## The Blue Route Issue 18

#### The Blue Route, Issue 18 (May 2017)

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Widener University's online journal of undergraduate writing takes its name from the Blue Route (I-476), a north-south highway running through the suburbs of Philadelphia.

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## **Alterations**

#### Korbin Jones, Northwest Missouri State University

Altars became a common sight for the Morales sisters over a period of four years. They saw their first in a hot August. Sweat dripped from the pastor's nose like a leaky faucet as he spoke, but Remedios—standing like a terracotta virgin, smelling of milk, wearing the dress—showed no signs of wetting. Nerves seemed absent. Her mane-like hair threatened to tear itself away from the countless bobby pins her sisters had stuffed in it earlier, but other than that she appeared unwavering.

The groom, Pepe, was beaming. His smile was as polished and brilliant as Remedios's ring, which shone in the light as he slipped it onto her tapered finger. They were a hopeful mirage for the two families packed in the tiny chapel. A Morales turned Buendía. So much rode on the vows Remedios and Pepe shared—they both knew it. After all the formalities had been addressed, Remedios, having downed a few drinks, confided in her sisters at the reception.

"What a beautifully miserable day," the bride laughed, scrunching her dress within her hands. "Watch me turn to rot before Mami's crow's feet scratch my face."

Between that night and Carmen's wedding, which followed no less than seven months after, Remedios had taken up drinking beyond her wedding night. The sun would rise with her morning glass of red wine. Pepe laughed it off when worried relatives asked about her peculiar habit. He even tried joining her, but found the after taste a bit too sour. A rumor passed around the family dinner tables. Carmen and Ximena worried for their sister.

"There's a parasite in her," said Carmen. "It curled up in her belly the day she said 'I do."

"But what can we do?" Ximena looked up at the ceiling, spying a cobweb twirling from the ceiling fan's current.

"You've all those friends. Take her to dinner, or whatever it is you all do together."

"She's always been a little solitary though."

"All the more reason to get her around others. Loneliness is leaving her in a bottle, Ximena, and on the outside is an untouched husband any woman in town would snatch up in an instant."

Weeks later, Ximena finally convinced Remedios to leave her dusty, unkept home for a night out with her friends. It was an awkward arrangement at first. As soon as the group sat down in the restaurant, Remedios waved her entire arm in the air until a waiter was summoned. She ordered the first red wine she saw on the menu and crossed her arms, impatiently awaiting her libation. Ximena was embarrassed. She began to apologize for her sister when Remedios's gaze fell on Imo, a friend who had travelled from Jamaica for the weekend. Her hair was done up in dark dreads, as if roots were sprouting from her scalp. Her laugh, like the trilling call of a skylark, crawled across the table and brought Remedios's skin to goosebumps.

The two women found each other later in the night and became inseparable. While many of the others had shuffled out in irregular intervals, Imo and Remedios remained seated at the bar late into the night. Even Ximena, who found the two women to be odd ends tied together, left before they did. It was after that night that Remedios poured all the red wine in her house into the garden. Her spirits improved remarkably. She cleaned weekly, cooked Pepe tolerable meals, and even found the courage to finally consummate the months' old marriage. Pepe himself glowed.

Carmen was facing inverse luck. Over the course of a few months she'd gained quite a bit of weight, which some blamed on an unexpected pregnancy, and was found by her sisters covered in the tattered remains of her wedding dress the night before taking Aureliano's last name.

"I thought to try and let it out," she sobbed, scissors nestled between her thighs.

Remedios took the scissors and placed them in the drawer. Ximena wiped the tears from her sister's round cheeks. Carmen had been the thinner of the three sisters. She had taken pride in her cornstalk body, but now she was about the same size as Remedios before her liquid diet.

"I think my dress will fit you." Remedios pulled Carmen's head into her lap and stroked her shiny, black hair. "You can have it tomorrow, if you'd like. I'll never wear it again."

The altar paid witness to Carmen walking down the aisle in Remedios's dress with a slight alteration; she had cut and hemmed the long sleeves to stop at her elbows. Her veil—so thick that Ximena was surprised her sister could even see—was what caught the eyes of the Moraleses and the Cortázars. Her soon-to-be husband, Aureliano, was shaking as he saw Carmen make her way toward him. To Ximena's self-contempt, she could not recall much of what happened after Carmen arrived at the altar. It was all so similar to Remedios's wedding—the vows, the exchanging of rings, the lighting of candles.

