

# **The Blue Route**

**19**



**December 2017**



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December 2017

Widener University

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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.

*Cover photo by Autumn Brown*



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# Note From the Editor

*Jennifer Rohrbach, Widener University*



Welcome to Issue 19 of *The Blue Route*. We are so excited to present this diverse and meaningful collection of writing. With this December 2017 issue, *The Blue Route* has migrated to the platform Issuu, which has allowed us to publish art alongside the moving pieces of prose and poetry received this semester, taking the journal to a new level of aesthetic experience. It is essential that all these forms of artistic expression continue to be produced and dispersed, especially in this time of political

upheaval and social unrest. The voices in this issue are members of a community larger than their backgrounds, than the schools they attend, than the states they live in. The stories they tell, whether real or fictitious, are vital pieces of the human experience.

Along with the addition of art, this issue features an interview with author Stephanie Powell Watts. Watts talks about the experience of writing for women, writers of color, and writers from marginalized communities: “I think writing, above all, is a social justice. It’s you saying this world and these people have a right to a voice, have a right to exist. Doing that is a movement towards social justice. Just by asserting the legitimacy of the existence of the people that you are representing, you are having a social justice moment. You can’t try to chase a trend. You have to write what it is that you write.”

The writers in this issue have, I believe, accomplished just that. They share their experience of the world by writing what it is they write, whether that be poetry or prose, lighthearted or complex, fact or opinion. “An Orca’s Letter to the Ocean” takes on the perspective of an orca taken into captivity, longing for its past in the wild. In “See America

Right,” a young girl, unprepared for motherhood, struggles with the decision whether to have an abortion. A mother and her queer child find a way to connect in “The Day My Mom Accidentally Went to Pride.” These stories and poems explore a variety of social issues, and by doing so, these writers are making a statement. By publishing this issue, we are making their voices heard.

I want to thank my staff for their tireless efforts and our advisors for donating so much of their time, energy, and expertise every semester to this journal. I must thank the talented artists who submitted their beautiful art to make this the first multi-media issue of *The Blue Route*. Thank you to the College of Arts & Sciences and the English and Creative Writing department at Widener for their continued support. Of course, thank you to the phenomenal writers who have lent their words to grace the pages of this issue. And thank you, readers, for engaging in this conversation we’ve placed before you. I encourage you to read, view, pause, reflect, and perhaps read again. These are important voices of your community—the human community.

—*Jennifer Rohrbach is a senior English and Creative Writing major at Widener University.*



Photo by Autumn Brown

# The In-Between

*Grace DeLauro, John Carroll University*

## **Autumn**

Matthew thinks the cold sand must feel exactly like snow. He's never seen snow, never felt it, but he can imagine it's much the same as the cold grains sifting through his fingers. The dull North Carolina winter is coming. The air will thin and the sky will haze but there will be no snow.

The ocean roars in front of him, he closes his eyes and imagines he is listening to the whistling wind of a snowstorm. An echo from the north. His mother calls his name from the back porch. Matthew can hear in her voice that she's been crying. He grabs handfuls of the sand and goes to her. He lets the sand fly out of his palms behind him, leaving a blizzard in his wake.

His mom curls her fingers around the back of his neck, desperately, like he might disappear. She leads him inside and sets a sandwich in front of him.

*Your favorite*, she says with a forced smile.

It's peanut butter, which was Christopher's favorite and not his, but he nods anyway. Matthew's mother sits next to him with a cup of tea and writes in her journal. Matthew stares at the chair in front of him, empty when it shouldn't be.

Matthew counts the days on his desk calendar before bed. Christopher has been gone for one month and one week. It has felt like years.

He lies on top of his blankets, quilts that he usually uses when the weather turns but have stayed cast aside. He likes to feel the cold air now. The room feels eerie without his brother, empty and bare. His bed is still there, his baseball quilt is still there. But Christopher is gone.

*Where did he go?* Matthew had asked his father after the funeral.

His father would not look at him when he answered, *His body is in the ground.*

Frustrated, Matthew shook his head quickly. *No, I mean, where is Christopher? Where is he now?*

*He's nowhere, he's gone.*

Matthew hears those words run through his head a few times a day. When he does his schoolwork and instinctively leans over to ask his brother for help. When he is bored and grabs both baseball gloves from the garage. And on nights like this when he longs to talk to his brother before he falls asleep.

*This big house and you boys still want to share a room,* Matthew's mother had been fond of saying with a laugh.

And now the room belongs to just him.

Matthew was never meant to be an only child, this he knows for sure. He wonders if there are other people in the world who have lost a twin brother, if they feel like he does. If they feel a physical emptiness that never subsides.

The beach is calm now, the vacationers long gone. Only a few families remain, scattered down the coast, too far to interact.

Matthew misses the renters from the house next door, new families each week in the summer. Sometimes there would be kids the same age as him and Christopher. Kids they would lead on imaginary treasure hunts and explore the secret tide pools with.

Today is overcast, the sun just hidden behind the veil of clouds. Everything appears to be the color of sand which Matthew doesn't think is a color at all. He walks to the shoreline and lets the water lap at his bare feet. It's cold but not unbearable. He lets his feet sink into the wet sand until they have sunken passed his ankles. The salty air catches in his

nose and makes his eyes water. Wind blows his hair this way and that, it's been a long time since he's had it cut.

A big wave crashes the shore, Matthew sinks a little further. He wonders if he could be swallowed whole eventually. Maybe there is a whole other world beneath the beach. Maybe if Matthew is patient enough the sand will creep up to his shoulders, to his neck, will encase his head. And he'll hold his breath like he does in the pool and a moment will pass before he emerges, reborn. Christopher will be there, ready to show him around. He'll lead him to the ground beneath the cemetery where all of the other people buried in boxes are alive and free.

## Winter

On a cloudy Saturday, Matthew's parents take him to the mini-golf course.

On their way, the town reels by outside of the car window. The colorful little houses where the summer workers rent now seem dull and purposeless. The lure shop now sells Christmas trees, they are short and disproportioned. He doubts they will buy one this year.

The course is mostly vacant. There is an old couple at the seventh hole. The man misses over and over. The woman laughs and pats him on the back.

Matthew finds it hard to concentrate on the game that he had used to love. Instead he spends the time watching a seagull circle the sky.

*At least try Matthew,* his father urges, putting his heavy hands on Matthew's shoulders.

Matthew wraps his fingers around the rubbery handle and swings. He misses, the seagull lands a few feet away and begins to peck at the fake grass.

*Look,* Matthew points to the bird.

His father sighs, *Pay attention to the game Matthew, not the seagulls.*

Matthew's father wins, his mother comes in second. The man at the front desk nods to them as they leave, a gesture of understanding. A sign that he knows.

On the car ride home, the familiar song of his parents hushed arguing drifts to the back seat.

*He's trying to heal, and I'm the only one helping him,* Matthew's mother says, *you don't-you don't even try to know him.*

*I know them,* his father replies and then corrects, *I know him.*

The ocean is still, more calm than Matthew has ever seen it. Tiny afterthoughts of waves lazily catch the sand. The air is quiet but for a low rumble of thunder somewhere far away.

Matthew walks to the water and wades to his ankles, his knees, his waist. The Atlantic soaks his pants and his sweatshirt and makes pinpricks of the goose bumps rise all over his body. It is the temperature of a glass of water directly after the ice melts. His breath is ragged, shaky with cold.

Once the ocean reaches his neck, he stands perfectly still. He readies himself and ducks under the water. He reaches his hands out, searching. His hands move in slow motion, pushing against the current. When he can no longer hold his breath, he surfaces.

Someone calls his name, an urgent voice that he cannot identify over his labored breathing. He goes under again, hoping to find the source.

A hand grabs onto his arm, tugs him above water.

Matthew stares into the eyes of his mother. Disappointment floods his body like a fever.

Her hair is hanging in wet tendrils, she isn't wearing a coat or jacket but her body seems hot instead of cold. Her cheeks are a brilliant pink.



*Matty*, she says, *we talked about this*. And then she begins to cry, wrapping her arms around him as if he'll disappear. As if she is his anchor.

That night, cracks of thunder wake Matthew. Flashes of lightening illuminate Christopher's side of the room.

Matthew imagines that a camera is taking pictures. Each time the lightening strikes, he can almost see his brother.

Flash

Christopher jumping on his bed.

Flash

Christopher playing with legos.

Flash

Christopher tossing a bouncy ball against the wall.

The storm ends. Christopher fades. Matthew lies awake until his bedroom fills with the sepia glow of morning.

## **Spring**

*We're going out today*, Matthew's mother announces one morning when the weather has begun to turn. She has gotten dressed in something other than sweatpants. She has her hair up in a neat bun.

The sun is peeking out from the clouds, shining softly for the first time in days.

Matthew and his mother walk to the marina, picnic basket in hand.

The boats are gone for the day, already out fishing in the middle of the Atlantic. Matthew pictures his father's boat among them. His big hands lowering nets into the ocean, searching for something he cannot find. He remembers the days last year when his father had allowed him and Christopher to come along. They'd learned to steer, to position the rods just so. They'd caught matching cods that they'd been allowed to keep.

Matthew's mother had clapped her hands at their bounty and said, *Now this is what I love about homeschooling.*

Matthew almost smiles at the memory. He looks around at the old wooden tables and green grass. He looks at his mother. She taps him on the shoulder and runs in the opposite direction.

They play tag together, feed the seagulls and eat sandwiches. Matthew can't remember the last time his mother laughed. He laughs with her.

The boats begin to return in early evening. Matthew watches the crew unload big silvery fish, two by two.

His body tightens up, a question rises to his lips.

*Where is Christopher?* He asks his mother.

He can tell by her face that she knows he is not looking for the obvious answer. That he does not need to be reminded about the shiny coffin and the deep rectangle hole. He does not need to remember seeing his brother at the funeral home in the scratchy blue suit they had both hated. How he called his name over and over until his father yelled for him to stop.

