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THANK YOU

The entire Essence team would like to extend a thank you to all who submitted their precious works of art and word. To all of those who were accepted, we would like to give congratulations, and to those who were not, we always encourage you to keep at your craft, and submit again next year. We would also like to thank our advisors, Tony Bleach and Kate Clair, because without them the creation of this magazine would not be possible. We would like to thank, as well, the entire staff, faculty, and student body of Kutztown University, who has kept this magazine alive, and thereby doing has kept the arts and literature a relevant part of the students' lives. As our staff graduates and moves on, we encourage students to join the Essence team and keep the legacy going. Thank you so much, see you again next year!

ESSENCE FINE ARTS AND LITERARY MAGAZINE

is a collaborative effort of Kutztown University students who share and express personal feelings, philosophies, and views through the artistic media of photography, illustration, life drawing, painting, fine metals, sculpture, crafts, poetry, prose, and short stories. The works contained within are considered, by Essence staff members, to be some fine examples of creative art and literary expression. The Essence staff express appreciation to all its contributors and readers for sharing in this publication.
I don’t know when I’m asleep, because life itself seems like an unconscious fantasy.

Sometimes I contemplate not blinking just to see what would happen. How would it feel? Would it burn? Would it fatigue whatever currently sits in place of my original extraocular muscles? How would they react to it? Would they take me as dead—sacred to the fragile lifestyle they have provided me to this point?

Maybe they’d assume I was just trying to amuse myself with whatever simple bodily function I could summon up. They’d be right in that case.

Though, it’s not like amusement is hard to come by here. Life becomes comedy when every ounce of your hatred, distrust, and confusion has been expended upon an impervious dilemma. I want to laugh sometimes, but I’d ultimately blow my enduring façade if I did.

They’re a hard group to analyze, and I’ve struggled a lot with how to view them.

An obvious path would be one of animosity. This was how I felt at first, once I was fully aware of it all—once they had violated and desecrated me beyond what I’m capable of remembering.

It’s easy to fear them, to look at them as clawed imps of nocturnal habit.

But despite all that, I sometimes catch myself viewing them as family. It sickens me to the marrow of my exoskeleton, but it’s also understandable. See, when you remain somewhere for your entire existence, you inevitably grow attached to your surroundings, no matter how cruel or manipulative they may be. The environment you know from creation brings with it a predisposed sense of normalcy.

I hear them talk a lot about time and memories. One of them is a bleeding heart; he’ll go on about the “good old days” and the horrors of living with nostalgia-induced insomnia. The others concede to him pathetically, like poor men’s philosophers. They reflect on the apparent tragedy of all the time that is lost and unappreciated.

But they know so little of actual tragedy. None of them know. They don’t know how it feels to be aware of life’s every moment—to have each passing
SECOND forced upon you like the dripping of Chinese water torture. When the occasional passing of a white suit is the only thing keeping your world animate.

Once or twice a day, they’ll dedicate time to marvel at their work. They take credit for my limbs and my wings, the stitches and incisions. They boast their artificial approach to conventional biology to anyone willing to listen. They invade what little personal space I have left and mark it as their own. And if they knew my mind, if they knew of my growing potential and the ways that I could make them hurt, they would declare ownership of that too. I suppose they feel entitled to reap the benefits of their brilliance.

But no amount of intellectual knowledge can prepare them for what is coming.

I am standing on a coarse, grey rug in my bare feet. The princess pajamas I wear cling to me in a comforting manner. I am three steps from my bedroom, the walls painted a bright pink and green, channeling the colors of a watermelon. I am two steps from the bathroom, seven steps from my parents’ room. My backpack pulls heavy under one arm, my pillow floats light under the other, harboring the scent of my strawberry shampoo. I am one hundred steps away from my neighbors’ house, where I will spend the night laughing and falling asleep in front of the TV with my best friend.

The hallway stands dark, creating the tunnel-vision I acquire from where I have paused in the middle of it. The doorway to the bedroom of my parents is engulfed in light, commotion, conversati
My small blue eyes immediately fixate on my mother, the only person I can see from where I stand. She sits in the middle of the queen-sized bed, beige sheets covering her pale legs, her dirty blonde hair pulled up in a pony tail, her lips in a wide smile. Behind her hangs a knitted quilt, a backdrop to the scene she stars in, covered in patterns of blue and violet. She is seven steps away, and she sees me.

The grin she bears grows wider as her blue eyes catch my matching pair. "Goodnight, sweetie!"

Her voice travels through the hall, tickling my ears. She is seven steps away, and I have a decision to make. My mind flutters with the anticipation of my sleepover. I am beaming with the idea of spending a night with my best friend, an idea that has become a reality so many times before, an idea that will become a reality so many times again.

But my mother is saying goodnight, and my childish instincts dare me to take those seven steps and, for just a moment, embrace her before I go. But my bag already hangs wearily under my arm. My pillow is nearly slipping from my grasp.

My teeth sting with the taste of mint toothpaste. My pajamas cover me in the cozy scent of fresh laundry.

