

The Carson Review

Marymount Manhattan College

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The Carson Review

The Literary Arts Journal of Marymount Manhattan College
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Submission Guidelines

The Carson Review is published once a year in the Spring. We invite submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and cover photography and digital media from current students at Marymount Manhattan College. Selecting material for the next issue will take place in the Fall of 2019. *The deadline is October 15th, 2019.*

All literary submissions should include a cover sheet with the writer's name, address, telephone number, e-mail address, and the titles of all work(s) submitted. The author's name should not appear on the actual pages of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Double-space all prose and single-space all poetry. For such texts, we ask that you send electronic submissions as *Word documents* to carsonreview@mmm.edu. The same cover sheet directions apply to photography and digital media submissions, which should be excellent quality .JPG images of at least 300 dpi. If you have any questions about these guidelines or about working on the *Review* as a student editor, please contact Dr. Jerry Williams at jwilliams1@mmm.edu or at (646)393-4118.

Editorial Policy

The editorial staff of *The Carson Review* is an assemblage of students at Marymount Manhattan College. In order to cultivate an atmosphere of integrity and evenhandedness, the staff evaluates all entries without knowing the identity of the author or artist. To maintain a thriving literary arts journal at MMC, a variety of submissions remains absolutely vital, so please send us your best work.

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Poetry

Against the Current

Joyce Alayon

Loving you is smoking a cigarette,
cancer made easy,
whiskey to a rotting liver,
a clot of blood in the brain.

Loving you is morning on a mountainside,
brilliant sunlight spilling into the valley,
a hummingbird drum of the heart
finding the sweetest flower.

I've gotten drunk, dizzy in the city,
the Empire State Building wobbling,
laughing in urgency because I don't know
if I ever left my own room.

I've watched ice freckle my windshield
and imagined the snow would vanish
if you were here to melt
all of winter in your palm.

Loving you is the midnight hour
when there are no grocery stores open
or friends to meet for coffee,
and the distant subway drones.

We will smoke cigarettes,
rooted to what's passed,
addicts musing on former vices,
as if dope and liquor and lovers are guardian angels
smiling, leading us closer to the green light.
We will suffer like Gatsby.
We will die like Gatsby.

Emergency Surgery

Kellie Diodato

Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub.

My heart is in need of a transplant.
It just can't reside
inside me anymore.
Not with the idea of you pulsating about my valves.

Wheel me to the surgeon.
Take my not-so-virgin heart
and clip it out of me.

Crack sympathetic nerves.
Crickety crack:
like glow sticks he and I used to fancy
on firefly-filled summer dusks.

Chisel away at the *Vena Cavae*.
Start with the superior. Be ruthless
in ridding me of the inferior.
Make me feel the intention of your new invention:
carve away at me like Donatello.

Squeeze what's left of him out of the aorta:
an ooey-goey slimy slush.
Let it splatter: let it scatter.
Let memories
kisses
love letters
coagulate, jell on the frozen tile floor.

Lub-dub, Lub-dub.

Disinfect the concave left
behind in my chest:
use peroxide.
Do what it takes to make
this permanent.

Take tweezers
and pick and prod at the stinging hole.
Use no self-control as you pull out puny pieces:
otherwise they'll find time to survive and override
my mind.

Stitch my skin back together with needle and thread.
Give me no anesthetic:
make me dread every painful puncture.
I'll scream and squirm and scar.
Leave me with a visual of what loving can do.

I need a heart transplant.
This feeling just can't
live inside me anymore.

Replace it with an artificial heart:
have it shipped in a box
or just fill the hole with rocks just
anything. Anything
that doesn't beat to the memory of his name.

Lub-dub.

Before the Storm

Corinne DiOrio

We hadn't prepared for the cyclone
that blew through your apartment.

We hadn't boarded up the windows
or tuned the radio to doom.

The winds became so violent that every love
letter we ever wrote to each other dissolved.

You scrambled after the pieces
and tried to glue them back together,

but the rain grew so heavy the roof caved in
and the ink bled all over your hands.

You smeared the paste on my arms,
my face, and all through my hair.

The debris from the ceiling
stuck to my skin like feathers.

You told me to fly away,
that I didn't deserve this chaos.

Still I clung to you
like static to silk,

though the steel door
blasted off its hinges,

because right before the storm
you smelled like Sunday morning petrichor.

Simulated Suburbia

Corinne DiOrio

I grew up in a town where I once found comfort
in green grass and polished decks,

where my neighbors got high
off wood stain and fertilizer fumes

and their plastic picket fences were
painted white like their plastic faces.

I sought insight in their petty discourse,
in forced smiles and forged concerns,

surrounded by people who felt pride
in becoming carbon copies

and degraded those who tried
to stray from monotony.

I feared I would become the cul-de-sac
I grew up in—a cycle, a dead-end—

so I played manhunt with myself
and hoped to find divergence.

masochism

Maddie Dragsbaek

i beg you to fill my lungs
with enough helium
that the pitch of my voice
will shatter my bones.

my hollow body pleads to be
filled with the pernicious gas
that leaks from your lips when you
tell me my eyes sank the moon.

have you ever thought of forever?
a self-inflicted wound we dream of having,
a vow to flip over every hourglass
before our fists bleed against flesh.

promise to keep promising,
pushing against papercuts
until they split in the center and
we pretend forever gained a day.

i'll shove the moon back into the sky
and everyone will congratulate us
for tangling our deficiencies together
and passing them on to new pulp.

frivolous words we pretend are romantic
suffocate our misfortune.
we tie knots around our fingers
and convince ourselves it's love.

somebody taught me what love was once

Maddie Dragsbaek

it's supposed to be beautiful, isn't it?
midnight movies and poetry cafes,
your mattress floating on hardwood flooring,
lying about how i'm so, so different.

they suffocated my heart with clichés i thought
i should long to stop breathing for,
as i inhaled so deeply my lungs popped,
and i never again felt anything for those men.

i don't want to be coated in curated conversation,
words you stole from a man writing poetry on the subway
because you think i like beautiful things even though
i'd rather you twist my fingers with your fist and ask me to

untangle them and send them to a publisher, raw.

peel my skin back and not just once,
not just when you get off work and you're
missing someone, someone, someone you used
to know that isn't me—but i'll do for tonight.

am i supposed to feel anything when you show up
and hand me an empty wallet, tell me to fill it
with my mind, as if i even know what that's supposed
to mean? cryptic nothing, this isn't real.

beautiful poetry is never as honest as you think it is.
i want to burn beside you in bed, spitting homemade gasoline
on each other, laughing about all the people who made us

believe love is supposed to be scripted, directed, and taut.

tangle me, tangle me, tangle me:

i never want to know what love is again.

Epiphany

Cait Gagnon

Discomfort ensued at the sight of the spork
because it wasn't a spoon and it wasn't a fork.

Since they thought it had been a nice spoon all along,
they felt quite alarmed when they noticed the prongs.

"Well, it's no good for soup and it can't spin spaghetti.
So I guess we should just throw it out already."

"But that seems rather harsh since we've had it forever,
and it's got those four prongs we could ask it to sever."

The spork felt diseased when they called it deranged,
but why should this innocent feel so estranged?

Though it wasn't a spoon and it wasn't a fork,
it was perfectly lovely being a spork.

Though the cupboards had labels for each different appliance,
to a single section the spork felt no alliance.

When they pleaded with the spork to sand off its prongs,
the spork said, *Fuck off, I'm a spork and I'm strong.*

In This Bed

Maya Georgi

white linen sheets and lust
that smells a lot like love
sunlight spilling gold
skipping shadows from the trees

your narrow hips and wine lips
those tiger lily eyes lit up for once
and gentle hands dancing across
my skin like rivers of ecstasy

my honey hair
swirled on your chest
teeth bared from joy
words driven with vivacity

tangled legs
as entwined as our stories
the song of your laughter
echoing between our bodies

there is no room
for the cancer the drugs
forgotten friends broken families
anxiety depression

the ugly life breathing outside your window
heavy and violent
narcissistic with its presence
like all the hurricanes we've ever known

in this bed
only us and the sunshine
we quiet the noise
drown it out with moaning and banter

new york has got her nightgown on

Jasmine Ledesma

strings of lace like blood streaks down
her empire legs
& i am in the backside of brooklyn
adtil brownstones & coconut
milk from the street corner deli

i wonder what the ants in the
east side are doing—
swishing flowers & hounding
businessmen for cigarettes
buying tarot cards & playing
lousy guitar on their wood floors

or maybe they're sleeping
sober for the first time in weeks
& wondering why they feel
so clean-cut

I Swear

Lauren L'Heureux

A stranger stands before me
with objective eyes prescribed
only to officers of the law.

He bows his head to a thick book
clutched in his hands, his protection of the
literature overwhelming.

The judge speaks:
*Place your right hand on the Bible
and raise your left.*

I imagine a silver, mystical hand
attempting to clasp my own,
entombing me in proof.

I fail to succumb to
His preaching.
I don't believe in God.

Wretched judgement
swallows me in a blister
of infallible appraisal—

like trees that invent the ground
from which they grow.
Damnation is a lie.

*Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth
and nothing but the truth,
so help you God?*

I swear away my life,
a façade to an athlete of the truth.
I open my eyes and state my deceit:

I do.

Black Thumb

Ashley Lowe

You lost me within the rose bush
because I blossomed into vibrant reds.

My thorns prick your fingertips
when you search for my stem.

You pluck through the others,
scratches covering your hands.

All these beautiful flowers are
just petals and stems at your feet.

Soon they will all rot,
like the love you once promised me.

Dreams of You

Ashley Lowe

Sometimes I lie awake,
unable to sleep,
thinking of how I look for you
in every person I meet.

I miss our late-night car rides—
you teaching me how to drive,
your pack of cigarettes gone
before the end of the night.

I search for your kindness
in my memories and delusions.
I wanted you to remain
better than the rest.

You wouldn't want me to settle
for a one-sided love,
for belittling words,
for this boy who doesn't see my worth.

I wouldn't be making you proud
because tears flood my eyes
with each cruel word,
and excuses are fabricated for his actions.

Your advice is all I seek,
though it's not possible.
I still beg for the chance
to see you once more, Dad.

Finally I fall asleep,
you visit my dreams,
and the fanciful hug you deliver
puts me at ease.

Daybreaker

Noelle Maticke

Your studio feels bleak today. Through the window, dark clouds hang heavily in the sky and weigh down your soul—they are a vacuum for light. Shadows cast on white walls, bulky blobs, remain still. You rest, tangled in your sheets, empty, in your empty bed. The chill in the air is persuasive; you shrink back to your depressive, dormant sleep. *Laundry*, you think to yourself, *today is a good laundry day*. You gaze out the window; it's your time to emerge, time to detach. The floor feels cold; your toes curl in protest. You kick a Serotonin pill bottle across the room, the bright orange a beacon for your descent. You have this bad habit—you lay hot eggs of doubt within yourself and allow them to fester in your gut. *We all do it*, you reassure yourself. The tight-knit ball in your chest burns as you fully awaken. You grind your teeth, swallow, and attempt to start the day. But she's sitting at your kitchen table, molting, oily feathers on the floor like clouds close to mountaintops.

Thursday's Laundry

Noelle Maticke

The massive heart in the laundromat palpitates on the blue and bubblegum-pink floor. There's a sticky pool of clotted blood that coats the tile; the aorta oozes, bleeds down the decline towards the entryway door and thickens inches before my white woolen slippers. A faint *thud-um thud-um* reverberates off the thin metal of the machines as the water within splashes against the glass. Synchronized beating—my heart echoes the contorted one in the corner. The monstrous muscle hits the wall as it beats, its torn valve spatters blood up to the time-worn tin ceiling. I stand in the middle of the laundromat, abundant with aluminum appliances. The place reeks and tastes of metal, like when you bite an old spoon. Through the porthole of Washer Number Seven, I see my laundry swirling in a frothy soup. I wonder how hard it would be to break the thick glass, punch it over and over until the machine vomits multicolored cotton. I bite my tongue and look for the sole worker with wide eyes. She shrugs at me and coughs loose change into her hand. I step towards the rotund organ as it emanates heat—our pulse pounds in my ears. The washer doors crack and spurt water—my slippers are now damp and pink. Quarters fly from the change machine: some clatter, others land with a plop in the blood still trickling from the pulmonary artery. I try to catch some, but they slip through my fingers. *Thud-um. Thud-um.* Washer Number Seven stops with a jolt and a high-pitched tone resonates; the angry red light on its facade blinks frantically. Dissonant beeps ring until I open the machine's door, shove my wet laundry into a dryer, and wait.

Eclectic

Laura Morini

Her mouth blows graceful
sunshowers laced with
light blue smoke over the
Maine countryside.

Her neck is the bend
of a celery stalk,
gentle and wise,
before the snap.

Her knee is the bump in Grandma's old
embroidered pillow
from the loop you pulled out
when you were seven and
tried to put back into place.

Her smile is the best Monday morning
you can think of,
even before the coffee.
Shards of light reflected
in cereal milk,
daisies in a homemade vase
next to the orange slices.

She is everyone's
kindred spirit.

The Day You Drown Me

Vaughn O'Connor

I will let you drown me
in my next-door neighbor's above ground pool
while my mother watches
from a foldable lawn chair
with a family-sized bag of Doritos and a Pepsi.

When she asks why you drowned me
you will answer *because she likes it*,
and she will believe you.

You will hold her hand
and a sad-looking bunch of daisies
you picked on the side of the road
by the high school,
and you'll both walk down Main Street in mourning.

She will make a bronze mold of your head
and place it on our mantle
next to mine.

She will host potlucks at the house
every Friday in my honor,
and you will always make a toast.
Then everyone will sip from their stemless glasses
of pinot noir and taste the bitterness of our ancestors.

And I will not be looking down.
I will not be smiling.
I will be asleep on a cloud, curled up with Dionysus.

To Catch a Thief (1955)

Vaughn O'Connor

We used to go on drives
to the highest peak in Saratoga County,
my bare legs stuck
to the vinyl seats of your Dodge Neon,
your sweaty right hand on my thigh.

That turquoise tin can groaned up the gravel road,
and your grenade-shaped air freshener
swung from the rearview,
a reminder that this whole affair
could blow at the next pothole.

The afternoon light peeked
through the Adirondack pines,
casting tiger stripes on the pavement
and flickering against my sunglass lenses
like the countdown at the beginning of an old movie reel.

I used to pretend you were Cary Grant,
the Dodge a Sunbeam Alpine convertible
we drove down to the French Riviera.
I had a silk scarf around my hair.
I liked playing Grace Kelly for you.

Remember that time you flipped my forearm
onto the center console to check if I had cut myself again?
You said, *This is weakness*.
Why were you smiling at me, Mr. Grant?
Did you feel like your father?

Your car looks like a kid's toy
on top of that mountain now.
I imagine it speeding down the slope,
taillights first, and I think
one of these days I'll cut the breaks.

The City

Joely Phenes

Like birds we flocked here—
starry-eyed poets freshly spit
from our hometowns.
In the throes of young love
we fell head-first
for the dirt and the grime,
for the pretty women wearing heels
like skyscrapers,
for the sidewalks which seemed to stretch
on forever. We thought if we walked far
enough we would reach heaven.
So we walked
up and down the avenues,
back and forth between the Hudson
and the East River,
stuck in a pinball machine,
steel balls bouncing off concrete,
always ending up in the same places.
And while we were looking
for something, for anything,
the soles of our shoes began to wear,
the stars in our eyes grew tarnished,
and the city lost its promise.
We got jobs.
We became waitresses,
cashiers, receptionists.
We don't have the time
to wander through Central Park,
notebook and pen in hand,
trying to put the city's majesty
into words.