Matthew's mother looks at him with the saddest eyes he can imagine. The laughter has vanished from her face, he wishes it was not him who chased it away.

*I wish I knew.*

Matthew nods, looks away. He studies the pairs of fish and wonders if twins are meant to live and die together.

In April, the sand begins to soften. Matthew finishes his schoolwork early and goes to dig around for hibernating crabs. The very first spot he sinks his hand into he feels something hard and round. His fingers move beneath the surface and feel the tight lacing. He pulls out the baseball that he and Christopher had buried last summer. They'd both signed it, certain that someone would be able to make a fortune off of it once they won the World Series. His handwriting looks sloppy compared to now.

He picks up the ball and throws it, as hard as he can, into the ocean. Minutes later, it washes ashore. He tries again, and again. Finally he wipes it dry and brings it inside the house.

His mom cries when he shows her. They decide to display it in the living room. Each time Matthew passes it, he feels glad that it didn't get lost at sea.

Matthew silently watches his father take apart his bed. Warm wind floats through the window and rustles the drawings on Christopher's desk. He has transferred all of his belongings to his brother's side of the room. He and his mother plan to fill his old side with bookshelves. Now there will be no more emptiness. He has also begun to sit in Christopher's chair during meals, his own chair is empty now but somehow that is easier.

Matthew's mother stands in the doorway of his bedroom with a mug of tea. She smiles at him. His father mumbles under his breath, frustrated at the time-consuming task. His screwdriver slips out of place and scrapes his thumb.

*Is this really necessary?* He spits out through gritted teeth.

No one answers him and after a few moments he goes back to work.

In the nighttime, Matthew buries his head into his brother's pillow. He breathes cotton and laundry detergent. He does not expect to smell his brother, he's not even sure he would know if he did. But he takes comfort in occupying Christopher's space, in filling his void.

## Summer

The season arrives gradually, spreading like a sunrise through the city. Christopher finishes second grade without his brother. The streets become busy again, open signs blink in store windows after dark, the renters come back.

*Where is the other one?* A little blonde girl asks Matthew. They had played together last summer, the three of them.

Her mother yanks her away by the arm and scolds her with quiet words that Matthew cannot hear.

*I don't know where he is,* Matthew says to himself.

Matthew walks slowly back to his house from the beach. He has grown tired of the other children, their loud shrieks and toys littering the sand. He unexpectedly misses the quiet and vacant months from the rest of the year. Everything seems too shrill, too bright.

His father calls his name from the top deck. He motions for him to come up. Matthew climbs the wooden stairs, wondering if he has done something wrong. His father is in one of the four wooden lounge chairs his mother had bought at a yard sale the year before. They'd made a family project out of painting them their favorite colors. Matthew's father sits in the blue chair, Christopher's.

His father pats his knee and Matthew pauses before perching on it. How long has it been since he has done this? It seems familiar and foreign all at once. A minute passes and his father wraps his arms around him. His whole body shakes with sobs. Matthew freezes, he has not seen his father cry since they'd lowered the shiny coffin into the earth. Even then he had hid behind his mother's arms.

But this, he cannot hide from. He cannot ignore the sharp breaths and whispers that sound like *I'm sorry*. He counts to one hundred and sixty

before his father's breathing is normal again. His grip loosens, Matthew lets himself relax against his chest.

*You should probably go inside for dinner,* his father says after a moment.

A few days pass and the little blonde girl reappears in front of Matthew as he tries to untangle the strings on an old kite.

*Are you going to fly that?* She asks him.

Matthew shrugs, *Maybe.*

She sits down next to him, her bathing suit is dotted with strawberries and clusters of wet sand. She begins to help him, patiently working her fingers through the knotted string. They sit like that for a long time.

*My mom said that your brother is in heaven,* she tells him.

Matthew has heard the word before, in books and on TV. He did not know it was a real place until now.

At last, the kite is ready to fly. The wind picks it up almost immediately and Matthew and the girl watch it dance around in the sky.

*I'll bet he can see it too,* she says.

Matthew and his mother lay on the sand, side by side. The sky has grown dark, dotted with flocks of stars. Matthew puts his head on his mother's chest. She smooths his hair.

*What do you think Matty? Is he up there?* She asks him.

Matthew squints and tries to make sense of Christopher dancing among the planets. It doesn't seem to fit.

*I think he's down here somewhere.*

Matthew can feel his mother's heartbeat quicken. He looks up to find that she is smiling.

Her words come out carefully, like she has been saving them for a long time.

*I feel him in the ocean, on the beach, around the house,* she says.

Matthew begins to breathe faster, his words tumble out. *In the storms and in our room.*

There is a silence before he hears his mother's voice again, *Do you want to know where I feel him the most?*

Matthew shakes his head.

*In you.*

He nods. Moments later he can feel drops of wetness on his head. He looks up at his mother, ready to offer comfort. Her face is not one of sadness, but one of hope. She hugs him a little tighter.

They stay that way for a long time. Until the moon is high in the sky, until the ocean sings them to sleep.



Photo by Autumn Brown

# An Orca's Letter to the Ocean

*Courtney DuChene, Ursinus College*

I listen. One ear poised, straining to  
grasp foam, white whisper rills as they caress  
the moonlight shore, a midnight gull's grey coo,  
or the many wild-haired lovers who confess

their lust to seashells. I hear memories:  
echolocation ocean lullabies.  
Their voices flute sea stone and driftwood scales.  
The whale calls—saltwater kiss on my eyes.

My weary thirteen year old mind lost its  
fin tunes. The drumbeat glass walls crucify  
my ocean's blue orchestrals. Kids thick bare  
palms starfish smack my tank. They holler. I

press my near deaf ears against crystalline  
shells. Listening for waves that were once mine.



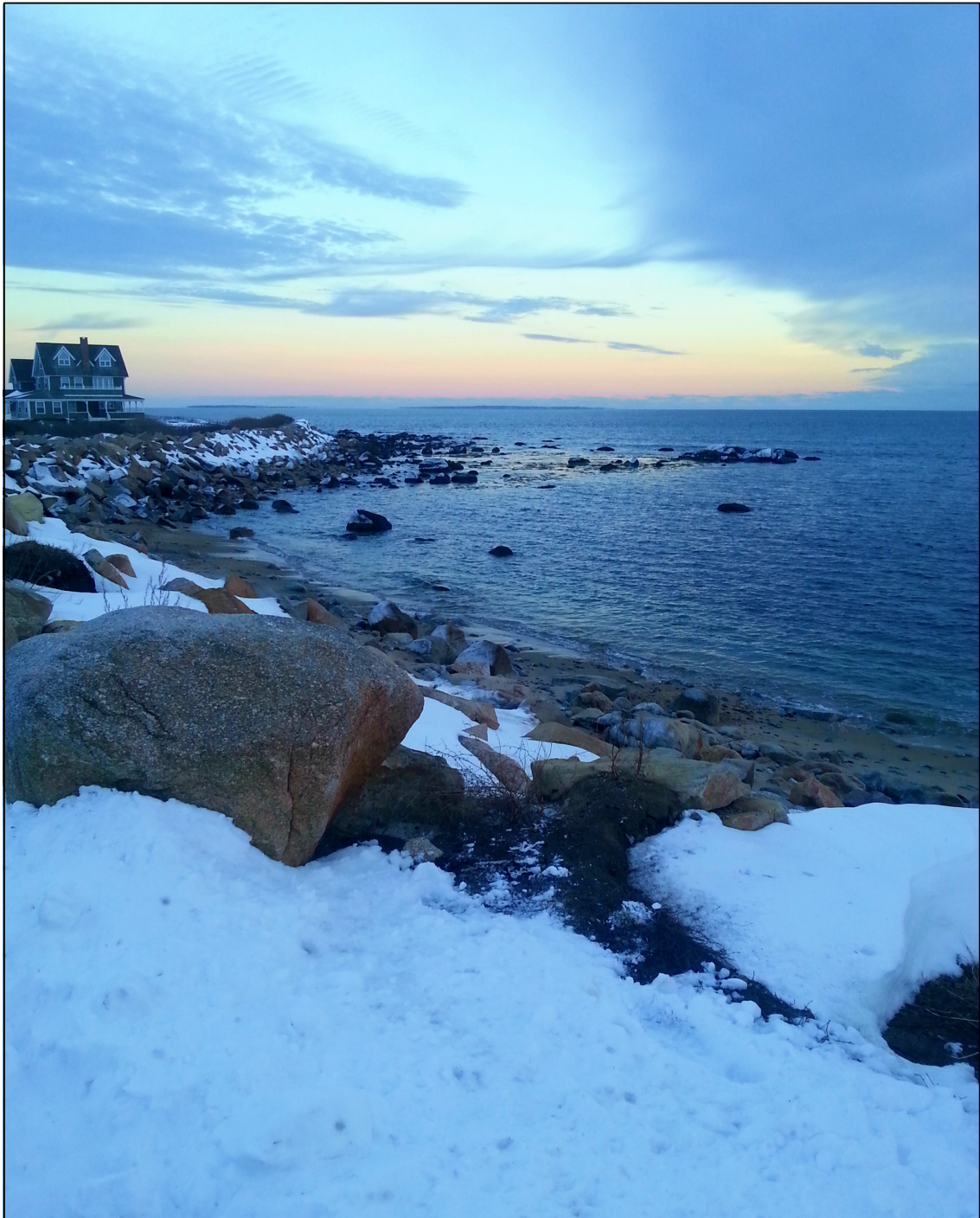


Photo by Carlie Sisco

# Smile

*Molly Fennig, Swarthmore College*

The wheelchair tires sink into the fresh dirt as I weave around *Elizabeth Vadenais 1911-1937 (In Loving Memory, here)* and *Martin Jacobs 1897-1953 (In Memory, here)*, and *John McDaniels 1811-1866 (Here)*. I leave a flower on each, to apologize for the tracks my wheels leave, and because I know Sage won't mind she has three less and because I haven't seen anyone leave them anything for 37 days straight. I drop the rest of the bouquet on top of the 36 others, this time yellow poppies I picked on my way here because Sage would never have let me spend money on something so frivolous as flowers and because yellow was her real favorite color even though she told everyone it was pink because that was the cool thing to do and because I don't have any more allowance money since I spent the last of it on that writing notebook we had always wanted but never committed to, the kind with prompts for each day and an elastic loop for a pencil. I should probably bury the notebook along with the seventeenth letter I got this morning, "While we appreciated your submission, we feel that at this time..."

