virginia Piedmont from the Coastal Plain, where rivers, small waterfalls, and rapids cascade or “fall” off hard, resistant rocks as they make their way to the ocean.

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*Beryl Solla*

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## *Dedication to Beryl Solla*

This year's edition of *The Fall Line* is dedicated to Beryl Solla, PVCC Professor of Art and Chair of the Art Department, who died in February from cancer. Beryl supported the Creative Writing Club, often allowing us to join Art Department or Art Club events in order to celebrate all forms of creative expression on our campus. She invited us to hold the reading of winners of our annual Horror Story Contest during the Art Club's Day of the Dead Candython, and she enthusiastically championed *The Fall Line* as a celebration of PVCC student designers, artists, and writers. That we have a beautifully presented magazine is in no small part because Beryl believed it should be.

Beryl's winged bunny graces the cover this year, and we have included a small sampling of her vast body of work on the following pages. Beryl worked in many mediums—ceramics, painting, sewing, and tile. She is known for the tile murals collaboratively created with student and community artists. In Charlottesville, her murals can be seen at McGuffey Park and Belmont Park, and at PVCC, among other places.

We miss Beryl, and we will continue to honor her spirit by celebrating creative expression, and particularly the work made by PVCC students.

*Jennifer Koster*

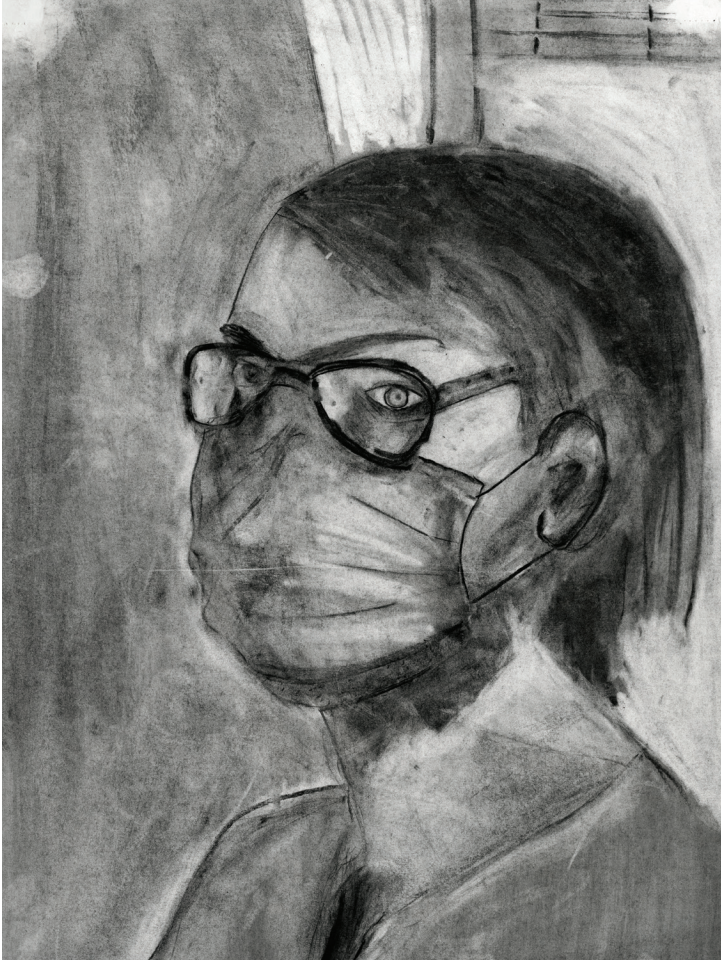
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Untitled Beryl Solla





*Gratitude* Beryl Solla



*Self-Portrait* Mario Brown

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# *These Sordid Times*

by Julianna Skuba

The day the trees stood unstirring  
the great American sycamores, keepers of silent things  
and scrappy cedars  
oaks  
holding with bated breath  
paused to consider the general state of affairs  
they seemed not too concerned with my murderous thoughts  
the thrashing of wayward brush  
the covert throttling of an ill placed box elder  
belonging to the neighbor  
whom I do not wish to speak with anymore  
this day

The day the trees stood unstirring  
was so much more than the frivolous annoyance of weeds  
immigrating

On this day, a suggestion  
began to seep from bark crevices  
downward into the failing soil  
dissemination of quiet respectitude  
imbued in molecules floating  
upon the whispered air  
confetti  
that even the neighbor  
whom I do not wish to speak with anymore  
inhaled

And so it went on and on  
unfolding  
just like that

# *Lighter*

by La'Tasha Strother

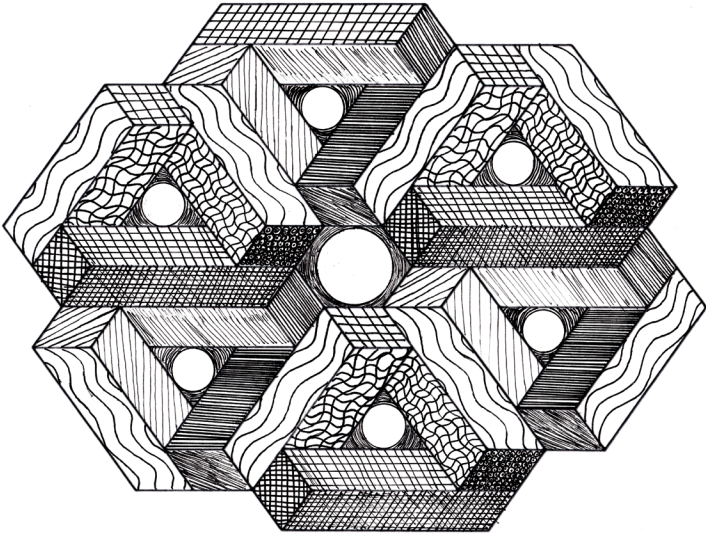
If you give your son a joint,  
he is going to ask you for a lighter.  
When he asks you for a lighter,  
you will have no clue as to what fires he will set ablaze.  
When he sets ablaze the fires,  
it will be too late for you to say,  
"Son, weed is more acceptable than crack cocaine."  
When he sets ablaze the taste for crack cocaine,  
he will ask for a dollar.  
When he asks for a dollar,  
they will eventually turn him away.  
When they turn him away,  
he will begin to steal.  
When he begins to steal,  
you will not have a clue.  
You will age thinking you offered your son the rite of passage.  
When he begins to steal,  
he will also learn how to pray.  
He will pray for the urge to go away.  
He will pray for the itch to leave his hands.  
He will pray for the dry cotton mouth to dissipate.  
After he prays,  
he will see that his temptations have not been cast away.  
When he sees that his temptations have not been casted away,  
he will fix his face to display the stature of a reformed man.  
When he sees that his facade is unable to hold up,  
he will show anger.  
He will become angry at his bone-of-my-bone and flesh-of-my-flesh,  
in hopes that it will keep her questions at bay.  
You will take rest in thinking that your son has cultivated a stable home.  
You will praise his foundation without knowing that crack flows through his veins.  
If you give your son a joint,  
he is going to ask you for a lighter.  
When he asks you for a lighter,  
you will not see him use the heel of the lighter to crush the head of the pill.  
When he crushes the head of the pill,  
he will want to inhale.  
When he inhales,  
he will think that he has found a higher place,



