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Dear Reader,

As I write to you, I am sitting in a coffee shop in the heart of Portland. A man to my right is dancing. Not in the traditional sense, but dancing nonetheless. A neat stack of pearl-white paper towels sits on the table in front of him. He picks one up and tears it in rough outlines of amorphous shapes. His dance begins. With a swift motion of his hands, he throws the paper into the air. It flows between his fingers, sometimes escaping his frantic kneading and floating above his grasp, repelled by the wake of his hands in the air below. His arms follow the paper as it flies, adding a crease or bend to the sheet when it ventures too close to his hand’s erratic orbit. He brings in a second sheet, and a third, weaving them into the growing form taking shape in front of him. As his masterpiece grows, so does the eccentricity of his movement. His arms extend far from his torso, engulfing the table space in front of him. Suddenly, his focus sharpens in preparation for his final act. He coerces the art close to his gaze and inspects it carefully for any perceived imperfections. Finally satisfied, he places a finished paper flower in front of him.

For the students, faculty, staff, and alumni of Mines who pump the heart of *High Grade*, this man’s dance is our own. We work with care and vigor, striving to create something representative of our emotion, experience, and passions. More often than not, our craft takes on an art of its own, motivated by the subtle currents in the fluid world around us. It is both separate from and motivated by the rest of our lives. As we work, *High Grade* remains in a state of constant, chaotic reinvention.

*High Grade* is an exercise in contextualizing and understanding the world around us. I hope you find equal parts comfort and questions in its pages. It has been my pleasure to work alongside the *High Grade* team as Editor-in-Chief, and I am thrilled to see the progress it has made in the four short years I have had the privilege of contributing to it.

Sincerely,

Connor Weddle
Editor-in-Chief
Look at the bulbs of bioluminescent glitter, electrifying fields of plankton; creatures blind but mesmerizing against a soot-soaked sky. See them flitter & glitter then whisper & drift, wired through the dark, a path to the world above their own imagination.
It’s Sunday, so even though the sun started weaseling its way through the taped-up curtains a few hours ago, Mama is still in bed. I tried snuggling up with her, but she said she couldn’t bear any touching so instead I curled up in the corner with the lilac bunny I found halfway in the gutter on Fulton Street. He’s missing an ear, which has gotta be especially sad for a bunny, but it helps to have someone on your side if you’re an underdog so I took him home anyway. At first he was scraggly and itchy but Mama said he’s just like everyone else - he’ll get softer with love and she was right.

Last week Pastor Jones told me God makes your prayers come true if you love Him and then Jamie said you only love Him if you go to church every Sunday. I start looking around for Mama’s keys so we can go get some prayers answered. But her jacket pockets are empty except for a gum wrapper, so I lick the wrapper and think maybe the government man took the keys the same time he took the car. I find a bible underneath an empty bottle that stinks of Mama’s bad moods, flip it open, get confused by the curly letters, and just start praying. Dear God, please let bunny hear extra good out of his one ear. Dear God, please love the world more so it’ll get softer on Mama and me.
EBB
TALA TAHERNIA
I spray water on the catalpa tree
and wait for him to come
and he does,
the chickadee,
and takes a drop
then another
and flits away
satisfied.

It has been written,
etched,
an epic mind you.
they have lived
in this Midwest desert
for over a million years.
Enough time
to see it through.
I rode a bike
the wheels were daisy chains
the handlebars orchids
the frame itself a mix
of weeds, branches, and clover.
nuts, bolts, and screws
replaced by acorns and mud
a dream bike
as my feet pushed
on lillypad petals
my ascent began
without wings
seemingly powered
by caffeine and invisible joy
Acrylic
They say the moon is companion to the lonely, but tonight even she has abandoned you to the dark of the wood. Typical fair-weather friend. The flashlight on your phone will have to do, its sixty-degree cone pushing away the heavy darkness just enough for you to see where your foot will land, enough to illuminate the birch trees into pale sentinels standing between you and their terrible writhing shadows. Silent and statuesque under the scrutiny of your light, they creak and turn and whisper once you’ve passed, spreading a message outward for miles along their rustling leaves. A lone traveler. Can’t see in the dark. You don’t think about what’s on the receiving end of that message. Easy prey. You keep walking.

Tree after tree, step after step, you have no idea how far you’ve wandered, what invisible boundaries you have crossed. Distance holds no meaning here—anything outside the beam of your flashlight does not exist. You keep walking.

You don’t think about the shadow that lurks in your peripheral vision, the one that has been following in the space behind you where the darkness gathers thicker and more feral after being disturbed. It creeps ever closer to loom over your shoulders, to breathe down your neck, waiting for an acknowledging glance. “Don’t ever look behind you in the forest,” your mother told you once when you were young, “or else you’ll never shake the feeling that something is following you.” She didn’t tell you what to do if that feeling came on its own. You keep walking. Tree after tree, step after step.

You don’t think about the quiet, about the crickets that should be singing all around you but instead make no sound. Your mind tells you that the evening rain pushed them back into their hollows to await another day. Your mind tells you a lot of things. You ignore them. You keep walking.
Something wet kisses the back of your neck. You feel it in the long microseconds before it makes contact with your skin, the gentle suggestion of a truth about to unfold. A drop of water from a branch? It rained hours ago. Sweat? You don’t think about it. You keep walking.

Your phone burns hot, overexerted from fighting the relentless dark. Maybe you should have charged it before coming here. Maybe you should have brought a real flashlight. It doesn’t matter, you tell yourself. Everything remains the same in the dark, even if you can’t see it as clearly. Your eyes will adjust. Probably.

The light turns off.

There is no transition, the space in front of you is immediately missing, cast from being into unbeing with no time for comprehension. Darkness crowds around you, crawling across your skin, into your nose, down your throat, choking you as it greedily explores the creature that has been kept at bay for so long. It savors the taste of your hitched breath, the drops of cold sweat in the small of your back, the half-moon crescents on your palms where the fingernails fiercely burrow, and it claims you, another possession in its eternal domain. Your heartbeat pounds in your ears, thrashing fiercely against the violating presence even as you tell yourself you are not afraid, not on the verge of panic. It’s just the exertion of walking causing your pulse to become so frenzied, just the chilly evening air causing you to tremble. You stand resolute as the darkness slowly loses interest in its new toy, untangling its slithering form from the deepest corners of your being and allowing you to return. A shaky breath passes through your lips.

After a time, the impenetrable black in front of you begins to manifest into suggestions of shapes. A tall, thin figure—a tree. An outstretched arm—a branch. A large rock. A second tree, a third. Two beads of reflected starlight—eyes, light green with slitted pupils. You start. You don’t know how long they have been there, how long they have been staring straight at you, floating in the darkness with no suggestion of an owner. You stare back, rendered powerless by the unmov-\ing gaze. Seconds pass. Minutes. Hours. Years. Just you and a pair of incorporeal eyes locked in an arena of night, watched hungrily by the surrounding woods.

You stand fixed in place as the eyes begin to creep along the ground toward you, un-\blinking. You do not take even a single breath, afraid to break the silence that surrounds you like fragile armor. As the eyes reach the spot where you stand, something warm brushes gently against your leg. Something soft, disarming.

The silence shatters, pierced by a shrill sound.
\textit{Mrow.}

“Yeah, yeah,” you mutter breathlessly at the feline shape curling around your ankles affectionately. “You know I have better things to do than spend half the night stumbling through the woods to find you? Asshole. Let’s go home.”

You reach down and clasp a thin leash to a harness around the cat’s torso, stopping to stroke its back along the way. As you gaze toward home, you scour the darkness for any hints of the menacing presence that stalked you on your journey. Nothing. Only trees, standing peacefully amid swathes of deep shadow. You take a breath and start walking, cat following in your foot-\steps.
INGEMINATION
JULIA CORMOS
OWL
MICHAEL J. SMITH
A stray sunbeam shines off the skylight, lazily scattering itself across the street
We marveled at how much it looks like Rainbow Road.
I
don't
wanna
fall
off

My bike tips over for the umpteenth time but this isn't MK Super Circuit and there's
no Lakitu here to pick me back up so I dust the gravel off my knees,
grab my bike and lug myself back up the driveway.
From my crows nest, I see Brady and Devin in the street
chewing Starbursts pulled from their back pockets, eyes expectant.
You know how difficult it is to get a plastic Razor ramp to not move when you hit it?
About as difficult as trying to clear the Water Temple in Oracle of Ages when all
you have for light is the occasional street lamp. With each pass, it only gets
harder
and harder
darker
and darker

But we always keep trying. A naïveté reserved for the young.
Some say that doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result is insane.
We just called it Tuesday.
I fling myself down the drive, plummeting down the concrete to greet my
true shining moment as the one and only Evil Knievel,

flying through the summer air with two bloody knees.
I glance up the street full of wheeled aquariums to find a man with a fishbowl on his head approaching me purposefully, a little wave hopping the glass edge with each long stride.

“The manta ray who lives on Fourteenth told me to come see you about my sick goldfish,” he tells me, gesturing to his fishbowl, where one fish swims lazy circles near his left eye, making figure 8’s through the plastic seaweed, while the other flops ungainly by his right, barely staying above the miniature treasure chest.

“Oh, sure,” I say, pulling out a vial from my bag and reaching up to drip one small drop into his bowl. The effect is immediate: the ill fish swims upward frenetically until it breaks the surface and leaves the fishbowl, paddling up higher and higher through the air.

“Wow, fish really can fly,” the man comments at the same time his fish grows wings and disappears into the clouds, and we both reach up to catch the stray feathers falling down to earth.
Photography
L’APPEL DU VIDE
JORDY LEE

We tucked the remains of the summer day into our socks, and quickly scampered up the mountain. Cool, loose black dirt spilling down from our footprints. Half torn saplings bent at raw angles as we grabbed them for balance. Vines that crawled became trees that loomed, and up we went.

Ferns and flowers slunk away near the top, as sandstone boulders erupted and flexed together. We belly crawled across their muscular backs, reaching for ledges, as a stadium of whispering pines and preaching aspens hummed nervously from the stands.

Peeking over the cliff edge, you could see your weight. Every sin, every bite of chocolate cake, pulling you down. A butcher’s meaty paw politely pinching your thigh for market.

We slid away cautiously. A wrong step was enough, but a running start was so much better.

Curses are gasped, paradises are lost. Kick your legs all you like, nature always gets her due.

The water was a cold slap across the face. You always stayed under for a minute. As a courtesy, while you and the universe decided if you were still alive before kicking off the pebbled river bed, taking your first breath, and suddenly understanding baptisms.
Charm wears golden barrettes in her hair and keeps a jar of honey moonlight in her pocket. She doesn’t own a watch. She never learned how to read time, never needed to, because time obeys her. She is dark purple oil on canvas. She thinks anything that makes her sweat is good for her. She does not whisper. Growing up, her homeroom teachers scolded her for not sitting still. See, she needs fluidity and movement. Otherwise she becomes swollen with her obsessions. She likes dancing into the epicenter of what scares her. Oftentimes when she sits with her piano she starts humming along, eyes closed and breathing with each cadence. When she visits the library she’ll read aloud, turning every line into rising and falling arpeggios and glissandos. A few times she has been asked to leave. Not surprisingly, she has been fired from every office job.

Charm has terra cotta skin, rare and polished. There are other people with softer or healthier or clearer skin than hers, but her radiance somehow declares that she is alive. When the snow starts melting in April, Charm likes to take off her velvet shawl and soak in the tangerine sunbeams that kiss her collarbones. She does not mean to be explicit or insulting, but most people don’t think like her. They tell her she upsets them, but Charm knows she does not have to be modest to be respected. From the time she could walk, she went barefoot.

She does not like the “You Are Here” stickers on maps, so she tears them off wherever she goes. She believes it is an anonymous act of kindness. Charm will make love where time and space change places, where they become indistinguishable from one another. When she finds a lover, she takes him to the mountains and observes him. Will he dance with the leaves? Does he tell her about the time he backpacked through the Appalachians? Did he wake up at dawn to watch the purple mountains pull that sweet honey moon into its peaks? Does he sing and weep and worship the expanding sky, just like she does?

