

FICTION

Jules Raymond

Lopez

The first time you ruined a meal was when your bike threw up in my coffee.

It was your idea, and our decision, to buy a small house on the island. There were many barns and meadows and jagged beaches that drew us there, and a certain stillness that was only interrupted by summer tourists. I remember arriving at the island and seeing the lighthouse from the ferry. It was the end of June, and you were brushing the hair out of my face, and I kept waiting for fairy tale creatures to pop up in the eye of your binoculars.

You spent most of your time cruising through the trees and fields. I didn't have much of an appetite for biking, so I usually walked down the two-lane road and picked blackberries on my way to get coffee. I liked the café with the mismatched chairs, the one between the fruit stand and the icebox convenience store.

I remember one day you came skidding up to the café window. The morning rain had been replaced by sunshine, but the roads were still wet, and your tires shot up a hissing trail of water. You propped your bike on its hind legs and wheeled it through the cafe door. I don't know why you didn't just leave the bike outside, so instead you balanced it across all the chessboard tiles and found me sitting in the corner.

I looked up at you wide-eyed and caffeinated. You told me how many miles you had ridden already, and you talked just loud enough for the baristas to overhear. I stared at the top wheel of your bike, which was still spinning and ticking from your ride. Its rubber grooves slowly unblurred, and then a few steady drops of mud fell into my cup. I winced as if it were a bee sting, and you apologized profusely, and you later declared that it was kind of funny, which it was.

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The second time you ruined a meal was when I got blood on my tomatoes. I had a handful of onions cooking on the stove. They were right on the cusp of smelling brown and sweet enough for the sandwich I dreamt up in my head.

I chopped tomatoes while I waited for the onions to finish. I thought about how the inside of a tomato looks remarkably similar to a human body. It was like someone drew a lazy summary of my interior. No replicas, no sordid details, just a vague amalgamation of red human parts. A fiery gel enveloping different nerves, reaching desperately and fervently like octopus cupids. The tomato could camouflage as the inside of my cheek, or a lung, or another random organ for you to touch.

The knife crept up to the edge of the tomato. Each slice fell perfectly onto the one before it, and a thin membrane of juice spread across the cutting board. I heard you unclipping your bike helmet, probably sweating and aching from the solar noon. You walked behind me and squeezed my butt. It was a quick pinch of fat between two of your fingers. I stood up suddenly, and the knife slipped into my left thumb.

Blood leaked out onto the wood and the seeds. You rushed to find a bandage. We were too busy fixing my thumb to save the onions from burning, so I abandoned the sandwich and just scraped black onions out of the pan. You asked me if you could eat some of the tomato slices, and I said you could help yourself to the whole row. I wondered later if you even saw the blood.

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The third time you ruined a meal was on my birthday. We rotted in bed together for half of the day, per my request, to your chagrin. You were probably thinking about bicycles. I was getting hungry, so I picked myself out of bed and carefully dressed in front of you.

You took me to your favorite spot on the island. It was a lookout on a crumbling cliff. I could see the tops of pine trees and a rare blue color gleaming past the shoreline. The sky was cloudless, and you said you wished it was raining lightly. I couldn't tell if you were joking or not.

I listened to the harbor seals barking out in the ocean. You unfolded a quilt for us to sit on, and dropped a basket down to the tessellated cotton. Inside the basket was a loaf of bread and a deep collection of blackberries warming in the sun. I burst a few between my teeth.

You hooked your thumbs around my skinny legs and followed my veins like arrows. My mouth was ready for a flood of berries, but it found your tongue instead. There was no end in sight. Not in terms of company, not in terms of place. I traced the quilt with the scab on my thumb, and I wished for a seal's ignorance, so then I could smile a little easier.

FICTION

Kimberly Dunham

The Sidewalk

Gloomy skies never bothered Cora Wright. Still, getting drenched on her way to the studio was less than ideal. Her team would have to do her hair and makeup again, and she might even need a wardrobe change. With less than thirty minutes until her com went live, Cora had little time for delays. She grabbed a WAM-approved protein bar, downloaded an audio therapy file to her in-ear device, and hurried out the door.

Cora walked briskly along, admiring the orderly traffic, the mile-high skyscrapers, and the flawlessly aligned street trees dipped with autumn color. Still, she had to fight the urge to yawn. Remembering the audio file, Cora tapped her device. The feed hummed. Her morning audio always boosted her energy. It calmed her and cleansed any toxins from her body that accumulated overnight.

After a moment of gentle, undulating noise, Cora felt perfect. The light rain wasn't a problem; she could walk in the shelter of the trees. She exchanged smiles with a man walking in the opposite direction and beamed at a young mother and child skipping through the scattered leaves. Cora was almost past them when something jarred her steps. Glancing down, she noticed a crack where tree roots had pushed up the sidewalk. For some reason, she found the uneven sidewalk oddly distressing. Before Cora could collect herself, something slammed into her and knocked her sideways. The ground traded places with the sky, and her head hit the pavement with a dull crack.

For a moment, Cora lay on the sidewalk while a man on a bicycle sped away. The audio file playing in her ear screeched and popped, then went silent. Cora groaned. Her head throbbed, and her arm burned white-hot. A dark red stain marred the soft wool of her sweater. Cora gasped and instinctively tried to cover the stain. Was it—blood?

“Must've been standing too close to traffic,” she murmured, half in a daze.

Nobody replied.

Cora thought again about the uneven sidewalk and shuddered. Overhead, the clouds were darkening. She pushed herself to her feet and tried to tap her audio device. Nothing. She took a deep breath.

As a wholecare wellness advocate, she had to be an example. She was never distressed, never disorganized, never in pain; her Wireless Ambulatory Medicine network wholecare plan ensured that. Through her daily coms, Cora demonstrated to the public what life could be like with audio therapy, the technology that had replaced antiquated medical care decades earlier. No one trusted traditional healthcare practitioners. Only the wealthy could afford their services, and their science was outdated anyway. But Cora didn't have time to reflect on history; she had a storm to race.

At the studio, her interns greeted her with their usual smiles. “I don't think you got your makeup on quite right this morning, Miss Cora,” one of the younger interns had said. “It'll take me a moment to cover up this blue stuff.”

Cora had heard of blood and bruises, but she thought audio therapy had eradicated all physical and mental trauma. Perhaps she was mistaken.

Cora woke with her heart pounding. She had only dreamlike glimpses of the day before, of arriving at her studio after half walking, half dragging herself through the rain. She remembered the uneven sidewalk, the gash on her arm, the bicycle speeding away.

The audio therapy device clicked irregularly in Cora's ear, reminding her she needed to have it repaired. She glanced at the clock. Usually, she was up and alert already, revising a com script or drafting

another. But today, she wanted nothing more than to burrow into her plush bedding and let sleep take her. Then, she remembered her viewers. Her com would go live in two hours. She tossed the blankets aside. If she hurried, she could get her audio device in for repairs on her way to the studio.

Cora's pace was slower than usual. Her arm throbbed, and her breathing was labored. It was her audio therapy device, she told herself. Too many toxins had built up in her body overnight; soon, she would have that remedied.

The sun was out, setting the city aglow and dazzling Cora's eyes. As she walked, she spotted the man she had exchanged smiles with the day before, only this time, his skin was a sickly color, and his smile seemed off. Likewise, the young mother skipped with her daughter just as she had the day prior. But the little girl had a horrible, hacking cough, and her mother's arm hung at an unnatural angle. Still, both were smiling. Cora shivered, wanting to be anywhere else.

The WAM repair shop had Cora's audio therapy device repaired and reinserted within moments. As she made her way toward the studio, she glimpsed the same section of broken sidewalk from the day before. She realized the bicyclist who hit her had sped away without stopping. Come to think of it, *no one* had stopped to check on her. No one cared. A strange, burning liquid gathered in Cora's eyes and trickled down her cheek. She felt alone. Scared. Uncertain. It was just the audio device, she told herself. She needed to allow more time for its healing soundwaves to relax her and heal her pain.

She stumbled into her studio, shaking and sweating, but she tried to maintain an appearance of calm. Cora Wright was immune to distress; WAM paid her well to demonstrate that to everyone. Even so, she was glad to be away from the street and the broken people with their strange smiles. She was glad to be safe with the people she knew.

"Oh, Miss Cora," the makeup artist said. "It'll just take me a moment to cover up this wet stuff."

Cora's heart seized at the sight of the makeup artist's broad smile and the deep gash on her forehead. Before Cora could get free, the interns gathered around her, smiling like a pack of sharks. She

gripped the edge of the chair she had pushed her into. No one noticed the intern missing two fingers, the director with a rash covering the side of his face, or the camera operator with one eye swollen shut—no one but her.

