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*Winners of the 2020-2021
English Department Awards*

*Libbie Keeton LaPrade Creative Writing Award
Abby Burnett*

*Charles H. Barrett Creative Writing Award
Donald Shields*

*Belle M. Hill Creative Poetry Award
Marissa Smith*

*Floyd H. and Rowe M. Crews Memorial Award
Anna-Catherine Kueng and Nicole Tolley*

Wanna Dance?

The stars ignite beneath my feet
as I saunter towards the moon.
They don't mind being my stepping stones,
though I've never stopped to sniff the stardust
long enough to ask.

Mirrors taught me
that asymmetry isn't beautiful,
but the stars prove me wrong
with every out-of-sync line dance
disguised as a lop-sided constellation.

The rhythm they shuffle to is so sporadic
it's a wonder I manage to step in time,
as a misplaced foot guarantees I trip,
knocking the moon out of orbit.

Maybe tying my shoelaces together
will be selfless, after all.
Why should the moon be married to earth
when the stars invite her to dance?

Cosmic Thoughts

I have always been offended by
shooting stars -- (comets
living under alias).
They mock my ability to
identify flying objects,
drifting innocuously through the sky
as if the earth wouldn't tremble
if a real star had done the same.

I was told that
the moon dictates the tides,
making it entirely possible to
feel drawn to her, every time
I step into the ocean and let
her waves sweep me off my feet.

I wanted to write about
Pluto, but I find its planetary status is
irrelevant. As long as it remains
in our galaxy. As long as it doesn't
abandon me.

I am mesmerized to know that
the sun's rays take more than
eight minutes to reach the earth.
At any given moment, the sun
could have already died, and the light
we receive could just be the last breaths
of something that no longer exists.

I cried when I heard that
Saturn is losing its rings.
In a factual, unsympathetic sense,
billions of years will strip a planet
of its only devising feature.
To say that time heals everything
would be to ignore how much it simply erases.

With You

Most days, I'm packed, ready to go, hope in hand, peace my destination. A one-way ticket, stamped with bittersweet tears and farewells. The ebb and flow makes it easy. I hold on loosely, like a child; knowing any second pop goes the red balloon, the atmosphere's weight, too much to bear. Most days, it's easy to imagine a better place, without bombings, burying children, ravaging illnesses, words like bee stings, permanent tattoos, remnant dirt under fingernails. It's easy to imagine holy texts unfolding before my eyes, beholding my Beholder, the weight of being alive lifted from my weary shoulders. I tell myself I can leave this place satisfied having seen, felt, done it all.

But, a pan pops in the bubbly water; *splash*-- a crescendo of laughter. You're wearing a "King of the Grill" apron now drenched in lavender dish soap. We're hysterical, you and me, two clowns in our tiny apartment, as if this is Man's first comic relief. Our bellies ache as you pull me to you in our lemon-decor kitchen. As I listen to the distant sound of Cash on the radio, and the closer sound of your happy inflections, I take out a single sock from my packed bag, promising I'll put it back in tomorrow.

Another sunrise pours in, illuminating your calloused hands, shoulder freckles, ever-changing eyes like stained glass windows. You pour me a cup of cold apple cider (you know I hate it warm), drench my blueberry waffles in honey syrup, stroll in moose flannel pajamas. We turn on our favorite episode of *Winnie the Pooh*, your heat-radiating arms around my waist, our breathing, synchronized. I take out another sock from my packed bag, promising I'll put it back the next day. It's only one pair, I tell myself.

The days, years, roll on— slow dancing under Christmas lights, eating pumpkin pie every first of October, feeling kicks in my belly, picking peaches in western Virginia, driving on backroads with your hand in mine. The pairs of socks grow into a mountain of indecision, an obstacle preventing my surrender. You're 39 today. You doze as I place my head on your chest, listening to the pitter patter of rain, your heartbeat, our ceiling fan. My secret prayers to God: *Teach me how to say goodbye.*

Then my solitude replies, it is well. I imagine I'm in a single field of sunflowers without you; it is well. The sun will rise for you whether I am here or not; it is well. I get flashbacks of my childhood, when I knew how to exist without you; it is well. Most days, repacking is easy. You say senseless words—I put a sock back in. Our baby girl is suffering from Crohn's disease—another sweater is thrown in. Some days, the insurmountable mountain of indecision crumbles back to nothing. My suitcase is fully packed. My departure gets closer—freedom, ecstasy—in reach like a low-hanging apple on a bountiful tree.

Then, the sudden plop of a pan, a mid-afternoon kiss on my forehead, your sleepy time drawl, the giggle of our Maybella, sends me unpacking, pulling my upward-bound balloon down, longing for the innocence of youth, to be nineteen again eating cookie dough with you. I try to fix my eyes on Heaven once more, pretending you're not my selfish idea of it. Secret tears trickle down my cheeks as I throw myself on my Solid Rock. Midnight Q&A sessions with God while your chest rises and falls: *How can I say goodbye to this? How can I ever say goodbye?*

On Turning Seventeen

I sat down on his creaky bed. The sunlight danced on his navy and pink flowered walls. His breathing was slow as I gently stroked his forearm, whispering, “Daddoo, wake up.” The words could hardly leave me, fearing that they would startle him into a premature death if I raised my voice any louder. I breathed in the aroma of Vicks Vaporub and ginger ale. I could hear his wooden cuckoo clock above his dresser, the dresser where his bright orange Tennessee Volunteers hat sat beside a picture of his grandchildren. In the picture, I was eight months old, being cradled in my oldest cousin’s arms.

Eventually, after a long exhale, my Daddoo’s eyelashes began fluttering like a child’s when woken from an afternoon nap. Slowly, gazing into the pale blueness of his watery eyes, I said, “We are going to Cracker Barrel. Do you want anything from Cracker Barrel?” He reached his cold, darkened-by-the-sun hand to mine. I kept my gaze on the gold wedding band he had been wearing for sixty years. Muttering “chicken and dumplings” was a laborious act for him, and I looked down at the ugly pink carpet so he wouldn’t see my eyes were now watering.

After that October afternoon, when the men in white coats told my Daddoo, who was wearing a golf shirt he’d never wear again, “stage four,” I found myself looking at the ugly pink carpet a lot, the carvings in his bed posts, the sun dancing on the walls, or anything that wasn’t his withering flesh.

“Okay Daddoo, we will bring you chicken and dumplings when we get back from Lynchburg. I love you,” and I let go of his hand, as if the cuckoo clock wasn’t furiously ticking above

his dresser. My dad drove the sixty mile drive, which I'd end up driving numerous times after I began college at the University of Lynchburg. As I watched the houses go by, I wondered if there were sad grandchildren in them too.

I can't remember anything we talked about at the restaurant except the apple pie had 1,000 calories and our waiter only gave us two spoons for five people. I stared out the window, looking at the gray trees, forgetting that Valentine's Day, my favorite holiday, would arrive three days later because the world seemed so dull as if there was no longer anything worth celebrating.

During the drive home, I held the chicken and dumplings close, as if they were the only remaining source of salvation. I remembered my Nana's voice saying soup could fix anything, so I prayed it would, even though I knew the incessant cuckoo clock could not hear my prayers. Back at 1800 Franklin Turnpike Drive, I entered into the quiet house with the ugly pink carpet.

I reawoke the child from his afternoon nap. "Daddoo, wake up. We are back. We're back with your chicken and dumplings." The bed let out awful squeaks, as my grandfather propped himself against the faded pillow while the colorful sunset faded outside.

I looked at the shiny golf clubs beside his bed and gave him updates on how his golf friends did in the tournament he was supposed to be in (even though I knew nothing about the sport).

"They did well. Really well," I lied because I had no idea if the tournament was even that day, as I watched his hands shake while he gripped the bent, faded silver spoon. I rambled about the cold weather, how his wife, Eleanor, was doing, and about the wait time at Cracker Barrel. I did not tell him about the balloon my parents had given me that morning because balloons reminded me of his swollen, empty stomach. I was afraid it would make him think of it, though I knew he was not blind to or unaware of his body's cries for permanent rest.

"Do you want me to take this back to the kitchen?" I asked, as he set down the chicken and dumplings on the bedside table, almost dropping it because of the weight. He shook his head, whispering he would get to it later. He never got to it, or any other soups for that matter.

The sunset faded, and the haunting hours befell, as I tried to forget about the coming moans and cries he would give in the night. As I was telling him, see you later, because I needed to get home, to my energetic dog and lively sister, my Daddoo sat up once more.

“Happy birthday, Anna Catherine,” he said quietly, smiling as if I were his greatest pride in life. I squeezed his hand, feeling the wrinkles and warmth that belonged to him, then let go. He did remember that I was seventeen-years-old that day.

The next time I saw my Daddoo, I wanted to shatter the cuckoo clock with a hammer. I hated time and the way it ran out. I hated the ugly pink carpet, the gray trees, the cold chicken and dumplings by his bedside. I hated his eyelashes that no longer fluttered, his hands that were still, the man in black and khakis who told me, “I’m sorry for your loss,” as he nonchalantly took my Daddoo’s body from me.

Nevertheless, my Daddoo left the Earth—the year, the world, my life, went on anyway. My eighteenth birthday came, and then my nineteenth, and last year, I celebrated my twentieth at the same Cracker Barrel that fixed my grandfather’s last bowl of chicken and dumplings soup.