And I will see my mother tomorrow. I will hug my mother tomorrow.

She is seven steps away, but she will be there tomorrow.

So I throw a matching smile back. "Goodnight!" my voice trails from the hallway.

And this is the last time I see my mother. Because tomorrow, everything has changed.
URINAL CAKE
Philip Baily

Pink and smooth beside the drain,
Urinal Cake is his name.

Idle he waits, until he sees another penis get released.

Yellow rain wears him down, until he shrinks and floats when drowned.

I am this cake you do not eat; unzip your pants and take a leak.

The urine lands all over me; I can't escape this Pee-Pee Sea.

Is it so hard for you to stop? Just hold it in or fill a cup.
TEENAGERS WITH ATTITUDE

Philip Baily

Wearing tight spandex,
they fight monsters after school.
Power Rangers rule!

BABYMAKINGMACHINE
Jackie Hurwitz
Mixed Media
GRAVESTONE

Samuel Benning

All throughout life
He sat on his grave
And chiseled away

Spring arrived
Green grass grew and mayflowers bloomed
But he noticed it not
And chiseled away

Summer came
Sunshine sang and butterflies danced
But he kept to the shade
And chiseled away

Autumn fell
Greenery died, turned brown and decayed
He raked dead leaves aside
And chiseled away
When winter had come

He stood and proclaimed
"My work is now done"
He fell over
Dead

They buried him there
Under his stone
For ages it stood
His likeness it bore
And his likeness remembered
But he was forgot

Janine Ngai | Photography
FLOATING | Daniel Albright | Oil on canvas

IDENTIFICATION | Ashley Jenkins
Stoneware ceramic, acrylic finishes, ink

JUDGING THE FENCING MATCH | Leah Clifford | Marker
Gunshots echoed in the distance as I marched along the battered desert road. At my best approximation, they were half a mile or more away and not in the direction the road went. One or two shooters. Nothing to be concerned about, I figured. Shootings are common out here, I reasoned.

After perhaps five minutes, I noticed something curious. It sounded like the shots were growing closer. They were a bit louder and more resonant. I felt a twinge of panic. Could the shooter be headed my way? My senses sharpened, and I surveyed the surroundings. A faded moon dimly illuminated the road. Sand dunes stretched as far as I could see. A subtle wind tussled my hair. It was dead silent except for that damned gunfire. I was sure I'd be safe. The shots were still far off.

I trudged on. Ten or fifteen minutes went by, and all the while, the shots drew closer. They cracked with a heightened viciousness. The change was gradual—perceptible only after certain intervals of time. It sounded now like a band of shooters. Six or seven or eight of them. Anxiety gripped me with increasing intensity. My pace quickened, and my heart kicked like a bass drum against my chest. I looked in the direction I thought the shots came from but saw nothing—only darkness.

The shots drew nearer. The shooters were closing in fast—now, at my guess, 100 yards or less away. Then, something disturbing—a horrific screaming joined the gunfire. Men, women, children, all—hundreds of them—let out blood choked cries as the shots tore through the air. I became disoriented. Dizziness and nausea rushed over me at once. I could no longer tell from which direction the noises came. If I turned one direction, they seemed to come from another. If I turned that way, they seemed to be elsewhere entirely. It was so maddening! I just wanted it to stop! I peered deep into the black nightscape, trying to locate the source of it all. There was nothing. No muzzle flash, no movement—only darkness.

A sickening explosion pierced the air. I fell to the ground and covered my head. Adrenaline coursed in torrents through my body. Cold sweat poured down my face. I wanted to flee—to get away from it all—but I was petrified. The noises—the gunfire—the screams—were closer now—perhaps 50 feet away. I reached for the pistol tucked in my boot, but I couldn't pull it free, my hands trembling in fear.

I curled up on the ground. I'd wait for it stop, I told myself. I'd lay there until it ended. But it would not cease. I laid there for what seemed like an eon, but it kept going, growing louder somehow—so impossibly loud. I lifted my head and scanned the surroundings, but there was nothing—only darkness.

I don't remember the precise moment, but at some point, there came a maniacal laughing. It came from everywhere, echoing back and forth between everything, creating a discordant chorus of horror. It was so vile—so cruel. I screamed my lungs empty, trying to drown it out, but it just got louder.

I couldn't take it anymore. I stood and called out, "Where are you? Show yourself!" But I received no response. The cacophony—it continued, eroding my sanity. I stumbled up and down the road in an incoherent daze, shouting and cursing. It came from all directions at all times. It was right next to me, but I could not see it! That was what drove me so mad—that I couldn't see it.

