



**THE BLUE ROUTE**

A LITERARY JOURNAL FOR UNDERGRADUATE WRITERS  
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# The Blue Route

Spring 2026 | Issue 31

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# Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Issue 31 of *The Blue Route*! This year, we had a bit of an unusual arrangement with two Coeditors-in-Chief instead of just one, and we are both very excited to have stepped into this role together. As we worked on this issue, we found a common theme emerging, one that was very important to us: human connections. The writers whose work you are about to enjoy explore all facets of the ways in which people's lives cross, be it beautifully, mundanely, or painfully. These gorgeously crafted pieces bring this theme to light in real, touching ways, and we could not be more pleased to present them to you here. However, we also want to acknowledge that some of the pieces in this issue involve heavy topics that may be upsetting or triggering, and we encourage you to take care of yourself and know you are never alone.

We want to thank our wonderful staff for all their hard work and dedication to curating this issue. We would also like to thank the contributors one last time for their beautiful pieces. Happy reading!



*Katherine Abissi & Laura Polaski*

Editors-in-Chief

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# When an Onion Unravels

Chela Wetzel

The man walked into the foyer half past eleven.

*Dinner?* he asked, but he said it more like *Dinner*. It's all about tone, someone said that. It's all about tone. And I could tell from his tone that he was cross, and I could tell from his tone that he was unhappy, and I could tell from his tone that we were not going to have a good night.

I thought about asking for the onion I'd asked him to bring home, though at this point it was irrelevant, I had made do without it, but it was the principle of these things, right, I'd asked him to do something and he hadn't and now it was too late, I'd made dinner without the onion, but damn, it was the *principle*. Still, I didn't ask about the onion.

My job was *love* and my job was *ease* and his job was *genius*, and I could hardly remember a time in which these roles had been anything other. It really wasn't his fault he was so smart, I reminded myself every day, even on the days when the only feeling that bubbled up underneath my love was an aching sort of disappointment.

*Dinner*, I smiled and rose from the sofa. The cat who'd been sitting on me made an angry noise, and he didn't even look over at her.

My body said *CREEEAAK*. The man's body said nothing, but it felt very cold, all the way in the foyer, and it didn't even whisper *I love you* like it sometimes did, it was just still and cold. Something looked out of his green eyes and saw disappointment, and Something spoke out of his mouth and said *Dinner*.

The man sat down at the table, a big one that I'd bought back when I thought children would be coming soon and we'd have many mouths to fill. It looked comically large in our empty dining room, he and I were the only ones who ever sat there.

*Your day*, I said, *how was it?*

That same Something spoke out of his mouth and said to me, *It was terrible every day of my life just feels like a never-ending slog to get to the next and what do I have to show for it but a grey hair and a bruised ego.*

To that I said, *I'm sorry to hear that* and I said *I love you* and *I think you're brilliant* and *I made food for you I hope that even after your long day which sounds so hard this makes you feel a little bit better* and that Something, the thing peering through his eyes looked at me and said, *You don't get it you've never understood me or my work*, and I blinked and that Something used his hands to push away the plate and that Something used his mouth to say *This is bland*, though I hadn't seen him even try it and then finally that Something used his legs to get up from the table and walk away. There wasn't very far to go in our small house that was pink and blue and green, but I felt that he went very far anyway.

I sat at the table and thought hard, replaying the day to understand where I had gone wrong because often there were little things I would have said that caused him to be very

angry at me and usually I could pinpoint exactly what it was but this time... Well, *this time I had caught the thing that would have upset him in advance!* I patted myself on the back for that, and smiled, but then very quickly remembered that things had gone sour anyways so maybe not having asked about the onion was not really the achievement in placidity that I had thought it was.

I racked my brain and I tried to trace it all back, everything that had happened from when we woke up and he got us coffee from the coffee shop down the street that was my favorite and I said, *Thank you!* and he said *They took too long and now I'm late* and I said, *Thank you, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,* and he said *I did this because I know that you wanted me to and because I love you I went there instead of the other place that I like better and I hate what I ordered and it was just a colossal waste of time* and to that I said nothing so he got in his car and went away.

I hadn't really known what to do with myself so I made our bed and I cleaned out the cat box and I made some tea and brought a cigarette out to the patio. I sat smoking and thought about how Raymond Carver once described himself as a cigarette with a body attached to it—very quickly he couldn't breathe and then, of course, he couldn't live, and I didn't want to smoke very much anymore, but what else was there to do with nervous hands?

I kept my cigarettes to myself these days, but when we first met I swear he liked how I smoked, he used to let me do so in his car and sometimes he came back from international business trips with special ones from Indonesia that tasted like cloves and burned like incense and we would sit in his living room on the floor and smoke and talk about *Ideas*. That was a long time ago, back when he used to tell me that I was *uniquely brilliant*. Now all he tells me is that I don't understand.