Somewhere, my grief traded its nametag of rage for one of gratitude. I wear that one now. Occasionally, I forget to put it on when I dress, and I worry that I am forgetting my Daddoo. But on my birthdays, his voice returns to me. Then I feel the soft gaze of his blue eyes, and God makes the sun dance on my walls like I am seventeen again, like the world still has Millard Morton Crumley in it.

The Wolfwild

There are stories from back home of a curse in the woods which bordered our small mountain town. Born of the earth itself, it's no unnatural, malevolent force. Hardly a curse at all, as some might say. No, it's more of just... an occurrence: something that happens. I'm not sure if it's anywhere else beyond those woods which surrounded our town.

My uncle knew this curse personally, so did my dad. At a young age their older brother was lost in those woods. The search wasn't long, as they're never found after three days' time. Three suns fell and three more rose, and life went on. They still saw him every now and then. My dad and uncle would be at the table with my grandparents, and Dad'd catch a glimpse of him, only for a moment. And they'd all rush up to watch their brother, their son, disappear among the trees.

My uncle married early on, in his twenties or so. Dad waited longer and married Mom when he was thirty-seven. My aunt was a wonderful woman, as my parents used to tell me. Only a couple years older than my uncle, but the personality of a kindly old woman and wise like one too. She was an artist from out of town. Not many people would move to a small town like ours, usually moving away, but she craved a quieter life. She cooked in a diner and sold paintings on the side. Uncle was quiet, but thoughtful and honest. Knew the woods like the back of his hand but never lingered too long. He was a miner. Coal industry was about the only thing holding that town together at the time. Only reason it's standing now is the railroad. Even so those rails are barely enough, but the town doesn't seem to be going anywhere.

My aunt and uncle, before they were either, met at a biannual dance at the town hall. Nothing much to say from what my father told me. Never danced, neither were the type. A couple wall flowers who bonded over just that, talked outside the whole night. She was just passing through, looking for a possible place to move. Dad told me she later confessed that talk with my uncle is why she stayed. He was nicer than those outside the town and different. All the townfolk were. A few chats with strangers was hardly a good reason to move there, but she didn't regret her decision.

A year or so passed. They both watered their tree. Eventually it bloomed and they married, as things go. It lasted a while. Two decades of happiness are more than many can lay claim to. She fell ill one winter, though, like many do. She was one of the few who didn't get better. Not sure what it was. There was a blizzard during the funeral. It was a struggle against the snow to inter her. My uncle stayed out in the storm once everyone else had gone. Dad had to drag him back to his cabin and spend the night with him there.

Time passed by and my uncle fell into a state of depression. My parents had him home for dinner often just to see how he was holding up and to keep him company. A couple more years crawled on and things began to seem better. Then the mines dried up. He was left jobless in a town where there were few spaces to fill. He continued for a few months doing odd jobs for people around town, began to get most of his food by hunting and fishing, and the occasional meal from my parents. His depression only worsened. The world seemed to be assuring him he had no place in it. I was about one and a half years old.

We were there, having dinner. Me in my highchair and my parents on either side. It's strange that of the very few memories I have from that age, the most vivid are the few seconds which passed as my uncle walked by the window and into the woods. My parents hadn't seen, but they knew by morning where he'd gone. They'd been expecting it would happen. There was no search, he wasn't lost, but he wasn't coming back.

There's something about those woods which draws in the broken people. Those who just can't bear to try and go on as they once did. There are exceptions, such as my dad's eldest brother, lost

by chance as a child. But more often than not, they leave of their own accord, silently in the night.

I wonder sometimes what drives someone to do it. Not to leave life, but to simply leave the town. It's a calling, I think. Something beyond the hearing of a happy person. They feel themselves called back to something else, something simple and wild. I can see the appeal every now and then, of shedding all human meaning, to shed responsibility of the pointless and tiring complexities they face from day to day.

Deep in the woods, late at night, a man can shed more than just his place in the human world. He can shed his skin.

★

I would gaze at those woods in the night, wondering if I'd see him. Or maybe I'd see someone else. I did, occasionally. A dark shape, or the glow of eyes staring back in the moonlight. I never once felt afraid; I had no reason to. The tree line was a brick wall to them.

They were a common sight in that town. Never once was someone attacked and never once would they venture past the border. They would only stand and stare. You might wonder how someone could recognize family. I've seen my uncle, and somehow, you just know. It's just something in the eyes: a familiarity.

Throughout my father's childhood, and throughout mine, when we gazed out the window and caught a glimpse of old family, we saw no humans. Out across the meadow of our back yard, still and silent against the trees and bushes, stood a grey wolf.

★

To be human is to accept knowledge. The main aspect which separates us from the animals is not biological, but rather mental. We seek an understanding of our surroundings. Our instinct is not to accept things as they are, but to understand why they are. And that isn't bad, it's good, but there is a cost. The more we know, the more that's explained, the more grounded and meaningless the world starts to look. We realize how little we matter when we know how big the world truly is.

To become an animal is to truly accept insignificance. A person who enters those woods gives up trying to make a name

for themselves. They give up being the dominant species, and the artificial complexities of human society. They ensure they'll be forgotten, to die alone and silently among the trees, unrecognizable save for what someone could catch in a brief glimpse. There is a peace in it, to trade a head raised high on two legs for a head focused down on four. To shrink the world into something personal and compact. What you see is all you know. That's the curse of the woods, a renewed innocence, a fog of ignorance, and a quiet simplicity to life. It's sad to see someone leave for the trees, but it's not a sad ending to their story. A bittersweet one perhaps, as it hurts us some, but we can take solace in the fact that they are there, among the leaves beyond our view.

And if they no longer are, well we wouldn't know. So in a way even when they're gone to us they're still watching.

I feel that curse as we call it is more a gift than anything. The woods offer a return to the wild when we're done with civilization. I feel maybe in our past it was everywhere, every forest, every wood. Humans are quite fond of wolves in a strange way. Possibly left over from when the divide between human and animal wasn't so wide.

In any case, that's all I have to say. I'd be lying if I told you I hadn't considered it every now and then. It's something that's captivated me more than I think is healthy. Even now, so far away, I still wonder about those woods.

Beaches in Maryland

Night walks mean the sand, the sea, and you. Once the lifeguards are gone, the fishermen set up their rods, and the sun drowns beyond the ocean, the beach is deserted. Especially on a night like this, where lightning strikes the ocean in front of you and the bay behind you, you're alone.

The wind picks up sand that stings your legs. You're not supposed to be here, and these little particles are doing their best to push you onwards. You know there's traffic on the other side of the dunes, but it doesn't reach you here.

You remember hearing a story, only a few years ago, about a woman who took a late night walk on the beach. She left her hotel, stumbling, and wanted to clear her head. The rules state you need to fill in any holes you dig, but someone didn't, and instead she disappeared into one. She was swallowed by the sand, and then the sea, and she wasn't found until the next morning.

You wonder how many other people are out here, buried by the sand or taken by the ocean. The sea is a fickle friend, coaxing you to the edge and dragging you into the depths. This late, no one would hear your screams over the wind, the waves, and the incoming thunder.

While you walk, a fox follows in your footsteps. It's thin from scavenging in the seasonal town, and the salty air makes its coat scruffy. It keeps dipping in and out of the plants on the dune, and you can't keep it in sight. You don't think it's dangerous, only hungry, and you feel sorry you can't help it. After a while, it wanders away from you, slipping into the night and the tall dune grass swaying in time to the storms.

You don't remember why you're on the beach. Maybe you needed to clear your head, like the woman, or maybe you needed a break from your family. But it's getting late. Holes lurk in the darkness, and animals hungrier than the fox. It's best to seek shelter, and leave the beach to itself this night.

Small Towns in Maine

There are mountains, and the wind brings clouds that cover the sky. Fog winds its way through the trees, which all changed a while ago and are now past their prime. Leaves scrape against the ground, and any breath from the living clouds the air.

It gets dark faster here. The sun abandons the sky to the moon long before he should, but you won't complain. The moonlight plays nicely on the fog, turning the wispy strands to quicksilver.

Small towns dot the whole of Maine. They might have one stoplight, if you're lucky, and one gas station, the only thing open after the sun goes down. Everything else is quiet, so the only thing you hear is your heartbeat in your ears. It feels like you're the only thing alive within a hundred mile radius. The world could end here, and you wouldn't know for at least a week.

The churches, like the towns, are small. They resemble drawings of colonial America: square, white, the steeple sharp enough to pierce the stars. You're not sure if you can feel God here, or something else, but you're not alone.

The fog dances around the headstones in the graveyard beside the church. The way it moves, almost alive, makes your hair stand on end. Maybe something else moves out there, but you're not sure. When you turn to look, it's already waltzed away.

You're alone here, in this small sleepy town, but it doesn't feel like it. The memories of the past, of years far older than your own, press down on you. You think of Stephen King, and how right he was to write horror about small, sleepy northern towns.

Clandestine

Who am I to tell you to stop?
Qasem Soleimani is gone.
You needn't start a war you can't end
So cease stirring the damn pot.
I beg you, please sir,
We are a nation of idiotic bastards
And I am but one of many who heeds your commands.
Trigger-happy is my middle name,
So grab the guns from my arms and burn them.
You had no problem when the guns were books.
Maybe words are easier to purge than bullets,
But there will be neither if you wait.

Build the fire.
Throw in the damn books if it comes to that.
Just don't send me away,
I beg of you.
I seek to atone for my youthful lust.
Just ask Archduke Ferdinand:
Was it worth it?
The answer is never yes if it can be counted in bodies.