Moments later, Cora sat in front of the camera, vision blurring as she stared at the countdown clock. 60 seconds until the com went live. She had her script in hand, but she was shaky. Her hands felt cold, and her mind was blank.

“Forty seconds,” the director said. “Miss Cora, if you’ll just face this way. That’s right. And don’t forget to smile.”

Cora couldn’t see her script; she was too busy staring at the bloody fingers signaling to her, trying to get her to look at the camera. Her head pounded in time with the countdown clock. Shivers wracked her body. She didn’t want to see all this. Why wasn’t the audio therapy working?

“Thirty seconds—twenty—fifteen. Miss Cora?”

Cora turned to the camera. She tried to paint on a false smile, but she couldn’t muster one. She couldn’t speak, couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe. The smiles were the last thing she saw before she fell face down on the floor.

FICTION
Naomi Brown

Counting Raindrops

One, two, three.

Three stops stood between J and freedom.

The man and woman across the trolley spoke a language he didn't understand. It sounded like English, but it wasn't. Shared glances, smiles, and laughter turned it into something else entirely.

The man set his hand on her knee for the fifth time. She smiled for the seventh.

J locked his fingers together. Ignore them. It doesn't matter.... The numbers begged to be counted, though. How else to keep track of the world and everything in it?

There came the third giggle.

When J stepped onto the platform, the two stayed in the train.

As did seven other people, while three more boarded.

He passed five people in the corridor. Three of a family, with a small child who was missing one tooth.

J smiled at him, and the boy blinked big blue eyes back.

J emerged on a busy street. The scent of hot metal dissipated. Instead, exhaust, spices, and perfume clamored for his nose's attention. He followed a familiar path, paved with the smell of coffee.

Eighteen freckles speckled the barista's nose. Counting them lost him thirty seconds.

"That will be four dollars."

J nodded. Exactly his daily budget.

He paid and sat down.

Everybody liked coffee.

J wasn't everybody.

He bought coffee anyway, enjoying the warmth between his hands and inside his chest.

J finished his drink in fifteen minutes and thirty-four sips. In that time, twenty more patrons bought twenty more cups of coffee.

His watch read five thirty, so J left the shop.

His apartment perched atop thirteen more of its like, mostly empty. J owned four pieces of furniture. Bed. Chair. Cat tree. Television, if you counted that.

J showered, finished the leftover ramen from the fridge (he was quite sure the appliance didn't count as furniture). Sixty-eight noodles. B watched him as he ate, tail flicking one hundred and twenty-four times. J washed the dishes and scratched B behind her ears.

Dusk crept, slow and thick, upon the world. J slid the blinds closed, letting them paint the room in stripes. His watch reflected the reddish light in a focused beam, and B batted at it.

J's TV had two hundred thirty-eight channels. None of them good, not really. J turned one of them on regardless. Thirteen extras in that scene. She'd already cried twice. This was the

twenty-first episode, a season finale. J didn't know why he did it. By the time he finished counting everything he could, he still felt like he'd missed something....

B curled up around his shoulders, resting on the back of the chair. With her warmth pressed against him, he fell asleep.

J awoke feeling tired. Bright light streamed through the cracks in the blinds. The TV still droned on, coloring the room blue. B had migrated to a spot on the floor patched with sunlight.

J refilled B's water—four ounces—and food—one can—and left.

Five blocks to the station. Six stops.

J started when someone sat down next to him. The three seats in front of him, though worn pale like the rest, were empty. She didn't need to sit next to anybody. J eyed the strange person. She looked...well, he wasn't exactly sure. Frazzled. Or excited. Worried. Or nervous? Her eyes gleamed. She looked like she'd slept too late or perhaps hadn't slept at all. Her hair wisped around her face in uneven coils, half held back by a struggling hair tie.

She smiled at him when she caught his eye.

J's eyes, quickly averted, widened.

He didn't think it a pretty smile. Or, at least, it didn't look like the actresses on the shows he watched nor the grinning women in the makeup ads that played between the scenes. Her gums peeked out, but the twelve teeth he could see were nice and straight. The front ones were perhaps overlarge, but her bright eyes crinkled when she smiled, almost forcing him to meet her gaze.

When J hopped off the train, he nearly forgot to count the passengers. (But not quite; there were fifteen. Counting them made him feel a little better, a little more certain about the world. And yet....)

She stayed. J stared at the train as it departed, part of him wanting to chase after it. Why was that? J shook himself, trying to ignore the itching, creeping feeling that he had missed an opportunity to count something important.

The sky darkened, though the clock on the wall of the coffee shop proclaimed the time was only five fifteen. Outside, people rushed by, umbrellas warding off the rain.

Droplets hit the window.

One, two, three, four... then too many to count. J liked that. It battled the tightness in his skin and the itching feeling crawling up his back. All he needed to do—all he could do—was watch. Watching the rain felt like falling asleep with B curled around his shoulders. It felt like warm coffee inside his stomach. It felt like a stranger smiling at him for no reason at all.

J finished his coffee in thirty sips this time and left the shop at five twenty-three.

The sky still rained its sorrow upon the land. People tucked themselves away in three-bedroom houses with warmth radiating from the floors and mugs of coffee.

J stood alone on this road of fifty doors. And, at last, he was free.

J ran the rest of the way home, grinning inside the downpour. No one shared the smile with him, but that was all right. In his mind, he shared it with the stranger on the train. She had a pretty smile, he decided, for no reason at all.

No umbrella remained in sight, just numbers of houses, already counted.

He laughed as the sky wept.

PERSONAL ESSAY

Crystal Kaya

Futility

I sit next to my son in the soft light of the early morning hours, the sound of the IV pump whirs steadily in the background. He is in his ninja pajamas, wrapped in a spiderman blanket, and curled around a knotted mix of stuffed animals and wires. I watch his face for a long time, still and peaceful, and my mind wanders to superheros. In the movies, as the train speeds toward the broken track, and as it tilts precariously over the edge of the damaged bridge, the viewer sits fixed on their seat waiting for disaster: the impending doom, the big explosion. It's then, though, when all hope is lost, that the super hero rushes in, cape flying, a firm grasp and a determined brow saves the day. The viewer sighs, the characters on screen cheer, and all is restored.

But I, his mother, sit in the stillness while my son, young and unaware, is rushing forward, forward, forward, toward a future where there is no track to stay the course. The bridge is beyond repair. And I, his mother, am no superhero. There is no tearing off of domestic garments to reveal a cape, no superhuman skills to heal or mend. There is just me, by his side, holding his hand. Unable to change the course, unable to restore what has come undone.

I look across the room and his dad lays curled up under a thin, blue, knitted, hospital-issued blanket on a sofa-bed that's a few inches too short. Even in his sleep, he looks tired. He is tired. We're all tired. It's our second week here this month, back after only a few short good days at home. It's been the usual summer for us these days, our son ping-ponging between joyful bursts of sun-kissed days playing by the beach, and hours curled up in a little ball of pain, unable to eat or drink enough to keep his small body strong.

The imaging and labs confirm the continued progression of our son's disease. It's rare in children, less than .03% of kids have chronic pancreatitis. Treatments are limited and there is no cure. There is simply patching him back together when he gets too sick to function. Our little humpty-dumpty. He has been put back together so many times, that this time, all the king's horses and all the king's men have told us soon, there will be no more putting him back together again. There will only be taking him apart.

The IV pump starts to beep, my thoughts snap back to the present moment. I cover my son's ears, shuttering the noise so he can stay in his dreams a little longer. A nurse comes in to switch out the IV bag. She smiles and asks if I need anything, I smile back, thank her, and tell her I'm fine. She connects the IV, checks his IV needle, takes his vitals and quietly closes the door behind her. The room returns to stillness.

I used to believe childhood should be magic, but how do we make magic from this? I remember when our son was born, ten fingers and ten toes, perfectly healthy. We watched him learn to sit up, crawl, roll a ball, and take his first teetering steps. We checked off milestones, notched the door jam with his inches and then feet. We showered him with balloons and love, and magical stories of bears that talk, and heroes that save the day. He was magic and magic blossomed from the world around him.

When he first got sick we believed it would pass and so did his doctor, the white caped heroes who asserted our son's health, beyond this little glitch, in an otherwise healthy childhood. But not longer after, there was another glitch, and another, and the pattern was hard to shrug off. They ran labs for things which our thoughts could give no meaning or emotional weight. We waited. Life went on.

It was a sunny summer afternoon and we were parked waiting to pick up sushi for take-out when the doctor called. He spoke with authority and a paternal softness, the gentle confidence of bedside manner, as he read off numbers and values and explained our son's pancreas wasn't working properly. "It's your job to be worried, but don't be scared." I hung up the phone and we drove to a park and had sushi. My husband and I sat in silence watching our health-not-so-healthy little boy run through the grass, pure joy spilling from his body as he raced through the summer sunset, a dragon kite trailing behind him in the last hours of sunlight.

