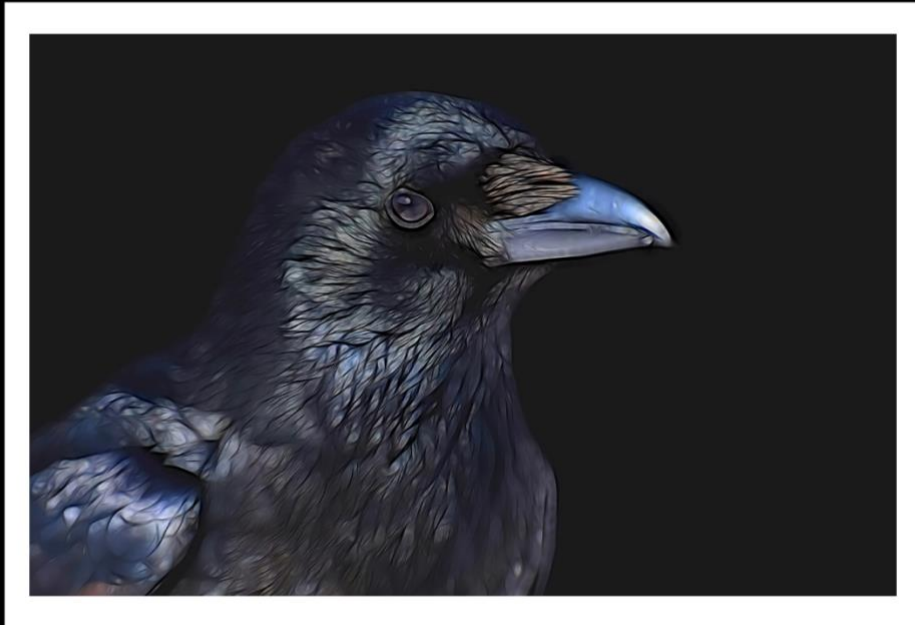


THE RAVEN REVIEW

LITERARY MAGAZINE



VOLUME I, ISSUE III
JULY 2020

THE RAVEN REVIEW

Volume I, Issue III

July 2020

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Alexandra Grunberg
Coffin Lining

It is not much of a cradle,
but if you're already asleep
I don't know why you'd want to be
protected from the arms that hold you.
I don't know what comfort can be found
in words like "plasticized" and "lining."
You would look just as peaceful without.

But there's a comfort
in completing the puzzle
and ordering all the pieces.
Even if I can grasp the picture –
a green field, a blue sky, a dog –
to see a jagged hole to the wood
table beneath the swath of blue
is as intolerable as a restless death
as inconsequential, as monumental.

It's these objects you don't know about
that rock the living to rest.
Knowing someone else has all the pieces,
can fit the 3 to the 1, 2, [], 4,
makes the sky a little more blue.

Ana Surguladze

Untitled

She thinks I'll fall in love with her and end up heartbroken-
brings an ironic smile to my face all the time.
Little does she know,
there's only one growling storm between the two of us,
and it's named after me.
She tried to kill herself twice,
but how do I tell her my whole life has been a suicide attempt-
Not so successful
But I still have time.
She had lovers,
and I had none,
but if love is just an illusion why would I let it warm up my bones,
settle my wavy ocean.
She thinks she's cold,
should I tell her that I'm colder?
And her eyes are soft, but should she know
that mine are softer?
She says I can't impress her, but I don't mind,
for I know how impressive slamming the door of my life will be:
out of the blue,
without a word.
How do I tell hers I'm the monster she thinks she is?
lonelier than loneliness itself,
heavier than any feeling she has ever carried.
Maybe I'll leave the signs,
maybe I'll leave them everywhere,
you just find them,
just find them
Please...

Ariel K. Moniz

Guillotine

Looking into my childhood
tastes like secondhand prophecy
feels like sucking on a color-changing Jawbreaker—
never quite reaching the end,
entranced by the mystery of the coming colors
stimulated by the pain.

I knew what life would be early on,
for me, the pain started young.
I learned how to ride a racing heartbeat,
how to feel from my toenails to my teeth
full to my narrow brim with the capacity
to ache.
Just in case.

Just in case
came with nuclear fallout—
a childhood in ruins,
radiation poisoning for generations.
It's the latter really that's the killer.
I'm quite accustomed to the bombs
that drop from their open palms—

No, it's the oozing and coagulating inside,
the realization that you are still alive
in the trauma ward of life—
that's the problem,
that's the death of your light.

That's why people look so much like guns,
how challenges cripple us like enemies,
and life, that sordid walk to the guillotine.

Babitha Marina Justin

The Way Madmen Smell

The presence of a couple of madmen in the family blessed me. One was a granduncle, and I will call him Magnus. I met my granduncle just once, but the impression of the meeting stayed for a lifetime. Magnus came visiting for the first and last time when I was six years old. He almost came tumbling from the hills, smelly, deranged, and furious. I cannot describe it with accuracy; I have only hazy memories. But believe me, I can still smell him. I can recall the memory of his stench with precision. I have a train full of memories related to smells, with compartments dedicated to happy, sad, embarrassing, shocking, grievous, and shameful ones. Shameful and embarrassing odours outweighed others, and next came sad and shocking ones, and no matter how much I tried to forget them, I could not ignore the ways of the olfactory world.

When Magnus came home in his dirty and torn overcoat that trailed the road, that formed part of a memory that was associated with one of the most pungent and embarrassing smells in my life. I flared my nostrils to find what precisely the stench was. I could smell a dead rat and a mad dog, with decayed fish entrails, offending my entire being and dignity, which was swathed in a six-year-old body. I can also remember a considerable uproar of kids and street dogs barking and snapping at someone when Magnus descended from hell.

“What’s that smell?” Mariamma, my grandmother, wrinkled her nose and sniffed hard.

Everything looked filthy and intimidating about the man who looked and smelled like a heap of garbage. He appeared at our gate with matted dreadlocks and an unbearable brownness, escorted by a group of booing kids. The children accompanying him made a ruckus by drumming on empty tins and swishing cycle chains, and the dogs snarled as if they were competing to bite off a chunk from the human form.

Magnus tried to shoo off the kids, but they hovered around, mocking, and pelting pebbles at him. None of the pebbles dared to hit him. When he stopped in front of our house, I hid behind Mariamma. My neighbours came out of their homes, complaining about the smell.

“Jonah? Where is my nephew, Jonah?” The kids around him mimicked, tittered, and catcalled. I sank behind Mariamma.

“Not here,” Mariamma spoke to him harshly from behind the turquoise-tinted door.

Magnus growled: “I’m hungry; give me some food.”

He mopped the steps with his big fat palms and sat his big buttocks on the steps. He wore a torn black coat, and he was sweating through the many layers of dirty, torn sweaters he wore inside. Mariamma almost retched; she tied a *thorthu* on her face. He wore tattered shoes through which nasty cat-poop smelling socks stuck out.