These days all we talk about are unhappy happenings but often we just sit in a kind of silence because he has a temper like a match and a silent house is better than a house on fire. The spark of a light against the tip of my cigarette used to be a welcome thing and I thought he understood this part of me and I actually thought he liked it and then recently out of the blue he said *It is disgusting that you smoke cigarettes the mother of my children would never smoke cigarettes* which felt like an impossible challenge and I wanted to say *What children do you see any children in this house has there ever, even once, been a child in this house* but instead I bit my tongue and stamped the fire out.

The man tells me that he loves me a lot but there isn't much action behind those words, and rather sometimes when he tells me this it makes me worried because this cannot be what love is! His love cannot be the thing that moves mountains and unites kingdoms and all of that, can it? I love him and I cannot imagine doing any of the things to him which he often does to me, and then I get real in my head about whether or not this repeated lie has irrevocably altered my perception of love because since I kept getting told that *this is love* at some point I started to believe it.

Where I'm at now is kind of a feeling that my love for him is enough for the both of us.

I sat at the table a while longer but he never came back out, and when I went to the bedroom he wasn't there either. I pulled back the curtain in the living room, looking for the car. The driveway was as empty as it had been when I got home.

I hugged my arms around myself and thought that maybe he wouldn't have left if he'd liked the dinner more. I hadn't even tried it in my rush to get it on the table before he got home, but now that he was gone I allowed myself a bite from the pan on the stove. It was bland, he was right, wanting for an onion.

I put the spoon back into the dish and thought for a while about how to fix things. I worried about him. It was late, and now it was raining, and he'd left upset. One of the headlights on the car was out, I'd asked him to fix it a few weeks ago but I didn't think he had. There wasn't much I could do about that now but make him a new meal, one that'd be ready when he got back if I started soon enough. The grocery store on Garber was open late, and Claude would still be at his register.

\*\*\*

I had the misfortune of stepping in every puddle that I passed on my way to the store, and I counted eighteen. I got so wet that at a point I folded up the umbrella and put it away. I just couldn't get any wetter, I thought.

Back at the store, I piled together the things I needed. *Ground lamb, potatoes, cream*, I ticked off, again racking up costs we couldn't afford. From the produce section I grabbed a yellow onion, big and bulbous with all those little legs sticking out from the bottom. *Not again*, I thought. *Not today*.

At this hour I normally would have gone through self-checkout, but it was only Claude working the register and I thought it might be nice to give him some sense of purpose, and wasn't that part of the reason I came?

"Back again," he said to me as I loaded up the belt.

"That's right," I said. "Call me Sisyphus."

He looked at me blankly.

"Why are you out so late?" he asked, and for a moment I contemplated telling him the truth: That Something had come home in my husband's body and that it had looked out at me through his green eyes and spoken to me from his mouth and that it was unhappy and that it was hungry and that though it scared me I wanted it to come home.

But instead I said, "Oh, you know. Just getting ready for the week."

He smiled at me, all sad-like, nodded, and then I left, walking down Garber for the fourth time that day.

At home again, unpacking the groceries again, tallying their prices up and down again. I pulled the onion out last, big and beautiful bulb that she was, with dozens of little tendrils covered in dirt. I cut off the end in one smooth piece, using the good knife, the one that didn't fight me.

\*\*\*

When we first bought the house, I had said *Look baby there's a real backyard where I can*

*plant food for us and we can grow a beautiful garden* and he kind of looked but mostly nodded and then asked the realtor about the integrity of the foundation.

The seasons slipped by through the window in the kitchen, summer turning into fall turning into winter turning into spring, nothing growing in the yard except for a few dandelions. The earth dried and wettened and dried again, and nothing grew. Years went by, and so my life passed.

\*\*\*

Through the window the sky turned from black to blue and while it did Something began gurgling deep in my stomach. It gurgled, and it gurgled, and then it frothed!

And suddenly this Something rose up through my throat and said *Enough is enough* and that sneaky Something used my feet to walk right out into that patch of dirt and unfulfilled promise where I knelt down and, getting my fingers real dirty, placed the end of the onion into the ground, and to her I whispered *be good*. It was not the right season, nor was it the right time, but there is hardly ever an instance in which it is.

I sat back on my heels to admire my handiwork and I thought *Now this will never happen again*.

\*\*\*

When I went back inside, the man had returned, red-eyed and bleary. The sun had begun to rise, skewing our blue and green and pink house mostly pink. He was jittery and he was agitated and he smelled like a new kind of perfume.

*Now where the hell have you been*, he said to me.

The Something inside of me thought *I should be the one asking you!* but in the morning hour it had already begun to slip back down into the pit of my stomach and so I stayed real still and silent.

He grabbed my hand real abruptly and held it close to his face.

*You're covered in dirt*, he said.

Still, I said nothing. The remnants of my false promise were strewn about the kitchen, but he didn't notice. The lamb bled from its paper wrapping onto the counter, and dripped slowly onto the floor, but he didn't notice. The pot of water for mashed potatoes that I had started had dried up, and the room had a bit of a smell of burnt metal, but he didn't notice.