When our son was little, I believed everything he touched would turn to light. Childhood carried a magical invincibility. He would tumble and get up, booboos were soothed with kisses and hugs. He was magic and light and the universe would pave his future with grace. But now, he is 8 years old, 4 lbs lighter than he was 2 weeks ago, and I lay next to him watching his vitals flow across the screen on the monitor above his head. I gently unwrap the IV tube which has wound around his little arm and daydream about superheroes and genies that grant wishes because kisses and hugs won't make him better these days.

His dad groggily rolls over to wakefulness and we hold each other's gaze for a few moments across the room. Our son starts to stir, and his nurse comes back in to tell us the team will be doing rounds soon and will give us an update on how things are progressing. I help our son sit up and find all his stuffies. His dad folds the bedding for the sofa-bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, as he opens his laptop for work. I took out my phone to show our son pictures I took of his stuffies last night while he was sleeping, where Yoda appeared to glare at me from over his shoulder in the red glow of the oxygen monitor light. Our son looks at the photo, laughing a full belly laugh of pure joy, and for a moment the magic and the light are all there, all around him.

Our son keeps moving forward, forward, forward, and for now, there is nothing to change the course that he is on. We, his parents, have no powers to fix, or to mend, or to save. Parenthood bears with it the deeply rooted, instinctive responsibility and privilege of caring for our young, protecting them, and championing them to a successful adulthood. Our children often see us as heroes, always there to swoop in and save the day from a broken toy or a skinned knee. But for us, we carry futility in our pursuit to protect and to ensure that happy ending. If the train reaches the edge of the broken bridge, no amount of will or determination will be able to stop it from careening over the edge. Life is fragile and ephemeral and all we can bear forward against the uncertainty, is the endurance of love and the determined spirit of joy against darkness.

I hear the tap-tap at the door of the doctors at the room ready for rounds. I tuck away my meandering thoughts of superheroes and magic, straighten my clothing, hop off the hospital bed, and slip on my shoes. Ready or not, life continues forward, forward, forward and we are pulled along with it, together, fragile and ephemeral, uncertainty our companion, and love the only power we have against whatever comes next.

PERSONAL ESSAY

Sylvie Sallquist

Feeding the Beast

Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant. – Robert Louis Stevenson

Back pressed against the mustard yellow wall, my eyes quietly sorted the other bodies in the room. *Staff, patient, patient, Staff?* I felt a deep sense of overwhelm and numbness radiate within my head and chest; this relapse marked my fourth residential eating disorder treatment, and the familiarity brought tense discomfort. *How did I end up back here? How did I choose the eating disorder again...* I pulled my phone to my face, then swiped picture after picture of my four-year-old son. I stared into his twinkly eyes as my heart yearned; *I will do this for you, I will be the parent that you need—you deserve. I can 'just get over this', I promise I will choose to get better, I can do this for you.* A sharp voice of a staff member broke my trance, "Mealtime!"

Marched through the halls, I joined the milieu of patients as we entered the windowless room crowded with tables. Placed above each seat was a name card decorated like a middle schooler's folder: cheesy smiley faces and stickers that proclaimed, "You got this!" and "You can do hard things!". In front of each place card was a pre-portioned plate of food. As we took our seats, a staff member started the meal.

"Alright everyone, you have 30 minutes to complete; anyone who does not finish 100% will be boosted,¹ and won't be able to join the next outside break. Time starts... now!"

Time slowed, the food upon my plate morphed before my eyes; no longer the reasonably portioned meal—gargantuan piles of food. *I can't do this.* Pictures of my son splashed into

¹ Boost, is a high calorie Nutritional drink that comes in a variety of flavors. Frequently used to supplement calories in weight restoration environments.

consciousness; every bone in my body ached. *Just eat the food! JUST GET OVER THIS.* My chest tingled, and before I could reach the fork to instigate a bite, the starved and trenchant beast—the beast that had grown and morphed from my early days of my eating disorder—overtook every cell in my body. The message was clear, “Eat this and everything goes to hell.”

At 10 years old, I couldn't shield myself from the emotional turmoil caused by my undiagnosed bipolar, alcoholic father and a mother fixated on my body size and diet. The beast offered me control over external influence, allowing me to regulate when and how I experienced pain. The beast dampened the world's overwhelming noise; over the years, it shielded and emboldened me. Now, in the treatment facility, I struggled to comprehend; when did I lose control of the beast within?

The staff member's voice broke my trance. “Alright everyone, 30 minutes, times up!” Not a bite to my name, eyes drew to the floor. I was proud to have survived the beast, yet guilt and shame washed over me as I recalled my broken promise to my son. *I failed.* If I loved my son so much, why could I not just ‘get over’ this eating disorder? Why did I ‘allow’ this beast to control my life?

Days within the facility dragged on; my body curled tight upon my therapist's green couch. My eyes traced the bare winter trees that sat idle outside the window; I had not been outside the treatment facility in a week and yearned for fresh air. My therapist, a few years my junior, spoke up.

“You're in substance abuse recovery, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“How would you feel about hitting a weekly A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous) meeting? I think the principles of the twelve steps may help you here.”

I grimaced, “Eh, I don’t know....”

The next night, my heart raced as I entered the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, palms clammy with sweat. I took the seat closest to the door for an easy escape, my mind filled with memories of my first A.A. meeting five years prior. My swollen belly, pregnant with my son and still reeling from opiates. In that familiar room, the smell of burnt coffee ignited the same fear: I would not be capable of being a parent, my love wasn't good enough to give this child a good life, and I would surely perpetuate my cyclic family childhood trauma.

A harsh voice noted the start of the meeting and snapped me back to reality; for a prolonged moment, I wished for the simplicity of my past addiction. Addiction was out of control—a constant chase, a perpetual search for relief. Drugs consumed me, yet when I got clean, I never had to hold another baggy again. My eating disorder was the consistent and familiar way to find control, in a world I felt lost and overwhelmed within. Yet to recover from this eating disorder, I had to confront what it tried so hard to restrict me from. The mental and physical discomfort of being required to eat six times a day in treatment felt like the pain of a withdrawing heroin addict placed in the same room as their supply and told “don’t use that, you’ll die.” Five years prior, during my pregnancy, I got clean, I was able to quit smoking, I contained my ed behaviors. It felt possible to heal through the strength of my love and connection I had with the fetus inside of me. My body slumped against the chair in the back of the A.A. meeting; the fluorescent lights seemed to be a spotlight as a wave of shame rushed through my soul. *This eating disorder is a choice; if I really wanted to get better like I did when I*

was pregnant, I could just stop. Why can't I just stop? Why am I so weak now? A thought slipped through my mind, *is this beast here to protect me, or to kill me?*

Three weeks into my stay, the treatment team granted a three-hour pass. Allowed to leave the confined walls of the treatment facility, I was joined by my sister and son, and we set out into the city. The instructions for my pass were clear: eat a meal and a dessert. We sat on the picnic table bench in the restaurant, my son perched next to me. I wanted to melt within the precious moment I had next to him, to forget about why we were at the restaurant in the first place. With each bite, my beast howled, angered that I had eaten. We finished our meals and drove to the beach; our faces and fingers bitten by the crisp winter air. Hands excavated the cold sand, to my four-year-old's demand and delight, "Toilet Town" was created and subsequently stomped away with the great force of a child's rainboots. Waves crept along the shore; the laughter of my son echoed within my soul. For a moment I was overtaken; peace and warm joy flooded my cheeks. The moment darted away as I checked the time on my phone: *don't remind them of the time, don't get dessert, keep playing until you MUST go back.* My eyes narrowed; the voice was mine yet somehow, I knew the words came from the snarled beast within. A voice that was so familiar and intertwined with my own.

Filled with love for my son and devoid of dessert, I reentered the treatment facility, terrified and brimming with hope. Was the voice that controlled me, who deemed me unworthy and an enemy, truly my own or that of my inner beast? Tears streamed down my face as I collapsed onto the green couch in my therapist's office, sharing this newfound revelation. She posed a question I had heard countless times through my treatment cycles but had never grasped.

“You must feed the beast to understand its needs. It is just as hungry as you are. What if instead of fearing it, you embraced it, loved it, listened to it? Beyond your eating disorders fear and protection, what is it trying to tell you?”