How many glassy eyes justify your dreams?
Mine glaze over just from thinking about it.
Don't make me write home,

Because, Dear Martha,
I will not be home by Christmas.
The snow will be ash and we will be digging ourselves out.
So sir, I'll beg you once more:

Don't send us to a war we aren't meant to fight.
Put away our weapons.
And let us lay in the warmth of the burning pages
So we can feel something other than fear.

I'll stoke the fire,
And you can turn the page.

Part 1: Ode to a Brown Girl's Resilience

Dear brown girl,
it's the little things.

Hair always matching your personality
even on the days your bun won't be the bun
you planned for,
or your edges won't lay down
or someone has the nerve to call it nappy
or the audacity to get their fingers stuck
in it.

Those curls represent love
flowing through your scalp,
the constant reminder that shrinking
doesn't always mean lessening,
but actually growing.

Dear brown girl, it's the little things,
strong without having to say it,
taking pain in silence
playing with the hand you were dealt--
and it's rarely a good hand.

In fact it's playing spades
with no actual spades in your hand.

It's raising your kids
sometimes on your own.
It's getting paid less than the man
that you're expected to hold up.
It's not letting anyone run off with your stuff
that they don't even know is embedded in you
and cannot be stolen.

Brown girls were meant to be strong,
that wasn't an invite
to place everything on you,
but you still handle it with grace.

Brown girl,
you make pain look trivial.
Brown girl,
you make guidelines and standards
marvel at your creativity.
Brown girl,
you take the struggle and turn it into the
brown girl's song.
A song that no one has heard
because no one deserves it.

Sacred brown girl,
it's the little things.

Part 2: Ode to a Dark Man's Humanity

A dark man enters the world with his fate
already decided for him--
which is the case for everyone who believes in fate--
but for a dark man destiny is a curse.

A dark man's destiny is a
dark man's worst fear, because that means
coming into the world at the bottom--
as a stair,
stepped on with dirty shoes for the privilege of progress.

Coming into the world at the
bottom is to be--
the book under the shelf
to keep it from wobbling,
the book nobody bothered to read,
and it's so scratched up now
that it doesn't read how it used to--
but it might.

Because one person's oppressed,
stereotyped,
gunned down trash is actually our treasure--
And dark men I see so much more for you,
so don't lower your head

to the streets that don't love you.
Don't get lost in them trying to prove yourselves,
because a dollar is the same shape of a casket
and the highest bidder
doesn't have your best interest at heart.

So dark man keep your head up,
yes, you have a lot to lose
but you don't look like a lot to lose--
to way too many people.
Like how many years in prison exactly
is your black body worth?
Because it's worth infinity to me,
and I'd hold all of the pain of a dark man
if it guaranteed not his survival--
but his LIFE.

The burden of having loved a dark man
is really a blessing--
and the circles might be bullet-shaped
but I'll stand in the middle of it
long enough for these dark men to know
that I love them back.

Mirage

Compassion is smaller than sand
Don't try to convince me that
Benevolence is truth
Because when I inquire sincerity
Kindness is a facade
I will never accept that
Pools of water are near
In reality
The sand blinds the truth
And it is naive to think
The sahara moves with grace
I can say with conviction
That illusions kiss actuality
Read this backwards and realize
Poems can be mirages too

Magical Ditches and Reunions

I remember the magical creek and family reunions of childhood summers with my sister, Miranda, and our cousins, Jamie, Danielle, and Robert Wayne.

One summer my dad built us a little house out of scrap wood. It was made out of a lot of spare materials. We'd all pile in there and have our secret, sweaty meetings. We even had a chalkboard on the wall that we wrote our plans on. There were colorful paintings of butterflies on the walls and we would open the little window that my father and papa put in for us to let in the sticky, heavy air of summers. Countless times there were spider webs in the corners, but usually the spiders were nowhere to be seen.

Behind our little hideout and past the graves of our dead pets, we had our super-secret spot. At the time it felt like the dangerous stream in *Bridge to Terabithia*. There was a fallen log that bridged the gap of what we called a creek. We would walk across it and really think we were doing something, even though a minute later we would be jumping down into a couple of inches of murky water to examine the slimy rocks. Robert Wayne and I picked up the rocks first to check that they were free of bugs before presenting them to our older siblings. We would marvel at the flash of a blue lizard tale or the lazy eyes of a frog watching us on the bank. Then we would easily climb back out, using our hands to crawl up the bank: laughter filling the woods. We felt like we were exploring even though we could still see the house if we glanced up the hill.

We never saw any big animals down there, but sometimes my cat would allow us the privilege of letting us rub him. My sister coaxed him to come over, kneeling down and offering a steady hand for him to collide with: his fur warm from the sunlight and

his purrs joining the sounds of all the bugs and birds. Soon enough he would slink off, his ears perking up at a certain loud chirp.

This past weekend I decided to go back to that spot. It was my first time going down there alone. With the autumn chill wrapping itself around me, I felt the cool of the grass come through my shoes. The first thing I noticed was how overgrown everything was. The plants that had spread over the ground were wirily and dark green, with wide blades of grass and clover. I had to duck under some bushes that had grown thicker and taller over the years. There was no one to help hold back the branches so that I could easily make it through without any scratches. Once I made it into the clearing, I was glad I was wearing jeans that didn't leave exposure to all of the different overgrown sections. I heard the sharp, repeating call of a bird in one of the towering trees above me. The same log was across the "creek," which I now realized was actually just a ditch where runoff water ended up. The murky water was unmoving and puddled where the trench was deeper. The log that we used to walk over was rotting in some places and the frayed gray of old porches.

I picked up a branch and listened to the plunk when it hit the brown water. The ripples moved the red leaves. The harmony of insects was loud in the air and I stood there for a few minutes. No cat came to greet me, and I did not hear any rustling in the trees around. Then I made my way back up the hill that is great for sledding and in turn not fun at all to walk up.

We used to have our Tolley family reunions at a cabin that my nana and papa rented. We would always have the gathering in the middle of the summer, and it was magical. Our van would make its way down the winding dirt road and we would park behind the last car in the line. I'd jump out and wait for the rest of my family to get out before making my way to the cabin. There was always one old woman saying, "My gracious, how big you two have gotten."

Another one leaning over to the lady beside her to explain, "They are Wayne's grandchildren. No, not Lisa's, they are Doug's daughters."

I let them hug me, even though I was itching to run off to my cousins before we started eating: to leave the porch and run to the grassy clearing that had a few trees sprinkled around.

I remember random pieces of the reunions throughout my childhood: a mosaic of past family reunions as a whole. One summer our older second cousin was showing off the way he could do backflips off the side of towering trees. He'd land amongst the gasps of us children, while kicking up the dusty dirt. The younger cousins, me and Robert Wayne included, would play tag throughout the field or search the ground for four-leaf clovers. One summer we were into throwing pinecones at each other, harmless enough. When we were small enough we would try to climb on the trees where we could reach the branches.

We'd hear the call of women calling us in to eat, and slowly make our way over to the tables. Most of the time all of the picnic tables were full outside and so us kids would just sit on the ground, resting our cans of soda on the level parts of the land and trying to keep ants away. At the end of the reunion, we would leave worn out and with sweat plastering our hair to our necks and forehead.

The cabin was sold a few years after my nana died. We have the reunions less frequently, maybe once every other year and we started having them in the fall instead.

I unbuckle my seatbelt with a click that sounds hollow and slowly make my way out of the SUV. I wait for Miranda, so at least I have my sister to fall back on during lapses of silence at the picnic table that all of the cousins sit at now.

The cabin that we would go to didn't even have that much land that we had access to, it was just flat land with trees that dropped their pine needles on the cars parked below. Sure, there were some trees in the clearing, but they were few and far too small to warrant the excitement we had for them. Now I realize those places that I remember from my childhood were magical because of the people I was with.

Honeysuckles

We five cousins always tried to finish dinner quickly:
shoving chicken and cornbread down our throats
water to wash it down
our silverware slid around in our plates
as we carried them over to the sink.

We hastily shouted “bye” to the grownups in the other room
and ran out the back door:

I instantly feel the sticky warmth of summer evenings on my skin.
I can see lightning bugs slowly flashing in the distance;
the sky is a soft, light blue.

Danielle, the oldest cousin, leads us to some huge bushes with
drooping dark leaves.

She pulls off a handful of little flowers:
the light yellows and pure whites
with tiny hairs coming out the middle.

They looked like tiny terrific trumpets.

Danielle hands one to each of us.
She tells us the name
“These are honeysuckles and you can actually suck on them!”

I twirl the silky flower in
my rough hands:

I suck on the flower
and taste a hint of subdued sweetness
spread on my tongue.

They do live up to the name: honeysuckle,
and I long to go back to that yard and see if they still taste
like the sweet summertime evenings at my nana's.

Evelyn Brunelle

Windows

I used to count the stars

like the

freckles on your

face

I look up and smile

For I found my star

Mermaids Don't Grow Up

What is the ocean to a child who has nothing to fear? Small waves of dark blue cover the horizon, touching the purple pink sky, while the wind nips at my short, unruly hair.

As I run for the water, I can feel my feet get lighter and lighter. I feel like I am flying, floating to the edge and my parent's far off warnings get lost in the wind's whispers

My heels dig into the cool sand when I finally sit at the edge. I put my hands to the ground that changed from the sharp edges of the hard asphalt, to warm green padding, to the friction that is Virginia Beach sands.