Despite the mid-October frost, I am joined by several dutiful mourners, plodding from their homes, children and flowers in tow.

I smile at everyone. At the young man with tight, khaki shorts, a mint green jacket, and a confidence betrayed only by the erraticness in his gaze as he strolls past me, swallowed up by the next hill. At the woman, shuffling, determined, with a back in the shape of a question mark, weighed down by the black turtleneck and a single, red balloon. At the baby, swaddled into place, in the plastic, navy stroller dotted with cartoon ducks, a mischievous smile behind thumbs, drool-covered, hovering over its mouth.

Some people nod back, tight-lipped and dead-eyed. Most do nothing. But I smile anyways, just in case the article was real and that people can

change their mind about jumping off a bridge or swallowing pills or pulling the trigger just by having a stranger see them, acknowledge them.

There are other reasons, too. Nothing covers up the heavy circles of insomnia or the darkness seeping out through mouths and eyes and bodies like the creases of laughter, a well-faked grin. Even Sage, who had endured diapers, the cruelty that is middle school, two years of high school with me, was easily appeased by one, or two on a bad day, especially if paired with a conveniently arranged change-in-subject.

“Are you okay?” Sage would ask, getting dangerously close to seeing through the glassy indifference, like cataracts on my expressionless eyes.

“Yeah, just tired.” Cue smile. “How’s Aden?”

“She’s good, yeah. I still don’t know if she’s the right one, though. To, you know...” She looked down at the chocolate chunk mound in her hand. “Get my cookie—or would it be give my cookie?”

“Um, probably both.” I had little experience with cookies of any kind, so her guess was as good as mine, and probably better. Sage liked a variety of potential cookie-takers while I’d only ever liked one, the socially acceptable, widely-accepted kind, for which I’m sure my Catholic grandparents were forever praising God.

“Yeah, true. I mean, I know I’ll like cookies—who doesn’t? But is she the right one? Will I regret it? Once you do it, you can’t get your cookie back.”

“Yeah, it’s a big deal, Sage. But she’s really nice and sweet and so enamored by you—”

“But I don’t know if I feel the same way about her, especially enough to, you know, give my cookie.”

And just like that, Sage would be off thinking about Aden and cookies and *cookies* and my heart would both sigh in relief and drop in disappointment.

I stay with the ghosts ten minutes past when the sun sets, even though the darkness will make the trip twice as long. He doesn't come.

The distance from my house to the graveyard is 17.5 minutes by wheelchair, 2 by car, and 3 if you get caught at the stop sign on Jefferson and 10th, the same place Mrs. Hibbinson's cat got run over by Mr. Hibbinson on his way home from seeing the other woman. Google maps says the distance from my house to the writing class is 15 by car and an eternity on foot (which means two eternities by wheelchair). Not that I would know.

I make it back, despite getting caught on every sidewalk crack, and having to take an extra three minutes to mail my manuscript to the 18th publisher, my hands bleeding from the tires. I press them in harder, especially as I pass Sage's house, the book pages still plastered to her window like moths, blowing in the wind, trying to break out of the invisible, glass prison. I work my way up the rickety ramp, the one Dad built after I got out of the hospital, but before *The Funeral*, my prosthetic legs wedging me into the doorway. I lift one up, setting my plastic foot on the welcome mat, then the other, then push off, shakily. My body still has not learned how to have legs again. Dad comes running, picking me up as I try to push him away and wiggle free.

He doesn't let go until I'm over my bed, though, the tulle bedskirt mostly ripped off, the posters shredded, clothes everywhere, the room's aesthetic since *The Phone Call*. I reach down and tear off more tulle, loving the satisfying rip.

"PT at 7 and therapy at 9. I'll take you," Dad says, stroking my hair. My back is turned slightly to him. I could've gotten up on my own, like I always do. "We can get triple chocolate sundaes at the Village Scoop after."

I flip over slightly, eyes narrowing. "We'd have to drive, then."

"Yeah, but then we can get ice cream."

"I'll just push myself to PT."

"Come on Brooklyn. You have to get over it sometime—"

I cut him off, my voice flat, cold. "I'll just push myself."

"You're being ridiculous!" His voice rises at the end, as if remembering it can be louder than a whisper around me.

"Get out of my room!" I throw my prosthetics, one after another, at the closing door before drawing my covers over the sutured, sausage stumps that used to be my legs.

Andrea's my therapist, but I doubt she has much experience, or been around very many mentally ill people because she's always too perky, too optimistic. Even her clothes are almost aggressively happy and she always has a dish of chocolate in her office, but she says I have a phobia of cars. She has a PhD in brain stuff so she's probably right, but I tell her it isn't a phobia because it's a logical fear.

Cars can collide with best friends, kill them, take your legs, and separate you from the boy who could have been your boyfriend but you're not sure because you never really talked about it because you couldn't, how could you have, he was her brother and you shouldn't have been driving anyways except you were coming back from seeing him at the lake behind the field. Andrea says I should reach out to him for closure. She doesn't have any suggestions for getting him to pick up the phone, though. She also says maybe 63 calls in one day might be "too much for him to handle."

Before Mom gets home today from the veterinary hospital and Dad finishes his oil painting, I make eggs. Two, cooked to death, with cheese and toast and enough salt for half an ocean. I have to fish out part of the shell after smashing it too hard on the bowl, but I give up on the last piece, slipping through my fingers in the snotty whites, and compensate by beating them hard enough the bowl almost flies from my grasp. The plate, white, with watercolor fruits dancing around the edges, I leave next to the sink so Dad knows I've eaten and so he has to put it in the dishwasher himself. Not that I'm still mad, or anything.

I wait until I'm halfway down the ramp, the door closing behind me to yell, "See you later!"



Since I know he could catch up to me whether I rush or not, I stop, across the street, to look at the papers still clinging to the window like moths. Moths made of John Green and Shakespeare and George Orwell. I keep waiting to see Sage's silhouette, to see her press a new moth to the wall, made by Brooklyn or Sage herself. That was the plan. I roll forward, just to make sure they're not there, but the he materializes in the doorway, instead. The surfer-blond haired boy, the expert call-evader. He starts to turn, gaze dropped. My voice cracks. "Dylan?"

He stops. I say it again, louder this time. "Dylan."

He says nothing, back to me, and runs into the safety of the house, behind two concrete stairs, like mountains for a partial body like mine.

I barely get halfway standing before my legs earthquake from under me, throwing me back into the chair. I try once more, catching myself, nose inches from the step, before crawling, like a cockroach, back into my nest. I kick the step. The prosthetic cuts into my thigh. I kick it again, seeing the blood start to mound on my skin. I could wait for him to come out, for Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton to get home, but Dylan once went three days without food, to protest having to do more chores, and I try not to have to see the Hamiltons, the accusation masked by concern on their faces, so I let my chair roll away from the house and push myself down the street, faster and faster so the wind will evaporate everything but the salt on my cheeks.

I skip therapy and instead get an entire tub of chocolate ice cream from the grocery store. I think about getting a tub of birthday cake, too, maybe bringing it to her tomorrow, but if she were here she would think it a waste. Darkness has sent everyone home, except the birds and crickets too far away to see, so I lock my wheels next to a crooked bench under a lamp post and focus on the ice cream label, on the strange words like carrageenan and annatto instead of the strange words like why and I miss you.

I do go to PT, though, not because I enjoy the stupid-looking exercises they keep coming up with, or the well-intentioned small talk, but because I want to march up the two concrete stairs and fling open his bedroom door, where he kissed me the first time, and ask him, like I've

grown so good at texting out, *are you okay? Are we okay?* And then, what I haven't said, *I don't want to lose you, too.*

So when Gertrude, the older woman at the front desk with metal-rimmed glasses on a pink chain and a high-pitched voice, asks me how I am, I give her a smile that would be Sage-deceiving. "Great, how are you?" And the same to Aaron, my middle-aged, balding physical therapist, and to Susana, the young, thick-haired trainee.

I only manage to stand up for three seconds, but they say it's "great" and "progress" and to "remember it's a long process." Apparently, these kinds of words are supposed to help.

The next day, I make it through four out of six classes before I have Dad pick me up from school, a new record. I sit in on my bed and try to write the opening to my novel's sequel, but all I can focus on is the world outside. The little girl peddling her tricycle wildly down the sidewalk and the family of three walking their over-eager labrador and the house I can see outside my window, congested with paper moths. I'll probably sleep in the guest bedroom again tonight, or with Mom and Dad.

I've only texted Dylan twice since breakfast, another record. Like most days, I don't know if I can handle going to see Sage again. But I have to. It's my fault and she would visit me if I was dead and she was my best friend and I should've told her everything and not snuck out to see him. I retrieve the pink bunny from under the bed, the one with matted fur and only one eye, and hold it up so the ears tickle my nose. It almost doesn't smell like her anymore. Setting it back under the bed, I bury my face in my pillow, turning it over when it gets too damp.