Sailing from Hanoi At Dusk

By Annabelle Vu

One of my earliest memories of my mother is her tending to the garden. I remember watching her weathered hands, moving with purpose, while she clipped the stems of her red roses. Blushed pink and velvet red roses climbed the side of our house, hungry to soak up the sun. Their sweet perfume drifted in the breeze and made our Francis Street smell beautiful. To her, the flowers were more than just plants; they were like children, something she nurtured, cared for, and loved. Alongside my two older sisters and two brothers, we grew up amidst the daisies, pansies, and sunflowers, each bloom was a testament to her tender touch.

There are many things about my mother that remain a mystery to me, especially her traumas. I don't believe she'll ever fully open up about the pain that still resides in her heart from the Vietnam War and the loss of both her parents at a young age. Pain, grief, and suffering became rock boulders that weighed heavily on her soul, threatening to drown her in it. Sometimes she did share snippets of her past with me like the bicycle she once rode as a girl that my grandfather owned at his bike repair shop. She described the pink shades of cherry blossoms in Vietnam during spring and told me stories of going to her aunt's rice farm lands to work.

"Bác Minh, Bác Bing..." My uncles. Often she would take out photographs with yellowing hues, carefully preserved, and show me the faces of my family in Vietnam. She was born into a family of four brothers, two who had passed away. As she pointed to the faces, she would tell me where she saw resemblance of them in my sisters and brothers. How the way my siblings would smile or the shape of their eyes would remind her of her past family. As we would hold hands she told me that my fingers were formed just like my grandmother's. She would search for luck, wealth and length of life in the lines of my palms. In those moments, our shared heritage became a thread weaving memories into the tapestry of our lives.

Cultural traditions were practiced by my mother. In the evening, she lit incense, its smoky herbal scent would weave throughout the room as she prayed to her departed ancestors, I would curiously peer at her from the kitchen corner. With each tear that fell and every whispered chant, it was as if she was reaching out to my grandmother. Begging her mother for the advice she had

never gotten in her upbringing, longing for the maternal guidance and wisdom she had never received. On her knees, my mother would search for answers and seek reconciliation that everything would be okay. As if the spirit realm beyond could offer an unprecedented reassurance. My mother's heart ached for memories that never happened and deeply mourned for the memories that had slipped away.

One midnight, my mother spotted a large white moth resting on our porch light. She called me outside to see it, telling me it was a sign of her brother's presence. For a fleeting moment, it lingered, its delicate wings paused to let us admire the glistening iridescent patterns. It hovered on the light for a moment longer, as if granting us a brief glimpse into another world, before taking flight and disappearing into the stars of the night sky. We waited, hoping it would return, but it never did.

Throughout my young childhood, my mother found solace in the Vietnamese documentaries, which were played on repeat, offering her an escape from the challenges of a new world. In a place where her accent was judged, streets were unfamiliar, and the absence of a Vietnamese community and diversity that understood where she was from and what tragedies she had endured to get to America. Despite her efforts to adapt, encounters with police telling her she was driving in the bike lane and unexpected visits from proselytizing Mormons served as a constant reminder of her status as an outsider. Growing up in an elementary school predominantly populated by white students, I felt ashamed of my last name, as it rhymed with all sorts of teasing words. But now, I wear my last name proudly; it's my mother's heritage and legacy, and I have no intention of ever changing it.

Once, I asked my mother about her journey on the refugee boat, and she described it as "*đen tối, không bao giờ kết thúc*"—a never-ending darkness with no light or shoreline in sight. It was during one of the refugee camps in Hong Kong that my mother gave birth to my eldest sister, Nga. All of my siblings possess the same strength I see in my mother—a resilience that runs deep in our bloodline. It's a determination to fight for a better life, for the lives of your children, no matter how dark and frightening the challenges may be.

My dad, a fully New York-raised American, had an upbringing that stood in polar contrast to my mother's. While she navigated her teenage years selling pho as a street vendor in Vietnam, he pursued his passion as the drummer of a rock band in high school. When they first met, I believe they truly fell in love. My dad not only taught her the little details of American life, from using a vacuum cleaner to embracing American dining, but he also introduced us to the joys of family outings at zoos and aquariums. He went above and beyond, addressing my mother's insecurities by ensuring she received braces so she could confidently smile in the many family photos he took. Yet, despite these efforts, the haunting memories of my mother's past traumas lingered like ghosts, casting shadows over our household. They divorced and my mother has never married since.

When I was nine years old, my father gained custody over my youngest brother and I. The memory of that day still haunts me- the sight of my mother, tears streaming down her face, as she chased after the car, her anguish ringing through the air. It was a moment that etched itself deep into my soul, marking the end of an era with my mother, a heartbreaking echo to her own departure from Vietnam. In that instant, as I looked back at her, I felt the weight of her pain, a mirror of the agony she endured when she left her homeland behind. That moment felt like the final chapter of my life as I knew it with my mother- an echo of her own departure from Vietnam.

Tears glossed over in both my brother and I's eyes as our hearts felt the pain of leaving everything familiar- the last glance at our mother and siblings, how things were and how we knew them. It was a wrenching separation, like my mother's departure from Vietnam, leaving behind not just physical places, but our memories, hopes and dreams. In that moment, our worlds collided intertwining our shared experience of loss and displacement.

That departure marked the beginning of a new chapter in my life—a chapter where I would no longer wake up to the comforting presence of my mother, where her laughter and playing with my siblings would be mere echoes in my memory. Despite the brief moments we shared during Christmas breaks and summer visits, they could never fully capture having my mother and all my siblings by my side. With each passing year, my admiration for her resilience

and sacrifices grows, yet so does the ache for something more—a deeper connection, an unspoken understanding.

I dream of traveling Vietnam with my mother, to unravel the layers of her past that have been buried for so long. I want to walk the streets she once roamed as a child, to witness the cherry blossoms dancing in the wind and to greet the dawn rising over the waters of Hanoi, her homeland. In those moments, I hope to bridge the gap between us, to understand her roots and the world she knew before she became the mother that I know.

I dedicate this personal essay to my beautiful mother, Thai Vu.

POETRY

Linus Elkins

Why Dogs Howl

This is what I know –
there is no true memory of the canine
without the howl. The bark alone isn't enough,
if thunder could clap without lightning
it wouldn't. There are no true coincidences,
only patterns, only those
who call and those who respond. When I was
young I would watch my neighbor's dog hollow
it's throat and, tongue flat, pour out of the doorway,
guttural at the mail carrier.
Maybe a dog's call is wolfhood,
to shriek til given back,
mourning themselves as poster child:
before the swaddle of
snaggle teeth and flat noses.
I say this only
after camping once and waking
to the woods ricocheting wolven voice like hammers
hitting nails in sequence, one after the other after the other,
and dizzy with sleep I thought they sounded human. Which meant, really,
that I could see myself within them, all life as instinct and licking
the red from wounds. I wonder
when all you have left is a voice no crossbreeding could quiet,
is the choice whether you should use it or
what you should say.

POETRY

Aija Mattice

Lament of a Fallen Star

I wish you were a black hole,
Pulling me infinitely close,
Bending light until the entire universe lies behind me,
My vision entirely dedicated to observing you,
My peers watching me redshift with blush.
I wish I could watch the universe end with you,
As you pull and stretch me to fit by your side.
I want to feel all of humanity's rules and need for conformity
Break down around you, infinitely beyond comprehension.
I want to fall into you,
To be consumed by you,
As you spaghettify every atom of my being,
Unraveling and grasping every detail I possess.
I want to feel time slow down with you,
The outside world whizzing by,
Entire civilizations beginning and ending
In the span of our first handshake.

I wish you were a black hole,
Lasting longer than every planet, every star, every galaxy,
Lasting longer than light itself,
Until the universe comes to an end.

1/5

Would I still light up the mri machine
If you stuck me in?
Could you still detect
The rings of it
Stacked in a strand of my hair?

These bodies we inhabit are as dense and vital as the ground
Sediment layers
Dark and crumbling, full of tiny threads
The fibers of decay
Impenetrable to sense
Yet time has left us
Somehow too transparent

Now the waves interpret the inside
The computer interprets the waves
And the doctor squints and harshly taps a finger

But these are my lungs
My liver
My hands
I haven't a say
Just drug along—

How does the past become the present?
Digestion.
The blood desperately tries
To stave off rot.
We negotiate.

The trance puddles.
Flocking mechanical bird
Preening our eye for visitations

The spirit
Brushing in the air
Thankfully incorporeal.

But how many souls can we relinquish
Into the songbirds spent too long at the window
Or the bees that crawl back through the screen
To panic against glass

(I say)
I let you out
I let you free
Leave me be
With your hazard.

(He replies)
I can see the world
I can see it there
But I'm crashed again.

And together that way
Trying to seal the safe passage
We negotiate.

And the winter rolls over
On its thin haunches
Teasing, speckled belly, suspending the last frost
But the ground, for now, softens
And the daffodils foolishly sprout.