*Portrait* Cansu Ozbulut

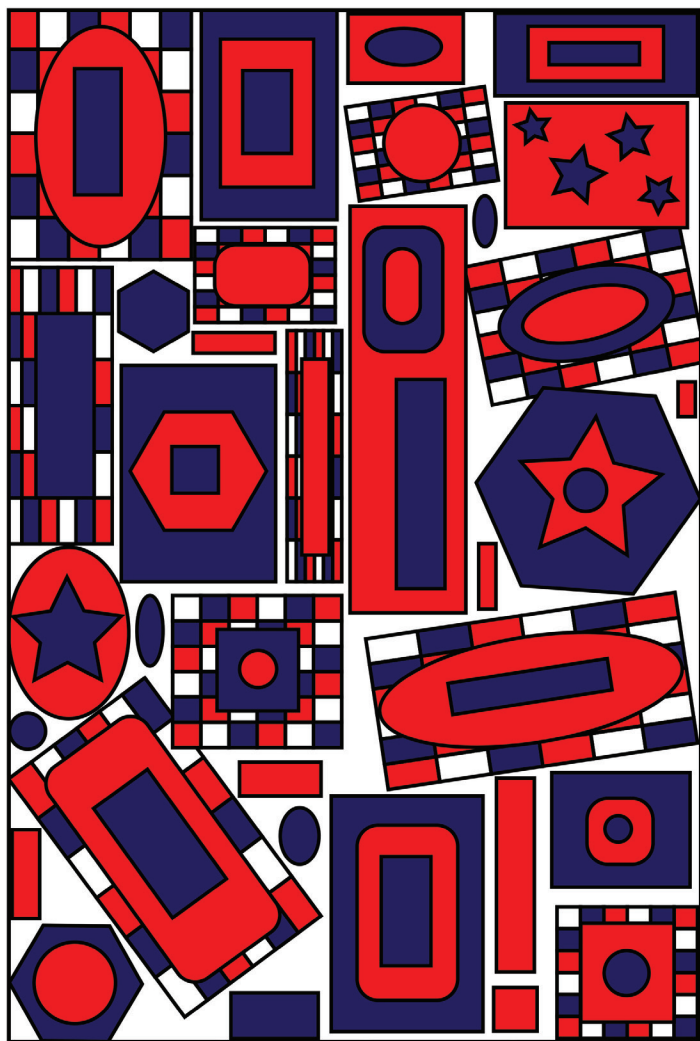
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a holy place that brings freedom and shame.  
When he has seen the higher place,  
he will be unable to look his loved ones in the face,  
for he has locked eyes with his dealer.  
When he locks eyes with his dealer,  
anything sacred such as fathering has taken a back seat to his addiction.  
When all things sacred have taken a back seat to his addiction,  
his temple will begin to display the signs of starvation,  
for his appetite for street drugs has replaced his appetite for nutrition.  
He will not bare his chest,  
so you will inaccurately call him slender and graceful.  
You will not see the way his ribs display his addictions.  
Your son will come and go like a ghost,  
and you will think it is due to his mother being bipolar.  
If you give your son a joint,  
you have passed on a generational course.  
A course that will strive to strip your lineage of everything Godly.  
It will kill,  
steal, and destroy from the inside out,  
and without a doubt you will be left with a shell of a son.  
But thanks be to Abba who formed your son before you offered him the rite of passage  
and before he met his mother's womb.  
Abba who breathed the breath of life;  
to make all sons join heirs with his son formally known as Christ.  
When you give your son a joint,  
Abba will lead him to the light that is lost in the dark.  
Abba will lead him to the light to remind him that before he was born to man,  
he was formed by God the Father known in Aramaic as Abba.  
Abba who was,  
who is, and who is to come.  
Who has joined him together with hope, truth, and life,  
so he can be more than a fig tree with leaves but no fruit.  
When you give your son a joint,  
Abba will remind him that he has been joined to the resurrection power of Christ,  
and it is in the dying of his own flesh that he will come to live again.



*Illusion* Michelle Curry

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*Rhythm* Caroline Cruz

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# *Outside the Lines*

by Zoe Hall

Snap. Another crayon broken. Lying on my stomach, my body tenses as I firmly draw in my animal coloring book. I always press too hard, careful to thoroughly color inside every line. My mother constantly explains to me that my muscles will suffer if I remain this tense. Regardless, I continue to stay there on our carpeted floor, stiff as a brick. I push aside the fragmented pieces and reach for a new color, inhaling a whiff of the waxy smell as I do so. I return to my drawing, determined to finish completely and accurately. My father is an artist, and as the daughter of an artist, I ought to properly color my kittens.

In the evening, I tiptoe around the corner leading from the kitchen and into the study, peeking my head into “the studio.” I silently hoist myself into the towering chair by the entrance. It creaks as I clamber up the rickety beams and situate myself towards my father. Surely he notices my presence, but he continues to focus on his painting. I leave behind my world of perfectionism and broken crayons and enter the paint splattered and rock music filled world of my Dad’s. His canvas stretches across the entire wall. The floor, littered with paint drips, appears to be art itself.

I found no method or pattern in his work as he squiggled line after line. His acrylic filled solo cups lined his desk as he switched from color to color. Occasionally I piped up, inquiring about or commenting on his brushstrokes.

“Why did you cover up all the red?

That looks like a Z!” Oftentimes he explained his artwork without me prompting him.

“See how I trace these lines? I do it with a smaller brush each time. I just keep going back over them again and again.”

I came to realize that he did indeed have a method, but unlike me, he remained relaxed and at peace. His placid approach allowed the paint to flow freely from his brush. He created the lines. He painted outside the lines. And when he didn’t like them, he covered up the lines.

I later returned to the coloring book and set out to create my own lines. I selected my favorite Crayola colors; I always held them with great caution, lest I break them too. Among the few were “Inchworm” and “Blue Jeans,” two colors unfit for the kitten I had flipped to. I continued despite that, outlining the cat with my vibrant colors. I filled the entire page, willing myself to relax as I did so. Relief washed over me, and the creativity began.

Genuine art does not come from trying to be perfect, but from being at peace. My father consistently demonstrated this truth. A decade later I sit up tall in my own chair, immersed in soft piano music and surrounded by sunlight streaming through open windows. I lay out my pans of watercolors and variety of brushes. Delicately painting my own scenes, I combine both loose colors and intricate details. A peaceful mindset penetrates the room, and all pressure to be perfect escapes. I create outside of the lines.

# *I am*

by Lee Taylor

I am a human being  
A woman being,  
Solid yet immeasurable.  
I transmute abuse  
    and make flowers bloom.  
I take your pain  
    and give you fog over Graz.  
Like Ali in '71,  
waiting for the 15th round  
    *valere veritas.*



*Selfie* Laura Ravenhorst

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# *I am She. She is Me.*

by April Oliver

The lobby was fairly empty as I glanced around the room taking in the all too familiar scenery that I had become so accustomed to over the last few months. Remnants of Christmas decor still lingered leisurely throughout the space as if it had not already come and gone. The bright red poinsettias that adorned the tabletops and the glittery snowflakes that dangled from the ceiling exuded a sense of excitement, while the lighted tree in the corner of the room invited you in and insisted that you feel welcomed here. An aroma of warm vanilla sugar filled the air creating a coziness that engulfed you and persuaded you to feel safe. I, personally, liked it here and even though in recent times I had been coming quite frequently, it never grew old because I looked forward to the experience.