It takes me two weeks to write him the letter, and I have to visit Sage more than once a day to keep her updated, get her help. I'm only able to stand for two seconds at PT, so I don't know how I'll make sure he gets it. My parents were easier to write to, not that I ever wanted to write to them this way, and the pills were not as hard to get as they probably should have been. I also get more rejections from publishers so the grand total is 21 no's and 0 yes's. Even though someone told me it usually takes more rejections to get a yes, I still take it as a sign, especially since

my chances should be greatest with a new guardian angel. Unless she's doing all this to get back at me, which I would totally deserve.

Will I get to see her? And what will it do to Mom and Dad? And will Dylan even care?

I pull up to the concrete steps and dial his number. He doesn't pick up. This time I don't leave a voicemail, just the yellow envelope, perched on the front step. I wait for five minutes, looking for his black curtains to pull back slightly or for the foyer light to go on. I wait one more minute and roll back a few inches. Then another minute before I give up and slowly push away.

The pills rattle in my backpack and the clouds roll over the sky, dimming everything. Mom won't be home for another few hours, and Dad will have left for dinner with Nana. I have everything planned out so there's no room for emotions or choices or second-guessing. One last trip around the house. One last Oreo. One last mouthful of pills. *I'm coming Sage.*

I start up the ramp that quivers under me like always. I stop. Deep breath. It'll be over soon. Slowly, I make my way around the house, taking more and more time to notice things as I get closer to my bedroom. Aunt Rose's blue-stud earrings in the family portrait, Uncle Jonas's right pinky that turns out slightly at the end, the one black string on Baby Annie's dress. *What if it hurts?* I never noticed the crack from the kitchen ceiling to halfway down the back wall. *What if it takes a long time?* There are two panes of glass in our windows instead of one. Who would've known? *Will Mom and Dad be okay?* I've run out of house to examine and my fingers are dusted with eaten Oreo crumbs. I wheel into the bedroom, locking the brakes in front of my bed. I stand up, bracing myself, but I let go, giving myself one last chance to stand. One second. Two. My tight grip on the comforter loosens. Three. Four.... Ten. I fall onto the mattress, hands shaking. The bottle is blurry, even though I keep wiping at my eyes, but it's the only way. I have to.

I take one. It sticks, hard in my throat, but I jam another four right after it. I lift the whole bottle to my lips, tipping it back. My hands are shaking, though, so a few scatter onto the carpet, one close to the bed.



One in the middle of the room. One under the window where, through the crack in the blinds, I can see someone has taken down some of the paper moths so the blank spaces form a sort of grin. No, I think, the smile has always been there, but I had always looked at the moths themselves, not the empty space surrounding them, holding them up.

I pick up the last pill, but I can barely see it through the salt stinging my eyes and the blurriness setting in and the smile engrained in my vision. I guess the article was right.

I call 911.

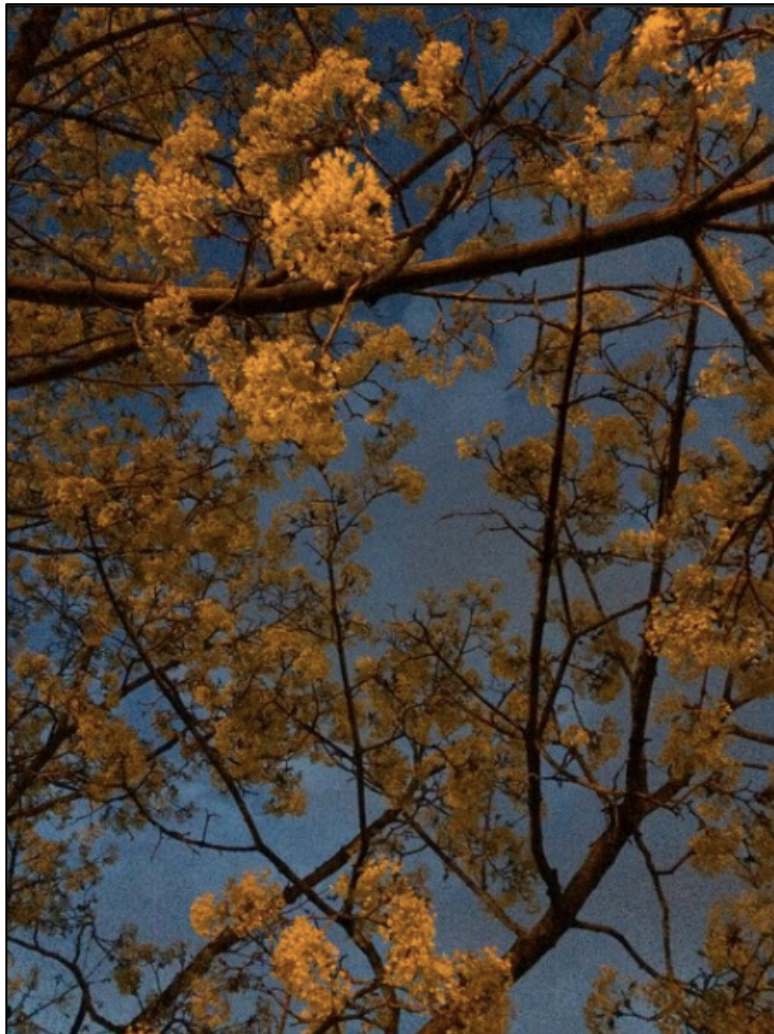


Photo by Autumn Brown

dear siri,

*Robin Gow, Ursinus College*

if i place my finger over top of a city a thousand  
miles away will you tell me how to walk there?  
we can flatten mountains with  
our thumbs—raise gas stations from  
the ground & eat apples in parking lots.  
we'll plant the seeds there between  
lamp posts.

tell me how to come back  
siri—take me home the way we came  
so i can see a parking lot full of apple trees—  
catch golden delicious on the roof  
of my green Volvo with the squeaky breaks &  
a trunk full of places we only visit  
on google maps

i'm in the process of  
becoming the creases of a map—

a mystic snake crawls on its belly to bite  
the cities of our dreams—

siri, can you tell me  
what the best way to walk  
across the ocean would be?

i'm not going to paris but i might end up there—  
i just want to cross the Atlantic—the  
most direct route would be best—

siri, when was the last time  
you watched the sun come up?

do you keep track of all the perhaps places  
i've asked you to take me?

is this intimate for you  
like it is for me?

to know the blue lines i ask you to draw in  
the dirt—do you laugh when i miss my turn  
& keep driving?

oh siri, let's be strip mall  
lovers—drink coffee  
from the back seat—let's

just draw lines on top  
of lines & trace

what a journey should  
look like—

let's take buses to the moon—  
or are you scared we won't get  
4G up there?

to the bottom of the Mariana  
Trench then?  
or somewhere else  
impossible as us—

you know i'm not leaving so tell me how to get there—  
you know i'm drowning in this room—  
in this stop light hymnal—

oh siri do you know what i mean when i say  
i want to go home now—i want to go home—

when the ocean is done being blue would you pick me up?  
drive the car for me—one hand on the steering wheel  
like my father—letting me lay down in the backseat—a little girl  
again whose father waits for her to be done with guitar  
lessons or brushes her hair after swim lessons—

oh siri be my father for  
me—be my mother & show me where the nearest honeysuckle  
bush is—i'm thirty & my ankles are covered

in snake bites from all the places i pretended  
to travel with you—

oh siri oh siri—  
i know where we live on  
noble street—  
i know the flat of land  
where we used to have a house  
on main & the brick face of  
our old home on franklin

you tell me that home  
has an ETA of twelve foot steps—  
eight breaths—&  
an open window—

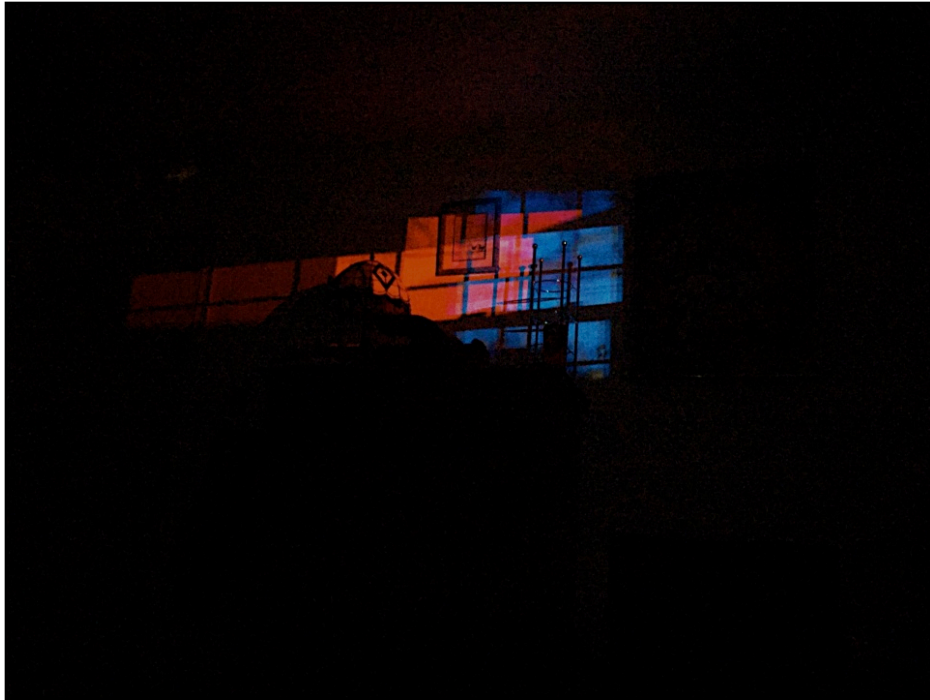


Photo by Autumn Brown

# Flowers on a Windowsill

*Marshall Farren, Indiana University Bloomington*

Jim has developed the peculiar habit of watching his neighbor every night. He watches from across the street, through a window, through the muggy, evening air that separates their adjacent buildings. Jim sits at his kitchen table for hours, sipping from a glass of water, looking up often from his crossword puzzle. His neighbor is a drunk and, being a drunk, doesn't do much besides drinking and sitting at his own kitchen table. Nothing extraordinary ever happens—certainly nothing that warrants undivided attention. It's as if the neighbor man is an actor performing his one-man show every night, and the act consists of nothing more than the man drinking from fifths. But there's never any applause.