Mariamma pulled out a chipped plate that was about to be thrown away, and she served dollops of rice and heaped it with the previous day’s curries from the refrigerator. She didn’t even bother to heat them up.

“I want fish and chicken,” he moaned like a child.

“No chicken today.” Mariamma was rude.

“Thooo! Who wants to eat the cold grass and tuber you serve? You old hag, give me some fish at least.” He spat a splutter of rice and curries on the steps.

Mariamma shuddered. She felt humiliated being on the receiving end of the madman’s fury; the boys around him dropped dead silent. No one dared to call my grandmother an old woman on her face. Selvi, the maid, looked away and rummaged the fridge and ferreted out some fish gravy and offered Magnus, turning her face away with disdain. Magnus splattered food all over and ate avariciously. I heard my grandmother puke in the kitchen garden. He washed his hands with the water meant for drinking, and he laid himself out like a smelly, sunning whale on the veranda and snored. The boys started to leave after having watched the spectacle. My grandmother beckoned me to the kitchen and gave me ten rupees and asked me to hand it over to the madman.

“Is he a madman?” I asked my grandmother in astonishment.

“What else is he? Can’t you figure it out?”

I trembled. I had never seen or smelt a madman in my life. Madness smelt horrible. I was scared, and I hesitated to go near him. I thought of tiptoeing to him to place the money near him. When I walked cautiously towards him, he started from his sleep and sat up. I had almost come near him, and I was trapped. He called me to him, and I could not breathe. He extended his gnarled arms with black, overgrown talon-like nails and touched my cheek.

“What is your name, Jonah’s daughter?” His mouth smelled of sewage.

“Maria,” I said, holding my breath.

“Magdalena or Mother of God?” He laughed, displaying his charcoal mouth. I knew I was about to faint, and I stopped breathing.

“Come, child, I will teach you a song,” and he reached out to me.

I trembled and felt a warm trickle ooze between my legs, forming a puddle of shame. Perhaps the old man changed his mind. He got up and started after snatching ten rupees from me. All the neighbouring boys who had remained stared at him. They had seen me pee in my pants. The old man staggered on his feet, sang a beautiful song in a high octave, and faded away, but his stench lingered in the house for days and days together.

After Mad Magnus left, my grandmother told me that my father’s family was full of madmen because they married their cousins like pigs and rabbits. She said marrying cousins was sinful. The same blood clotted in the brain when children were born, and they became *mandabudhis*: mentally disabled kids. She also told me that Magnus was once a bright child. He was afflicted by smallpox when he was tiny and because my father’s people were “uncivilised,” they tied him up in the cattle-shed and left him there to die. Magnus survived with scars and ran away from his house as an ugly and deformed man. He had nowhere to go but to join a seminary, and he returned a madman after many years. When he came back, mad and ugly, he had learned eighteen languages. He could also sing like an angel. Though his smell disgusted me, this piece of information was new, and I was impressed. Magnus spoke eighteen languages like a parrot; this overawed me.

Many years later, I was teaching at a university, and I struggled with the only three languages I knew. Deep down, I was proud that I had a granduncle who knew eighteen languages. Sometimes, I boasted to my children about this but never told them about the madness part. Madness reminded me of the smell. I was by then married and well-settled into an upper-middle-class family of Hindus, who accepted me into their house with some initial hiccups. For me, getting away from my religion was a kind of tearing myself away from my past. The routine of litanies and church goings had turned me into a defiant agnostic. Because of the strict imposition of church going, I stopped going to church altogether when I moved out of my house at eighteen. At twenty-one, I went to a university and then, my ambition had no bounds. I travelled for research all over the country. During one of those travels, I met my husband, and we decided to spend the rest of our lives together.

Mariamamma, who was still alive, was not very happy about it. She said such liaisons would deprive me of a place in heaven. I knew that this would indeed rob me of some space in the family vault in the church graveyard. We had bought a family vault for 150 years. The funeral insight calculated that at least five to six generations could be buried there without any hassles. I knew that they lost out on the youngest of the third generation, and I boasted that I had booked myself in a crematorium in advance, which was cheaper, hygienic, and eco-friendly. Mariamma and my mother disapproved of my actions from within. But they didn't reprimand me. My father, who was unfazed, used to grumble when I was out of his earshot. Once I heard him say that perhaps Magnus's ghost remains in the family, especially in the youngest offspring. I hadn't thought of Magnus after his death a few years after I met him, but all of a sudden, I was curious to know more about him. However, the memory of his stench overpowered me, and I choked at the thought of it.

I came to know Magnus, the priest and the man, through Brother Joseph. I was a Ph.D. student in philosophy, and I was invited to a seminary, two thousand miles from my university to hold a series of lectures on the metaphysics of faith. I was curious to know how modern-day seminaries were. I was quite surprised, too, because usually, the church had enough teaching and learning resources within its precincts.

The seminary was near the sea, and it was one of the cleanest places I had ever seen, with its well-trimmed Mughal style gardens and palms and its luscious fruit orchards. There was an assortment of exotic fruits from Thailand and Malaysia, and I saw rambutan, dragon fruit, and litchi trees being grown all over the yard. I strolled endlessly, sometimes plucking a couple of exceptionally swollen guava fruits and munching on their tender, juicy flesh. There was no fallen leaf on the ground, as the *maali* in the courtyard worked fastidiously at keeping the place almost picturesque. I was a bit exasperated thinking of how the garden was groomed and manicured to such heights of cleanliness, and I missed red, yellow, and burnt umber shades on the ground.

A young priest, who chaperoned me, took me to the hall of fame, where hung the photographs of all the priests, including the Bishops and Rectors of the seminary, in chronological order. I noticed a dark anteroom attached to the Hall of Fame.

“What is that room all about?” I was curious about the Gothic darkness and mystery of the hidden room.

The young priest laughed and spoke to me in a heavily accented stage whisper. “There are photographs of laicised priests.”

“Laicised?”

“Defrocked, I mean. Either they left the congregation or got expelled from the priesthood.”

“May I take a look at the lost paradise?” I was curious.

The young priest hesitated for a while, and then he took me to the anteroom, which was dark and dingy and roomier than I expected. Riddled with photographs of the rebel priests, I ran my eyes over the walls.

“Did they run away with nuns or laywomen?”

“That’s not the case with many priests; the church expelled some for heresy and bigotry. Some for exorcism without permission from the Vatican, and some for Satan worship. Some learned too many languages and became mad...” The priest lowered his voice then.

I nodded and fixed my eyes on a familiar face framed on the wall. A sepia-tinted photo of Magnus hung there. I could not believe my luck. The photo was titled: *Father Magnanimous Innocent Abraham, laicised in 1969.*

“This is someone I know,” I said, and then hesitated, sensing a familiar stench I always associated with Magnus.

“You mean, you have had a defrocked priest in your family? Not an honour, I say.” The priest started chuckling at his joke. I wasn’t laughing, and I was curious to know more about Magnus.

