



equinox

Issue 8 | 2020

literary and arts magazine

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Campus Honors Program  
University of Illinois at  
Urbana-Champaign



*Equinox* is the literary and arts magazine exclusive to the Campus Honors Program of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It was created, organized, and published by Chancellor's Scholars.

The mission of *Equinox* is to share the artistic and creative talents of CHP members. Its name, borrowed from astronomy, reflects this mission: the vernal and autumnal equinoxes are days of the year when day and night are seen equally. The duality of day and night reflects the balance between academic and artistic achievement among Chancellor's Scholars.

Before we begin, many thanks are in order to so many people for helping us create our own little magazine.

Anne, Kim, Elizabeth — thank you for constantly supporting us, your flexibility while we created this, and your support throughout it all.

Tami — thank you for coordinating logistics and bringing this book onto your shelf.

To the HSC — thank you for making room in your meetings for a bunch of nerds who like to write.

To everyone who submitted — thank you for letting us share your art and bringing this magazine to life.

And to readers like you — thanks.

## Staff

Editor-in-chief — Ethan Frobish  
Assoc. Editor — MaryRose O'Donnell  
Head Designer — Gail Schneiderman  
Assoc. Designer — Briana Sobecks  
Assoc. Designer — Lily Holmes  
Copy Editor — Mac Dudley

## A Letter from the Editor

I had, in a previous draft of this letter, in a previous life, written on how proud I was to get this magazine out on time, about how the Equinox team's process had been refined to the point where we had become a veritable editorial machine. However, everything changed when spring break didn't end.

You may have noticed, if you've checked your calendar lately, that we missed our goal of getting Equinox published by the vernal equinox. There's a quote from Douglas Adams that I find applicable in these situations: "I love deadlines--I like the whooshing sound they make as they fly by." To my knowledge, I don't think that the publishers of Equinox have EVER made that arbitrary deadline, but this year, I feel as though we can be forgiven. It's rather hard to hit a deadline when the whooshing sound comes at you through a Zoom call. The acoustics just aren't the same.

I, of course, am beating around the elephant in the room. I don't have anything intelligent to say about the COVID-19 disaster, so I won't bother with the "In these troubled/uncertain times" nonsense. What I will say is that this is a book that predates the pandemic--it's from the before times, if you will--and Equinox will have more to say on the issue in time. But for now, we have a book that was 90% complete before everything got weird, and it would be a shame for it to go unpublished.

Regardless of everything that has happened, I am still incredibly proud of this magazine's improvement in both its production and its content. Chancellor's Scholars, as always, have produced amazing works of literature and art, and I am excited for you to see them. They deserve to be seen, even if it is a little later than we all had anticipated.

Ethan Frobish

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# a ritual of replacement

kayla vittore

Plant, Primp, Pluck  
Plant, Primp, Pluck  
Three stages of life  
For flowers on the campus

Plant them Monday morn  
Infant buddings wrapped in green  
Stems still sparse and young  
Fresh potential clearly seen

Primp, adore, dote on --  
Fresh mulch and water showers  
Maximize the yield  
Overextend their powers

Pluck without a thought  
Some dull afternoon from now  
Sole purpose fulfilled  
Dethroned, their weary crowns bow

I walk by each morn  
And watch the gardener truck  
Probe these restless beds  
To plant, primp, or pluck

Merciless and strange  
This pattern I've observed  
Spring set on repeat  
Life's prime perfectly preserved

Every act exact  
Plant, primp, and pluck  
The pretty treated precious  
The spent out of luck

I was late to class today  
Mesmerized by the routine  
I mourned decorative lives  
With grim familiarity



blooming  
gail schneiderman





peace  
natalie bready

no matter  
natalie bready





a series of short vignettes about social anxiety  
tentatively/collectively entitled “the worst case  
scenario” by dieter dietrich, age 19  
ethan frobish

1.  
How do you feel about laundry? It's all fun and games if you have your own private machine and your own private room, but semi-public laundry is one of Dante's overlooked rings of hell.  
Imagine this: You're in your building's laundry room on a Saturday evening, half-way through your laundering process. Your clothes have all been sorted into the correct machines and washed on cold to minimize your carbon footprint, of course, and you've taken out your rayons and pure wools and other plasticy fabrics to dry outside of the shrinking heat of the dryer, but you notice something isn't right after you pile your sopping articles into your basket.  
Each and every single one of the building's twelve dryers is full of dry clothes. Bone dry clothes. They've been there for quite some time; you haven't heard a beep or a tumble through the quiet din of the podcast you've got flowing into your ears to ward off any would-be conversators. What do you do?  
Obviously, you wait. You sit patiently for many painful minutes while a soft tenor whispers in your ears about the history of Velcro, and then another mumbles a luke-warm recapitulation of an esoteric Czech folktale. You wait because you know what will happen the minute you open one of those dryers.  
You'll be emptying one, placing the clothes gently on the adjoining counter space when you hear the door open to your left. You'll look over and see some middle aged woman. Between her and you are your hands extended unwittingly from your body, a pair of her yellowed underwear spread between them. She'll stand with her mouth agape, then come bash you over the head with her purse. Your headphones will fly out, and no amount of sputtering and stuttering will keep you from going to jail for a hundred years and being placed on the sex offender registry.  
So, you wait.



the starting gun  
alexandra schneeberger

2.  
Have you ever really considered the horror of eating at a restaurant?  
If you go there alone, you're a creep and a weirdo, and if you manage to find someone to go with you, you have to grapple first with their schedule, then with their tastes, and then you have to talk to them for the duration of the meal. So to avoid banal conversation, you'll often go alone and sequester yourself in a corner. A baritone podcaster will provide a centrist's take on the state of the union to keep you company.  
If you haven't been to this restaurant before, you can be sure that you've seen every image that Google can provide of the interior and know exactly what is on the menu and whether you order at a counter or have a server for your very own table for one. Most of the time, it's easier to go to a place with a counter, but if you're really in



the mood for a good taco or were given a gift card to a Red Robin by some distant relation two weeks after your birthday despite never actually having gone there in your life or are in an airport and need to eat to keep your pre-flight nerves distracted and have no other outlet than a Chili's... well, you may need to grapple with a server.