It is autumn now, and Charm has fallen deeply in love. Her friend is cherry sweet and tender. She might even say she has a new favorite. His name is Vulnerability, and when he sighs, she can see his heart. He has a sapphire voice and glassy eyes. The first time they were alone, he confessed he was anxious to make love to her. Charm held his trembling hands and finally whispered, “But we’ve been making love for days.”
“Don’t you know that nothing good happens after midnight?” she asks me as she holds the cigarette elegantly with her legs crossed at the ankles and her head resting back against the pock-marked brick wall. I say nothing because, as always, her actions supersede my words. “And yet here you are, hoping for nothing but the best.” Her fingertips are cool and smooth against my cheek, her smile darker than the night sky above us. “Oh, you silly boy,” she almost coos, and I am swallowed up by her eyes, “this will be the end of us all.”
Look to the teeth brandished
in thunder, movement
hypnotic under the gaping
mouths of electricians, aliens,
abductors of friend & foe alike.
Closer,
the metallic twang of a ship
shuddering under sparks; the darkness
a veil, signals a language
as I search the dark
waiting
waiting
for a dimming sound.
A soft crackle sparks to life between the prongs, reaching out gently to caress my hip. The blue light that cascades like a halo from his hand glints in the metal around me, like shattered glass flying through the air that’s trapped in my throat, just before blinding its own beholder. Arms flail in front of me, soaring high as carmine packages fall from mandible bombers, ruby bracelets staining my cheeks with casualties. His face is stretched with shadow, never relenting, shook tremors in me, cracking my skin, pulling out the screams trapped inside. This can’t be real. A nightmare. A hallucination. This echoing through me, each wave turning my skin from jelly to brick and back and forth and back and forth. A whip of electricity shaking the steel prongs until the switch fell back. The crackle stopped. But he did not. Invasive, pervasive, an unending torrent of fervent twisted lust that withheld nothing. tried to move, run, scream, but all that met the shudder of my shoulders was the mocking tinkling of scrap metal. Tears welled, falling, met with nothing but the patter of impact and the rustling of metal, buckles, clothes. Through blurry eyes, the scene wavers as pain explodes. I have never met you. What demons are your skin harboring such that you must find others to embed them in. I’ll forever live with the scars of cutting them out.
I SAID I LIKE THEM TALL
JORDY LEE

Tall enough that ruby red lips
drip down milky arched backs
to splash golden run calves.

Tall enough that bad intentions
twist growing bean stalks
leading to slain giants and golden geese.

Tall enough to remind all the
red bottomed boys
of forgotten kitchen scoldings.

Tall enough to believe gloating Greeks
that the red daughters of Ares
never bothered to spare mushy men.

Tall enough to step over greedy, sticky hands
telling them
they must be this beautiful to matter.
POWER
MARK BALDWIN

Digital Art
SENSORY OVERLOAD ON A BUS
MICHAEL LE
Flint is still without water
Flint is still without water
Millions flee genocide in Myanmar
Türkiye'de gazeteci parçalandı
A journalist was dismembered in Turkey

Smoke and souls rise over the bombed cities of Syria
ött: im je 1141040
Ni perdas ĉion en tradukado
We lose all in translation
the prickle of rain on tin roof, 
slice of sun on my shoulder blade, your hand there 
and smile not unlike dew beaded tenuously 
on grass.

the wind entices grasses to fold 
lay wetly down on bayous 
as lightning panics its way 
to the safety of ground—
perhaps in the way our bodies meet 
in comfort.

thunder thrumming in chest—
maybe that is the crash, 
the sound of holes 
punched through tumultuous sky 
the void place here, 
still blue canvas, 
where you belong.

rivers form in gutters, 
on streets, in static lakes, 
disrupting the surface 
the aggregation of water 
in joining, in abundance. 
I think if I am still enough, you will gather in me.
SOUL
BLAYN MASONER

Oil Paint
I clench the steering wheel with both hands, waiting for the red twinkle in front of me, blurred by leftover drops of rain on the windshield, to turn. The water smudges the light and the red streams down like slow tears. In the car behind me, a couple argues, exchanging bent brows and sharp gestures and unheard retorts.

The red flashes quickly like a change in camera angle, and alien green spreads over the windshield. I ease my foot onto the accelerator and I’m off, rolling down the wet pavement that smells thickly of heat and rain and tires.

On either side of my car lies another world. Skyscrapers loom like shadows in the night, some alight with a decorative neon glow on the exterior or yellow squares on the inside. The stars are nowhere to be seen, but the buildings and street lights and myriad blinking eyes of vehicles and the curve of the moon make up for their lost light. People swarm the streets. Their silhouettes dot the buildings’ interiors and duck into dark corners and under awnings. The city is always in motion, forever restless, forever expanding and shrinking like the rise and fall of breaths.

I turn a corner onto another street. This one has a different view, with little trees and quaint black light posts stuck into the ground, creating a corridor with the storefronts. I pull my car into a parallel park, grab my bag from the passenger seat, and slide out.

The air smells like summer, and I breathe deeply and smile. It’s stuffy and packed full of people and their business, the spiral of different directions of life. Coupled with the humidity, the air is heavy and my lungs are overwhelmed.

I come into the coffee shop, a young urbanite’s dream if he or she is lucky enough to find it in this tangle of city. The coffee bar is industrial, with exposed airducts and one brick wall. Pale oak hardwood lies over the floor, and vintage light bulbs dangle from the ceiling in gunmetal-
al-colored casing. An Asian lady in her late twenties leans behind the counter, thumb skimming over her phone. Her family owns the shop, and often times her mother or aunt work in her stead. During weekends, her older brother. On Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights, the days she doesn’t have night classes, she’s here. Her father, never. On this night, her mother is with her.

I order my usual and slide onto a bar stool near the brick wall. The plain white cup sits in front of me with steam rolling off in tattered wisps. While it cools, I pull my DSLR out of my bag and change the lens, swapping the 18 mm for a fixed lens. I’ve been documenting the city, trying my hand at street photography and capturing the still high rises and vehicles blurred in motion and the skyline. Now the focus is on the cells of the city: the people.

In coffee shops, people are in a world of their own. They catch up with close friends, focus on laptops and work, study, write, sketch, enjoy tea and quiet. Because everyone is invested in anything but their surroundings, they hardly notice a black eye pointed at them. I record the gentle aesthetic of the shop in stills and visible, tangible memory. Everyone is peaceful. The college girl on her laptop with a textbook cracked open beside her, the mother talking softly with her son, the young man with headphones sitting alone by the long glass window, the elderly couple with the man reading a newspaper and his wife reading a book. I write them all down with a press of a button and a fluttering shutter. Including the middle-aged man who is alone and strangely aware. He is the only one who isn’t concentrated on something right in front of him. His coffee cup is forgotten and untouched. He glances around and around. I press the playback button and study his portrait. His head is turned to the side, watching, watching. I swivel around and point the camera elsewhere.

I snap a few more photos then turn my attention to my coffee. But now the man is at the counter, talking to the Asian lady, hunching his back and leaning too close. She nods, retreats almost. Something stirs in me, my pulse hiccups.

Her mom joins her daughter at the counter and protectively lays an arm across her. When the man pulls out a gun, a shining black pistol, I can only think,

*Why a coffee shop*
*Why here*
*Not a bank or jewelry store*
*Why here?*

While the first gunshot rings and everyone, pulled back into our shared reality, hits the floor, I raise my camera.
When I used to tell my grandma
Nai nai, I’m scared,
she’d sit on our floral armchair
with me curled in her lap
and point to one of her scars.

When the rain hammers our roof, she points
to four parallel slashes across her shoulder.
Sunnu, these are from when flood rivers
covered the Earth and the Black Dragon
rampaged through Nanjing, mutilating
every person in his path. He could see the
bright flashing of swords sent to slay him,
so I chose five colored dull stones
from the riverbed and threw them at him.
He sliced my arm when I got close enough
to aim, but the stones flew straight.
One landed in each eye, blocking his sight,
one in each nostril, blocking his breath,
and one in his throat, blocking his fire.
He perished, and the stones were melted
to patch the holes in the sky where rain
pummeled through.

When the class bully made me his target
in the canteen, she took my fingers
and gently guided them over a patch
of crimson skin on her left cheek.
This is from when a man controlled
the elements: wood, water, metal, earth,
and fire. He bent them to obey his will
and when I refused to marry him
encircled me within a wall of scorching fire.
His power could harm me,
but never control me,
so I turned my cheek toward the flames
and ran for the river’s safety.
He tried to drown me, but the elements
turned against him, refusing to be used for destructive desires.

When Nai nai’s coughs start deep in her diaphragm and shudder through her small core, she traces a rabbit-shaped patch on the stomach of her blouse, outlining the scar beneath. When I was young, a baby rabbit was about to be crushed on the streets by an incoming bicycle, but I blocked its body with my own. It grew to become the jade rabbit on the moon, and he will let me join him when I no longer breathe on Earth. And from there I will have the best view to watch over you.
INTO THE FOREST
CHARNG-SHIN ABIGAIL WONG
The national tree is the willow,  
but not because it weeps.  
It’s hardy and strong  
and it bends without breaking.

The national bird is a fruit bat,  
flighty, blind, and nocturnal,  
hungry for something sweet.

The national animal is a wolf.  
Believed to be isolated,  
but really a pack animal.  
Loyal and fierce.

The national flower is a cactus.  
Prickly and thirsty  
and dangerous to touch.

My heart is a country,  
independent and imposing.  
We’re as tough as we look,  
but the borders open.
SAUDADE
LUCAS SANTANA FURTADO SOARES

The word *saudade* is untranslatable. We feel *saudade*, and we carry *saudade*. Sometimes, it is “to miss”, but missing is not needed at all. It is not nostalgia, we embrace *saudade* and acknowledge that we don’t want a future filled with the past. *Saudade* keeps sadness away. Long time ago, the Portuguese ships sailed with a hidden cargo of *saudade* headed to Brazil. When it touched our lands, *saudade* anchored at every living being and became the basis of our culture.

Uma cadeira vazia,
uma mesa de quatro
lugares, apenas três
pratos e muitos risos.

An empty chair,
a four seating
table, just three
plates, lots of laughs.

Um filme na televisão,
canal aberto, meio da tarde.
O mocinho morre no final.
A mocinha segue a vida.

A movie on the T.V.,
a boring afternoon.
The good guy dies in the end.
The good girl, “life must go on”.

Uma caixa de banco imobiliário
rasgada nas bordas com
dez notas de cem e a saída
livre da prisão faltando.

A box of Monopoly,
torn corners, half of the
money and the Get Out
of Jail Free cards missing.

Dois adolescentes beijando
um beijo, bocas tortas, mãos
perdidas e o cheiro de saliva
incensando o ambiente.

Two teenagers kissing,
unfitted lips, discovering
hands playing on untouched
skin and a scent of saliva.

A tarefa de casa, para uma
quarta-feira da infância,
escrita à mão e guardada
em uma caixa marcada “lembranças”.

A homework due on some
lost childhood Wednesday,
handwritten and kept in a box
labeled “memories”.

Luizes amarelas penduradas
pela rua, enfeites nas árvores e
nas portas de casa. O cheiro de
doce que emana da cozinha.

Yellow lights hanging on
trees and holiday ornaments
decorating doors. Sugary scents
emanating from the kitchen.

Um passeio na beira do rio,
descascando laranja e contando
quantas flores de pétalas brancas
fazem da beira do rio uma casa.