We trudge along the same paths
as yesterday
and the day before,
falling out of love
by the hour.

when john lennon died

Maria Santa Poggi

my father told me
he only listened to frank
while we were on a road trip
to his uncle bob's funeral
in the 7th grade

he stopped listening to music
after john lennon died
though now he would discredit
this statement
he just says
he doesn't believe in
all that noise

during that four-hour car ride
to grand rapids
he promised with his pinkie
he'd be okay
it's a treatable kind of cancer
he was diagnosed
when applying for family healthcare
soon after i was born

my mother told me
she stopped listening to her
oldies cd collection
the sound of joy
now made her depressed
her doctor had her on
a cocktail of medications
she would mix
with her boxed zinfandel wine

she would slur
boys only want one thing
my brother bob is evidence
of what he did to me and my sisters
as i went off to my first and last
homecoming
freshman year
with a dreamboat boy
i made sure
not to have
my first kiss

mark chapman
claimed
what he wanted
was an autograph
until he fired gunshots
the first bullet missed
the next few transformed john
into a cadaver
rushed to the hospital
the legend
was soon after pronounced
dead

my mother was found
by her best friend
they took her away
in a body bag
as my father flew
to the city
to give me the news
she had a cardiac arrest

he now sings
with my mother
in the garden of eden
those who suffer
are taken to a better place
a land where they are
free to be
off pitch and out of key

john lennon
is only dead
when you reduce him
to being
strawberry fields
in central park
he is more
than memorabilia
a death certificate
and lyrics to quote
on instagram
the same way
my mom is more
than a tombstone
left to decay
in a graveyard

Taxidermist

Halle Roberts

You talk about your past lovers as though they were cuts of meat:
the big breasts on this one, the thick thighs on that one, the firm ass of
another.

You call them Chicken, Cow, Pig.
You call me Dear.

I prance into your slaughterhouse
and tie myself to the gambrel.
Always the butcher, never the butchered.
I ask you to slaughter me.

You do as I ask: strip away my skin, crack open my chest, tear out my
organs.

You have to separate my consciousness
from my carcass
to finish.

My body is venison, fresh.
You mount my head on your wall
next to the others and
shut my eyes.

I Have a Confession

Billie Sangha

I date white men
Like I used to be a Boy Scout
And last summer I was a camp counselor kind of white men
Goes cliff jumping and tries to justify drinking beer
And thinks Jack Kerouac is the greatest writer of all-time kind of
white men

Doesn't season his food or believe in astrology kind of white men
He watches the Super Bowl with his family
And they have a cabin in Tahoe kind of white men
Owns vintage things he paid contemporary prices for
And has a fixie bike mounted on the wall of his Williamsburg
apartment kind of white men
And none of that is a strike against this:

I am a brown woman
Like bilingual before I could walk kind of brown woman
And I gotta make my mama's struggles worth it kind of brown woman
TSA looks at me twice kind of brown woman

Doesn't wear shoes inside the house kind of brown woman
Could probably lose a tooth if I looked at my father wrong kind of
brown woman
Freedom isn't free and I'm still paying the price kind of brown woman
Always talking about how brown I am kind of brown woman
My romantic life is not a criterion by which you can rank my
performance
White isn't so blinding that I forget this
Privilege isn't transferrable through kissing

Escapism

Fiona Scannell

a dehumanizing thrust against the threshold

there was nothing I despised more than
feeling vulnerable

once I was a lion and one that never
counter-quarreled

but stood like Themis who ceased to raise
her sword unless the scales shifted

but fire came from within as spit flew from
his mouth and stomped painful cleats into
my visage

I just wanted my arm to be freed up, forget
the bruises and escape up the dark stairway
to the corridor

a dim and beckoning abettor to circumvent
my plight below

I would scurry off like some surreptitious rat
in the night once I found my chance

and lock myself behind the door at the top

it was a portal to a place that made infinite
sense but had no logic

it was automatic, and I would try to scream
but instead flowed out hot viscous glue

forget the bruises again, I was away

a new world, and a lovely one, was just
behind another door
accessed through the mind's passageways

sixteen different fathers I had adopted would
greet me on the other side

new embraces I had not felt would wrap
around me with soft, wide hands

hands that had many rings upon them

they would wipe away the tears that stung
like warm and joyous embers on my cheeks

scorching tears which contained the tiny
faces and souls of my reincarnations

who I have yet to meet

I create my own subconscious syllogism

under the violet moon

where the animals wear calico skirts

and a woman on guitar teaches me gratitude

I erase my origins

I erase the part of me from which I have
biologically spawned

I am no body but only a spirit

I have no race

I have no gender

I have no appearance

I am my own father and my own mother

and no one at all

Fiction

How to Kill a Cowboy

Joyce Alayon

The dawn stretched along the horizon like an infinite glitch in time, and I was blowing chunks. Thick obtuse chunks. Violet-hazel masses between glops of orange saliva that kept spilling out of my mouth like unwarranted gossip. I found a breath between the billowing and sneered at the rising sun. The sun sneered back, a rebellious array of red, orange, and blue.

“Screw you...” I managed, wiping sweat and remnants of vomit from my chin. I’d spent all night ingesting courage in the form of Jameson and pints of piss-colored beer. Six hours later, I was no braver than before and wearing more vomit than clothes. A proud moment.

The fence was a sturdy crutch I latched onto, a commendable companion to my drunken stupor. The skinny heels of my leather boots kept sinking into the sand, stranding me on an imaginary tight rope. I looked back down at the puddle of purge and admiration blossomed. The palette of regurgitated bits matched the sunrise. A romantic coincidence. I scoffed and reasserted my vision towards the semi-circle of sun. The motherfucker wouldn’t stand still. It bobbed lazily, up and down, up and down and around, tripling.

A poor attempt at spitting sent chunky saliva trickling down the skin of my throat. I laughed absurdly and tripped over a rock, animating a swirl of dust and desert sand. A dizzy heat singed my temporal lobe like bacon, and I tried to blink it away, but noticed I was bleeding from my knuckles instead. The mountains mocked me in the distance, blurry and superior. I straightened up to prove them wrong. The Harley ‘75 I’d crashed was a couple feet away, soaked in a bed of its oil and former glory, chipped black and rusted silver. The bitch was in worse shape than I was. I grimaced and saluted my steel comrade goodbye, then huddled with the fence for further strategy. But first a cigarette. I dug into the denim ducts of my shorts in search of a stray one but ended up fingering a pocket hole I hadn’t noticed. Cherry on the sundae. Woman dies in desert. Cause of death: dehydration and lack of cigarettes. Folks say she was armed with a loaded .38. Further investigation under way.

I closed my eyes and pleaded with the tide inside to steady. The

circumstances were palpable. I couldn't die the woman who never used her bullets. I had to be the woman who could stand straight without slurring. Mustering a spontaneous state of lucidity, I lifted my fingers off the fence's cordial splinters and stumbled straight into the blistering sunrise.

The place reeked of Marlboro and mold. It was a shabby shack sitting in the middle of the desert and the wood soaked up every stench and gave it back in a defective photosynthesis. I'd kicked the swinging saloon doors open, but the bar tenants went thoroughly unperturbed. The hum of cackles and bar talk continued harmoniously. My throat tickled, but I couldn't afford to scratch it. Neil Young's sorrows greeted me out of some old jukebox muffled between masses of sweaty overweight men. A pungent stench of copper and urine emerged, battling the cigarette smoke for dominance. There was a modest bar to the right, sitting about nine or ten of the same degenerates, all sporting motorcycle jackets and mullets. An identical crowd gathered at the establishment's rear, huddled around a game of pool. They had heart-surgeon focus, and their wit was contingent on their cue sticks. Wincing and grunts came in intervals. The whole floor caved in the center, like an atomic bomb had once hit and a wobbly plastic table was covering the damage, though not to much effect. A game of beer pong ensued there. A man whose face was half mustache tossed a tiny white ball and it plopped into the questionable contents of a plastic cup, arousing a chorus of curses and cheers. Mustache man grinned yellow, no lips, just mustache. He spilled his beer mug to the heavens, then to his mouth. I was the only woman in this place. No surprise.

I commenced a slow and steady saunter towards the bar, tugging at my sweat-soaked leather jacket and kindling last night's courage to down whiskey. My organs squirmed in defiance, but their standards wouldn't dissuade me. The clack of my heels garnered the attention. I smirked, as if this were a good thing. A bald plaid-clad dude offered me his stool and I took it. He raised his eyebrows at a friend like I was a fish he'd hooked. I toughened my gaze and shot him a look. The bullet wasn't for him. The bullet was reserved. The guy in plaid conceded. I set my fist down.

"Johnnie Black. Double. Neat." The tidiness of my diction surpassed my expectations.

The bartender, a lanky, awkward guy whose clothes were two sizes too big, nodded and poured my vice, his gray brows two disheveled ferrets. He was chewing on a match. He set down the rocks glass, rocking its contents side to side. I got nauseous.

“That’s thirteen-fifty, lady.” He looked a convertible away from a mid-life crisis. The kind of guy who had been bartending for decades, having let go of a now distant dream of pouring anything but drinks.

His black-dot eyes stared me down stand-off style. I slid him a crumpled bunch of dollars and stared back.

“I’m looking for someone.” The words left my mouth like this morning’s vomit.

“Yeah?” A rhetorical question. He wiped the mahogany bar with a piece of tattered cloth, spreading the dirt and grime along the wood. “Well you ain’t the only one.”

I almost rolled my eyes. A hustler. “His name’s John,” I prodded, knowing the bartender knew better than he was letting on. “John Wayne.”

John Wayne’s name was a dog whistle and all the dogs’ ears perked up. The bar went silent as a burial. Even ferret-brow, with his permanent squint, widened his dot eyes in either shock or sudden stroke. My chest tightened into an aggressive knot and the pistol pinned against my back chilled the flurry of blood rushing beneath my skin. The bullet ached for its target. I repressed a convulsion and casually rerouted my posture to take a sip of scotch. It burned like gasoline, right down my throat to my liver. Puke surfaced. I swallowed it.

“Do you know where I could find him?” I said.

The bartender and I exchanged an enduring look. His mouth relaxed, preluding a gape. I knew I’d either made a huge mistake or had finally done something right. The verdict was disappointing.

“PFFPFFFFTTFFTT WAAAHAAA HAAAA HAAHEEEE HAAA HEEEHAAAHAAAHAAA!” His cackle had a domino effect of concerto waves that lost stamina and gained it again. Guys wiped tears from their eyes. No kidding. Ferret brows hunched over laughing for so long that his ribcage must have suffered. A minute of recuperation allowed him to harness his flamboyant state of mind and simmer down. The rest of the bar tenants followed suite and quieted. He grinned like a cat and shook his head at me, continuing the mindless spread of grime along the bar wood. “HAH! John Wayne! That’s a damn sure good one, I’ll give you that!” He walked away, chuckling still.

I frowned at my Black Label, wrapped my fingers around the drink, and tucked it back, urging the puke to reprise. I held the vomit in my mouth and walked outside.

The sun was well up in the clear blue sky by now and no longer

passive towards me. I bent over a large rock and purged. Heave, puke, breathe. Life was a cycle.

Footsteps came up behind me, but I ignored them. They only got closer. An asshole must have followed me out. Goddammit. The bullet wasn't for some asshole—it was for a particular asshole. Sweat dripped down me and the steel tucked between the hem of my shorts got heavier. I'd practiced its weight for months, went to sleep with it, bought groceries and mailed letters with it. The pistol was my best friend, Thelma to my Louise. The approaching steps stopped right behind me. I took a patient breath and steadied myself, ready to offer a mouthful of slurs. I caught a glance of the culprit and froze.

He wore a white t-shirt, blue jeans, and a disarming smirk. His hazel eyes were sweeter than the sunrise, the kind of look that could stop a war. A tear of sweat journeyed down his face and into his soft mouth. The mouth of an angel. We held each other's gaze and it felt like a century strolled by. Finally, he broke.

"John Wayne, huh? Good one." His voice hit me like a panic, and I began to tremble. I focused my stare and stayed silent. He waited, conducted a visual analysis, and simmered his smirk down. "Yeah, you're right." He plucked a Marlboro from behind his ear and held it between his teeth.

I plucked the pistol out of my shorts to hold it between my sweat-coated hands, overpowered by a sudden steadiness. I was out of my body. The nausea, the heat, the doubt—I was untouchable.

He checked his pockets and shot me a look. "Wouldn't happen to have a lighter, would you?" He looked gorgeous in this light. I double-checked my aim and shot him dead.

The only way to kill a cowboy is to become one.

The Cycle

Corinne DiOrio

“I’ll take another.” I nodded to the bartender, who looked wearily at me, but poured another glass of Jameson anyway.

“You sure you can handle those?” he asked.

“I think I’ll be okay.” I smiled slightly and looked down at my fourth glass.

I knew I should probably stop. I had learned my limits when I was still in high school by stealing liquor from my father. I would sneak into the dining room, open the chestnut curio cabinet, and pick whichever bottle was almost empty to pour into a thermos. My father would assume that he drank it all, and I would have something to bring to my friends.

I really had no excuse now. Ten years later, alone at a bar, not willing to share my whiskey with friends. I looked up from my glass and noticed there were only three of us left, not including the bartender. We each sat with our drink of choice, evenly spread apart, not wanting to socialize. These were my favorite kind of people. I finished my drink (I could barely feel it slide down my throat anymore), grabbed my wallet from the back pocket of my jeans, pulled out a ten-dollar bill and stuck the edge of it underneath my empty glass. I walked through the bar, trying to hide how drunk I was feeling, holding my head down and attempting to avoid eye contact with anyone. Finally, I stepped through the doors to the outside world of Midtown Manhattan.

It was raining. The kind of rain where your shoes get so wet that it feels like your toes are sinking into sponges every time you step. Of course, I didn’t bring an umbrella. I walked down the sidewalk, not really sure if I made the right turn out of the bar toward my apartment on 45th Street and 1st Avenue. My glasses became coated with tiny rain droplets and were fogging up with every exhale, further impairing my vision. I stopped underneath a scaffold to wipe off my glasses and check my phone. It was already two-thirty in the morning. I had a voicemail from Jessie, Michael’s babysitter, and also my best friend. “Olivia, call me when you get this. Michael has a fever.” My fingers stumbled around the screen on my phone before I was finally able to find the call button.

“Sorry, I just saw this. Is everything okay?” I began to feel nauseous.

“Yes, he’s okay. Just a slight fever, but I think you should come get him.”

I told her I would and hung up the phone. We both lived in the same building, so I searched for a street sign to make sure I was heading in the right direction and continued down the block. The image of my son, red-faced and tearful from a fever, came into my mind and I prayed that the rain would wash it away.