Iced tea. Unsweet. The first part is easy enough, just try to remember your server's name. Judy, Beth, Steve, maybe even Todd. You can peruse the menu freely if you're alone, and hopefully you are, but if you're dining with others or, worse, on someone else's dime, God help you. Do you order what you really want, regardless of price? This is sometimes a bit of braggadocio from your companion, or perhaps it's a potential rift between you and your benefactor because they never really mean "order what you want." More likely than doing that, you create a list of plans for different price ranges and will always go at least one dollar below your host, even if it means getting stuck with a salad.

For your sake, you're alone in this hypothetical dining excursion. That's usually how it is anyways, you creepy weirdo. You're alone at an airport Chili's, but oh dear lord, you've ordered entirely too much food. You could let your server take it and feed it to the void, but you're very environmentally conscious. You hate food waste. You wouldn't want to be judged for your carbon footprint in the next life, or in this life, really. Regardless, you need your check. How do you get your server's attention?

You can't snap at them. Both socially and physically. Your hands are too sweaty, and that's very rude. People who snap at other people, that is, not sweaty handed people. You wouldn't want to draw attention to yourself anyways. You can look desperately towards your server, but they'll never notice. They're busy talking to families and perverts, thinking about their seven children, and not making enough money on tips. Tipping is another can of worms entirely. But to get their attention, do you clear your throat, or try to use morse code? Semaphore? Is there a symbol you can use to let your server know "Hey, I need a doggy bag over here"? Probably, but no one ever taught you, and those things are probably regional anyways.

You can try to dine and dash, but that's not advisable. Someone would come bash you over the head with a purse, and your headphones would fly out, and no amount of sputtering or stuttering would keep you from going to jail for a hundred years and getting put on the sex offender registry.

So, you'll wait, and you'll miss your flight because you were held up in an airport Chili's while Judy, Beth, Steve, or maybe even Todd neglected the quiet child at the table in the corner, and you'll never make it back home, despite all the hassle of going through security, but it's probably for the best because someone would complain about the smell of your leftover food on the plane or about how loudly you were eating your leftover food on the plane and you would be jettisoned from the plane by the seat of your pants without a parachute or even an umbrella, which might also be for the best.



afternoon tea  
christina su

3.

Do you want to go on a date?

No, stop laughing. Hypothetically, you do. Hypothetically, you do more than just look and observe and gaze out at the world around you and wait for someone to break through your headphones and their meaningless clangor (a deep dive into serial killer Richard Chase on this hypothetical day) for anything more than a pencil. Hypothetically you know what you're doing, but when you're asked for coffee at three on Saturday by the girl in the corner with the short hair and the headphones and the good collection of sweaters, you must put your hypotheticals into action.

You pick your best sweater, weather permitting, and shower early enough so that your hair dries right, and you wear a reasonable amount of cologne, and you fret all day waiting for three o'clock. But when do you arrive? Party protocol says that it must always be at least five minutes late, but you don't go to many parties. It must be two thirty, and not a minute later. You come so early so that you have the liberty of picking your own table in your own corner. You come so early so that you have the freedom of not having to look for someone and looking like an asshole to everyone around you. If



you come after the girl with the short hair has already arrived, God help you. Everyone in the coffeeshop will look at you and say “Hey, look at this asshole looking for someone. What an asshole! I bet that he’s looking for someone who asked him on a date and who he is possibly romantically interested in! What an asshole! I bet she bails on him because he is an asshole!” You arrive early everywhere, but especially for hypothetical dates.

Do you order when you arrive? Of course! That is, if the coffee shop has a counter, but who has ever heard of a coffee shop with a server? You shudder at the very thought. You take your time reading the menu on the wall, but none of it makes much sense to you. There are entirely too many options. How complicated can coffee be? Americano, cappuccino, macchiato... the words swim in front of your eyes. You don’t even like coffee! You’d go for a hot chocolate, but you want to seem like a viable adult with hair on his chest for the girl with the short hair on her head. She probably drinks coffee like a real person who knows exactly what she’s doing at all times. So you get coffee, black, and dull it down with pounds of creamer and sugar. And you drink that coffee and keep drinking it to occupy yourself to help the minutes pass by faster while a group of men with reedy voices play Dungeons and Dragons in your ears.

Three approaches. Good lord. You watch the minutes tick down on your watch, and double check that it is in sync with your phone. You stare at the door, alternating between that and your watch. The seconds tick, the dice of the reedy men in your ears clatter. You still have time to leave, to run and bail on the girl with the short hair and flee the country and change your name and avoid the inevitable hundred years of jail and sex offender registration that this date would result in, but at ten till three, with ten whole minutes (or fifteen if you’re playing by party rules) to spare, the girl with the short hair and the headphones and the good sweaters walks through the door. She waves. She comes over to your table in your corner and sits down. She smiles. You take your headphones out and the reedy-voiced men are silenced. She takes her headphones out, and you swear that you recognize the voices that were coming through them before she has paused them into oblivion.

“Hi,” she says.

“Hi,” you say.

“Sorry that I’m... early?” she laughs.