Unlike the first wedding, Remedios did not drink, not even at Carmen's reception. Sobriety seemed to be coupled with Imo's addition to her life. Ximena thought it her success, then, that she introduced a godsend to her wayward sister.

"I'm going to Jamaica in a few months," Remedios told Ximena over the trumpets and hoots and hollers. "I'm going to see Imo. You're welcome to come."

It was at that point that Carmen galloped over to her sisters and collapsed into Remedios's lap.

"I was just thinking, Remedios, about the rot you spoke of the night you got married." Carmen slinked down, kneeling, and looked up into her sister's eyes. "I've been rotting for ages. I was born rotten, my soul riddled with all these festering sores. I hope Aureliano can plug them up."

The Morales family went some two years without marrying off Ximena, the last of the sisters. She would tell her parents that she was too busy to find a husband. Her trips to Jamaica with Remedios, short as they were, kept her occupied when she wasn't working. Rumors passed through the mouths of the Moraleses, but none quite believed. Remedios was contently married and Ximena, although a bachelorette, would never stray, not in her family's eyes. So while the words still found their ways into her cousins' and aunts' and uncles' ears, none of the Moraleses were convinced that Ximena was the debaucherous type.

Ulises, her father, prepared her a suitor while she was away with Remedios, Imo, and the other women of the island. His name was Pietro Navarro, an aristocrat and well-traveled man. When Ximena returned and the news broke, she herself was broken. Her wedding was planned much without her. Úrsula, her mother, and Pilar, her future mother-in-law, took it upon themselves to arrange the whole thing. It was Carmen who approached her a few days after hearing of the wedding with the shared white dress folded neatly in her hands.

"I suppose a tradition has been started." She offered it to Ximena. "It'll need some taking in, but it won't hurt. Not much, anyway." Ximena gently took the dress and watched it unravel before her. "I went ahead and took off the sleeves. I know you hate them."

There were yellow and red candles burning near the altar. Sunflower and rose petals were strewn about. Ximena's wedding was by far the gaudiest of the three, but perhaps the saddest. As she walked down the aisle she stared into Pietro's eyes, his returning gaze an ember. He burned for her, but she was cold for him. Nothing he did could replicate the warmth she felt on Jamaican sands; no touch could be as intoxicating as the waves on her naked skin. The thought made her body itch within the dress. She wanted nothing more than to run, to find the fastest mode to the island and erase her name in the surf. She'd awakened the rot her sisters spoke of in Jamaica, and she was wilting at the altar.

**Korbin Jones** is an undergraduate at Northwest Missouri State University studying creative writing, publishing, Spanish, and art. At the university, he works at GreenTower Press for The Laurel Review as an editorial assistant and typesetter. He has had poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction published in the Medium Weight Forks, Sucarnochee Review, The Vehicle, Noctua Review, and Polaris.

## A Death in the Family

#### Logan Jorgenson, Concordia College

Connor opened the front door and stumbled into the winter wind that blew down from the north. He wore a warm coat over a sweatshirt and T-shirt and a fur-lined hat with flaps to protect his ears. In his hands was an old ice cream pail filled with water and Lysol toilet bowl cleaner. The stench, a fetid smell, rose from the pail.

He stepped off the porch of the little two-story farm house into the night. Near the red barn, a light on the telephone pole lit the landscape as it always had. Snow covered everything, the tall pine trees to the west and the hills far to the north and even the pond between the house and the barn was hidden under snow, covered as one might try to cover a hole in a leaky bucket.

Above, the stars shone bright, the Milky Way like a river flowing from horizon to horizon. Twinkling in the night, Polaris rested above the barn. It was March, the middle of calving season and two days after the largest snowstorm of winter.

Connor hunched his shoulders against the wind. He missed his bed. He had been awoken only minutes before by his mother because his father needed help birthing a calf. This had been his brother's job. His father would wake his brother at any time of night. His brother had loved the cows.