I slowly walked over to the registrar to check in for what may be my last visit and was greeted by Ms. Ruth with the brightest, most contagious smile ever; it caused me to smile back. She was always so kind and excited to see me which in my world was a rarity so I appreciated every encounter with her. "Hi April, how are you feeling today?" she asked with such genuine concern and I, not wanting to overwhelm her with the burdens of my truth and fighting the urge to explode into a river of raging tears, merely responded with "I'm ok." She proceeded to check me in and instructed me to sit in the waiting area assuring me that someone would be out to escort me to the back shortly.

As I sat down and began rummaging through the pile of parenting magazines strewn about on the table, I could hear the clinical staff giggling behind the big, sliding glass windows that guarded the registrar's desk and I couldn't help but envy their outright display of happiness; these days I wasn't allowed to be happy instead I was just supposed to feel the constant shame of my past transgression. When I finally stumbled across a magazine whose cover read, "Top 10 most frequently asked questions by teen moms," I picked it up and began flipping through the pages. Reality is, I had no idea of what I was doing and no one was interested in teaching me but I was determined to use every resource available to me to learn even if it was just an old crumpled up magazine at a doctor's office.

In the lobby there were two other young ladies who weren't too far removed from my age. The first, accompanied by an older woman who was possibly her mother, was engaged in a joyful conversation; they too laughed. The other, however, sat there quietly like myself staring off into space as if she were in deep thought; I recognized that state of mind and I empathized with her. I could see the bugle beneath her shirt and I wondered about her story. How old was she? What was she thinking about? And is she having a boy or a girl? I said nothing though and nor did she. We just sat there, waiting. Neither of us ever cracking a smile.

Both of us remaining alone, isolating ourselves from the outside world for fear of harsh words and unjust treatment. Both of us just trying to protect the little bit of sanity we had left.

In recent years, working as a Peer Recovery Support Specialist, I have been awarded the opportunity to assist other young ladies that have shared this same life experience and learned how so many of us walked that journey out alone. I think about that girl and how much we may have had in common if we had only been courageous enough

to talk. I ponder the many facets of how that conversation may have went and speculate on where she is now. I wonder if she went on to accomplish great things or if she was defeated by the bitter realities of life. I contemplate the many ways we could have supported each other on that journey and if she's using her story to empower others too. I, then, think of how we sat there in silence that day, never making eye contact, afraid of connection and holding tight to the defenses we'd developed from unspoken experiences, and I wonder if she ever overcame.

# *25 Years, An Awakening*

by Seven

I hear my name from down the hall  
of this place I know I've been.  
At 17, add up some months,  
back then eight, maybe even 10,  
his position in my life was to be  
that of hand holding,  
tuck-ins, of sweet dreams  
and maybe parties  
with dress-up  
and tea.

But I liked basketball.  
And so did he.  
And this made me  
special.

Late night video games and secrets,  
later night visits and locked doors.  
As a raven appears and elicits fears  
while I stall  
beggin' upward, nevermore.  
Perhaps my tomboy offered protection  
of a big boy who was insecure.  
But I'm unsure of this lesson  
or the definition of succession,  
accept intrepid guilt and depression  
while you silence my voice  
and try to score.

This was not basketball.

Card games in tiled closets where 21 takes the win,  
a numbers game my brain added up  
that you were there for you to sin.  
The heiress employed in the night  
left hours of opportunity,  
where it was not sweet dreams but a fight

and an imbalanced burden on me.  
My locked door  
locked monsters  
in.

I hear my name from down the hall  
of this place I know I've been.  
I've announced that I'm in love.  
And she  
is not he.  
But I can breath  
in honesty.

Somehow this presents a challenge for you.  
"Help me out, kiddo."  
I'm staring, confused.  
"Help me out, kiddo."  
I'm now told I'm confused,  
for I haven't met a man, he says,  
that can counter my gay.  
It's his job, he explains,  
and he will show me the way.  
I am "his," and it's his "right,"  
and somehow it's ok.  
But it's not; I'm not "ok."

Somehow I'm eight again, maybe 10.  
The locked door is again unlocked, and  
I'm fighting this monster, again.

With his pride showing through shorts  
and no shirt,  
a bed begging for me to oblige,  
play my part.  
I'm trying to say no, but he wants  
what he wants.  
My concern is not his concern.  
All of this wrong, my stomach starts to churn

and I beg to let me leave, for the heiress is to return,  
and she does. Unannounced.  
She looks around, and he settles down,  
slowing the nausea and racing of my heart.

I fought my life to just keep my pants on,  
questioning my worth,  
expressing my confusion with actions,  
sexing in needing validation,  
or at least achieve self hurt.  
I wanted to die.  
Parts of me couldn't achieve, alive.  
And while self sabotaging, I was worried  
and consumed quietly  
about you.  
But I was wrong.  
I should have worried about me, too.  
Because honestly,  
me too.

# *Life Sentence*

by Lee Taylor

What do dreams sound like when they die?  
A punch of a factory clock?  
A bank account zeroed?  
Nothing to show for months of work  
A house littered with exhaustion  
And the years pass  
And you keep punching the clock  
Hoping one day the phone will ring.

# Creation

by Sophie Ashburn

*In Realms of Eos, players can explore one of the four vast continents of Eos. The unexplored jungles of Tenebrae, the island nation of Spira, the vast snowy peaks of Nibelheim, and the deserts of Nova Chrysalia. Questlines start in the capital city of each continent.*

*In patch 2.7.3, we introduce a new non-player character (NPC) to the Realms: Prince Orion Caia of Nova Chrysalia! This NPC is the crown heir to the throne of Nova Chrysalia. Players can spot him wandering locales throughout the royal city. Keep an eye out for official press releases, as Prince Orion will deliver update and patch news in-game from here on, alongside escapades of his own.*

**Prince Orion makes debut in crown city's Central Park! Prince Orion found fishing on city outskirts!**

**Prince Orion sponsors the local crown city aquarium! Prince Orion announces patch update 2.7.4!**

**Prince Orion caught napping in a coffee shop!**

**"You seem fit enough for what I require."**

**Prince Orion endorses virtual band!**

**"Let me open you up and see what you are made of."**

Very suddenly, Orion goes from nowhere to somewhere. He doesn't

really know where this "somewhere" is; in fact, it seems to be more a physical manifestation of nowhere, as all that surrounds him is white space. He is standing somehow, or possibly floating, although it looks like he should be falling. Maybe he is falling, and he doesn't know it. The only personality in this bland liminal space is the scent. Somehow, the air smells a bit damp, like a wet towel. The silence surrounding him is oppressive, broken only by the sound of his breathing. He can't tell if this is better or worse than the way things were before, if there ever was a "before." At least then he didn't realize what he was lacking.