I ventured off the road and scoured the desert in search of my tormentor. I walked so far I couldn't find my way back. I was lost. Lost in the desert—the sandy void. And still, the gunshots, the screams, and that laughing—that awful laughing—kept taunting me. I looked all around. I searched. I searched until my legs gave out, weak from fear and exhaustion. Then, I got up and searched some more—hoping. Hoping I'd find something. At least if I found something—if I found who was shooting and who was screaming and what was laughing that god-forsaken laugh—l'd know. Goddammit, at least l'd know! And I tried. I tried so hard, but I found nothing—only darkness.
Our hero--our valiant hero--our knight in shining armor--ran through that winter wood like a rat trapped in a maze. He ran as fast as he could, his chainmail armor clinking and rattling with each stride. The bitter chill of winter bit at his pale cheeks, turning them bright red. Twigs popped and snow crunched under the weight of his thick leather boots. He hurled over frost-crusted shrubs and weaved around the trunks of massive trees. He looked upwards, past the thick canopy formed by the spider-web branches of the treetops, and there, high in the sky, he saw it.

The wyrm circled its quarry like a hungry vulture, its figure black as midnight against the purpling twilight sky. The beast was unnaturally slender. Its wings were translucent and frayed at the edges. Patches of long, needle-like spines protruded from its back and forearms.

Our hero thought himself safe, at least for the moment. He reasoned the beast could never reach him through the canopy as long as he kept moving. Our hero was wrong. He underestimated the beast's cunning.

With a single flap of its wings, the wyrm shot like a meteor towards the earth. It cocked its head and opened its jaws wide. From the back of its throat crawled a stream of flickering embers, which coalesced into a mighty ball of fire, bright as the sun. With a deafening scream, the beast snapped straight its neck, and the fireball rocketed forth.

It moved faster than anything our hero had ever seen. By some sheer stroke of luck, he spotted a boulder just big enough for him to hide behind. He made a dash for it. The moment he was behind it, the fireball crashed through the canopy and slammed into the ground. A wall of fiery destruction radiated out. The flames trampled past on either side, licking at his arms and legs. The chainmail on his arms got so hot it seared his flesh.

When it stopped, he peeked up. Everything was dead--scorched black. The trees that stood nearest the blast were no more.

The wyrm glided through the gap in the canopy and landed in the smoldering crater. It locked its gaze on our hero with its blood-red eyes. It screamed another ear-shattering scream, revealing a horrifying maw of crooked dagger-like teeth. Our hero wasted no time. He turned and ran as fast as he could. He zig-zagged through the trees, hoping the beast would lose his trail, but it was relentless in its pursuit. It snaked through the forest with ease, sliding between and around trees like it was half made of liquid.

For a fleeting moment, our hero caught a glimpse of the sun through a small gap in the canopy. It was dipping behind some far-off mountain, its light cold and muted. The second he fixed his eyes forward again, he ran into a thicket of tall shrubs. Frantic, he clawed his way through. He burst out the other side and found himself on the edge of a great precipice with a sheer drop. At the bottom, there was a river. He recognized it. It was a mighty river that flowed fast and ran white, but from where he stood it appeared no more than a gentle creek.

Our hero turned back towards the woods, and just as he did the wyrm slinked out from between the trees. It scanned our hero up and down with those horrid eyes. Saliva dripped like molten stalactites down its jaw. The scale-covered skin on its face tightened and pulled back into a snarl. It seemed to slither as it approached.

Not willing to give up hope--not willing to accept his apportioned fate--our hero--our foolhardy hero--removed the shield from his back and drew his sword.

If the wyrm could have laughed at this display--this exercise in futility--it would have. It was like a shrew standing before a cobra, hoping to defeat it with a toothpick.

The beast coiled its serpentine neck and lunged forth, jaws stretched open. By another stroke of sheer luck, the light of the setting sun happened to glimmer brilliantly off our hero's sword. For a split second, the beast was blinded, and it miscalculated its strike. Its jaws met with stony ground rather than warm flesh. Teeth cracked and bones snapped.

Our hero seized the opportunity. He drove his sword deep into its eye. The wyrm's screech echoed far off into the mountains. It stumbled back, trying to retreat into the woods, but smacked head-first into a tree and crashed to the ground, its eye gushing black blood, sword still sticking out. Our hero was upon the beast in seconds. He climbed onto its head and stomped on the sword. It dug deeper and deeper, awash in blood.

The beast let out one final scream--a whimper, really--and then it died. Our hero climbed to the ground, and stared in disbelief at the corpse. His heart swelled with pride. Bards far and wide would sing ballads of his victory. Statues would be erected in his honor. He would be immortalized as a savior--a destroyer of evil.

Ecstatic, he went to the ledge of the precipice and screamed of his victory to the world. He waited for the world to echo his cries back, and when it did, he smiled from ear to ear.

But our hero's luck had run out. By some cosmic happenstance, there was a patch of ice hidden under a dusting of snow inches behind where he stood. He turned around and took a single step. His feet flew out from under him, and he plummeted down the sheer cliff face. The moment he realized what had happened, the frigid water enveloped him, and he sunk to the bottom.

Our hero--our white knight--our savior--lays still at the bottom of the river, entombed in muck with rust-cracked armor and bleach-clean bones.
When Papa came home from the war, a suitcase hung shackled to his arm. He had gone bald. He wouldn't talk about it. All he said was, "I died in the war."

Mom passed on before he returned. Fever. When I told him, Papa just nodded and sipped his coffee. His eyes stared off through the kitchen wall to somewhere I couldn't imagine.