Jim is a florist in the city. His shop sits on the first floor of an old two-story building. His apartment is on the second.

The neighbor man has a daughter who stays with him two nights a week. On Monday and Tuesday evenings, when Jim returns from work, a teenage girl can be seen cooking in the kitchen. Dinner is served no later than 7:00, and conversation is minimal, if at all. After they eat, the girl cleans the dishes before disappearing out of view.

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There was a time when Jim had a girlfriend. Her name was Rose, and she was a painter. She liked to paint sunsets and mountains with vibrant colors. Jim would often arrive home to three or four unfinished canvases mounted on easels around their apartment. The easels stood on cheap beach towels to avoid dripping on the hardwood floors. Opened buckets of paint huddled together at the corners of rooms. Despite Rose's mess, she did her best to keep the apartment how Jim preferred it: neat and clean.

She usually failed, but Jim learned to live with it. He would sit by the window at the kitchen table reviewing floral sales or doing crosswords, all the while watching Rose paint. Her strokes were long and graceful; carefully crafting landscapes only she had seen. They rarely spoke—she painted and he watched.

Sometimes they would talk about the possibility of starting a family, but these conversations never lasted long. Rose would start, passionate and hopeful. Jim would listen, nodding through her speeches, never offering any opinions of his own.

Perhaps it was his silence that caused her to leave. He wasn't prepared to keep progressing through life, petrified of the responsibilities of love. They always proved too daunting for him.

Now Jim is alone. There are no unfinished canvases mounted around the apartment, no paint buckets in the corners. It is a clean apartment now, no mess—except for the flowers. They're everywhere: in pots on the windowsill, in a vase on the table, in cups on the counter. Rose left and took the color with her, so Jim borrows from the surplus downstairs. It makes for a lovely, lonely apartment.

A stale silence pollutes the second floor, silence that rings louder than bells. For a time, Jim would listen to a record player but quickly grew annoyed with it. Every other song was about love.

After closing up shop for the day, Jim returns upstairs to nothing. He brings up new flowers every now and then for the slightest bit of change. He sits at the kitchen table, spooning cereal for dinner, wishing he could cook.

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If it weren't for crossword puzzles or his drunken neighbor, Jim might have become nothing at all—no more sentient than the flowers around his apartment. Fortunate for him, the light is always on and the blinds are always up in the apartment across the street.

The best time to watch is early in the week when his daughter is with him. There's simply more action during these nights. She moves with vivaciousness completely absent in her father. When she is not in the kitchen, Jim waits with rising suspense for her to come back and brighten the scene.

Sometimes she leaves the building and Jim times how long she is gone. Upon her return, Jim guesses where she went. The game is made easier if she returns with bags, usually indicating a trip to the liquor store. Her father is either too shy or too lazy to go by himself, because his daughter buys in bulk.

When the girl is not around the scene becomes repetitive. The man will go through his normal routine, undisturbed. He sits at his table smoking cigarettes and taking pulls from a bottle. He scowls at the wall. He drinks. He grimaces at the ceiling. He takes a drag. He drinks. He grumbles at the empty chair facing him. He sits. He takes a drag. He drinks.

Around midnight, the neighbor man, wobbling as if caught in earthquake, rises from his shameful throne. He slowly staggers towards the wall where he turns off the kitchen light. Soon the apartment across the street is dark. The show having ended, Jim rises from his post by the window, tucking the semi-completed crossword puzzle under his arm, and walks to bed, turning off all the lights as he goes.

---

Jim has never seen the neighbor man inside his flower shop. This saddens him. He certainly doesn't need the business - the city is full of romantics. What bothers Jim is that the man must have never had a reason to buy flowers. Whether this is due to lack of love or ignorance to the delicacy of it, Jim doesn't know.

He waits eagerly, wishing each day to be the one the man walks into the store. It seemed that day would never come. But then on a Thursday, a day like any other, the man walks through the door.



Jim's breathing quickens upon seeing him. He fiddles with the hem of his shirt and sways back and forth. He watches on as the man drifts sluggishly through the aisles of bouquets.

When he finally comes to the cash register, he has only a single lily in his hand. His eyes examine the friendless flower as he approaches, his shoulders hunched and a shadow of self-pity covering his face. Jim straightens up and gives a shy grin. The man's empty eyes meet Jim's for a second before falling back to the flower.

Jim speaks with an indiscrete eagerness, nearly tripping over his words. "Just the lily today?" he asks.

"This should do, I think," says the man, his eyes unwilling to look up again from the lily. Two of his pale fingers fiddle with the stubble on his chin.

Jim leans forward. "Romantic night ahead of you?"

This confuses the man. He looks at Jim incredulously. He seems dumbfounded, his mouth hanging open slightly. "She stopped coming," he says.

"Who did?" asks Jim, his face twisting with perplexity.

The man blinks. "My daughter," he says. He looks at Jim expectantly. Jim glances past the neighbor man's head at some geraniums hanging in a basket. He swallows hard.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Jim says finally. He now remembers not seeing the girl earlier in the week. It was the first time she hasn't been there on a Monday or Tuesday.

The man pays for the lily without saying another word. He turns and slowly makes his way out of the store.

---

Later that night, the apartment across the street is dark and empty. Jim sits at his kitchen table thinking about his encounter with the neighbor

man. It was the first time he had seen him in public. It was surreal in a dream-like kind of way.

After some time had passed, Jim looks out the window and notices the light on across the street. He sees the neighbor man sitting at his kitchen table with the lily in his hand.

With no warning at all, the neighbor man looks out his window. He looks directly at Jim.

Startled, Jim jumps in his chair. He quickly averts his eyes for a few seconds before returning his gaze. The man is still staring at him, his sullen face bearing a pained expression. He raises the flower, shrugging mournfully as he does.

Jim freezes. The man has acknowledged him, in doing so shattering the ostensible privacy that separated the two men for so long. After the brief paralysis, Jim manages to stand. He hesitates for a moment before turning and striding out of his apartment. He walks downstairs, grabbing a single flower as he makes his way through the dark shop. He steps out into the cool night air and carelessly crosses the street. As he reaches the steps leading up to his neighbor's building, the man appears at the door. Jim stops. The two men blink at each other.

Then the neighbor man speaks. "She turned eighteen a week ago," he says. "She said she isn't legally obligated to see me anymore." His face is red. The lily quivers in his trembling hand.

He waves the flower. "I brought her this," he says, "as if it could save everything. But she's through with me."

Jim looks at the lily in the man's hand and then at the flower he had plucked from his store. It is a rose. He silently offers it to the neighbor man.

The man shakes his head, "I don't deserve it." He motions across the street to Jim's apartment. The kitchen lights are still on and the flowerpots are visible on the windowsill. "Add it to your collection."

Jim looks back at his apartment before returning to face his neighbor. He holds the rose out in front of him. "I want you to have it," he says.

The neighbor man forces a thin smile and accepts the gift. "Do you want to come in?" he asks. Jim nods. He follows his neighbor inside the building and up the stairs.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Jim studies the features of the room he had viewed from afar for so long. He looks out the window at his flower-filled apartment. He can effortlessly picture himself inside it: sitting alone, head down, working on a crossword puzzle.

The man lowers himself into the empty chair across from Jim. "Quite a view, isn't it?" he says. Jim laughs. It is a genuine laugh, a laugh that sounds delightfully foreign.

The two lonely men sit and talk for a long time. The next night they did the same, as well as the night after that.