“There is a directory of priests; it’s classified information, though.”

I met the Rector in the evening to know if I could have access to the classified information on Magnus.

“He left many years back, and is perhaps dead by now,” the Rector spoke reflectively.

“Yes, he died in 1990.”

I rummaged through Magnus’s file. Born as Magnanimous Innocent Abraham in 1929 in Poonjar, Kerala, and ordained to the church in 1949, Father Magnanimous was laicised in 1969 and left the congregation of Disciples of Joseph and Mary in May 1970. Present Whereabouts, unknown.

That was all. No wonder the Rector had been so casual about Magnus’s so-called classified files.

I walked towards the room allotted to me in the convent, which was a few miles away from the seminary. The young priest, Brother Joseph, walked back with me. He sensed my disappointment.

Over the next two days, we had such vigorous training and discussion sessions that I came to my room very late. I could not meet Brother Joseph during that time as well. On the third day, he came rushing to me when I had an egg and bread for breakfast.

“Praise the Lord, Brother,” I hollered at him, expressing my delight meeting him after a couple of days.

“I have news for you,” he sat down near me and pecked on the French fries on my plate without asking me. I found that gesture quite endearing.

“What is that?”

“You need to pay me for that piece of information.”

“How do I do that?”

“Easy, you just have to sneak in some forbidden journal papers for me from JSTOR.”

“Yes, of course. I will do anything for you.” I batted my eyelids.

“Listen, there’s an old cook in the seminary, your granduncle’s contemporary. He knows all the gossip of the seminary for sixty years.”

“That’s amazing, and that’s the bit of oral history that I had wanted to listen to.”

That evening, Brother Joseph took me to the Rector’s kitchen to meet this old, shrivelled man. He tied his flaxen hair in a bun, and his leathery-brown skin wrinkled like the bark of an old tree. His ancient eyes twinkled when he saw me.

“Father Magnanimous’ grandniece.” I shook hands with him, and he glinted a twinkle that was mirrored by my eyes as well.

“Listen,” he instructed Brother Joseph and me to sit on a wooden table with wooden stump stools and served us some strong tea spiced with ginger.

There was a hearth burning in the kitchen, and he said he used to double it up like an oven before the nuns started baking cakes for the priests.

“Your granduncle came here as a runaway at sixteen, and I, too, was of the same age. He was a bright boy, and he learned tongues like no other. He knew twelve languages; did you know?”

“Yes, my grandmother told me.” She had exaggerated, but twelve languages were astonishing enough.

“He never spoke about his family, but here, he found a family of his own, and he was much loved, ‘til...”

“‘Til?”

“I don’t remember the rumours of those days, but it was here, right here in the kitchen, he was found mad and rumbling one night.”

“Why here?” I gaped.

He paused for a while, shuffled his feet, and got up. He picked up a few capsicums and onions from the vegetable rack, peeled, washed, and diced them into perfect squares. He placed a *tawa* on the charcoal stove, and poured some oil, and tossed onions and capsicum into the sizzling oil. I observed him as he stir-fried the onions effortlessly like a prayer. Then he cracked some eggs into the *tawa* and added a dollop of butter.

Brother Joseph and I waited for a while with a crackling of wild suspense in the air. In between, I felt Brother Joseph’s eyes on me as we waited for the old cook to continue with his story.

The cook, Vincent, (Brother Joseph whispered his name to me, and while he did that, I felt his warm breath on my ears) came back with two plates of fluffy omelettes and a loaf of freshly baked bread. Then he hobbled to the cellar and came back with a bottle of communion wine.

“This is the best in the country,” he said, and he opened the bottle with a pop.

The food was delicious, and the smell of wine lingered like heaven, and Vincent, the old cook, sat down and he poured the wine into Austrian wine glasses.

I took a sip, and Brother Joseph, though he was reluctant for a while, got a nod from Cook Vincent and he started sipping the wine. Warmth trickled down my spine, and I felt quite conscious of the fact that Brother Joseph glanced at me mistily whenever I started talking to Old Vincent.

“I don’t know what exactly happened to him. They even suppressed all rumours.”

I felt the warmth of the wine slowly turn to an inexplicable chill.

“He used to join me in the kitchen with Sr. Philo. She was an apprentice cook; they had some sparks flying between them. One day, Philo disappeared. He went mad searching for her, and they had to shut him up in a secret chamber. He used to howl from there in the darkness. One night, I bundled his clothes and food; managed to collect some money and broke the lock of his room and set him free. I asked him to run away to any place he wanted.”

“Without even thanking me, he disappeared into the darkness, and afterward, we have never heard from him.”

“And Sr. Philo? How did she disappear?”

“They came to know about Magnus and Philo. And Philo had an abortion and was sent to another nunnery. Or that’s what I heard. She, too, disappeared.”

I sat there frozen; all I knew about my great grand uncle was his stench and love for languages. Of course, I remembered his voice.

Old Vincent said it was time for him to retire and he hobbled out of the kitchen. Brother Joseph looked at me, and I could see the fire from the hearth dancing in his eyes. He reached out to my shoulders and held me close, “Sorry, I didn’t know this would end painfully for you.” It was not painful. It was heart-wrenching. I closed my eyes and snuggled to his warmth. The next thing I could remember was the warmth of his lips on my face, mopping my tears away. I could only feel the heat of the fire spread from my belly down to my groins. I saw Philo and Magnus in the dimly lit kitchen, exchanging their secrets. I do not know what came over me; all I wanted that night was him, and through him, I also wanted to know Magnus.

While kissing me, he said, “This is what learning languages are all about for us. We learn its carnal pleasures right here.” Passion crackled and spurted in the corner. I knew what Magnus and Philo felt, nurturing their fire in a dark and oppressive world.

Brother Joseph murmured, “lo thaalan il nessoono, elo fasson men beesho.”

We woke up from each other’s embrace in the middle of the night, and as I dressed, Brother Joseph apologised. He offered to drop me at the convent, but sensing the risk, I declined it. I was also carried away by a wave of guilt.

“Your uncle Magnus learned too many languages. They will drive you mad if you learn too many.”

“Who will drive you mad?” I wanted to know too many answers at the same time. I was afraid for Brother Joseph for a minute. He walked away silently without answering.

When I walked into the darkness, I smelled the stench of guilt, sex, and madness. It felt just as rotten as Magnus. The smell of Bread and Wine and a whiff of Brother Joseph’s sweat which lingered on my body and hair overpowered me.

I knew that it was time for me to forget Magnus’s stench. Certain madmen smelled like food and sweat, too. Kitchens precipitated the smell; sometimes, they put them out. I, too, have inhaled the forbidden smell.

Dominic Loise

Gloria Has Questions

Gloria hated liver, but it was the closest thing in the refrigerator to brains. She grabbed it, cooking twine and two snack cakes. The vacuum sealed treats were for her. Then, Gloria exited through the backdoor of the kitchen to the garden. Balancing her items, Gloria made her way up the ladder already unfolded next to her neighbor's fence smashing some of her mother's perennials.