A walk along the river,
peeling an orange and counting
how many white petal flowers
have named the river margin home.
I walked through the rooms a few more times pretending I was looking for clothes I had forgotten to pack, while really giving an appraising eye to the lost pennies and other scraps of life that were drowning in the sea of off-white carpet. All the small pieces of life that had escaped our attempts to clean our shitty apartment now huddled around the indentations our furniture had made. They formed little preserved reefs of the past and seemed to shrink away as my shadow floated by, as if they were ashamed they had been found. I could see all the small pieces of confetti from our beach-themed New Year’s party swimming next to a splinter of wavy blue glass from something she threw at me a few hours later. There were smears of cigarette ash from when we would spend all winter tangled up with each other in bed, being too lazy to go outside. She would always rub the grey and black ash into the carpet and joke that we sure did spill a lot of pepper in the apartment. I loved the fragments. They were better than a photo album in a lot of ways. They weren’t just full of moments we had wanted to remember.

We lived near the ocean, but not in the romantic way everyone pictures when we told them about it. It was in a better way. A more honest way. We were near the edge of the shipyard where we could watch beautiful behemoths come lumbering into the docks, not quite able to turn and never knowing where they were going. It was up to the small fiery tugboats to come and guide them along, chastising them with their quick, chittery bumps. We would sometimes watch them together while we had breakfast and she would point out the especially slow ships. She would mention how they were prone to being extra stubborn in their movements before winking and giving me a knowing smile. It calmed me down watching the old barges. I liked knowing that layers of screaming metal and sun-bleached industrial paint could stay afloat for so long. Nothing lasts forever though, and we would just as often see ships that made us wonder how
things had gotten that bad. How the calm blues that rocked the crew to sleep in her arms could turn to frothy whites and swallowing blacks that cracked masts and turned wives to widows. The one yesterday was like that. Every one of its flaking paint chips spun in the air like it was waving goodbye. It wasn’t as broad or stocky as the other ships, but its thick steel had an elegance about it, like it could have survived anything with its raised rivets and burly bolts. It was as solid as a floating island until you got to the giant hole ripped in it. We could already see the sailors prying apart the deck and packing up the important components, signaling that they were ready to move on. Neither of us made a comment about it before bed, but we could both feel the weight of it draped over us as we tried to sleep. How could it have gotten so bad that they were just packing it up? Were they not even going to try to save such a beautiful ship?

I didn’t want to stop interrogating the carpet of our apartment, but I could feel the clock giving me pitying looks. I had to finish loading the truck. She was getting off in a few hours and I had to put everything I cared about in a box and throw it in back so that I could run away. I had to be gone. It had only been a few hours since I had dropped her off at work, but even the cat could hear the rumbles of the storm raging through my head as I played the last few years of our relationship over and over in my mind. All I could do now was turn from the wind and aim for the shore, hoping I’d feel better when all this was over, but really the more I thought about her leaving this morning, the more I felt like I was drowning and wouldn't fucking die.

She could have walked to work faster than I could drive her down the maze of one-ways, but every morning I would wait for her and watch her brush the waves out of her hair. I’d watch her sit cross legged in front of a mirror singing 90’s pop songs she had forgotten half of the words to. I’d groan that we were going to be late, but she would always laugh and sing louder and more off-key. I secretly liked that no matter how certain she was that she blew out the candles, she would have to unlock the door and walk through the apartment again, sometimes twice, because of how worried she was about the cat. I liked the fight for the radio. I liked the goodbye kiss. I liked her stupid goddam coffee order and that she ordered a bacon sandwich with no bacon just because even though she was a vegetarian she still missed the smell. I never told her though. I never told her how much I loved her, and after this morning she would never know.

This morning she hadn’t bothered to check the door because she knew I was coming back. We drove in silence, she ordered her coffee black, and when the time came to get out of the car, she held me close and pushed her wet cheeks against mine until they were dry. We got out together and she melted into my chest while squeezing me tighter with every tearful hiccup. Then I looked down and she was gone. She had turned and walked into the building where she worked without saying a word, and I hadn’t stopped her. What did I still need to say though? We had the conversation a thousand times. We had screamed until we lost our voices and we had made our choice. I remembered the certainty in our voices last week when we had agreed that this was for the best. How she had convinced me to let her go. How she had convinced me that I didn’t love her enough. How I had conceded and thought that what we were doing wasn’t healthy. I remembered the certainty in our decision and tried to imagine all of our fights and disagreements speaking in unison telling us we weren’t quite right for each other. I remembered our choice and understood why God would flood the Earth, why it was easier to bury everything under a mile of opaque water than to keep looking at your failures. I remembered and remembered as everything I love raged around me and as I kept trying to think if I had kissed her goodbye.

The booming horn from a nearby ship woke me from my daze and looking around the
apartment I saw that I was down to the last room. I had grown to hate that room. The deep blue
door seemed like it was sinking into the floor, and every step I took towards it I could feel the
cold water of unwanted memories floating up my spine. I started pulling down the pictures that
plastered the wall, trying not to look at them, but every thumbtack felt like I was ripping some-
one’s throat out. Why did this city have to have so many goddamn photo booths? When I found
the one I had unconsciously been looking for, I couldn’t help but to sit down. I had always been
under the impression that you could judge the strength of a relationship by how the couple had
gotten together. Hands reaching for the same order at the coffee shop was alright, pretending to
fail English so they would tutor you showed conviction, but trading Halloween costumes and
howling at the moon together, that was love. It was two years ago, but I still remembered every
word she had said to me.

“You know, you look surprisingly good in a slutty sailor dress,” she said, eyeing me and
trying not to laugh.

I stopped my strained grunting from pulling the dress up long enough to smile and say,
“You know it helps that we have the same size shoulders. If we ever decide to get married our
children could be some great swimmers.”

She didn’t even blink before replying, “I don’t know how to tell you this sailor, but I’m
just using you to get out of that dress and into your surprisingly comfortable skeleton onesie.”

I feigned offense and said “Well shit... At least now I know that my urge to wear wom-
en’s clothing was justified. How do I look?”

She looked long and hard before responding. “Have you ever heard that rumor that you
shouldn’t throw rice at your wedding because it makes birds explode? You look like the moment
before the exploding part. You look like someone shaved a sailor’s pubes, had a prostitute spit on
them, and then put them in a polyjuice potion. You look like…”

“I GET IT!” I yelled as I stared in disbelief at the impossible shoes she had provided
before finally looking up and asking “Do you want to marry me? I feel as though if you still like
me at my slutty-sailor-est, then you might actually be my soulmate.”

She gave it more thought than it deserved and replied, “You know you may have a point.
I’ve also actually been looking for someone to share my clothes with…”

“I think I love you.” I whispered half to myself.

“That’s big talk from a big fellah, but deep down I think we both know you ain’t got the
guts to love someone like me,” she said with a challenging smile.

I frowned and realized she meant it. Her gaze was all fire and brimstone and I finally saw
what she was getting at. “What are you afraid of? Because if it’s love then don’t waste my time.”

“I’m not afraid of anything,” I told her, before hopping over with one heel on and rolling
into her accusatory eyes. The darkest eyes I had ever seen.

“It’s looking over the side of a ship at night,” I said with all honesty.

“You’re quite the poet!” she said sarcastically.

“Nah you just make life more poetic,” I replied and kissed her as she started snorting and
laughing at the audacity of my line.

Looking down at the photo strip in my hand, I couldn’t put it down. It was just four
frames of her black lips pressed against mine and a torn striped dress, but it was one of the only
things I actually cared about in this apartment. I tried to think about how it had gotten this bad.
I had always loved her, but somewhere along the way I had become afraid. I had started to worry
that this wasn’t it. That there might be unexplored lands over the horizon. She could feel it too, and a few drinks were all she needed to ask, “Do you Love me?” It was always an easy yes, but what I really wanted to say was, “How could you even ask that? How had we gotten here?”. I felt like a time traveler with amnesia. I needed something to tell me what had happened.

I picked up the photos off the carpet and started putting them in order to see if I could find some clue, some landmark that could tell me where I was. We smiled and laughed through every frame and she looked just as beautiful to me as she had in the first photo. I wanted to will myself back there. Back to when we were happy and she looked at me knowing that I would rip the moon from the sky for her. Back to when I could kiss her for days without coming up for air. When had it stopped? When had we stopped being the people in the photographs? What had I traded that life for?

I don’t remember walking out of the room with the photos, but outside the window I could see the tide coming in and the sun turning a shade of orange that I didn’t like. It smothered the clouds and made the sky look like it had been robbed of its shine and promise. It wasn’t a blue sky of possibility and chirping birds anymore. It was a sky painted with bruises and swallowing hues. I know I didn’t have much time, but I stood in our ransacked bedroom watching as the sun sank faster and faster. I pretended I could see my feelings pushing it down over the horizon with their shoulders and burnt hands. Still trying to convince myself that the end was a good thing, I turned back for one last look at the apartment. Across from me Macy the cat was strumming the last few threads of sunlight. I wanted to reach out to hold her. I wanted to tell her that I was sorry and that this wasn’t her fault. I wanted to tell her I loved her, but I was afraid. I pulled my hand back. I’m not sure my heart could have taken it if she ran away from me. I just looked at her and hoped that she knew.

Half an hour left and I was still adrift. I knew that I loved her. It was the certainty my entire life in this city was built around. Why was I leaving? Why was I so eager to give up my world for the unknown? It felt like I was drowning. I could see a wall of black and blue water in front of me, but I didn’t know why I had to swim that way. All I had to do was turn around. To go back to the shore and the home behind me. Why was I swimming out? I couldn’t remember. I had been so sure a few days ago. I remember the words coming out of my mouth. I remember the tears. I remember feeling the certainty in my hand as ran through the motions over and over again. I remember both of us being sure. I remembered the fight that ended it.

“Just let me go. Stop torturing me. Please...You don’t love me. Not the way you used to,” she would tell me.

“I’m coming back, please don’t say things like that,” I pleaded. “It’s just for a few months, and then I will be right here with you again. It’ll be over before you even know I’m gone.”

She didn’t look up. She had heard it all before and the truth spilled out from her, “A few months now, a year later. You’re leaving. We could have worked something out. I could have found a job out there with you. But you didn’t even ask. You just told me...” She finally looked up. “You don’t get it. You’ve always been my world, as long as I’ve loved you, but to you I’ve always just been an island. A stop on your journey. You’re a wild man, and I love that about you, but stop making promises we know you don’t want to keep. Kiss me goodbye so I know it was real, but don’t lie to me and leave me waiting for a tomorrow that will never come. Don’t keep my love in a bottle just so you can drop it in the ocean when you get bored with it. I know when it’s over, do you?”
I didn’t bother to pack anything else. I locked the door and tried not to think that it might be the last time. It was easier to pretend that I was going to get a drink by the docks. I got in the truck and waited for her to come home. I was sure I loved her. I would cancel my trip. I would drain the oceans. I would breath fire and brimstone. I would lift her into the air and tell her every loving thought I had ever had about her, and she would never doubt me again. I would make her bacon sandwiches and brand her name onto my chest before asking her to marry me. I adjusted the mirrors on the truck and waited for her to walk home. For her to see that I would never brave the open ocean without her, that the only thing I was really afraid of was being without her. I waited for hours. I waited for years. I waited until there was no more waiting to be done. But she never came. She was sure.
Look to the radio, distant
under a beam of neon stares,
each a fearful reminder of what lies
patiently waiting.
But,
as night turns to night
as hours
pass into years
the film threatening to spread
over my still gaze grew tired
of phosphorescent glares,
the mute radio’s static, a message
a hymn
an endless symphony.
1. The smell is a dull knife—
   enough to notice, but not enough to do anything.
Alongside the mellow orange of trees starting to hibernate,
the tang of winter-fresh air sits on my tongue.
The sky seems endless, infinite, everlasting
in all its pale blue glory.
Sharp angles with soft edges left by the setting sun—
a reminder of life’s contrasts.
The air is now static,
but driving earlier,
it was all silk scarves and humming electricity,
constant kinetic energy.
Later, light will sketch a canvas,
painted by star trails,
colored in with hope.