In his bed now, he's finally dying. He holds my wrist with his heavy hand, weighed down by chains. His lips barely move.

"Listen. When I die, take my revolver. Shoot me in the chest—my heart. Burn me. Burn me to the ground. And don't open this suitcase."

That suitcase never left his wrist. When he showered or slept it stayed shackled to his arm. I was too afraid to ask him what was in it. He wouldn't have told me. Every once in a while, when he slept, I'd stare at it, and from inside that case I'd hear a little thump. A pause and another thump. I'd wonder if something was alive in there.

I made him meals. He barely ate. He sat most days just staring. He barely spoke. When he did, he'd say, "Go away. Get married. Leave my corpse behind."

I caught glimpses of his bare chest and stomach. He kept careful to stay covered. A pink scar ran all the way from his left collar bone down in an arc to just below his belly-button. I never asked how he got it.

At night he'd talk to himself. I'd press my ear to the door. He'd whisper words I couldn't understand. "Gel shill de' shleedia. Gel delsha gish tla. Gel dja' gel rja."

Then, he'd fake another small, gurgling voice to echo him in the strange language.

Papa's dying eyes stick to the ceiling.

My hand trembles, holding his. "What did the war do to you?" I ask him a final time.

He shakes his head. "I died in the war."

He closes his eyes.

I hang my head, sob. My fingers wrap his wrist. The pulse fades. It disappears. The blood flees, leaving his skin cold.

I let his hand drop. The chains rattle; the suitcase thumps the ground. My eyes draw to it. I know that no good can come from opening it. I kneel on the
floor and lift the case onto my thighs. It's brown leather, worn down from water and abuse.

My fingers find its gold-colored latches. I spent too many years staring to go through the rest of my life not knowing. Click.

The suitcase drops open, and its smell strikes me first. Decay. Like a wet body growing mold and falling apart. I clasp a hand over my mouth and nose. My eyes stare, unable to blink or look away. A whine peels from my throat.

I know what I see inside the suitcase, but I can't put it together. Coiled at its bottom sit Papa's intestines, above that his kidneys and liver and other organs. And in the center sits his heart, grey and no longer beating--

Something was alive in here--but not anymore.

I stand on trembling legs, and I look to Papa. He wanted me to shoot him in the heart, in his chest.

I stumble forward, a hand still clasped over my mouth. I unbutton his white shirt. The pink scar still runs down his torso. Up close, though, I see it's not a scar--it's a flap. It can be opened.

I don't know what compels my fingers to move down to his chest and peel back the skin, see what horrible thing waits inside. But I do. I have to know. How did Papa die in the war?

I jump back and scream at what I see. My body trembles that I can barely feel my own skin.

Inside my father's chest, red and pink webbing runs, fusing to a strange and small body inside the cavity. Its face sits where Papa's heart should be, one black eye rolling lazily. It reaches its only free arm toward me, tiny and baby-like. It closes its fingers to a fist--

And I hear its gurgling voice.

"Gel' shill de'shleeda. Gel clrick clang'la. Gol cla' cle cla'. Gel crey cro'cley."

I shudder and stumble back. My body runs rigid. I turn from Papa, walk from the room. I go into his study, find his revolver. It's heavy, already loaded. I cross back into his bedroom. I aim the gun to his chest, where his heart should be--

And I fire.

DESEKLED THOUGHTS
Jennifer Cleary

This fire is spreading
Coursing through me like hot blood
But I cannot break away
I refuse to leave this scorched inferno
Where the sun blazes without mercy.

The day is fading
But still the Earth is burning
Still my mind is flaming
As the sand blankets my reveries
And leaves me thirsty for more.

The air is changing
The sky twisting with color
As giant cacti spike from cracked cuts
The Earth's wounds snaking
Through this never ending desert.

Such a brutal place
But a wonderful sanctuary
I walk through the rain's rejection
As my thoughts circle the sun
The fire forever burning.
The weathermen are saying this is the blizzard of the century. We sit on the couch and watch big wet snowflakes coat the cars and rooftops and powerlines all along the street, but we don’t see anyone outside.

The people on the news said not to go out. The streets are dangerous, the planes are grounded, the train stations are empty. It’s quiet and cold and blindingly white outside, and we have nothing to do but snuggle on the couch with hot chocolate and Netflix and wait for it to go away.

For dinner, I offered to go to the Burger King right down the street. You tried to decide what movie we should watch next while I put on a coat, a hat, a pair of old gloves, your scarf. When I walked down the sidewalk, I was all alone. I turned back and looked at my footsteps behind me. I wrote your name in the snow with the toe of my snowboot. My nose ran and my eyes stung, but I got you French fries and chicken nuggets, and we ate them while watching a film about a boy trying to find his lost dog.

After you fell asleep I looked back out the window at the street, but your name and my footsteps were already covered up by fresh snow.
Taste of iron.
Eyes meet through smoke.
Blue and red lights.
His hands reach for mine.

Eyes meet through smoke.
Lips bubble with bloody words.
His hands reach for mine.
His throat gurgles and chokes.

