

THE BLUE ROUTE

ISSUE 27



The Blue Route

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Letter from the Editor

Another semester ends, and with it, another school year comes and goes. It is during these times that I believe we all need a moment of reflection: a step back from the tumultuousness. The world is moving so rapidly around us, that if we don't catch our breath, it might be a while before we have the chance. This time of year represents change and transformation, and the feeling is palpable in 2022. Walking on my way to class, it all feels surreal. Despite this unease, it is not fear I am sensing. Humans are the most resilient creatures on the planet, and it amazes me the feats that we, as a collective, consistently accomplish. Even when the odds look far beyond our favor and calamity seems like it's on our doorsteps, we step up and do better. I know for me, this year has been an emotionally, physically, and financially turbulent year, and I do not get the feeling it is much different for others. And yet, nobody seems to be throwing in the towel. Despite justified fears, humans are only getting stronger.

I am envisioning a caterpillar, on the verge of complete metamorphosis. The caterpillar has been preparing, gathering its nutrients and growing, waiting for the perfect time to emerge and demonstrate its true magnificence. This brilliant insect is indicative of all of us at the moment, and I cannot think of a better batch of literature to match this energy. The Blue Route's 27th issue is the culmination of many amazing writers demonstrating their resilience, but more importantly, their positivity and passion. In the most pressing times, we need work of art and literature like the ones presented in this issue. They elevate us and bring about our own growth. Good literature should always remind us how to be a better version of ourselves, and I hope you receive that same satisfaction from reading them.

Sincerely,
Stefan Cozza

What You Sow

Anika Brahmbhatt

In the '90s, Japanese doctors discovered that some heart attack patients were experiencing a strange new symptom: their heart's left ventricles ballooned until they looked like takotsubo, or octopus traps. The condition came to be known as takotsubo cardiomyopathy, or as we call it here in the States, "broken heart syndrome." Your heart can literally change shape in response to emotional stressors.

I look up from the book. Unashamed, my dad hacks out a prolonged cough. Then: "That's nice. But you know that if you've got a tight chest and shallow breath and nausea and all that shit, it's still more likely you're just having a heart attack."

"I know, Dad."

"Okay, just making sure."

Then it's completely silent, except for the beeping of the patient monitor beside his spartan excuse of a bed. His sheets need changing. Do they bother changing sheets in hospice? I wonder if the cleaners get annoyed at patients who die the day after laundry day.

"Dad," My tone is too curt; I promised myself I wouldn't act like this anymore. I try to regain my composure. "Do you want me to keep reading?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." I shift in the chair. I keep forgetting about the nail that protrudes from the wooden backrest and leaning against it.

"The most common cause of broken heart syndrome..." I look up, scanning the outside—that's what I call anywhere in the hospital except this tiny room now—for the redhead nurse who said she'd be back about thirty minutes ago. She still isn't anywhere within sight. "...is the death of a loved one."

We're both silent again, and then he starts to laugh. He's wincing while he does it, and I glare at him.

"I think that's enough for today," I say, standing up.

"Elissa," he says, but he's too weak to sit fully up, much less stop me from leaving.

I turn around, my face proudly stoic, like its muscles are coated in concrete.

“What gives you the right?” I ask. My voice is so even toned and devoid of hysteria that I can hardly believe it’s me talking.

Then I leave for the night. If that’s when he goes, that’s when he goes, I think.

“Did you know that the man who invented lobotomies was killed by someone he’d performed a lobotomy on?” he says.

“That can’t be true,” I say.

“Why would I lie?”

I shoot him an aggrieved look. His machine starts beeping and I leave to fetch the redhead nurse. Her name is Mary. She must have told me a dozen times since I got here.

“So, how do you think orphanhood is going to feel?” he asks once the nurse is gone. The sun outside is disappearing behind burly black clouds. I think about how much I hate driving home in the dark.

I shrug at his comment, knowing it was meant to be incendiary. I tell myself I’m used to his irreverence by now, but I still can’t look him in the face. “I’ve basically been one since I was eight,” I say.

I’m proud that my voice remains even, but the concrete mask is beginning to crack. Even a decade later, any reference to my mom still tears at me. And I can hardly believe that he, of all people, would dare to bring it up. Maybe dying destroys all the inhibitions even the worst of us have left.

I fiddle with the white orchid on the table across from his bed. I’ve been staring at the floor for so long my eyes are beginning to feel like they’re covered in cataracts.

One of Dad’s old colleagues sent the plant. I stop disturbing it when one of the petals flutters to the floor and I realize what my hands have been doing, expediting its death.