2. There’s this tree in my backyard,
really a 30-foot-tall stump.
In the fading light, it’s the only thing in black and white.
Even where the sun grasps at it,
the old scarred bark refuses to live.
Everything explodes in color—
emerald green,
soft yellow,
empty blue—
But this tree has a hollow heart,
a useless, dead, bark shield,
Eventually, it will find purpose.
For now, it stands, an arrow towards the sky.
3.
A neighborhood pulses, bleeding with sound.
Cars drive past, bass thrumming in my bones
(and maybe my soul).
Leaves falter under my dog's paws,
a cliché crunch every time she moves.
Music, intended as background, stays at the forefront.
Deep brown eyes gaze at a threshold of in-betweens,
silhouettes and memories,
shadows and purpose,
intent on drinking it all in before they close.

4.
Fall has arrived,
the soundtrack of my life
and the urgency of light.
The sharp boundaries are blurred
as color fades to shadow
and purpose hollows out.
Winter, love, is almost here, and
I'm ready now.
HOME
REBECCA R. REEVE

Acrylic
The only person to ever walk in on me masturbating is dead. They’re not related events, unless female masturbation causes cancer in loved ones, but it was always weirdly comforting to me that he took the secret to the grave.

That’s always the moment I see when I think about him. I cried, heavy, ugly, chest-aching sobs, at his funeral, but I also kept being hit with the absurd urge to laugh. His brother was choking out a eulogy, barely keeping it together, breaking every already-broken heart in the church, hunched over in pain the same way his sixteen-year-old brother had hunched over in laughter in the doorway to my childhood bedroom years earlier after walking in on his best friend’s little sister with her hand down her pants.

The weird thing about people dying is that it somehow turns into a competition. Who loved him more, whose heart is broken worse. I can’t win that competition with him, no matter how much I miss his stupid mean laugh or his sweet mischievous face, no matter how much my heart physically aches, because his mom and his brothers and my brother owned such a bigger piece of him than I ever could. So I thank my adolescent horniness for giving me a memory that just belongs to me and to him—seared into both of our minds until death, a one-handed scramble to pull up the covers.
The year was 2150 and Bingo had been outlawed on every planet. In its decision to outlaw Bingo, The Council of the Universe stated that “The boring and aging nature of slow-paced activities (including but not limited to Bingo, creative writing, and calculus) may be deemed cruel and unusual punishment.” This resulted in the closure of nearly every engineering school and nursing home in the galaxy except for one, Auntie Bill’s Home for Old People. This prison for the senile was a black market operation, only permitted to exist by the nature of its inmates, the elderly beyond stimulation.

This is where they sent me. My kids found my will under my mattress and discovered that I intended to give the vast majority of my priceless two dollar bill and marble collection to my pet skink, Stumpy. They sold the marbles and used the money along with the two dollar bills to fly me to Betelgeuse III, the low-atmosphere rock that Auntie Bill’s keeps barren of life and happiness.

I smuggled my pet skink, Stumpy, into Auntie Bill’s in a manila envelope. Upon arrival the Siberian menace, Nurse Jo, performed a thorough pat down and searched my things. She discovered Stumpy and despite his good manners informed me in a deep Russian accent that my options were: “I eet dis now foor breakfast oor I eet later foor deener.”

“He has rights just like you and me.”

“Yes, he can be eet now or later, I could give same choice to you.”

I had to act. I grabbed Stumpy and ran swiftly to the nearest waste airlock. I flushed him. I flushed Stumpy.

“Okee you flush me foot, you slip on rock.”

And just like that, from my very first moments at Auntie Bill’s, I dreamed of escape.
Like most off-the-books events (golf tournaments, corporate training sessions, etc.), the people of Auntie Bill’s played Bingo all day. The prizes ranged from extra peas with dinner to a night on the Tempur Pedic mattress. I have won small things from time to time playing Bingo, but never one glorious night away from my brick and cardboard mattress. A romantic evening with the Tempur Pedic mattress was this night’s prize.

You could tell the stakes were high. People were antsy. Grizz was sharpening his large bowie knife. Mary was twirling her gray hair, blinking incessantly.

Eugene was my best friend at Auntie Bill’s. Much like the great American skink, he was passive, needed feeding three times daily, and possessed a shiny, lizard-like scalp. Eugene always won Bingo, but he hates winning. He was doing well in Bingo and was slouched so low in his chair that you could pretty much only see the bright lights reflected off his bald head.

Eugene frequently gets bullied out of his prizes. Last week, Grizz had Eugene’s feet tied to the lift used to get patients out of bed. Grizz dangled him upside down for a couple minutes before Nurse Jo heard Eugene’s low whimpers. By that point Grizz had already secured Eugene’s “unlimited orange juice for one day” pass. When Nurse Jo arrived she began laughing uproariously. “Ha ha weak man. You can not even kip orange joos around. Only Mary like you ha ha.” Without Nurse Jo’s protection from Grizz, who knows what would happen to him if he secured one night on the Tempur Pedic?

Nurse Jo lifted the next ball. “Ayee turty-foive.” Her thick Russian accent was impossible to get through, much like her stench. Glints of light caught my eye, reflected off Eugene’s shaky head. Sweat began dribbling from his scalp. He slowly raised himself so it was possible to see his wrinkled face. Eugene looked as if someone had just taken his blankie. He shuddered, sending sweat across the table toward Grizz, who had begun a low growl.

Eugene covered helplessly. Grizz had his teeth bared. “SAY IT Eugene!”

Eugene looked around the room for sympathy, but received only hardened glares and one lustful grin from the prison bimbo, Mary.

“B-b-bingo…” Eugene trailed off, mumbling curses softly to himself.

Eugene always carried with him a burlap sack filled with his various medications. Diabetes, blood pressure, sleep, and Eugene’s favorite, pain meds. This sack was nearly always on his person, and if you spotted him around the nursing home you might think he was an old hobo, carrying his life’s possessions over his shoulder. Rumor was that he slept with this sack clutched tightly in his arms. He loved this sack with his sweet opiates more than he ever loved his grand-kids. More than I loved my old pet skink, Stumpy.

Grizz was well aware and he acted swiftly to punish Eugene’s transgression. Grizz snatched the burlap sack.

“YOU LOSE.” Grizz stormed towards the waste airlock.

Grizz shoved the sack into the small airlock. The glass cover shut and the meds were ejected rapidly into space. They were gone in seconds, disappearing over the high walls of a far away crater. Everyone was watching the sack through the windows of the dining room. I looked back at Eugene. Tears poured down the crevasses in his face.

“I-I loved that bag,” Eugene spoke through low sobs.

“Eugene’s so sexy when he cries,” I heard Mary whisper.

“Let’s go Eugene.” I grabbed his arm and wrestled him from his chair.

“My pills, my pills…”
As one of the more mobile inmates at Auntie Bill’s Home for Old People, I liked to roam the halls.

Grizz was a skinny guy with the worn face of Willie Nelson. When he turned the corner at the end of the hall, his oversized leather vest and Doc Marten’s always greeted me like a huge “fuck you”. He had been restricted to jeans since Nurse Jo flushed his last pair of assless chaps out the waste airlock. He growled as I passed him, not breaking eye contact.

I turned the corner and immediately heard Mary’s screechy voice. Eugene was in trouble. I walked slowly into Eugene’s room where Mary was busy collecting Eugene’s sweatshirts. Eugene was watching with horror from his green recliner, trapped by the insurmountable effort required to get up.

Mary lifted his favorite blue sweatshirt with his fraternity’s letters. “I like to wear this one without anything underneath, now we have a secret Eugene.” She winked. Eugene let a tear fall from his left eye.

Eugene looked longingly at his cabinet of cleaning supplies, trying to calculate how much Drain-O it would take to free his sweatshirt of Mary once she returned it to him.

I stepped farther into the room. Mary glanced over, quickly dropping the sweatshirts onto the floor. Deer in headlights.

“Hey, gorgeous…” She stared straight into my eyes like a bug, then buzzed out of the room. Eugene’s body was restless in his recliner.

“It’s alright Eugene she’s gone.”

“Could you…the flowers?” Eugene motioned toward a vase of brown, withered flowers in murky grey water.

I handed Eugene the flower and watched in awe as he began to crush the flower in his palm and roll it into a blunt.

“The uh…that purple package?” Eugene was grasping for the pack of Black and Milds near his bedside.

“Does that even get you high, Eugene?”

“I...Uh. Well I don’t have my painkillers.”

Eugene lit the blunt, inhaling deeply. He immediately relaxed into his recliner. Eugene reached into the pocket of his oversized sweats. He pulled out a brand new iPhone 32sx plus, sparkling like a gem.

“Damn Eugene! I didn’t know you were up to date with tech.”

“My great-grandson bought me this device, and per my request he deleted all extraneous apps.”

“Well let me see it!”

Eugene sheepishly handed me the phone, wavering a bit. The background was black with no apps. I had to swipe to the fifth screen to find his phone’s singular app, Tinder.

“I need a beautiful woman to protect me from Mary. She needs a strong temperament and wide hips. I would also like her to make me ham sandwiches.”

His bio was very clear on these points. It also mentioned that hand-to-hand combat skills would guarantee a second date.

“Wide hips and ham sandwiches, huh?”
I handed Eugene his phone back. He quickly got to swiping.
The first prospect was a being from Perseus B. And I mean being. Alien being.
“She has a lovely face.” Eugene pointed to the top of the screen.
“Eugene that’s her ass.” Eugene pulled his finger away thoughtfully, he couldn’t tell.
“Does it matter?”
Eugene began to read her bio: Looking for an older man to help with finances. If you have a dog I swipe right. My face is whichever side you like to look at ;). Eugene scratched his chin pensively. “See it doesn’t matter! Do you have a dog I can borrow?"
“Eugene she’s half your age and has a face-ass that she wants you to give attention to desperately.”
Eugene begrudgingly swiped left. His eyes lit up. “Nancy from Betelgeuse III. She lives here!”
“Eugene isn’t that your sweatshirt?.”
“Oh no. Oh no.” Eugene’s favorite fraternity sweater was draped over Mary’s skinny form.
Eugene quickly swiped left only to be presented with Suzy, then Cathy, then Lucy, all with Mary’s shining face and a different sweatshirt from Eugene’s closet.
Eugene was in shock, sweat began to bead into large drops on Eugene’s shiny temple, falling slowly into his lap.
“Is this all there is for me? Mary, Mary and ass-face?” A tear pooled slowly in his eye.
“She can’t have every account in this sector, keep swiping.” After a few more iterations of Mary, an ad appeared. I was instantly enthralled.
Eugene scoffed. “Planet Cabo, what is this nonsense?”
This planet excited me. The ad showed warm tropical beaches, with scantily clad green women from the Nomar Sector bringing you topped off Mai Tais. But best of all, the air was blue with two big suns, enough solar energy for millions of skinks to bask. It was far beyond the walls of Auntie Bill’s and the tyranny of Nurse Jo.
“Eugene this is our free ride. This is our path to freedom. No Grizz. No Nurse Jo. Just us and the sun.”
“I don’t know, seems alright.”
“Eugene haven’t you always wanted a boat?”
“I guess I have.”
“Let’s make a boat with palm trees and rope and sail to faraway islands with green alien women and skinks.”
“Sounds ambitious.”
“You know what Planet Cabo doesn’t have?”
“What?”
“Her name rhymes with hairy and she defiles your sweatshirts.”
Eugene looked up, eyes wide. “You think they have poppy plants?”
“For sure!”
“What’s the plan?”
“Eugene you were in the air corps right?”
“Well of course! I served in The Great Horsehead Nebula Beefocide!”
The Great Horsehead Nebula Beefocide came with the advent of vegan politics. The last
beef farm in the Horsehead Nebula became a war zone following the universe-wide decision to outlaw meat. When I was a kid, I remember seeing stills on the news of vegans strapping themselves to cows to prevent the rebels from eating them. The conflict ended in just a few days once the vegans got hungry.

“Alright Eugene, I’ll get you a ship.” The cogs were set in motion.