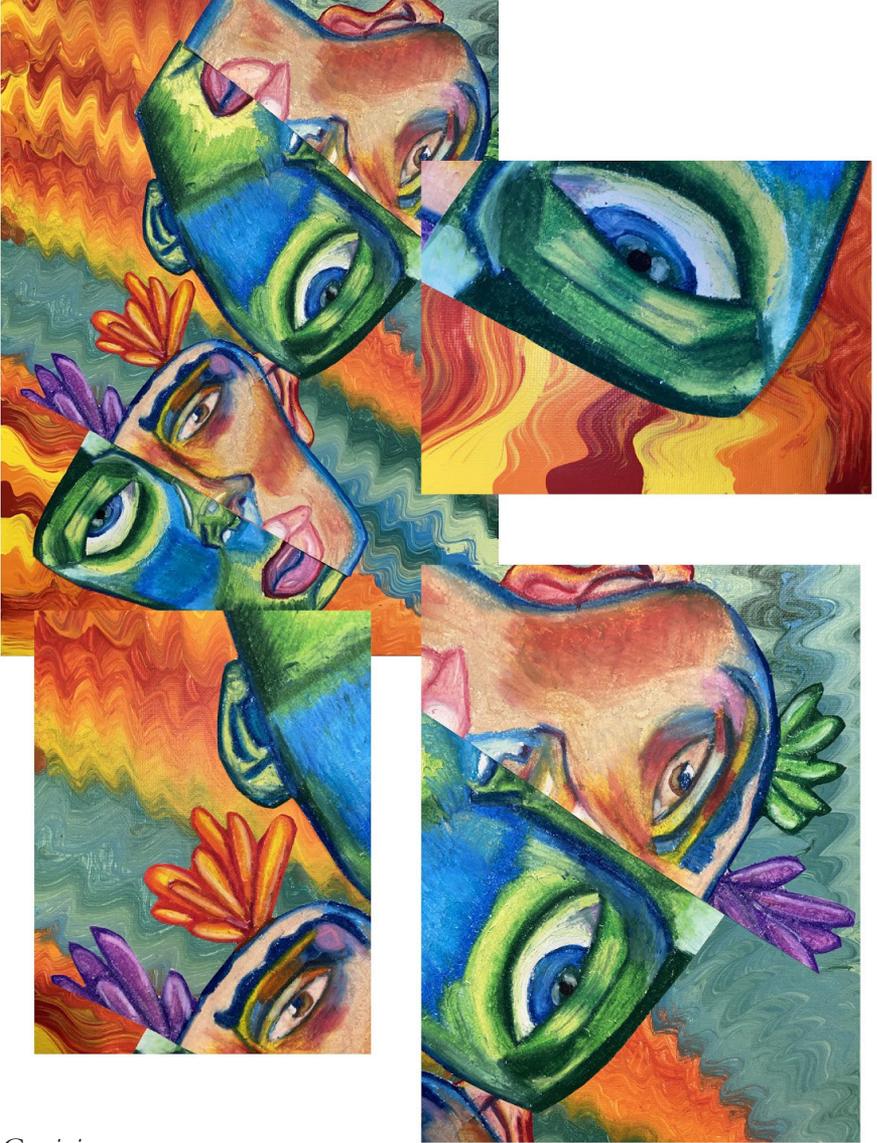
The sand is an ever changing surface, hard to punch yet soft to pick up. You have to move slowly to break the seal and keep it from crumbling into thousands of pieces. Each piece a different color: dark and creamy browns, obsidian blacks, rusted orange, seagull gray. If you search hard enough into the seal, you can find a hidden treasure, a shell left behind just for you to find.

I let the waters touch my toes, then my calves, then it coats my stomach as I inch closer and closer into the abyss. I can taste the salt and feel it burn my eyes like the sting of a harsh word from a close friend. The waters are comforting like an embrace from one's mom after a long day at school.

Swishing and pulling me in, I go under. I feel free, and never-ending like the waters around me. The fish nibble at my legs like a pinch from my brother's angry fingers.

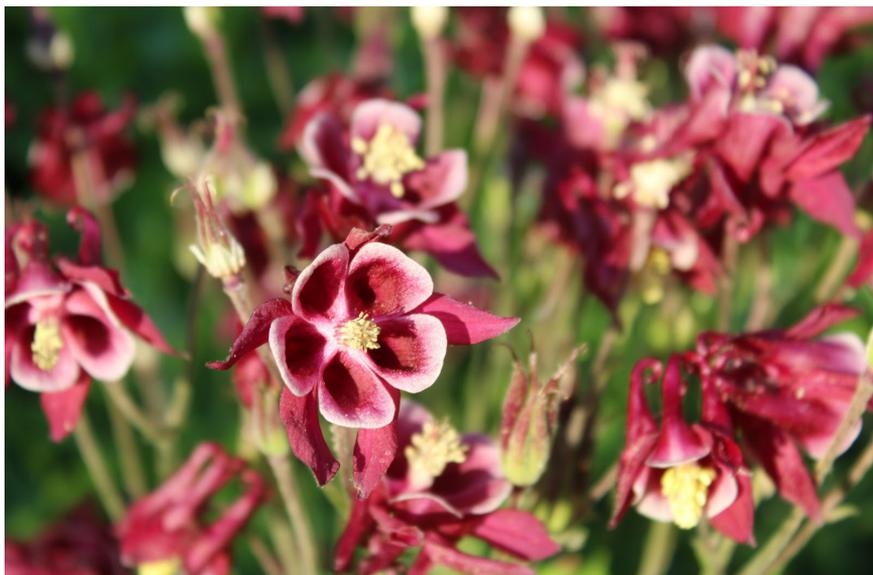
I break the surface and look behind me back at the dry land. I wonder how I was made a human when I have always been meant for the ocean.

Destiny Todd



Gemini

Anna Pindell



Wisps

Haley Rolince



Olivia



Dazed



Struggles of a Black Woman



True Royalty



Through The Bars

Claire King



Reaching Toward Necessity

Midday Memories

As I sit here at this little worn picnic table, I let the rain fall on my tongue, the taste reminding me of the summers of my youth. This midday rain shower that is nothing more than a light sprinkle helps me to recall a time full of mud pies and carefree dancing and I cannot help but wonder when it left me.

I remember the twinkling sound of laughter as I splashed in the puddles without regard. No worries about keeping my shoes safe from the dirt—a time full of excitement and imagination. I recall the icky squishy feeling of mud in my hands building and crafting things beyond explanation, then coming up with one anyways. I wonder where the time went.

I can see it now, the muddy outside of my childhood home coated with droplets of sticky rain. The walls were perfect to watch them race down. I can still feel that same rain coating my skin as I ran through the trees singing at the top of my lungs, not a care in the world. I wonder when it left me.

I can remember slipping and tripping over the things in my path and tumbling down onto the wet dirty ground and instead of getting up, laughing it off and relishing in the feeling it brought me. Letting myself be consumed by the nature around me. I can still hear the call of my parents making sure I was still alive, but never telling me to come inside. To let me explore and experience nature on my own was one of the greatest gifts they have given me and for that I am forever grateful. I just wonder when it left me.

When did the carefree attitude of a little girl happy to play in the mud unafraid of any consequences turn into the complete opposite? When did she turn into someone who stays away from

the dirt and is always cautious to avoid anything that could make her fall? The longer I sit here at this picnic table--that longs to be worn from the enjoyment of families but instead has rotted after years of abandonment and neglect--the closer I come to a realization. Nothing has left me. The carefree love for nature I had as a child has been buried within me by my own doing. It has been squashed down by years of neglect. I so casually shunned the trees that once guided me with nurturing branches. I've so easily forgotten the feeling of rain.

Dust Rose

Sunset roses, swollen in dust pink, pose in front of freshly lit tea candles.
Huddled so close together on the mahogany table,
It would be a common mistake to see one instead of the dozen there are.

And the sweetness hangs tangy and unhinged in the humid
Summer air,
They're whispering,
"I love you," and
 "Forget-Me-Nots"
Softly so only they can hear.

Their bloom is a baby's pair of lips after the first cradle of oxygen,
 A sixteen-year-old's first lipstick,
Each petal delicately waiting for a brisk romance,
A clumsy adolescent date in his dad's beat-up Buick.

Even the timidness of a rosebud needs
 Protection, which is why thorns
 Adorn each stalk's slender body, teeth bared and snaggletoothed
Loyally defending a sweet love's innocence.

Fresh Start

The dull sound of my heels pounding the stinky linoleum floor echoed in my mind, rattled around so loudly as I leaned over, hands on my knees and sweat on my palms. A heartbeat that jackhammered against my rib cage, begging to be let out or slowed down. No matter how hard I squeezed my eyes the image of him was sewed so deeply into my retina that it was all I could see. My reaction was completely emotional and instinctual; all my training flew out the door just as quickly as I had. It was my first shift as a mortician at the Breezy Coast Funeral Home, and I was so eager to finally put my studies and hours of knowledge crammed into years of school to the test.

This job was my dream job, to watch people's faces light up to see their loved ones as they remembered them. No lasting images of their deaths in their faces or along their skin. To give back to the people who lost a loved one, to give them a sense of calm and familiarity if they were unrecognizable before. I knew with me that they, the deceased, would be almost as good as new and something surviving loved ones would want to look upon. Moving here had been hard. I moved across California to settle and take this job in the small town of Belvedere, a population of less than 3,000 people, most elderly. So, to say I was shocked to see such a young body on the cold metal table was an understatement, but I had thought nothing of it. It was just a body.