I wonder if they’ll send the plant home with me after, or if they’ll just throw it away. I kind of hope for the latter, even though it would be a waste. I’ve just never been able to care for plants the way some other people can.

I hear a long sigh, followed by more coughing. “Read from the history book today,” Dad says, as if he didn’t invoke the death of my mother for the sake of conversation a few minutes ago.

“You don’t want to hear about more obscure medical conditions?” I feign surprise. The sun is hardly a fluorescent dot on the horizon anymore, and I know it’ll be gone by the time I sit down and find the right page in the ramshackle History of Imperial Russia. I remember the book sitting on our living room shelf since I was a child, mostly because of its signature gold binding, but I’d never touched it until a few weeks ago when they

transferred Dad to hospice.

I read to him about the little Russian princess, Anastasia. Yes, the same one that the animated movie is based on—except in real life, she didn’t survive the Bolshevik revolution. She died along with her mother and father and brother and sisters when they were massacred by their own guards in Siberia.

Sometimes, I think, we humans are so stupid. What could possess us to animate such romantic wistfulness into the image of a young girl left all alone in the world, especially with such a burden as that?

The nurse tells me today looks like it might be it. Mary. Her name is Mary.

“Oh,” is all I can say. She places a cold hand on my shoulder; it’s supposed to be comforting.

I figure I might as well ask him today if it might be my last chance. “Did Mom force you to stay?” I say, staring into his face as if it’s just a mold of him, a version of him that can’t think or speak or move.

He doesn’t look as surprised as I expected. Either the exhaustion has pushed him to the brink of some strange serenity, or he’s thought about this on his own already. “No,” he says.

“Don’t lie,” I say.

He lets out an irritated grunt and tries to shift his weight. “Fine. But I wouldn’t say ‘forced.’ She just didn’t want her kid to grow up in a broken home, you know?” He’s looking at me almost earnestly. “So many kids with divorced parents these days, even I have to admit it’s fucking sad.”

I scoff. “Okay,” I say. “So then why’d you move out?”

He’s silent for a long moment. My gaze has been fixed on the nurse’s station through the tiny glass portal on the door, so about two minutes into the silence, I almost worry that he’s gone ahead and left me.

“That’s just who I am, Elissa,” he says finally. “I’m smart enough to know when a thing is broken beyond repair.”

Leave it to Dad to keep self-aggrandizing until his last day on earth.

“But you came back,” I say. “It probably would’ve been easier if you’d just—”

“I know, Elissa.” He pauses, his breathing growing labored. The beads of sweat forming along his hairline and between the creases of his forehead viscerally disgust me. I make a mental note for my advance directive: if fighting with my estranged child sends me into this much physiological distress on my deathbed, the doctors should take it upon themselves to end the pitiful scene.

“I know you won’t believe me,” he continues, “but every day, I wish it

was me instead of her. I didn't know how to raise a kid, for God's sake. If you were only going to be left with one parent—”

A ball of heat is suddenly gurgling through my chest, constricting my throat, and I briskly leave the room before he can finish. Mary looks up, alarmed, from the nurse's station, where she's eating what I assume to be a late lunch. It's a tuna sandwich from the deli downstairs, and it smells awful.

“Everything okay with you all?” she asks. I don't answer. I run to the women's room and vomit in the sink before I can make it into a stall.

An older lady hobbles out of a stall to my right—she's gripping her walker so hard that the thick veins in her hands look ready to burst—and scowls disgustedly when our eyes meet in the mirror.

“Sorry,” I say under my breath. She doesn't seem to hear, or if she does, she doesn't acknowledge it. She makes a point of dragging herself to the leftmost sink so she can wash her hands as far away from me as possible.

I can't stop thinking about the comment he made yesterday about orphanhood. Wondering what made him think it was okay, then chiding myself for entertaining the assumption that he'd care how his words made me feel. It would be a first. And isn't there some old adage that goes, “people rarely change once they're on their deathbed?”

Despite how long it's been since the accident, I can't dam up my mind from the inundation of sounds and images: my wailing about leaving the theme park when the sun was still bright above us, him yelling at me to stop being a brat, to appreciate that he and Mom took time off of work for this, her begging him, increasingly desperately, to keep his eyes on the road and discipline me later, if he was really that upset.

Then: shattered pieces of windshield, sunlight leaking into the car at an angle that made no sense, sirens flashing with only slightly more intensity than the carnival games at Wonderland.

Dad dies that night, while I'm alone at the apartment watching some new reality TV show I don't know the name of. I mute the TV when I get the call. I wonder what Mary must think of me, abandoning my father when it was clear he was in his final hours. When she explicitly told me so.