Setting herself at the top of the ladder, Gloria steadied herself for the sliminess of unwrapping the liver from the cling wrap. She tied an end of the twine to the refrigerated meat and unraveled the spool before casting the liver over to the neighbor's side of the fence. At first, the organ meat didn't land by the neighbor's shed as Gloria aimed. So, she pulled the cooking twine back for another throw. Then, she unwrapped the first of the snack cakes and waited. Before she could take her second bite of cream encased sponge cake, there was a strong tug on the twine. Gloria quickly wrapped both her hands around the strung and dug her feet into the ladder. The snack cakes fell into her mother's perennials. And Gloria landed on the neighbor's side of the fence.

• • •

The scent of the liver had slowly made it into the MacKellroy's tool shed. It was a dimmed pungent smell. The liver was cold and was no longer filtering blood, but the smell was enough to wake the dead. That's what the smell did as the MacKellroy's uncle slowly shambled out of the shed towards the liver. Uncle Dustin's rotting jaw encased the liver finding disappointment in the lack of life and the refrigerator's chill. Thinking the twine was a sucked-dry intestine, Uncle Dustin twanged and sniffed at the thin rope before giving a solid tug hoping to find it connected to a fresher source of meat, which it was.

Young Gloria had thought Dustin MacKellroy would enjoy the makeshift fishing game. That it would make him happy. The only pictures that the MacKellroys had of their Uncle Dustin were of him at the family lake house showing off his latest freshwater catch. In the backyard, Gloria never saw Uncle Dustin happy. She only saw him shuffle along slowly across the back lawn unless one of the MacKellroys came home to feed him. Then, Gloria would see him perk up.

On the other side of the fence, Gloria saw her game gone wrong. She saw Uncle Dustin ravenous. For once she wished she was back on the playground where she knew her way out of a bad situation. Gloria's classmates had given her plenty of rough housing, but nothing hurt like the twine digging into her skin as she was drug across the lawn. Gloria wished it was school where she could easily raise a hand as she called out for a teacher to hear her plea to stop the bullying. She felt her cries drowned out in the open space of the backyards.

Uncle Dustin slowly moaned like a junkyard dog about to awaken into a bark. His eyes yellowed with disease focused on Gloria as he pulled the twine hand over hand. Slower than any of his shambles across the lawn was a dry tongue passing his lips with a memory of moisture. A dried out and decayed tongue over peeled-back lips as if exploded by desert heatstroke. Before Uncle Dustin's tongue could take another pass, the ladder flew over Gloria's head and dislocated Uncle Dustin's head from the rest of his body.

Gloria couldn't stop screaming to look behind her; because of the beheading, because Uncle Dustin's muscle memory was still pulling her toward his decapitated body, and because she couldn't figure out how her game went so horribly wrong. She didn't hear her father hop over the fence and had just snapped out of it when she saw his heavy motor grease stained work boot step on the cooking twine. As Gloria unraveled herself, she couldn't meet her father's gaze as she rubbed both her arms.

"March, you have some explaining to do," ordered Gloria's father as he pointed to their fence leading out of the MacKellroy's backyard gate.

• • •

"We are so—just so very thankful that you are both safe," said Mr. MacKellroy as he leaned over to grab a fresh cup of coffee brought in from Mrs. MacKellroy.

Gloria's father had politely refused the offer of coffee hoping to make the stay as short as possible. Gloria was nervously chewing a fresh baked Snickerdoodle trying not to get crumbs on the neighbor's couch.

"We also feel blessed that Uncle Dustin's Second Passing was through an innocent like yourself Gloria."

"Gloria, would you honor us with taking part in our Uncle Dustin's Second Returning Ceremony tomorrow?" asked Mrs. MacKellroy then caught herself when a narrowed glance from her husband let her know she had spoken out of turn.

"Yes, would you?" Mr. MacKellroy reaffirmed the question as his wife disappeared into the kitchen. Gloria looked at her own father before answering.

"Uh, sure. Gloria will be there. We better head off. Uh, you both have a lot to prepare before tomorrow. Thank you as always for your hospitality!" Gloria's father exited, trying to make sure Mrs. MacKellroy heard from the kitchen. As Ken MacKellroy closed his front door with a wave, the MacKellroy's Revelers' symbol swung like a pendulum from its nail on the door, like an angular hand.

Gloria gave a sigh of relief.

"You're not out of the woods yet, Kiddo," huffed Gloria's father. Gloria slowly looked up to meet his eyes, slower than any movement Uncle Dustin ever made. "We still have to explain to your mother what happened to her perennials," he winked.

• • •

“I never heard of such a thing!” Gloria heard her mother exclaim, wooden hairbrush in hand. She gave Gloria’s hair another stern brush and checked her daughter’s reflection in the bedroom vanity mirror. Gloria sat silently in her Sunday best waiting to be released over to the MacKelloys for Uncle Dustin’s Second Returning. “You just remember how you were raised,” Gloria’s mother reminded her. “You’ll be taking Confirmation next year.” Gloria’s mother put down the hairbrush and went to her jewelry box. Gloria opened her eyes from the tugging of the hairdo. Her mother paused and then brought out the crucifix she only wore on special masses and put it on Gloria. “Don’t let those Revelers put any ideas in your head and keep your dress clean.”

• • •

Gloria wasn’t cold as she buttoned up her sweater. The bonfire in the MacKellroy’s backyard gave off enough heat. It was the discomfort of her mother’s crucifix on her during the ceremony. So, as Mr. MacKellroy gave his sermon, she slowly buttoned the sweater from the top down.

“Oh, Lord!” bellowed Mr. MacKellroy, “We know we are not worthy. That is why you did not select us amongst your flock to be herded up into the Rapture. So, we must make out the remainder of our days here on Earth until the End of Days...”

Gloria tried to make sense of what he was saying but was distracted by local family and friends who were taking turns circling the bonfire and adding what Gloria figured out was Uncle Dustin’s body parts to the flames.

“...‘til the Day of the Great Beast. We are yours, Oh, Lord, the Eternally Passed Over.”

As Mr. MacKellroy closed his leather-bound text, Mrs. MacKellroy handed Gloria a wicker basket with Uncle Dustin’s head inside and motioned for her to throw it into the bonfire. Mr. MacKellroy also gave Gloria an encouraging nod.

• • •

The family and friends had moved their way into the MacKellroy’s home after the ceremony. Gloria quietly kept Mr. MacKellroy company by his barbecue grill. She stared out at the bonfire dimming to char and embers in the yard.

“How do you like your hamburgers done, Gloria?” asked Mr. MacKellroy.

“Oh, I should probably be getting home for Sunday dinner with my parents,” replied Gloria in a distracted tone, not taking her eyes off the service area of the backyard.