What he did notice, misfortune of misfortunes, was the onion: The beautiful onion that I had plucked from its brothers not so many hours ago, whose end I had sliced off and buried.

Pacing up and down the kitchen, he picked it apart. Layer after layer he peeled off, throwing them to the wayside.

*My onion*, I whispered.

It must have been Something that was using his beautiful hands to be so cruel, those hands which had once stroked my cheek and called me his, held my belly and promised me babies.

It must have been Something that ruined my onion, that tore it apart so that it could no longer be sliced, so that there was no longer the promise of filling our house with an aroma of home, and it must have been that Something that did this all silently. The man of words whom I had married would not have done this, I thought.

Whoever, whatever, it was, took the long legs of the man I loved and walked out once again. For a moment I considered getting on my hands and knees and collecting the littered pieces of onion which lay across the floor, but my own Something burbled back up inside me and said to let sleeping dogs lay.

It isn't easy work, loving a difficult man. But he had let the question of the dirt under my fingernails go and because of this, I knew something which he didn't.

When an onion unravels, it ceases to exist. Or so he thinks.



Photo by Laura Polaski

# Composting

Maxwell James Kuecker

Last November, I buried myself in the garden

I shoveled deep into the dirt until sweat blinded me the coffin sat beside me unsanded  
and chipped my corpse lay within eyes glassy a cadaver infested with rot a natural  
process that produced a vile odor yet for a moment amongst the fetid stench I smelled  
a hint of lavender

I shoved the box into its hole praying its contents would stay dead I looked into the  
lifeless visage a grimace forming on my perspiring face I pondered erecting a  
tombstone of some sort out of twisted obligation but decided against it  
I covered the casket in earth and without further ceremony  
I left

April has come, and my garden blooms  
with cosmos and lilies



Photo by Michael Cocchiarale



Photo by Abigail Grossman

# How to relocate your right hip after a bad night's sleep:

Nic Hinson

1. Stay on your back. Keep your spine straight.
2. Add a tally mark on how many times you have had to do this this month.
3. Slide your palm under the covers, finding your right knee.
4. Imagine a Barbie doll being pulled apart.
5. With your hand flat, push your thigh inward.
6. Breathe.
7. Keep going until you can't anymore.
8. Roll sharply into your right leg, like an alligator spinning around something in its mouth.
9. Hear a crack.
10. Worry you did it wrong.
11. Worry you won't walk again.
12. Stretch your legs out straight. Raise them up in front of you. Admire your handiwork.
13. Rotate your body off the bed. Wince when your naked feet feel the floor.
14. Don't think about falling over. Don't think about how far the bathroom is.
15. Walk.
16. Walk.
17. Walk.
18. Almost black out.
19. Walk.
20. Open the door.
21. Step out.
22. Imagine the bathroom mirror is an x-ray. Wonder how you are still standing.
23. Wonder if this is normal.



Photo by Abigail Grossman



Photo by Abigail Grossman

# Brace for Impact

Angela Athena Karr

He was drunk when he did it.  
His last breath reeked of his father's whiskey.  
His neck constricted leaving no room for air,  
The fabric around his neck getting  
Tighter  
tendons are the ones you will feel as soon as  
you get on the ice. They'll be the stiffest causing your  
landings to be shaky. Once the warmup ends the gossip  
starts: which of the judges struggle with  
drugs  
had nothing to do with his death. Though, a lot of  
the town thought so. I heard it was fentanyl  
said the front desk lady with her teeth stained with brown  
Lipstick  
will be reapplied by your coach when you are  
Up next to perform. It's a part of it  
and as time goes on you will hate that  
Part  
of me wanted to rip her big, rimmed glasses  
off her pinched face. But that would ultimately  
do nothing and it surely wouldn't bring him  
Back  
aching from the hours of training that week  
you'll tell yourself it's only a few minutes of  
pain. It will be the only thing to get you  
Through  
out the day I couldn't help but cringe at  
every whisper. Every time someone looked at my  
Bloodshot eyes and my disheveled get  
Up  
Next is the girl you had your eye on during warm up  
The hundreds of dollars worth of Swarovski crystals  
shining in the glass. For a second you look at your own  
reflection  
I couldn't recognize her now. My grief took over that  
Week. It didn't get much better until after the funeral.  
It helped me put the pieces together and checked me into  
Reality  
Will hit you, that you are up next on deck. Your stomach  
Drops as she stands in her end position and her music stops.  
You take your jacket off as your name is announced.  
Nothing prepares you.