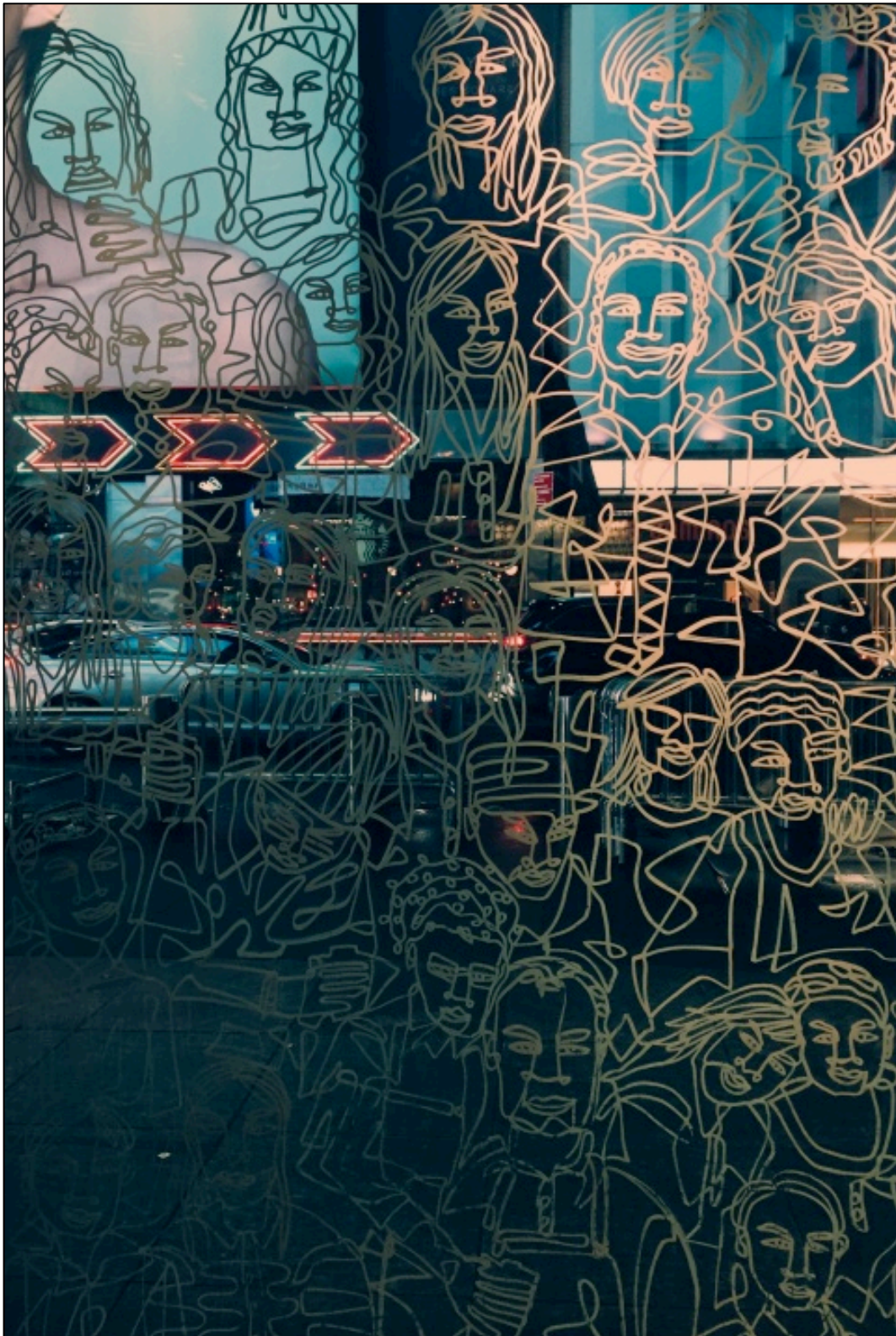


Photo by Autumn Brown

# i picture god as a muslim woman

*Isabella Barricklow, Central Michigan University*

with large, dark eyes  
and a hijab  
covered in yellow daisies.

i think god  
appreciates  
oozing, purple blueberries straight off the bush  
in september,  
walking barefoot on cold grass,  
and puddle splashes when it rains.

i think god lives for greasy, oily pizza,  
vintage record players,  
a lavender bubble bath with candles,  
and slow indie rock.

on god's bad days,  
god probably always feels better  
after an autumn sunset.

i think god hates to see  
dust and blood scraped into children's skin,



brown cheeks pressed to pavement,  
deflated of their breath like a bellows  
fanning flames.

so god, who i picture as a 1920's  
black jazz saxophone player from harlem,  
makes more sunsets  
and more autumns  
and weeps peach-pink tears.



Photo by Autumn Brown

# See America Right

*Fiona Keane, Dickinson College*

The American desert isn't nearly as expansive as I always thought it would be. When I was younger, my dad would tell me stories from his trips. Back when the Greyhound buses still ran in crisscrossing lines across the highways and you could just pack a bag and see America right. Nights when I couldn't sleep, my dad and I would sit on the living room couch, the hem of my pajama pants dragging on the floor. He would make twin glasses of warm milk in the good crystal glassware and tell me about the desert sky. He would describe the shape of it, the expanse of the land and the way the sky looked as the clouds rolled in just before a storm. As my head would fall forward and my eyes would droop, he'd tell me stories about nearly leaving behind his backpack in De Moines, nearly missing the bus in Little Rock, actually missing the bus in Kansas City and having to hitchhike sixteen miles. It all seemed so romantic, and I was nothing if not a romantic slob.

"We have to talk about it eventually, Louise." My brother, Andrew, gripped the steering wheel and gently pushed the brake as yet another behemoth of a truck swung into his lane. We were on the final leg of the drive from good old Dodge City, Kansas, to Colorado Springs and both of us were starting to lose our stamina. There were no clinics back home, so we had to drive seven hours to undo my stupid mistake.

"I don't see why we do. It's going to happen either way." I said as I rolled my head over to look at him, wincing as the muscles in my neck strained.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

He rolled his eyes.



“Act blasé and try and turn this into an adventure—mother fucker! Ever heard of a turn signal?” A small, sporty Jetta had cut in front of us, causing Andrew to jam on the brake. I flew forward, the seatbelt cutting into my stomach and neck. “I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, fine.” I rubbed a hand over my belly. Andrew’s eyes followed the motion and his lips pursed.

“Louise—”

Maybe it was the years that had passed that made the desert lackluster. Areas along the road that must have been empty just thirty years ago now held rest stops, McDonald’s and strip malls where coffee, cheap pizza, and haircuts were advertised in faltering, broken neon. The haze from the lights rose and condensed, blocking out the stars. The heat made everything seem closer; the sky to the ground, the buildings to the people.

“What do you think contributes to the claustrophobia of this place more, the heat or the air pollution?” The words came out fast and high pitched. Andrew sighed. We were still about an hour away from the motel where we were staying for the night.

“Scientifically speaking, it’s the heat. But Lou, please, can we just focus for a moment?”

“Really? I would think it’s the air pollution. I mean, when you visit the Caribbean and places like that, they don’t seem this small, right? I mean, they’ve got clearer air. It’s not—”

“Lou, I don’t care,” a sharp interruption came from the driver’s seat, and I knew that Andrew had reached the end of his rope. “We need to talk about this.”

“We have talked about it. We talked about it last week when you booked the motel room, and the week before when I called the clinic, and the week before that when we sat down and told Mom and Dad, and the day before that when I told you. We’ve talked about it and I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I just want to do it.”

We drove the rest of the way to the motel in silence and I let my eyes slide out of focus as we passed rocks and scrappy shrubs barely illuminated by the passing headlights.

All the books I read growing up told me that girls who helped boys who were trouble would be happy. That they would be rewarded with adventures and a feeling of accomplishment for fixing something broken. And when I read about those girls, driving late at night in cars too fast, hearts in their throats, I heard my dad's stories. I didn't see the warning labels attached. So I went to make my own stories. There were girlfriends who fought with barbed words and sharp nails, and boyfriends who were careless with their actions. I dated a string of Hemingways, Kerouacs and Holden Caulfields. But I was fine. I was always fine, until Oscar showed up at my dorm with pretty words, a bottle of whiskey, and an even prettier face. Our relationship was almost completely physical; Oscar said he didn't like to go out and the few times we did, he was silent and withdrawn. He ignored my birthday; I thought it was the most romantic thing. When I told him about the baby, Oscar had glanced up at me from a bottle of beer, eyes low and dark.

"What do you expect me to do about it?" he had said. His tone was uninterested, as if this was a matter of him not cleaning up the dishes in the sink.

My heart had dropped to the pit of my stomach and I folded into myself. I didn't tell Oscar what I had hoped: that maybe, he'd tell me he loved me. Maybe he'd be willing to see this through. That he'd at least come with me. Oscar left a week later. I haven't heard from him yet.

In the wild, bright colors warn predators of poison. The same cannot be said for humans.

According to the Mayo Clinic website, the thing in my body now resembled a tiny raspberry. Its chromosomes were beginning to decide hair color, sex and intelligence. One of the anti-abortion ads from home flashed into my mind. A woman holding her sick nine-year-old son, somehow simultaneously crying and glaring accusatorially at me. *My son*

*could have been cured* the ad said, *but you killed his doctor when you chose to get an abortion.*

“Andrew. Turn back. You need to turn back.” We had just pulled into the parking lot of the Motel 6.

“What?” He parked the car and turned to me, puzzled. Behind him, I could see the sign marking the way to the check-in desk. Warm neon spelled out the name of the motel, and below it, the slogan: *we’ll leave the light on for you.*

“What if it finds the cure for cancer? The baby? What if I’m killing the cure for cancer? And then I kill even more people? And they all die because I killed the cure for cancer?”



Artwork by Fiona O'Sullivan

I was starting to hyperventilate. Another memory forced its way to the front of my mind. My fourth-grade teacher standing in front of the class, dressed in a pale green sweater. She was gesturing to the white board as she spoke. Written in prim, contained print in black marker were the words *The Butterfly Effect*. I think she had been using it as a lesson to teach us to be kind, and that our actions had consequences. But now I could only remember it as a warning.

“There are hundreds of scientists working on the cure for cancer; there won’t be one mind that figures it out.” Andrew was clearly forcing his own voice to be calming, but I could hear the knife’s edge of exasperation creeping back into it.

My heart was beating rapidly in my chest, and I could feel a tingle beginning in my hands. Soon they would begin to shake, and my world would narrow as the panic would climb its way out of my chest and spread through every part of me.

“But what if it’s the doctor that figures out the last part?” I croaked out, licking my lips.

“Lou, if Watson and Crick hadn’t discovered the structure of DNA, someone else would have. It might have taken a few more years, but someone else would have. No one person is the final puzzle piece, you know?”

Andrew reached over and placed his hand on my arm.

“Franklin discovered it first.” My breathing began to slow down and I pushed my palms against my eyes. Breathe in, breathe out. In, out. “The DNA structure, I mean.”

“Exactly my point. You aren’t killing the cure for cancer because you aren’t killing anything. Just a bundle of cells. Like dead skin.”

“I’m scared.” I was crying in earnest now. “I’m really, really scared, and I know it’s just cells but it’s still scary, and I don’t want to be here.”

He leaned over and hugged me.

"I know, Lou. It's okay, it's all going to be okay. We're so proud of you for making this choice. Mom, Dad, we all are. It's the right choice."

I flung my arms around my brother. I was trembling, and getting snot all over his shoulder. Andrew's face was a caricature of shadows cast by the dim motel light. Half of his face was covered in darkness, while the light from the motel sign turned the other half a washed out yellow, with splashes of red over his cheekbone. For a moment, I felt lost. Like someone had plucked me up, spun me around and dropped me, disorientated in an alternate universe.

"Mom and Dad aren't proud of me."