"Hello?" he ventures. Perhaps someone else is trapped in the void as well. If so, perhaps they know how to get out.

The silence rings more oppressive than before, and Orion realizes that what he thought was silence was broken by a quiet clicking, a clicking that stopped as soon as he spoke. "Hello?" he asks again, craning his neck in an attempt to see past the white.

"Oh, my apologies, Highness. I didn't realize my changes would take effect on you so quickly! Allow me to greet you properly..." The voice trails away, leaving Orion to contemplate the man behind it. It sounded smooth and self-assured, but Orion could detect a bit of sourness there. The voice sounded ...pretentious.

There is no noise or change to announce the arrival of the man. He is simply there where he wasn't one moment before. His hair is a darker shade of auburn, half hidden beneath a newsboy cap perched upon the crown of his head. He wears a suit, as common as any other, and bows to Orion in a way that suggests deference. Orion can tell immediately that the man does not mean it by the sarcastic and overstated flair of his hat.

"Who are you?" Orion asks.

"You may call me... Genesis, for I am to be yours," he responds, chuckling to himself.

"What do you mean?" Orion asks, fidgeting and looking away.

"Why I will be your creator, your sculptor. We are here, in the center of the bits of code that make you well... you. I have taken those scraps and combined them with my AI program to form this, you here and now. The next step is to tinker just a bit inside that code and set your new AI on the path to full sentience."

"What do you mean 'code'?" Orion asks, flapping his arms wildly. "I am a real person, I'm me, Prince Orion!"

"The only reason you exist, let alone think right now, is because of me. I gifted you my AI, and I can take it away. Why don't you tell me about yourself, boy, if

you are so sure you are real?" Genesis days, an infuriating smirk on his face.

"I know I like fishing. And I'm the crown prince of Nova Chrysalia! My dad just let me move out of the palace when I was fifteen, and I wanted to get a pet cat, but I got so excited to be free that I forgot," Orion recites what he knows, a tremor in his voice. It's only a few basic facts, but his independence and love of fishing are the most important parts of him.

"Ha!" Genesis chuckles once, a sharp sound that doesn't really sound like laughter to Orion. You only know that about yourself because your programmers have written it into your code. You aren't real; you have no body in the real world. You are nothing more than a character in a video game, and even with my gift of sentience, you'll be nothing more. Let me read your character description to you. Are you ready?" He pauses, smirking at Orion's look of disbelief. "Prince Orion is the crown heir to the throne. He lives in a city apartment to experience life as his people do, and enjoys sneaking out of the city to fish every now and again." Sound familiar? It is, after all, exactly what you told me. Now hush and let me work, if you're going to have a breakdown, do it quietly."

Distantly, Orion hears the mechanical clicking noises start again, and some part of him registers that it is a keyboard. He collapses, feeling as if

his world is bursting open at the seams and pieces of himself are falling out. His breathing quickens into pants as he tries to think back to a memory, any particular memory, but all he can find are the empty words in his head that he thought described him. He can't. It can't be true, there must be some other piece of himself he can use to defend himself. He searches wildly, thinking long and hard, straining as hard as he can to find a piece of himself to use as armor. He fails.

"Do calm down, you may be boring and empty now, but I didn't come here just to see you break. No, you will rise from the dust like a phoenix rebuilt from the ground up! I will give you memories that reflect who you are." Genesis describes grandly, clicking away at the keyboard Orion can't see. Orion sniffles, ignoring him. "You like fishing, hmm? Let's give you a real memory of it then."

*Orion sits in a thin fabric chair, hunched protectively over his fishing rod. A cool breeze ruffles his hair, and a shiver wracks his body. The sun is falling slowly, and the wind brings an evening chill, but still he waits. He is out to catch one of the legendary Devil Gars, a fish known to swim only at dusk in the brisk autumn season. Cicadas buzz behind him, and lightning bugs rise like ghosts from the forest floor behind the dock. The river gurgles happily along, uncaring of the budding fisherman and his awaiting catch.*

*Orion waits there until the sun fully disappears beyond the horizon, periodically recasting the line. It gets harder and harder to see his pale hands wrapped around the fishing rod. Eventually, when he can no*

*longer feel his ears and his breath fogs the air, he gives up, leaving his chair as a silent vow to return the next evening and try again. He tromps through the woods, arms crossed and head down. With any luck, he won't fail again tomorrow.*

Orion is pulled from the memory unwillingly, enjoying the scent of pine and the sturdy feeling of the fishing rod in his hand. It takes him a moment to place himself in the void, staring at Genesis and listening to the clicking so constant it could be a heartbeat.

"What... are you creating memories for me?" Orion asks eventually after successfully pulling his thoughts together. The response doesn't come fast enough, he only catches Genesis' eyeroll and the first movement of his lips before he is tugged away into another new memory.

*Orion wakes in an uncomfortable position. Somehow, before he had fallen asleep, he managed to wedge himself in between a towering post and the wall. It had seemed a good spot for a nap earlier, hidden away from the guards and near the gardens, so the scent of winter berries blew in with the breeze. Unfortunately, Orion forgot that the gentle breeze turns into chilled gusts in the afternoon, and he works himself out of the spot to find a crick in his neck and a persistent ache in his back. He runs back down the hall, deeper into the cavernous palace, following the echoing calls of his name. Better to face the music, and his father earlier than to get in more trouble by waiting.*

Orion has barely a moment's view of the white void and Genesis before he is whisked into another memory,



*Untitled* Gail Sullivan

the scent of berries fresh in his nose even as the season changes.

*Maybe I should have waited for the weather to cool down to move out, Orion thinks as he carries yet another box of clothing into the elevator of his new building. The city is alive with festivals and celebrations, garnering attention from locals and visitors alike. It is a good cover for Orion's move from the palace, but with only himself and one guard, the moving is slow going. Now he knows why his father was smirking when he approved the impromptu plan this morning. Sweat trickles down Orion's back even as cool air is vented in through the elevator. He sets his box down inside the apartment when he gets in, sighing at all that he has to unpack. He leans out the window for a moment to take in the city from above. Up here, the weather isn't as bad. It's only below that the heat seems baked into the concrete and asphalt. Monstrosities of steel and glass spear into the sky around him, and for a moment, Orion misses the view of Central Park that he had from his room in the palace. But a room with a view is not as important as his budding independence. He can still see the strings of yellow light that signify the start of the festival grounds, after all. A cool breeze sweeps the apartment, and Orion sighs. Another carful of boxes and he'll be halfway unloaded.*

The clicking is back.

Orion catches his breath slowly, feeling as if he has just run a marathon. He doesn't think he can handle much more of this. Even though these are presumably just memories, they are taking a physical toll on his body based simply on the effect they have on his

mind. With that thought running central in his mind, Orion cries out.

"Please wait, I don't even know what you're doing!"

Genesis looks up from his little screen, still clicking happily away. He rolls his eyes, presumably at Orion's lack of understanding of the situation. "I suppose three will do to start... You see, dear prince, I must give you a base to form your memories on. Your new AI system cannot simply build from nothing, after all. Three should be adequate for the AI to go on, and it can build based on your surroundings as well... I will leave it at that, but I must remember to check up on you in a few days to assure myself of your progress. Let me therefore move on to the most important part of this process..." He trails off, then keys in a new command, and Orion is placed upright, arms spread apart, in a position to be scrutinized by Genesis.