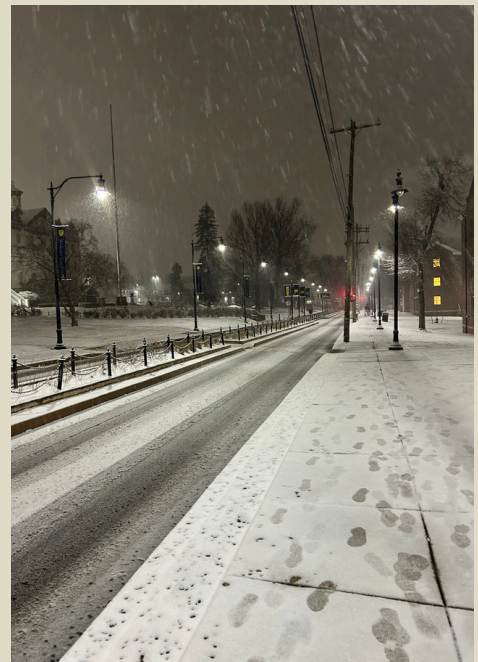


Photo by Laura Polaski

# The Fox

Brandy Smith

Until I was given a wipe  
Greased fingertips seeped beneath childhood sheets.  
Imagining his normal type  
Deprived of touch, a lonely leech.  
Under fluorescents, I, the unwanted.  
Poisoned with beauty of red fur.  
The bed he lied in haunted.  
The way I said no, a blur.



Photo by Katherine Abissi

# September

Diane Brown

is when I read Bronte  
in the humid Tennessee air until  
I can't sit anymore  
with the red leaves that swirl  
around me reminding me  
of the tree in front of my room  
with bright purple blossoms  
clogging my sinuses but filling the air  
with a sweet magic I sit in  
when I get lost in the story  
of the Romanovs  
I'm always making sure  
to carry my inhaler so my lungs don't shrivel  
which means that I could never be  
one of Tolkien's elf princesses who live  
in trees surrounded by millions  
of flowers, I don't think he ever  
wrote an asthmatic elf  
so it's good  
that this is September and ladies of  
ill-health abound in *Wuthering Heights*,  
although if I had to choose between  
Arda and England I would  
much rather be in  
Arda where the sun shines and  
while I make a terrible elf princess,  
I might be a half-decent human.



Photo by Laura Polaski



Photo by Abigail Grossman

# The Itch

Hadley Shoaf

The cursor blinked, blinked, blinked, like the incessant tapping of a fly against window glass, trying to force its way through the invisible barrier. If it made a noise it would be the ticking of a clock, each second moving the thin line of a hand over and over as if counting down to something horrific. It reminded me of the deadline that hovered above my head, weighing my hands and my mind down with its rigidity and instilling an overarching fear into everything I did. This morning, I made my coffee in a trance, not once blinking my eyelids while pressing the earthy coffee grounds in the French press. I poured the dirty, piping drink into my oversized mug, cursing when it scalded my hand, snapping me awake.

I closed the window of my manuscript and opened my email, the AOL logo appearing on the screen in bold, pixelated letters. I checked my mailbox, void of any recent messages. Considering the scarce possibility I had missed an email, I clicked through old messages from weeks prior, failing to find any that hadn't already been mulled over. I typed his username into the search bar, my last-ditch effort. I had last sent him an excerpt from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* to try and explain my feeling of existential perplexity with my manuscript. The tree that she describes in her only novel was full of sweet, succulent figs. Each fig resembled a far off possibility, just close enough for me to smell, to get a whiff of what it would be like to actually be a writer, or a mother, or a schoolteacher, but it's just beyond my grasp, so it dangled on the branch above. I tried to explain that I could only pick one fig, one life, leaving the rest to wither like Plath had so perfectly described in her novel. His response was, "See, I don't think there can only be one fig. I certainly agree that these figs are constrained by time, and there's a time period in which they are rich and plump and obtainable, and there comes a time when they begin to wrinkle and rot, when they get closer to their expiration. They do ultimately become inedible and will waste away into nothing. But, I think it's possible to collect many figs at once, to gather them in the cloth of your dress, or shirt, or whatever it is you wear to ponder under a fig tree, and bite into each and every one of them before they decay into compost. I think that collecting multiple figs is very realistic in fact, though I would prefer the analogy if it was a peach tree. I like peaches much more than figs. - M."

I had responded that night, with a message that I thought sounded rather thought-provoking and made me proud,

"But wouldn't you feel full? There's only so much room in my stomach, or in the apron I am cradling the figs in, since I've decided I would wear some sort of apron to sit under a fig tree, for me to fit the fruit in. It's impossible to eat every fig on the

tree. I agree, maybe I could manage to chew and digest two or three fruits, but anymore would be impossible. It would spoil the sweetness of the initial fig, the satisfaction of choosing that very fig from all the ones that blossom from the branches and calling it my own fig. I couldn't possibly juggle all these figs in my apron and eat them all in a timely manner. I couldn't savor the fig I was chewing if another one glared up at me from a plate, rotting and molding as I swallowed the fig before it. It's impossible you see, and that's what makes the analogy so visceral, that even as I think about it and type this message to you the overhanging figs are beginning to fall, to wither into something that I can no longer grasp. It's one good fig or possibly several bruised and fermented fruits, but not several pristine and healthy ones. In this case, it really is a matter of quality over quantity, and for my personal application, I suppose I could be an above average mother or writer or school teacher, or a half-assed version of all three. I also agree that the analogy would be better off if it used a different fruit. But in my case, I would argue cherries over peaches; they only taste sweet when they are perfectly ripe, before or after they taste more like a soured lemon that has sat in the sun for far too long."