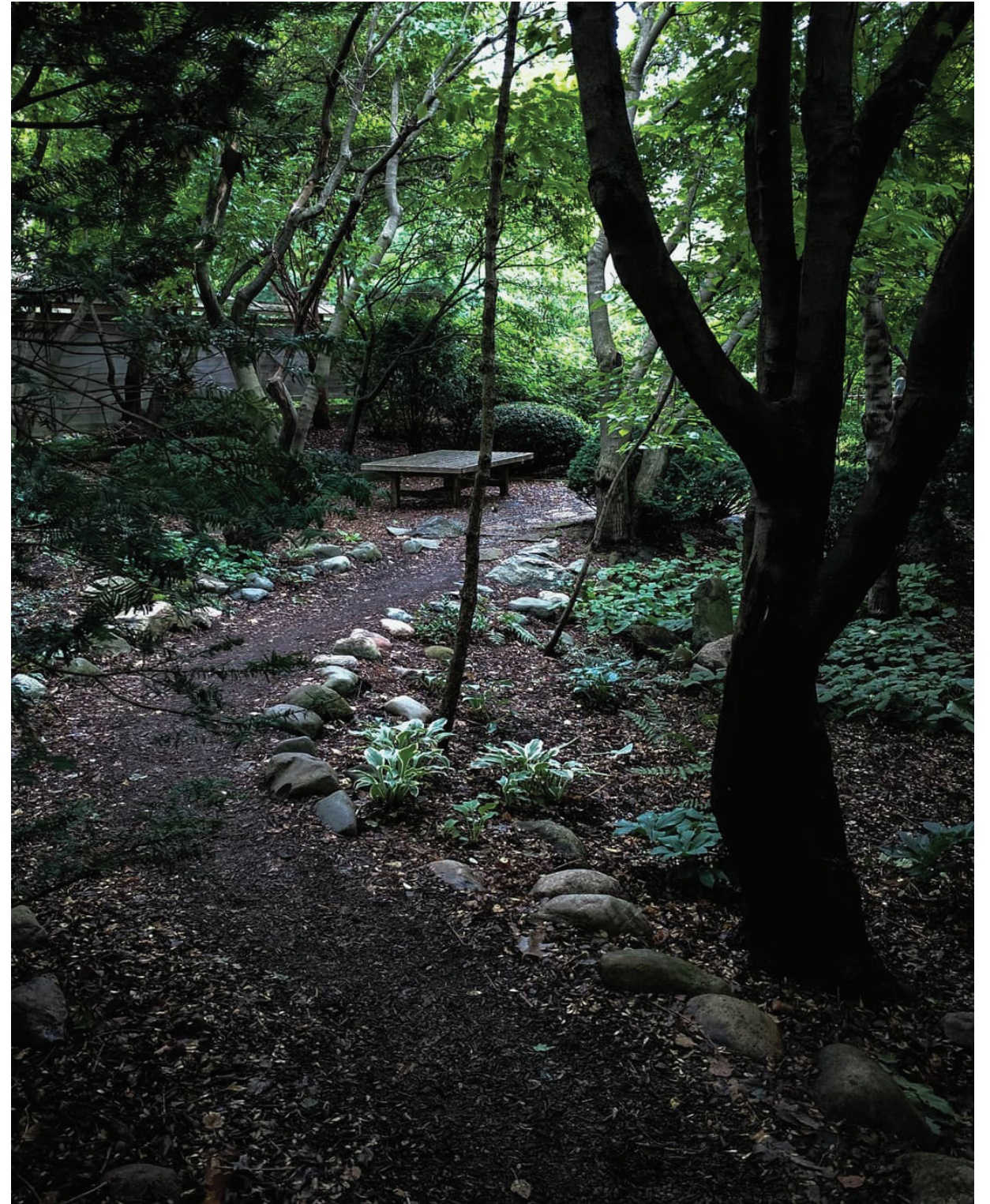
You laugh, too.

“I just like getting places early,” she says, “but I guess you beat me to it. I won’t hold it against you.”

You laugh again, apologizing with a measured tinge of sarcasm.

“Have you been waiting long?” she asks.

“Not long at all,” you say, and you sip your coffee, and you play it cool, and you let yourself believe that maybe she understands what it’s like to be you, even if you’re only believing it for the length of one cup of coffee.



untitled  
matthew pettineo



## bedtime

mac dudley

low voices sting  
like tears in my eyes  
something close to almost a promise:  
"i wanna keep your hand in mine"  
whisper the name i claim for the night  
ill tell you the truth when my voice feels right  
soft words hurt--  
pulling punches like pollen  
sharp irritation -- and release  
gentleness is fear and i am terrified  
something inside is swinging on rusty hinges  
"it's been more than a few years since we've opened this up" but  
your velvet hands  
didn't even have to fumble for the key  
who told you every weakness on this anxious body  
with each impossible tiny motion  
years of muscles stretched taut over insecurities release their hold on bony  
shoulders  
numbness melts like ice cream, dripping down those fingers  
that gently rub circles around my familiarity  
steady me  
with that ever-present resilience  
somehow you are tender and sturdy simultaneously  
riptide and bedrock, sweeping and solid  
beneath my feet  
hours are minutes and minutes are years  
trace over rivers of dried tears  
you never saw  
unearth the buried words  
i could never voice  
to anyone before you

discomfort slumbers somehow  
anticipation for the pullback that never comes  
this accelerated thumping  
is not as painful as it used to be