Orion himself, however, takes the time to scrutinize the environment. Or rather, the change in environment. The space that had before been empty white has now completely transformed. A forest clearing with a bubbling brook is where he stands, a fishing dock just a few paces down the stream. Soft grass crinkles beneath his feet, and dappled sunlight warms his hair. He can feel the heart of the city here, also in the sound of a busy city block from above, and the scent of a bakery, entirely sugar and pastry. Genesis hasn't even noticed his incredulous glances though, too busy in his examination of Orion.

"You were created by a woman named Aulea Caia. She gave you her name, and

it seems her basic facial structure, but I need the similarities to be far more pronounced than like that. She never had a child you see, and I believe she intended you to represent the one she lost. I need you to match her most obvious features, something like... her eyes," Genesis muses. Orion is, for the first time, getting a sense that something might not be right here.

"She has lovely blue eyes, stormy and fierce. I do believe that would be befitting a prince, hmm?" He taps away at the keyboard Orion can't see, and though he can't feel anything change, he can tell deep inside that his eyes are no longer the muddy brown he knew them to be.

"Silver hair, far too cliché. No, I think we'll match you to Aulea's husband. His hair was a lovely shade of black before it went grey; matching it should be easy."

Orion feels the change once again and finally shakes himself out of his stupor long enough to ask, "What is the point of this? And why have we moved out of that white place?"

"That white place' as you call it is a manifestation of you. We haven't moved; your perception of yourself has changed. You were empty, so I gave you some memories, voila, your inner space has changed to match. Easy enough," Genesis replies, rolling his eyes.

"And as for the point of this, well..." he backs away just a bit, far enough for Orion to really see him. "I intend to destroy this lovely little game one line of code at a time, and you are my ticket in. You see, my virus can only attach to sentient code, code that is changing almost constantly.

In a game of this caliber, that is occurring only in players as they play the game, and obviously none of them would help me. I can't simply become a player myself, as that would make it impossible to leave the game once the virus is planted. You, however, will be changing constantly as you gain sentence, creating new memories and learning. You are the perfect host." He summons a strange purple fire, glowing bright and hot in proximity to Orion. He tries to shy away, but finds he can't move.

"At least give me a chance to fight back!" Orion cries, trying and failing to move his body, a headache forming from the strain of it. Suddenly he is released, and he runs into the woods, away from Genesis and the little fishing dock.

He doesn't get very far before the man appears directly before him and knocks him to the ground. Orion turns to crawl away from him.

"I like to cause chaos, Orion, and this virus is my newest plan to do so! It will destroy everything in the game slowly, starting with things that you touch and spreading from there. They will never figure out that it was me." Genesis flashes close again, this time stopping Orion with a kick and a boot on his back. "This shouldn't hurt. If you want to keep your newfound life as long as you can, I would avoid everything, but players especially. They will spread the virus faster than you. Anything you touch will be infected."

"Why are you telling me this?" Orion asks, biding his time.

"Well, you did ask for a sporting chance, and I like to think of myself as a fair man,"



*Patterned Vase* Gary Yablick

*Bonsai Holder* Jay Ouypron



*Ceramic Mug Duo* Kim Helme



Genesis chuckles, then shoves the flame coated hand deep into Orion's back.

When he awakens, Genesis is gone.

When he awakens, the clicking has stopped.

When he awakens, the liminal space they occupied before was gone, replaced by Orion's apartment, void of any unique features that could identify it. The sleek, minimalistic design was something Orion had picked himself, or at least he thought he had before this mess began. Now, laying on the floor crying, all he can think about is how this, like everything else he believes in or knows, is just a manifestation of someone else's will.

The sky is dark outside before he can drag his tired body off the floor and onto the couch, and he doesn't think he will ever make it to the bedroom. He scrubs his eyes with his hands to clear out the worst of the tears, and notes that the teardrops have stained his skin the same purple of the virus.

His mind is too exhausted to focus on anything, let alone the implications of his purple hands right now, so he slides his head down and falls asleep, bone weary and barely cognizant, but awake enough to appreciate that the clicking of Genesis's keyboard, the soundtrack to his breakdown and rebuilding, was gone like dust in the wind.

*An anywhere  
kind of 12am*

by Logan McConaughy

proper/neon  
glowing into the streets  
and buzzing with midnight jazz  
stale pretzels and folded pizza  
zigzagging around those puddles  
in those heels like there're eyes  
in your toes, how are you always  
looking up, laughing  
into the skyscrapers like  
you saw a joke written in their windows, no  
cigarette butts impaled on your stilettos,  
just a spread, lipsticked smile laughing  
up into the long lines of the city.



*Untitled Kaz Smith*

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*Untitled Jessica Hildebrand*

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# *Post-Squirrel Sighting*

by Justin Pineda-Pirro

Country music stung my ears while I held my drink tighter than I hold onto my dog's leash post squirrel-sighting. Anya and Marie made their rounds, greeting and shaking hands with everyone they recognized. This town wasn't home to me; this music didn't sit right with me; and these people, all but two, were not my friends. So I stood, patiently awaiting their return, trying not to get mad every time someone bumped into me. I was a few feet from the top of a flight of stairs at a corner bar near the University of Virginia. The abnormal amount of humidity in the bar amplified the smell of beer, leaving me with a second-hand buzz and an excuse to drink slowly. The girls, all dressed the same, flocked behind the boys at the bar, leaving those who could dance, but didn't have anyone to dance with, in chairs next to high tables against the wall. The background music, laughter, and distant banter left me all but submerged in white noise.

My friends circled back around to meet me. The country genre of music abruptly changed to hip hop, and as my eyes met with Marie's, our heads rhythmically and simultaneously bumped to the beat. The flow slithered through our ears and down our spines. Alcohol kicking in while we were kicking it made it near impossible to be anywhere but there. Blue beads of light lined the floor around the bar, favoring those with Air Force 1's, me included. The dark and granulated outlines of people swaying side to side left us with the

exact nostalgia we came searching for. With exquisite timing, a young security guard, wearing all black, began to yell.

"HEY! HEY! KNOCK IT OFF!!"

Pulling and tugging led us to the bar where our nervous laughs left us excited to see what lay on the opposite side of the gathering crowd. An orifice, formed by sweaty intrigued bodies, revealed a man in a denim jacket throwing around the bartender. With his head down, Denim grabbed the bartender by his shirt, jerking him back and forth, trying to score a few punches but failing each time. In the midst of the chaos, we watched as Denim knocked and shoved until he made his way towards the bar where I was. I was lucky though. A female bartender watched the men fight their way towards her and, being on the inside of the walls of the bar, was left completely and utterly unlucky. Denim, barreling towards her, clocked the poor girl in the head, knocking her into the oh-so-many bottles of vodka adjacent to the brawling men. She yelped, and I thought of my dog getting her tiny feet stepped on by a careless me who couldn't bother to watch my step.