Sucking in a breath, I steadied myself and slid down the wall outside the swinging doors. The floor was cold and hard sliding up my body through my thin scrubs. Rubbing my arms I rendered some heat, and as my head lolled to the side, my eyes drifted to the

two small windows sitting perfectly, in no way aware of the pain I had just by looking at them. Knowing what's on the other side. A heavy feeling shoves its way from the back of my skull to right behind my eyes, settling, and the pressure stoked up hot tears. They welled up in my eyes, vision blurring and a sob wrenched from my chest.

The call came early in the morning, a car accident. Deceased on-site. And as I waited for the transport of the body in the balmy early morning of the first day of spring, I remember being so excited to finally start. My life had been slow, almost a crawl and a very sorry excuse for living. I just flitted through life, no purpose, a divorcee, and a mother to a dog that was too old to see now. My brother already had five kids, my sister and her wife owned a restaurant in San Francisco. And what did I have to show? An ex, and a medical degree that my parents seemed not to find impressive since I found my calling in my early thirties. Too late in their minds.

My ex-husband and I met in college. We fell in love and married way too young, too involved in the idea of being in love than respecting what it means to be in love. After a short five years of trying and failing to connect we had both decided we were better off friends. He moved to Oregon and I stayed in California pursuing my severely late calling to the medical field, while Wyatt opened his bar and became a master in brewing beer. We hadn't spoken in four years, and just last winter my brother had seen his brewery and name in an article for the best IPAs and cider in Oregon. I don't know why I had, but I emailed him that following week. Wyatt responded and we both fell back into our normal and calming way of speaking to each other like we hadn't been divorced for half a decade.

Everything fell so perfectly into place; we were older, more steady in who we were, and had grown to balance each other out instead of competing to be better. Our divorce had been easy and amicable, so us reconnecting wasn't as odd as my sister felt it was. It wasn't odd that we talked for hours on the phone or texted about funny jokes or annoying co-workers, or about the crazy fires that were ravaging Oregon. I told him just last week that he should come down to visit me, to get away from the fires and the smoke and to just be together in a house again without any animosity.

Wyatt, of course, was standoffish about it and I had respected his answer, we didn't have a name for this--for whatever two exes who spoke like they never parted--was.

I would be lying if I said I fell out of love with him, and I could tell by the way he said my name on the phone or laughed at a really bad joke that it was the same for him.

The cold concrete I sat on was numbing my body, and as my mind threw memory after memory back to the forefront, breaking through my sorrow, I just sat longer. Staring at the cracked gray and dusty floor, past my comfortable clogs, to the opposite wall I knew I had to get up. I couldn't sit here and disregard the body waiting for me. No matter how hard I wished it away. With a nod to no one but myself and a clenched jaw, squared shoulders, I pushed my heavy body up off the floor and took the few steps to the doors. The fluorescent light was bright and as I peered into the small window, I saw the white sheet untouched and my clipboard still lying where I had dropped it.

With shaking hands and a clenched jaw keeping me from screaming, I pushed the door open and slowly made my way to the only other human in the room. The air was chilly, a must for my line of work, and smelled of heavy chemicals that I was thankful for. They pushed me from my mind and allowed me to focus. I needed to regain my composure. First thing was to wipe my eyes. A sleeved hand ran aggressively across my wet eyes and I placed my hot face into my hands for just a moment, collecting myself before I picked up the clipboard. I eyed it, the brown backing face up, papers strewn about, but still clipped. I knew there would be creases.

It felt heavy in my hand, way heavier than it should have, but the information on it was as important to me as the man beneath the sheet. My eyes closed, bracing myself, keeping me from the reality that was written on the papers, before with a heavy sigh I opened them.

It was as if my mind wouldn't allow me to read it, my eyesight was blurry and that was when I felt a hot tear slide down my cheek and splat perfectly above his name. Squeezing them shut I wrenched them open again. Now, I could see.

Wyatt Matterson.

Male.

12/17/88.

Right below was the cause of death still waiting to be filled out, but I couldn't bring myself to learn the exact cause just yet; instead, I placed the clipboard on the empty table next to me and took a step towards the white sheet. I snatched it back as if it was to jump at me and laugh in my face for being terrified to look underneath.

He was still as perfect as the first day I met him. Strong jaw, large but attractive nose, full lips and dark brown hair that he wore short now, his tanned skin hadn't lost its color yet. Black and blue bruises were smattered across his face, neck, and throat. I inched the sheet back to see a large purple and red bruise that bloomed across his chest towards his torso. Internal bleeding. My eyes shifted over the scar from his shoulder surgery our freshman year and back up to the scar from his graduation above his eyebrow. The worst part was that I didn't even know he was coming to see me and that he had changed his mind about my offer. I now knew the voicemail on my cell phone was most likely Wyatt telling me he had arrived and that I was to take him to the best breakfast area in this town full of old people.

I always wondered what it'd be like to be in the same room again, but this is not what I wanted.

Peace Lily with Condolences

When my grandpa died he didn't leave much--

I got his tv; the one that he'd watch dvds on
all night and a shoe box of cards I colored
for him as a kid.

Not many people showed up at the funeral
(maybe ten, and half of them came for me).

At the front of the room his urn sat small and round
on a table and beside it a peace lily perched small and green,
sent with condolences from his sister.

An old man in a can and a leafy green plant in a pot
--it was quite the sight.

You should keep it

my grandma said afterwards, handing
me the plant. Her hands knotted and dry, nails clipped clean;
the same hands that had held his and their childrens and my
own.

I'd held my grandpa's hand a month earlier
for the final time (not knowing it'd be the final time)
and then after the cremating and crying all that was left was a
plant.

I took it home, repotted it, and stuck it in a window.

Soon after, I moved across the country and there it sat
in the backseat of my Saturn, small and stretching for the sun.
Then there it sat in a new window in a new house.

There it reached up for the first time with a white hood
like a tear and yellow flower tucked safely inside. There it
reached its own hand up for me as a final wave or perhaps
a gentle reminder, a forgiveness, an acceptance.

Broomshedge

I asked my father about you
one morning while we were driving to the park.

I said I loved the color of you,
so golden in the light like a lion's mane.
I said I loved how you moved,
a gentle sway in the breeze, so serene.

My father told me that you are a weed,
broomshedge,
and that you grow in poor soil along hills
and highways mostly unseen.

I told him that you are my favorite plant,
and when he looked at me
I told him that you remind me of another world
across the sea, of the wild and lawless aura
of the Yorkshire moors in England.

I told him that I trekked up a steep hill
that made my calves burn,

as if a match was put against my skin
and my sweat was oil.

I told him that when I reached the top,
my hair was whipped to my face,
my lungs begged for air,
and that my body demanded to sit down.

I told him I could see you.
Well, mostly you, the moor grass,
as far as the eye could see and past that.

I told him that in muggy weather it
shined as brightly as you
and swayed as gently as you,
and I realized you were more than a weed.

You were a beloved memory of the past,
and that once I made the connection,
I couldn't get over you.

A Portrait

I stare at an image
That no longer mirrors my own
Hands on hips I glare
Tilt my head and squint
I am desperate and tired once again
Of meeting expectations
For no other reason than
To meet expectations

I can't go on like this
In this Jekyll and Hyde like fashion
Neither face
Complete.
Each a mask covering up for the other
Not all good
Not all bad
Living to hold the obligations of others
Is not living at all

Your guilt is not mine
Your shame is not mine

You presume I feel any in the first place

Forgive me father for I have sinned

Play it safe

Kneel

Pray

Repent

Pretend

For Christ's sake

Or for yours?

I have questions

You ignore that there may be

More than one right answer

You can't serve two masters

Balance and moderation

In everything but this

So, I imagine the dagger

Wielding it

The balance of it in my hand

The power of what I could do so easily

I stare once again at the portrait before me

And imagine

The dagger as it slices through the woven threads

holding it all together

Grandfather Nature

My grandfather and nature are synonymous entities in my eyes; I can't experience one without thinking of the other. That is not to say that I did not experience nature with other people in my life. I spent plenty of time outdoors with my parents and friends while growing up. It is more to do with the ratio of time spent outdoors with my grandpa. Whenever I was with him, there was some outdoor activity we would participate in: hiking, helping to build nature trails, or hanging plaques on the sides of mountains where men died in World War II.

When I was younger, I was intimidated by him, just like I was by the vastness of the forests around my home. He was not the most warming figure, usually reserved and a little gruff. I always thought his attitude matched his hands, which I remember always being very tan, darkened by the sun, and very coarse. He had developed callouses from twenty-six years in the Navy, sixty years of masonry work, years of sailing on his boat, and a lifelong passion for woodworking. In many ways, he personified the trees that he held so dear. When I was younger, he was an avid smoker of cigars and pipes, and the smell of tobacco both preceded and followed behind him, making him an easy man to find.

He was one of those people who encouraged others to figure things out for themselves, which typically led to more freedom when my half-brother and I were with him, without our parent's supervision. This freedom gave us the opportunity to explore nature during our outings in ways that we could not with our parents around. My half-brother and I would be able to climb trees or play in the shallows of creeks, and he would have us help pick up litter on the trails with our bare hands, or on the highways near his

house. His only rule was that we only left our footprints behind, always showing a strong disdain for litter or desecration of nature. I remember there was a tree on Blackwater Creek Trails that people would carve their names, or names of significant others, into, and my brother and I wanted to do it too, but he would not let us, repeating his one rule.