I imagined myself at twelve years old, waiting for my father to come home every night. When my mother fell asleep, I would tip-toe past her room and as quietly as I could, walk down our carpeted stairs and sit on the bottom step. I would wait to hear the sound of wind-chimes rattling, and the front door slam against the bookshelf in our foyer. Most nights he would fall asleep in the living room, too inebriated to walk up the stairs and into his bedroom where my mother lay alone. When I knew he had landed on the couch, I would run from the stairs to the kitchen, grab a mug from the cabinet, fill it with tap water, and leave it on the coffee table next to him. I would take off his heavy work boots, untying the laces and maneuvering his feet around to get them off, pulling the shoe from his heel so hard that the tips of my fingers turned white. I would then throw a crocheted blanket over his body, run back up the stairs, tip-toe past my mother’s room once again and jump onto my bed. It was my favorite nightly routine. I slept peacefully when I knew my father was safe.

35th Street. Rain was hitting me like pellets as I approached the apartment building. Only ten more blocks and two avenues until I reached Michael. I couldn’t fathom the idea of seeing Michael sick, and worse, him seeing me drunk, even if he wouldn’t understand. It was something I worked meticulously at hiding by hiring Jessie to babysit overnight and only indulging when he was asleep. I walked slowly, hoping that if I took longer to get there, I would sober up. I could hold Michael and pat his head with a wet rag. Maybe draw him a cold bath, cooling his tiny heat-filled body down. I was good at taking care of people.

The last time I saw my father was three years ago when I was visiting my hometown for Michael’s first birthday. My mother gave me my third cup of coffee as we waited at the dining room table for my father to show up. We set the ice cream cake out to thaw and I hoped it wouldn’t melt before we got to eat it. He was late of course, and my mother made excuses like always.

“You know him, always doing side jobs, bringing in extra money,” she said.

I smiled at her without showing my teeth. She told herself over and over again since I was young that he was okay. I used to resent my mother for not trying to change him, for letting him miss father-daughter dances, for letting him be there, but not really there. But now, I felt pity for her.

A few minutes later, I heard the door slam, along with the wind-chimes clashing hard against the side of the house. The same sound I had grown accustomed to when I was just a pre-teen. Michael started to cry, a screechy, ear-drum bursting wail. My father stumbled over, grabbing onto the sides of the wall in our long narrow hallway that led to the dining room where we were sitting.

“Oh look, my grandson Michael. Oh, don’t cry. Here let me have him.” My father reached his arms out, and as he got closer his breath burned my nostrils. “Give him to me.”

“You’re too drunk.” I picked Michael up out of his high chair and held him close to my body.

Ignoring me, my father grabbed under Michael’s armpits and pulled him away from me and into his arms. Michael’s cries only got louder as he held his small limbs out to me.

“Dad, give him back right now. You’re making it worse. You make everything worse,” I said.

He looked at me wide-eyed, stumbling backward a bit. I was scared he might drop Michael.

“I make everything worse? Fine, I’ll just go then.” He shoved Michael toward me and started back down the hallway, grunting and mumbling incomprehensible sounds under his breath.

In the distance, I saw that he found his favorite spot on the couch. Michael was crying still, and now my mother was crying. Birthday balloons swished under the ceiling fan, and the birthday cake had melted away on the table. I grabbed a paper towel and began to clean up the mess. When I was done, I picked a mug from the cabinet, filled it with tap water, and made my way to the living room where my father was sprawled on the leather loveseat. I placed the mug on the coffee table, took off his boots, covered him with his favorite crocheted blanket for the last time, and swore to myself I wouldn’t let my father ruin another day, let alone another birthday, in Michael’s life.

43rd Street and Second Avenue. The wind picked up and was prac-

tically pushing me closer to my apartment building. The few trees that lined the edges of the road seemed to multiply as their leaves and branches danced around me. I could hear a young couple in the distance, and by the level of their voices, I could tell they were just as drunk as me and fighting about something important.

I was freshly twenty-two when I had first felt the pangs of morning sickness. When I told Michael's father, my boyfriend of only five months at the time, about my discovery, he was less than pleased.

"What do you mean pregnant?" he asked, grabbing the stick I had just wiped my piss off of. "This can't be right. I'll get you another one." And that he did. Less than an hour later he bought me three more packages of Clear Blue pregnancy tests.

"It says it's most accurate in the morning. Did you try it in the morning? Have you been drinking? Alcohol might change the result somehow, right?" He was overwrought, Googling facts about false positives, hovering outside the bathroom door in his shared two-bedroom apartment every time I tested.

"I'm really, really pregnant Tom." I handed him the last test I would take before going to the doctor.

He looked down and nodded, accepting this reality. He was right for asking about the alcohol. I hadn't gone a week without getting blacked-out drunk in some dive bar—or even a day without a bottle of wine before bed. Tom had this fetishized idea of my addiction. He thought I was reckless and carefree, but in reality, I was just good at hiding what had been going on for years before I met him. Part of me hoped that having a baby would change things somehow, that it would give me something to truly care about, that I would have to be more responsible, and then maybe my drinking would dissipate. It was selfish, really.

Our idea of fate was different though. For the next few weeks, every time I stopped by, he had another pile of my clothes neatly folded on his desk.

"I folded some of your things, it's getting a bit cluttered in here," he would say.

And I would smile shyly, understanding what this really meant. Understanding that Tom wanted no part of this, but also understanding why. We hadn't been together that long; we were just out of college a year, working minimum wage internships. I wasn't sure that I even wanted this for the right reasons, but I knew I wanted it so badly. And

I wasn't going to try and fight for a father who didn't really want to be a father.

45th Street and First Avenue. I buzzed into my apartment building and walked up the stairs, clasping my hand tightly around the railing. My head was spinning. I thought for sure I was going to be sick. When I finally reached Jessie's apartment, I leaned my back against the door and slid down until I reached the floor. I cupped my head in my hands and began to sob. I was guilty of being just like him, my father.

Jessie opened the door and bent down to my level. "What's wrong?" she said. "Come inside. Let me get you cleaned up. You can sleep here."

I immediately saw Michael asleep on the couch. My hair was still dripping wet when I walked over to him, leaving a trail of rain water on Jessie's floor. I wiped my face of tears and leaned down to kiss his forehead. Then, I lay on the floor next to him and closed my eyes, drenched and shivering. I was here for Michael, but was I really here? I felt the room spinning, even with my eyes closed. Somehow, I found the willpower to lift my hand from the floor and grab onto Michael's pinky finger. He moved it slightly, scratching the palm of my hand with his fingernail.

"I'm not really here, Jessie, I'm not really here," I whispered through tears.

Then I felt Jessie hovering over me, rubbing my back as she kneeled down to my level. She set a cup of water down on the floor. She pulled off my boots. She covered me with a crocheted blanket.

They Shall Be Comforted

Frankie Kavakich

“Did you know this place was built on an Indian burial ground?” Julia said, snapping her gum hard against the roof of her mouth. The sound of it, that wet blow and that snap, was grating. In the library, with its vast walls and high ceilings, the pop almost resembled a gunshot. Luckily, we were the only victims to it.

“Oh yeah?” I said noncommittally, “And where did you happen upon this fantastically original horror story?”

“Where do you think?” She waved her hand, popped her gum, and I cast my gaze out to the quiet library around us. Rows of tall, text-book-filled shelves lined the walls in neat, straight lines. On the far end of all the rows were arched windows that curved up as tall as the ceilings. The windows were so beautiful, segmented with thick iron lattices and heavy curtains. Even the plush, tongue-colored carpet below our feet had to be three times older than me, just like everything else in this school.

Despite its beauty, the gothic design of the library filled me with dread. Endless dread. St. Elizabeth Boarding School seemed keen on covering its hallowed halls with designs such as this.

Julia popped her gum again, arching one of her perfectly groomed eyebrows in a way that felt like a personal attack. Her impatience was palpable. Sometimes, I wondered if she always rushed through conversation the same way she rushed through morning prayer. I opened my mouth, questions raised and ready to strike, and then lost whatever I really wanted to say to an overbearing feeling of curiosity.

I said, “So? From a book in here? Graffiti? If it was graffiti, then Jacob probably wrote it to be a little shit.” Julia’s expression wavered, probably due to me dropping Jacob so nonchalantly, and I quickly recovered with: “Or did you get Sister Nancy to ramble for you again?”

Julia said, “Sister Nancy. You know I don’t read.” Her expression shuttered, and she flicked the bent spine of my journal. I pulled it away from her as if it was some wounded animal. Sister Nancy was probably the only other person in the library besides us. She was currently snoozing at the front desk which she manned all by herself, her wrinkly head most likely resting on a pile of unorganized books and folders. From our

place in the center of the library, only two tables from the front desk, I could see nothing but her draped coif.

"You shouldn't bother her, you know. She's not as oblivious as you think she is."

"I'm not bothering her! She loves talking about this damn place." Julia rolled her eyes, ever dramatic, and kicked her feet up onto the table with a loud bang.

We quieted, waited for a familiar croaking complaint, and when none came, I said, "She's never told me about an Indian burial ground, and she tells me everything."

"Well, Sister Nancy actually likes you. Maybe she didn't want to scare you," Julia said, her expression wry. "But she said this place has been haunted for decades because of the burial ground! It's like *The Shining*, but real! It kind of explains all the fucking disappearances, right?" I scowled, eyebrows knitting, and Julia skipped past the topic with an added, "Hey, maybe if we try and do that ghost-summoning-shit that Lucas is always talking about we can actually contact something."

"I'd rather leave the dead dead, thanks," I said. The sudden thought of contacting a spirit twisted my gut enough to just want to drop this topic entirely, but Julia looked ahead stubbornly. She wouldn't back down without a fight. Her gum snapped, a declaration of war, and she leaned forward to slam my textbook closed.

"C'mon, Isaac! What's the worst that could happen?"

"That has to be a line from a horror movie. Julia, you can't be serious—"

"I'm as serious as death itself, man." Julia tapped her nails erratically, her smile a gruesome imitation of Mother Mary's pure visage. "Lighten up a little, won't you? It's just for fun. There's probably nothing even in this stupid school." She jabbed her thumb at Sister Nancy again, eyebrows furrowed into a devious line. "She's an idiot, remember?"

"She's not, she's not an idiot. Julia, please. It sounds like a waste of time."

"Just because you'd rather be cooped up in here reading and cutting your fucking wrists doesn't mean everything else is a waste of time—"

"Julia!"

"Shhhh!"

We both fell silent and turned, eyeing the now-awake Sister Nancy with varying degrees of guilt. Julia slowed her frantic chewing, the fire in her eyes simmered to embers as she turned back to see me. Me, the

nerd, the geek, the mourner, the fucking wrist-cutter. Her hand reached out, as they all do, ready to take hold of the unneeded rage she let spill and meld it into an innocent mistake.

That was the thing about Julia: she could never deal with mistakes, with punishment, no matter how much she talked herself up. Even if she started the confrontation, she never wanted to let it end sourly. Julia Park, my best friend and my worst fucking enemy, was a coward in all plausible ways.

I pulled away automatically from her touch, shaking, seeing the redness of rage burn through the fading serenity of the library. Julia's expression was apologetic, a rare and pitiful look on her, and for once she said nothing. This space was not hers to fill with noise.

I said, "I'm leaving."

She responded, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Isaac." And I knew she was, truly, but forgiveness had left my vocabulary for the hour. Julia would understand.

"Just... Come and get me, whenever you talk to Lucas," I said and gathered my things.

"No, no. I was just kidding. We don't actually have to—"

"You heard me, Julia." My voice cracked, wavered. I swallowed my discomfort and put forth my favorite brand of apathy. "I'll see you later."

Leaving the library felt like a relief. Sister Nancy's eyes had followed my long, quiet walk out; she looked sad, somehow, when I glanced back to give her a small wave goodbye. The halls outside were full of moving shadows. I walked like the Devil himself was on my heels down the haunting corridor, my eyes focused keenly on my Oxfords.

Somehow, I made my way to the west wing boys' dorms in five minutes. Somehow, I walked into my bedroom and collapsed onto my bed soundlessly. Somehow, I started and stopped crying within seconds.

Jacob's photo watched me with its usual disdain. He would be laughing at me if he were here, calling me a pussy. I sat up, rubbed the panic away with a swipe of my bunched-up sleeve, and turned to stare at his empty side of the room. The picture, of course, stood out the most—a beacon of memory pulling me back in to the past. In it we stood side by side in our new uniforms, identical in every single way except for my glasses and his arm cast. Dark skin, dark eyes, dark hair, boys of Sin City thrust into a Jesus-filled wonderland. Next to the picture, folded into neat piles on the dresser, were three thick sheets of paper. I scooted forward off the bed and reached out to grab the papers, unfolding each

to reveal three distinctly different missing posters. One from this year, one from two years ago, and one from last year.

My brother Jacob and all his physical descriptions lay on the third page. He had gone missing last fall, just around Halloween. His legs—just his legs—were found in the Green Pond eight months ago, only thirty yards away from the school. Just like the other two missing kids, and all the ones before that, probably.

Living without my twin was like living without laughter. This school failed to find him, to bring him home to me, and now I am trapped inside these walls of mediocrity, and maybe so is he, still. Ghosts and memories weren't so different in context. Maybe Jacob was still writing shit on the library bookshelves in the afterlife, waiting for me to find his curses and chuckle into my hand as I always did.

The cuts on my wrists were just a side-effect of loneliness, probably, or a sign that I really needed to get back into therapy.

I rolled over and stared up at the bare ceiling. Maybe it was time to stop mourning. Jacob didn't like me when I was depressed, after all. I sat up eventually and found the room drenched in darkness. The sun had finally been eclipsed by the Pennsylvanian forest beyond, swallowed by the earth, leaving St. Elizabeth to be just another shape in the city-less night. It was awfully lonely in here, with just myself and my thoughts. Despite that, it looked like a good night for memory-hunting.

I kneeled onto the creaking floor and pulled out two shoe boxes from beneath. One box contained various paraphernalia for my vices: cigarettes, dildos, the general works. I merely pulled my lighter from there, testing the flame once before shoving it into my breast pocket. The other box held my journal, an old flashlight, and an old polaroid. I pocketed the flashlight and examined the photo. It depicted this: Julia, Lucas, Jacob, and I squishing in to all take a picture in front of a weeping Mary altar. We smiled like the children we were.

That night had been full of sneaking and rapid shushing. I could remember the break in vividly: Jacob, master of tiny gadgets, had spent more than half an hour picking the lock to the nave. Lucas carried a duffel bag of goodies, of stories and smoke and sweet dreams. Julia had whispered gossip to me, lacing her hand over my shoulder as we kneeled nearby, useless, and I could feel the tremors of adrenaline and fear through our contact.

Once inside we had danced down the aisle, stared up at the high ceiling of our sanctuary, and hid laughter behind our open hands. Every

time we spoke, we could hear a thousand voices, a thousand echoes. Lucas settled us down with firm but jovial looks after we tired from pushing each other against pews and passed around three joints which I had anxiously puffed at until Jacob taught me how to smoke, and I swore I saw God while getting high in that place with them. My friends, my family. We took the picture with the Virgin Mary while cackling about Julia's outrageous lies, and then we fell asleep below the pews and woke up just in time for a janitor to bring us to the Headmaster. It had been our first real excursion as a friend group, and my first time getting detention.

It's been a year since I've had fun like that. Julia was right; I do spend too much time alone in the library. I do avoid fun. I avoid anything that could remind me of better times. A better time could be waiting for me tonight, and I could either sit in this holy silence or get up and do something with myself.

I shoved my shoeboxes back under the bed and sat myself down in front of Jacob's bed, and waited.