It had been eight days since I sent that message. Twelve days since we last spoke over a bottle of cabernet. In a dimly lit and swanky bar, I had talked about Plath's poetry, to which he responded that he had never read her. I sent him the excerpt to prove to him that he was wrong for never having read her. I sent it to him so he would think of me, think I was maybe a puzzle to be solved and I was just giving him a clue. Maybe I had been too difficult of a game, my pieces being irritating to fit together instead of enticing. I selected new mail and addressed the blank page to him. "Dear," far too formal. "How's it hangin;)" "Hey,". I closed the tab and decided I needed a break instead from all the thinking and the typing. I chose to walk to Lincoln Park and lay in the grass and let the sun beat down on my face and let my cheeks turn pink.

I trudged through scattered newspapers and littered plastic shopping bags for five blocks, absentmindedly peering into the darkening sky overhead. I had brought a large picnic blanket, a woven Navajo print from my grandmother who had gone on a summer trip to Colorado. She had traveled with her best friend from nursing school, whom we all were sure she had been sleeping with. She had been given Nan's two bedroom apartment in the will, along with the pair of Maine coon cats whose names I couldn't remember but knew that they rhymed.

Spreading the blanket across the scorched grass, I lay against the rough wool, my arms crossing behind me and cradling my head. The uneven terrain was laden with small mounds of dirt, reminiscent of the drought the entirety of Illinois had rambled on about for the month

of June. I squinted up at the gray sky, any cloud or sun or airplane indistinguishable against the expanse of ash. I thought that if I chose to be a writer, I would have to take up smoking to be a good one. I would take long drags of burnt smoke into my lungs, holding it there until I was satisfied with the dry sensation that filled the cavities of my chest. I would release it through the O shape of my lips into clouds that would linger in circles around my head, like a halo, or more accurately a storm cloud. I would look as though I were deep in thought, no one could tell that I would be more concentrated on smoking in the correct way, looking experienced in cigarette use. It would give me a chance to gaze off into space without seeming lost or frustrated with writing. It would be purposeful, as if savoring the haze that encircled my head. It would be something else to hang over me.

I scratched at my ankles, feeling raw and itchy from the grass, and noticed the anklet of red bumps that formed on my skin. Black, humming insects flew in circles around my feet, mosquitoes buzzing with blood. I jolted, sitting up straight on the blanket and swatting at the air around me. Suddenly, I felt violated and unknowingly fantasized while I lay with my eyes closed. I removed my clog and slapped at the ground, hitting my own ankles in protest. I must have looked mad, kneeling over the dirt and pounding my shoe into the earth, over and over. I shook the woven blanket of the dry, dead dirt and hastily hurried out of the park, leaving with angry hives rising from my ankles. I hadn't reached the corner of Third and North when I saw it, round and discreet, feeding from my leg. I knelt down and clapped the mosquito under my palm, my own ruby rich blood bursting from its body. Its crushed self looked like an ink blot, surrounded in crimson red, almost looking artful. I hurried home, furious as the red bumps that had settled in my skin.

The computer screen's harsh light glowed in the darkening apartment. An AOL message rose to the surface, sending the blood rushing to my ears in alert. The loading bar crept with anticipation.

RitaCat67:

How's that manuscript of yours coming along? Send what you have, I'd love to take a look at it! PS. That deadline is coming up! Ciao!

I clicked off instantly, scratching at my swollen ankles until they sprouted porous specks of blood. In my dingy powder room, the lighting flickered, the grout between the checkered tiles caked in dirt, hung a metal medicine cabinet over the porcelain sink. I rooted through the glowing orange bottles filled with vibrant oblong pills and reached for the tube of ointment. The cooling cream oozed from the tube and I rubbed it along the inflamed, furious skin as I crouched on the floor. Soon, the oily sheen of medicine would soak itself deep into my epidermis, numbing the poison left behind by the ravenous insects. I lay on the unswept tile waiting for the itching to subside. I intertwined my fingers among themselves, picking at the fraying skin around my fingernails to stop them from traveling down the hairy skin of my calves to my ankles, sinfully scratching. The itching refused to stop.

I rose to my feet too quickly, black and purple specks danced behind my eyelids. I thought I would faint. I wished I would faint. If I fell backwards, my skull would strike the edge of the

clawfoot tub, rendering me unconscious. Maybe it would be Rita that found me, days later, laying on the grimy bath mat in some contorted shape to accommodate the base of the toilet and the sink. She would feel so awful for pushing that deadline onto me, so horrible for the myriad of messages she had left on my computer.

Maybe he would come over, holding a bouquet of lilies, an apology for his AOL silence. He would ring the bell and wait, his concern provoking him through the unlocked front door. He'd check each room, noticing the heaps of laundry strewn across my bed, the dirty dishes piled high in the kitchen sink, the computer's cold glow illuminating the frozen living room. He'd push open the bathroom door and see me lying there, inevitably blaming himself for not being there sooner, not emailing me one last time. He'd weep over me, rest the lilies on the ground beside me. He would forever remember me as the girl who showed him Plath.