• • •

The only person in Auntie Bill’s who had any sort of ship was Grizz. He had a small hover scooter with a glass cockpit so he could fly it in the low atmosphere on Betelgeuse III. The scooter barely had enough juice to resist the low gravity outside of the home. Late at night, I have often been awoken by the wet farting noises emitted by his scooter. Even with the thin atmosphere I can still hear Grizz screaming “GROUND CONTROL TO MAJOR GRIZZ” and buzzing around on his tiny vehicle.

The problem was that Grizz’s scooter was stored in the loading dock, paces from Nurse Jo’s office. We needed a distraction.

Nurse Jo had taken all of Grizz’s assless chaps, but she was not aware that I also owned a pair. Before my internment, I had used them exclusively to terrorize my grandkids when they harassed Stumpy, my pet skink. However, they currently lay idle in my dresser.

I packaged them up in nice wrapping paper and wrote “Grizz” in big letters on the front. I placed the package outside of Grizz’s door in the morning and waited.

• • •

Grizz was late to dinner. He’s usually first through the door, but by the time he got there everyone was seated. To my dismay, he was wearing a pair of athletic sweats.

People were getting intimate with their food by this point. Mary was sucking peas up one at a time through her straw. Occasionally, she would wink and shoot one at Eugene who was sitting next to me.

I glanced at Grizz. He was surveying Nurse Jo, gauging her interest in the room. She was eating sausages and grape leaves she must have brought from her personal stash. Grizz stood up slowly from his chair, attracting little attention. The flash of metal snaps from the seam on the side of his sweats caught my eye. He walked up onto the stage where Nurse Jo announced Bingo numbers and tapped the mic.

Grizz spoke directly into the mic with a low growl. “Excuse me. I have an announcement. Nurse Jo, could you please direct your attention to the front.”

Nurse Jo’s face looked like it was ready to go supernova. Her burly form moved quickly, swimming between the tables to make it to the stage. But it was too late. Grizz turned to face away from the room and ripped the front of his sweats off. The back half of the sweats fell slowly, revealing Grizz’s hairy buttocks, framed by the pale leather fringes of my chaps. Jaws and dentures hit the floor. Nurse Jo leapt onto the stage and stood square to Grizz, fists raised.

“You’re gonna have to rip them off me, Jo!”

Nurse Jo grunted, the Soviet Kodiak was ready. Nurse Jo and Grizz stood, eyes locked, in complete silence as the room shuffled towards the stage. Who would take the first shot?
Mary raised her straw towards Nurse Jo. The pea traveled quickly. As soon as I heard Mary exhale, the pea was stuck firmly in Nurse Jo’s nostril like a huge booger. Nurse Jo reeled back, swatting at her nose. Grizz bounded through the air like a cat. His pruney butt cheek shined brightly over the heads of the inmates. The crowd erupted.

“Eugene let’s go!” I had to yell to get his attention over the loud jeering. I grabbed his arm and we scurried out of the dining room, making our way to the loading dock where Grizz stored his scooter. The loading dock was dim and smelled vaguely of mold. Only one lamp hanging from the ceiling illuminated the space. The tiny scooter was visible in the corner.

We pushed the hover scooter into the airlock.

“Eugene you ready?”

“Yes.”

I pressed the red button on the control panel for the airlock. This would no doubt alert Nurse Jo, assuming she had already taken care of Grizz’s chaps.

The inside door closed. Eugene slowly lifted himself into the scooter. I squeezed in behind him, my back pressed against the glass dome of the cockpit.

Eugene’s hands were hovering over the scooter controls thoughtfully, moving from one button to the next without much conviction.

“Eugene, you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, just a bit different than the janitorial control station.”

“Wait, you were a pilot on a ship right?”

“Did I say that?”

“I mean it was kind of implied.”

“Oh yeah, I mean I served in the Air Corps on one of those big tankers taking care of spills and messes, for sure. I was in the cockpit all the time, you’d be amazed what pilots spill on the controls.” Eugene pointed to an octagonal button on the dash. “I cleaned puke off a button just like this.”

My heart sank. They would probably be cleaning us off the face of this planet in a few minutes.

The outer airlock door swung open. I have never been so scared of space.

“Eugene just pick one!” His hands nervously ran from button to button.

I looked back at the inner airlock door. Grizz was staring directly into my eyes behind the glass airlock window, showing his sharp canine teeth, undoubtedly growling. He banged the glass with his head few times and then began to wriggle his large bowie knife between the seal of the inner airlock door. Grizz’s fingers were just visible prying the door open. He slid through the small gap that he had created and stepped into the airlock, audibly growling despite a near vacuum between Grizz and the cockpit of the scooter.

Grizz began to approach the scooter like a zombie. “Pick a button now, Eugene!”

“Give me just–” Eugene hovered over a large green button in the center that read ‘Go’. “I cleaned mayo off a button like this. I seem to remember feeling a jolt when I pressed it too hard.”

I reached around him and slammed the button. The scooter farted out of the airlock, making a beeline for distant stars.

“Eugene, throw Planet Cabo into the UPS.” Universal Positioning System. This coincidence put USPS out of business.
Eugene pressed the microphone button near the base of the unit. “Where would you like to go?” The robotic voice was eager to know.

“Uhh, Planet Cabo.”

“Right, navigating to nearest 7/11.”

“No, no! Pla-net Ca-bo.”

“You are a planning to net a Navajo? Please dial 555-1234 for the Native American Harassment Hotline.”

“Shut up! Planet Cabo!” Eugene slammed the dash.

“Sir, please don’t get frustrated with me. Call customer support to provide feedback on my user interface.”

“Planet Cabo, dumbass!”

“Sir, please squeeze this stress ball.”

A flap under the UPS opened, shooting a stress ball into Eugene’s face.

“Cabo! Cabo! With the green women and Mai Tais!”

“Great, taking you to Planet Cabo, enjoy!”

The scooter swerved sharply down back toward the planet. “Eugene where is it taking us?”

“It says Planet Cabo right on the UPS!”

“Do you see anything around here? We haven’t even left Betelgeuse III yet.”

We scanned our surroundings for any sign of where we were. Miles of craters covered the rock below us.

“Aghhh!” Eugene let out a shriek. “Look, look!”

Eugene pointed feverishly at the rear of our scooter. Grizz had a firm grip on our tailpipe, dangling like a howler monkey in the near vacuum of Betelgeuse III. His bowie knife was clutched between his sharp canines. He appeared almost frozen with his eyes wide open but his jaw was lightly trembling, as if attempting a low growl. He was still wearing my assless chaps.

“What do we do about him?”

“Eugene let’s just sort this out at Planet Cabo. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

The UPS let out a shrill ring, “Arriving at Planet Cabo in 30 seconds.”

“Great, see! We’ll be fine Eugene.”

“We still haven’t left Betelgeuse III yet. You sure about this place?”

Over a high crater wall near the horizon a blue and white building became visible. The building was nondescript. One poorly lit sign over the airlock read “Welcome to Planet Cabo!” Around this sign were several over-sized cutouts of green women carrying trays of Mai Tais.

Our scooter slowly came to rest inside the airlock, dragging Grizz along the floor like a sack of laundry. The outer airlock door shut and we stepped out of the scooter.

The inner airlock door swung open. A large, stocky woman stood in the loading dock.

“Heelo. Velcome to planeet cabo. I eem Nurse Za. It ees not a pleasure to meet more old peepool. As newest and weakest old peepool here, you vill slip on cardboard and rock. Okee? Who is dis frozen man?”

“Uhhh…Grizz.”

“Okee I vill get heem some real pants. Comrades, join us four beengo. Prize tonight ees extra applesauce vith dinner.”

And just like that, from my very first moments at Planet Cabo, I dreamed of escape.
Isn’t it scary to live in America?

No, I laugh. No, I’m not scared for my life. The faint heartbeat of freedom is always pulsing here. The patriotic flag billowing with all the colors of a stolen wind.

Here we focus on solutions.
Here we focus on prayers and flags.

And flowers on graves. Columbines memorializing American Dreams lost. Because memorializing is easier than mending. And that American Dream is already dead. But so alive in our red, white, and beating hearts.

But you all have guns, don’t you?

No, of course not. It’s only half. And they’re no different than the gunless. Picking one out on the street like pinning the sinner at church, the mailman from the moviegoer, the disturbed from the student. You know Lady Liberty has an AK up her skirt, right? She’s as free as us all. Free to be motionless, unyielding, and unhearing.

But the rate of gun deaths is so high in America.

Guns don’t shoot people. Terrorists and mental illness shoot people. Silence and stillness shoot people. Toddlers who think they’re toys shoot people. It’s just that, here, we’re taught young to play with lives. Taught young tradition over talking about our problems. Taught young the 1st amendment unless questioning the 2nd.

Do you feel safe?

Wrapped in the prayers and flags of a hollowed country?

Just beyond our purple peaks and amber grains, Sam is waiting once again to stitch history between stars and stripes, badges of actions once promised by gospel dreams, on this hallowed ground our dead not dying in vain.

America! America! God, why do you let my people sing – ashes, ashes – from sea to bloodied sea?
The sheets are ice,
bleached and brittle.
The air conditioning relentlessly pelts his face,
causing the July night
to feel like January.

Underneath the unforgiving white lights
he lies in a wintery hell.
When he finally shivers himself to sleep,
it seems to come and go fast
as if he blinked and
his eyelashes momentarily froze together.

The nurse skates by now,
as she has every fifteen minutes
without fail.
On her way back down
the desolate corridor,
she pauses and peers into his ward.

There is no door,
only an empty arch.
Doors can crack skulls
easier than cold can crack lips.

She scribbles on her clipboard.

This is the second night she has found him
awake so late, curled up beneath the lights.
She briefly meets his frosted gaze
before she consigns him to the bitter darkness,
where he quickly succumbs to a sort
of hypothermic hibernation,
and drifts into his dreams,
still, yet psychotic,
like snow.
Anne Sexton's parents died four months apart. Imagine that separation. Does it make you rationalize? “Perhaps they weren’t close; perhaps a part of each of them left, as a bird, at the start.”

*In absentia* we are forced to ask the question, “Which part?” Anne? Perhaps. Anne, depart. We’ve all made asses of ourselves. Anne, flee the branch but leave it bouncing. The brass will play your exit, as their counterparts, crass bassoons, played your entrance. As a bird trumpets in the bushes I can see the sound of it in waves, brushes and breaks across my body. So it is: entranced by the soundness of life, I consider my parents’ death. How death knocks — out of each of us — the breath.
The bot was not a MechanoBot. It had long, awkward limbs and an oversized head, lanky body panels coated in a dusty enamel and rusting around the edges. It had a pixelated face on a screen that currently smiled at her as it opened that passenger door and smoothly positioned itself in the seat. It was all a bright yellow. It did not have the characteristically square shoulders of a MechanoBot. Something rounder, eerily organic about the shape.

The heat of the salt-lake desert sent waves up from the ground, blurring the bot as it approached the car with its caretaker. For a second, the driver thought she was looking at a second sun.

She couldn’t argue with the agreed price, though. Driving this thing to Los Angeles for whatever business it had there would set her up for months. She could finally get the money to take trips north. But still, she was told she’d be picking up a MechanoBot, and this wasn’t one. “This the wrong bot,” the driver called to its caretaker. “I have an order to drive a MechanoBot. What’s this?”

“No, he’s the right one,” the caretaker called back, shuffling over to the car. He chuckled from an unseen mouth beneath a bushy mustache, but underneath his dusty hat his eyes were glazed with moisture. “He’s programmed right and good, helped me fix up that ol’ junker there.” He pointed to a shiny green pickup, even older than her own car, that peered apprehensively out of the barn towards them. Beyond the barn she caught sight of a small, freshly dug mound. Then the caretaker stepped between. “It can do hunna’twelve miles on a three-hour charge, and at the age it is! Older than me by a number of years, I tell ya.”