I wonder if she'd been there, holding his hand as it went cold. For some reason, the mental image makes me furious. I bury my face in a mountain of pillows and fall asleep like that, distorting the ligaments in

my neck and showered in the silent fluorescence of the people on screen.

I never finished reading him the chapter about Anastasia.

The original palace guards refused to kill Anastasia and the other Romanov daughters. It was only Czar Nicholas who had to answer for his sins, they argued; the girls were innocent.

These guards were promptly replaced with others who had no such aversion. But all of them still shot at Czar Nicholas first. (I assume there was more glory in killing a king than a little girl.) Ironically, all this did was ensure that he died the most quickly and painlessly. The girls, on the other hand—Anastasia included—had to be bayoneted to death, one by one, at close range because the guards had run out of bullets.

Poor Anastasia and her sisters remind me of an old Gujarati proverb: Mawtar vave ne viya vadhe. Children reap what their parents sow.

I wonder if the Russian princesses would have liked to garden, had they lived. In the last few months of their lives, they had barely seen the outside world. I think they would have loved to tend their own plants, to be responsible for a life no matter how small and delicate, to see that they could coax another being through germination and turn it into a thing of beauty. I think it would have brought them comfort, made them happy, even.

I, on the other hand, have never been able to care for plants.



Shpresa Ymeraj

4128

Lacey Buycks

The day they bulldoze my house, I will
swallow a bottle of whiskey whole and spend
the following days writing poetry. My dreams
and sparkled desires turning the lined page black,

*my only
way of coping.*

I will mourn the alley kitchen that my family
never fully fit in, our batches of oatmeal
raisin cookies. The leafy trim that
edged the corners. Our hardwood floors that
squeaked in certain places. My feet missing
the warmth in our floorboards from the furnace

in the winter.

Tears will run for the silver maples when they
come down. The catalpas lining our front yard
wave us goodbye, their white petals no longer
covering all. They'd last longer if Amazon
would stop eating our land and shitting out concrete.
The most depressing loss: a pine tree my age

and twenty feet tall. A wedding present
to my parents. Their backyard ceremony *flattened under cement.*

The sun will set in our sunroom one last time,
my summers spent reading books surrounded
by spiders and bumblebees, disappearing into pollen
and dust. I'll keep a brick from our fireplace and
some flowered wallpaper from our entryway.
I'll hold on these things until they crumble too,
erased from the timeline like *something insignificant*



Shpresa Ymeraj

Illegally Transporting My Grandmother's Corpse Across State Lines to the Family Burial Plot Because My Father Doesn't Want the Paperwork

Max Hunt

We are six: two parents, three children, and one Other.
Summertown is a body covered in old wounds. Cliffs approach
the Tennessee highways, only to—inevitably—halt. Deep vertical lines
carve their faces.

Ninety degrees straight down, like they've been taken by surprise.

Summertown is an old wound with cliffs that hide a body: my
grandmother,
her body filling the hollow between the passenger seats in my
family's Suburban.

It took me by surprise: no school today! I high fived my
brother. My father cut straight down an old blanket
and placed half of it over the corpse, in case of cops. Half under, in case
of leaks.

Her head rests on the Cheeto-stained carpet between the passenger
seats, legs stretching toward the trunk.

Skin like damp Kleenex drapes over her cheekbones, shivering when
the car jolts.

Half a blanket over, half a blanket under—we pass a cop car, and I tug
the blanket up.

Pull it back down once we've passed so I can keep studying her
crooked mouth. Her jaw is set, her lips drawn.

Her skin turned to damp Kleenex months ago, and her brain died
weeks before she did.
Around the time her lungs began to drown themselves, Dad explained
to my brothers and me
how expensive a hospital would be. Anyway, look at her there,
he said. That set jaw, those drawn lips.
So dignified. She wouldn't want to die in a hospital, obviously. Probably.

She must've known the moment when her lungs would finish
drowning her. Maybe my father did, too,
because he tried to remove her dentures to make her more comfortable.
My grandmother—in all her drooling, vacant-eyed,
comatose “dignity”—could not push him away or even glare.
But she could bite.

I wonder if Dad regrets trying to take her dentures as he motions out
the window with his tooth-marked hand.
They used explosives to blow those hills, he says.
Drilled dynamite into the bedrock to bite a stretched, crooked mouth
into the land.
It's impractical to drag your highway over a mountain. So they lit a
fuse and ran.

They used dynamite to blow up those hills. I try to picture it and can't.
What happened to all that extra stuff afterward, I ask—
What happened to the animals, the trees, the dirt?
Dad ignores me to tell my brother that no, we can't stop at McDonald's.