A taller monster of a man finally grabbed Denim off of the bartender and yelled for everyone to leave, marking what we thought as the end of the night. The girls and I regrouped and trotted over used crinkled red solo cups to check on the female bartender, who was now hunched

over holding her head. I placed my drink on a nearby table, and we lifted her over the bar and onto a chair. Standing over her I asked about her head and neck. She shrugged me off and immediately as I looked to my left, you wouldn't believe it. Denim barreled through for a second time trying to get over the bar where we were. He pushed me out of the way and violently started bumping into the female bartender while trying to hop the only barrier keeping him from his target.

"Okay, is this guy serious?"  
I quietly huffed to myself.

I felt something in my gut. It moved around in my chest and I could feel it freeing itself of cuffs and chains. I didn't quite know what was happening, but I felt something, something big, coming undone inside of me. This beast I had successfully captured and condemned deep within my psyche years ago was knocking down blockades and barriers, climbing up my throat, and trying to take control of my arms and legs. I didn't let him take it. Instead, I just gave it to him: Sweet and absolute permission. I looked at the girl and then back at Denim. In a quick burst, I charged him. All of my years at the gym, all the miles ran, every intense workout during soccer practice could not account for the strength I felt pulsing through my veins. I wrapped my arms around Denim's waist and lifted this two hundred pound man up into the sky and down onto the same table I had placed my drink not even seconds prior.

He quickly got up and threw the cup at me. My own drink hit me above my brow, and not even for a second did I blink. My eyes were piercing through time and space, altering reality, beaming directly into his.

"OH SO YOU WANNA DO THIS?  
HUH?" Denim shrieked.

With Hennessy dripping down my profile, I said nothing. I just continued to stare. He looked scared and, quite frankly, I was beginning to feel frightened myself. Reality swept through the building and nestled into that crumpled-up cup Denim threw at me. Adrenaline fled my body and cowered away next to the female bartender. I wanted to look back and say, "HEY! Where do you think you're going? We're not done yet!" But I knew if I broke the stare, Denim would know that whatever bravery I might've had when I initiated the fight was now definitely gone. Speaking of things that were gone, I was genuinely curious as to where Hulk the security guard went. Oddly enough, his big head peaked over the steps I spent the majority of the night next to. He scanned the room and carried his eyes through the bar until he met the back of Denim's head. His eyes widened, his brows arched inward, and his upper lip scrunched showing his long, horse-like teeth.

Thank Jesus, I thought.

Hulk grabbed Denim by his jacket and relentlessly dragged him down the steps. My shoulder felt warm, so I

looked to see a familiar hand followed by a crazed voice, “Yo, that was wild bro! You were great, dude! What the hell was wrong with that guy?”

“I don’t know, Marie, but let’s get the fuck out of here.” I followed with a soft laugh as I let out all the air I was holding hostage in my lungs. “Where’s Anya?” I looked around to find her talking to the female bartender. I walked over to the injured girl in the chair. “Hey, are you okay? I hear an ambulance. Is that for you?” I said sympathetically, looking down at her.

“I’m fine,” she muttered.

Not that I was expecting a “thank you,” but I was definitely not expecting THAT. “Yo, Anya.” She looked over to me. “Let’s skedaddle.” She hopped up from her kneeling position, fixed her jacket, and nodded at the both of us to leave.

“So much violence, I feel tainted.” Anya smirked at me with squinted eyes. I bumped her lightly but hard enough to make her step off to the side.

“Shut up! That shit was crazy, you really threw that n\*\*\*\*, huh?” Marie smiled ear to ear, jealous she didn’t get into any fights.

“Yeah man, I just didn’t wanna see that girl get more hurt than she already was. I don’t know what came over me if I’m being honest.” But I did. I looked down, almost embarrassed I showed that side of me. We walked down the steps and outside to find a well-lit street flooded with cops and an ambulance. As we walked, I saw black men being questioned. I saw black men speaking to the cops, black men that weren’t even in the bar. I saw cops

grabbing black men by the arm to ask them if they knew the perpetrator. As if every black man knows every black man in Charlottesville, Virginia. I squeezed my eyes shut but could still see the blue and red lights. I opened them to see Marie turned my way trying to show me the video she took of the fight.

“Yo look, I was gonna post this, but if the ops get their hands on it, it’s wraps. So I’mma just keep it for myself.” She chuckled looking down at her phone, holding, in her mind, what seemed like a million dollars.

Cops stormed up and down the street carrying notepads and pens. I kept my head down, trying not to bring attention to myself. I thought about Denim. I wondered if he got away safely. I questioned how he got himself into that situation. I thought about his beast and if he had successfully locked him away until today. I thought about how that could have been any of us, and I got angry at myself for feeling empathy for a guy who had just gone on a tirade in a local bar. I felt more empathy for him than I did for the rude girl who got bonked in the head. I felt more empathy for Denim because while staring in his eyes I saw my own. I saw fear and I saw pride, and if we weren’t just looking in a mirror, then I’m not quite sure what we were doing.

Country music blared in the background and brought me back to existence. The overwhelming sound of sirens fell over us like white noise. I held both their hands tighter than I hold onto my dog’s leash post-squirrel sighting, and we walked. We walked through the chaos. We walked through the fire until we got to the other side.



*Self-Portrait* Morgan Bell

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# *Heritage*

by Pramit Patel

Indoor flat loafers speckled with eccentric lines,  
gritty weathered high tops for the other side of the door.

A dulcet lie whispered in my mother tongue,  
protecting the image of the immigrant son they knew.

Living with the details of the intricate sarees and kurtas,  
having to remind myself to separate these lives.

Resplendent memories of tradition,  
often met with the gut feeling of shame,

Words outside uttered in English, separating my lives,  
yet celebrating my culture with a shameful pride.

Equality the right of birth in the west, a sensation I rarely feel,  
fearing the maledictions: *Fresh off the boat, refugee, immigrant.*

Chants of everyone, everywhere, wanting their country back,  
feeling hiraeth of a place I don't belong.

Emphasizing my western identity, they ignore the melanin in my skin,  
sun kissed by generations living off the land.

These days its been known for belonging to terror attacks,  
nitpicking the details, they say:  
*You're not like them.*

Removing myself from tradition, isolating myself from my mother's tongue,  
to show them that I'm one of the good ones.

But as time passes, I'm wondering if all this hate for my heritage was wrong,  
I'm caught up within a dual-faced lie,  
And I don't know where I belong.

# *Blossom at my Side*

by Asia

*Te extraño mucho*

*Te amo mi amor*

*Te quiero mucho*

He said those words so easily to someone  
who never said their mother's name

To someone who was perfect for lack of features

To someone who loved him

A gesture of being good enough to fill

To someone blank enough

to paint the words on.

*Tú eres mi mundo*

*Tú eres mi reina*

I see a life with you

I want you to be my wife

He gave all parts of himself and never asked

to see any parts of me. He admired me

for who I could be for him

"Please don't call me perfect," I said. "I'm not a product  
or a meal that turned out well"

He refused to acknowledge that I could be an equal

and cried out, starved, when I would not

allow him to build a home inside of me.