The bot followed at the caretaker’s shoulder. Its dark screen of a face lit up in a placid yellow smile.
“I have been programmed to operate on all vehicle makes and models dating back to 1955,” said the bot. “If you are worried about subpar maintenance during the trip, I can assure you that is not the case. Your vehicle will receive the best care, should you require it. It dates back to the 1970s, I believe?” The eyes blinked as the pixels of the mouth moved in squarish shapes and a metal-jointed hand passed over the curves of the car’s hood. The eyes followed, and the shapes of the face flowed into a wide-eyed expression. It seemed...awed. She stared at it.

“I got a request to drive a MechanoBot to Los Angeles,” she told the caretaker. “What the hell is this?”

“He’s a good machine,” the caretaker insisted. His voice was smaller than before, wavering. “He’ll do everything he can.”

“I am a Model 2C43 MediBot, trained in ontological and hospice care,” the bot said as it opened the passenger door and folded itself into the seat. “I am also programmed to perform basic first aid and emergency response.”

Hospice?

The old man nodded, his mustache wobbling. “Man’s got cancer, I think.” He paused for a moment, lost in some thought. “Please take him, ma’am. He needs to get out of this dust bowl.”

The bot’s joints squeaked slightly as it turned to face her, its position eerily human. The caretaker leaned down, arms resting on the rolled-down window. “Look, I...please. Just...” A wave of something passed over him, and his eyes looked without looking, shiny and wet. “He can’t be here anymore. He’s...he’s done his job.”

She turned to start the car as the bot turned forward, neat and square. “You paid me,” she said, turning the ignition in the precise jerking pattern she’d memorized. Thieves had tried to steal it too many times.

The caretaker suddenly leaned in closer, tapping her shoulder as she moved to adjust the clutch. “Take care of him for me,” he whispered.

She turned to stare at the caretaker. He seemed to look through her, at the bot in her passenger seat. Something in his look made her uneasy. “What?”

“Just...make sure he gets to L.A. safe,” he said.

Slowly, she nodded. What was the point in worrying about a bot? “We should arrive in ten days. I can give you our GPS tracker if you want.”

The caretaker shook his head, patting the top of the car. “You need to get going, now.”

He watched them from the dirt lot in front of his shabby barn, and stood watching the car for miles as it disappeared into the desert haze.

• • •

The first three days passed in silence. She would drive until the charge ran out, pull over, set up the solar cells on the roof and hood, wait. She might eat, sleep, whatever tasks her body needed her to perform as the car took four hours to charge. All routine.

The bot liked to watch things. It would sit in the passenger seat, watching the lifeless world around them pass by in a flurry of dust, rock, and shrapnel. It tapped patterns into its lap or on the passenger door, bobbing its head along with them. It fixated on odd-looking rocks, twisted wreckage in old airplane graveyards, the occasional dying tree, cactus, or shrub, and jos-
tled and started when something particularly odd caught its eye. It was a toddler taken on a walk outside, assaulted and fascinated by so many things at once.

It was unnatural.

As the fourth day ended they came upon one of the grounding spires of the Trade Ring, a hundred square kilometers of alien technology stuck in the wasted earth, extending past the sky to hold up a network of galactic ports and trading stations. Ships winked in the dying light across the sky and around the spire, erratic as flies surrounding a dead animal.

In a single, precise motion, the bot turned to her. It pointed at the structure. “I remember when this was built.”

She jumped halfway out of her skin, slamming on the brakes.

“I do apologize for startling you,” the bot said. “I was simply taken by this.” He turned back to the structure looming miles in the distance. “I believe this was one of the last spires to be completed in this area of the world. Quite a remarkable piece of engineering.”

She looked past the bot’s hand as she pulled the car over. No driving anyway, now that light was fading. From this distance, the shadows surrounding the spires turned it into a massive knife, the faded red desert around it a sea of blood around a deep, fatal wound. She shuddered.

“Are you alright, miss?”

She didn’t look back at the bot, but kept staring at the spire. Her eyes trailed upward, following the ugly stripe of imposing metal far beyond the upper reaches of the thermosphere. “I always drive by this,” she said. “I never really look at it.”

“It certainly produces a...striking...image with this light,” the bot said. Its facial features faded to blue.

“It does.”

She and the bot watched the ships around it for a few moments before the bot shut its systems down for the night. Her muscle memory urged her to push her seat back, grab the blanket in the back, and try to catch a few hours’ thin sleep before waking up hours to set up the morning charge. Instead she sat a moment, watching the sunset glinting off the metal panels of the spire, the desert darkening around them.

As she gathered her blanket around her for the night, she remembered looking back briefly at the bot’s caretaker, standing in the dirt as they drove off his property. She hadn’t allowed herself to see it before, but she’d seen the mound in full as she turned away from the barn. It had the cross-shaped mark of a grave.

* * *

The red desert melted away into a deep, faded canyon the next day. Again, the bot stared at the strange warps in the rock as they passed eyes occasionally wondering as tinny gasps sighed from its mouthpiece. She had never seen a bot show that kind of behavior. She hadn’t seen anyone do that, besides the youngest of children. It spoke a few times about the way the sun shaded the rocks, turning yellows to oranges to reds.

“Can you see color?” she asked.

The bot turned sharply to her, its yellow-glowing head nodding. “Yes, of course! It is not a standard of my model, but it was requested of me by one of my patients years ago.”

“Your...patient...wanted you to see?”
“Yes,” it replied, its face paling. “She had rare and aggressive intracranial tumors, causing her to go blind, among other things. I was assigned to her for three years, and she wanted me to describe everything around her in great detail. I was programmed to see color in 576 megapixel resolution, my empathy drive was upgraded, and I had quite a large sample of classical American and European poetry downloaded to my memory.” It stopped, turned back to collapse into the seat, almost like it was an old man itself. “She was one of my most favorite patients.”

She spared a glance at the bot, who had turned to stare forward, perfectly upright. Its face was blank.

“I’m sorry.”

“It is alright,” the bot said. “My purpose is to assist terminally ill cancer patients. That was not the first time, or the last.”

“She gave you the ability to see, though,” she said. The bot offered nothing in return, and for a while they both allowed the miles to stretch the silence between them.

“How old was she?”

The bot did not answer a long time. Its face was a mask of blue.

“She was nine years old when she died,” it said. “Her family invited me and my supervisors to the funeral. They were very kind people, and she was a unique little soul in that facility.” He said nothing more after that, turning to gaze out the window the rest of the day, unnaturally still.

* * *

The driver puzzled over the question she meant to ask the bot as she tore into her morning rations. The bot was leaned against the passenger door, its own set of solar panels splayed out like a flower around it. She half-expected it to start breathing.

She crouched next to it, waving a hand near its face to activate its motion sensors.

“What is it?” the bot asked, sitting up. “Are thieves approaching?”

“I have a question,” she replied.

“Oh.” It settled back in that strange old-man way. “How can I help you?”

“Why did you lie and say you were a MechanoBot?”

The bot’s shoulders sagged, almost as if it had breathed a heavy sigh. “It was not my intention to be untruthful in my ridership request. My dear friend thought it better if I advertised myself as a mechanic rather than as a nurse. More individuals would understand my purpose that way, and it would increase the chances of a successful booking. So, he helped me expand my programming to keep up with the MechanoBot artifice, and here I am.”

They sat in silence for a while, watching the sun parch the ground.

“How’d you end up out there?” the driver asked.

The bot tilted its head up to the sky, where the faint shadows of the Trade Ring loomed above the atmosphere like a ceiling. “That.”

The ring was much busier in the daytime, surrounded by hovering, floating glints of military cruisers and slivers of massive miles-long freighters just exiting lightspeed.

“They brought far more advanced medical technology with them, and it immediately made myself and my fellow MediBots obsolete. Many of us were scheduled for deactivation, but I was the personal assistant to a very stalwart patient at the time, and they refused to have me
deactivated.” The bot’s face organized itself into a wry smile. “I have discovered that as long as I have a directive, I can override the compulsion to deactivate. I had finished helping my friend in the desert with his request, and I have found another request for help in Los Angeles.”

The driver hugged her knees to her chest. “That’s sad.”

The bot simply nodded. “Why do you drive?” it asked her. “It is a perilous profession.”

The driver sighed, allowed herself to lean into the car next to the bot. “It keeps me alive,” she said. “It pays enough where I can eat, afford a room somewhere if I need it, make repairs if I need them. There isn’t much else for me to do, or anyone, really.”

The bot turned to face her. “I am so sorry,” it said, blue.

The driver felt something tighten in her chest. Her breath caught in her throat, her eyes began to sting. She scrambled upward, fighting whatever this was that the bot was making her feel. “Pack up, we need to get going,” she said, fumbling her keys into the ignition.

She slammed on the gas pedal before the bot had even closed the door, and they drove in silence for many long hours. It wasn’t until she went to sleep for the night that she realized she’d shed tears, and was continuing to shed them now.

• • •

It was halfway through the sixth day, and she and the bot had developed a game. During the midday charge, it had found a strange flower growing on a roadside cactus.

“What does it smell like?” it asked.

She inhaled as it held the flower under her nose. “It smells...red.”

“Explain,” it said, sitting up in the seat as it faced her. Its face glowed a yellow-orange, and a mosaic of pixelated smiling motions danced across its face.

“It smells... like how a sunset looks. It smells like, like how crickets and all the bugs at night sound, all chirpy.”

“How does it feel?”

It placed the flower into her outstretched hand. She spent minutes grounding herself in its fluid softness, the bit of resistance when she pulled a petal, how delicate and precise its shape was.

“It feels...like how still a body of water looks,” she said. “Like how a...what’s it called... like how a flute sounds.”

“How incredible,” the bot murmured, that awe in its voice again. It turned the flower over in its enamel-coated hands, digit joints squeaking as it passed the flower’s textures between palm and finger and thumb.

They played the game at every charging stop, with a new object every time.

• • •

They passed through the heat of the Nevada desert on the seventh day. They began passing other cars, charging by the side of the road or trundling back in the direction they came. Dusty men and women, rusty and deactivated bots, scraps from old wrecks cluttered the road as they skirted around the dead city, a strange concrete observation tower the only untouched building in the city center. The rest of the buildings were dry, hollow shells of what must have
been colorful, extravagant places. Glass was shattered, trees lay long desiccated on the ground, buildings toppled over as if children had knocked over blocks.

The bot remained uneasy as they passed through. They passed by numerous people, dry and dusty and desiccated as the city around them, holed up in ramshackle huts and holes carved out from heaps of rubble and shrapnel. Some of the people they drove past stared at them, through them, looking at nothing.

She'd heard of airplanes dropping out of the sky the day they came. It looked like they were passing through a massive graveyard of them. Rusted wings and debating fuselages crowded the sides of the road.

“What happened here?” the bot asked.

“Same as everywhere else,” she replied. “They came in, people realized they weren’t alone in the universe, and the world shut down.”

They passed through the rest of the crumbling city in silence. The desert closed back in around them, the dunes slowly consuming the ancient blacktop. In her rearview mirrors, the last traces of the grounding spire, hundreds of miles behind them, vanished over the horizon.

“The world has become so much less of itself,” the bot said. A flickering blue-purple glowed from the passenger seat.

“There’s nothing to live for anymore. Now I think we just live.”

They passed through the Mojave the next morning. The sky was a pallid blue, bisected by a link of the Trade Ring above them, faint as the moon. Scarred blacktop stretched for miles before them in a straight, unbroken line.

Except it was eventually broken by an ancient camper van, pulled over hastily in the sand next to the highway. The two saw figures crouched still in the scrub just off the road. She pulled over as she saw the bot sit up in the seat. Its face lost its pleasant yellow glow, fading simply to white. Its mouth formed a stark, straight line across its face.

A child lay dead by the road.

She didn’t need to be told to stop the car. She’d barely parked before the bot hurried out of the car, and she was quick to follow. In the scant brush off of the road, a couple and a younger boy were crouched next to the dead child. The woman clutched the pale body in her arms, staring at nothing, while the younger boy sniffed opposite her. The man sat behind the two, his face in his hands. A knife lay beside him, spattered with blood.

“Can we help you?” the bot asked.