I touch my grandmother's milky forehead, and I wonder
—What happens to a body, afterward?
What will happen to the four bodies in the backseat if the ones up front
get arrested, and what will happen
if they don't? We can't stop what's happening now—
Dad's controlling the car, not my dead grandmother, not me.
But it's inevitable, I think, one day: for both Dad and the Tennessee
highways to screech to a halt

at the bottom of a series of unyielding cliffs.
This land has been hurt enough, and it's ready to bite.

Stress Eating

Karen Burton

Caitlyn stared blankly at her monitor. Her hope of coming into the office to get her mind off things had been overly optimistic. She couldn't think, couldn't focus on anything beyond her 'discovery' of the previous night.

Just thinking about it pulled a cold sweat onto her forehead.

What if...?

"Stop it." Caitlyn whispered and grabbed a handful of fish crackers – her stress-eating stash -- from her purse. She couldn't help but glance at the poster tacked to her cubicle partition, at the ugly, wizened Yoda imploring Caitlyn to "Do or do not; there is no try." It had been a gag gift from her husband, who knew Caitlyn hated motivational proverbs almost as much as she hated Star Wars.

After last night, however, Caitlyn had to admit there was wisdom in Yoda's words. She could try to diagnose her discovery via WebMD while scarfing fish crackers, or she could do the responsible thing – see her doctor.

Even so, Caitlyn couldn't stop her shaking fingers from typing, "how do you know if it's breast cancer" into a Google search.

Several sites offered her lists of symptoms.

A lump that feels different from the surrounding area. Maybe?

Pain. Not at all.

Red, pitted skin on the breast? What exactly did it mean by pitted?

Nipple discharge. No.

An unexplained change in the shape or size of the breast. Well....
Yeah?

Caitlyn ran through the list again. None of the symptoms fit her, not definitively. That was good, right? And yet: "Contact your doctor," the site admonished. "Early detection is critical." She crossed her arms over her breasts, over the discovery that had, since last night, become almost a presence that followed her around.

"You're worrying for nothing," the presence seemed to say.

"Hey, Cait!" Tamara poked her head over the partition, and Caitlyn hurriedly maximized her Minesweeper game. Better her boss think she was wasting time rather than self-diagnosing cancer. She wasn't ready for anyone to know yet. Once people knew, then it was official. She'd be a cancer patient with all the fear and all the pitying glances that entailed.

And besides, right now, there was nothing to know.

“Did you RSVP for the company picnic next month? The Powers that Be want a final headcount by end of day.”

‘Will I be here next month?’ Caitlyn wondered, but she smiled and promised to add herself and her husband to the list.

“Also,” Tamara winked at her. “A few of us are going to the pub after work. You’re down, yeah?”

“Um...” Caitlyn was notorious for loving impromptu after-work pub trips. But there was no way she could go today. Not after her discovery. Because she was also notorious for ‘wearing her emotions on her sleeve’ as her mother put it, and someone would know something was wrong. Someone would get the story out of her.

“Go. There’s nothing wrong with you.” Was that the maybe-cancer talking? Or simply Caitlyn’s desperately hopeful thinking?

“Lemme talk to Alex, and I’ll let you know?”

Tamara gave Caitlyn an exaggerated frown. “Since when do you have to ask your husband’s permission?”

“I don’t. But I think he had something planned.”

Tamara stared at her for a moment. “You OK?”

“Fine,” the maybe-cancer whispered.

“Fine,” Caitlyn repeated.

The resulting pause felt as heavy as the presence of the maybe-cancer. But Tamara finally shrugged. “Just don’t forget to RSVP. John and Cathy are talking smack about their basketball game, and you’re the only person who can help me shut them up.”

Caitlyn smiled, nodded. She’d be able to play basketball in a month. She willed herself to believe it. After all, she felt absolutely fine.

“Absolutely fine,” the maybe-cancer agreed.

Once Tamara was out of sight, Caitlyn minimized Minesweeper to stare at the symptom list again. At that final, damning line. “Contact your doctor. Early detection is critical.” She suddenly pictured the maybe-cancer as a Minesweeper bomb deep within her breast. What happened when it exploded? Game over?

Resigned, she found the number for her GYN.

God, she didn’t want to do this. Going to the doctor made it official. Getting a diagnosis made it more official. A diagnosis changed the maybe-cancer into definitely-cancer. It was stupid, Caitlyn knew. It wasn’t like not getting a diagnosis changed the malignancy of the thing. Still...

“I’m not cancer,” it said.