Shivering, Connor walked around the covered pond. He and his brother used to walk across the frozen pond all the time, but now he never did. He could remember when he and his brother would play games out on the ice with sticks and a rubber ball, pretending to be hockey players.

He shuffled through the knee-deep snow, clutching the pail so tight that the whites of his knuckles were visible. He kept it steady with his left hand, preventing it from spilling or sloshing as he made his way around the pond and to the barn.

It was not a picturesque barn that often appeared on postcards or in calendars with a high sloped roof and a hay loft above. It was a

wide, three-roomed building with red steel on the outside that was still dented from the hail storm two years ago.

He remembered the storm well. They had been harvesting when the storm came through. Connor had driven the tractor and grain cart back to the farm through the thick of it. The hail cracked the roof of the cab, causing water to pour down into the tractor. Yet, his brother always claimed to have had it worse when he drove the semi home and a baseball sized hailstone burst through the passenger side windshield and landed in the seat beside him.

Connor opened the gate to the pen right outside the barn and then turned to latch it. Something nuzzled him in the back of the knee. He turned to find a small calf with red fur and old socks over its ears to keep them from freezing off. It was the bottle calf, born only four days ago. Its mother had died soon after its birth. Now it looked for the bottle of formula milk it received three times a day.

He pushed it out of the way and stepped across the frozen manure. The calf followed, mooing for milk. Sliding the heavy barn door open, Connor stepped into the barn. The floor was layered in frozen manure matted with golden straw. The ceiling was engulfed in dust-covered spider webs. "Dust traps," his father called them.

In the far wall were two openings that led to the next room, one guarded by a gate and the other by a door. Connor walked across the cold floor and through the door, using his leg to stop the mooing calf from following him in.

The next room was insulated and the walls were covered and painted. The ceiling was bare and whitewashed while the floor was covered in beautiful, clean straw. Across the room was a cabinet and a long metal shelf. In the center was a square pen made up of a metal frame and red metal gates. Along one side was a rusting green head gate.

A ruddy cow stood in the pen, her head wedged between the panels of the head gate. The cow was raising her tail, moving it out of the way for the calf that was about to be born.

"There you are," Connor's father said.

He was a short, burly man with salt and pepper hair and the beginnings of a beard. He took the bucket out of Connor's hand, then set it on the shelf. Connor took off his coat and hat and joined his father.

The bucket was sitting on the shelf, the top still warm and bubbly from the Lysol. Connor's father stood at the cabinet, rummaging through it. Inside was an assortment of medicines and epidermal needles as long as Connor's hand. His father grabbed two ropes and handed Connor a long thin chain with two metal handles, one on each end.

"She's a kicker," his father said.

Connor gave no response but looked back at the cow's yellow ear tag. It read "66F." He dunked the chains in the Lysol and turned to help his father tie the cow's back legs to the gates with the rope.

After they had finished, they dipped their hands in the Lysol water, and his father took the chains and stuck his hand up the cow's birthing canal about four inches at which the cow gave a throaty moo. He worked his hand deeper, wrapping the chains around the unborn calf's front hooves.

Connor waited. Off to his left, through the gate to the other room, movement caught his eye. There, at the gateway, stood the orphaned bottle calf, watching them.

"Ok," his father said and handed him one end of the chain. "One, two, three, pull." Connor leaned back and used his body weight to pull on the chain, planting his boots in the soft, straw-matted ground.

The chain grew taut but refused to move. Connor leaned back further. His boot slipped on the loose straw and he fell onto his back as the cow mooed in displeasure.

"Dammit, Connor. I said pull," his father said.

Connor rose and pulled on the chain once more and looked over to his father. His arms were a deep tan from years spent in the field; the muscles toned from decades of hard manual labor. His shirt was faded and grease-stained, a large brown spot covered the left shoulder, a stain from changing oil on the tractors.

Connor thought of his own clean, unstained shirt and his own white skin, and he pulled harder.

The chain moved, link by link, emerging from the cow's birthing canal. Soon, front hooves appeared, greasy black. Then a nose, a pink fleshy soft-spot surrounded by hair.

Connor and his father pulled with renewed encouragement, sweat soaking their shirts and pants, beading on their foreheads and dripping down into their boots, until Connor regretted his choice of woolen socks.