These outings were some of the most educational when I was a youth, as he would teach us the different types of trees and which were good for woodworking: oak, maple, cedar, fir, beech, elm, mahogany, walnut, dogwood. One type of tree would lead to a lesson on another, even if it weren't a local species. He would have us touch the barks, from the rough bark of the maple, to the smooth of the dogwood. He would even have samples of the various types of wood back at his house in his workshop, letting us see what lay within these mighty sentinels that permeated the woods. At one time, I could name over half of the states and their trees thanks to his teachings. He was one of those people that would use natural remedies for injuries and ailments, and we would often show up to his house to see him with his thumb, or other appendage soaking in a jar of honey, letting it deal with a wound received from his active lifestyle, usually from woodworking.

My grandfather's woodworking passion continues today, and whenever I visit, he first ushers me to the garage where he is constantly working on his next project. The smell of the sawdust and varying woods he has on display, waiting to be carved and turned into bowls, ornaments, and desks, are a reminder of my childhood spent with him in the woods around Virginia. I have received several of his wooden works as gifts: a flag case for my time in service, a gun case, and other boxes and pieces of memorabilia, each of which serves as a reminder. It is a reminder of a simpler time spent walking the asphalt and dirt trails around Blackwater Creek, and stopping to go off the trail to explore the surrounding trees, wistfully climbing them, knowing that we would be in trouble if my parents were to see us playing like that.

It is impossible for me to go out on walks or hikes now without finding something to associate the experience with my grandfather. Whether it's pointing out trees that I recognize, or critiquing litter that we see off the trail or alongside the creeks, there's always something that he taught me on those trails.

Let's Talk About Prog.

Prog., or “progressive rock,” is a genre of music that spawned out of the UK in the 60’s. It’s characterized by poetic lyrics, complex instrumentals, non-standard chord progressions, and generally not being constrained by what’s popular of the time. While this, at first glance, sounds super pretentious, I can assure you that that genre is anything but shallow. When I think of prog rock, I think of the bands Jethro Tull, Yes, Haken, King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard, Opeth, and Dream Theater.

It’s 1999, and Dream Theater had just dropped their fifth studio album: *Metropolis Pt. 2: Scenes from a Memory*. Dream Theater fans were clamoring for a follow-up to the song “Metropolis Part I” from the previous album *Images and Words*. So they took the themes and story behind the original track and stretched it out into a full concept album. The story itself concerns the struggle of a man who keeps reliving memories of a woman who was murdered decades ago. The album sees near immediate success, and quickly becomes the gold standard for progressive rock.

My dad would’ve bought the album when it dropped, but unfortunately I was born the very same year and nearly financially ruined my family. You would’ve thought they’d learn from the first time it happened, but then again, questionable life decisions do run in the Fredericks bloodline. I was too young to remember, but apparently it had gotten so bad that my parents had to sell their vinyl collection to buy milk. It wasn’t until I was in preschool that my dad finally went and got his hands on a copy. He listened to it every single day, regardless of who was or wasn’t in the car with him. By the time I was five-years-old, I could belt out “Fatal

Tragedy” start to finish. It was pretty horrific, considering that I had the grace and cadence of a belt sander, but it didn’t matter because I was enjoying myself.

It’s 2007 and Dream Theatre is on their ninth album now. This one’s called *Systematic Chaos*. While it isn’t a concept album, each of the tracks tell a short story, each one vastly different from the last. One’s about a vampire, another about a man’s experience with alcoholism. It’s a much heavier album overall compared to *Scenes From a Memory*, with the genre shifting slightly from prog. rock to prog. metal. In all honesty, I wasn’t the biggest fan of this album. It’s good, and I’ll listen to it, but I still think their sixth album, *Six Degrees of Inner Turbulence*, did everything this album was attempting to do, but better. Regardless, there’s a reason I bring up this album and not *Six Degrees*.

This time around, my dad buys it the first chance he gets. Once again, he plays it in the car. When you’re a kid, you listen to whatever’s thrown at you. You don’t reach for the car stereo with an album in your hand, you just ride the wave and jam with whatever’s playing at the time. For some people, it was country or jazz, for me it was metal. I listened to so much metal, the youth pastors at my church thought that my brain would liquefy and pour out from my ears, brackish sludge pooling around my feet, staining the nice church carpets.

I suppose they had some reason to worry. After all, the only reason they knew was because I wouldn’t stop talking about it. Worst yet, I couldn’t really explain *what* I was saying, I just knew that I had to tell everyone, and I mean everyone. We had a school project where we were supposed to make a newspaper describing ourselves and our interests and title it “The [insert name here] Times.” So naturally, I fill the blank with “Dark,” and for the little section where you put your full name, I scribbled down “The Dark Master of Sin.” Lovely, isn’t it? The funniest part about this was that I didn’t look like the kind of kid to pull this kind of thing. They made us attach photos to this project as well, and I decided to pick something that I thought fit perfect. Somewhere in my mother’s closet in a box full of her son’s papers, there’s a little fake newspaper. On the front of it, there’s a photo of me in a brown and tan striped

polo, grinning ear to ear, completely oblivious to the black and red text below him: **The Dark Master of Sin.**

It's about 2014 now. Because of a little 'disagreement' I had with the faculty at the last school I tried to go to, I'm commuting 40 minutes one-way to the school my dad works at now. With a drive so long, we needed something to keep our minds occupied; so we'd listen to entire albums to pass the time. Around this time, my dad still listens to Dream Theater, but he's been getting back into one of other favorite bands: Opeth. They just released their eleventh album titled *Pale Communion*. *Pale Communion* is special, because it's a real turning point for Opeth. Prior to this album, Opeth released another by the title of *Heritage*. Before *Heritage* dropped, Opeth was exclusively a death metal band with progressive elements strewn about. Death growls were commonplace, and the music was heavier in general. *Heritage* however, was their first album with completely clean vocals.

Some fans loved the change, some hated it and demanded they go back to their old ways. No one was really sure what they were going to do until *Pale Communion* came to store shelves featuring *completely clean* vocals once again. As much as I loved the growls on their previous albums -- *Watershed* especially -- I absolutely loved the new direction the band was taking. It felt like a breath of life into their music, and Mikael Åkerfeldt, the vocalist and frontman for the group, has one of the best voices in the genre.

Now, it's been a solid seven years since I took the brimstone throne, and much about my interests have changed between 2007 and 2014. One of the major reasons behind this is because I actually began to listen to my own music. As I mentioned previously, I used to just listen to whatever I was given with no regard to whether or was actually interested in it or not. It wasn't until I was about twelve or thirteen when I realized that I could listen to music for fun as opposed to just listening to whatever was being played in the car. Of course I didn't have the disposable income to actually buy albums, so I would just listen to whatever I could find on the internet. Thankfully, my childhood was in the era of Youtube, so I didn't have to brick the family computer by torrenting music. I was sophisticated, I had other ways of bricking that two-ton Windows Vista hunk of garbage. That however, is a story for another time.

With the winds of the internet in my sails, I branched out and explored new genres. It was in these seven years that I got into English rock, and had a brief Oasis phase. I found out what a synth was and how it defined New Wave when I discovered Ultravox. I ensured that a woman would never want to be romantically involved with me when I fell in love with the absolute stain on the music industry that is Weezer's *Blue Album*. I went from exclusively listening to metal in the car with my dad to listening to all these new and exciting genres on my own. If I could capture any feeling in a bottle so that I could uncork and re-experience it on a day when I'm down, it would be the feeling of discovery that I had when I first listened to some of these songs. When I first heard "Paranoid Android," I must've looped it a dozen times before I moved onto the next song on the album. When I heard Florida, I wanted to tell everyone about it, but felt super embarrassed because thirteen-year-old me didn't want to tell his friends that the band's name was *Starfucker*.

It was this exploration that really fostered my love and respect for music. I was exposed to all sorts of artists, both good and bad, and I learned a little bit of something from every single one of them. I still listened to Dream Theater in the car with my dad, but it wasn't the only thing I listened to anymore. When people asked me what bands I like, I could actually tell them instead of giving them the usual hackneyed answer of, "Oh, I like everything except country and rap." I could define the genres that I was interested in and explain why I liked them. Because it wasn't just what I grew up with or what was shown to me. It was all music that I had sought out and listened to because I wanted to. It felt special, and it's why so many of these songs and albums still ooze sentimentality for me to this day.

It's 2020. A few months ago, Opeth released their thirteenth studio album titled *In Cauda Venenum*. One evening when I had just come home after I'd finished classes for the day, my dad came up to me and handed me a package. It was one of those yellow USPS bubble-wrapped paper packages that easily fit in your mailbox. He then walked away without saying a word. I tore it open, and inside was a little album. The cover featured an empty fountain to the left,

a horse-drawn carriage to the right, and a foreboding manor in the background. I didn't even have to see the title of the album to know that it was Opeth's. The moody color choices and imagery immediately gave them away. I went back to my car, put the album in, and went for a long drive. I didn't own a CD player at the time - still don't - and I could only listen to discs while I was driving around.

I didn't mind this too much, because in a way, it reminded me of my dad. More than a decade had passed and he was still able to get me to listen to his music in the car, albeit in a very roundabout fashion. I'd developed my own taste in music and branched out from my roots, but moments like these brought me right back to the beginning, and it was very nostalgic. The songs were new, but the feelings weren't. It was just like when I'd first started listening. That same sense of satisfaction you get from finding a new song you liked, it was all still there.