“It’s not cancer,” Caitlyn whispered and put her phone away without calling. No reason to overreact. She’d wait a week. By then, it would be gone. Probably. And Caitlyn could forget all about it, go drinking after work, and reign supreme on the basketball court at the company picnic.

Because it wasn't cancer.

And yet she still couldn't focus on anything but terrifying possibilities. After staring at her monitor for another unproductive, fish-cracker-filled, thirty minutes, Caitlyn pushed away from her desk.

Once safely locked in a stall in the empty bathroom, Caitlyn took off her shirt and bra and dug in her purse for a make-up mirror. There wouldn't be anything there; she'd mostly convinced herself. She always let stress get the best of her, 'making a mountain out of a molehill' her mother always said. The thing, the maybe not-cancer was just a pimple or a scratch. Certainly nothing to worry about.

But as Caitlyn raised the mirror, she saw that it was definitely still there. And it was smiling at her. The cupid-bow lips that had grown since this morning stretched from breast to armpit, and as its smile widened, it revealed two rows of pin-needle baby teeth.

"I'm not cancer," it said.

"Then what are you?"

"Hungry."

Caitlyn choked out a sobbing, hysterical laugh. How the fuck was she supposed to go to her doctor with this? How could she go to anybody with this?

"Hungry," the mouth said again.

And because – what else was there to do? -- Caitlyn pulled a fish cracker from her purse and offered it to the mouth. It moaned appreciatively.



Shpresa Ymeraj

Southern Pride

Saitharn Im-Iam

He's all southern pride, Browning

tees, worn boots beneath bootcuts,

durable as an Old Chevy pickup.

29 stars stand bright against a red

field entrapped in a large, blue

diamond—embodies his Arkansas pride.

Striking in hue and ego—blue eyes

swirl with superiority—endless amounts

that teeter between angel and devil.

His smug smile hits harder than a jungle storm.

He's all southern pride, confederate

Flag large enough to envelop me twice.

He misses his uncle, his best friend, feels the

weight pull him under—drowns

in rivers of sadness, I've grown within. He

confides in me coaxed by the royal seductress of

whiskey with an unrivaled force like the crescent

wave that nearly pulls me under too.

I'm torn between two countries,

living in one

unable to feel at home

in one.

But he's all southern pride, American flag

large enough to envelope me twice.

He's got that ornery glint in the middle of

his ocean blues, puffs of smoke that fogs

my vision, a devious grin born to sear

through years of constructed walls.

He's all southern pride.

I'm corroded by the unknown, torn

between two lands, with no home in one.

A sea of misery seeps into me while the

people in this land seclude a little girl

from the south of Thailand.

Walls of mountains overgrown with green collapses

against intertwined red dirt roads all leading to my

mother's small shack infested with tiny wingless dragons.

I've flown across oceans escaping a tyrannical father,
an abysmal fate, a potential home—isolated from a culture
I was destined to dance in alongside my family.

A new family—poisonous pale hands of paternal falsehood
grips my throat hard—fooled me into believing I belonged.

A new country—laughs at my skin, some call me ugly, some
desire my secret possessions, treats me like I'm a unique
trinket.

I grew in the wild of my country; I'll blossom in this one.

The Intimacy of Raindrops

Abby Edgecumbe

It was cold the night we danced in the garage, James and I.

I want to say that it was raining, and that the drops made adorable little rivers down the thin rectangular windows on the top of the garage door. However, I recently looked up the weather on that day (the almanac history of weather the internet holds for those of us with too much nostalgia and not enough life to drown it out- -a most welcome resource). It wasn't raining that night.

It may not have been raining the night we danced in the garage, James and I, but it was cold. I remember it was cold. I remember the way my goosebumps rose despite his hand on my arm. I remember how he felt those bumps and rubbed me up and down. I remember that because it made me feel so in love. But now James is dead, and my marriage is more about contentment than love or fondness.

How fond I felt of you, James. How fond I felt of you. You would work on your model trains in that garage and sometimes I'd watch you from the doorway. You never realized I was there. Though, now that you're gone, I imagine that you knew I was there, and you gave me those candid moments. You were thoughtful like that.

You would hold the model trains like they were baby birds. I'd catch you stroking the smokestack, or rubbing the turning wheels on your thumb, rocking it back and forth.

You did always want kids. Married for four years. Maybe we should have had them. I could never imagine my stomach swelled like that. I never told you this, and I hid it from you when you were alive (which, of course, I regret, just like every interaction with you- - never enough love, always too much reality), I would stand in front of the mirror and hold my arms out in a cradling sort of way, out in front of my stomach, where it would stretch if I was growing your son or daughter in there. Of course, I never was. You were so kind, always so unassuming. Tender to the softness of women, though I was hardly soft. I let you believe it, though. Because I knew you wouldn't push me, my poor, sweet James. I just hated to think of my skin stretching. I hated to think of your love shifting from

me to anyone else, even if that someone else came out of me, came from me, was me.