After an hour of anxious pep talks and trying to finish up some endless biblical reading, I heard the telltale whispers of Julia and Lucas outside my door. I stood up, shook the sleep from my legs as I walked over, and opened the door before they even had a chance to knock. Surprisingly, I instantly found myself comforted by Lucas's lazy smile.

"How's it hanging, dude," he said coolly, and we bumped fists. I smiled, slow and gentle, and Julia seemed to deflate behind Lucas, probably relieved to see my rage had gone.

"It's hanging alright. I just tried to finish up some homework." I scuffed my toe against the floor, "So—ghosts?"

"Ghosts," Julia agreed, elbowing Lucas in the ribs. He smiled despite her continual hitting and opened up the tote bag that hung heavily at his side. In it was a board I vaguely remembered seeing in *The Exorcist*, three shiny rocks, and a few half-melted candles. Figures—Lucas was the type to collect things like this. He often described himself as "a stoner occultist" which Julia absolutely detested.

"Ghosts," Lucas said. "I got this from the last time the sisters took us into town. Have you seen *The—*"

"Yeah," I said, smirking. "Don't think you and Julia are the only ones who watch that shit."

"It's far from shit, Isaac. That's a horror classic," Julia said, but her voice offered an instance of good humor. I closed the door behind me, and we began walking, both of us following the lead of Lucas as usual.

“Anyway,” Lucas said, “I thought we could head down to the basement and try out the Ouija board. If what Julia said is true, well, we should get a lot of activity.”

“The basement? Seriously? What if someone catches us?” I said, ever the worrywart.

“That’s where Sister Nancy said we’d see a lot of ghosts. Also, shouldn’t you be used to our sneaking by now?” Julia asked, rolling her eyes.

“Maybe I don’t want another visit to the Headmaster’s office,” I said.

“Don’t worry, Isaac. The sisters are all at evening mass right now. As long as we’re in and out within the hour, no one should be around to see us,” Lucas said, ever the calm and collected one. I shut the door behind me, ignoring the twitch of anxiety in my fingers, and we started out into the dark.

The halls before us twisted and turned as they usually did, but at night everything seemed more like a labyrinth than a school. We walked knowingly, only because of our familiarity with these tall walls, but with each step we made I thought I could hear another pair of feet following on along with us. Four distinct footsteps. It almost felt nostalgic. When I turned to check behind us, to see if my brother had somehow returned from the dead, no one was there. For some reason, my legs ached.

The door to the basement wasn’t locked, but there was a thick red rope placed in front of it to deter children from peeking inside. Lucas easily undid the clasp and let it fall to the other end of the stand it was situated on, looking as relaxed as can be. Sometimes, I envied his lack of care. Other times I wondered if he had a few screws loose. Still, Julia and I followed him into the fray without a second’s thought, and we all descended the basement stairs in quick, quiet steps.

“Shit, man. It’s dark,” Lucas said, squinting out into the featureless room before us. I immediately pulled out my flashlight and handed it to him, already lit. The basement didn’t look like a basement, really. There was also an abundance of noise down here. We could hear the evening mass choir singing beautifully in the distance.

“Creepy,” Julia said approvingly, walking out into the dark. I instinctively grabbed her arm, feeling the well of anxiety that poured through me grow and expand to encompass all of me.

“Too creepy. Is no one else having second thoughts?” I asked.

“It’s fine, dude. Nothing’s down here. Yet,” Lucas tried to assure us as he began setting up his little circle of candles, but I felt watched,

even shrouded, in these shadows. Julia didn't stick around to watch the preparation, and once the candles were lit, she took the flashlight to investigate the nearby corners and crooks. Her lack of anxiety burned me, but also, I itched to find strange things like she sought. It felt like playing tug o' war with my spine, anxiety—maybe I really should go to a therapist. Lucas sat down in the center of the circle once completed and beckoned me over, his tan face illuminated, turned orange in the glow of the candlelight.

"Know how this works?"

"Barely. I just know you have to touch it." I offered my trembling hand and he took it, smiling.

"That's right. We each put two fingers on the planchet." He held up the strange teardrop-shaped item and stared through the glass center playfully. "And then we move it around the board a few times to summon a ghost. We can then ask it questions."

"Sounds super-duper easy!" Julia suddenly cried from behind us, and her small body collided with both our backs, knocking the wind and soul from me and a laugh from Lucas. I pressed a hand to my chest to settle the racket that was my terrified heart.

"Sit down, Park, and let's get to it," he said, and we all settled into the circle, knee to knee, fingers to fingers, and we began to do just as Lucas instructed. The planchet circled the board once, twice, three times, and then settled on the serenely painted face at the top of the board.

"So... What should we ask?" Lucas asked softly, his eyes focused entirely on their shivering fingers.

"How about... Who are you?" Julia stared out into the darkness instead, her curiosity as thick as the anxiety roiling in my chest.

The planchet shivered and moved over to the word YES. All of us knew it was only due to our vibrating fingers.

We waited, still, for at least five minutes before Lucas asked, "Is anyone here?"

Again, the planchet shivered but made no move to YES or NO. Nothing happened. We continued with nameless questions, pushing through every horror movie trope with aimless abandon as we grew more and more desperate for something to happen.

Losing hope, I rifled through my endless stream of personal questions until I finally spat out, "Jacob? Are you with us?" Lucas and Julia held their breaths I saw them shiver, freeze, stare at the board. We stared

for ten minutes, twenty. We waited for him to show up and bless us with his smile, or his graffiti, or at least a polite hello, but nothing happened.

"God. This is a load of bullshit," Julia said, forcibly moving the planchet to say GOODBYE. "Why'd we even try?"

"You're the one who wanted to," Lucas said. He leaned back and stared down at the planchet, his expression too complicated for me to read.

I wanted to feel annoyed like them, but I felt numb. There was a gaping hole in my chest that refused to close, and I couldn't do anything about it.

"We should start packing up," Lucas said, breaking our collective silence.

Before he could stand and bend to reach for his bag a soft voice rang out through the distant choral music: "*I...saac...*"

I stood, my eyes turned out towards the darkness past our glowing ring. Lucas also seemed to have heard it, his ear turned out to listen for more whispers. After five more seconds, the whisper started again, clearer, and I reacted to the sound of my name with a step forward. Julia grabbed onto the back of my shirt, clutching tightly, as if expecting something to reach out and pull me into the inky black beyond.

"Who's there?" I asked, shaking.

"*Isaac.... Isaac... Please...*" The cries were swallowed by a rendition of *In Paradisum*.

"Who is it?" I took a step forward, and Julia pulled me back.

"We should go," she said

"Why? You wanted to come down here," I said.

"Yeah, that was until someone started calling your fucking name. We should go. Lucas?"

"Yeah, yeah," Lucas agreed, folding the board up quickly and with a bit more shakiness than I had ever seen from him. Fright on Lucas spurred some sort of alien satisfaction within me, and it quickly turned to panic. "That's wild. I don't wanna mess with someone who knows you, man."

"What if it's Jacob?" I said, suddenly, inspired or perhaps a bit insane. The hymn continued, but I swore I could hear the moans still beneath it, calling for me. *Isaac, Isaac.*

It was him, it was his voice. I could still hear him calling for help as we were moving into the dorms. His voice was raspy, yes, yes, and

warm, like a campfire or a scratchy blanket. That was Jacob calling me. How? Why? I couldn't think of reasons, only my emotions. Happiness and disbelief and a want, a want to know if my feeling was right. I pulled myself free from Julia's grasp and picked up the flashlight before walking down into the dark alone. I could hear them calling for me, their footsteps then following after me, but I didn't slow down. I couldn't slow down. I could hear my brother chanting below the music of the church. He's here.

I ran. The basement went on for what felt like miles, an endless stretch of black leading to God knows where. I could see the shaggy silhouettes of covered furniture, and countless pillar-like support structures gleaned off the beam of light. Whenever I paused to breathe, I swore I could see something dripping from them. Water, maybe, or blood. I turned my flashlight to them and recoiled as I saw a mixture of vines and gore dripping from the pillars. Higher up, I could see the wood flooring from the nave, soaked with the same mixture. Jacob screamed again, my brother, my brother, and I was tugged away from the freakish sight as if on puppet strings. I needed him. I ran.

A scream rose up over the endless hymns, screeching for salvation, for paradise, suddenly. Begging for the words promised in the Latin song. It sounded as if it was right in front of me, but my flashlight saw nothing. I froze, if only because the shout turned my blood cold, and was immediately run into by a panting Julia.

"What the fuck was that?" Julia gasped as she settled in beside me, resting her hand on her knees as she caught her breath. She was shaking like a leaf. Lucas was right behind her, holding a lit candle that was dripping wax all over the floor. Something in me felt disturbed at the idea of wax being left behind in such a place; perhaps it was my mind's way of trying to stay calm, to keep focused, to worry only about getting caught and not about the fucking screaming that was going on a mere dozen feet in front of us.

"We should go now, Isaac. Please," Lucas said, nearly begging. We were all drenched in the heady scent of fear. The screaming stopped, but whispers took its place, crazed and needy. My curiosity twisted in me, curled and cried, and I shook as I took another step forward despite my friend's wishes.

The begging continued. Closer, now, along with the hymns from above. We were probably passing under the threshold on to the altar. The choir was so loud, as if they were all around us, and the echoing Latin

almost sounded Satanic. There were moans, too, interlaced between the soprano singing, filling our ears with an endless cacophony of pure agony.

"We should go, we should go," Julia kept repeating, caught in a loop, maybe. Her voice was so damn grating. We were not the only victims to it. I hated it, I hated her, I hated them as they kept trying to drag me back towards the exit. Jacob's voice beckoned me still, urged me to keep going, and I pulled and pulled against Lucas's hold, crying right back to him.

And then Lucas's hand on my shoulder loosened, and I fell free and turned in time to see his vacant, stunned expression.

Lucas was staring up at the ceiling, holding his candle high, and his mouth was open, as if pulled by an invisible string. I didn't understand what he was looking at, at first. Then I felt something warm drip onto my cheek, and I heard that voice I had been seeking again, louder, fuller. Above me.

"Isaac, please. It hurts, it hurts."

I looked up.

My twin brother stared down at me from the ceiling. His torso was attached—no, *growing* out from the wood of the church floors. I could see where his flesh melded and twisted into solid oak, pulsing with what could only be *life*. His veins were blackened and from certain spots on his bare flesh twigs and leaves were growing out of him, forming macabre versions of flowers and sproutlings on his arms and chest. Everything was rotten; his flesh, his eyes, his hair, his teeth. This was no human hanging above me. But still, his chest heaved, his body shook, his eyes wandered. He was alive.

Jacob was drenched and dripping with blood, and he stared at me with a look of pure ecstasy in his eyes. Desperation fell from him like his own gore. He worked his shoulder awkwardly until he could pull it free from the wood (it cracked and shattered like bone) and he held out his rotted hand to me expectantly. *"You came... I knew you would... You came to save me... Sister Nancy told me you would come... Isaac, Isaac... Save me..."*

Julia screamed and fell away from me, her eyes following the glow of Lucas' candle. Coward. My arm twitched, casting the light out across the rest of the ceiling for a mere second, but that was all it took to reveal the other horrors above us. More children hung from the ceiling, all children who had gone missing in the years before. I could see the faces of those from the missing children's posters I owned. Some were older than

Jacob, the rot of them darker, and they were sprouting like shrubbery, yet they still moved and even sang along with the choir madly. In the darkness of this basement, surrounded by only church bells and hymns, they were like grotesque angels slowly melding up to join the rest of the church in the coalition.

"Isaac. Isaac, please," Jacob begged, reaching for me. Lucas grabbed my arm and tugged me back.

"Run, run!" he said, and he gathered Julia into his other arm before turning and running back towards the entrance. I slipped free of his grasp. He didn't stop. I didn't follow. I glanced to the side to see Julia being held back by Lucas, his arms wrapped right around her torso, and she fought his hold to get back to me, but he was bigger, stronger. His fright came out of a wish to stop seeing the horror, and her's was for me. I, however, felt nothing but a void in my stomach and a heart that felt too full of relief.

I let my flashlight return to Jacob's face. His horrid, coal-black smile filled me with memories. My brother, my dear brother was alive. I didn't have to mourn him any longer. He reached out and I could see that the open gashes in his wrists were filled with maggots and wildflowers. The hymn above us concluded, and I could hear the priest begin the last prayer of the night. Lucas and Julia were gone, the door was shut, and that was fine.

I reached for my brother's hand and said, "I'm here now, Jacob."

A Song on Parade Day

Collin Orton

On the evening of October 31st, 1877, Edward Till nestled into the porch seating at Uncle Earl's. He sipped his tea, the china rattling in his delicate hands. Before him lay the hamlet of Pottswood, Massachusetts: a small collection of wooden buildings, little chimneys, rough shingles, and falling leaves.

Peering through his mantis-like bifocals, Till studied the edifice that set Pottswood apart from the other New England hamlets. A towering obelisk of sandstone stood in the center of the town square. A battered thing, it jutted in defiance of wind and rain and all the natural forces that should have corroded it long ago. The obelisk bore the marks of writing or, Till thought, of some neat scratching, too heavily worn to be credited as language.

An old woman, a creaking log cabin of a creature, swayed out onto the porch and sat beside Till. He marked how well she fit into the picturesque town: a woman as much made of the chipped, peeling paint, as worn by the sun, as stained by the soft earth as her surroundings.

"It's Parade Day, stranger," she said, with a voice like the leaves.

Till nodded and sipped. The teacup, painted with little blue flowers, clinked as it settled in the saucer that rested on the porch banister. With his thumb, he stroked his tarnished ring.

"Strangers don't stay for Parade Day," she said. A child laughed in the shadow of the obelisk, and Till shuddered at the sound.

A fit of coughing, a deep rasping crawled up Till's throat, shaking his frail body. He bent double, wincing, and collided with the banister. His teacup fell, its saucer behind it, and shattered. The little blue flowers, intricate things, which had twisted and grown in their porcelain garden with such life, danced across the dirt street.

He limped around the old woman, down the three decrepit steps of the porch and into the square.

His gorge rising, Till brought a shaking hand to his chest. He gathered each piece of the cup and saucer, feeling the eyes of Pottswood upon him. A tear ran down the long crags of his face.

Till could not bring himself to look at the old woman, who stood,

unmoved, on the porch. He stalked inside Earl's, climbed the stairs, and, with some difficulty, opened the door to his room. Ever so carefully, he laid down all of the little pieces on the desk. They would never be whole again. He stroked the ring.

His teeth tasted like iron. He coughed again, and his body folded. Producing a stained handkerchief from his breast pocket, he spat. By the cold light trickling in from the dirty window, he could see himself reflected in the bloody muck. He balled up the kerchief and stuffed it back into his jacket.

His suit was faded and threadbare, on the last legs of its hard life. It would have to do. With a leg full of lead pills and a habit for tar water, Till was amazed he made it in time. He had come almost a thousand miles from Indiana. Train tickets were expensive, and when the alcohol soaked into his money, he walked. All this way, Till hadn't broken that cup.

He sighed.

He opened the creaking door to his room. There was nothing for it now.

The war was over.

In the fall of 1865, Marie Till drummed her fingers on the window-sill. Steam rose from her teacup, the one she had spent so long painting.