The dots behind my eyes faded into nothing, my vision became perfect and clear. I sat in front of my desk yet again, feeling just as exhausted as before. I typed out an email to him, held down the delete key and watched each letter, one by one, disappear. I opened my manuscript and typed a sentence or two, something I was certain I had stolen from a book or a television show. I sat numbly then, the itching sensation around my ankles resting somewhere in between his emails and the deadline in my mind.

# Patronizing

Sophia Adams

I believe you, Joan. I don't believe  
in God, or war  
but at 19 I heard voices too.

Praying to St. Agnes,  
but she can no longer hear me.  
Growing, grown. Irrevocably  
so, now I am found  
by another Saint

Margaret it is no coincidence  
I think  
that you are the patron of both: women  
and the falsely accused. Praying twice

1. For God
2. For the spider building his web on the windowsill

Entombed by blades of glass, the sun  
Pierces through  
your body, painting mine  
in color words cannot  
capture. You did not  
die for me

no one should. Invoking  
only to be saved,  
not to save. Praised,  
while you char.

The chainmail leaves  
honeycomb prints in my hips.



Photo by Abigail Grossman

# supplicant

Camille Pirtle

the first time i dream of her we are on the forest floor. there are gnats  
in my hair, bodies filled with blood. she squeezes one between her  
fingers. she puts her hand on my face and i can feel the cold ring on  
her left pinky, the one i gave her. yes, i think, as we cut through chicago

in her prius. the streets are salted, white spots on gray cement. i balance  
a crystal on my tongue before we kiss. i tell her not to hold me too long. across  
the ocean there are children dying, so much red

you can see it from space. and here i am, lost in my own wires, waiting  
for her to love me how i do. and her hands grip my warm flesh. and

my heart still beats. and I will wait forever.



Photo by Abigail Grossman

# Landscape of a Chasm

Andres C. Lopez

The sun set hours ago, and Oliver had lost count of how long and how far he had walked. The streets were not bare, but they were quiet. Traffic circles and triangles were full of evening commuters, but it was not chaotic. Cars and taxis made their way, but they did so with a certain hesitance. As though breaching a certain decibel level would make the city too tangible; DC felt fragile and unreal. For Oliver, though, the silence set over the city still managed to draw attention to itself.

Columns and towers stood before him; he, an ant, carried the crumb that was his briefcase across lawns and sidewalks. He flipped through his notes from various press briefings from that year and stared at the politicians' hollow words delivered by apathetic messengers, *I promise to...We guarantee...I'm trying...but...but...but*. He shut the notebook and looked up; at a distance, he could see them, the Washington Monument, the National Portrait Gallery, and various others he'd seen in his textbooks. Twenty-seven, now of ripe occupational age, especially for a reporter. He thought he would have been in the prime of his life by now, but what awaited him at home was not the life he had imagined. Instead of sleek blacks and whites, accented by politically correct neutral tones, there were loud, egregious pops of color. Bright, bright color.

What also awaited him in the small flat in the middle of Church Street was Sebastian. Oliver, of course, loves Sebastian, but their disagreement was either too large or too close for Oliver to be able to stay that evening. The couch that faced away from the kitchen and the rest of the flat was not far enough of an island this time. Oliver had to go; at first, he felt like running, sprinting, but after he had made it far enough into unknown DC streets, his fatigue corrected this idea. He, of course, later adjusted his course to make it back somewhere familiar.

In front of the Justice Building, he stared without entering. The lights were off, and Oliver had never seen the buildings so late at night. Although he may have seen them like this; after the election, and after a few too many drinks with the other reporters as he exited the bar on Blagden Alley, nearly at sunrise. But then again, he surely did not really see any of the buildings that night; only the littered sidewalk and the spinning floor of the car that drove him home. He stood very still in front of the building; Oliver's feet cried for reprieve. As did his shoulders. As did he. His phone finished ringing after the thirteenth missed call. Oliver imagined Sebastian standing in their colorful kitchen, worried.

Speaking into the phone, "Just text me to let me know you're alive and if you are, don't try to fix things until morning. I'm tired. I need sleep."

But Oliver only stood there and let the phone vibrate in his back pocket. He thought that maybe if he stood there for long enough, an answer would come to him. A retort strong enough for his argument with Sebastian earlier, but also one that would be enough to bring closeness. One that would bring a warm sleep tonight, holding him. But he could not have

both. This was the seemingly fundamental truth that Oliver found in the grooves of the pillar that he was still staring at.

It was time to go home, and this was a conclusion Oliver had to come to on his own; no clouds parted to reveal a rising sun; nor did a fourteenth call beckon him; nor did the morning rush push him aside. With his back to the Justice Building, Oliver walked away. Going further and further, he tried to remember the last time there was noise in the streets; the real clamor of people. The city at this hour sounded the same as it did on his morning commute, and his evening commute. He walked down 9th Street into the Penn Quarter; he was getting further from the buildings with great columns and of great importance, but nothing changed. To Oliver's surprise, Washington showed no sign of life. Were he blind, he'd worry there was some sort of rapture. All those years he dreamed of this place; he never thought it would be this way.