I never really connected to my father too well. Because of our differences in interests and our apparent combined lack of social skills, we've always had problems communicating. But music had become our lingua franca. We couldn't always express thoughts and feelings, but we could share music with each other. We might not see eye to eye, but we can talk about different tracks, methods of composition, playing styles, and for once, we can let our guards down just enough to really get a feel for what we're trying to say. It's not the easiest solution, nor the most efficient, but it's enough for the time being.

So even now, I'm waiting for the next Opeth or Dream Theatre release. I'm sure it'll come in the mail, and I'll get handed a little yellow package. I'll listen to it, and finally my dad and I will have something to talk about.

Elizabeth Martin

A Mesmerizing Dance

Your pencil strikes the page with endless grace
A mesmerizing dance escapes your mind
A melody of words, a steady pace
And I can see the music in your eyes

A repertoire inside your genius aches.
Like a composer, you dictate the score;
A single flick and point is all it takes
To leave your audience yearning for more

What is it about words that mean so much?
Is it perhaps, poetic harmony
That gives each love a purpose and a crutch
To lean on when our words alone can sing?

My thoughts are interrupted once again--
Your pencil strikes the page and you begin

The Great Connector

*The soil is the great connector of lives, the source, and destination of all. —
Wendell Berry*

There is something peculiar about the way dirt squashes. There are days when I am uncertain why the dirt has a wet *splooosh* to it as I walk along, collapsing beneath my feet like clay. I have an inner discourse with myself in those moments: when did it last rain? Has it not been sunny enough to dry this mud? Was it simply the morning dew? I know it sounds rather odd to be aware of the way that dirt mashes and flattens beneath my feet; but I like to reflect on what happens to the earth I walk upon. What wetting force visited the dirt when I was not watching? How did I miss it?

These thoughts lead me to monitor the time I spend inside man-made shelters, buildings, sitting on manufactured chairs beneath industrial fluorescent lights. I must acknowledge I am unaware of all that touches the dirt when I am stashed away from the forces that cannot permeate my concrete resting place.

Sometimes I am disconnected, a small hermit inside my shell, not watching as the world moves around me. When I find the dirt wetter than I last remember it, I feel a sense of loss. I realize I've missed the rain I love so much; I've missed the dew in the morning that gives the plants a wet embrace. I missed so much.

The dirt never misses a thing. It sees all of the rain, it sees the dark and the cold, the arid and the dew. It is impressive to observe the memory of the forest floor; it does not forget. The dirt tells us a story. It tells us what it has seen lately, how its day has gone (has someone else trampled on it recently?), it reflects on the weather

we've been having, recounts its early days and its oldest memories.

Not only that, the soil tells us an even larger story. The layers tell us everything that it has ever seen. Maybe these soils used to see the ocean floor, crawling with life, prehistoric plants, and hardened shells. Maybe it's seen dinosaurs, tall and cowering creatures with bones that lie beneath the earth, just waiting to tell their stories about the days they ruled the world. Maybe it's seen a young child, burying some childhood memorabilia, only to dig it up and tell its story twenty years from now. The soil tells us what it has been collecting for much longer than we can fathom. The dirt holds secrets, encapsulated, not telling all it has seen. It is full of uncovered stories and stones.

But the soil is not just a time-capsule for lost times; it's also home to many critters and creatures. The worms crawl into the dirt, sliding and slimy, letting the brown dirt cover them like a blanket. The spiders scurry around quickly to keep hidden, sometimes jumping amongst the crumbled earth, disguised and sharp. The groundhogs nestle into the soil, creating holes as hiding places, peeking their heads above earth only to dive down again. The soil serves as a host for many others, lending its protection to other living beings. It is the heart and the body of our planet.

Mother Nature keeps her guard over the dirt. As the leaves begin to fall and lay on the forest floor, they must succumb to the forces of the dirt. In some cases, the leaves decompose and become a part of the soil; in other cases, they are swept away. Sometimes I can almost see the invisible broom of Mother Nature doing her housekeeping, sweeping the forest floor, pushing leaves along into piles from one place to another. And I have watched the leaves pop and crackle along the ground, moving and jumping like fresh kernels on a stovetop.

It might sound like hyperbole at this point if I said the soil *is* alive, but it's not an exaggeration at all. The soil is alive. Researchers have found that soil has a microbiome, much like the microbiome that humans have in our digestive system. In fact, there are more microorganisms in a teaspoon of soil than there are humans on the entire planet. The roots that are beneath the soil we walk on hold special forms of fungi called mycorrhizae that have a network--

almost like a plant internet--to *communicate* with each other through special chemicals. The soil is alive, it's thriving, and it has internet!

There are many things we do not understand about the very ground we walk on. It holds power, much more than humans could ever wish to obtain. It holds the ability to nurture life, giving nutrients to plants and animals alike, as well as the ability to encapsulate death as it feeds on the decomposition of things that lie dead: it feeds off the bacteria of death and turns it into life.

The soil holds the secrets of life and death, of disease and resurrection. Our livelihood as human beings is intricately and intimately tied to the soil. In nearly every culture and deeply ingrained within religion, we arose from the dirt. In the Bible, Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed life into his nostrils, the breath of life. One of the central tenets of Hinduism is to respect the earth from which we came, the dirt and the bugs themselves. And as such, we all return to the earth. When our bodies no longer breathe air, we will be buried in the soil. The very name of humans came from the soil, derived from "humus," the Latin name for the earth and ground.

The soil has existed for long before humans did, and it has learned the lessons of our ancestors and stored it in its layers. It will exist long after us, learning more lessons, watching the days go on, learning from the squashing of feet.

Run!

Another strange fruit.
Long, dark, and bruised
Overlooking this white sea
In which I drown,
Put up as an example
For those like me who think about freedom.
Freedom is fear.

Don't you dare run!
You'll be strung up
And hung up.
Left there for the crows to come pick at ya.

Don't you dare run!
You'll get two dozen lashes
That will leave you hog-sized welts
That fester and boil.

Don't you dare run!
Master treats us good--

We got a place to sleep.

What's a poor ole negro gonna do up North?

Freedom is sweet.

Go on and run!

The miles of cotton won't last forever--

Keep going up north

And don't let the howl of the dogs scare ya.

Go on and run!

I heard freedom tastes like a sweet pastry

Sugary all over

The kind that warms ya on the inside.

Go on and run!

You may get caught.

But you'll be better to die tryin'.

Arbor Day

Rain drizzled miserably against the windows when the grandfather clock struck three. Shadows concealed Tristan as he crept up the staircase, but the old floorboards that groaned under his dirty red hightops betrayed him. The clouds passing over the moon cast curious shadows on the wall by him, and Tristan's heart thumped unevenly when each grew stranger than the last. He paused by the first door on the landing and put his ear up to it, closing his eyes in order to listen for any noise, any indication that someone on the other side had been roused from their sleep. Hearing nothing, Tristan bent double in the dark to pull the shoes from his feet. He labored up the next flight of stairs as quietly as he could, his socks now muffling the sound of his steps on the wood. Tristan stopped outside the door at the top of the steps and reached slowly for the handle. He cringed at the gentle whine the hinges gave when he pushed the door open, and shut it again slowly before he tossed his shoes onto the carpet below him with a dull *thump*.

Tristan dragged his ruined shirt over his head before he crossed the floor to his dresser and began rummaging around inside for a clean shirt. The moon, previously hidden behind a passing cloud, now shed its light through an open window in his room and revealed him in more detail. Tristan glanced at himself in the mirror before him: stout, plump, and no older than twelve with round brown eyes in an equally round face. His eyes flicked to look behind himself in the mirror, a movement grabbing his attention. It was then that he caught sight of what else the moonlight had illuminated.

A dark shadow, a giant creature with piercing red eyes, was perched on his bed in the corner. Tristan's knees shook and his jaw locked, stifling the scream that began there. He grimaced, stretching his already thin lips into a fine line, and pulled a clean shirt out of his dresser to yank it over his head. Gathering his nerve, Tristan hesitated before he turned around to face the creature behind him. He did his best to ignore the sudden and overwhelming stench of toadstools and decay, and forced his trembling legs to take a small step toward the creature. The hulking shape spoke as Tristan moved, a dry rasping croak of a voice falling from its gaping maw that reminded Tristin of the rustle of dead autumn leaves.

"Boy. You've kept me waiting. I don't have forever."

Tristan gave a shudder at the choking laugh the creature gave, his eyebrows pulling tightly together.

"Me?" He asked, and a nervous laugh of his own pushed past his anxiety. "What do you want with me?"

"You have something of mine. Something that I'd like to have back," the creature answered, all previous traces of humor vanishing.

"What do you mean? I have nothing--"

"Do not lie to me, boy, and do not take me for a fool!" The hulking shape roared and lurched forward, thrusting its face into Tristan's. "You have stolen from me, and now it is time to pay for your actions!"

The creature's breath was revolting and it choked Tristan as his mouth fell open. Though he tried, Tristan could not speak as he stared into the hard, fiery eyes of the creature, frozen in place. Its ancient face was weathered and lined, gnarled bark stretching across where skin should be and a mop of moss in place of hair. Tristan whimpered as a long centipede crawled out of the creature's ear and into its nose, and he scrambled back away from the menacing face before him, running into the dresser with a clatter.

"Tristan?" A woman's voice carried up the stairs, irritation mixing with concern. "It's so late! What are you doing up there? Are you alright?"