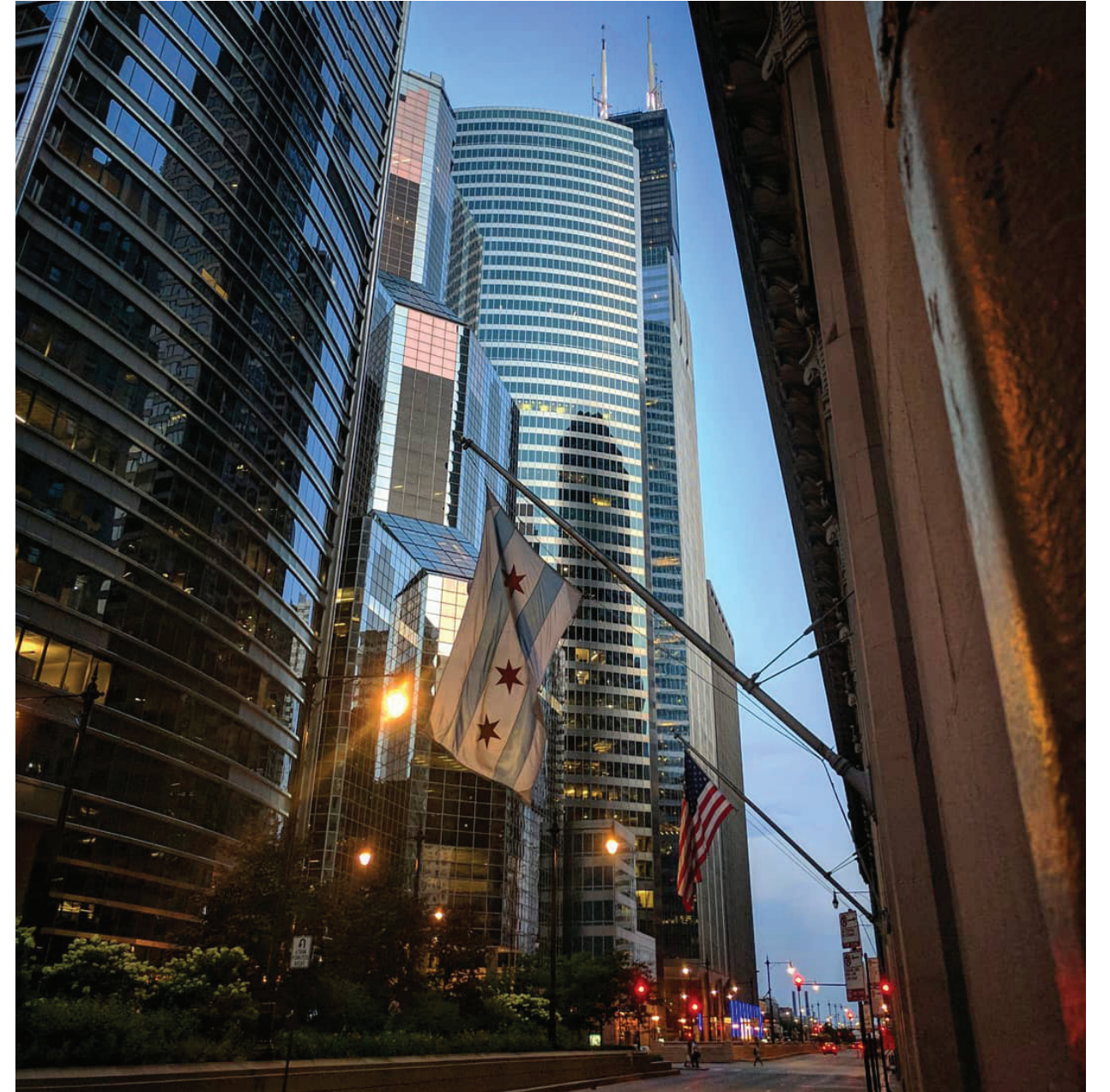
all my self-sabotage  
is buried in the backyard of my childhood home  
maybe this time capsule  
will find its own place in the soil  
as roots break down its defenses  
and worms and bugs crawl in between the cracks  
they can shuttle off with the doubt and pain  
as we dance on the grass above  
forgetting, forgiving, forgoing all the fears  
i want all our good times to be good  
leave the bad with our bad times  
let me enjoy myself alongside you and lose the overthinking  
creaking in my anxious brain

i want to paint you a picture using one color  
yellow was never my favorite but now I understand  
i couldn't smile lighter  
not wider  
im done ripping gashes along my happiness trying to  
maximize minimum feelings  
when i feel my lips parting, i don't have to force it  
im never running out of breath pushing out giggles  
i let it wash over me like a warm shower in the morning  
refreshing & readying me  
still, you're steadying me  
hold this big dumb heart  
as kindly as you can.  
that's all i ask.





bridges of cam  
christina su



untitled  
matthew pettineo



# forbidden

## tayo oriade

A fatal attraction,  
a love that could never be.  
She was betrothed to another,  
a man of status and virtue.

He promised her the world,  
the finest jewelry and rarest  
delicacies that money could buy.  
Her every will was his command.

Her lover was a stable boy,  
face perpetually covered in grease,  
hands and heart hardened over years of hard labor.

He could never become nobility,  
never provide her with the luxuries  
she was accustomed to.  
She could never disgrace her family  
by marrying a peasant like him.

Although they were destined  
to stay away from one another,  
they couldn't remain apart.  
An unbreakable chain bound them together,  
forged out of the strongest steel.

To him, she was a wildfire,  
deadly yet intoxicating.  
Unruly threads of smoke ensnared his body,  
and pulled him in.

To her, he was a piece of coal.  
Smoldering, and marked  
with a blackened heart.

She was the only one who could set him  
aflake, the only one with enough heat  
to chip away the darkness hidden inside.

Their love was an inferno,  
it spiraled out of control, wreaking havoc  
and chaos in its path.