Standing around on our shovels
We hesitate before going to plant the tree
Afraid we might encounter the old dog

Did they have the same thought
Before they entered me?

So thankful that only us, knowing him, can see.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Caroline Recker

The Breaking of the Wings

Mike knows Danny's dead. The 200-something pound Samoan's head is on the ground and his feet are up on the table. His body's showered in debris, all white like a statue. His deep-set brown eyes are wide and staring. His corneas are covered in a fine dusting of powder from the ceiling. And he's not blinking.

*

The nose cone flips up on the Lockheed C5 Galaxy. When the tail is raised, you can look straight through the belly of the aircraft and out the other side. And it's *huge*. At 380,000 pounds, it is and has been the largest aircraft in the Air Force inventory since its introduction in 1969.

Twenty years later, five-year-old Michael Recker is ascending a tight staircase to the C5's upper flight deck. He hasn't seen a lot of things yet in life, but this plane's the coolest one. The cockpit is a sea of buttons, levers, and dials. There's even switches on the ceiling. Mike's eyes grow big.

After the tour, Mike stands on the concrete at Travis Air Force Base and squints at the sky, where six navy blue F/A-18 Hornets fly in formation. They rocket upwards before plunging back towards the ground with a tearing, screaming thunder that rises and falls in pitch as the planes pull out of their drop just in time. Mike can feel the sound deep in his chest. The roar is so loud it seems it will rend the sky apart. Everyone cheers when the show is finished.

"Michael, Michael, motorcycle," his dad says. "Maybe you could fly planes someday."

*

Since man started flying, he has taken to the air with a certain amount of risk; to counter peril, a tradition was established years ago when the Army Air Corps started issuing pilot wings to their aviators.

*

There's a loud banging, like someone dropping a manhole cover, like plate weights tumbling off a barbell, a heavy metallic thud. Then a cracking din, something shattering overhead. Then the false ceiling collapses and chunks of drywall rain down. Danny falls in slow motion, arms spread like an angel, his back to Mike. He plummets head-first towards the concrete floor. Mike wants to duck, to get out of the way, but there's no time. Danny hits the ground three feet from where Mike stands, unable to slow his descent, unable to stop what unfolds before him.

Their unit is in Udorn Thani, Thailand for a training exercise with the Thai Royal Air Force. Danny scaled the tower they're working out of to plant a weighted antenna at the top; it was supposed to be high up for better reception. He must have been too heavy for the roof.

"Watch out!" Mike shouts as people rush into the room. His eyes dart to the gaping roof in case it continues to crumble. Heedless, the people rush to Danny. But Danny's dead. Why don't they know he's dead?

*

Stepping outside in the Florida Panhandle in July is like putting on a sweater. The air is thick with humidity, and *everything* is sticky.

Mike's nearly two weeks into Air Force field training, a 28-day course in fitness and problem solving and suffering.

His team of cadets is navigating the leadership reaction course, a series of cubicles full of timed obstacles. So far, it's the most fun he's had down here.

A large rectangular frame sticks out of the ground, almost like a pull-up bar. The sides are painted touch-me-not red. Touching red nets a time penalty for the team. Don't touch red.

Opposite the frame is an imposing wooden wall. Ten feet stretch between the two objects. The ground here is an imaginary minefield. The task is this: with two cadets stationed on the other side of the wall, get the team over the obstacles without blowing up.

The cadets decide to heft a long pole across the gap, then shimmy up the pole and over the wall. Mike hoists himself up on the frame, alongside Cadet Overstreet. Both cadets have their legs twisted around the top of the frame for balance. They hold the pole between them. Their plan is to shove it across the gap, then hang on tight.

"Okay, ready?" Mike says, his voice strained from the effort.

"Yeah."

They lunge the pole into open air. Then Cadet Overstreet lets go.

Metal collides with flesh as the pole smashes Mike's finger on its descent to the earth below. Pain erupts in his hand. A blister on his finger is quickly filling with dark blood and Mike's vision starts to spin. He looks away.

The field training officer overseeing the exercise steps in. "Get down, cadet," he says. "You can touch red, just get down."

At the base hospital, Mike is presented with a choice: go home and come back next summer, or tough it out. There's sixteen days remaining.

"Put a brace on it," he says.

That night, Mike ponders a letter he's writing home to his family. "Greetings from Tyndall Air Force Base," he scrawls. "Or as I like to call it, Satan's asshole."

*

This tradition was called the Breaking of the Wings.

*

Danny takes a hoarse, gasping breath. It's laborious and ragged. Everyone crowds his body except Mike, who stumbles out of the room. He knows there's nothing they can do for Danny. They didn't see his eyes. They didn't see him fall.

Away from the commotion, Mike sits down. His mind is unsteady, and he thinks he might faint. The air conditioning is blasting. Mike's skin is alive with goosebumps. He feels the hairs on his arms, feels their friction against his clothes. He tries to drink some water. It's like sipping from a firehose. The water is glacial and his teeth start to ache. With dull shock, he looks down to find his hands are splattered with crimson. He doesn't remember touching Danny. The Thai Royal Air Force gave everyone hand sanitizer, so Mike rubs it into his palms to clean them. The air smells like vodka and blood. The scent burns his nose. Mike hears frenzied conversations from the room where Danny died and wishes the others wouldn't talk so loud. The rushing of the AC is like a jet mid-drop without the ear protection.

*

Mike bought the wings pre-scored. They came in a package deal alongside his framed hero shot and his diploma. Also included was a frame for the wings that featured a brief description of their significance on a mottled blue mat.

Mike stands with his parents beneath a Boeing C-17 Globemaster III. At 174 feet in length, it's enormous. It spans 169 feet 10 inches from winglet to winglet. Two engines on either wing give the gunmetal grey beast a combined 161,600 pounds-force of thrust. As #2 in his class, Mike's being stationed at Hickam Air Force Base on Oahu to fly it.

Mike snaps the wings in half and presents one of the pieces to his dad.

"You keep one and I keep one," he explains. "It's supposed to be good luck."

"Thank you, son," his dad says. Mike will give them the frame later. His own half of the wings isn't framed, but he'll always know exactly where it is.

At the graduation dinner, Mike and his parents pose for a picture. Mike's in his dress blues, and Mom is too, both with silver stripes on the tops of their shoulders. Dad's missing his jacket, but his bow tie matches Mike's. All three wear medals on the left sides of their chests. Mike's new wings, the second pair, are pinned there too.

*

At every UPT graduation, the Air Force issues new pilots their first pair of wings.

As tradition has it, that first pair should never be worn by the pilot.

To bring good fortune through their aviation career, the novice pilot should break the emblem into two parts.

*

Thai medics are loading Danny onto a stretcher. He's a big guy, though, and the men are struggling. Mike watches with his whole body tense, scared they're going to drop the stretcher. Danny—Danny's body—is headed to the hospital.

"He's gonna be okay," someone says.

Mike wonders why they're all pretending it's true.

*

To fly from Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar to Camp Bastion in Afghanistan, brand new Aircraft Commander Mike needs clearance from the mission manager. He makes the request and waits. It's tricky to deconflict the routes: Procedural Instrument Flight Rules, or PIFR, dictates 15-minute time slots broken up by altitude. And there's thunderstorms rolling in.

The weather instruments aren't great. Mike knows the general area of the storm but not much else. He remembers his training: when flying above thunder, avoid the area by ten nautical miles. If flying below, double that distance.

"Okay, Captain, you're flying at 190," says the schmuck on the other end of the line, one Captain Shawn O'Neill. He's sitting cozy at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois, 7,000 miles away.

Mike frowns. The lowest altitude possible. Into a storm.

"Sir, the weather at the airfield is barely legal."

Mike knows visibility for landing is right at the minimum. The FAA hasn't certified the instrument approach for Bastion yet. The only way to see the airfield will be to dip below the storm.

"You'll approach between 0400 and 0500 hours." O'Neill is relying on a small chunk of time where the weather will abate enough to make the plan legal. He's also being a cock.

"Legal is different from advisable."

"It's legal."

Mike sighs. "Well, can I have a different altitude?"

"No, sir."

"Well, that's bullshit," Mike says brightly. "I'll go, but if I see any weather I'm turning around."

"Fair enough, Captain," says cocksucker O'Neill, "wouldn't want you to do anything you're not comfortable with."

Mike's got about 25 passengers in his plane, plus some low-priority cargo. The aircraft costs \$212 million to produce and \$20,000 an hour to operate. He's not comfortable flying all that into a war zone filled with weather just to see if he can. But he does.

The weather radar measures moisture returns, and Mike can sort of see what he's heading into. When he sees rain clouds, he stays away. He's got night vision goggles pulled over his eyes. The invisible mountains of Afghanistan splay below him.