She gasped when she saw her neighbor, Mr. Jacobs, clutching his side, come sprinting along the dirt road that wound towards the house. Between steps, he waved his handkerchief in the air. Marie grinned, and the weight of four years abated.

She turned, sweeping her arms frantically. Edward's mother, brothers, and nieces did their best to hide themselves in the modest parlor of a modest farmhouse. Dusty sunlight dappled the frayed furniture, shining off poorly concealed heads.

He was home.

They waited in silence, and Marie's grin filled the room. Mr. Jacobs flew inside, panting, and threw himself behind the sofa.

Marie hissed, "Did he see you?"

The elderly Mr. Jacobs wheezed a "no" from his hiding place.

Marie clutched the pocket watch ticking in time with her heart. Eight minutes passed.

The door creaked open.

There stood Edward, in his battered uniform, haggard, sweating, but very much alive. Marie screamed with joy and flew towards Till like a shot.

He flinched. For a moment, the room was a graveyard.

She kissed him, and he tasted like blood.

Edward was sobbing, his breath tearing at him. His teeth were red; he hadn't noticed yet. She ran her thumb along his knuckles.

Around the obelisk, in a tight circle, a dozen lanterns had been placed. In a second circle, a few paces away, stood the townsfolk, hand in hand. The flickering light danced along the ancient stone, and the shadows undulated across its pocked surface. Radiating out from the ancient rock, Till saw the shadows of the town slithered forth from their usual places, frolicking in the boiling light.

The buildings, the many-hued trees, the earth itself, had a strange energy. A full moon in a starless sky shone down upon the congregation, and Till, as he stood outside the circles, could not repress a strange, creeping anxiety. Something had changed in the night sky, and that terrible stone, that spire at the center of town, seemed only to grow in the unearthly light.

The old woman stepped forward until she was entirely bathed in amber light. "It's time, friends, for the Parade! Stay if you can, go if you must." She stepped back to the circle, and, from its battered case, produced a violin.

She sawed at her fiddle, and one long, cracked note pulled itself free and flew into the night. Then came a second, and a third. From between her jagged teeth came a sound like the cracking of stone. One voice wailed with the violin and was joined by another and another. The people of Pottswood, their voices coiling in the starless dark, broke their circle. Their voices seemed to pull them, to the beat of the avalanche-voiced fiddler, towards the lanterns, towards that great stone. The sky filled with a thousand voices, each given winged form in the tenebrous night.

From where Till stood, outside of the circle, he could see the stars winking out, one by one.

As abruptly as the song began, it ended. There was a deathly quiet.

Then came the response. The leaves whispered to one another and, egged on by the wind, cried out to the townsfolk. The trees, in their

creaking tongue, sang, and the wind, in a thousand voices, a chorus of night, led the ensemble. Till gasped: the moon was red as fallen leaves, bathing the town in blood. The voices of the wind began to grow distinct, coalescing and finding form between the trees.

Till staggered back when, from outside the firelight, one after the other, silhouettes became visible in the flickering light. They smelled of pumpkin flesh, of sweet rot, of candlelight. Their scent ran through Till's hair, kissed his eyes, his mouth.

And there she was, raven-haired, bright-eyed. Her voice, hoarse from disuse, cracked like old wood; her body seemed to flicker, to vanish and reappear like flame.

Till dropped to his knees, and cried out, his own voice joining the song of the dead. He quaked, coughing.

He felt a hand under his chin. He shuddered at the coldness of it, of how it moved, twisting, semi-solid. It pulled his gaze upward, where he met the eyes of his wife. Her eyes had always entranced him: they were an earthen brown, alive with an inner light. Doe eyes, people had called them; but there was something transcendent in them, even then, a wisdom and understanding of the world that mystified her husband. She knew of the earth, of the growing things, of life and death, of eternity, of the terrors and joys of rotting away.

She was beautiful, even in shimmering death.

Till, tears streaming down his face, embraced her. She was startlingly real, and strong as she had been in life, holding him to her fiercely. Through his wracking sobs, Till whispered, his voice high and soft, "I'm sorry about the cup, I-I—"

Till tasted rot, blood: the consuming, lung-eating work of worms. "You've come," she said.

Marie Till held her husband's hand. Her body, her head, her hands, they all burned with fever. Her body glistened. She must have drunk three gallons of water today. It was never enough. When the sweating lightened, the coughing would begin. Edward clutched his own handkerchief, soiled by the contents of his ragged lungs, and whispered to his wife, over and over, "I'm sorry, Marie."

She did not hear him.

The song had ended.

The dead were saying their farewells.

"The Parade begins, Edward."

Marie paused and, in her silence, a thousand years passed between the two. Her body flashed and shimmered like broken glass. Their eyes never wavered and, for a second time, she ran her thumb along the knuckles of his shaking fist. Sweat dripped from him, he quaked with the effort of holding himself upright. In the presence of so much death, the disease within him raged, devouring his tissues in a frenzy, filling his lungs with blood.

"We must return."

Till could hear cries of shock, wails of grief. He could not turn his head, his eyes were bound, shackled, to the figure drifting into the night before him. One step, then another, he took in pursuit, before his arm shot out and caught himself. His legs shook. The old woman cried, from the light, so far away, "Stay, all who can!"

He ran, as best he could, resting on tree after tree, deeper into the woods. His ragged, gasping breath rent the whispering night, just as dozens of other voices, in desperate chase of the fleeing dead, rang out like shots in the night. His hand slapped against a tree and the rough bark bit into him, but he gritted his teeth and passed it. The wind, the hands of the numberless dead, pushed him gently on.

The song of the dead began again, so loud and so sudden that it stopped Till in his tracks. There was a light and, again, the smell of death. Till had reached the graveyard of Pottswood. What was, in the daylight, a mouthful of crooked stone teeth jutting from the earth, a smiling remembrance of the dead, had grown, become infinite. The song was deafening: an orchestra of wind and bone. Behind each mossy tombstone was a legion of the dancing dead, shimmering in the moonlight. The parade marched from between the earth and sky. Rising into the night, in the distance, behind the moon, behind the very stars, was a tower, an obelisk of stone, a great finger into which was carved the name of every human being, every soul, every shimmering thing blessed with decay, with eternity.

They danced together, the largest congregation Till had ever seen, the human race, every shade and none, transparent in the night.

Marie smiled, her arms wrapped about him.

Her husband smiled back.

Blood trickled from his lips. She wiped it away, her finger shuddering and shifting in the crimson light, and kissed him. He took her hand, and together, alone in a tide of the dead, they walked into the sky.

Creative Nonfiction

Near-Life Experience

Joyce Alayon

Lucy never touched her plate. Instead, she sat in a pensive stupor, staring off into an imagined arena of pine trees and northern cardinals chirping, a docile stream splitting beds of daises in two. She once told me it was her favorite scene to visit. I don't blame her for fabricating a more pleasing view than the morose, grainy walls of Palmetto Hospital's psych ward. If my mind had not been deeply embedded with the logic that pursues the remotely sane, I would like to have imagined grand spectacles as well: the northern lights or an array of evergreen mountains in Pinar del Rio. Lucy's mind worked two ways: either it would clock out for a couple minutes to take a break from its typical rapid fire or it would fire all at once, electrical impulses transforming the monotonous into grand spectacle. I wasn't very hungry then, a consequence I attribute to the trauma of having brushed shoulders with death, so I'd sit back and watch Lucy. Sometimes she would lift her palms from the long cold lunch room table and begin swirling them in the air in perfect unison, smooth and slow. She'd finish her intricate hand dance by placing them right back where they'd been, and she'd wait. Depending on whether the day had been good or bad, there'd be an encore.

Her hair was long and thin just like the rest of her. She was shriveled by what was either age or illness, but her crystal blue eyes retained a youthful vigor. They'd light up as she boasted about being pregnant with Baby Jesus. "Schizophrenia," the round lady at front desk said once. The front desk was right smack in the middle of our psychiatric cave. To the desk's left were two long hallways of bedrooms, one hallway reserved for male patients, the other for female patients. To the desk's right was the cafeteria room, designed after the common blueprint for high school lunch rooms. It led to a recreation room the size of an office space, host of a big payphone, and some foldable chairs. Beyond the recreation room was the courtyard, a basketball court bordered with grass. I didn't like the round lady at front desk very much. She stooped over stacks of papers, bored and annoyed at any given hour, desensitized to the privilege of being alive. Her peering eyes would judge every behavior, filing it under ostentatious and a product of mental decay.

Rose had her own room and was the eldest patient. She sported a silver mullet and a slow gait as she maneuvered her brittle body and portable IV. Alzheimer's, I had figured. I once watched Rose slip in a puddle of fresh urine and bust her head open, a crimson trail trickling down her absent face. There's something deeply unsettling about watching the elderly bleed. Front desk lady barely noticed, barely picked up the receiver and called for Rose's rescuers. Watching Rose fall was the only time I ever felt sad to be there.

I'd been committed to Hialeah's Palmetto Hospital's psych ward because of what the doctors had falsely interpreted as a suicide attempt. I was seventeen years old and for the first time in my life, living out of the custody of a clinically depressed, anxiety-ridden, bipolar mother. The attainment of a new independence outside my mother's overbearing qualities was something I experimented with, trial and error. One regular Sunday morning, I awoke to my grandparents' empty apartment. My grandmother was off playing bingo and my grandfather was off at a part-time gig as a security guard at a car dealership. I had never had an alcoholic beverage before. I'd been stressed out due to rehearsals for our drama club's state competition and wanted to let loose and be in a good mood for the day. My mind had been wandering in negative pitfalls and the further I was from my mother's grip, the more I feared becoming just like her. In a spur of spontaneity, I decided to fix up my first cocktail using grandfather's liquor cabinet. The dusty bottles all looked the same to me, and he would be less likely to notice if I spread out which ones I took from, so logically, I took a little bit of each. Brandy, whiskey, rum, scotch, and my morning coffee. No breakfast. The last thing I remember before I lost consciousness was laughing at the stairs as I carried my spiked coffee up the steps to my room. The next thing I remember was my grandmother's worried face, flashing in and out, howling my name, bargaining with God to let me stay. I awoke again, this time in the emergency ward of the hospital with an unpleasantly invasive tube up my urethra and the black charcoal I'd been fed splattered all over my hospital gown. I reached for my Samsung flip phone and it too was encrusted with remnants of vomit. I was alive. My sister walked in to tell me she loved me and that half the hospital staff had seen my hoo-hah. She was six months pregnant at the time and adamantly attempting inner peace, so as to not perturb the baby's state. I remember staring at her ironed hair and owl-brown eyes and feeling a strong pang of guilt. How could

I have been so careless and stupid? They didn't let her accompany me as they transported me immediately into the psych ward.

There were no locks on bathroom doors, and I am still relieved to this day I never had to go number two. We weren't allowed hair products, phones, or really anything that wasn't the textural equivalent of a sponge. My roommate was a middle-aged lesbian who'd fought with her girlfriend and whipped out a knife on her, her admission a consequence of this incident. Every morning, I'd lie still on my back and reflect on how I had come to be there, dazed and transient. Meanwhile, my roommate Ilda, would make her bed and sob. By the time she was done fluffing her pillow, tears were fluent. I'd do my best to console her. It felt nice, to be around someone who was so open and unforgiving about her sadness and insecurities. I didn't mind listening. For the first time in my life, I wasn't preoccupied with what I had to do later or what emails I had to send. I could just lie down and really listen to another human being.

We weren't allowed access to the television remote in the recreation room because it induced violent disagreements over what to watch. One time, the security guard let me change the channel when no one was looking. I think he knew I was too "normal" to be there. As complimentary a privilege as this was, I was thoroughly uninterested in watching television. I was entirely relieved of anxiety and preoccupation. It was easy to sit and let the sun stroll by and breathe. I didn't feel the need to play Sudoku and I didn't even miss music, a nostalgic fact that astounds me still. I was existing in the simplest version of life possible. There were no meetings to make or phone calls to return, no assignments to turn in and nobody to impress.

Melina and Julianne were regulars. Melina was older, married. Julianne was in her early twenties, with glasses and a pending college degree. They'd commit themselves to the ward every other month once life began to plague them with its failures and instability. I overheard them speaking about how long it'd been since they'd turned themselves in, both lamenting the time spent outside and indulging in being back. They seemed to be suffering from a debilitating depression that summoned them back every other month. I understand now, how much easier it must be to leave it all behind and let go of the moral obligation to fulfill the unwritten duty of a human being.

Cigarette breaks were given every hour between the hours of nine to five, lasting about ten to fifteen minutes. I didn't smoke then but I

liked going outside most of the times and taking a whiff of cool air. Marva, a quiet red-haired woman of middle age, didn't smoke either, but she went outside each time and walked the perimeter of the fenced basketball court. I only ever heard Marva say *hello* and *thank you*. Her eyes were a desolate black and she was always in a subtle tremor. She spent most of her time in the recreation room by the pay phones. One of them was broken and had no dial tone. Marva preferred that one. She'd wait patiently seated next to it until it rang like a dog whistle. She'd sprint like she'd been an Olympic runner, picking the broken phone up in desperation and urgently begging, "Hello? Hello?!" She seemed disappointed every time, placing the phone back and sitting again, waiting for the next ring and hoping for a voice on the other end one day. Her thank you occurred one afternoon after I accompanied her for her daily stroll around the perimeter. I had been sitting in a stupor on one of the courtyard's firmly adhered seats, one of many architectural precautions taken to avoid potential injury. Marva approached me and stared, begging with her abysmal eyes. I looked back at her and instantly knew what she meant. She was begging for company. I stood up and we walked shoulder to shoulder through her daily course. The psych ward looked much larger from an outside perspective. Its exterior walls were just as colorless as the interior. We walked alongside the edge of the basketball court's cement, sometimes missing a step and landing in the weeds and dirt. There were small weed flowers growing all over, with white petals and golden fuzzy centers. I realized why Marva made this walk every day. It was the most color I had seen since I'd been admitted. We didn't say a word to each other until we reached the end of the court's perimeter. She turned to me and softly broke the silence with a thank you.

I don't remember eating while I was there, though that seems virtually impossible. As far as I'm concerned, I gave Chris all my meals. He was slightly overweight. He was the kindest, most formal person I'd ever met. He'd call me "sweetie" and always say "please" and "thank you". Unfortunately, he wasn't as kind to his split personality. They'd fight over everything. The first time I gave him my barely defrosted pizza, his other nagged him for being gluttonous and rude. They'd argue back and forth at dinner every night. I always thought their arguments were merely a product of a simple misunderstanding. I wish I would've told him he was brave for reciting his insecurities out loud. I have had similar fights with myself at dinner, unable to summon the bravery to let the world know.

I was only there for seventy-two hours, but it felt like longer. They

figured I fit the standards of sanity and let me get back in to the whirl of the world after I had fulfilled protocol. Those three days felt like limbo; they went on forever. It felt like a week, like a month. A month in unconventional heaven.

Sometimes I imagine I'm sitting with Lucy, Rose, Chris, Melina, Julianne, and Marva in front of cold pizzas on paper plates. I imagine going outside to toss a hoop, then coming back in to change the channel when no one is looking. It was unexpectedly grounding to live in an environment where formalities were as unnecessary as they were unexpected. I've been asked what my happiest memory is, and my response usually garners some raised brows. I guess I can see how staying at the psych ward might incite astonishment or even alarm. I wish I could put into words the feeling of simplicity and freedom I found there. I try to replicate those feelings in the world outside its walls.