Mr. MacKellroy tapped the kitchen window with his beer bottle, shook his head no and then pointed to Gloria.

“Well, before you take off, Mrs. MacKellroy and I have a thank you present for being part of the day,” beamed Mr. MacKellroy. Mrs. MacKellroy arrived outside straightening her

dress with one hand as she held in the other hand a new hardcover book with gold ribbon across it.

“Now, we figure you might have some questions about today. I know I found my copy of this book very helpful when I was your age.” offered Mrs. MacKellroy with a smile. Through the ribbon, Gloria could read the title: *An Illustrated Revelations Bible*.

“Thank you,” replied Gloria, mesmerized by the events of the day.

“And maybe just keep this gift between us,” said Mr. MacKellroy with a wink as he pointed to Gloria fiddling with her mother’s crucifix.

• • •

“I don’t want to have to call you again, young lady!” scolded Gloria’s father from the bottom of the stairs.

“I was just...making sure my dress was hung nice so it wouldn’t wrinkle,” lied Gloria as she rushed down from her bedroom to start setting the table.

“Well, that’s a first!” praised her mother. Now, Gloria knew she would need to both quickly amend the falsehood after dinner and find a better hiding place for the book.

While Gloria’s parents were both in the kitchen, she took advantage of not having to look them in the eye to ask something on her mind all day. Gloria waited until she was placing the table setting which would have her back to the kitchen door, as the extra safeguard to being separated from them in the dining room wasn’t enough distance for her.

“Why didn’t we give Grandma the chance to stay risen?” Gloria asked her parents.

Without thinking, her father replied, “She was so mean when she was alive; I would have put the bullet between her eyes if I could...” A kitchen cabinet door slammed before he could finish his standard mother-in-law joke.

“I knew she was going to get ideas!” Gloria’s mother shouted. “Harry, tell that little girl I can’t even look at her right now. You want to know never-ending hunger, Gloria? Upstairs.”

“Come on, Gloria. Upstairs,” reinforced her father, knowing he didn’t help the situation.

Gloria went to her room without dinner but with enough time to hang up the dress.

• • •

Gloria’s mother meant to surprise her daughter with the dinner plate she brought up, but her audible shock was heard as she opened the bedroom door and caught Gloria reading the book from the MacKellroys.

“Give that to me. Bringing that into this home—what were you thinking?” punished her mother as Gloria walked over from her desk handing over the book. “Tomorrow, we go to church and have you talk with Father Kolwalski!”

Gloria looked at the picture of her grandmother holding her when she was a newborn. She picked it up and asked, “Why can’t you explain it to me, Mom?”

Gloria's mother hung her head then put the dinner plate and book on the desk as she sat down on the bed. She took the picture from Gloria and gathered her thoughts...her memories.

"She was a difficult woman. Worked to get to where she was in life, but she always looked after her family in her way. That's how I knew what came back wasn't her...because she would never attack family," explained Gloria's mother as she wiped a tear and put the picture back. She then walked over to the top shelf of Gloria's bookshelf and picked up an old storybook about a tree. "She would read this to you every night just like she used to with me when I was young. Now eat up." Gloria's mother walked for the door with the MacKellroy's book. "She'd want you to focus on the living."

• • •

Gloria walked to school the next morning. In some yards, she heard birds chirping and in others she heard moaning. She also noticed how the different neighbors set up for the upcoming holiday. On the next block, a group of boys were around the base of a tree. They were inspecting a fallen nest.

"Cool! The eggs are blue!"

"Let's see if the yolks are, too."

One of the boys was hit in the back with a rock. They turned around to face Gloria.

"Over my dead body!"

Emma Keanie

Waking

amidst the fading flotsam of night
the lachrymatory vessels wrestle
with the presentiment of being
whetted into consciousness
as the fine saw edges of barbed
lashes lift and there you are
Kleist lidless in front of the monk
peeled back into another day

Finn Cargill

Arctic Cotton

Is it the old who are easy in their living?
Like arctic cotton, they wait,
Flowering shyly in the wide, white tundra,
Dusty as the peppered moth under silent snowfall.
They have pressing matters at hand
Such as the fading of the day
And the circling of the raptors above.

Is it the young who are now exhausted?
I have no universal value, not to hand,
Only a kind of lonely stripping,
Unveiling a great unkindness,
That bulbous death cap on my shoulder:
A king parasite. I grit my teeth,
Raxing for an audience or an ally.

Giovanni Mangiante

Almost 25

I sit in my lonely, decrepit room
abusing alcohol and chain-smoking cigarettes,
feeling nauseous, thinking about suicide
two or three times a week,
remembering all the times my parents
asked me to smile,
and I try to keep it together
one more year for them, for my sister,
and for the dog that now sleeps on my bed.

All these years I wasted
believing I would be okay someday
now amount to almost 25,
and as the calendar pages are ripped
without joy,
the darkness under my eyes grows
with no intentions to stop,
the ribs slowly begin to poke through
my pale skin,

and I remember my parents laughing
and I remember myself laughing
and they seem so far away
and everything seems so far away,
trying to keep it together.

James G. Piatt

Just Wondering

An ancient grandfather's clock
chimed away the shifting hours of
wearisome time, as an iron horse
vanished into the soot-covered
hours. Hearing the strident
bird-songs of a mockingbird, and
the raucous voice of a morning
dove. The moon sighed, and I
heard fading notes dancing on the
strings of an ancient harp,
causing me to ponder on the
inexplicable questions of life and
death.

Luisa Kay Reyes

Baseball Banner

“Ouch!” Garrett exclaimed to himself out loud. His shoulder was aching terribly as he was sitting in his office trying to take care of some last-minute details before he was scheduled for yet another follow-up surgery to remedy the original one that had put an end to his college ball playing days. Like every former ball player who has had their career cut short due to unforeseen circumstances, he secretly harbored the notion that one day he would get a second chance to hit the ball out of the park. But at the rate the surgeries kept mounting, he would be older than the thirty-five-year-old rookie, Jim Morris, before he ever stepped out onto the baseball diamond again—that is to say, stepping out onto the baseball field as a ball player. He actually was on the baseball sandlot nearly every day during the spring to early fall ball playing season as vice president of operations and marketing. It was a term that was just impressive enough sounding to remind him every day that he was a far cry from ever being called up to the major leagues. And now he found himself trying not to wince with pain while searching for a fill-in due to a last-minute cancellation for their upcoming homestead.

“Rats!” he cried out before he could squelch his discomfort as he turned in his chair. Whenever they held tryouts for National Anthem singers, they managed to draw in quite a crowd. However, when it came time to find a last-minute replacement, none of those eager aspiring singers were available. Scanning his list of returners on his computer screen, he realized they all had let him know they had prior commitments. It was a predicament compounded by the fact that the teams could offer the singers a handful of complimentary tickets and that was all. But at least they didn’t require them to buy a costly set of group tickets like the closest major league team did.