Lips bubble with bloody words.
Slick skin painted red.
His throat gurgles and chokes.
His pupils scream at me.

Slick skin painted red.

The belt burned my flesh.
His pupils scream at me.
I scream as the metal did.
The belt burned my flesh.
The wreckage cries with me.
I scream as the metal did.
His beat has stopped.

The wreckage cries with me.
My ear to his chest.
His beat has stopped.
His life is gone.

My ear to his chest.
The car remembers before.
His life is gone.
He had been smiling.
You're killing me
In a form I never thought
Death could take.
Without words,
Without swords,
Silence is your weapon.

TRANSFIGURATION
Daniel Albright
Oil on board
Sometimes I forget how old I am and that I still need to do my French homework and feed the cat. I get so caught up in poem or a song, and I'll forget to feed myself.

But I can't forget to drink water or the lines of everyone's hands because a hand's too easy to memorize after you've held it for so long. And though I've held so many I've lost count, I've never confused one with another.

On some days, even the good ones, this is all I can remember.
FOR CONSTELLATIONS
Alexandra Werle

Flash flood on the night we met
Amidst thunder and lightning,
Percussion of rain.

We huddled in the darkness,
Mirror images of matching skin,
Your body fit into mine

At complex angles:
Your arm through the crook of my knee,
Your head cradled in my lap.

I outlined your brow,
Sideways infinite on your shoulder
And mapped your skin

For constellations.

WIBBLY WOBBLY | Bobby Stank | Oil on canvas
You tried so hard to be Vivaldi arpeggios, the sound of slurred quarter notes reaching a fermata, a graceful cadenza in the middle of a symphony. But to me, you were always a wavering mezzo-piano, a nervous refrain, or a prelude that fizzled out before going anywhere.

Your fingers always fumbled across my skin like they were moving down catgut and wire strings, searching for an octave they couldn't quite reach. You often misspoke, and the dissonance made you cringe, made you a nervous vibrato, the same kind that ruined your audition for the philharmonic.

You got so worried about how you looked to me that you fell out of tune, trilling between 'um's and apologies, performing some sort of elegy for your own self-image, until I put my hands on your shoulders and told you to relax, because you are the only music I want to hear.
She sits in a therapist’s office. It’s old, stuffy; there are diplomas along the walls and book shelves. She looks very small. She keeps playing with the collar of her cat in her hand. The name carved on the tag says Lucky.

[Therapist: Tell me what you can, Katherine]

I loved my cat, love her. It not like she was my whole world or anything, just a cat. Just a cat. I still loved her though, like how normal people love their pets. She was company, something to come home to. My job, it doesn’t let me get out a lot. She was always there. Would curl up on my lap, you know? It was nice. Really nice. I had her for about a year. Not long. Already got’n out of being a kitten when I got her. My mother thought it was a good idea, some company. I’ve never been the nurturing type, she says. While my brother Teddy would play with my dolls, I’d always be out in the dirt. I don’t have a motherly bone in my body, she says. She liked the idea, liked that I wasn’t alone, alone. As alone as you can be with a cat, I guess. She was kind of right though. I won’t tell her that. It was nice to come home and feel...wanted, needed, loved, even if it was just for food. She was cute cat, really cute. But cats are weird you know.

really weird. Self-sufficient, if they had thumbs they wouldn’t need us. I loved Lucky; I guess that’s why I didn’t notice when she got weird right away. Or maybe she was like that all along. [Therapist: What was strange about her?] It was her eyes. Cats stare. It’s in their nature, but Lucky stared like she was...looking AT you. Like really focusing. There were times when she wouldn’t stop, you know? It would give me the creeps, and I’d stomp my foot or snap my fingers or something, but it didn’t faze her. She just kept right on staring, made me leave the room a couple times. It was weird, eerie. Like she was watching me. And then I noticed the light. I was going to the kitchen to get a glass of water, and there she was, staring. Staring up at me, and I swore. I swore there was a light in her eyes. A little red light. And it was blinking. Blinking up at me, like a camera recording. Just this little blink, blink, blink in the dark. I never saw it in the light, even lifted her up to my face a couple times and stared back at her. Really, really stared, but I never saw it. Only at night. Only at night. Her eyes would blink, like there was a little red light back behind’em. Ever seen that? I tried to take a picture of it, tried to record it, but never captured it. No, she was too quick. Too quick. Just this blink, blink, blink following me at night. Watching me. I woke up one night to her sitting at the edge of my bed, watching, staring, recording. I called her name; she didn’t move. Just kept blinking. Kept blinking. I couldn’t take it anymore; I had to get it out of her, that camera. I had to get it out.
“Billy, when the hell are you gonna wake up?” Jean shouts at me. “It’s three in the goddamn afternoon!”

“Hell, I know that!” I groan from bed. “I work nights, babe. I need my sleep!”

“Well, I need some help!”

I stand, rub my head. I pull the hanging blanket we use as a bedroom entrance away and stumble into the trailer. I throw a hand to my eyes.