The cow squealed and knelt down on her front knees.

"Pull!" Connor's father said.

Connor pulled and leaned back as much as he could without the fear of slipping. Suddenly, Connor could see the ears of the calf as its whole head became visible. Then torso and rump slid out of the cow with ease and the calf fell into a crumpled heap on the barn floor. The sudden slack caused both Connor and his father to fall onto the floor.

The cow mooed for its calf and struggled against its restraints. But the calf lay still, covered with the fine film of the placenta, the umbilical cord wrapped like a noose around its neck. Its eyes were frozen in their sockets, and its tongue hung out of its mouth, the top a gray-blue and the underside a mild pink. It had been dead before they even pulled it out of the womb.

Connor's father swore at the dead animal and then walked over to the cabinet on the other wall. He took out a bottle of whiskey from behind two ropes. He kept it hidden there, Connor knew, so his mother wouldn't find it. It wasn't as if she didn't know. It had been there for a year now.

Connor looked at the dead calf. Its red hide was drenched and matted. Soon it would bloat, or freeze, or both. Lord knew it only took minutes to freeze in the winter.

It had taken even less time for his brother to freeze.

He had been asleep the night his brother went out to help birth a calf. His brother walked across the pond as they always had, unaware that the ice had thinned under the layer of snow. They found him lying on his face, three feet from the hole, face porcelain white with cheeks still red from the frostbite. "Hypothermia," the sheriff had said.

His brother had been the one who loved the cows, loved the work, loved it all. His brother had been the one who was going to take over the farm. His brother was the one who actually enjoyed it.

His father took a long sip of the whiskey, straight from the bottle, and then handed it to Connor. Connor took it and held it in his hands for a moment before bringing the bottle to his lips and tilting his head back. The liquid just touched his throat when he choked. He coughed and covered his mouth with his hand, trying not to spit out the whiskey. He took a deep breath through his nose and swallowed, coughing again. His father took the bottle back and took one more swig before putting it back in the cabinet.

"What could we have done different?" Connor asked.

"Nothing, and you know it," his father said. "Stop being foolish. Make yourself useful and go get the chains."

Connor walked over to the dead calf, its mother mooed at him as he went by, still stuck in the head gate. He touched the calf's front legs. They felt warm but Connor knew it was not the calf's own warmth, but the mother's. He pulled the hooves apart and slipped the chain off its feet. The slime stuck to his hand as he let the leg fall back to the ground.

He brought the chains back to the shelf, set them in the Lysol water and washed the slime off his hand. He stared down at his hand and could still feel the slime of the dead calf on it. He dipped it in the water again and again but still couldn't wash off the feel of the slime.

"Buck up! It's one dead animal," his father said. "You'd think the world was ended the way you're acting."

"I'm not staying here," Connor said, not looking at his father.

"What?"

"I said I'm not staying here."

"Then head back into the house. I'll just clean up here." His father moved to pick up the dead calf.

"I've enlisted," Connor said.

"Oh?"

"I got a letter two weeks ago, junk mail. I—I decided to join." Connor straightened his back, still not looking at his father.

"Will you be back?"

Connor paused for a moment. "I don't know. I can't do this every year. I wasn't cut out for it like—you know."

"Yeah," his father said. "I know."

They both stood still. Connor looked down at the shelf. The surface was scored with millions of tiny scratches, and a large brown stain covered the upper left corner. The right edge was dented in from a bull that had gotten loose in the barn. The cow cried behind him, two loud moos followed by a clang as the cow struggled against the head gate.

A soft, slow moo caught Connor's attention. He looked to his left and saw the orphaned calf standing at the gate with its head held low, staring at the unmoving red lump on the floor. Connor's father saw the calf too.

"Go get her," he said, taking a buck knife out of the cabinet.

Connor opened the door to the other room. The calf stood at the gate and looked at Connor as he approached. He walked up to it, expecting it to jump or run away from him. It did neither. Connor reached down and picked it up, one arm around its hips and the other around the base of its neck. The calf mooed in discomfort.