The mother looked up at the two of them, and suddenly her mask broke and she screamed in a flood of anguish. The younger boy began crying too, and the father stared at them, exhausted.

The bot kneeled before the mother, gently unwrapping her son’s corpse from her arms.

“We need to bury him,” the bot said. “What was his name?”

The mother only cried harder. The father offered nothing; he seemed to be in shock. The younger boy stared up at the strangers with big and tearful eyes. “I dunno,” he sobbed.

“What did he like?” the bot asked, gently taking the boy’s hands in its own.

“He liked finding feathers,” the boy said. “He’d wanna be buried with ‘em.”
Feathers. The driver hadn’t seen a bird in months. She wasn’t entirely sure birds existed in the Southwest anymore.

The younger boy picked himself up and went to the van, searching around inside it as the strangers helped calm his parents.

The father muttered to himself as the driver propped him up against his van and gave him water. “Snake in the van,” he said. “Snake in the fucking van.” He and the mother held one another, watching their dead son in the hopes that he might move again.

The driver watched the bot go through memorized procedures of checking pulses, taking a brain activity scan, finding the bite wound, and wrapping the body in a spare blanket once it declared the boy dead. It closed the boy’s eyes, but before it could wrap his face in his shroud the younger boy came up to it. He held a jewel-blue feather out to the bot. “This was his favorite.”

The bot’s face lit up in a small smile. “What a beautiful thing.” It took the feather and tucked it between the dead boy’s hands. It was the deepest blue the driver had ever seen.

The bot helped the father bury the body. It wordlessly walked back to the car and slid into the passenger seat, fluid and precise as any programmed motion.

The day faded into an unusually starry night.

They arrived at the bot’s final destination on the tenth evening.

Los Angeles was a hellhole, as she’d always remembered. It was worse than the crumbling city, and several times the driver had to maneuver around craters in the cracked streets and speed away from gangs eying her car. They reached the home of the bot’s next directive, an old man from Mexico renting a house for whatever reason near the toxic ocean.

The place was overgrown and shabby. Windows had been boarded up, siding was rotting and coated in a thin gray film from the chemicals choking the air. Long-dead roots of unkempt bushes lined the path up to the door, leaning out of the frame on one hinge. A hole in the door had recently been patched with synthetic plywood. The grubby porch was stacked with odd bits of furniture, scrap metal, and rotting food. No light escaped from the few windows that could be seen from the road.

“You sure this is it?” she asked.

The bot nodded, its face a muted blue. She had watched it turn from a bright orange as they saw the towers of the city rise out of the mountains, and now to this. The color knotted her chest.

It took its time exiting the car. “Thank you for your service in transporting me here,” it said, its voice low and clipped. “I did not bring any possessions with me. Our time together ends here.” Then it turned to walk up the cracked sidewalk to the waiting door.

But she did not drive away. She turned off the car and watched the bot steadily knock on the fragile door.

She watched the bot wait. Knock again. Wait.

Finally, the door swung open and she released a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Inside the slanted door stood a man just as slanted; he leaned drunkenly on one leg, dressed in a grease-stained shirt and faded shorts.

He looked at the bot for several moments. “The fuck you want?”
“Are you Mr. Angel Martínez? I am the MediBot you requested.” She saw the bot lean forward on its toe joints a bit as it uploaded its holoprojector to show the request form in full.

The man shook his head. “Guy jus’ died. Been waitin’, wasn’t payin’ is rent. ‘e’s not ‘ere no more. Fuck off.”

The door slammed in the bot’s face with a final thud.

Around them the street darkened in an early dusk.

The bot turned and walked back down the path. No clanking, no excited starts or even a glance other than forward. Its face, the pixelated eyes and line of a mouth, had vanished. It was only blank and black and cold.

She watched the bot turn up the street too mechanically, turn at perfect right angles around a dimly lit corner, and vanish towards the heart of the city, compelled by some alien force.

The street with the broken house and idling, beat-up car was quiet.

The car roared to life, headlights flaring like the eyes of an enraged animal. Tires screamed as the car struggled to accelerate to the wishes of its driver, fishtailing as it got up to speed. The young woman driving the car yanked the wheel and sent it into a dizzying turn around the corner after the bot.
FAREWELL
TALA TAHERNIA
I think about a lot of things when I can't sleep at night. My thoughts are like bats, wing-flaps in sync with the beat of my heart. They’re thoughts that escape me, wild and unwrangled. I’m doomed to lose, but I chase them around, follow the buzz.

I know I’m getting closer when the buzzing gets louder, but not closer to sleep. I do the math every hour, know I’m losing rest I can’t get back, nocturnal like bats. I can’t sleep during the day; I’m not wild. But try telling that to my thoughts, to my heart.

They’re busy bees, their hive my heart. Thoughts that hurt, stingers out, buzzing through my veins. They’re unstoppable, wild. No anesthesia can put them to sleep, not melatonin or alcohol or baseball bats. I hate that we think of cancer as a battle that’s lost.

I hate to think of him as a loser. That’s not the boy I carry in my heart. Chubby and hairless, no eyelashes to bat. God, he was annoying. Constant mosquito buzz. I saw him before he died, but he was asleep. I remembered him young, healthy and wild.

What does it mean in this world to be wild? We live like we have so much to lose. But I’d rather be up, and lose all this sleep than miss out on the things my heart keeps me awake yearning for. The buzzing lights will hurt my eyes like vampire bats tomorrow, but like real vampire bats, I’m just misunderstood. The wildness in me, helped along by a coffee buzz,
gives me a feral edge, impervious to loss.
I’ve lost so much by now my heart
can take it all, but it just wants to sleep.

The buzzing of my brain and the night’s bats
keep sleepless company. We’re all wild.
We’ve all lost the protective coating on our hearts.
Be still and know
every single second
a hundred million cells
within your body are living
and dying
and straining for life.

Be still and let your body
sink below the water
let bubbles and steam
cover your skin
with scented oil
and bubblegum pink residue
that lasts for days.

Be still and breathe
when a woman
whose handbag
matches her lipstick
clicks up and demands
to see your manager,

In the middle of the airport
two o’clock on Christmas Eve,
Be still.

And know
that almost everyone has had
at least one night
they wish
they could take back.

You need to be still and recognize
that the man who just served you,
triple shot vanilla latte,
did so with shivering hands.

Be still and run
past the edge of a mile-long pier
lake-water reaching out
with an embrace.

Be still and look up
when you’re walking.

When you’ve been waiting in line at
the grocery store for five hundred thousand
hours and the cashier is having the worst day
of their life because the person in front of you
just keeps pulling out coupon after coupon
and you’re about to start real life sobbing
in the grocery store because you were just
sent there to buy some milk and by rights
you should’ve been home half an hour ago,
Be still even then.

Be still and drink water not coffee.
Or drink coffee.
I’m not your boss.
Just be still.

Lay down in a field
backwoods highway cars whispering
the buzz of a bee
keeping you awake,

Climb onto a roof
and watch as clouds
are painted over with stars,
Naming every single shape you see,

In the quietest spots, bellow.
Then find the loudest spot you can
And listen -

Be still.
THE CALM OF THE ARCTIC
GAVIN SHER
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BRENDA BAIN
Brenda graduated in 1983 with a degree in Chemical and Petroleum Refining Engineering and is now retired. She started in stained glass in 1995 and within a few years got interested in glass fusing. In addition to taking classes all over the United States, she teaches glass art and loves experimenting with new techniques. She lives in Golden, CO with her husband (also a Mines graduate).

MARK BALDWIN
Mark Baldwin earned degrees in Engineering Sciences from Purdue University. Before entering academia, he served in the United States Air Force as a missileman and worked at NASA in charge of ascent flight design for the Space Shuttle. Mark is also one of the early founders of the computer game industry having written, programmed, designed, directed, and/or produced over 30 commercial award-winning computer games including “Game of the Year”. Mark has been teaching in academia since 2004. Mark’s expertise is in the field of simulations and modeling, and in the computer entertainment industry.

Since Mark comes from a storytelling field of entertainment, much of his work strives to create story as a partnership between the artist and the audience. Mark’s art strongly reflects an eastern aesthetic balanced with strong western influences. In creating his art, Mark uses modern technology as a foundation source to be expressed on traditional canvas.

KEARA BARRON
Keara Barron is currently a freshman with a major in geological engineering. Although she is in love with math, she has a passion for creative writing and literature, which inspired her to write and self-publish a fantasy novel by the age of sixteen. She also enjoys photography, volleyball, and marveling at Earth’s wonder and beauty.

CONNOR BEEKMAN
Connor Beekman spent his childhood living in coastal California, but now calls colorful Colorado home. At Cherokee Trail High School, he competed on the cross-country team. He also enjoys cross-country road trips. Connor is currently studying civil engineering, taking classes on construction and concrete. A connoisseur of photography, he commonly carries a camera. Connor enjoys consuming cookies, candy, and Coca-Cola, all of which cause cavities. He also likes listening to Coldplay, cuddling with cute cats, and hiking in Clear Creek Canyon.
AGATA BOGUCKA
Agata is a science nerd with a passion for visual storytelling. Growing up in Chicago, she longed for adventure and an escape from the city. She is happy to have found herself in Colorado, and enjoys working for the Mines Office of Communications & Marketing, using video and photography to tell the Mines story to the rest of the world. She studied abroad in New Zealand her junior year at Northwestern, and hopes to move back to the beautiful country one day to start a documentary company.

AURORA BORGHI
Aurora Borghi is a 19-year-old budding Computer Scientist and aspiring Poet from North Lauderdale, Florida. Known to refer to herself as a potato, she too enjoys a cool and dry climate, hidden away from the sun's harsh rays. When she isn't writing poetry or coding, she enjoys crocheting in beanbag chairs, reading under desks, and hunting for the perfect bubble tea. However, her true passion lies in fries, and she will steal yours given the chance.

JOSEF BOURGEOIS
Josef is a PhD student in Mining Engineering. His band (Your Bourgeois) has an Instagram page and you should check it out.

ALEC BOYD
Hailing from Denver, Colorado, Alec Boyd is known best as a fantastic friend and brother. He is the type of friend who, when he takes you to the airport, also brings a Pop-Tart and latte you didn't know you needed. He always tries to pay for your dinner, sends and curates the best playlists, and will happily lend you his favorite record (Bill Evans Trio: look ’em up). Catch Alec around campus in self-proclaimed “high fashion”, book in hand, jamming to some of the highest-quality music around (unless it’s Paramore...I can’t speak for his love of Paramore). Though this spirited, brilliant, and fun-loving guy doesn’t quite know yet where he’s going with his life after graduation, he’s sure to make wherever it is a more exciting place.

TYLER CAMPBELL
Tyler is a sophomore in the Physics department from Aurora Colorado. Tyler’s was exposed to music at a young age and it developed into a current passion for the music industry. When not at school Tyler can usually be found spending time with friends and families, listening to music, or sneaker shopping online. You can spot Tyler easily by Chi Town apparel, and Nike Vandals. Recently just got his first Apex win.

GAVIN CASTANEDA
Gavin Castaneda is a freshman at Mines who picked up photography at a young age. He enjoys shooting landscapes and is excited to be featured in this year’s journal.
Khris Clymer
Khris Clymer graduated Mines in 2010. Amidst working in the aerospace industry, he has since started a career as a composer, scoring music for film, TV, and commercials. His films have won festival awards and premiered in Hollywood, and one of his TV documentaries was selected by PBS for entry into the Emmy’s.

Alex Clymer
Alex Clymer (Mines B.S. ’10) currently lives in Lakewood, CO. She is a painter and photographer specializing in animal portraits and nature photography. Alex works her art side-hustle while also working full-time as a technical writer for Oracle. Even though she enjoys both gigs, Alex longs for the days when she can escape the corporate world and be an artist full-time.

Julia Cormos
Julia likes to beat her fiancé at Battleship and Sequence. She hopes to one day win at Stratego.