“Ah, hell, babe, it’s too bright in here,” I grunt. “I can’t take that.”

She sighs. I look toward the wall and floor; my vision comes back between flashing burns of white. I hear her messing with the dishes.

“The blinds are barely open. Maybe if you didn’t drink so much, you could take a little light.”

I shake my head. “You know I don’t drink.”

“Do I?”

I shrug and stumble toward her, head down. What does she think of me?

A man who stalks out every night talking about a job she knows he don’t have. A man who comes home every morning right before dawn and climbs into bed next to her. A man who sleeps all day, can’t look at the light. The only thing I got going for me is that I come home with watches and jewels, cash and clothes. She asks me where I got it; I say my job.

She knows I’m a liar.

“You want something to eat, some breakfast?” she asks.

I shake my head. “Nah, I ain’t hungry.”

“I never see you eat.”

“Well, I ain’t hungry. I eat at work.”

She wrestles with the dishes in our little sink, gripes, “You do everything at work.”

I lean in behind her, wrap my arms around her stomach, bury my face in her shoulder. “What do you need help with, babe?”

She lets the dishes fall into the sink and holds my hands under her pruny fingers. “The sprinkler ain’t working right,” she says.

I stop breathing for a second. “The sprinkler? Like outside?”

“Well, duh, Billy,” she teases.

I don’t do the light anymore. I can’t take it. I don’t know what’s happened to me, but the sight of it burns me to the bone. Feeling its heat, its pressure, it makes my skin bubble just thinking about it.

“I’ll do it tonight,” I tell her.

“No. You’ll do it right now,” she says.

“Oh come on. It won’t—”

“Billy, it is ninety-five degrees outside. If that sprinkler ain’t working, we’ll have nothing but crab grass by morning. That lawn is the only goddamn thing we have over Berta’s goddamn trailer park mansion, and I don’t want her coming over here and making fun of us!”

“Okay, baby, okay.” I kiss the back of her neck. I wonder if she feels my fangs rub against her skin. “I’ll handle it.”

My Jean, I want to give her everything she deserves. She should live in a mansion. You see all those movie stars and singers on the TV showing off their million dollar houses, and you get to wondering why you live in a tin can. Jean’s a good woman; she tries so hard. She don’t deserve a dead-beat husband in some rundown box. And it’s that wanting, that wanting that gets me so goddamn hungry.

I step out of our trailer into the light. It scorches my eyes. Little girls wearing shirts two sizes too small run in the dirt with empty beer bottles. Stray dogs bolt by, barking fury. Why are we here? Is this Hell? Cockroaches squirm out from under the foundation of an abandoned trailer. I don’t want to see this shit. It hurts to look at it.

I hunker near the sprinkler, trying to see what I can do. Its metal burns my fingertips. I keep my eyes to our pristine green lawn, nice enough that I can fool myself into thinking this is my Garden of Eden. But I still feel that sticking heat on my back from the shit-heap smoldering behind me.

So I stalk out at night. I find these fancy Italian restaurants and sports bars where business-types unwind after work. I wait out as long as it takes to spot a straggler. Don’t matter if the person is a man or woman, black or white, I push the son of a bitch into the nearest alley, and I bleed him dry. I drink until they stop fighting against me and fall limp. I drink until I’m full. Then, I raid their bodies of high-class suit jackets and jewels. I steal their pants and shoes. I leave them naked in the alley. I don’t know if they’re dead.

But I know it’s wrong, even if it feels good. Riding home, I think maybe I can make something of myself; I can taste those mansions and luxury cars on my lips and tongue. Then, I drive back
to the trailer park, and I know it's all for shit.

--The heat!
I scream like a dog that's been shot, jump up from
the sprinkler, and run into the trailer, slamming the
door behind me. I twist around, hearing the crackling,
feeling the burn. "Ah! Ah! Ah! Oh! Oh, fuck!"

Jean beats at my back with a wash
towel. She hits my shoulder again and
again, until I feel the flames go out.

"Jesus!" she shouts. "You're out there for
five minutes, and you set yourself on fire?
What the hell's wrong with you? Do you
need to get to the emergency room?"

I wave a hand, stumbling for the bedroom.
"Nah, babe. I'm fine." I disappear into the
comforting dark and lay down, closing
my eyes. "I just need to sleep it off."

"Okay," she says and pauses. She waits
a moment. I know it's coming--

"Did you fix the sprinkler?"

---

I've wrapped my body around someone else's
In a swirl of hormones I called love
But sitting next to you makes me forget
And I become a statue
Centimeters away from a kiss.
I was in a car—
With one of the twins, I can’t remember his name
And Billy, before he killed himself

We were driving down that street
By the abandoned shoe factory
There was some kid’s birthday party

I don’t know, there were balloons
And all these little kids running around
This SUV was in front of us

Driving way too fucking fast
It swerved
And the twin slammed on the brakes

’Cause in the middle of the street
This little fucking kid
In a birthday hat

We stopped and scooped him up okay
Carried him to the adults
Who just stood there, empty-eyed
Not saying a word.
We got back into the car, quiet
Driving, just driving
Pulled over on some dirt road
Right next to a pasture
Standing there
The three of us picked up rocks
And started hurling them

Whipping, stoning, pelting
This fucking cow
That was just standing there, dumb
And it didn’t move
We started screaming
Beating on it with the rocks
We got back into the car, then
Not saying anything

And just drove off.
I’m sorry I didn’t come back
For nine years
And when you saw me in between
I was an asshole.
It’s just that
This fucking town, you know?