When Connor walked into the center room with the orphan in his arms his father was just finishing skinning the dead calf. He pulled the skin up and away, using the knife to separate the tissue in between. The skin looked misshapen in his father's hands, the fur a glistening auburn with stray pieces of straw stuck to it. The dead calf lay in a heap of soft, pink flesh.

"Bring her here and hold her steady," his father said.

Connor set the calf down and held it still as his father draped the skin over it. The orphaned calf stood and stared at the dead calf. In the pen, the cow mooed again and again, struggling against its restrains.

Connor's father tied the skin to the calf with six pieces of rough twine, one around the neck, another around the hips, and then one at each ankle. Finished, he pushed the orphan into the pen in the center. It squirmed, uncomfortable in its new coat. "Go bring the carcass out," his father said.

Connor picked up the dead calf as his father walked over to the head gate and released the cow. It mooed and sniffed the ground behind it, searching for its calf. But the calf stood rigid, eyes locked on the dead calf in Connor's arms. Then the cow mooed at the orphaned calf and sniffed the hide on its back. The calf stepped to the side as the cow began to lick it. As Connor walked out, he saw the cow licking the calf clean and the calf sniffing at the nose of its new mother.

**Logan Jorgenson** is in his second year at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota where he is currently pursuing a B.A. in English Writing.

## **Angelic**

#### Tavi Gerstle, Oberlin College

i.

"Hey baby, did it hurt when you fell out of heaven?" No, motherfucker, it hurt when they cut off my wings.

ii.

You want to know what hurt me? Clothing hurt me, fabric rough against my soft skin.

Food hurt me, heavy food of the earth dead flesh of beasts and plants, all of it tasting like dirt filling up my tender throat heavy, earthen, choking me.

iii.

You want to know what hurt? Domestication hurt. Feminization hurt. Normalization hurt. It hurt when the pinned my fluttering arms to my sides and said "Kid stop flapping your hands. You're not a bird. You're not flying anywhere."

iv.

It hurt the first time they separated us, boys on this side and girls on the other

and I felt my spine try to separate, vertebrae wrenched in opposite directions.

In that moment, I knew how Adam felt when G-d split them into him and her.

v.

You want to hear about pain?

Puberty hit me like a train running over a maiden tied to the tracks. I mean, puberty hit me like a man who would tie someone to train tracks

would hit, closed fist, going for the pain.

A one-two sucker punch, first to my ribs (broken when I was fourteen, when I tried to bind down my chest with duct tape) then, when I doubled over, to the face. Leave me black-eyed, bloody-nosed.

vi.

What hurt: the appearance of little black hairs poking through my skin

like worms from the mud after rain.

I used to rip them out one by one and I always ended up tearing skin. I think I meant to tear skin. I think I wanted to rip off my skin, really.

Also: the appearance of lumps on my chest, painful soft, heavy, peat moss soaked with rain water. So heavy every night I felt them pressing down on me, constricting my lungs.

So heavy I thought I would suffocate.

vii.

Do you want to know what hurts, really?

Most days I hate my body.

Most days I feel like I should have been ten feet tall, a thousand eyes all over my body, going all around, like a wheel, never ending.

Most days I wish I could have been living fire, too hot to touch too bright to behold, six wings on my back. Most days I wish I had been

anything but small and weak and flesh.

Most days I think that "trans" is just another word for

"changeling" is just another word for

"android" is just another word for

"I'M A MOTHERFUCKING ANGEL"

is just another word for

I want out this body. Any way possible.

#### viii.

And you know what hurts? When guys like you yell at me on the streets

or beckon me like a dog or wink at me in cafes.

When you say "gorgeous" when you say "you're just who I've been looking for"

when you say "hey girl" and I want to scream

"No I'm not" and

"creating you was G-d's only mistake" and

"I'm not here for you" and

"I am too holy for your touch your sight your anything."

ix.

Anyway, did it hurt? Yes, I guess so. Yes, it hurt. Yes, it's still hurting.

**Tavi Gerstle** is a second year creative writing student at Oberlin College. They have been writing since they were a child, but they have never been published before.