Yet, even the brightest of fires,  
dwindle down until there is nothing  
but embers are left in its wake,  
ashes fluttering away, disappearing in the night sky.



second and third chances  
lily holmes



untitled  
matthew pettineo

## dead ringer ethan frobish

my ears are still ringing  
from a dead sound  
but that's probably the point.

he shredded in an urbana alleyway  
and the crowd was bigger than i expected  
but not enough to feed off of

there was the upside-down cross  
in white on his cheap amp—  
black metal is an art form

i couldn't tell you a word he screamed  
but his passion was accentuated by  
the corpse paint and fake-blood streaks

what if it was real?  
maybe it was actually metal as fuck  
but it just seemed loud, sad,

and almost wasteful  
a waste of talent to shred  
in a gentrified alley for someone like me

i didn't belong there  
in my button-down and khakis  
but i banged my head with him

i smiled while he told me  
to go and fuck myself  
his echo still screams

it's not my genre but  
tinnitus insures that  
i remember every note



# birdflight

briana sobecks

I entered the palace courtyard, feeling the bright rays of sun fall upon my face. The spring breeze carried a hint of warmth. The foliage was deepening its shades of green, growing from a sprightly lime into a deep emerald, color streaming from the flourishing tree branches to the trickles of ivy that grew up the stone walls. There were drops of other colors too, cones of pale lavender and tips of fuschia, bells of buttery yellow and speckles of white. And up ahead, shrouded by the other hues, yet nevertheless striking, an ebony braid.

I was rooted to the spot, and yet the figure glimpsed me immediately, pursing her lips at my sudden helplessness. Her head tilted slightly, daring me to approach her.

"Hello, Reina," I said.

"Hey," she replied.

"How's it hanging?" I asked, trying to sound cool. It failed.

"Fine." Her dark eyes glinted.

"That's good."

"Yeah."

She certainly wasn't making things easy. I shifted my gaze, looking at a rosebush nearby. "Look at these. Your favorite."

"Yes."

Did she want more? I could give her more. "Would you like me to call a gardener? I can have a whole garden of these potted in your room."

"No, thank you."

Was that not enough? What more could she want? I looked at her clothes: black dress plain save for a white collar and ruffled hem, black stockings, and black shoes. Now that her usual apron was off, I noticed how stark the outfit really was. "Would you like another dress? Or several more? You can design them yourself, or I could have one of the seamstresses help."

"You know I prefer t-shirts."

"Isn't that just when you're in your room?"

"Yes, and everytime I'm not working I'm there."

"What about moments like these?"

"What about them?" She folded her arms.

Things were only getting worse. This wasn't how the meeting was supposed to go! I kept silent, hoping not to make things worse. My eyes grew fuzzy from staring at the trees.

A bird flitted through the trees until it perched on a branch, resting its wings. I took a deep breath. "Look at that bird over there."

Reina glanced at it. "Pretty."

"Isn't it?" The bird had long ebony feathers, stretching out on either side, while

its stomach was a brilliant ruby red. It opened its golden beak and sang a few notes, clear as a tolling bell.

"Wow, that sounds exquisite. And such bold colors." I stepped closer, stretching out my hand next to the bird's feet. It darted back.

"I guess it doesn't like me," I said.

"It just needs space," Reina replied. "You can't do too much too fast. Watch this." She advanced slowly, extending a single finger. While Reina was still several inches away, the bird crept forward, gingerly extending one foot onto the finger. The next foot followed. Reina slowly lifted the bird, face softening as it started to sing.

"You are incredible," I said.

"Not really. I just think about what it wants."

That was the key, wasn't it? Understanding what the bird wanted. That was the way to connect with it. "I'm sorry. I was incredibly selfish. And I'm hopelessly lost when thinking about what others want."

"I want to go home for a while. I haven't been back since my family started working here. And I want to finish school."

"You want to leave that badly?"

"Not permanently. But the old king scarcely gave us time off. There are too many things I haven't seen."

"And this? Do you think this will work out?"

"I don't know. But we need to listen to each other. I won't take your charity. I have to do things for myself, and I need you to understand that." As she finished her sentence, the bird spread its wings and took off.

"Alright. I hope you find happiness, wherever this takes you."

"I'm glad you understand," she replied.



dare to fall  
gail schneiderman

## aren't you cold?

mac dudley

You use the buttons on your coat instead of the zipper. The zipper works well enough, but it gets stuck sometimes, and you hate dealing with the panic of remaining calm as the cloth you chose to wrap so tight suddenly becomes a space heater around your form, tinfoil around your baked potato body, squeezing and suffocating like some exotic snake made of polyester and nylon. Things like this have never been easy for you.

This summer was the first time you worried about freezing to death. You realized how much you crave the heat, and how bad it hurts when it's gone. You miss feeling warm. You miss it so much that you've spent half your spending money on duvets, quilts, body pillows, and sweatshirts. You're so terrified of waking up chilly, finding you've accidentally left the window open during a cold front, that you smother yourself for eight hours at a time. Most mornings, you wake up sweaty, but it's okay; you just have to wash the sheets twice as often. There are more nights when the heat melts into your dreams than the fear of its loss- you dream of jungles, of harsh deserts, sweltering basketball games, a stressful test in the center of the middle school cafeteria.

You find a kind of peace in the ritual of buttoning it up, one at a time at a time. You like how each button snaps directly into place; you're glad that they all have somewhere to belong. You're thinking a bit too much about six goddamn buttons.