The chasm between him and his beliefs, him and his hope grew bigger and bigger. He continued walking home, perhaps he would bridge the gap where it started.

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Oliver woke up on the couch, almost slipping onto the floor with the colorful and tasseled cushions. Hot water in the kettle began to bubble a few feet away, Sebastian was in the kitchen preparing for the day ahead. Oliver was so used to this routine and the sounds that came with it that he could tell exactly what Sebastian was doing as he prepared the coffee grounds and grabbed a mug from the cabinet. He knew where his hands were and where they would go next, everything was always done in the same order, everything had its place.

"Morning." Sebastian said as the kettle began to whistle.

Oliver sat up and adjusted his posture. "Good morning."

A pause before Oliver continued. The silence hung heavy in the air, there was too much to be said. "Look, I'm really—"

"No. Not yet. Let me just make us coffee."

"Alright."

A few moments passed before Sebastian walked over to the living room with two mugs and he sat in the chair next to the couch. Oliver's coffee was made the way he liked; Sebastian's frustration did not show in small petty actions. Before he had come in, Oliver did not move from where he sat. He did not prepare for the incoming day and its needs or meet Sebastian in the kitchen. Instead, he remained still, looking at the various paintings adorning the walls. They were mostly Sebastian's, not placed by his own will, but rather by Oliver, who had always been supportive of his artistry.

Sebastian took a long sip of his coffee, staring at the same painting Oliver was. Striking reds that bled into pillars of white. "How long were you out last night?"

"I'm not sure. I just walked. It's been so quiet out there lately." Oliver took a shorter sip and looked outside. The sun began to incandesce on various shades of gray outside.

There was a pause as they both braced themselves for what might come next. “Do you really think that what I do doesn’t matter?” Sebastian began.

“Of course, I think it matters. You and that nonprofit do a lot of important work together.” Oliver looked back at the painting, struggling to meet his partner’s eyes. He remembered the buildings from his long morning, how he could approach, touch them if he wanted, but he did not dare to.

“Not that—God don’t be so purposefully obtuse. You’ve been spending too much time with those comms people.”

“Yes, I think your painting matters. I just don’t think that’s how we’re going to fix things.”

“Obviously me painting isn’t going to fix our fucked-up government and dying democracy, but it is important.”

Oliver felt that Sebastian missed his first sentence or simply didn’t care.

The tall window in the living room was open, but no noise entered. Oliver stared out at the buildings across from them. They were on the second floor; he could see the sidewalk, gray and unmarred by feet. He was surprised at how the street was exactly as it was earlier that morning. Oliver almost forgot to answer; Sebastian continued for him.

Sebastian turned his body to face Oliver, even if the chair didn’t face that way. “I know you think your way is better because you get to be in the room with them. But what happens when they stop letting you in?”

“They won’t.”

“How do you know that?”

Sebastian continued. “I want us to both be making change. Because both of us can, and you can’t go parading around like Joan of Arc because you wrote a piece about Senator who-gives-a-fuck doing coke before a hearing.”

“That piece was important. People didn’t know and now he’s being investigated for much more than just that.”

“But what is it going to do? So, you’ve taken down one Senator who wasn’t even going to try to keep his seat. Now what? Everything’s still fucked.”

“But at least I did something. Even if I just got one, I got one.”

They paused, each feeling the heat of the argument increase, and each needing a moment to collect their thoughts. Oliver recalled walking the twilight streets, passing formidable buildings with intricate architecture, exemplifying their importance. He remembered walking by Judiciary Square, various courthouses, and the National Portrait Gallery.

Oliver became exasperated. “I know everything is fucked. I’m in the room, I hear what they’re saying first, I see the looks on their faces as they say so many words while saying nothing at all.”

He paused and assessed where he wanted to take the argument. He didn’t want to escalate, but he wanted to sleep in the same bed.

He continued. “I’m frustrated too. All this hurts me too.”

“I know. But you can’t take it out on me. You fight with your words and recordings, and I fight with this.” Sebastian gestured to the walls, littered with his paintings. Oliver followed

the movement of his hand and stopped at the one with those bright red tones, stark against the white seemingly shrinking on the painting. Three columns of white, each with different amounts of near blood red seeping into them.

Sebastian briefly paused as he noticed Oliver get stuck. “This is how I fight, and it may not seem effective to you, but it is.”

Oliver couldn’t find the words to continue arguing. He felt as though there was nothing he could say that would even out the scales of power on which they fought. Instead, he decided to be truthful, more so than he had been in quite some time.

“It all feels terrible and pointless. I feel terrible and pointless.” Oliver felt the breeze against his forearm and almost shuddered at the cold. “Every day I go out and I listen to them, and I report and it doesn’t mean anything. It’s all empty, but I have to keep going back. I don’t know how to keep going back.”