He approaches an occluded front—calm clouds that surround a vicious core of thunder and rain. As the plane passes through the cloud, his vision turns bright green, and he pulls the goggles off. The radar isn't painting anything. Mike is forced to descend.

Then the plane lurches violently. Mike commands 1,000 feet per minute on the descent, but the gage reads 4,300 feet. The bird is falling from the sky. The whole craft shudders, 280,000 pounds flapping on the wind like it's made of paper. They break through the clouds and the city of Lashkar Gah appears like a miracle on the suddenly visible ground. On touchdown, Mike's plane becomes the first C-17 to land on Camp Bastion's newly constructed runway.

The passengers deboard, looking mutinous, and Mike's furious along with them. He knows he's just risked their lives against his better judgment. Fuming, he calls Captain O'Neill.

"I have no faith in my weather radar. It's broken," Mike declares. "I'm not legal to fly in weather. I'm staying here in Bastion tonight."

"Well—have you called them yet?" O'Neill sounds like a cross child.

"I'm calling them right now."

"This is really disappointing," O'Neill says. "Might as well have turned around and not landed, because now you're maxing out the airfield."

Mike looks around at the deserted field. "I'm looking at an empty ramp," he says.

"Bullshit, there's only three spots total."

"Actually, sir, they've built a new ramp here and we are the only aircraft on it. We're going into crew rest, and we'll self-alert at 12. I'll call you when I get back to the aircraft," Mike says. *Dickhead*, his tone says.

"Okay."

“I feel stupid for letting you push me into this. If anybody asks me about tonight, I’m telling them your name and what I think of you.” Mike hangs up.

Camp Bastion is under British control. Mike doesn’t know how it works here, but he explains the situation.

“Oh, mate, I gotta tell you, man. We usually have air crew dorms for this specific purpose. But the FAA is here certifying the approach.”

Mike and his passengers get punted to Camp Leatherneck with the Marines.

It’s pouring rain and the desert has turned to sludge. Wet sand cakes Mike’s boots as he walks, and icy rain pelts his back. It smells like wet dust and cold and burning trash. They’ll be spending the night in tents.

Mike heads to the chow hall. A Marine colonel sits next to him.

“What the fuck are you guys doing here?” The man is jovial and booming. His voice takes up a lot of space.

“Well, sir, we keep asking ourselves that question.”

“Where you guys out of?”

“Al-Udeid,” Mike says. He’s a colonel’s son. He’s not particularly intimidated.

The colonel laughs. “Where you’re at right now, this is R&R for most of my Marines.” Real tough.

“Yeah,” Mike quips back, “but I noticed you didn’t have anywhere to get a pedicure.”

The colonel chuckles. “Well, good luck,” he says, and heads back out of the chow hall.

“Fuck that guy,” Mike mutters. There’s a reason he joined the Air Force.

*

One half is kept by the new pilot, the other half given to someone of significance in their lives.

*

Danny’s body is transferred to a trauma center in Bangkok, a city where frequent motorcycle accidents have led to significant advances in the treatment of head injuries.

The Air Force flies Danny’s pregnant wife into Thailand to see him. They ferry her through the notoriously tricky Thai customs. Everyone has hope for a while.

Danny’s unconscious body is flown back to the States. He never wakes up. His family elects to take him off life support.

In Thailand, the exercise continues. Mike eyes the ceiling warily in every room. He doesn’t want to be inside. The air outside is almost gummy with moisture but ozone isn’t liable to collapse on you. Mike finds himself shying away from the Thai power lines, which sit much lower to the ground than their American counterparts. For two weeks, his fellow officers pump that hand sanitizer just because it’s there. For two weeks, the smell is electric in his nostrils.

The antenna is planted on the ground, where it turns out to work just fine.

*

Mike’s in the Reserves now. It’s been over a decade since Danny’s death, but Mike thinks about Danny every year. Mike has two children, a wife, and a house in Wichita, Kansas. The city was

named the Air Capital of the world in 1928, but Mike didn't move there for that. Or for the weather.

"I feel bad that I have this great hobby and you don't," his wife, Hannah, says. She spends all the free time she can get with her horses. A lawyer and a reservist, Hannah's happy place is the stable.

"What do you want to do?" she continues. "What are you happiest doing?"

Mike shrugs. "Going to work and flying," he says honestly. "When it's a really nice day out—it's a great day for flying. That's what I want to do." To hear his parents tell it, it's all he's ever wanted.

*

To preserve that good luck, those two halves should only be brought together again in the next life for the promise of successful flight through eternity.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Jules Raymond

Fork

I'm trying to figure out how I will survive this dream I had at the start of the summer, and in the dream, there is a beach, and I brace for a wound to open on my hand, and a full-body shiver washes over me, the kind that anticipates a sweat.

I'm scared of the beach. The sky is chalky and white from distant fires. The beach is green, sewn together by seaweed, moss, and clams. If I cross my eyes, two solid blocks of color coalesce.

There are bodies in the barnacle minefield. The bodies are still. Spliced people bleed into the tidepools, their hair matted and their hips bruised, clawed in half by Spanish donkeys. Some are close to me, and I see their mangled tissue. Some are barely visible at the far end of the beach. I can't see their faces, but their purple wilt fits the calm of the scene. My soft arms wait for the mouth of the rocks, ready to be broken and swollen and bloated. If I were traveling fast enough, or at just the right angle, my blood would stop beating and my eyelids would come crashing down.

I've seen the place from the dream before. I was barely old enough to leave the house on my own, and the tides had trapped me on the wrong side of the bluff. I tied my shoes to my backpack and held it above my head like some old jungle explorer. The barnacles tore skin from my feet, and I bled into the dark saltwater. Too dark to see where I was stepping. I winced and tiptoed around the bluffs, stumbled onto the shore, and began drying my feet with socks.

On the path up through the woods, I felt a sharp pain in my shoes. I shook them loose, and two dead bees fell onto the sand. Their stings were hot and bright above my battered feet.

My biggest fear is forgetting these things. The camera and the pen are an external catalog, separate from my brain, a brain which I once described as an incessant banging noise. An oil barrel rolling down a hill. Pleasantly, sometimes. Collisions set me straight, sparklers rain down the street, pop tires, smash windows, and do backflips. I've never done a backflip in my life, not even on a trampoline, not even into a swimming pool.

*

I decided I would look for survival clues throughout the summer, and then maybe, if I was confronted by the murderous beach, I would learn how to evade its edges.

The beaches in California were unblemished, smooth, and nothing like the earth vomit I was used to at home, or in the dream. It was my final week in the state. I half expected to crash down in the rainforest on the flight back up the coast. The beach would wait for me there, hanging a mossy noose somewhere up the neck of a pine tree.

All of this raced through my head on a night that ended prematurely, spending restless energy with some old friends, some new friends, and some fast friends. The four of us sat on the curb, and the weeds grew with us, and we were bored, so we talked about our own personal brand of sex.

1. Like an old married couple.
2. Like a ritual, like playing with knives and bleeding into each other.
3. Like, drunk after the club, I guess?
4. Like, playfully, I guess.

In a nation of losers, we all want to be cyborgs and porn stars. We want to be sexy, we want to be desired, and we want to be adored.

“We would have beautiful children,” she said.

It was pretending and kissing all over town. On top of grocery stores, in alleys, in train stations, in dog-eared city parks. All the pretending and kissing and redundant flattery saw the young problem of having lots to do and no place to do it. I thought of this later:

iceblink!
some cheer from the royal parade
sheds a veil over your red stutter
and past my teeth and metal dreams
is an eight-legged star
sitting flush at the edge of the door

The haze was bookended by a playful shove goodnight, all the way home, all the way to Greece, where our beautiful children would grow up with the Aegean, and the swings by the grass.

*

Leaning against the plane window, I thought about how I would carefully examine the desert landscape on our way up, reflecting on what the years had done to me, where I had been, and where I was going. The window seat was a wasted investment. I fell asleep before we even left the terminal, and woke up thousands of feet above Oregon.

*

The first night back was a test for velocity. Moshing, punching, and screaming. The hornet screech of amplifiers snapped us loose. The venue was a crusty backyard, where beer cans and ashes had been stomped down for eons to make a dancefloor. The buoy of enough bodies created a malleable shield. A possible defense for the beach knives.

Everyone kicked up smoke and dust with their raggedy suits. She looked at my black-toothed grin, broccoli and mud stuck in there under the gums. Quite the jump from our nap in the park just a few hours earlier, still clutching the same sunny gallon jug of tea and booze.

Sam and I were friends who had orbited for a while, separated by distance and circumstances, but she now commanded my full attention, and admiration, as we collided again in Washington. I looked for her bobbing head in the crowd when I got too stirred up and spun around.