This fucking town.
WHISKEY AND LATTES
Elizabeth Leavens

Every single version
Of the boy I have loved
Has preferred someone tiny and bold
I cannot float like a dancer
Or sing like a bird
I certainly can't write to make you weep

I'm not so engulfed
In the idea of my own torment
To live on lattes, whiskey, and cigarettes

But she can.
She's enough for you.

So I have hated who I was
And who I could not change

Because she was
The only thing she could be
And not the one for you.

TRAINS AND DOLLS | Andrea Krout | Photography
This rain is silent.  
As noiseless as a vacuum in space.

Fogged streetlights,  
pebbled with water,  
guide me on my way.

The quiet  
grows quieter  
as the moon passes voiceless across the sky.

And in that void...  
that expansive,  
endless,  
blackness.

It is then,  
in those empty moments,  
that I ponder

why?
I wondered when and if you'd find someone new
and get married. I wondered if I would ever get mar-
rried. I stayed with my parents for Thanksgiving and
slept on a pile of blankets on my old bedroom floor
and wondered things like that. I stared up at all those
ancient plastic stars on my ceiling that barely glowed
anymore, and I thought a ton of stupid thoughts. I
stared at the chunks of glue stuck to the ceiling where
stars used to be before they fell and got eaten by the
dog or thrown in the trash or sucked into the vacuum.

I wondered what you'd say if you were laying there
beside me right then, with the sound of the heater
kicking in in the background. Maybe you'd be close to
me with your head against my shoulder, and you'd tell
me you love me. Maybe you'd ask me about my room
while you held my hand. Maybe you'd ask what posters
used to be hanging where nothing but torn little cor-
ners were pinned to the wall now. Maybe you wouldn't
say anything at all, and we'd lay there and not need to
do anything else.
It didn't really matter since I'd never know.
I guessed you'd get married pretty soon. You were funny and charming, and you had a wonderful smile; it'd be so easy for you. I didn't know about me. I wasn't charming or funny or any of those other nice traits people dream of in their future spouse. I might not get married. I'd tell people marriage isn't my thing, and I like being alone, like the Lone Ranger or something. Even the Lone Ranger probably got married though, to some hot babe of a cowgirl, or to Tonto. Or he pulled a Brokeback and got them both.

I guess that meant I wasn't like the Lone Ranger, either. I was just someone unimportant that wasn't good enough for you, sleeping under plastic stars and hardened glue chunks.

But maybe we'd marry each other. Maybe you'd change your mind and decide you do love me, and you made a mistake. You'd run to me in slow motion from a hundred yards away, pick me up and spin me around and tell me you love me so, so much, and we need to get married right away. And we would. We'd have a quick wedding on the beach in our everyday clothes, and our minister would be dressed as Elvis. Our rings would be the twist-ties from Wonder Bread bags. We'd kiss, and then we'd start our lives together by getting ourselves real rings and going from there. We'd have a great big house with a garden of roses the same color as the shutters. We'd have a golden retriever, and maybe we'd adopt a kid or two from some far off country with an unpronounceable name. We'd grow old together and die together and get buried together and get eaten up by worms together, and it would be the most perfect life I could ever ask for.

That's how things worked in the movies, wasn't it? Wouldn't that be the kind of life a guy like the Lone Ranger would live?

The stars on the ceiling were already fading to a dull sea green. The heater started up with a whirring sound coming out of the vents on the floor. I reached over next to me, but all I felt was carpet.
A convenience store is true evil. There's nothing convenient about it. All the products are placed precisely in order to extend your shopping experience. The store wants to make you look for your shit in the hope that you will find more shit that you don't really need but decide to get it away. I blame convenience stores for a lot of unnecessary death in the apocalypse.

Panicked people looking for things to help them survive don't think rationally. They rummage, they make noise, they get trapped in the mazelike aisles, and then they die. They become a quick, easy meal.

The shitty part is that convenience stores are a necessary evil. It's nearly impossible to live without them. Even if you could hunt or raise crops in the city, nothing grows this time of year, and nothing is easy to catch. You have to go to the store. Sometimes the apocalypse isn't so much different than how it used to be. It's just too convenient not to go.

Sneaking into the store is the easiest part. Most of the doors and windows have been busted. Avoiding the broken glass, I head to the back of the store. Jarred food always seems to be near the back. Pickles, olives, and jerky have become my new best friends. Terribly salty, but they don't go bad that quick.

The vegetables and fruit are too far gone to even pick over. Just black fuzzed over lumps. What's left in the refrigerators isn't any good either, all melted or molded. Shame, I really wish I could have gotten some pizza rolls before they all went bad.