They say trauma is the killer of memories, that the mind tries to survive and builds blockage to that trauma. Trauma blurs the burn. It is the annihilator of exquisite detail. I don't remember what my grandfather's liquor bottles resembled or what time of day it was. I don't remember what I was wearing or what I said back to my sister once I'd been resuscitated. I don't remember meetings with Dr. Blanco, the ward's psychiatrist and our fulfilling daily required assessments of my mental health. I don't even remember eating. While I was there, I didn't think much of anything at all. I don't remember what I did the day I got out. My memory feels scarce since, as if it is a constant victim to my mind's survival instinct and all I kept were the strange, beautiful parts. I think that's why I remember Lucy. Lucy never touched her plate.

Voice Lessons

Kathryn Milewski

“I heard a woman becomes herself the first time she speaks without permission.”

—Denise Frohman

The first time I made her cry, it was on the second floor of a renovated garage a block away from campus. It was spring approaching summer, night had fallen. A chorus of chirping cicadas added a crispness to the performance's end. Dim lighting turned the lemon-yellow walls and her teardrops a deep marigold.

“I just can't believe it,” she mused while closing up the songbook, which contained sheet music to Franz Schubert's “Ave Maria.” As she rose from her seat near the keyboard, I placed the heavy tome back inside its respective shelf, then joined her and my mother in the tiny kitchen next door. It wasn't where she usually taught me, but there was something homelike, *safe*, about the space regardless. “Y'know, Sue,” she addressed my mother while enveloping me in a warm hug, “she's the best voice student I've ever had. I mean it.”

My mother beamed with pride. I was only thirteen.

“Well, Miss Cindy, I hope she sings that song in a recital one day. I want to hear it again before she graduates high school!”

I giggled, noting her words. And Miss Cindy, still sobbing, planted a kiss upon my forehead.

“I *cannot wait* until she's in high school,” she said. “She's going to do *great* things...”

While other kids got in trouble for cheating on tests and cussing, I was reprimanded for singing too loud in church. My first-grade teacher always told me to shut up, lest I desired to sit all alone at the back table of our classroom and write an essay on my misbehavior. Even my friend, Sergio, couldn't stand my chanting. “Can you please be quieter, Katy? You're hurting my ear,” he whispered to me once during a school mass.

Since she received many concerns about my whale of a voice, Mom thought it best to put me in show choir my second year of elementary school. That way, people wouldn't complain, and I'd find an outlet for

a budding passion. If I were to continue singing loudly, it was best I did so properly, and preferably on pitch.

That's how I met Miss Cindy. Tall, smiling, jazzy Miss Cindy who donned lilac eye shadow, high heels, and had a gift of looking ten years younger than her actual age. An ex-trumpet player, she possessed the brown irises of a fifty-year-old woman who starved for something more in her career. And the same thing went for her students; not a show choir practice passed in which she didn't mention the "superiors" her high school kids won in singing competitions. A whole shelf full of grand, glittering trophies proved it. Miss Cindy had high expectations for all her pupils, regardless of age, and although the feat seemed impossible, I was determined to win her attention.

The first year of show choir included the performance of an adorable bug-themed musical. My heart yearned to be a pretty ladybug soloist, but because of my rookie status, I was promptly sent to the chorus. There was one girl who never attended any practices, and because she didn't display commitment to her role as a stinkbug, Miss Cindy's patience wore thin.

"Does anyone want to try the part?" she asked one afternoon. As expected, a silence swept the room.

But I didn't care how unattractive the role was—it was a chance to show my singing capabilities. "I'll do it!" I shouted, raising a hand high while marching to the front of the trailer-classroom. Miss Cindy gave me the sheet music, I sang my pounding heart out, and she granted me the part. Our insect musical was a smashing success, and the very next year, she encouraged me to take private voice lessons.

To say it was a dream come true would be an understatement. The next few years flew by as we laughed and sang through Disney tunes, musical theatre classics, and Leona Lewis pop songs. She taught me breath control, how to manage vibrato, and introduced me to sight-reading. The only thing she wouldn't teach was belting. "Your vocal chords are still developing. It'd be unhealthy to let you belt so young," she explained.

Not like I needed belting. By eighth grade, I got paid to sing the national anthem at high school basketball games. Even more, my Catholic school's parish allowed me to cantor masses after receiving Confirmation. No more was I a little girl shouting hymns from the pews, but a young woman standing front and center, leading an entire congregation in song.

I knew Miss Cindy both professionally and personally. She told me stories of snowy farm days in South Dakota and failed attempts at

making it big in the cabaret world. Over the summers, I received voice lessons inside her own house. It was there I met her second husband, Brian, who smiled even more than she did. “You have *such* a gift,” he’d tell me in his smooth Filipino accent after vocal concerts. He was also a musician, and it was clear he loved Miss Cindy very much. Occasionally, he’d croon a jazz song to her with his wonderfully silky voice and she’d grin, snapping a beat right back. Although I’d never seen him perform on a stage, I knew he was part of a successful band that played around our small town. I’d watch him and Miss Cindy slow dance during Spaghetti Dinners—annual concerts the high school put on to raise money for their competition trips—and think, *wow, someday I hope to have a marriage like that*. Everyone loved Brian. Everyone loved how much Brian loved Miss Cindy.

They had a tiny Doberman Pinscher called Brindy—a combination of their names “Brian” and “Cindy.” They let our family dog-sit Brindy one summer while off on vacation. We soon learned Brindy was a dog who maintained a composed reputation in public but went berserk in private. When I walked her one rainy afternoon, she slid underneath our white fence in an attempt to escape into the neighbors’ garden. I held onto the leash for dear life as she barked furiously. After wrangling her back inside the house, I couldn’t wrap my head around why this adorable little pup, who led such a spoiled life, wanted to run away so badly.



Eventually, high school arrived. This was it—the next four years of my Catholic school education where I’d become one of the shiny role models I admired. The colorful costumes, the competition trips, the *trophies*...even a change of scenery was due. No more was I studying music inside a crowded trailer or renovated garage, but a spacious classroom filled with multiple keyboards and pastel songbooks stuffed inside towering shelves. A large, wide window stood behind the risers, letting in white light and a grand view of the church. It was monolithic, open, and at long last, mature.

My high expectations for high school show choir were delightfully met. I was accepted into a tight-knit circle of friends and we all made hilarious Kodak moments while learning dance routines and caroling at senior centers. There was Courtney and Will, two black-haired beau-

ties who maintained the will-they-or-won't-they sitcom trope until my sophomore year, when they started dating. The two balanced each other out; Courtney was the down-to-earth, reality television guru who knew secrets about everyone, while Will was a total goof. They hung around Gabby Castellanos: the curly-haired funny girl who maintained perfect pitch while doodling iconic cartoon characters across sheet music. "Here comes the playaaaa! He so fiiiine!" she'd chant whenever John Scott, a lanky, blond-haired baritone, entered the room. Sophomore year, he started dating Maria Heitmann: my best friend since elementary school. We'd made a connection while discovering our mutual worship of all things Harry Potter. We were so close, people thought we were lesbian lovers.

Other friends came and went within our circle, but the six of us stayed together. Never will I forget the karaoke-filled bus rides, the inside jokes, the fake Christmas album covers Maria and I made from photos we took while caroling at senior centers, and the hope all six of us felt as our prepubescent voices developed. We even travelled to Boston and Washington D.C. for competitions and two years in a row won rousing "superior" rankings from judges. We were leaving schools from all across the country in the dust. Our tiny show choir's rising success and happiness seemed boundless.

Until junior year, when Miss Cindy announced her divorce from Brian.

It wasn't something anyone anticipated, but it wasn't something Miss Cindy hid. Especially not during my voice lessons, when she'd break down into floods of tears. "I'm sorry...it's just *so hard*," she'd sniffle, head in hands.

"Everything's going to be okay," I said while wrapping her in tight embraces: the only consolation my teenaged brain could conceive. It was painful to watch her suffer. She was a second mother. She watched me grow up. We were a *team*. What advice could I give about moving on from another failed marriage? I knew nothing about love, about falling out of partnerships. For her, I wanted to fix everything—put a smile back on her face. But it was impossible. Although I was twelve months away from eighteen-year-old adulthood, youth limited my ability to comfort.

Fortunately, after each lesson, she'd talk privately with my mother, who would then talk privately with me. One car ride home, she explained the change in Brian. According to Miss Cindy, he'd turned into an angry

alcoholic out of nowhere, wasting money on pot and leaving her alone in their house for long periods of time. Occasionally, Miss Cindy wouldn't know where he was.

"Isn't that odd?" Mom shook her head while turning the steering wheel. "I never pictured him as the type to do that...he was always friendly. They looked happy together."

"I wonder what's going to happen to Brindy." My mind jumped back to that day in the backyard. *Composed in public, berserk in private...*

"I know she's going through a rough time, but she shouldn't be crying in the middle of your voice lessons. She needs to be professional. She's wasting time *and* money."

"Dunno, Mom. She's just processing things right now. Maybe we should cut her some slack."

I related to Miss Cindy's emotional instability. Hard times plagued my life as well. I developed an inferiority complex due to a worsening growth spurt in my lower jaw, which caused chewing problems, clicking pains, and teasing from boys. Behind her piano stood a rectangular mirror, whose reflection my eyes could not look away from. Because of my facial misalignment, my mouth moved differently from everyone else's whenever we sang as a chorus. *What I wouldn't give for a normal chin, a normal smile.* I lived through a bout of depression and endured anxiety attacks because of crippling low self-esteem. I wholeheartedly believed I was ugly. Whenever I worked up the courage to vent, Miss Cindy said something along the lines of, "Oh stop, Katy. You're *so* pretty." Her responses had caustic edges to them, as if to slap me for thinking of something so stupid.

Additionally, the interests I intended to pursue in college unconsciously shifted. Music, particularly musical theatre, had always been a love. But across from Miss Cindy's classroom stood the entrancing TV studio. When the choir room's door was open, I'd watch kids lug tripods and cameras into the little space. They were always busy, considering the studio delivered announcements on the school's live television feed every morning and afternoon. The team was led by the eccentric Mrs. D'Anton, who wore an impressive amount of charm bracelets on both wrists and only reached up to my neck in height. (I'm 5'2", to give some perspective.) This lovely woman, who had known me since kindergarten, let her students record music videos, funny commercials, and the occasional short film for the whole school to view. Even my younger brother helped her. Because Mrs. D'Anton knew of my film editing

skills from archived class projects, she tried to recruit me annually. “We could use you, Katy! You have a great work ethic...just come in and edit some footage!”

Although tempted by her offers, I always gave the same excuse.

“Sorry Mrs. D’Anton, I can’t. I have show choir practice.”

Then there was the infamous concert band led by the almighty Harold Frazee. Mr. Frazee was the laid-back, beer-bellied, rock-n-roll uncle everyone secretly wanted. As a musician, he was a genius, able to play any instrument from the saxophone to the Appalachian dulcimer. As a teacher, he was incredibly generous. He brazenly believed in the potential of his students, and although I wasn’t included in that category, he was a fan of my voice.

“Just you wait, kid. I’m gonna use you in my band concert senior year,” he’d say while wobbling past me in the halls. “Get yourself prepared. It’s gonna be *wild*.”

Unlike your typical high school marching band teacher, Mr. Frazee had his kids learn songs from the old school rock groups he was passionate about. Whether they played a Beatles tune, Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall” or Chicago’s “Beginnings,” the concert band never failed to receive standing ovations. Everyone loved them. Well, *almost* everyone. Miss Cindy never understood why Frazee didn’t care about the band receiving bronze medals at competitions. “It’s like he doesn’t acknowledge the judges’ opinions,” she’d remark. To Frazee, that was the point. He wasn’t concerned with musical perfection. He wanted his recreations to *inspire* people. Eventually, his work inspired me, too. My music taste aligned with his. I desired to wail like Joan Jett, shriek like Ann Wilson, rip a piece of my heart out like Janis Joplin. I wanted a strong, passionate voice identical to the women I admired.

I wanted to be loud again.

“But like I said, it’s unhealthy to belt,” Miss Cindy countered.

Not if you do it properly, I thought. No, no, no. Don’t say that. I held my tongue. She knew best.

After the divorce, Miss Cindy began to change. The lines on her face sunk deep into her skin, crescent-shaped sides of her chestnut hair grew salt and pepper streaks, and she became more irritable, more unpredictable, more hawkish than before. Of course, she had always been stern—the reason, I believed, why I and so many others improved under her tutelage. But this was different. This was a Miss Cindy who, at every choir practice, claimed she was disappointed in us. If we didn’t get a note,

a single harmony right, she'd start yelling. She made a soprano, an alto, a tenor, and a bass stand in front of everyone and sing through the music we'd be taking to competition.

"Whoever lacks dedication enough to miss a note, you're out of choir."

Everyone's face paled as she clicked the CD player. After her make-shift quartet carefully sang the Latin song—sweating the whole way—they were replaced with other students. Fortunately, Courtney, Will, Gabby, John and Maria all made it through. They were dedicated choir members, after all. Thank God the bell rang before she could call me forward, because those days, I never remembered to bring sheet music to practice.

She was harder on the girls show choir: a group exclusively for freshman and a few sophomore girls until they were older and "skilled" enough for acceptance into the main choir. The lucky boys got to skip this initiate program, but it was where every female upperclassman once started. That's why it was so easy for people to belittle girls show choir: it was full of young bottom-feeders. One rehearsal, a trio of blonde upper-classman girls, sat before the stage in our school's gymnasium, snickering while the chorale of fresh meat danced their routine.

"*Remember to smiiiiile!*" shouted Emilie Zuhowski through piggish snorts. Miss Cindy was just in front of them, pacing below the elevated stage in red-hot anger.

"Louder, ladies! I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

She pivoted back, shook her head, and snagged the seat next to Emilie.

"Some of them can't dance no matter how hard they try," whispered Olivia Coniglio who, ironically, was the worst dancer in our main show choir. The third blonde in the trio, Maddie Michowski, wiped tears from her eyes. And Miss Cindy chuckled.

"Oh, tell me about it. That's why most of them are in the back. I SAID LOUDER, LADIES!"

Judging from the grave looks the girls wore as they limped off the stage, it was clear they'd heard every word. That year was the first all four of our choirs won silvers or less in competition.

It was a warning Miss Cindy heeded the wrong way. Despite a suggestion from a judge to "unwind" and mend the cliques within our choral groups, she used the failure in Annapolis as an excuse to become more aggressive the following year. She said she was disappointed in us

before, but now she *really was* disappointed in us. Well, everyone except me. I was still one of her favorites—the senior girl she’d taught since second grade.

“I’m *so excited* you’re singing the “Ave Maria” for the Christmas recital!” she exclaimed during one December voice lesson. “And of course I’m saving you for last. The *best* for last.” Her cheeky wink made me giggle. For a fleeting moment, she looked younger.

“I’m happy you’re excited. Mom is too: she’s wanted me to sing that song for her since grade school. I’m going to dedicate it to her, you know.” I was planning on dedicating it to Miss Cindy as well. Looking back on everything, I’m grateful I made that decision.

She closed the songbook on the piano’s sheet music stand and gazed upon me with tender brown eyes. Her sigh and smile, both gentle and serene, were comforting. Contagious. Hypnotic.

“So Katy, what are you planning on studying in college?”

The soft feeling dimmed. Would my honest answer break her spell?