I spoke in a soft whisper, pulling away from Andrew. My brother, the scientist, the pragmatist. My brother, who scrubbed every bit of the dusty, poor kid drawl from his voice as a means of survival. My brother, who sees things as yes or no, black or white. My abortion was the logical choice; so obviously, it was the right choice.

"Andrew, I was supposed to—this wasn't how—I was supposed to be better than this."

Better than where I'm from, I added silently. Smart Louise, pretty Louise. Louise the successful, Louise the helpful, off in Chicago saving the world. I thought about how my mother cried when I told her, how in that moment she looked at me and saw her sister, saw the girl from next door with the premature gray hairs and two skinny kids.

"Lou, that's ridiculous, of course you're—"

"No! No, don't tell I'm better than this, because clearly I'm not. We wouldn't be here if I was." I sat up and faced him. The tears had stopped, replaced instead by anger and frustration. "I'm a failure, Andrew. I've let you all down and now I don't even have the decency to see this through. I'm a murderer, Andrew!"

I couldn't even look my father in the eye when I told him. I stared down at the floor, at the faded rug with the worst of its worn spots covered by the sagging couch. I needed my father to hold me and tell me it would all be okay. Like he did when I had a nightmare.

“Well, Lou, it looks like you finally got your adventure.” He had meant it as a joke, he was trying to smile as he said it. “You’re finally gonna get to see the desert.”

I almost wished he had yelled, had tried to throw me out or tell me I was going to Hell. He hugged me while I cried and offered to take me. I told him Andrew would. Told him I didn’t want him to take time off work that he couldn’t afford. If he went, it would be too much. I couldn’t spend seven hours sitting next to him, hating myself, hating what I had become.

“Louise! Will you listen to me? You aren’t a murderer because you aren’t killing ANYTHING. That thing in your body? It’s just cells, like a parasite or a tumor.”

“Don’t call it a tumor. It’s not a parasite, it’s not a tumor, it’s my BABY.”

“Don’t tell me you want to keep it now.”

“And what if I do?”

My words rung out and filled the car. I fell back against my seat, shaking. I hadn’t realized until I said it out loud, but there was a part of me that wanted to keep this baby. I wanted to see it through and raise it. I wanted to buy dumb, color coordinated outfits and take it to the park on Sundays. I wanted to lean against the fence with the other young mothers, chat idly about diapers and the merits of Gerber’s peas versus other brands. I wanted to protect it and nurture it and make sure it grew up knowing that some boys were beasts.

Silence. A fly buzzed against the windshield and I almost wanted to laugh. It all felt so cliché.

“Is that what you want to do, Lou?” Andrew’s voice was low and soft, bordering dangerous.

“No. Yes. Maybe. Fuck, I don’t know.” I slammed my hand against the windshield, missing the fly. “What if this is the only shot I get? My one chance to be a mom.”



“It won’t be—”

“But what if it is! I’m not independent like you, Andrew, I need to be loved, I want to be loved. I want a family. And what if something goes wrong tomorrow and I can never have kids again?” My voice caught and I blinked, feeling tears creeping back into my eyes.

“Nothing will go wrong.”

“How do you know that?” I whispered, focusing on the now smudged glass on the windshield where I had missed the fly.

“Because I know. Because this isn’t some back alley coat hanger job, Lou. This is the Colorado Springs Planned Parenthood and they want you to be safe. Lou, you’re my baby sister and I would never have agreed to take you here if I didn’t know that you would be safe.”

He sighed and closed his eyes.

“Look, if you still aren’t sure tomorrow, we’ll call and cancel. We can take a few days, see what’s what in town and then we’ll decide what to do. If you decide you want to keep it, fine. If you don’t, also fine. Either way, Mom and Dad and I will support you. Okay?”

I nodded. It wasn’t okay, but I knew he was right.

“Come on, let’s check in and get dinner. I saw an iHop a little way back. How does breakfast for dinner sound?”

We dropped our bags in the room and I had just enough time to get the knots out of my neck before we piled back into the car. Andrew tried to get me to talk as I picked at my strawberry waffles, but I couldn’t stop thinking about what had been said in the parking lot. Did I actually want this baby? I knew it was foolish. I knew I couldn’t afford it. I had plans. I was going to finish my degree and leave Kansas for good. There wasn’t any wiggle room to be a single parent. I took another bite of my waffles and felt the syrup settle thick on my tongue. I knew what I needed to do. I just wasn’t sure if I could live with myself after.

“How are you feeling?” Andrew asked me back at the hotel room as he brushed his teeth. I sat on the edge of one of the beds, careful not to let my bare feet touch the questionable carpet.

“Fine.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I took a deep breath. “I’m going to do it. I’m going to go through with it.”

“I think that’s the right choice.” Andrew climbed into his bed. “It’s going to be okay, Lou. Good night, try and get some sleep.”

“Good night Andrew.”

He turned out the light and I heard the spring squeak as he rolled over in his bed. I lay on my back, staring up at the crack in the cheap ceiling, illuminated by the light of the Golden Corral next door seeping through the curtain. The nice woman at Planned Parenthood had explained the procedure to me over the phone. They would give me some pills and I would bleed the baby out. Like a really intense period. I was scared of the other method, the prick of the needle. This was more natural. More like a miscarriage.

I could live with that. I would have to live with that.

I wrapped my arms around myself and squeezed. Andrew was starting to snore. I remembered what he said in the car. Just a bunch of cells. Like flicking off a scab. Nothing to be scared of. I took a deep breath and rested a hand on my stomach. Nothing to be scared of.





Photo by Autumn Brown

# The Day My Mom Accidentally Went to Pride

*Ashley Howell, Central Michigan University*

in Berlin and was handed a dildo from a purple-eye shadow man was a Tuesday. She packed that dildo in her carry-on suitcase for the flight home.

In a security line smelling of sweaty feet and still-wet bathing suits, a TSA agent saw the long, hard thing on his computer screen.

Calling her over with a two-finger point, said  
*We're going to need to open this bag and have a look.*  
He pulled out the folded t-shirts and pack of tissues  
before finding his fingers wrapped around a familiar plastic. *Ma'am you can't take this on-board... it could be used as a weapon.*

The next day she knocked with a strong motherly-fist on my apartment door to show me a picture of that confiscated dildo. That was the only time I have cried at a photo of a sex toy.

She didn't get it. Couldn't see the way I had been holding  
her tears on my chest since she saw me kiss a woman.  
She laid her head on my lap to cry; the daughter she raised was dead.

I was resurrected that Friday when she came over *proud*  
to tell me how she had stumbled upon that parade and asked  
for the dildo as a souvenir for me, her queer child.

That day, I painted a rainbow on my lips  
just so I could kiss her cheek.

# Author Spotlight: Stephanie Powell Watts On Her Writing Process

*Carlie Sisco, Widener University*

Author Stephanie Powell Watts visited Widener Nov. 14 and 15 as a part of the English and Creative Writing department's Distinguished Writers Series.

Watts published her debut novel, *No One Is Coming to Save Us*, with Ecco in April 2017. Described as “an arresting and powerful novel about an extended African American family and their colliding visions of the American Dream,” *No One Is Coming to Save Us* has been named one of the most anticipated books of 2017 by *Entertainment Weekly*, *W Magazine*, *Nylon*, *Elle*, *Redbook*, and *The Chicago Review of Books*.

In 2011, Watts published a collection of shorts stories called *We Are Only Taking What We Need*. While the reflective quality of the short story is something Watts is comfortable with, the final story in this collection is what inspired her to begin *No One Is Coming to Save Us*.

On campus, Watts spent time speaking in creative writing and English classes about her books, her writing process, and answering students' questions. She also individually met with several students in the Long-Form Fiction course for tutorials.



“It’s always encouraging to hear from visiting writers about their process, struggles and breakthroughs,” Jennifer Rohrbach, a senior creative writing and English double major, says. “She gave me great advice about how to round out my characters and ways to develop my overall story.”

Watts concluded her visit with a public reading from *No One Is Coming to Save Us*, which she began by giving a brief overview of how she’s gotten to where she is as a writer. The visit offered students a great deal of writing advice, such as one of the anecdotes Watts shared, which sparked inspiration in Haley Poluchuck, a senior creative writing and English double major.

Poluchuck says, “One thing that stood out to me was a story about Watts and her siblings when they were young, rushing to clean the house before their father came home. Her argument was that you could get a lot done in ten minutes if you really want to, so we have no excuses not to write. Lately, I’ve been inspired to dedicate at least ten minutes to projects I would have otherwise put off.”

**“I think writing, above all, is a social justice. It’s you saying this world and these people have a right to a voice, have a right to exist. Doing that is a movement towards social justice.”**

During her visit, Watts was also able to sit down with me for a brief interview, a portion of which appears below:

***No One Is Coming to Save Us* is your debut novel and *We Are Only Taking What We Need* is a collection of short stories. What challenges did you face in the transition from the short story form to the novel form?**

I think they’re very different genres. It’s not like you just lengthen a short story, it’s not that kind of process, so I found it very challenging. No words are lost in a short story. A novel takes you on tangents. You’re allowed more space, literally and psychologically, to develop characters in different ways. It was a real learning curve for me. I found myself resorting to chapters that resembled or felt like short stories. I tried to open them up, so there is at least something you can hook onto for the rest of the story and also to deepen the psyches of the characters.



**What inspired you to move towards the novel form?**

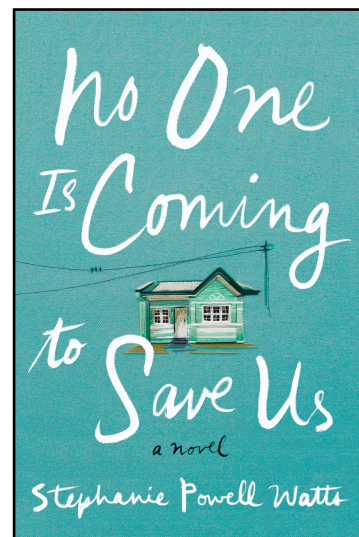
I felt like I had a story that would accommodate it. When I first started the story, it was about 30 pages and the last story in my short story collection. I felt like these characters had a lot more to do, so I just started writing. I didn't think of it as a novel at first, I just thought I was continuing these stories and I got to the point where I thought, this is something else.