Garrett began looking through some of his emails for anybody he may have missed. There was one he had thought about contacting but given that the video they had sent in for their audition was of some kind of rare format incompatible with the software he had on his computer, it had no sound. Making him not want to bother with giving them another opportunity to show off their singing skills. But now that he took a second glance, the singer looked presentable enough in the video. And with the pangs in his shoulder ever increasing, the last thing he wanted to do was devote any more time to the office. So, he decided to give her a chance before calling it a day.

• • •

Lauren found herself staring at her computer screen in a state of bewilderment. She had auditioned for several opera companies recently, only to be bombarded with messages that she had an especially beautiful voice but regretfully, they had no openings in their upcoming season for her specific voice type. Unable to afford to travel the world for a year auditioning, she had become familiar enough with some of the other faces at the auditions she did manage to go to

where she knew who some of the professional auditioners were. Sopranos, baritones, tenors, and the occasional mezzo who were all nervous yet gallant at the same time. It didn't take one long to realize that they could all be hailed as the next up-and-coming young opera star, if only the occasion would arise for them to be allowed to give proof of their skills on stage.

As Lauren squinted her soft brown eyes to be sure she wasn't reading anything incorrectly, she was fairly certain she had never included the local baseball team in her round of auditions. However, there was a message asking her if she was available to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at an upcoming home baseball game. Lauren reached for her planner and sure enough, she didn't have anything else scheduled for that day. *Do I really want to sing before that kind of an audience?* she asked herself. Her British ballet teacher when she was younger had forewarned her several times: "You can't cast your pearls before swine." It was a somewhat haughty sounding statement, but one that Lauren had found to be true in the local city wide "talent" shows.

Lauren got up to stretch and ponder things for a moment. She was fairly positive that she had never sent in an audition video for this baseball team. Which could only mean one thing: her mother. Lauren felt a smile forming in her face in spite of herself. Her mother must have sent it in without her knowledge. How she managed to do that, given her mother's severe lack of computer skills, Lauren wasn't entirely sure. But, so far, by the looks of things, no harm had been done by it. Still, though, it required a certain element of bravery to get up and sing before a sizable audience, especially when rejection had become the norm in her singing career. And lately, Lauren had been overcome by the feeling that skydiving into a forest that was ablaze with a wildfire would be less fraught with peril than trying to pursue an operatic career.

Yielding to her innate curiosity, Lauren walked over to the piano and started sifting through some of her music. Of course, she knew the National Anthem by heart, but it had been some time since she had sung it in her college choir, and she wanted to study the rhyme scheme. As she did so, the imagery began appealing to her. For in spite of terrible hardship, the flag was still there.

"Hang it all!" Lauren found herself commenting with glee. She was a far cry from being a president's singing daughter like Margaret Truman, but she would exert her best effort in the matter, and there might be worse things in the world than giving it a try. So, she quickly rushed over to the computer and typed up a message agreeing to sing for the upcoming home baseball game.

• • •

On the appointed day, Lauren drove to the baseball stadium accompanied by her mother. After a brief rewarming up in the car, she picked up her complimentary tickets at the will-call counter as they waited for her friends to arrive. Just a quick glance at the other people picking up their tickets made it clear that this game was turning into quite the family affair with people bringing their young children and elderly relatives, as well. Lauren also noticed that the stadium

was filled with large fans blowing mist to stay cool during the warm weather. The mist felt truly delightful, but Lauren made sure to avoid as much as possible lest the blast of cool air adversely affect her voice.

Before too long, her friends arrived full of smiles as they proceeded to the autograph table where some pitchers were sitting and giving out their autographs. Lauren laughed as her mother proceeded to tell them all about Mickey Mantle, who was her first childhood baseball crush. However, in another surprise of the day, Lauren noticed the pitchers didn't seem to slough it off as nonsense as if they were enjoying the conversation.

While the baseball stadium wasn't the Met or La Scala, Lauren was beginning to feel the nerves of excitement rising within her. So, she excused herself and went to the restroom to do some more warming up. She was determined to get the beautiful flowing "ooh" tone that her voice teachers had harped upon her for years right from the first word of the National Anthem. So, she practiced only the beginning part several times before walking back out and introducing herself to the lady at the counter who would let the right people know that she had arrived.

"Lauren," she heard a masculine voice say. She turned around to see a nice-looking young man with the classic baseball player's build uttering her name.

"Garrett?" she inquired, more than a little taken aback and at a loss for anything more insightful to say.

"Nice to meet you" he said before promptly escorting Lauren and her entourage down to an area that was blocked off where the in-between-inning-entertainers were getting the giveaway baseballs ready, and the baseball players and coaches were milling back and forth, setting things up in the dugout.

"We've never seen this part before," her friend said in astonishment. Gleaming with excitement when one of the baseball players offered to pose for a picture with her friend's little toddler, Lauren had to admit, the zeal of the pre-game festivities was beginning to make her blood rush with excitement, too. However, she must focus. So, she sat down on the bench and kept going over the melody, trying to block out the pop music that was blasting far too loudly.

As the clock counted down to the start of the game, the umpires took their place on the field. Garrett came over to get her, handing her a microphone that he informed her would turn on as soon as the announcer finished introducing her by name. Lauren glanced back at her mother and friends; there was no turning back now.

The baseball players from both teams took their places on the field, and the fans in attendance all rose. *Just let me get the magical bell tone quality from the first note, please Lord,* Lauren prayed silently to herself. And then her name was announced. Lauren held up the microphone, neither too close nor too far from her lips, and began singing. But the microphone wasn't working. Lauren glanced in Garrett's direction wide-eyed with "What do I do?" clearly emanating from the ready-to-take-flight expression on her face, to which Garrett merely shrugged his shoulders, nonchalantly.

Well, I am an opera singer, Lauren thought to herself as she let the microphone slide out of her hand. Directing her attention back to the baseball game attendees, she summoned up her

full voice and continued singing the National Anthem as passionately as she could. Silence ensued. Even the large train driving past the stadium slowed down to a halt. Once the introductory stanzas were done, Lauren braced herself for the high notes that followed. Sailing through them easily, Lauren even managed to come down gently for the last few notes, all despite her nerves. However, as soon as she finished singing, “and the home of the brave,” she was greeted with effusive applause from the baseball fans. Garrett even came up to her with his eyes sparkling and said, “That was beautiful! You made the world stand still. And the microphone didn’t matter; everybody could still hear you!” Garrett’s sentiment was echoed by the many fans as Lauren walked past them to rejoin her mother and friends.

When Garrett asked if she’d be willing to come back, Lauren couldn’t help but suppress a giggle, for she never thought she would be so glad for a non-working microphone. She unhesitatingly replied in the affirmative. Lauren realized that for the first time in an extensively long while, she felt free to sing...free to sing beautifully.

Maria Masington

Matriarchy

Mary watched her mother
lug American Tourister bags
down the driveway,
shove them into the trunk of
her champagne-colored Ford,
and get behind the wheel.
She would always remember
her tenth birthday as the day
Mom drove out of their world.