*The Butterfly* Laura Ravenhorst

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# *I am Only Thirteen*

La'Tasha Strother

"You should come take a seat beside me." I hesitate. I can sense his motive. I look over at the table in the left corner. My cousins are laughing. I want to laugh with them. He repeats his request, asking as if he cannot see the look on my face. "You should come take a seat beside me." I look down at my plate of food; it no longer seems appetizing. He has ruined my appetite. His wife looks up and smiles at me. Doesn't she see my hesitation? As a woman, does she not recognize this face? This face is the face that every woman makes when a man tries making unwanted advances. Is she oblivious to this situation? Why is she not coming to my rescue? I'm only thirteen, and I can identify a predator. She married a predator. The first lady of Rock Hall Baptist church married a predator. Now he is asking me to take a seat beside him. I took one last look at my plate of food then I watched my child-sized feet walk me over to the chair beside him.

This predator has a name, Pastor Beasley. He smiles. I hate his smile, so like always, I refuse to smile back. If I smile back, he might think I'm weak. He might think I won't tell, so I make a cold face. I make the coldest face a thirteen-year-old girl can make. His wife smiles again. I wish I could wipe the smile off her face. How does a woman smile when a predator is in the room? With the fork in my right hand, I push my food in a playful way to the left side of my plate. Then I glance over my right shoulder. My cousins have forgotten about me. Do they not

see me sitting beside this predator? I see them sitting beside each other. I see them chatting with each other as if there is no predator in the room. I wonder if the predator has asked them to take a seat beside him. Does the predator only like young ladies? My cousins are young, but they are not ladies.

Would the predator have asked me to take a seat beside him if I was a young boy? Am I not safe in this girl's body? The predator must think so because he begins to coax me into a trap. "You're growing up; it's time for us to consider what role you want to take on in the church. We should have a meeting and discuss this matter." I look at him. I look at him with the face you give when you know someone is lying. I'm only thirteen, yet I know the Pastor is lying. I know the predator wants to take me into his office alone. I know the predator wants to see what I look like alone. I want to see what the predator looks like exposed. I want to expose the Pastor for who he is. I want to stand up in the church dining hall and make an announcement. I want to say, "Excuse me, the man that you call pastor is really a pedophile." I want to expose the man of God before he exposes me.

I am only thirteen, but I still know when a man wants to do things that your body is not old enough for. The predator brings his elbows to the table. I watch him raise his hands to the left side of his face. While blocking his wife from seeing

his next move he then blows me a kiss! The pastor blows three consecutive kisses to a minor. How often does this heinous act occur in religious settings? How often do spiritual leaders abuse minors? How often do girls and boys make cold faces to scare away the predator? I look down at my plate. Somehow the predator's kiss has made my appetite return. I square my thirteen-year-old shoulders

while lifting my chin. I look directly into the predator's eye, and I glare my truth. Without words I make known my appetite for justice. I am not your victim. If no one else will fight for me than I will fight for myself. This thirteen-year-old body belongs to me. I gently pick up my plate of food while authoritatively standing up from the dining hall table to join my cousins in laughter.

# Secondhand Cat

by Hazel Rose Hubbard

Coco, when I met her, was this little rag of a cat. She hated the food they gave her at the SPCA—light brown, mushy grossness that they smushed on a paper plate to look more appetizing, almost like normal cat food. She was wise enough to avoid it, unless circumstances were dire, so she weighed very little—five pounds, five ounces of cat. Her honeydew green eyes were as large as cantaloupes against her small frame. When you'd open her cell to peek inside, all you would see were eyes, two big rings of green and yellow peering back at you, slowly blinking. Otherwise, she did not move at all. It was almost as if she was saying, "How rude of you to barge in like this."

You have to wonder when you look down at a cat; what does she think? What does she know? I looked into Coco's melon-shaped eyes, and I wondered if she ever thought of her old home or her old owners. Maybe she thought about those days when she was still able to go outside, frolicked among the grasses, chased birds through the bushes, and tortured bugs on the patio. I wondered if she had those experiences and if she ever missed them.

Coco had once been one of the "basement cats" that lived in the basement clinic of the SPCA. She came in with flea bites all over her and patches of missing fur. She had to have been down there for a couple months before she was moved to the cat rows. Finally, she was ready to be adopted,

but no one really came by. Coco sat there, squished into the corner of her cell like a big dust bunny. They'd open her cell doors sometimes, but she just sat still. Maybe she was thinking of her old owners. Maybe she was wondering if they'd ever come back.

I sat myself down on a stool in front of Coco's cell and reached out my hand for her to sniff it. *Pleased to meet you*, I thought. *Pleased to meet you, too*, I think she would've thought if she had human thoughts. Her wet nose lightly grazed my knuckles; she seemed to like me. At least that's what Evan thought.

"Maybe she could be the one," he said to me. Evan hovered above. He volunteered at the SPCA every Sunday, and we'd been looking for an apartment cat for some time.

"Maybe," I replied, my hand still outstretched to Coco. She got up, stretched, and pensively moved towards the gate.

Coco was like a waif. I think if Margaret Keane were there with us, Coco would've been her muse. In the light, we could actually see Coco's coloring. She had black fur smattered with orange and brown. Her head was big and puffy, and from that angle, I could see how her fur clung to her sides because she was so thin. She looked like those fancy long-haired dogs when their bodies get shaved—big, puffy face and comically tiny legs. Coco



*Low Poly Pet* Olivia Miller

---

stepped onto my knee and peered out the cell door, as if she were looking to see if anyone was coming. No one was.

“Hello,” I said to the woman at the adoptions desk. “I would like to adopt a cat.”

“Okay, great. Name?” said the woman at the desk. She was short, older, with curly black hair. The day was November 23rd, a Saturday, and it was raining outside.

“Coco,” I answered.

“Cocoa,” she repeated. She typed a bit at the keyboard then raised her eyebrows. “The dog?” There was a tinge of judgement in her voice.

“Oh—no! The cat.”

“Oh.” She did a bit more typing. “Ah, yeah, Coco. There are so many Cocos, you see...” Her voice trailed off. The older woman wheeled herself around behind the desk, grabbing clipboards and turning on the printer. She began droning on about the adoption agreement. Things like microchips, vet visits, and so on. Evan was there beside me holding my hand. I looked to him and I thought to myself, *I wonder if—*

“...and you should know that Coco was diagnosed with an eosinophilic granuloma complex this past year. This means Coco will be on a special diet.”

My attention turned back to the woman. She was now staring very intently into my eyes. “An eosinophilic granuloma complex is usually associated with skin lesions and other dermatological

issues...” She began to rattle off Coco’s medical history. *Skin lesions. Mouth ulcers. Hair loss.* My confidence in my decision to adopt began to wane as I thought about the numbers in my bank account. “...but Coco has been, for as long as she’s been in the rows, pretty healthy and she does well on the ZD.”

*Okay, I thought, I didn’t expect that, but it isn’t anything we can’t handle.* I squeezed Evan’s hand. The woman continued talking, and my mind wandered a bit. I looked at the poster behind her. It was a dog poster that sort of looked like a stylized Russian propaganda poster, but with a dachshund instead of Joseph Stalin. Above the poster were those lights you see in every commercial building. Specks of black sat inside the fixtures. Dead bugs. It makes you wonder how they manage to get in such strange places.