## Agoraphobia

#### Amanda Ray, Central Michigan State University

I'll probably be fine controlling this giant hunk of metal going fifty miles per hour with just a foot and some gangly phalanges but I'm thinking about how they say you're more likely to get in a car accident than a plane crash and how there is always some traffic accident on the news. I look out my rear view mirror to make sure sedans aren't falling into the river from a crack in the concrete. Maybe I'm grasping too tight, but sometimes, for a moment, I forget my left from my right, the break from the gas, and wonder if maybe one day I'll forget that my favorite snack used to be Goldfish, or how I'd catch little yellow moths with my hands during first-grade recess. Now, there's a guy turning right in the left turn lane and I'm reminded of why I should never, ever leave my house if I want to live to see the day I get married, if that day ever comes. Odds are I'll be caught conversing with myself and he'll drive off with everything but the extra TV remote and a pen to sign the divorce papers with. How would I explain that to the children? What if I put them in the car seat wrong?

**Amanda Ray** is a senior at Central Michigan University majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing and minoring in psychology. Her poetry has been published in *The Central Review* and *Grand Central Magazine's* "The Creative Issue." She hopes to continue writing poetry and fiction after she graduates in May.

# **Recurring Dreams of Family Dis-Union**

Shanley Smith, Hope College

Sometimes I wake up clutching a pen with ink spilt over my over worn pajamas. I dip my fingers in these black pools, copy

your signature on the ceiling. Carrying the strike of the i into the crossed t, I wonder if that's how it looked on divorce papers.

I'm sick of attempting sketches of you only to find I didn't draw the funny bent of your nose right. I've never been an artist

and these days I don't feel like your daughter. I'm sick of painting ceiling tiles. My neck is cramping from looking up and my shoulder is turning

into a weight that bends my back into a mirrored angle of the bone perched above your lip, which Uncle Eddy broke when he found out you liked blondes instead of his sister.

I'm writing you letters I'll regret beginning, knowing sleep won't come once fingertips have awoken and I'm trying to slip back into nightmares

where you miss my fourth birthday party over and over again and leave me crying as a clown tries to compliment my grass stained sneakers.

**Shanley Smith** is currently a sophomore at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. There she serves as the prose editor of their literary magazine, Opus. She seeks to get her B.A. in Creative Writing and hopes someday to own a large Irish Wolfhound and live on either side of the American coastline.

## **Tracked**

#### Shanley Smith, Hope College

Tired of rolling her fingers over her ribs she picked a practice to smooth the tentlike bones arching over her organs.

Began laying herself across train tracks until her bones formed a flat sheet, a shield of sorts to protect the slivers that snuck between her marrow and muscles and poked at her lungs.

Now that the wheels of the travelling circus have rolled over her, she can breathe. Finding a relief in the weights that steamroll her,

push her organs into new folds like origami that keeps being transformed into blank-page animals. She is an animal.

This waif thin creature, locks away her desires in a cage she built for herself along the railway, so that every passenger zipping by can see her sideshow from their blurred window.

How she loves this *tabula rasa* state of mind. A creature starved of thought and drive, locking herself away, occasionally turning keys to return to the tracks to lie down,

on the iron strips: unleashed, untied, this tigress, this ape, this seductive snake, and harmless waif of a woman lies.

**Shanley Smith** is currently a sophomore at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. There she serves as the prose editor of their literary magazine, Opus. She seeks to get her B.A. in Creative Writing and hopes someday to own a large Irish Wolfhound and live on either side of the American coastline.

## Flip the Switch

#### Jayvian Green, Stephen F. Austin State University

There was a little black girl with pale white—light bulb—skin, dark brown plaited hair which curled up at the edges.

There was another little black girl with dark brown—rich, chocolate cake—skin, who said to the light bulb girl *I don't like you. You're white.* 

Light bulb looked down at her absence of color and said to the little girl, *no*, *I'm black*. *My mama is*... If that's your mama, how come you white

she black? With a shrug of her tiny shoulders light bulb walked away but chocolate cake pushed her from behind —not leaving any of her color to crumb light bulb's skin.

Like the filament inside her, these words stayed: I don't like you you have white people skin.

**Jayvian Green** is a fourth-year B.F.A Creative Writing undergraduate at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. She is a native of Houston, Texas. She had one of her works published in SFA subplots chapbook which was used to raise money for local high students' books, and she placed first in the undergraduate portion of the Piney Dark Horror Contest.