It always comes back to middle school. Was that when you first felt the heat of the sun for real? Or was it when you realized just how cold "below freezing" really is? If someone asked you, you'd say "I don't know," but I think you do. You've hidden that memory somewhere in the corner of your brain like acorns for winter. Well, it's winter now: time to dig up every ugly happenstance you avoided in high school. No more time for reinventing; if you really wanted to hide yourself, you should've just stayed mute.

Undressing is a satisfying countdown. One, two, three, four, five, six....you're not sure what you're counting down to, but it feels like a relief of some sort. Setting yourself free. No unzipping getting caught on itself, threatening to rip with every violent yank at the metal.

"You should've just stayed mute."

You think that during all your serious conversations. When someone else misunderstands, all you can blame is yourself. Forgiveness feels like a million dollar prize: you don't think you could ever find a good enough reason to accept it. Isn't that pitiful? Don't you find some kind of pain in all the struggling not to smile? Why are you making your heart hurt so much?

The buttons leave small gaps in between. Cold seeps in with the wind, but when your mom suggests you buy a coat with a working zipper, you can't find the words to explain why you won't let this go. You trace your finger along the rip within your right pocket, pulling at loosened stitches like a kid tugs on his dad's shirt. Is it okay to just toss it aside like that?

"Aren't you cold?"

You always hated wearing a hat and gloves, but this tundra doesn't leave you with much of a choice. Your ears burn and your cheeks flush. Maybe everyone feels this way, and you're the only one who can't handle it; either way, you're terrified for winter to come.





untitled  
matthew pettineo

untitled  
matthew pettineo







dreamcatcher  
lukas kulbis

## fitting mac dudley

Jigsaw puzzles & knitting needles  
a crochet hook plunged deep into miles of cottony yarn  
Fabric scraps & one oversized quilt  
colors you don't remember fitting together so well  
I guess we see things differently now  
nimble fingers  
don't ask for a thimble  
but that smile is distracting  
one small prick  
suddenly dripping with red feelings  
the cross-stitch provides extra security  
for two patterned lengths of polyester  
that fear the seam-ripper  
with every fiber  
I don't want to lose you  
or see those scattered strips of ripped thread  
litter the desk chairs where we met  
Tie me tighter to your solid side  
I'm tired of blowing away with every kind word  
that's whispered ever so gently next to my ear  
Steady heat is easing stubborn creases  
from some other ill-fitting creation  
Repurpose me into a masterpiece of many textures  
I think we could make a beautiful thing  
with all of my shapes & all of your string



## absinthe tayo oriade

The bottle rested between his hands,  
emerald liquid reflecting onto his haggard face.  
His sunken eyes trailed the length of the glass:  
the skeletal face carved onto the bottle,  
the haunted smile that seemed to taunt him,  
the green alcohol that glowed eerily in the fading light.

His Adam's apple dipped in his throat,  
mouth furling in on the sides as it watered.  
Fumbling fingers started to circle the rim of the bottle.  
Like the waves that lazily lapped the shore,  
barely wetting the sand, he wanted a taste of the drink,  
just once more.

Though his coins of sobriety glinted in the corner,  
Absinthe's call was much stronger.

He longed for the familiar taste of anise on his tongue,  
the smooth burn of the alcohol as it slid down his throat,  
a welcome caress from his forgotten lover.

Forgotten...

The bottle suddenly felt heavier.  
Slamming it onto the table,  
he watched as Absinthe splashed on the floor,  
splintering the hardwood,  
disappearing into the cracks.  
He wasn't going to lose to her again, not today.



untitled  
matthew pettineo





fly  
gail schneiderman



sugar  
stephanie chen



## the boy on the merry-go-round

briana sobecks

I gaze up at the stars  
Millions of them, twinkling high above the earth  
Light unhindered by the glow of city lights  
My breath is frosty, ragged  
A cloud appears above my face  
I pull my hands into my jacket sleeves,  
Trying to keep my fingers from numbing  
But though my fingers stay limber  
My mind is frozen in shock  
How did I do that?  
How did I open myself up to all those people?  
I've always been so quiet, so guarded  
I never told anyone what was really going on inside me  
And there I went and spilled it all  
It wasn't on my own, though  
There was a voice inside me, guiding me, supporting me  
It told me to speak my mind  
And I did

I lay there atop the merry-go-round for who-knows how long  
Marveling at it all  
And though I could see no one with me  
I felt peace from above



rising up  
gail schneiderman





siberian birch beržas sibire  
lukas kulbis



seasons  
gail schneiderman



## the attainable star

emily ann pasetes

I'm reaching up onto this high shelf, this shelf-for-show with two empty wine bottles on it, this overhang of hastily stained wood, this dust-laden graveyard for insects. My fingers are all powder, but I swear it was here.

*He puts the lid back on the peanut butter after he makes a sandwich.*

I'm getting angry and I don't know if it's because I can't find it or because I wish I were taller. I know I threw it up here—what was it—four years ago, maybe. Three inches would make all the difference. Maybe even two. God, just one. I keep brushing at nothing.

*And he always puts the toilet seat down.*

Beneath my whining toes beneath my whining calves (all pulled taught as a bow), the old stool shudders. I think I might maybe jump, only when that thought comes to my head, the stool becomes a thirteen story building, the kitchen tile pavement, and I'm imagining the cut of wind as I stood on the rail. The shelf cries out as my nails bite into it, and the stool becomes a stool again.

*He kisses me good-bye and hello, every day, mouth closed, smiling.*

Then I have it. I grasp it with a starving hand, wrap it in a warm fist. Soon I find myself cross-legged on the floor, childlike, watching my fingers uncurl like a flower in bloom. I think suddenly of the sun, unchanging as the Earth whips around it, light made life's pivot. The time between now and then collapses, gone like all the the terrors we face while we're dreaming.