"Lie," the creature demanded in a hiss, bearing a set of sharp teeth at the boy. "Lie, or you will regret it."

"I'm fine, Ma! Just tripped!"

Gathering tears made Tristan's eyes glassy as he yelled back to his mother, and he twisted his head away from the monster.

"There's a good one," the creature growled, creaking as it moved back to the bed. "Wipe the tears from your eyes, boy. There will be plenty to cry over when I am finished with you."

"What do you want with me?" his piteous voice trembled.

"I want what you stole from me. You will return it this night, or you will suffer the consequences."

"O-okay," Tristan nodded fervently. "I'll get it for you. You can wait here, I'll be back before--"

The creature laughed loudly, a grating noise that shook him.

"You truly think I am so stupid? You think you could outrun me? Disappear before I have what is mine? No, Tristan, I will follow you. You won't see me, but I will be there. And once you return what is mine, you can offer your silly plea as to why I should let you continue living your miserable life. Until then, let this be your reminder."

The creature reached for Tristan, and he shut his eyes tightly. Its rough, scaly hand forced his own open, and shoved a small object into his palm, claws biting into the back of Tristan's hand as the monster clenched it shut again. When Tristan finally opened his eyes again he found nothing. The creature was gone. Had it all been a dream? A horrible, grotesque nightmare?

Tristan squeezed his fists, his breath catching as he felt the small gift dig into his palm and fell back into the horror of his own reality. Tristan forced his small, stubby fingers open to look at what the colossal monster had given him. He shrieked and dropped the behemoth's gift, scrambling away from it. The white fingerbone seemed starkly out of place against the midnight blue of his carpet.

"Tristan?!"

Acid rose in the back of Tristan's throat as he looked at the souvenir of the monster's visit to him. Why was this happening? How did the creature know? Was it there when he found it? It wasn't possible. No one had been around when Tristan took it. But how then? It didn't matter. All that mattered now was that Tristan put it back the way it should be. He shoved his feet back into his shoes and tucked the laces into the side before, stomach turning, he picked up the bone and stuffed it into his pocket.

Tristan shoved the door open just as his mother reached the landing, and he brushed past her outstretched arms in a mad dash for the front door. Emerging into the cold April evening air, his feet pounded furiously into the damp grass for a second time that miserable night. Shoving open the wrought iron gate that separated his dilapidated house from the pristine ones that surrounded them and glancing both ways across the street, the memory came back clearly.

“We’ll meet at the swingset, it’ll be fine.”

“What if my mom finds out I’m not in bed?”

“She won’t if you’re quiet, dummy. Now, are you going with us or not?”

Three boys from Tristan’s class clumped closely together at the bus stop, and he couldn’t help but eavesdrop.

“Go where?”

“None of your business, Big Blue,” Jimmy, the tallest, answered with a sneer.

Tristan tugged at the edges of his sky blue shirt, his cheeks heating up.

“C’mon, Jimmy,” Frank keened. “He’s already heard something. If you don’t let him come, he’s going to rat.”

“No way, not Tristan,” that was Zack, and he wrapped an arm tightly around Tristan’s shoulders. “You wouldn’t rat, would you?”

Tristan shook his head, but Frank was unconvinced.

“Just let him come, guys. Then he’ll have to rat on himself too.”

“Fine,” Jimmy conceded, and looked at Tristan with disdain. “My brother’s in eighth grade, he got me some smokes. We’re gonna meet at the old playground tonight at one. You’ll be there.”

But when Tristan showed, promptly at one, the other boys weren’t there. He sat, shivering, on one of the swingsets, and the chains groaned beneath him. The shadows played tricks on him, and Tristan was thoroughly spooked long before Jimmy ran at him from the dark street, screaming and shouting. Frank limped behind him, wailing, and Zack crawled across the wet grass as Tristan sprung up from the swing and ran for the woods. He stopped as the boys’ screaming turned to howling laughter, hot tears fogging up his glasses. The other boys called for him, but he only trudged deeper into the woods.

For the other boys, it would have been quite easy to get turned around among the dark, eerie trees in the blackness of night. Tristan, however, found it second-nature to know his way around. He had

made this forest his playground from the time his mother moved them there, the trees his only true friends. For the second time that night, Tristan counted his paces quietly under his breath as he staggered over roots and very nearly tripped over rocks.

“One hundred seventy-three, one hundred seventy-four, one hundred seventy-five...”

The ground was squishy underfoot, threatening to pull him down into its peaty moss for all of eternity. Owls hooted softly in the distance, the sound of the cicadas drowning out nearly any other sound in the vicinity. The cry of a fox made him jump, and he very nearly lost count.

“Two hundred forty-one, two hundred forty-two, two hundred forty-three...”

Once, Tristan thought he caught sight of those glowing red eyes, and he cried out. A closer glance disproved his initial thought, but this new knowledge could not get rid of the goosebumps sprouting across his arms and neck. He rubbed his hands up and down his arms to dispel them, but to no avail. Shivering, Tristan pressed on.

“Three-hundred twenty-five, three hundred twenty-six, three hundred twenty-seven.”

He was at his journey's end. A fallen tree lay before him, nothing but a rotting log lay where the magnificent tree had stood. Tristan stooped down, unable to shake the feeling that he was being watched. He jerked his head back to try and catch any unseen observers off guard, but the wood behind him stood just as still as it should have. Reaching deep into the open bark of the log, Tristan removed a shovel from it. Moonlight revealed fresh mud on the spade. Setting his tool to the side, Tristan reached in once more, hand scrambling around in the carcass of the log for his quarry, and gave a triumphant grunt as his short fingers closed around a small box.

Pulling it out into the moonlight, Tristan was able to marvel at it once more. The obsidian box had strange runes running along the sides of it, the frightening depiction of a man being enclosed in a tree sprawling across the top. Tristan gingerly lifted the lid off the box, revealing the odd, rotting red velvet lining beneath it. He fished the monster's gift from his pocket before gently placing it atop the lining and closing the box with a snap. Hands shaking,

Tristan picked up the beautiful box and his shovel and scrambled over the top of the log before continuing his journey into the forest. His destination was not much farther ahead, and Tristan knew just what he was looking for.

Staggering into an open glen, Tristan's heart picked up speed. It was time. He approached the lone tree in the center of the meadow, his breath catching in his throat. There was something familiar about this tree. Sure, he had seen it when he'd stolen the stupid box, but...

Something was off, something here was very wrong.

What happened to the cicadas? The forest was never this silent. Tristan took a closer look at the tree, his breath catching in his throat. No, it couldn't be. His dread was confirmed as bright red eyes opened before him and the tree cracked and shook the ground with its movement.

"Give it back," the bark hissed, though its mouth did not move.

The large, gnarled hand swiped at him, and Tristan just barely ducked out of the way. Tristan cried out, taking a swing at the tree with his shovel before turning and running. Forget putting the box back, forget atoning his wrongs. Tristan knew that if he stayed long enough to return this box he would not come back out alive.

So he ran, and he ran, and he ran.

His breath came in ragged gasps, his chest heaving with the effort of his exertion. Through his labored breathing he heard the crash of something heavy pursuing him, making the boy push himself harder as he cut down a different trail through the trees and ducked behind a bush. Clamping a hand over his mouth to stifle the sound of his breathing, Tristan closed his eyes to steel himself as he waited.

He soon heard the crashing race past his hiding spot, tears streaming down his ruddy cheeks and leaving their tracks through the grime covering his skin. He sobbed quietly as he tried to compose himself and leaned back against the tree behind him. Tristan futilely tried to push the tears from his face, smearing more dirt across his cheeks as he attempted to quell the fear that made his hands shake. Standing from his spot a moment later, Tristan took

off running again, this time toward freedom. His heart swelled as he saw the trees begin to thin and barreled head first out of them.

His feet were rooted to the ground as an all too familiar tree greeted him. No, this wasn't possible. How did he end up back here again? He had run as far from this place as he could. This wasn't happening. He must be hallucinating. There was no other option, no way this tree could have done this.

"Did you think you could fool me?" came the horrible rattling voice, and a cold sweat broke out across Tristan's body. "Give it back."

"No, you won't let me go anyway!" Tristan yelled, turning tail and running for the forest surrounding them, only to run back into the glade from the opposite end. "How? How are you doing this?" Tristan cried.

"Give it back," the ancient creature answered, moving toward him.

Tristan turned and ran again, pushing like mad through the undergrowth only to run back into the clearing, this time straight into the towering monster.

"Give it back," the creature snarled, gripping Tristan's hand and pulling him in tight against its rough skin.

Tristan struggled, though it was no use. The creature's grip was too strong, and pulling away felt like ripping his own arm off. Wait, his arm...*where was his arm?*

Tristan screamed as he looked for his arm, now completely enveloped in the bark of the tree. It was slowly creeping across his skin, covering him and drawing him into its heart. His screams echoed through the silence of the woods, his free arm stretching as far as it could in an attempt to grab hold of something that could give him some leverage. The box fell from his grip and onto the forest floor, the lid popping off and allowing the fingerbone to bounce out and into the grass. The bark had swallowed both of Tristan's legs and was creeping up to his neck, his screams hoarsening as sheer desperation set in. His arm continued to struggle long after his head was swallowed by the bark, his hand reaching and reaching until only his pointer finger was left protruding from the rough bark.

The tree plucked it off and tucked it gently within the box, laying it between its roots before covering it with dirt once more. Settling back into the Earth, the creature grew very still. The cicadas began singing once more.