“I know. But we can’t stop because it feels like that; because you feel like that. It’s terrible, but it’s not pointless. What we both do matters.”

Breeze continued to enter the room, but still no clamor breached. It was silent except for the soft howl of the wind. The light, translucent curtains partially obstructed Oliver’s view of the painting, and he followed them with only his eyes as they fluttered. Gently, as though he were trying to avoid disturbing the scene, he turned his head to look out of the window. There were scattered clouds in varied sizes and shades of gray, but the blue of the sky permeated enough to hold Oliver’s attention. What held his attention wasn’t the sky itself though, but rather the fine line between it and the roof of the small drab apartment complex across the street.

Oliver and Sebastian remained in their places, silent. Both felt that any sudden movement or sharp addition would shatter the fragile peace. Sebastian rose from the chair, walked over to the couch and sat on his knees with his hands palm-up on his lap, next to Oliver. He turned slightly, but before he could turn completely, they were already in embrace. They did not collide like two birds fighting for the same piece of scavenged food, but rather glided into each other, the way leaves of different branches do in autumn wind.

They held each other, and neither said a word. Over Sebastian’s shoulder, Oliver watched as the DC sunlight poured into the apartment through the open window. The coffee had gone cold by now, and they were both late, but they did not let go. Sebastian’s painting had never seemed so striking as it did in that moment.



Photo by Abigail Grossman

# Contributors



Sophia Adams

Sophia Adams is currently finishing her final undergraduate year at Villanova University studying both English and Environmental Studies. She likes writing, nature, and writing about nature and hopes to continue doing so in graduate study. You can find her @noelle on Substack, please say hi. Go birds.



Diane Brown

Diane Brown hails from Crestwood, Kentucky and is a senior English student at Lipscomb University. Diane was a featured poetry reader at Wild Bison Fest. When Diane is not creating fantastical worlds, she is crocheting and watching video essays.



Nic Hinson

Nic Hinson is an undergraduate student in The University of New Mexico pursuing a degree in philosophy and English. They have been previously published in *Conceptions Southwest* and *URCA*. All of their writing is partially credited to their cat, Nutmeg, for her supervisory role.



### Angela Athena Karr

Angela Athena Karr is a junior at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign where she studies Creative Writing and English. Karr's literary works are informed by her deeply personal experiences that she is able to gain inspiration from. She aims to create candid literary pieces that readers can connect with.



### Maxwell James Kueker

Maxwell James Kuecker is an undergraduate studying English at Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tennessee. His work draws on his childhood in Oswego, IL, and his love of Gothic literature. He spends much of his time working in Lipscomb's Center for Speaking and Writing, helping his peers improve their writing skills.



### Andres C. Lopez

Andres Lopez is a Junior English student at Montclair State University. He is a passionate writer who began as a screenwriter but later found a love for prose. Andres is an avid reader of books that contain intimate character studies from classics to contemporary. His love for writing brought him to becoming the Editor-in-Chief of Montclair State's own literary and creative magazine, *The Normal Review*, as well as the producer of MSU's first student run podcast, The Playne English podcast. Andres is committed to providing platforms where English majors and non-English majors alike can access literature in an approachable format.



## Camille Pirtle

Camille Pirtle is a writer based in New York City. Her fiction and criticism have been previously published in *Peatsmoke Journal*, *The Battering Ram Review*, *Expression*, *The Crucible Magazine* and more. She comments on fashion and culture for *Hoot Magazine*. She attends Columbia University, where she studies English Literature and Creative Writing.



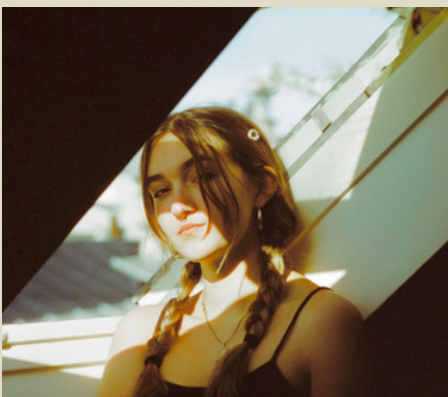
## Brandy Smith

Brandy Smith is an undergraduate student at George Washington University, studying Criminal Justice. Writing is her passion, and she hopes to publish work in the future. "The Fox" was written during her Sophomore year.



## Hadley Shoaf

Hadley Shoaf is a current senior studying Psychology and Creative Writing at Dickinson College. She has been published in the *Outer Banks Coastal Life* lifestyle magazine and their respective wedding guide. Her prose and poetry have also been featured in Dickinson College's yearly literary review and the *Oakland Arts Review*.



## Chela R. Wetzel

Chela Wetzel is a senior at Emerson College. Her fiction, poetry, and essays have been published in *Inquest*, *Concrete Literary Magazine*, and *Two Cardinals Literary*. She reads for the award-winning literary journal *Ploughshares*, and volunteers regularly at the Prison Book Program.