**In your essay about your relationship with *The Great Gatsby*, you mention F. Scott Fitzgerald says, “the measure of a first rate intelligence is to hold two opposing ideas in one’s head at the same time and still function.” Do you try to incorporate this into your own writing?**

I do. I believe that you can look at something and see it in its complexity. You can always find the way to redemption. It's a very sophisticated way of thinking, to be able to see shades of gray and not to always have to categorize something as right or wrong, good or bad, black or white.

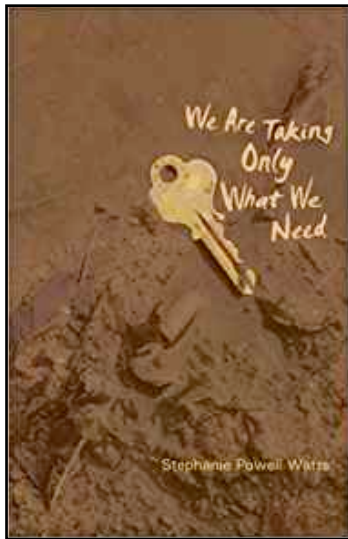
**In *No One Is Coming to Save Us*, it's clear to see elements of *The Great Gatsby* and the American Dream. How much of *Gatsby* went into the planning?**

When I first started the book, I was in a very different place and the characters were in a very different place. They were about twenty years younger than they are now, a young family dealing with an immediate loss. I'd heard a story when I was in North Carolina about a family dealing with an immediate loss and they believed that they might be able to take back from death their son and their brother. They tried to pray him back to life. They didn't stop until they were assured that they were going to be a national laughing stock, the media was going to expose their story, and everyone would know the foolish,



desperate, and sad thing they were doing. I started writing that story and I couldn't get a real grip on it and I began thinking maybe this isn't a story about the moment of grief, but instead a story about how you deal with grief in the aftermath, what grief looks like twenty years on. When I started thinking about that, I started thinking about a return. The family was thinking that the son would return and when I started thinking about this, I started thinking about *Gatsby*. It's not a retelling, reboot, or adaptation of *Gatsby*, but it's in conversation. There are thematic issues that are central to *Gatsby* and are also central to my book. The issues about class, possibility to transcend your class, are there invisible barriers like that glass ceiling for women, are there invisible barriers that keep people out, what is the American dream about and is there only so far you can go with that dream?

**Do you find that you write your stories chronologically with a plan of attack?**



I've tried planning, but I don't find it very helpful. I find that I resist the plan, but I do sometimes have images. If you do have images or sources of signposts in your story, I would encourage you to write them down, because it helps you figure out some trajectory. You may realize you don't need it, but first worry about getting the story down. With a short story in my collection, I knew there was going to be a scene in a vineyard, I knew there would be bees buzzing all around. Your senses are overloaded because the grapes are kind of rotting and the bees are really intense, flying around your head. I just wrote it down, wrote everything I could think of, so at some point I knew this scene was going to happen.

**How do you work through writers' block?**

There are a lot of people who have about 70 pages in a drawer. It really gets crazy at about the 70 page mark, because you've got an idea, you started to put it in motion, maybe you have characters that are interesting and compelling and then what in the world do you do with

them? One of the things that I do is put it aside for a little bit, maybe a week or so. If it's too long, you'll conveniently forget about it and hope it disappears. Write something else. You will surprise yourself with how much the new thing that you're trying is informed by the old thing. Push through. Let the character do something and figure out later if it's wrong. Don't take the safest route for the character.

**In an interview with Karen I. Johnson, you say, “Either you will be a writer and try to present the world in all its flawed complexity or you will stop writing anything more substantive than holiday cards or snazzy e-mails.” What do you feel this means in terms of your own writing and literature in general? What is the importance of this writing or the boundaries it can create?**

Especially for women writers, writers of color, people that come from a marginalized community, or immigrants there might be an expectation that your writing is going to be directly about social justice issues and that that is the intention of your writing. I think that's remarkable and important and that writing should exist, but I think writing, above all, is a social justice. It's you saying this world and these people have a right to a voice, have a right to exist. Doing that is a movement towards social justice. Just by asserting the legitimacy of the existence of the people that you are representing, you are having a social justice moment. You can't try to chase a trend. You have to write what it is that you write.

**If you were to recommend one book for aspiring writers, what would you recommend?**

If you are a short story writer: *Birds of America* by Lorrie Moore. It's such a good teacher on how to write a short story that isn't conventional. She has a beautiful narrative voice and she's very funny. All of her stories are funny, even the ones that are tragic, she finds a way to incorporate humor. Also, I would recommend Edward P. Jones's *Lost in the City*. There are moments of levity in his work, but he is so poignant, and he really understands the characters that he's writing. He has taken the time with these characters that aren't necessarily the important people in the world and he's made them the stars of the story.



## Contributors

**Isabella Barricklow** is an undergraduate student at Central Michigan University whose three main food groups are dark chocolate, peanut butter, and poetry. Her poetry has been published in *The Central Review* and *The Slag Review*.

**Autumn Brown** is a poet and a sophomore majoring in English at Widener University. Her goal as an artist in any medium is to perfectly present the past. From a series of South Jersey suburbs, Autumn enjoys recording moments impressed into her own mind to share with others. She works across mediums to capture the hilarity of suffering in the first world, and internally.

**Grace DeLauro** is a senior at John Carroll University where she is pursuing a degree in English with a specialty in Creative Writing.

**Courtney DuChene** is a student studying English and Media and Communication Studies at Ursinus College.

**Marshall Farren** is a Junior at Indiana University Bloomington, studying Psychology. He has been writing for the past three years and has just recently begun trying to publish his work.

**Molly Fennig** is a sophomore at Swarthmore College. She is currently pursuing a major in neuroscience and minors in both Spanish and English.

**Robin Gow** is an undergraduate student at Ursinus College studying English, Creative Writing, and Spanish. He runs his own poetry blog and serves as the production editor of *The Lantern* literary magazine. He has recently been published in *Synaesthesia*, *The Write Launch*, *FIVE: 2:ONE*, and *Corbel Stone Press*.

**Ashley Howell** is a senior at Central Michigan University. She is pursuing an English major and a Creative Writing Certificate. She has led two poetry workshops in Michigan correctional facilities during her undergraduate study. Throughout her career, she hopes to continue

working to amplify voices that have been silenced. She loves to travel. Having been to the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, and the Dominican Republic, she considers herself first to be a global citizen and aspires to visit all seven continents. She hopes to serve as a creative writing professor in the future.

**Fiona Keane** is currently a junior at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. At Dickinson, they are majoring in American Studies with a minor in Creative Writing and possibly another minor in Political Science. Fiona has had their work published in *The Dickinson Review*, and was chosen to participate in the 2014 Sewanee Young Writers Conference. Fiona plans to pursue a doctorate in American Studies after completing undergrad, and hopes to spend the future with good books and several golden retrievers.

**Fiona O'Sullivan** is a junior majoring in Animation and Game Arts at Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia.

**Carlie Sisco** is a junior English and Creative Writing major at Widener University in Chester, Pennsylvania. She is blog manager and a staff reader for *The Blue Route*.

# *The Blue Route* Submission Guidelines

Prose—Submit 1-3 pieces of fiction or creative nonfiction totaling no more than 3000 words.

Poetry—Submit up to 3 poems.

We want good, highly imaginative writing about contemporary life as you see it. We're not interested in genre writing (romance, detective, horror, sci-fi) unless it somehow rises above the conventions associated with those types of writing. If your writing is clichéd, inspired by TV, emphasizes end rhyme above all else, has flat characters, exhibits a general insensitivity to the beauties and subtleties of language, it will not find a place in this journal. No pornography. No racism. No sexism. If you've got to use profanity, remember a little goes a long, long way.

We do not accept previously published work. However, we do accept simultaneous submissions, but please notify us immediately if your work is accepted elsewhere. Our response time is about three months.

**IMPORTANT: Undergraduate Students: Only previously unpublished work of current undergraduate writers will be considered.** In order to verify your status as an undergraduate, we ask that with your submission you send along the email of a faculty member from your department. Until we gain confirmation of undergraduate status from this reference, we will not be able to publish your work.

Frequency of Submission: If your work has been published in *The Blue Route*, we ask that you please wait at least one issue before submitting again.

Terms: We pay twenty-five dollars upon publication. We acquire First North American Serial Rights, a one time, non-exclusive use of Electronic Rights, with all rights reverting to the author upon publication. We will archive your work online. If your piece is later published elsewhere, we expect that you will mention *The Blue Route* as the original publisher.

Formatting: We ask that you put no identifying marks on your submission. Instead, in your submission email, we would like the following information provided:

Name (First and Last)

Title of Submission(s)

Name and Email of Faculty Contact for Enrollment Verification

A Brief Biography (No more than 100 words and written in the third person.)

For submissions: Please write "Poetry—Your Name" or "Fiction—Your Name" or "Nonfiction—Your Name" in the heading of the email. Send your work in an attachment in .doc or .docx format. Submissions that do not follow these simple directions may be deleted. Send all poetry or prose submissions to [wutheblueroute@gmail.com](mailto:wutheblueroute@gmail.com).



# **Issue 19**

**featuring  
undergraduate writers from**

**Central Michigan University  
Dickinson College  
Indiana University Bloomington  
John Carroll University  
Swarthmore College  
Ursinus College**

**Author interview with  
Stephanie Powell Watts**



**Widener  
University**