Mitchell Cutts
Mitchell Cutts is a 2nd year student at Mines who spends most of his free time traveling, experiencing the outdoors, and writing music. These three themes of his life are reflected heavily throughout his work as a musician for the group “Richy Mitch & the Coal Miners”. As of early 2019, his band has released two full-length independent albums on all major streaming services and has seen great success with over 3,000,000 streams and 600,000 unique listeners on Spotify alone. Be sure to check them out!

Matthew Deutsch
Matthew is a mining engineer who writes software for other mining engineers, and he likes folding origami in his limited spare time. He would like to thank his wife, Amanda, for taking pictures of his art.

Wenli Dickinson
Wenli Dickinson is a graduating master’s student in hydrology with a bachelor’s in environmental engineering from Mines as well. She has been a part of High Grade for the past five years and was the previous co-editor in chief. Her poetry has been published in Red Paint Hill and the Louisville Review. Her work has recently been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.
COLIN DUBNIK
Colin is a junior mechanical engineering student from New York. He enjoys things like music, photography, reading, and being outside. He likes taking pictures that illustrate everyday life. You can probably find him at Sherpa House around lunch time.

SUSAN E FENDER
Susan Fender is a proud Michigangster who has slowly lost her accent over four years in Colorado but is still misunderstood as saying “salad” instead of “solid.” She firmly believes raw radishes are spicy dirt apples and is the kind of person who smells a lilac bush by accidentally smashing her face into a spiderweb at the same time. The proudest moment of her life thus far has been eating enough ice cream to become 4% ice cream (by weight), but graduation might top that.

ANDREW FLETCHER
Andrew is a second year Master’s student in the Nuclear Engineering program. His sincere weirdness is founded in the combination of his countless dreams, passions, and insatiable appetite for grooviness. Having played guitar for almost his entire life, music gives a voice to his deepest thoughts and emotions, and is an intensely spiritual practice for him. He has a knack for improvisation, loving jam bands, jazz, rock ‘n’ roll, and anything that is simultaneously creative and emotive, music or otherwise. Check out his band Life Science, a collaboration with friends and other Mines students, at one of their upcoming shows in the greater Denver area!

CLIFF HANCE GHIGLIERI
A camera, is perhaps, wilderness’s first line of defense against humankind.

LAINE D. GREAVES-SMITH
Laine Greaves-Smith graduated from Mines in December 2015 with Mechanical and Electrical Engineering specialties and now incorporates these engineering concepts into functional artistic sculpture and furniture. He believes that art isn’t just for walls and display cases but that artistic design should be incorporated into everyday items and surround people in daily life. The direct reuse of automotive, bicycle, and industrial components in art forces the viewer to appreciate the carefully engineered parts that are often overlooked. Many of his other pieces can be seen in previous editions of High Grade, Mines Magazine, and in galleries along the Front Range.

WYATT HINKLE
Wyatt is a junior in biochemistry who is passionate about writing, art, and majoring in fields of study he has absolutely no intention of pursuing further. He spends most of his time thinking about doing things and sometimes he does them. Favorite animal is cat.
TANNER JONES
Tanner is a senior computer science student at Mines and an avid writer. He likes to spend his free time dancing and rock climbing.

MICHAEL LE
Michael Joseph Zeleznik Le often finds himself jittery, self-removed, and coloring large swaths of grey paper black in the early morning. Some of his work reflects his constant confusion about the world. He enjoys good movies, chai tea, and long walks on the beach.

JORDY LEE
Jordy is a writer who didn’t realize that he was a writer until it was too late. Not knowing what he wanted to do with his life, he ended up with a petroleum degree. He hopes he can sell what is left of his soul to become a writer in the future.

ALEXANDRIA LETO
You would never guess that this kick ass girl comes from Windsor Colorado, but since 99’ Alex has been breaking the mold. She has a couple of sisters that she loves to death, too many friends to count, and a couple of cool tattoos. While not doing homework, she’s usually found in the High Grade office, where she puts in countless hours of work to make all of this possible. If on some odd occasion, she’s not at school, she’s probably exploring Denver, or at home with her favorite record on, and sketchbook in hand. When talking about Alex, some of the adjectives that come up often, are kind, intelligent, inquisitive, and easy going. If you see her around campus, ask her about her favorite band Paramore, you won’t be disappointed.

KYLE MARKOWSKI
Kyle is an exploratory chap who hasn’t written or edited a poem in nearly a year. He is currently living on a sailing catamaran, Nibiru, with his husband, Chad, and their boerboel, Luna. He hopes to find a futurehuman colony in the Bermuda Triangle and finally liberate his native gray matter; he suspects this will precipitate a years-long wild goose chase through the fifth, sixth, and seventh dimensions, or at the very least the aqueous, saline, tropical regions of Earth (Chad and Luna could not be reached for comment on the veracity of this statement). Kyle would like to express his utmost gratitude to Chad, Wenli Dickinson, and Toni Lefton.

XAN MCPHERSON
Xan McPherson is a sophomore in Engineering Physics and is planning on getting her Masters in Nuclear Engineering. She is a Colorado native and loves mountains and skiing more than anything. Xan hopes to spend as much time as possible traveling and painting all the mountains she can see.
LAUREN MILLER
Lauren can usually be found searching for her car on campus after forgetting where it is parked. If you need to find her, try shaking a bunch of carrots together, calling out metamorphic rock names, or making some especially odoriferous coffee. Will write for smiles.

RACHEL MIZENKO
Rachel Mizenko is a Mines graduate who wandered off to California for graduate school and expects to, one day, wander her way back.

GAIL MYER
Gail Myer graduated in 1980 with a Chemical and Petroleum Refining degree. He currently runs Myer Hotels in Branson, Missouri. Gail’s interest in photography began capturing a baseball as it either just left the pitcher’s fingers, or met the bat. This endeavor led to better equipment, and training. Improving photography skills has resulted in much travel. Gail has photographed in Kenya, Europe, and Iceland, as well as many National and State parks. Currently, he has two photos produced in canvas displayed in the Denver International Airport and the Colorado State Capital. Gail says, “Truly, God’s world is amazing. When you are serious about photography, you see God's world differently and with deeper appreciation.” The image, Canyon Light, was captured by looking straight up through the slot canyon as the light was centered on the opening. It was chosen for submission because of the wide range of light and texture.

ZACHARY NAHMAN
Zach is a Graduate Student in Computer Science at Mines. Sometimes when he is not writing code, he likes to write some poetry. He's very happy to be able to contribute to the journal as Webmaster.

JORDAN NEWPORT
Jordan is happy to have moved up over the years from grammar pedantry to actual writing, although sometimes he still can’t help himself.

JADE NJO
Jade has been an avid artist since she was old enough to hold a crayon. She pursued art seriously in high school by taking higher level art courses with the support of her family, especially her grandmother, who is also an artist, and is who Jade believes she got her artistic flair from. During her time at Mines, Jade will continue her hobby of traditional and digital drawing while she pursues a degree in economics. Contributing her artistic passion to the High Grade journal has been one of the highlights of her freshman year.
MAX J. PHANNENSTIEL
Max is a Colorado native and a sophomore studying Engineering Physics. He started his own photography business in January of 2015, and has developed professional portfolios for landscapes, portraits, special events, weddings, and travel photography. Max has photographed everything from concerts and aerial images to stock photos for Amazon and world famous action sporting events. Other passions include backcountry skiing, playing guitar, and backpacking through the mountains of Colorado. Visit www.maxjphotos.com to view his professional portfolio!

JACOB PROUTY
Jacob is a Physics major in his junior year. Hopefully next year he’ll have more time to write something.

REBECCA R. REEVE
Rebecca Reeve graduated Colorado School of Mines in May 2017 with a degree in Mechanical Engineering. She is trapped in a cubicle in downtown LA, pinned down by ravaging packs of excel spreadsheets, and fighting to keep her creative spirit alive. She also paints, explores, and rock climbs in her free time.

Don’t graduate, don’t grow up, pull a Peter Pan, and stay at the Wonderland of Mines forever.

DANIEL RENKERT
Dan is happy to turn coffee into code or poetry. He is known to haunt the Mines campus where he is an avid actor and director for Mines Little Theater and The Pungineers improv troupe. He is also the editor for The Oredigger newspaper where he edits the Arts & Culture section and is sometimes responsible for the chaos that is the tailing page. Dan would like to say “D”

CAELENE RITTENHOUSE
A Colorado native, Caelyn writes a lot about emotions and girls, the former because it keeps her sane and the latter because they’re beautiful. She can be astonishingly sappy sometimes, if you catch her in the love-poetry mood, just as she can be extremely aggressive on the pitch. The most important men in her life are her dad, her mom’s dog and her car, and the most important women in her life are her mom, her rugby team and her wonderful girlfriend. She hasn’t been writing poetry for all that long, and she’s extremely flattered, grateful and proud to be published for the first time in High Grade.

GAVIN RUDY
Gavin is a kid from Colorado who likes to try and make things for other people to look at. For more, see biteoftoast.com.
Gavin Sher

Gavin’s inspiration for photography began at a young age, with a small point and shoot camera. Nowadays, he enjoys taking photos of landscapes, wildlife, and the stars. Gavin enjoys showing movement and emotion in his photographs through the use of long exposures. For Gavin, the essence of photography can be observed during the hours of dawn and dusk; where there is a sense of silence that is unmatched. It is this silence that allows him to envision, frame, and execute a shot that invokes contemplation, and wonder. Gavin also seeks to capture images that emphasize the contrasts between order and chaos in nature. It is through these aspects of nature, that his compositions are pursued and developed.

Michael J Smith

Michael Smith would like to thank his high school ceramics instructor, Michael Helle, for letting him do what he wanted and not telling him the “correct” way to make art. Although there is no way to create ceramic art at Mines right now, he hopes that will change in the near future. Throw things, it’s fun.

Lucas Santana Furtado Soares

Lucas believes that art connects people and that words are a powerful tool to produce smiles and to seed emotion.

Once he decided to give a break on the writing. Some days after, an unnamed stranger wrote him “Your writings made me smile today, don’t you ever dare to stop!” He’s followed the stranger’s order since them.

Today he is writing a journal dedicated to his first son. He hopes that, in the future, the boy can connect with this Lucas, that had no baby in the home yet, but loved him too much already.

Erika Stromerson

Erika will graduate in December 2019 with a civil engineering degree. She’ll hopefully be accepted into a graduate journalism or writing program by then, and she’ll have successfully run the school paper and served as an ASCE officer. She’s ecstatic that her piece was accepted by High Grade this year, and even more excited for what her post-Mines future holds. Will she have a Ph.D? Will she be writing novels? Who knows? She doesn’t, but she’s ready to go on that journey to find out.

Jim Studholme

Jim is an adjunct instructor working in the brilliant course known as NHV. He lives in Boulder with his wife, Rae. He has two adult children and a dog and cat.
Tala Tahernia
Tala came all the way from Iran to study for a Ph.D. in Tunneling and Underground Construction at the Colorado School of Mines. She loves discovering new things through traveling, reading, listening and observing. She believes smiling makes the world go around.

Connor Weddle
Connor has managed to survive four years without taking his contributor bio seriously.

John A. Whatley
John lives in Highlands Ranch, Colorado and transferred to the Colorado School of Mines from Arapahoe Community College. He was awarded Outstanding Photograph by the American Scholastic Press Association for his work published in the 2015 edition of the Progenitor Art and Literary Journal. John is currently studying Chemistry with a Biochemistry specialty. He plans on going to graduate school studying Molecular Biology and wishes to study antibiotic resistance.

Allison Williams
Allison is a graduating senior in chemical and biochemical engineering who is above, below and all around excited (not to mention terrified) to start adventuring through whatever bits of life come next.

Charng-Shin Abigail Wong
Abby is a senior studying Mechanical Engineering at Mines, and also a member of the Mines’ Varsity Swim Team. When life is not being consumed by school or time spent at the pool, Abby enjoys traveling the world and learning about new cultures. She believes that unique moments are best encompassed by emotion and life captured through images, thus tremendously enjoying photography. This is her first time being published in *High Grade!*