Suppose I was selfish, in the end. But so were you.

Remember that Tuesday at the hospital? You thought it was kidney stones when I drove you. The laugh I feel rising when I think of it! The worst that could have happened, in the car the day before that Tuesday, was you pushing some carbonite through your urethra. I'd have you pee a boulder if it meant you would've lived. Secretly, secretly I think you were glad it wasn't kidney stones. Even as you laid there dying of liver cancer.

I could see the cancer. You couldn't, but I could. I wanted to tell you about it, but I figured it would only upset you. I wanted to describe how bright it was, like the fires in Agamemnon's eyes, stalwart and unmovable, angry, jealous. The cancer shone brightly from your stomach. The light was a beautiful sort of ugly. Hideous and sexual. It called to me, daring me to pull your organs from you and eat them. Take the cancer into myself. I would've done it, but your body kept absorbing the light. You wouldn't let me save you. You sucked in the light until your abdomen was a black hole. You started pulling light from the hospital room into you. You pulled my soul into you. Like I said, selfish bastard.

Maybe that's why it was so easy to remarry.

Johnnie. The "h," I'd always wondered why it was there. He absorbed no light. Guess that's why he was so irresistible. He left no mark on the universe. Didn't even leave anything behind. I've grown old with him on the outside. Inside, though, it was always you. I think he knew that, and he liked it in a perverse sort of way. I let him grow old with his daughter and he let me grow old with you.

His daughter died as an infant, in that mysterious way babies can die. Without warning, in their cribs. The universe sees their futures and plucks them from existence before they can cause much harm. But harm still they cause. Losing a baby is more than losing a teen, or an adult. Babies have potential like freshly fallen snow, and it's just as easily corruptible. Babies have ten billion lives because they haven't lived any. And all ten billion are equally as true. Losing a baby is losing ten billion babies. I think that's why Johnnie lived with his lost daughter for all his life. She was never disloyal, and she was never a disappointment. She was perpetually perfect,

and who could leave that? It's like a drug, or a hug with strong arms.

The night we danced in the garage was cold but not rainy. It was after you lost all your hair, after you lost your life but not our consciousness. It was lovely to see, actually, that your love was not your life but your consciousness. Towards the end, all you had left was love for me. Love for me, and tears. I never could figure out if I had anything to do with the tears. Up till the end, you cried every day. You cried and you told me you loved me. You cried because you had to leave me, that's what I tell myself. And you're not here to tell me otherwise, so what I say has become the truth. That's what's so nice about your being gone: you're no longer here to police what is true and what is false. You were always too smart. Death was the only thing you didn't know about and damn you, now you do.

This is why I steer clear of Ouija boards. God damn you if you come back just to correct my grammar.

And now, I am old. I stopped dying my hair two years ago. It's gray but not shiny, how you used to think it'd be. Those nights in bed that could pull the ticker tape from your tongue for hours. You used to fall asleep mumbling into your pillow, which I wish I'd have thought was cuter at the time, but then all it meant was a large drool stain to wash out in the morning, and your complaints of a sore jaw. On one of those nights, you tried to guess just how I'd age. What type of wrinkles I'd get, and when. If I would be a lace old woman or a flower old woman. What I became was a sad, quiet, old kook with a wild garden and a cabinet that can't be closed given the teacups. You said, You'll get gray, and you'll keep it, you'll like it. I bet it'll be shiny and glossy and the envy of younger women, and then you kissed me with big slobbery lips, next to my eye, and went to sleep. You guessed I'd get crow's feet, which I did, and you never got to see them. I wonder, would you like them? You fell in love with a smooth face and skin pulled tight across the cheekbone. You fell in love with a low, crowded hairline and eyelashes like Egyptian palm fronds, with vocal cords like strong velvet ropes and slender ankles you used to wrap your thumb and index around. And now, I am old. And now, I am old.

Margaret stopped by yesterday. She brought her new grandson with her; his name is James. She said, Named after him, for you. For me? I wonder at that. She's your sister, after all. She loved you too, in a different way than anyone else. A quiet way. I know I was angry for a long time because she only visited that once. But I'm not anymore. Maybe

this is a natural process for old people as their brain chemicals dissolve and their souls get ready for transmutation. Anger is too heavy to bring into the sky.