*He laughs at my jokes, and when he tells me I'm beautiful, he means it.*

I think the ring cost twenty-five cents. It was the only thing either of us bought that time we went to the mall. The day is a messy fingerpainting of laughter and stolen touches and moments where the world narrowed to only his eyes, but I remember this in vivid detail; he ran to the machine and dug in his pockets.

*I know that I have him, now and tomorrow and forever.*

Him sinking to one knee, reaching out to press his palm into mine. A laugh quietly written on the curve of his lips as he popped open the plastic container. "Will you super promise not to cheat on me?"

We were never going to get married, but that would never matter. I loved him so much in that moment; I burned with it.

*He lets me steal all the covers at night.*

I'm holding this gumball-machine ring. It's got this dark-yellowish band and a uneven fake diamond, but in my hand, it's shining; in my hand, it makes a mockery of space, time; in my hand, it sings Polaris, Capella, Icarus. I don't know how to let go of it, which doesn't make sense, because I never really knew how to hold it.

*He cried on our wedding day, his joy so big it overflowed.*

He would forget to call. Missed my birthday by a week without fail. He flickered on and off, all fire and ice, and in those moments, again and again, I learned how the sand feels when the tide goes out. His words became so thin—the kind of animal that doesn't make it through winter. When he left and took them with him, all that secret hope turning to tar, I could only be angry with myself. He was a virus in my brain, a hole in my heart, a ring on that useless shelf.

*He is a promise of comfort. A closed cage of arms.*

I've been sitting here for too long. He walks into the kitchen, home from work early, and I let the past sink into my back pocket. When my husband smiles at me, I smile back. If I focus, there's warmth— all around him, the gentle glow of the attainable star.

## i remember tayo oriade

You sit in the corner booth,  
mouth parted in a giddy, dimpled smile.  
Thick eyelashes frame hazel eyes  
that swim in a sea of emerald,  
the vibrant shade that peeks through  
whenever you show excitement.

Your pupils are dilated,  
head unconsciously tipped forward,  
as you soak up her every word,  
completely immersed in the conversation.  
For the first time in months...  
you seem happy.

I remember when you used to look at me,  
gaze heavy with adoration,  
the same way you look at her.  
It was as if I were the sun, and you the earth.  
You craved my warmth, the light I emanated.  
I remember our winter nights,  
cuddled up in the back of your truck,  
shivering, save from the warmth of  
each other's touch.

I remember our lips,  
swollen from lingering kisses,  
as we said goodbye.

I remember it all...

Your eyes flicker over to me,  
widening in recognition,  
with a look I've seen once before.

I remember how your eyes became filmy,  
a looking glass that reflected  
my heartbroken face as we broke up.

I remember how your calloused fingers  
enveloped mine, begging me to hold on,  
before I eventually let go.

Sucking in a deep breath,  
I bat away my tears,  
and turn away from you.

We're better off this way.



untitled  
matthew pettineo



rupi kaur  
ethan frobish

i read your copy of milk and honey mostly just to mock rupi kaur but as  
i turned her pages  
i found your corners folded and  
i found the ways she spoke to you and  
i found the ways  
i hurt you.



dream space  
christina su



untitled  
matthew pettineo



# redemption

## tayo oriade

Bradley was nursing a cup of coffee between his hands, shifty eyes observing the twenty-four-hour diner. *Casey's Cove* it was called. *Come for Coffee, Comfort, and Conversation* the neon sign flickered. Although the cramped eatery was located on the south side of town, Bradley didn't mind. The scars littered across his body more than proved his ability to handle a fight, and the skimpy meal of eggs and pancakes was about all that he could afford.

Bradley peered down at his mug of coffee. It was now lukewarm, granules pooling at the bottom of the glass. He stared at himself through the dark liquid, fully taking in his appearance for the first time in days. Bradley's beard was scraggly, rich brown fading into a dusty gray. He hadn't bothered to shave after being released from prison a week before.

"In need of a refill sir?"

Looking up, Bradley saw a young waitress looming over his table, a pitcher of coffee in her hands. Amy, her name tag read.

"Um, sure. Thank you."

Holding the cup towards her, Bradley watched as the waitress started pouring the beverage when she suddenly hesitated. Bradley followed her trail of sight, and then sighed inwardly. She would be treating him differently now.

Amy's eyes were trained on Bradley's fingers, more specifically the emboldened words written across them.

**REDEMPTION** the tattoo read. The cuff of Bradley's flannel shirt was also pulled up, revealing the black ink coating his skin. The insignia of his former gang, The Pythons, and prison cell number were in full display.

"Ahem," Bradley coughed, grabbing the waitress's attention.

"My coffee...?" he trailed off, raising an eyebrow in question.

"Right," Amy hurried, her smile wavering slightly.

Hands wobbly, Amy resumed pouring Bradley's coffee when she suddenly missed the rim of the cup, splashing hot liquid across the worn tablecloth and his jeans.

"I'm so sorry!" she whimpered.

Blue eyes wide with alarm, Amy reached into her apron to grab a wad of napkins when Bradley calmly held up his right hand.

"It's fine, just leave it," he deadpanned, a wry smile on his lips.

"O-ok," Amy quickly backed away from the table.

"Again I'm so sorry! T-thanks for being so understanding, dinner, or is it breakfast?- whatever it is, it's on us!"

Flashing him a shaky smile, Amy turned around, nearing careening into a grumpy waiter holding a platter of food.



witness and design  
lukas kulbis



"Hey, watch it!" he grumbled.

"I'm sorry!"