Thirty years later
Mary sits in her kitchen,
staring at the Lazy Susan,
a medication-laden bull's eye
in the middle of her table.
A carousel of chemical cures.
Pfaltzgraff salt and pepper shakers
hide amid tawny bottles with
childproof lids, each bearing
the name of someone she loves.

Lasik. Klonopin. Ritalin,
Lipitor. Antabuse. Lithium.
Everything but the estrogen patches
that she keeps next to her bed,
elixirs that assuage their symptoms
but never provide a cure.

She spins the emotional roulette wheel,
ignores the impulse to repeat history,
tells herself she will not walk out,
but finally understands
why her mother ran away.

Maria Masington

Storm Windows

as she decorated the nursery
a panicked tap of praying mantis
tall, proud, hands folded in worship
trapped between two panes of glass

in hormonal bliss
she thought him a good omen
a messenger in preparation
for the arrival of a son

encased in the transparency
he calmed briefly for her to lift the pane,
free him into the world with good tidings
of the beloved infant to come.

Melissa Gill

Dead Doll Face

My heavy head leans forward
Pressing against a plastic screen
Trapped in a collector's box
Dead glass eyes, a silent scream
Scratching the back of my porcelain skull

Thoughts bending in the light
Shadows catch me slipping in the night
My snowy skin reddens caressed
By a Holy Reaper's breath
Chilling me into a block of ice

I appear like I could be alive
The way a mortuary beautician
Studies pictures of me to find
Quiet details I left behind

The art of my uneven eyeliner
My left wing thicker than my right
She paints showgirl lips on my overbite
Masking my downward mouth

I remind her of a weeping clown left in the dust
Her circus brothers left behind to rust
Dressed in layers of glee, a story the world failed to see

Inside her heart, a wilting joy molded
Buried underneath the bones of a splitting cypress
Molting away the colors of a Summer trauma

A naked sadness choking her to tears
She imagines me riding off into Heaven's Gates

Touched by the damp breath of dawn, I lie motionless in her arms

Micah Granada
Family Portrait

Watching my father rest in his bed in the corner of the aged room, I realized the weight of all the years he had behind him. He had always been a small man—his frame was humble but father-like, and it seemed as though his cancer made him look even smaller than I could recall. He looked like a sleeping newborn cramped on the side of the bed. I decided it was better to keep my distance by the door so as not to disturb him. I turned the knob softly, but his voice surprised me, “Aly...”

“Dad,” I said, trying to keep my voice as low as possible. “I didn’t know you were awake.”

“Well, now you know I am,” he said, with a weak smile. I tried to conceal the disappointment that overtook me for seeing him this frail, as well as the fright for what may happen in the operation. *He needs reassurance*, I said to myself. *Don’t give him any more worries.*

“Feelin’ better?” I said, immediately realizing how thoughtless it is of me to ask if he was feeling okay. Of course, he wasn’t.

“Not the best, but there’s really nothing to worry about. Don’t you have a duty at the hospital today?”

“I asked Julius to take my place; it isn’t really busy at the hospital these days,” I said, despite knowing all too well that every day is a busy day for public hospitals.

“Julius? How’s he?” he asked. I can see he was trying to make me feel light and normal, but my heart was getting heavier as we talked, and the lumps in my throat could no longer keep themselves intact.

“He’s fine,” I briefly answered to cut the conversation short. He didn’t need to see me cry. “Get your rest, Dad; I’ll be here in the kitchen if you need me,” I said before he could ask any more questions.

It was hard to miss the dismay in his face as I turned my glimpse away. “Alright but wait for your mom. She went to the market.”

I closed the door as quietly as I can as if any sound that I make can further damage his deteriorating condition. Each step away from his room felt like kilometers of growing distance from the father I had known. I was still perhaps clouded by the myth of the invulnerable parent one is inclined to believe in his childhood. I had been an optimistic child, subjected to the belief that her parents were superheroes—and I guess it’s something inherent to young people. Adulthood is something young people dream of until it slaps them straight at the face; only then will they realize they’d do everything to remain as a child. My father once told me that children are the luckiest people, and he was probably right.

I sat on the chair closest to the window and tried to remember the happiest memories I had of my father. He used to take me to the park every Sunday back when I was roughly seven, and along with my sisters, we’d look for the perfect spot in the grass to put our blanket. I

remembered mocking my sister for drinking from the bottle I used to collect tiny grasshoppers, and I gave her the title Grasshopper Eater in jest. Some days, I watched my father paint outside the house. I could still vividly recall the way his canvas comes to life with every stroke; it was a magic trick for my little mind. But many people devalued his artistry as a laughingstock, and I grew up secretly adopting the same opinion. I didn't understand what his art meant to him.

It was his passion for art that distanced him from my grandfather, and after years, I realized that it was the very reason why I got closer to my grandfather than to him. Mom told me that Grandad's dream was for him to pursue medicine, like many fathers of their generation who crave success, but my father made sure it didn't happen. My grandfather told me that you could never make a living out of painting, and I started to blame my father for being naïve. I refused to talk to my father for a week after my grandfather died because I felt like he had wronged my grandfather for not resolving their issues—I felt like it was his fault for insisting on his ambition.

The windows revealed the emptiness of the house, with the specks of dust covering most of the surface. The walls—jeweled by father's paintings—resemble a visual art gallery. I couldn't help but notice the change of color in the paintings of my father throughout the years. As a child, I used to see him paint meadows and sun-streaked mountains, but I noticed that some of the pictures—I reckoned the recent ones because the strokes had become sloppier—were dominantly grayish. The paintings had become quiet and pensive. I stared at one of the paintings until I realized what the dull and leaden color unveiled—my father's loneliness. A tinge of guilt ran through my chest as I realized how lonely my parents must've felt, constantly growing white hairs with all their children out of sight. I sighed, thinking it was all inevitable, yet sadness overcame me still. My parents insisted on staying in this house, despite my offer to provide them a new one, somewhere else. I couldn't blame them for wanting this sort of peace. Even I would choose to escape the rush of the city, had I been given the choice.

Several empty bottles of San Miguel Pale Pilsen occupied the right side of the area below the kitchen sink. I put them inside a plastic bag one by one, thinking that if only my father listened to me, if only he stopped being childish, none of this would've happened.

• • •

“That's a bleeding tumor,” my co-resident said, pointing to the suspicious mass on the left side of a patient's brain imaging.

“Most likely,” I said, trying so hard to shift my focus back to the tests to be conducted after the assessment. “The only option is to operate and take out the mass.”

“Right,” he said, studying my reflection in the mirror on his side. “You okay?” he asked, trying not to sound so concerned.

“I have no choice but to be okay,” I sighed, taking in more air than I could exhale. I tried to keep my thoughts together. “His surgery's tomorrow; what if something goes wrong?” I said, more like a request for assurance than a question.