“...now let’s move on to talk about what her old owners said about Miss Coco.” The woman grabbed a page off the printer and stared intently at the printed words. “Well, they say she is affectionate.” She paused. “But here it says that Coco makes life for other cats ‘a living hell’, so they recommend no other pets in the house.”

Evan raised his eyebrows and looked at me. I knew we were thinking the same thing: *Cuddles and Monster.* Those were my landlord’s cats who often visited my apartment: two males—one big bovine-looking one and a small bug-eyed looking one.

“You still would like to adopt Coco, correct?”

I did adopt Coco. I took her home with me on that day. It was cold and rainy, and she yowled the entire way home. I think she was scared, since I was scared, too. Perhaps she was scared of my car or maybe not knowing where she was going. I was scared of the thought that I wouldn't be a good enough caretaker for her.

Many moons came and passed during the first year I had Coco. I adopted her right when I got my first apartment, so she was there when the walls were still bare and the shelves were empty. During that year, many things were destined to happen.

On a summer day, I woke up to Coco's big head looming over mine. Dreamily, she stared down at my eyes. Her eyes glimmered from the light that slipped from the covered window. Very suddenly and violently, she sneezed and sprayed cat snot all over my face. No words came out of my mouth but a groan of confusion. I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling the fresh splattering of her wet nose stuff all over my forehead.

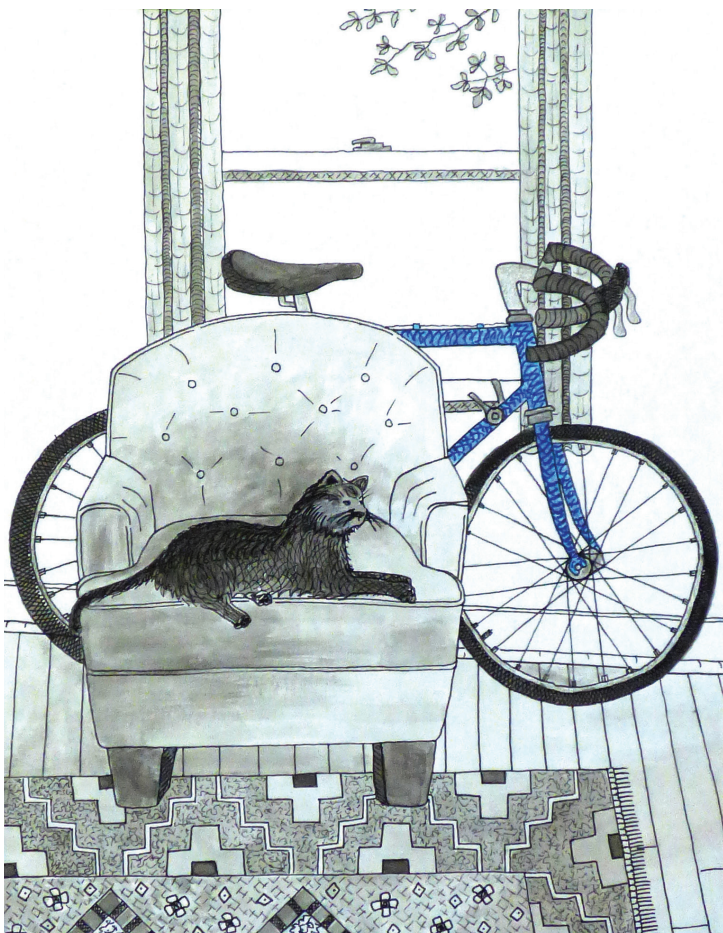
"Gross, Coco!" I immediately got up, and Coco followed me to the bathroom. She sat next to my feet as I washed my face, cold water dripping down my arms onto the tile floor. I dried my face and looked down at Coco with anguish. She

looked back at me, her melon eyes to my four eyes; she appeared thoroughly content to see me up that early. I think she may have done it on purpose.

She herded me to the food dish, and I obliged her demands by giving her a scoop of crunchies. It was the same song and dance each morning. She meowed, I cooed, and she got her daily fix of expensive cat food.

I sat on my bed, still disheveled from the wake-up call, and watched Coco work away at her food dish. She had gained three pounds since I first adopted her—she was now a whopping eight pounds and five ounces. Her stomach that once clung to her was now round and full, her hair was softer and puffier. She no longer looked like a rag.

Coco stopped eating and turned her head towards me. She slowly blinked. She may have been trying to say something. I watched her blink once more towards me, and she averted her eyes. I wondered whether Coco still thought of her old owners or of her old place. Did she remember it? I wondered, too, if Coco ever thought of me when I went away. I decided that she probably did. After all, if I weren't around, she wouldn't have anybody else to sneeze on.



*Old Bike* Karen Siegrist

---

# *Minute*

by La'Tasha Strother

The wave that failed to crash in.  
The glossy milk ring on the black marble countertop.  
The dot size spider dangling above while you take a shower.  
The forgotten panties draped over the laundry door.  
The pennies lost beneath the envelopes, rubber bands, and ketchup packets.  
The vanilla ice-cream on the tip of her hair.  
The baby vomit running down the chest of the yellow summer dress.  
The preschooler with two ponytails that have lost their ribbons.  
The ant.  
The crumb.  
The ant carrying the crumb.  
The apology after infidelity.

# *How many of these will I write about you: #85*

by Logan McConaughy

I sat in that tree for hours  
pine needles prickling me, imagining  
I was a bird, eighteen-years-old  
(because even birds had to be  
eighteen-years-old to leave)  
and free  
I watched them pingponging  
from branch to branch above  
me and wondered if their  
wings ever got very tired  
or if they got bugs smacking  
them in the eyeballs  
when they turned too tight a corner  
around that cloud just up ahead  
(not left, we told you right at the cloud,  
turn around, now we're lost)

Thought maybe if I turned into one,  
if I need to  
I'll fly and I'll walk  
just in case one option gets tired  
and then oh, that might make me an angel  
and that sounds good but I think  
I'll lay here and watch these birds  
for a while longer before that happens.

I'm still here and I'm still watching birds.  
You're not, but I think that's all right.  
One of us had to stay and watch  
to make sure the birds are okay, after all.  
They are, and now every one I see  
spells "I love you" as they fly, just  
like those airplanes that make the clouds  
like they have at the beach.

*E Pluribus Unum*  
*(Out of many, one)*

by Julianna Skuba

low  
ceilings  
repose  
grey blanket unfurling  
endlessly  
past eaton  
i watched sky jazz  
the common starling  
sturnus vulgaris  
in the southwest of ohio  
the flatlands  
fractured  
cornfields  
before the hills  
murmuration throbbing  
controversial riffs of utopian dimensions  
passerines  
tearing it all up  
across route u.s. seventy  
heading northeast



*Untitled* Palwasha Mohammad

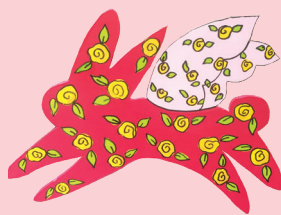
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