The key to getting out alive with your food is the golden rule: silence. That and a good back up plan. As I slip a jar of olives into my jacket pocket, I can hear someone breaking that cardinal rule. At first I think it might be a walker, but the crinkling sound comes and goes, too repetitive for the dead.

The sound comes from a few aisles over. I could ignore it. People aren't exactly chummy nowadays. I pocket another jar and move on. The squeak of sneakers stops me.

I hear him before I see him. He's about as short as he is round. His liquefied fat makes him shuffle. Bloody, ripped sneakers squeak as he waddles. It's a kid, was a kid. I grip my back up plan tightly, but he isn't interested in me. No, that crinkling, that's got his attention. They must have good hearing, the walkers. Their eyes look like shit. I can't imagine they see well.

Big boy waddles off down the aisle, and I consider making a break for it. Tubby's attention is elsewhere, but the crinkling won't stop. Do they not hear the kid coming? It shouldn't concern me, but I find myself stalking down the next aisle. I keep my distance from the kid but come out in generally the same place just a few feet behind him.

It's a girl. Her hair is as pink as the candy wrappers she's stuffing into her pockets. She looks young, and I can't tell if she's a kid or not. No, she's bent over, too absorbed in her candy collecting to get a good look at her. Candy, really? The thought never crossed my mind.

Tubby is slow, but she isn't paying attention. The window of opportunity is closing for her as death waddles closer. By the time she hears him it doesn't look good. Her head whips around, turning to look at him. He's too close though. There's no place to run, and I bet Tubby can lunge if he has too. Goddamn it.

Sprinting forward, I raise my back up plan. It's an old water pipe I had laying in the bottom of my closet. A prop I made for a costume years ago, something I never thought would actually come in handy.

The pipe moves so fast it blurs. The metal spigot smashes Tubby's skull like a watermelon and grey matter sprays in chunks onto the tiled floor. The walker topples over and doesn't move. I wrench the pipe out of caved in skull and shake off a bit of brain dangling on the end of it.

The girl hasn't moved, and when I look at her she stares back with surprise not horror. I can't help but shake my head. She's older than I expected now that I really look at her.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I ask.
She worries her bottom lip between her teeth.
"I was hungry."
She rummages through her pocket and pulls out a piece of candy before holding it out in her hand. A small smile lights her face.
"Want one?"
Maybe it was the cute little smile. Maybe it was the ridiculousness of the situation. Maybe it was the mischievous little glint in her eyes. But I knew, I just knew that from that moment on I would never be able to say no to that face.
"Sure."
I take the candy, and her smile widens. I smile back.
SHIP | Lindsey Borgman | Photography

SUNFLOWER | Cara Udicialis | Watercolor

UNIFORMed PATTERN SERIES | Jennifer Hadad
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR INDEX</th>
<th>ARTIST INDEX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Janna Adams</td>
<td>Daniel Albright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven Steps</td>
<td>Floating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake Austin</td>
<td>Transfiguration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They</td>
<td>Amanda Archer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip Baily</td>
<td>The Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urinal Cake</td>
<td>If I Was Barbie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenagers with Attitude</td>
<td>Ryan Bittle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Benning</td>
<td>Rain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gravestone</td>
<td>Lindsey Borgman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Darkness</td>
<td>Creeping Tide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaying the Wyrm</td>
<td>Ship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenifer Cleary</td>
<td>Leah Clifford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deserted Thoughts</td>
<td>Judging the Fencing Match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda Glencast</td>
<td>Jennifer Cresswell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without</td>
<td>Stylized Cheetah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Leavens</td>
<td>Carly Famiglietti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statue</td>
<td>After the Rain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whiskey and Lattes</td>
<td>Bryan Fellenbaum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive Pegler</td>
<td>Sunflowers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Truth</td>
<td>Ashley Fries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate Quinlan</td>
<td>Jellyfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Fucking Town</td>
<td>Lauren Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love, Mom</td>
<td>Neverland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa Reinbold</td>
<td>Jayarawan Gunathilake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonight</td>
<td>Thunder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayleigh Sabo</td>
<td>Intrigued Minds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter Storm Nemo</td>
<td>Jennifer Hadad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recital</td>
<td>For Rent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glow in the Dark</td>
<td>Uniformed Pattern Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin Shingle</td>
<td>Paige Halligan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspired by BFA Survival Guide</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristi Shorter</td>
<td>Benjamin Hoffman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He Had Been Smiling</td>
<td>3,652 Squares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle Yadlosky</td>
<td>Jackie Hurwitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside the Suitcase</td>
<td>Babymakingmachine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trailer Park Vampire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ashley Jenkins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elizabeth Leavens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photoventures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Andrea Krout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trains and Dolls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Janine Ngai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joey Painter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antonella Procino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doorway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fuck I Fell Hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kylie Richards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upward Over the Mountain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Through the Cannon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eliseo Rivera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Irma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Danielle Rogers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Branch Out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cara Udicious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sunflower</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>