After the moshing and punching and screaming, once the drums wore off and the aches set in, we sprawled out on the trampoline in her friend's backyard. Tired laughing fits. I wasn't yet ready to do a backflip, or lean in for a kiss, or wipe the dirt off of her face with my only clean thumb, but we stood a little closer, maybe nudged by the trampoline's strange sinking gravity.

I woke up with cuts and she woke up with bruises on her legs and on her feet. My guess was someone's silver carved a jagged line across my collar. I sneezed dust into the sink and rubbed grass out of my ears before the morning shower. The dream beach haunted the next few months of summer, but it was dangerously idle, just itching to throw spears through my head.

*

We parted the beaded lips to a tiki bar. It was the first night of a weekend trip across the Canadian border. The streets were warm and fly-ridden, people sat on their porches, and we sipped vibrant cocktails in an imaginary tropic. I kind of loved the tackiness of the whole thing. Plastic contorted into whatever form it needed to, be it appropriated Polynesian imagery, palm leaves, or umbrellas. The atomic age still shook hands with islands.

"I'm honestly jealous that you can remember your dreams," Sam said.

"Do you never remember your dreams?"

"I mean not never, but very, very rarely. I guess it makes the ones I do have feel more special, though."

"That makes sense. So you just sleep straight through the night? I said.

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Wow. I think I dream three or four times a night."

"Well, you don't have to brag about it," she said. Laughing and speaking were sometimes a merged action for her. It was an easy bug to catch in return.

The bartender told us about a firework competition at a nearby beach. It was almost dark. We joined the flow of bodies pouring down to the water, lured by the cracks and hisses.

We joked about birds flying through the explosions, and what their myths would tell about human celebrations. It was a race downhill, occasionally glimpsing pops of color above the buildings. The beach was completely full. Tops of heads hid away any barnacles or malice, ducking and weaving between knitted arms, led by a strong hand. I tucked away my camera and she held me.

i shook the alarm you set,
you let it ring a little longer,
tugged by cinder blocks
and the persistent warmth
of the afternoon,
not far removed
from the solstice,
i dragged my feet
bootzip untangled

i watched you sleep
(sorry)
the line of your lip
curved down slightly,
an inverse of your closed grin
when you stared out at the harbor
through a pair of yellow binoculars
now shut, you and it

i love the confusing joke cycle
rosetta tin barrel banging and rolling
you poke holes in them
when they don't make sense
i stumble ass-backwards
into a nevermind smile

*

We went to the beach on Sam's last weekend in town. She turned over the rocky crabhouse and her fingers were papercut by stones. The crabs scuttled across her hand, and their wet clicking waltz stung the cuts with salt. The crabs and their dumb tiny eyes camouflaged with the sand, and the sea anemone waved its purple arms with the flow of the tide.

I thought maybe if the sea anemone had a brain, and maybe if its brain banged or bung or beated to the rhythm of tin barrels like mine did, then maybe it could use its hundred arms to slam out a drum solo. But instead, it was quiet, and calm, so we watched dogs run along a shallow sandbar like four-legged deities.

"It usually takes some time before I really start missing someone," she said.

I walked home with songs in my ear so I could mark the day with an unchanging reminder that could be rewinded and reanimated. I tossed my keys onto the cluttered desk in the corner of my room, and laid face down on the bed.

Drool collected on my cheek. I spread my starfish arms, and imagined that the friction of the sea anemone's many furious drumsticks would carve a reciprocal body out of the mattress below me. The mattress pulled me to sleep, and I dreamt that I came home again, from the same beach and the same girl, but this time the desk clutter had been wiped clean, and it looked sterile, and shiny, and lost.

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"I remembered my dream this time. I relived everything that happened yesterday."

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I had another dream near the end of the summer, the only dream that equaled the murderous beach in clarity and illusion. It started with a bellhop and a preacher. The bellhop reached into the preacher's mouth with a pair of pliers, and the preacher leaned forward to wrap his lips around the metal jaws. A simple twist from the bellhop ripped out his front teeth, and the preacher swallowed the red pliers. He folded into a chrome mantis like sheet metal origami, then left to roam tall stalks of grass and cut them down with scissor-fingers.

I made it to the beach, finally. The tides pulled a carpet from under the murk, and I felt sand and gravel suck through the teeth of my feet.

I can't see the fish brushing past my leg. There's a deep scar running from my knuckle to my wrist. It freezes like a dark worm when it's cold. I place my hand in the water, and if I look just right, the worm slips off my skin and the wound closes, folding over itself, faces, dreams, tides, fleeting.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Douglas Moon

My Favorite Orange

I left alone my toe today. As a Hindi meditation. Went wandering in the words today. As an angry invitation. He made me cry today. As an angry invitation. I cried and said goodbye today. As a final insult to his station.

I said goodbye today and felt replete of my heart's drumbeat – me upon my throne. I wanted to weave spiders on my body with myself today - and it hailed, and my piss felt raw. It burnt.

And I couldn't cry because I was angry. It was simple and I asked, "why today?" and all I wanted was to touch myself. Alone.

We could have sailed a ship today but it was full of alligators. I left my crocs at home. I found my language in monkey bars and left my videos alone-

Today. Today I felt like my briefs. Naked and beautiful. And I wandered there alone. I was scared about crying at home again but I think I didn't feel at home. I wanted to figure things out today and instead I left my brothers to flowers and a dial tone.

I left him alone again today and fled his lips again.

I ate magic ice cream and saw myself in my laundry. I missed no-one alone.

Again.

I thought about gender and ninjas and turtles and how the people around me looked like mute ice cream pies and I was singing like magic in an ice cream cone.

And his love was his reflection, and I felt a lot like I was on loan.

I want to fly in my spaceship and shoot his from behind.

Like I want to erase my lonely steps and let my mimicry hide.

I dreamt of Caesar salad and tandoori chicken drumsticks, and I wanted to suck someone else's face 'till I was all alone with them.

I want to be a pirate with people and not let time ruin our stips.

I went down some dirty fears and let my tears trace my tips.

I want to sip myself in the shadows and paint my face with no one's slight.

I was a little mouse for him and he killed me to atone.

His face is screaming silence and all I want is his head cracked on the street, marching bands, and vegan penis to eat.

My apple-y answers smell like kinder secrets than moments of his boredom - which reminds me, I found butter in cheap strawberry ice cream...And I wanted somebody else's steamy armpits - with the breeze and I found this in boredom. All alone.

Thought about many things today and how he loves me shallow.

I miss me so much, I'm turning into my habit.

I don't care if I haunt myself as long as people can be around to love me.

I'm a naked kid in a bucket when we cry all alone.

A dead November drone.

I want my Nabisco crackers when he acts like butter's throne.

I missed his tears' bloody mucosal precipice again today and my left nut hurts. A lot.

Like my heart bit it again.

I wanna' eat my moldy habits and someone else's horny fornications.

He smells like rancid butter but only it was French and herbed and served in Mexico.

In a Mexican café, Someone Else is like my Mexican coffee in the evening. Dry and delicious with cream.

I wonder them over sugar and spirits in Rome, by myself on the wind with Tuxedo mask, rose in hand.

I'm nagging and tugging at my sleeve and hungrily ravenous for our freedoms.

I wanna' lick my lips as they smooth the wind with options and all I want are my afterthoughts.

These lips hold these secrets and my words are like my precum. Following, Flowing.

I wanna' bite him viciously and scratch a three-letter word on his neck and mark it with the mutilated feelings of his right hand.

I want to blush and call my friend something cool like cherry flavored love.

Like it's his whacked-out wicked soft-flavored verb.

I wanna' suck my own dick.

Don't let me near other men because then all I want is their left nut and I leave me with their French kisses.

I make me so drunk.

I wanna' merge me with my shadow. Like I wanna' tie my friends up and show them to bed and give them hours upon hours of head. I wanna' suck their dicks.

Like I wanna' kiss me on the dock and pick up my missing socks.

I was his salty Gypsy boy when he melted like the wicked witch of oz, in New Spain. Revolting necrotic disloyal swans with feces for eyes and each one a distorted erotic ego mane.

My mesmerizations feel like cool lime and dry paper and I wanna' play with my body like it's a video game and give my friend my armor and cry when he's all alone because I get lonely, too.

Today I worshipped in newer ways.

There was life pain and as raw as it was new.

He's my period stain and I would gladly scream out of boredom about him raping me from infancy to high noon tea.

I need new friends, sunshine, all relatable-y relaxed, bay area bread, and my boyfriend eating my freshly showered ass like its sugar dark rum.

I wondered today if the breeze would bless our life's metaphors with gestures.