You were a month and a half into chemo when she visited. You only lasted two months. Margaret was a wall of a woman then. Her eyebrows were uncouth and hung heavy over her wide dark eyes. Hairy eyelashes and huge irises. Thick dark hair and the shadow of a mustache. Sharp jaw and round cheeks. She spoke softly to the doctor, who then turned me away. I remember thinking, me? There was the anger. She went into your room and stood next to your bed for nearly two hours. She never sat down; I know this because I watched through the window as she stood like a terracotta soldier. From the frosted door window I could see the curve of her cheek and sometimes it would move and squish, so I knew she was talking. Sure, I could see you, too. Your eyes just watched Margaret and never moved. I know that memory melts and refreezes into different shapes, but I remember you never blinking, not even once. At last, you said something. Your mouth was so animated when you spoke, though your eyes, your brows, nothing else gave anything away. Margaret leaned down and kissed your forehead. She tugged her canvas raincoat even though it wasn't wrinkled or scrunched up and turned towards the door. I had to book it out of there; Marg wouldn't've liked to see me watching.

I think I might have seen her at the funeral, but you know. I wasn't really noticing things on that day. But I saw her yesterday. Lost about seventy-five pounds and had her hair cut real short. Holding a little baby in her arms. Johnnie thought he was real sweet, a real sweetie. I thought he looked exactly like you, he had those sad old dog eyes with the big bulging upper eyelid and the droopy cartoon eyebrows. I poked my finger over to him and he grabbed onto it. I'll tell you, James, I have put on some pounds since that night we danced in the garage, and now I wear our ring on my index finger. It doesn't fit past the second knuckle, so I just wear it half-way down. Kids think I'm some kind of old hippie woman, I don't doubt it. Margaret's kid, though, the baby James, I call him Jim because my throat won't say your name anymore, he latched on immediately to our ring. His tiny fingers tried to pull it off, but it was stuck on good due to my extra chubbiness. Guess it went straight to my fingers.

Remember how my mom used to tell me I had fat hands?

Baby Jim hung on tight to our ring and slobbered all over me. You know, I laughed some, it was cute, it was. But I wanted to yank my hand away and toss the little asshole in the weeds. I guess he was the first

person but me to touch that ring since you had. I guess I hadn't thought of that till now, but that explains it. And baby Jimmy spat all over it, I had to take it off and clean it and I felt like I was scrubbing away your fingerprints, which felt illegal. Like somewhere in my head, I'd always imagine I'd need your fingerprints for something. Maybe just because I knew nothing would ever have your fingerprints on it again. Doubt the ring did, anyway. It's only been fifty years, after all.

Johnnie said something that night. He asked me to take the ring off. It's part of the past, he said. Part of the past? Honey, I live in the past. It's warm there, and the eatin' is good. Pleasant memories are gammy and thick with sweet fats, and melancholy ones are crunchy and rich with umami. But I did it, of course. I twisted it off and put it on the nightstand. And of course, he slid it into the drawer and pushed it shut.

I'm old now, my James. Those itching crickets of arthritis are settling in my fingers as if I have craggy twigs with big bulging knots sprouting from my knuckles. My ring, too, is old. The gold facade is weakening, flaking, and the diamond which once was so ephemeral is now scratched and undeniably corporeal. Yet I feel less corporeal than ever.

I'm loosening, James.

The ring is too heavy for my fat fingers to carry. My blouses each day weigh a thousand pounds on each shoulder. All I want to do is lay in bed and feast in my mind, nowadays. I spend more and more time in the shadow of that cold night we danced in the garage- -I think I've figured out why I've been imagining that it was raining. The rain that is washing down those small rectangular garage door windows, riddled with thick cobwebs. Each rivulet racing its brother, eager to reach the puddle on the windowsill. I am those tiny rivers, I'm racing down the windowpane, James, I'm ready to lose myself to the puddle and join you.

Reasons I Can't Sleep at Night: A Lyrical Essay after Joe Brainard

Brianna Summey

I remember the old men in the grocery store who would say, “What a pretty girl you are,” and offer me a two-dollar bill that I refused with averted eyes and the statement, “You don’t know me. Don’t look at me.”

I remember trying to glue my feet to the floor in kindergarten and how every time I thought “I won’t move my feet and this time it will work,” but how else was I supposed to tell if the glue was dry. It never was.

I remember blue foam and plastic rollers in my hair and Mama’s burgundy lipstick and feeling comfortable in my skin.

I remember sitting on the front porch with Papaw Avery, molding Play-Doh into chickens with four legs and snakes with two.