“Actually, um...I was thinking of majoring in film.”

Her brows rose.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Maybe acting or something too, but...”

“Oh...well, good luck to you, Katy.”

“Thank you.”

“I definitely think you should consider looking into music as well. Maybe even music education. You could study more music theory. Teach some students. Everyone wants voice lessons nowadays...It *pays*.”

Nodding, I imagined myself on her stool, going down the same pathways she had taken. Wearing her same high heels, her same lilac eyeshadow. The eyes of the same choir kids staring back at me. My guts hated the long-jawed girl in the rectangular mirror left of the piano, but all of a sudden, I found myself preferring that reflection to the one sitting before me.

“Yeah, I’ll definitely think about it.”

“I feel like you and Gabi would be perfect candidates for careers in music education.”

Brrrring went her cellphone. As she picked it up and turned away, I seized the opportunity to roll my eyes. If only she hadn’t brought Gabi Hay into the conversation, I might have considered her words.

Describing Gabi Hay would be like describing a femme fatale in a film noir: so doe-eyed and seemingly innocent she was the last person

you'd suspect to be a psychopath. Adults fawned over her sugary giggles while boys sunk their faces into her Barbie doll-blond hair. And that's why she got away with every horrible thing she did, whether it was making rude remarks about friends and I before junior prom ("We can't take pictures on the staircase in Katy's house...mine is nicer!") or excluding Rebecca Rosenberg from her Disney-themed sweet sixteen court because she wanted to dress up as Elsa, and Elsa is technically a queen not a Disney princess and how dare she go against the rules of the court at her party.

In fact, Gabi Hay was so obsessed with transforming herself into a real-life Disney princess that she became a Snow White soprano. During my painfully short friendship with her, we had confessed a shared jealousy concerning each other's vocal abilities. Sure, I possessed an incredibly wide range, but Gabi was practically a high-brow opera singer. I was more like a scrappy Edith Piaf. Her reputation was Nancy Kerrigan's, and mine was Tonya Harding's before 1994. She could go sky high, shooting into the loftiest notes of "Glitter and Be Gay" as though she were a rocket touching the heavens, aiming for the moon and planets and galaxies beyond. And because she expressed a desire to continue studying music in college, Miss Cindy carefully watched her performances from the ground, wishing she could fly alongside her.

Maybe that explained the curious change in order which occurred during the Christmas recital. As promised, the program stated I would be performing the "Ave Maria" last. Rebecca Rosenberg was before me, while Gabi Hay would sing an opera piece before her.

Until Miss Cindy bolted into the room full of soloists a minute before the show started.

"All right everyone, Rebecca isn't coming. I just got a message she's sick. So Katy, you'll take her spot, yeah? While Gabi will be last. Break a leg, guys!"

I didn't mind agreeing to fill Rebecca's spot, but the flip between Gabi and myself struck me as odd. In all vocal recitals prior, the protocol went that if a soloist was absent, the next person listed in the program would sing. So Gabi would sing, and then I'd go since Rebecca wasn't there. But despite Miss Cindy making a big deal about it in my voice lesson, she didn't have a problem withdrawing my performance, the one she claimed was the "best for last," from the final spot.

While introducing myself and singing through the music, I blocked out the audience's confused whispering and the tapping of fingertips

against the names on the program's backside. Instead, I focused only on the crucifix hanging in the back of the room and my mother's teary-eyed face. After Gabi's performance and subsequent bows, it was no surprise quite a few parents approached me asking what had happened. I didn't make a show of it: I just told them I took Rebecca's spot. Even so, some elderly couples who attended the recital were bold enough to exclaim my performance deserved that last billing, and it was a shame it couldn't be last. The next day, Courtney revealed that before the recital, she had passed an arguing Gabi Hay and Miss Cindy in the hallway downstairs.

"I don't know what they were shouting about, and I don't know if it had anything to do with what happened yesterday," she shrugged, "but still. The timing of it all is curious..."

Would it be a stretch to say Gabi knew of my disdain for her? Not really. In response to her calling all five of my friends "horrible people" on Valentine's Day, I stuffed her unattended handbag with dozens of plastic spoons, some of which I licked. The next month, a group of us senior show choir girls hatched an idea to perform Lady Gaga's "Telephone"—a song we sang and danced to freshman year of girls show choir—for the karaoke contest happening during Spirit Week. Gabi was invited to participate, and she couldn't stop blubbering about how "freaking excited" she was to be re-visiting the routine. Unsurprisingly, the next week she revealed over group chat her desire to drop out because she'd rather sing "Part of Your World" solo. Vindictive and tired of her antics as I was, I took her message as an opportunity to call bullshit.

"KK. Though you made it clear you were 'freaking excited' to sing with us, do what makes you happy Gabi haha. See ya around!" Send. Despite my feeling guilty for typing the text, Courtney, Gabby Castellanos, and even my own mother didn't rebuke it. Instead, they found it hilarious.

With a month left until the slough of gigs that orbited around our competition trip to Disney World (you can imagine how "freaking excited" Gabi Hay was about that), it was time for Mr. Frazee to reveal what rock songs he wanted me to sing for his band concert.

"And not *just* the band concert...I want you to come with us when we play at Faneuil Market in Boston. Don't tell Cindy."

"Is that where you're going for competition this year?" I asked.

He laughed. "Nah, we're not like you show choir people: we're not doing competitions anymore. I got out of it this year, thank God. We're not playing for judges. We're playing for the people."

He told me to listen to Chicago's "Saturday In the Park," Earth, Wind and Fire's "Fantasy," and the song "Requiem, the Fifth" from the Trans-Siberian Orchestra. "Still trying to figure out the last song in our set; the one you'll be singing solo. Narrowed it down to two," Frazee finished, stroking the white hairs of his prickly beard. "I'll let you know when I know."

Imagining myself in Boston, singing in a square with a whole orchestra to my back put me on cloud nine for the rest of the school day. But my spirits crashed down after last period, when I changed out of my uniform into the baggy t-shirt and sweatpants I'd wear for show choir rehearsal. We practiced our dance routines in the second-floor study hall; the same spacious, whitewashed location where the Christmas recital was held. Us upperclassmen sat on the sidelines and watched the Girls Show Choir practice their act: songs and dances from the musical *Hairspray*. Just eyeing their tired, unenthusiastic expressions as they murmured the lyrics to "Good Morning Baltimore" made us fuzzy. Their routine was choreographed by Miss Cindy's daughter-in-law, Jessica. Much like her mother-in-law, she became increasingly irritable over time.

"Come on, ladies! Smile! Pick up your feet!" she blared over the stereo. My eyes lolled in their sockets. *Fuck smiling. Your choreography is boring as shit, Jessica. If I were them, I'd be yawning.* No, no, no, I needed to stop with these corrosive thoughts. At least wait until I got home to have them. Remain composed in public, go berserk in private.

As if on cue, Miss Cindy strutted through the double doors. All us main show choir kids straightened our spines as she clacked her wedged heels to the front. The clipboard she cradled gave her the countenance of a drill sergeant. "I want to see the choreography before I take the girls to the choir room."

Silence. The freshmen gulped. Jessica started the music and they scrambled back to their original places. Their performance wasn't half bad, but Miss Cindy glared at them as though witnessing a full-on train wreck. "Oh, COME ON! ARE YOU EVEN TRYING!" I could see some watering eyes behind the fake smiles. When it was over, she crossed her skinny arms and scoffed. "I can't believe this. I'm embarrassed. We have a month until competition and *this* is what you show me? Jessica, have them run through it one more time. Again, absolutely embarrassed."

Suddenly, she veered left towards the main show choir. "C'mon guys. We're warming up in the stairwell." Her tone and trot were eerily lighter.

The group and I followed her through the double doors into the narrow, echoic space below the study hall. She stood on the highest step while the rest of us took steps beneath. My mother has told me time and time again I have the best gut feeling out of anyone she knows—I can sense danger from a mile away. This moment was one of those times. Immediately upon filing into that stairwell, I knew something bad was about to happen.

“Let’s sing ‘Working My Way Back To You,’” she ordered. It was one of the songs from our *Jersey Boys*-themed set. Because of the reverb within the stairwell, every cheer and whisper from below was magnified tenfold. *How loud will it be with twenty or so singers in here?*

“Maybe we should go to the hallway and practice there,” I begged Miss Cindy after theorizing an answer. She barely looked at me. Was she aware of the disturbance we’d cause?

“We can practice in here.” As the distant trumpets of “Good Morning Baltimore” sounded from behind the double doors, she signaled for us to start.

And for a minute, my apprehension dissolved. I got caught up in the groovy melody with my fellow choirmates, exchanging silly faces with my friends as we sang. By the piece’s end we were giggling over our echoed voices. After all, it was a fun song. It was a fun choir. “Great job, guys! Let’s go back!” Miss Cindy beamed. We skipped through the double doors into the study hall. And when I saw the heavy tears rolling down the freshmen girls’ faces, their twitching frowns and envious eyes, my feet halted. Most of the kids who sang in the stairwell kept walking and returned to the sidelines, but a few of us stood there in guilt, unable to look away. If only I kept begging Miss Cindy to stop. If only I’d told her how inconsiderate she was being. *Of course* the girls show choir was crying. We weren’t the ones being harassed.

Once again, Miss Cindy tromped to the front and crossed her arms. The smile swept off her face. “I hope you girls are ready for a long night, because we have *a lot* of work to do. I’m disappointed in all of you. Now go.” Heads hung in shame, the girls shuffled away.

That was the moment I realized two things. First, I had wasted four years of high school performing in a ridiculous show choir like a circus animal when I could have spent those years playing a sport or writing in the school’s literary journal or editing videos in the TV studio. I could have spent those years doing things that would have made me a well-rounded person, things that would have made me happier. Second, I

chose to waste those four years of high school because I feared losing a connection with Miss Cindy. Shouting, abusive, apathetic Miss Cindy who favorited a few and didn't give a shit about making the rest cry.

I walked over to Abby Kelly and Lauren Hoeffling: two members of the main choir who whispered their disgust regarding Miss Cindy's behavior. I chipped in similar opinions and Lauren crafted a plan. "Tell the girls show choir to meet us in the hallway downstairs," she informed me. "We'll talk to them while Cindy is conversing with Jessica." I nodded and passed the message on to freshman Faith Scott, who in turn passed it on to the rest of girls show choir. I asked Gabby Castellanos if she or anyone else from the main choir would be joining us downstairs. "I don't think it's a good idea," she warned.

Regardless, the three of us herded the entire girls show choir into the hallway. Some were still crying, others looked like they could punch through the blue lockers lining the walls. "I'm so sorry about what happened up there," Lauren addressed the crowd: "Wasn't right of her to shout."

"Wasn't right of her, *period*. It's not your faults," Abby added.

My turn to speak.

"Don't let her push you around like that. She's treating you all like crap. Don't let her—"

The sudden clacking of heels. "What's going on?"

Miss Cindy didn't look angry, just confused. After an awkward silence, her brows knitted in static realization. "You three, get upstairs. NOW!!!"

Abby and Lauren scurried back up the steps. Before joining them, I exchanged an electric glare with the woman I considered my second mother. Right there: that's when the chord of kinship between us snapped. That's when she disowned me, and I her.

Moments later, she yammered at the rest of the main choir. I couldn't help feeling like I was responsible for the unwarranted scolding. Indeed, it would be a long night.

"I don't want any of you going behind my back again." She pointed. "I am the one in charge. *I* am the adult! Right?" She waited for us to repeat the word. "Right," we all mumbled. Save for Gabby Castellanos, who scoffed and made a face.

"I saw that!" Miss Cindy thundered. "Don't you *dare* roll your eyes at me! I am the adult, *right?*" But instead of giving her the satisfaction of an answer, Gabby pivoted—zipping past all of us in line. The brown

coils of her mane bounced as she left everyone behind. And of course, she slammed the double doors on her way out.

I held my tears until the evening's end, when I told Mom what had happened in the privacy of my bedroom. "Even the security guard made a remark! She said she hadn't seen so many girls crying before. It was horrible."

Mom gently stroked my shoulders. "So what are you going to do?"

"There's only one thing I *can* do," I sniffled, "I have to quit show choir."

Concern washed over her face. "Are you sure? You'd be missing Disney World. You'd be missing your friends. I still think you should talk to Miss Cindy."

"I can't! Mom, she's not the same person anymore! She's not who she used to be. She's different and toxic and I hate being around her. I just can't..."

Mom bit her lip, then gave a single nod. "Okay." She got off my bed and walked to the doorway. Then paused.

"I wonder if that's what drove Brian to it..."

"What? Mom, what are you talking about?"

"Like you said. She's toxic and abusive. I wonder if that's what drove Brian to alcohol, just before their divorce..."

★★★

Like some kind of sick joke, our school's karaoke contest was held the very next day. Instead of singing and dancing to Lady Gaga with my senior friends, I was miserably sprawled across the bleachers with the rest of the student body while we not-so-eagerly listened to the competitors in the gymnasium. We were scheduled to rehearse "Telephone" the day before the event, but due to the harsh happenings which had transpired the night before, none of us were in the mood to perform our freshman year girls show choir routine.

"Hi everyone!" squeaked a voice, "I'm Gabi Hay, and I will be singing 'Part of Your World' from *The Little Mermaid*!" Whoop-dee-doo. Mrs. D'Anton started the music. While Gabi gave her best Jodi Benson impersonation onstage, my baggy eyes wandered up to the sound booth located at the far back of the gym. That's where Miss Cindy perched herself during the former year's karaoke contest. After that event, we had gone back to her choir room and listened to critiques regarding whose

singing chops she thought were the worst. Now, she was nowhere to be found. Perhaps she wasn't as heartless as I thought. Maybe she was more distressed about the previous day's occurrences than I was. Maybe she'd apologize to everyone.

Maybe it didn't matter if she did, because I was still intent on quitting show choir. While listening to other students wail through Mariah Carey and Fall Out Boy, I decided I hated music. I hated its composition—how it was made up of notes you could either get right or wrong. It was all about judgement, I believed. You sang or played whatever the hell you wanted and people criticized you. It wasn't an art form: it was a game to win. At least, that's what ten years of show choir taught me.

After an eternity later, the last soloist finished, and everyone began filing out of the gym back to their classrooms. But I wouldn't be heading back to class just yet. Because my eyes felt like they could tear up at the drop of a hat, I decided to treat myself to some freshly-brewed coffee. My high school's library didn't conform to your standard definition of a library. Exemplified by the piles of costumes left by the theatre department, high-end sofas and silly memorabilia everywhere, it was more a place to hang out and eat lunch than study. It was also where a tiny blue Keurig was kept—a secret only I and a few others knew.

I trudged to the metal filing cabinet where it stood and grabbed a Styrofoam cup. Gabi Hay sauntered in. Her face still aglow from applause, *The Little Mermaid* wannabe swerved around me like a blood-thirsty shark. "Hi, Katy."

"Hi, Gabi."

"How are you?"

"Fine, how are you?"

"Oh, very good." She drew closer. "Why didn't you sing in the karaoke contest? I thought you were all supposed to perform 'Telephone?'"

"Yeah, those plans fell through. We couldn't get a rehearsal in."

"Oh, that's a shame." She lunged towards my right ear, making the hairs on my nape stand straight. "Y'know, especially since you *excluded* me and all..."