I'm my plastic flavored boy and I don't like me put away.

I wanna' fuck in someone else's old red jeep. Sometimes when I'm in love and imagining me, I seem like Altoids and collector's mints and gasoline freeways and cops getting maced.

I wanna' play prince Aladdin and run away with my boyfriend to Pakistan and let love be our target score.

I wanna' start wrestling and it feels something like college hazings in the New England Autumn fog and trusting the unknown Harry Potter future because all I want is to stuff coke up my nose and drink sparkled lemonade, to our government's angry tones.

I want to drown in their tears and piss in their fears and call them my newly baked brothers.

I wanna' blush about their chins and their new pet collections. I want them all on me all high on erections.

Will I make out with him on the corner of this city's pavements and grab his dick in its corner stores? Absolutely not.

I'm frosted with honey and sometimes I like me in small pill-like moments of complacent audacity.

I want to paint my boyfriend's face and call him my monkey and chase with him naked, in places we call money hidden pages of history we fondly call "Honey". Naked. Sunny.

Can I make fun of him with every digit I droop into my throat and call him a spermy old throat when I'm old like a goat?

Is my penis mine to see? I wanna' see it for free.

I wanna' go numb on coke with my boyfriend and puke on empty colored bills. And then we'll say our lunch was left alone. All alone. Well cry with open eyes and gasp amazed at the air, for once, because we found Jesus sleeping in Buddha's greased golden throne.

And we'll grab each other's bone and say that our love is no longer young and that Mars is our home. So, park it in maps and leave dust alone.

My boyfriend wants to watch Grease under pink vapor-wave Florida palms. I call him my fortune teller.

I wanted to fuck him in his chest 'till his heart ached and he was sinful and crying for his heart to be fucked by me alone.

Fuck my mouth if you're my kind of candy.

I don't wanna' wear his shoes again and walk on my teacher 'till our day is nearly dead. I don't wanna' eat his brains today as he says that they're all backstabbers with me and says that we don't drink alone.

'Till I wanna' leave me again and then I'll point out how that's empty and shallow. And that's how I'll know that my tears are only tears and sometimes fears and that we're not dead forgotten lullabies.

I wanna' wear an art smock with my mop and grin about us gay guys and docks and drink beef stew residue broth like I'm poor on the floor asking for more and say that I come with two messages but I forgot how they start but that I remember one continuous thing. That we're both very new and very old at our means and we'll let our teeth gleam as we let our guests wonder and whisper: unspeakable memories and umbilical things!

One day if we both get turned into warlocks we'll turn our patrons every color we're able - discussing out loud in perfect English the freedoms found in public urination, the phenomena of local exaltation and the politics of private insinuation.

I don't wanna stop typing but I'm profuse with time savers, like smoking some more cantaloupe dreams and examining the edge of our wondrous sundries and how incense creams when it's no longer sexless or angry or bled by a bone.

The times that I hate myself, I wanted him to fuck me and I want him to sleep with and to keep with, yet I left my dreams all alone.

Tomorrow we'll cry for each other because each lasting moment shit gets bigger for us and we can't light our night skies all over again if in our loving and leaving shit, we're all alone.

I'm your sin drunk skinny puppy because your my chocolate bone.

The color orange: is the color orange: is the color orange.

El Molinos

Nonfiction entry (1,198 words)

Galaxias n Kosmos

It is cold in Athens, Greece, this time of the year. The early spring is not the best time to visit a summer vacation spot, but when a mother sees that the tickets for a family of five are cheap, she snags that chance. It had been over a year since the Quejado-Marcial family had seen their daughter. This would be the first time in six years since this uniquely blended family would travel overseas.

The family was to stay in Greece for two weeks, with a strict itinerary to follow. The plans included guided tours, a day trip to Santorini Island, and popular dessert destinations. Even with this planning, they'd get multiple treats from the same gyro place and fresh Greek yogurt bar the entire trip, despite the hassling promoters outside the various restaurants.

The Quejado-Marcial-Molinos family is a special one. A uniquely blended family. The only daughter from a previous marriage. The mother is from Guam and whose entire life—and this family's—was based on her hastiness for moving the family from place to place since she was the family's breadwinner. Marcos Marcial Sr. was from the south end of Los Angeles and strived for a better life for his next of kin. Two sons, both on the opposite sides of the teenage spectrum; Marcos Jr. was on the football team, whereas Manolo was often baking or making art and kept to himself.

To these five, being family meant tolerating each other for the sake of pretending to be normal.

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It's incredibly windy on Santorini Island. The waves crash against black rocks in an attempt to reach the pure and intensely white homes. Despite the weather, it's quiet on the island as the locals repaint the white exterior walls of each house, expecting a big tourist turnout in the next few months. A muddied mule carries packs of bottled water on its back and is guided by a white dog down cobblestone steps. It's quiet except for the hardy wind and the subtle bickering between father and son.

"I've had enough of that." Marcos Sr. stops in his tracks, facing his son, bearing the same name.

"I didn't even *want* to come here." The son scoffs, eyeing down his father, "I didn't want to come here for my birthday, but now we're here."

Manolo sidestepped and side-eyed the conversation, wanting to turn away from the scene, but he couldn't do it even if he wanted to. The uneven cobblestone forces all their shoes to dip inwards.

Edel shoots sharp eyes in her son's direction, scowling at the same time.

"That's enough."

She gages the area for any Grecian locals casting stares in their direction. The illusion of the perfect family vacation was

falling apart quickly, which was not unusual for these five individuals.

“No,” Marcos says. He takes a couple of steps forward to his father, almost chest to chest. He’s taller than him by a couple of inches, with still more room to grow.

“We can’t even fix the bathroom at the house, but we can afford to spend two weeks here in Greece?”

“The only bathroom that works is the one in mommy’s room,” he says, almost out of breath. “Out of the three that work in the house, only her bathroom works.”

It’s clear that there was much more behind all of this, implied in between the cracks of his voice. It’s not just about how irrelevant this trip meant to him nor how the house was broken, but how broken this family was. How awkward it felt to spend time with the *stranger* his older sister had become after she was kicked out three years ago. Is it just adolescents' growing pains, or is this how life happens? Would anything have changed if she had just *stayed*?

Edel’s eyes shift sideways. A slight frazzled blush appears on her cheeks, the left side of her mouth tilting downwards.

“Is this true?” Marcos Sr. says.

She nods. She’s embarrassed. It’s not like her to show it. A breath is held in the air and then let go.

The family moves on.

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A few days before, the family had set on a Biblical-guided tour. Unbeknownst to the parents in the van's middle, the three children in the back were highly disinterested. The tour guide, Niko, occasionally made eye contact with Marcos Sr. The green and barren scenery of rural Greece filled the windows. There is no music playing—just conversations about God and other things.

The three in the back each had at least one earphone in one ear, squished all together. They’re all taller than they had been six years ago on that trip to Italy.

Six years ago, a family of four went to Italy rather than five. Rome is cold in November, yet you can still find stiletto heels and sheer tights stepping on Old World cobblestones. Edel tends to have a habit of planning trips to foreign countries during their off seasons.

It’s a struggle up the M.C. Escher-like stairs with five pieces of luggage and a carry-on to pair with each. Each luggage contained clothes for the week, except for the last one, which was virtually empty in case they wanted to bring back souvenirs. The family’s weekly rental had enough space for the older children to have their own room. The youngest son shared a bed with Edel, as the daughter kept borrowing her clothes the entire trip.

There’s a grocery store that’s open 24/7 right below the apartment. Edel and her children would browse its offerings each night, only to settle on chocolate panettone. Jetlag overcame them all, and they’d find that the panettone they had bought would only last from midnight until five in the

morning. So, it only made sense to buy another one the next day after their tour to the Coliseum.

After waking from their four-hour *siestas*, auburn lights were turned on in the kitchen. They all hovered over the decadent dessert and ate silently.

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“And this is the same sand that Apostle Paul set foot on,” Niko stated. Marcos Sr. walked alongside him, conversing about the Bible and such. Edel watches her children on the shore, who all stand at a distance from each other as if they were strangers.

The three siblings stand out like a sore thumb against the beige Grecian sand. If it were not for the blood that runs through their veins, you wouldn't be able to tell they were related. Winding his torso, with his right arm in somewhat of a right angle, Marcos grips a flat stone. When he lets momentum take its course, allowing the stone to fly out of his hand, his fingers all flay out. The rock skips three on the water.

Manolo watches timidly. He picks up a stone, too, with complete disregard for its characteristics. His stone doesn't skip, but he keeps trying.

The two boys stand next to each other now. Each takes his turn after the other skips his rock.

The older sister waits a bit before capturing them both on camera. She finally decides to try to skip a rock. It skips twice before sinking.