I remember orange sherbet and 7UP floats in a Smurfs glass

I remember sharing a bowl of Cheerios with Nanna before bedtime and how I drained the milk from the bowl, and it dripped down my chin and onto my Little Mermaid pajama shirt.

I remember being seven and Dad in an orange jumpsuit reading Pound Puppies to me, and I remember realizing the irony at sixteen.

I remember seeing my Aunt Alison writhe and shout in the name of the Lord and thinking something was wrong with me that I didn’t feel it too.

I remember asking for a quarter to buy sticky hands that always ended up in the floorboard covered in dirt and hair.

I remember Granny’s precious yellow Day Lilies in March, lining the walkway to a blue house—inside: wood paneled walls down a dark hallway, a wood burning stove in the living room corner, and a chipped white porcelain kitchen sink.

I remember yard sale roller skates in the Baptist Church parking lot next to the blue house.

I remember skint knees and scraped palms and getting back up again.

I remember my fifth-grade teacher telling me the Appalachian Mountains were the oldest and believing it. They were mountains who knew how to be mountains, like after their years of weathered worries they had everything figured out.

I remember the red-haired girl on my softball team with buggy eyes behind thick glasses who told me I had a mustache.

I remember a plastic pink flickering flashlight from Vacation Bible School, and dry eyes and fingertips from turning pages into the night until I floated away from the world, only brought back by suspect footsteps or birds trilling outside my window.

I remember sitting on the edge of my parent's bathtub as Mama and I bleached our mustaches.

I remember Dad coming home from work and the springy thump of the recliner footrest popping up, and how I untied his boots—the leather strings worn to velvet—like it was a game.

I remember wrinkling my nose when Mama fixed him a plate, folded his laundry, and literally wiped his ass when his back wouldn't let him, but I don't remember if he ever said thank you like he does now.

I remember a thrift store jean jacket worn in the elbows and seams, pockets full of lint and a stranger's grocery store receipt: 12 pk ginger ale, saltine crackers, 6 pk toilet paper.

I remember the whooping of teenagers through open windows as they drove too fast down a curvy back road and scream-sang “Don’t Stop Believin’,” and I remember wishing I was one of them.

I remember the prom dress that made me feel like a princess when I tried it on—peach silk and gold glitter—then the nervous lump in my chest on prom night. When my hair was fixed, makeup done, and dress on, I couldn't face myself in the mirror, much less bear the thought of someone else looking at me.

I remember slow dancing in the hallway of the Hilton Hotel with my boyfriend because what else do you expect from two socially awkward nerds.

I remember crying every night the first month of college because I didn't know how to make friends, and how everything I brought home at the end of the year smelled like mothballs and my roommate's kimchi.

I remember my best friend Summer's laughter bouncing up the green-tinged first floor stairwell of Draper Hall when she heard me, close to tears, say, "I hate stairs."

I remember the man I thought I loved—the month of March 2016 was flushed skin and fevered wanting—and the moment his brother called me to say they found him with a bullet in his brain. The call ended, but I didn't move. I sat in my car for a while and remembered the night two weeks before in his driveway—him in my passenger seat with my feet in his lap. I was wearing sneakers with no socks, so he went inside and returned with a pair of his own, took my shoes off, put the socks on me, and slipped my shoes back on. I think it was the most romantic moment of my life. I wore the socks to bed every night for months.



Shpresa Ymeraj

My Pockets Swallow My Hands as a Chicken Eats a Hummingbird

Max Hunt

a hummingbird pitches forward—
tumbling through a couple feet of overgrown grass
before jerking back into the sky—
an injured wing? or
someone's half-assed yo-yo trick—?
on the hummingbird's upward tug,
a hen pauses her scavenging.
her neck arches head tilts.
her wings snap out,
flap twice—
and she snatches the hummingbird midair,
her beak piercing the tiny ribcage.

you know,
might as well go ahead and show me the hand
that would choose to bob a hummingbird
on the end of a string. I i mean—
when a hummingbird starts beating its wings
slow enough for human
eyes to follow what reason
does God have to keep the less
important secrets



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Karen Burton is an adult student, returning to college after dropping out way back in the days of Nirvana. She is currently completing an Arts and Sciences transfer degree at Bellevue College near Seattle. She plans to transfer to a four-year university to earn a degree in literature and creative writing.



Saitharn Im-Iam is an undergraduate student at Pittsburg State University pursuing a BA in English. She received her AA from Coffeyville Community College where she graduated with honors. She is currently a member of Sigma Tau Delta and *Cow Creek Review*. She was first published in the 2021 edition of *Cow Creek Review* where she won the Jo McDougall Undergraduate Prize in Poetry.