This was about the text message, of course. "Not everything is about *you* Gabi Hay." I braced myself for a response, but none came. It was too late. My retort wasn't received. She had already disappeared.

Had it been any other day, Gabi Hay's attempt at passive-aggressive revenge wouldn't have mattered. But because I was processing the aftermath of a broken relationship, because a large love of my life, music,

had suddenly turned into a hatred, because I felt like I could burst at any minute, my chest tightened. My vision blurred.

When you're going through an anxiety attack, you feel like the world is crumbling around you. Like the world is flipping upside down, and you're trying to balance for dear life. That, and the horrible sensation of choking on air. As the Keurig's pouring coffee began to drip out of the overflowing Styrofoam cup onto the carpet floor, I just stood there, unable to catch any breath. My heart was about to combust. *Don't flip out don't flip out don't flip out. Composed in public, berserk in—*

"Katy, what's the matter?" asked Maria as she entered the library with a group of other show choir people. I couldn't respond. I needed to escape.

"I'm sorry, I can't I can't I can't..."

"Wait! What are you—"

My fumbling feet carried me through the doorway to the hallway outside, to my locker. I pressed myself against its metal surface, still gasping for breath. Miss Cindy was talking to a close friend, Brenna, a few feet away. She stopped and gazed at me. "Katy, are you all right?"

If I told her how Gabi Hay had set me off, would she believe me?

"I really don't want to talk about it," I wheezed. Her brows knitted again—the same scary expression she had thrown at me the night before.

"Is this about what happened yesterday?"

"N-no, I—"

She clenched my left wrist. Against my will, she dragged me towards the choir room. "Come on! We're talking about this!"

I yanked free of her grip.

"NO! GET AWAY FROM ME!!!"

My blood-curdling scream echoed throughout the long hallway, stopping passersby in their tracks. Even kids from the library crowded near the open doorway, trying to get a glimpse of the commotion. I couldn't believe the large sound which projected from my mouth. It was my voice, but there was a kinetic, tempestuous quality to it, as though it'd been brewing inside me for months and was just now tearing into the world. Something long overdue.

"Oh, stop your crying!" I remember her shouting as I staggered away. Her actions worsened the attack. The crumbling, whirling environment inside my head became a full-on earthquake. Fortunately, Maria was there to scoop her arm around my shoulders and lead me back to safety.

My guidance counsellor, Mr. Graichen, allowed me to use his office whenever I experienced anxiety attacks or emotional episodes of similar proportion. He sat quietly while I took a few minutes to catch my breath, then pried.

“Okay, Katy, can you tell me what happened?”

I started with the night before, then delved into the Gabi Hay library situation and showed him the passive-aggressive text which presumably set her off. (To my utmost surprise, he doubled over in laughter after reading it.) Then I revealed what happened mere minutes ago. He asked if there were any witnesses, and I told him, yes, my friends Maria and Brenna saw her grab me. Of all the horrible things which occurred that day, the worst was when he told me I could press charges against Miss Cindy. I had no intentions of doing so and he didn’t encourage it. But in all my life, I never thought I’d hear the words “press charges” and “Miss Cindy” used in the same sentence.

The second time I made her cry, it was over the phone. However, I wasn’t the one who received her call. I was home, taking a personal day like Mr. Graichen suggested. Miss Cindy phoned my mother while she was busy at work, then asked her to drive to school to pick up a letter addressed to me. After reading it herself, Mom handed it over. “I don’t think you’re going to find what you’re looking for inside,” she said. And she was right. I can’t tell you what the letter said because it didn’t contain anything to care about. It was just sugarcoated praise about how talented I was and how she had watched me blossom from a tiny sprout to a young woman, and the only two words that mattered, “I’m sorry,” were nowhere to be found. It went in the trash soon after it was finished.

“I feel like a horrible person,” I told Mr. Frazee the next day. We were in the same trailer-classroom Miss Cindy used when I was in grade school. Now it was the band kids’ headquarters.

“You’re not. I had a falling out with that woman years ago. You’re very brave to be leaving show choir. This isn’t the first time she’s done something inappropriate to students. You know Devon Santi?”

“I know him.” Devon was the son of my second-grade teacher.

“I’ll never forget, during a rehearsal for the Spaghetti Dinner, she got so angry with him. She started screaming right in his face. She was so close, poor kid fainted right there on the stage.” He shook his head. “And that’s when I knew it wasn’t wise to associate myself with her. She’s crazy.”

"I don't get it. If she's done all these horrible things, why hasn't the school fired her?"

He gave a dry laugh. "Are you kidding? Have you seen the number of trophies the choir's won? Good publicity. The dean isn't letting her go anytime soon."

He stared down at the ground, sighed, then revamped his fake smile into a genuine one. "Anyways, figured out what song I'd like you to sing solo. Ever heard of "Separate Ways" by Journey? You're going to be my Steve Perry."

My lips curled high. "Does that mean I'll get to be loud?"

He saw the excitement stir inside me. "Oh, the louder the better, my dear."

While informing my show choir friends about the trip to Boston I'd be attending with the laid-back concert band, they told me everything Cindy was up to. Gabby Castellanos apologized for walking out of practice and was accepted back into the group, but it didn't mean the tense atmosphere within the choir had changed. While resting in the library, my friends listed their complaints as they munched on Wawa hoagies.

"You think she's going to let up on the screaming?"

"No. Honestly, I hate our costumes. I hate sitting through practices. I hate everything."

"It's so hard this year."

"And it'll probably be hard next year."

With furrowed brows, I scoffed. "Well if you all hate show choir so much, why not quit?"

In response to the solution I deemed simple, they shot me hard glares. It was easy to forget I was the black sheep of the table when my choir friends still kept in touch. After a short silence, they continued with their conversation and sandwiches, and I was left wondering why my peers would further subject themselves to torture.

The white columns of Quincy Market gleamed in the afternoon sun. Kids rested on the complex's steps while adults and elders stood in a semi-circle around our orchestra. Maybe Woodstock had died years ago, but the sense of companionship I imagined happening there was the same

kind I found in this crowd. A bright wave of laughter rolled as Frazee cracked his jokes into the microphone.

“And now... ‘Separate Ways!’”

The bass rumbled, the drums pounded, the trumpets blared.

Here we stand,

worlds apart, hearts broken in two, two, two...

Singing those lyrics aloud offered a refreshing amount of catharsis. Brand new, I riffed. I roared. I went off the rails, pouring my heart into the sea of people. And they offered their hearts back. The exchange gave me enlightenment, and finally, I knew what music was all about.

After our performance, two young women approached me. “You have such an amazing voice!” chimed the first. “You’re a powerhouse!” added the second. *Powerhouse*. The word danced around inside my skull. It was a contradiction. A tiny, insecure, eighteen-year-old girl like me...a powerhouse? Could it be possible? Yes or no, I loved it. I clung onto that word, *powerhouse*, and told myself to wear it through womanhood. Yes, it was a contradiction. And it was *my* contradiction.

When I graduated high school, I was in the pews amongst the rest of my classmates instead of the choir space with the group I abandoned. And that was fine. My old confidence came back. College allowed me to pursue a concentration which offered film and acting training, and I received much-needed jaw surgery soon after my acceptance. Despite a new face and new friends in New York, I occasionally travelled back to Jersey to cantor at funeral masses. Funeral masses which often included the performance of the “Ave Maria”—that beautiful anthem of holy motherhood she had taught me.

And every so often, I’d visit my Catholic school to see younger friends perform in plays and vocal recitals. The few times I encountered Miss Cindy, her reaction to my presence, as well as my new face, remained the same. “Oh, my pretty girl. My pretty girl. How you’ve grown...” Her hugs weren’t warm anymore, but cold and brittle—like autumn leaves approaching winter. Although we’d broken apart, I treated her like an old friend. After all, she had taught me many lessons. Some of them I learned in childhood, others I learned through a rough adolescence. All of them I learned in my own way.

Excerpt from *Split*

Joely Phenes

October 4, 2013

I was fifteen, fingering a razor blade at my desk, wondering if it held all the power it promised. I was running out of places to turn—I tried pouring my feelings into poetry, and it helped for a while. But one day the words stopped coming. Craving release, I was seduced by the blade.

I had been haunted by a vague sort of sadness for as long as I could remember. Throughout my early years I thought it was normal, that it happened to everybody. As I got older, this sadness grew and transformed until it took the shape of despair. Around this time, I learned of a practice known as “cutting.” In movies and television shows, I watched beautiful, tortured young girls cut their wrists open behind closed doors. It never occurred to me until then that cutting could be a solution to my problem. At fifteen, it was all I thought I could do.

On this particular night, I let my depression get the best of me. Only a couple days since my dad moved out of the house, I was about to go see his new apartment with my brother for the first time. I’d known my parents were getting a divorce for some months now, but it didn’t feel real until my dad moved out. I felt my childhood being ripped from me as I entered a strange new era in my life.

It took a long time to pry the blade out. It felt wrong, perverting this pink plastic razor my mom had bought for me, using it to mutilate myself. I wavered with my decision as I worked. But when I held the slim little blade between my fingers, watching it reflect the dim lamplight, my mind was made up.

Gently at first and then all at once, I pressed its cool, clean edge into my virgin skin. The moment the blood came trickling down my wrist, there was a kind of pleasant rush. My body filled with feigned happiness, so warm and inviting. For the moment, it was enough.

When the euphoria faded, reality quickly took its place. I could hear my mother’s footsteps in the hallway. I pictured her opening up the door, seeing the razor blades and blood that had accumulated on my desk. An overwhelming sense of guilt engulfed me; I worked swiftly to cover up

my deed. A handful of tissues soaked red were buried at the bottom of my trash can. I masked the cuts with a couple band-aids and rolled my sleeve back down.

It was time to go. My brother and I boarded my mom's car, and she drove us five minutes down Route 33. We sat in silence, an old Radiohead song playing so quietly I could barely make it out. The small stretch of highway that separated Monroe from Twin Rivers seemed like an eternity.

Driving to my dad's place. I repeated that phrase in my head, but it didn't sound right. Why should we have to drive to Dad's place? His place was with us, not five minutes down the road. My mom pulled over by the side of an apartment complex and dropped us off. It was going to take some getting used to.

Still, it had been no surprise when I found out my parents were splitting up. As my childhood faded, I watched their love for each other do the same. I couldn't remember the last time I had seen them kiss or hold hands. There were fights every night at the dinner table. I didn't cry when my mother told me their marriage was over.

Nothing really changed until my dad moved out. There was an emptiness in the house when he was gone. There were no longer novels and newspapers strewn about the living room. The smell of fresh French toast and eggs no longer filled the kitchen on Sunday mornings. He still stopped by every once in a while, only now he knocked. He no longer had a key to the front door.

I tried to look enthusiastic as he showed us around his small one-bedroom apartment. The walls were white and drab and there was little lighting. The living room was filled with old furniture that used to be in our house. The red, floral rocking chair. The corduroy pull-out couch. Bookshelves filled with literature.

"It's not much, but it's perfect for me," my dad proclaimed, smiling wide. He'd always been an optimist. Or maybe he was trying to stay strong for the sake of his children.

"It's nice, Dad," I managed.

He made chicken and couscous, like he always did at home. As he cooked, he pointed out all the great things about the new apartment.

"Look how much cabinet space I have in here. And I got these new plates and utensils from Home Goods, really good deal. Oh, and do you see how nice the fridge is? Brand new, it even has an ice maker."

There were cans of root beer in his fridge that we all drank with dinner. Mom didn't let us keep soda in the house.

The cuts on my wrist were starting to sting. Feelings of guilt came over me again as I tried to smile back at him. Seeing the apartment was more than I could take. I wanted to leave.

As I tried to fall asleep later that night, I couldn't stop thinking about the apartment. I pictured my father all alone in that dark little room, crying the tears he was too afraid to shed in front of me.

January 6, 2014

I was persistent enough about wanting therapy, and right around the time of the divorce I started attending weekly sessions. Growing up, I'd intermittently tried different therapists who never seemed to work out. I decided that if this was going to work, I'd have to be completely honest.

So, when Dr. Garson asked me if I'd ever harmed myself, I slid up my sleeve and showed him my wrist. I told him that it helped me cope with the sadness. He suggested I tell my mother, although I didn't have to if I didn't want to. He said it would be best that way, to keep her in the loop. Putting all my trust in him, I agreed. I was terrified.

He stepped out of the room to go get my mom. I sat alone in the office, my heart beating in my ears. The door opened again, and they took their seats.

I sat there as Dr. Garson explained to my mom that I had been cutting, assuring her that it was completely normal and that we could work through it. He told us that there were cognitive exercises he would teach me that would help me resist the urges. She nodded her head, keeping a balanced composure.

We rode home mostly in silence, aside from the music playing softly on the car radio.

She pulled the car into the driveway, and only then did she break the silence. When she turned her face to me, I saw that she had been crying.

In a voice so soft I could hardly hear it, she asked me, "Is this my fault?"

I had never seen my mother so vulnerable or sad. A wave of guilt crashed over me, so strong I thought I would break. Each time I cut, the happiness was always followed by guilt at how my parents would

potentially react. My fear was now an actuality, as I watched my mother cry tears that I had caused with my selfishness.

“No!” I cried. How could she ever say such a thing? The woman who gives and asks nothing in return, who has given me all I could ever ask for as a mother, whose every action is filled with all the love in the world.

“Does it have to do with me and Dad splitting up? Was it selfish of me to do that to you and David?”

I assured her that it was in no way selfish of her to end their marriage for her own happiness. I knew that in the long run, it was better for the family to accept the end of a failing marriage than to stick it out and be miserable.

“You had to do what was best for you,” I said, “even though the divorce has been harder on me than I thought it would be. I know that I’m depressed, and whether you got a divorce or not, it wouldn’t have changed a thing.”

We sat there for a while and cried together.

August 16, 2017

I was in Florida visiting my paternal grandparents. We flew down, just me, my brother, and my dad. Our family vacations were now separated between Dad family vacations and Mom family vacations.

It was well past midnight and I was in my Nana and Papa’s guest bedroom. Everyone was asleep, and I was wide awake.

Suddenly, something on the wall caught my eye. It was a picture that I’d seen hundreds of times before, my parents’ wedding picture. It had been a while since I’d seen it last, since my parents didn’t keep it up in either of their places anymore.

My parents looked like themselves, yet they looked like completely different people. My dad still had a gap in his front teeth back then. My mom had flushed, rosy cheeks and her white dress with the beading, one of the most beautiful dresses I’d ever seen. Pink carnations were on his tux. Their hands were clasped together. The most foreign thing was the look in their eyes. They looked so innocent, wide-eyed, in love. The world hadn’t quite gotten to them yet. They didn’t look so tired, worn-down. They had no idea that in 25 years they would find themselves alone again.

After staring at the picture for a while, I realized I was crying. Most of the time their divorce didn't seem like such a big deal. I thought I was past it. But then, times like these, it would hit me.

I searched on Spotify for "In My Life" by The Beatles. My parents' wedding song. It used to bring me comfort. Now it brought me something else. A yearning for the past.

The words took on a new meaning that night:

*Though I know I'll never lose affection
For people and things that went before
I know I'll often stop and think about them
In my life I love you more
In my life I love you more.*

Contributors' Notes

Joyce Alayon is.

Kellie Diodato would like to thank the editors at *The Carson Review* for selecting her first poetic piece. She is proud to be sharing her work with the MMC community.

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