“Your worrying won’t help your father; you just gotta be strong for him. Besides, we’ve got the best doctors here,” he said with a smile, revealing his white teeth. “What you need now is rest. I’ll take care of this.”

I walked along the deserted hallway leading to my office, and for the first time in my stay at the hospital, I felt like a child uncertain of direction. I had always been meticulous with every step. For the past eight years, every gesture of my hand during operations was a calculated decision. But that day, I felt like I had earned the right to be incompetent, to be clueless, to be fragile.

• • •

My mind reeled with all possible measures they hadn’t considered. The doctor might be wrong; he’s just human, after all. My mother’s silent cry beside me drowned my thoughts, and my heart flared with seething anger and helplessness. Leaving my sobbing mother in the corner, I walked towards the room where my father was, deciding which words needed to be uttered.

I turned the knob to his room in the ward and quietly sat at his bedside. I tried my best to convince myself that inside those sagging skin was the father I knew. The thought of his lungs and heart straining behind his ribs dissolves my sanity. It was his liver that I despised the most.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said, startling me. “I told you so, Dad,” he said, mimicking my usual know-it-all tone.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” I said, not knowing what else to say, or what better way to say it.

“Don’t apologize for something that isn’t your fault,” he said in a serious tone. I stared at him until I could no longer put up a carefree façade in front of my father.

• • •

I never thought it is possible for the house to feel any emptier. The walls whispered of the many things I should’ve said to him, like how much I missed his jokes, or that I still remembered the sound of his voice on the recording when he sang Depeche Mode’s “Somebody” to my mother.

I stayed at the house for days, accompanying my grieving mother until we could both walk on our own again. My sisters left the day after the funeral, so I decided to sit outside when my mother went out to avoid the drowning emptiness of the house. Some days, I’d brave a look at the paintings and try to understand it as much as I could—maybe my father intended one of them to tell me something. But some days, they just felt like voices reminding me of the chances I wasted not getting to know my father well.

I woke up one morning to the sound of a rooster crowing. I needed to arrange my things because I was to leave that afternoon. I told myself he was probably out there, painting a landscape in the garden, or sleeping in his room, or somewhere else helping out my mother. My heart persisted, which seemed like the only thing it was capable of doing that day.

I found myself unwittingly walking towards his room. I turned the knob, ever so gently, trying to make sense of the odds that I'd find my father there. I felt stupid for being so disappointed. Sitting in his bed, I tried to recall how it felt like when he was still here. The room had the same scent.

I saw a canvas facing back on the corner of the room, and I picked it up. I expected to see a painting of a meadow or a mountaintop, but instead, I saw faces smiling at me. It was our family portrait. I didn't even know he painted anything more than landscapes. But this painting looked surreal—as if we weren't humans but astral projections—with the colors invading my senses and soul at the same time. It was hard to look at each of our faces without shedding tears. The emptiness of the house that had engulfed me drowned me at the presence of my father's painting, and I felt as if it was not the canvas I held in my hands, but my father's hands.

Molly A. Green

My Recovery's Beating Heart

They deprived me—of the power to draw my truth from reality
They demanded—that i accept my friend as a demon
They said, “bake him into a pie, slay him in one swallow”
so i kissed him goodbye when i fed on his smile
They think to let go all you need is bare hands
They don't know of his fingerprints on the walls of my fantasy

They watch when i thumb through this chapter as fantasy
when paper cuts bleed onto pages—now read as reality
how could i hurt so heavily in safe hands?
They weigh the heart though the mind is the demon
and as bitter as i seem, i'm the sugar in their smile
i watch as i crumble with each bite They swallow

i steal a sip of hope with the first pill i swallow
when the well is low, i remedy with the fantasy
when the willowy landscapes of my skin would smile
as my limbs wept, shade crept, winter waxed to reality:
the pathway, ablaze, to my core, the door of the demon
i'll burn once more behind... the opening, closing of his hands

i grow through the roots of my palms to practice willing hands
my life line's hardest to follow; heart line's hardest to swallow
i choke on my medicine and yowl like a little demon
i throw my fits, sigh with fire—a little girl bit by reality
but They douse each breath and plant a seed in my fantasy
i grow (to accept) with the soft sun of a half-smile

the water in my mouth freezes; He taunts me with a sly smile
i beg him, “wipe it off!” behind the hungry flames of clenched hands
but the dimples in his cheeks are shadows of reality
and the corners of his grin are lifted when i swallow
They figure i could fix this, redefine the fantasy
yet acceptance is a two-way street; He's more than a demon

He's the lifeblood in the poison—a reason, not a demon
his wings were the warmth, numbing my chattering teeth to a smile

albeit my truth may only foster me as fantasy
He was the one thing to hold close; i'll miss his claws in my hands
for sharpening his horns meant one less word to swallow
He lived in my mind so long, my heartbeat to his reality

to let go (of a demon) all you need is love and bare hands
as i gave them the key, their smile gave him nothing to swallow
We lay to rest the tired fantasy; I wake up to accept reality

R. Gerry Fabian

Sound Judgment

It's before midnight;
the street is almost deserted.
This is not uncommon
for a small borough town.
From somewhere in the distance
the tones of a piano
sprinkle in the dark.
It is a slow melody-
not exactly sad, but quite serious.
It is paced and organized
but not famous or practiced.
The notes are original
and the few flaws are genuine.
I want to follow the volume
and seek out the composer
but many years of experience
have taught me the inherent value
between what is perceived
and what is pure chance.
So I let the music
carry me into another direction

Robin Knabel

Washed Away

He spit on the window, pulled his sleeve down over his hand, and washed away a circle of grime from the glass. His stomach lurched as he peered into the dim interior. Two children sat strapped into car seats. Secure, safe. Twenty little fingers, too small to escape, were blue, rigid. A pacifier lay wedged between the infant's legs, the television screen above no longer showing cartoons or distractions. Open prescription bottles, an empty pint of vodka, and a desperate mother littered the front seat. Her phone plugged in, seeking life.

The river was cold that morning, and the light layer of ice formed over the accident scene had to be broken. He used to love coming to this spot with his family, taking in its simple beauty, before he didn't have time. He was too busy, too important to take a break, always telling them they'd do it again soon, maybe when the weather was nicer.

He turned to usher onlookers past the scene as they strolled close, wondering why the minivan was on the bank, covered in muck, water weeping out the bottom.

His job was never easy and working scenes like this made him want to go home, tell his wife and kids how much he loved them, wrap his arms around them and hold them tight. "I wish I had told you more often," he whispered, his warm breath covered the opening he created with a fog, entombing his family in darkness once more.

Sam McDonald

Latte Art

If I came here for the authenticity

Then I would be

Lost

But I came here for the view

For the polyphony of filters

And the aesthetic of the tilted--

Polaroid

1

2

3

Symphonies and mimicries

And less than half

Truths hung perilously

By the fray of an immaculate moment

Cemented—

In place