The corners of Bradley's eyes crinkled. He couldn't help but find the whole exchange amusing. Ten years ago, he might have been offended, picked a fight even. Deciding that his arteries have had enough greasy eggs for the week, Bradley glanced at the clock. It was 1:32 a.m., a couple of hours until his shift began at the gas station. The pay was meager, but options were scarce for an ex-con. Bradley was starting to raise his hand for the check, when he suddenly stopped in mid-air. His hand curled in on itself, slowly descending until it rested motionless on his lap.

The door leading into the diner chimed as two patrons walked in. A girl who seemed to be in her late teens, and a boy in his early twenties. The two appeared to be in a relationship, engaging in PDA with interlocked fingers, and stolen glances at one another.

They both stumbled over to the bar, giggling amongst themselves in a non-sensible way. Bradley's gave the couple a once over, but his eyes lingered on the young woman. She was scantily clad, light brown hair swept into a loose ponytail. She looked strikingly familiar.

Bradley sucked in a sudden breath.

Heart racing, he pulled out his frayed wallet and took out the lone photograph that he had stored inside it fifteen years ago. The picture was faded, permanently smudged from Bradley's fingers running over it time, and time again. It was the last one that he had taken with his now estranged family.

A wave of nostalgia overwhelmed Bradley as he looked at the photograph. He missed the days when life was so simple. The days when he came home to a kiss from his wife, and the fiercest hug from his daughter. Back then Bradley was clean-shaven, a businessman without a tattoo in sight. Next to him was his ex-wife Deborah, and their beloved four-year-old daughter Mackenzie. Gap-toothed, Mackenzie's cheeky smile lit up the screen. Her brown birthmark of a crescent moon stood in contrast to her light skin. Bradley remembered his late-night conversations with Mackenzie before she fell asleep.

*"You are my most prized possession Kenzie. The moon among all the stars. You shine the brightest, always."*

Bradley then remembered the last words he told Mackenzie before being led away in a cop car, towards the prison. He had to scream over her wails.

*"Whenever you miss me Kenzie, just look up at the moon. Though its presence may fade away, it will never disappear. I love you."*

Setting the photo down, Bradley looked back at the counter where the man and woman were perched. He had to steady his heart. There it was, the indistinguishable feature. The crescent moon birthmark.

"Kenzie..." Bradley whispered, testing the name on his lips.

He hadn't said it in years. Rubbing the wetness from his eyes, Bradley took another look at his estranged daughter. She wasn't a phantom this time. There she was, in the flesh. Mackenzie was beautiful; a fully-grown woman, no longer the little girl that he left behind more than a decade ago. Mackenzie was swinging her legs back and forth, head cocked back in laughter. He was glad to see that she was still so full of mirth.

Pushing away his plate of food, Bradley stood up and headed over to the counter, approaching his daughter. She was chewing a sandwich, about to start talking once again when she noticed him. Putting the food down, she stared at him, head tilted to the side.

"Hi, do I know you?"

Bradley's heart panged in his chest but shrugged it off. There were more important matters at hand. Mackenzie's mouth reeked of alcohol. Ignoring her question, Bradley addressed his daughter.

"Young lady, aren't you too young to be drinking?"

Mackenzie stared at him in confusion then scoffed.

"What are you, my dad?" Rolling her eyes, she took another bite of her sandwich.

Bradley held back a sardonic smile.

"I may not be your father, but I know a minor when I see one, and I still care."

Turning to her boyfriend, Bradley continued.

"Young man, you oughta' be ashamed of yourself. I don't want to see either of you getting into trouble, y'hear?"

"Y-yes sir," the young man quipped, tone sheepish.

Satisfied, Bradley pulled out a few bills and left it on the counter. It was enough to cover his meal and the couple's.

Before approaching the door, Bradley turned around. His gaze lingered on the boy's face.

"Y'know, you didn't just hit jackpot with your girlfriend. Out of all the stars in the sky, you landed on the moon."

Mackenzie's head whipped around. She stared at Bradley for a long moment.

"W-what did you just say?"

Winking, he turned around and exited the building.

"Have a nice night you both. God bless."

As Bradley walked down the street, he looked upwards and smiled. A full moon illuminated the night sky.

*Thank you.*





untitled  
matthew pettineo



ely  
christina su



## growing feelings

mac dudley

i ate six cherries and swallowed all the pits  
but the lump in my throat isn't from that  
im trying to grow a garden of apologies and reparations but lately we've had a drought  
of sincerity  
guilt looks like an apple tree  
with one rotten granny smith dangling from a twig  
if "im sorry" counted as fertilizer we'd have a dozen entries in the state fair  
but you have to mean it  
and i don't think we know how

regret reminds me of the pine tree  
i tried to plant in 5th grade- halfheartedly.  
those prickles never had a chance with my apathy  
swallowing up all its growth  
thin roots never took hold of the rough soil  
by the time i realized what i was lacking  
it was reduced to little more than one more ankle-height obstacle for my scrambling  
through the backyard  
still, im dreaming of the sap i used to steal from my neighbors' successes  
sticky, ruining my hands but i couldn't keep my mind off the discovery  
i never found a way to take back what i did to that sapling  
and i don't think i have the time to waste searching for forgiveness  
in the first spot where i ever killed something

redemption is a redbud  
tenderness in every pink petal  
drifting lazily to the cool ground  
my dad was always so good at raising  
and repairing all their sick branches  
clipping and trimming off the decay  
i wish i was a redbud  
planted in memoriam  
the first year,

strong winds whipped her  
grabbed at her new twigs and yanked her to the ground  
i stood audience for hours fearing that she'd snap but  
the storm passed, as everything does.  
and when we tied a rope around her neck, she did not choke, but rose  
standing up straighter  
than any of us ever could.



niceland  
christina su



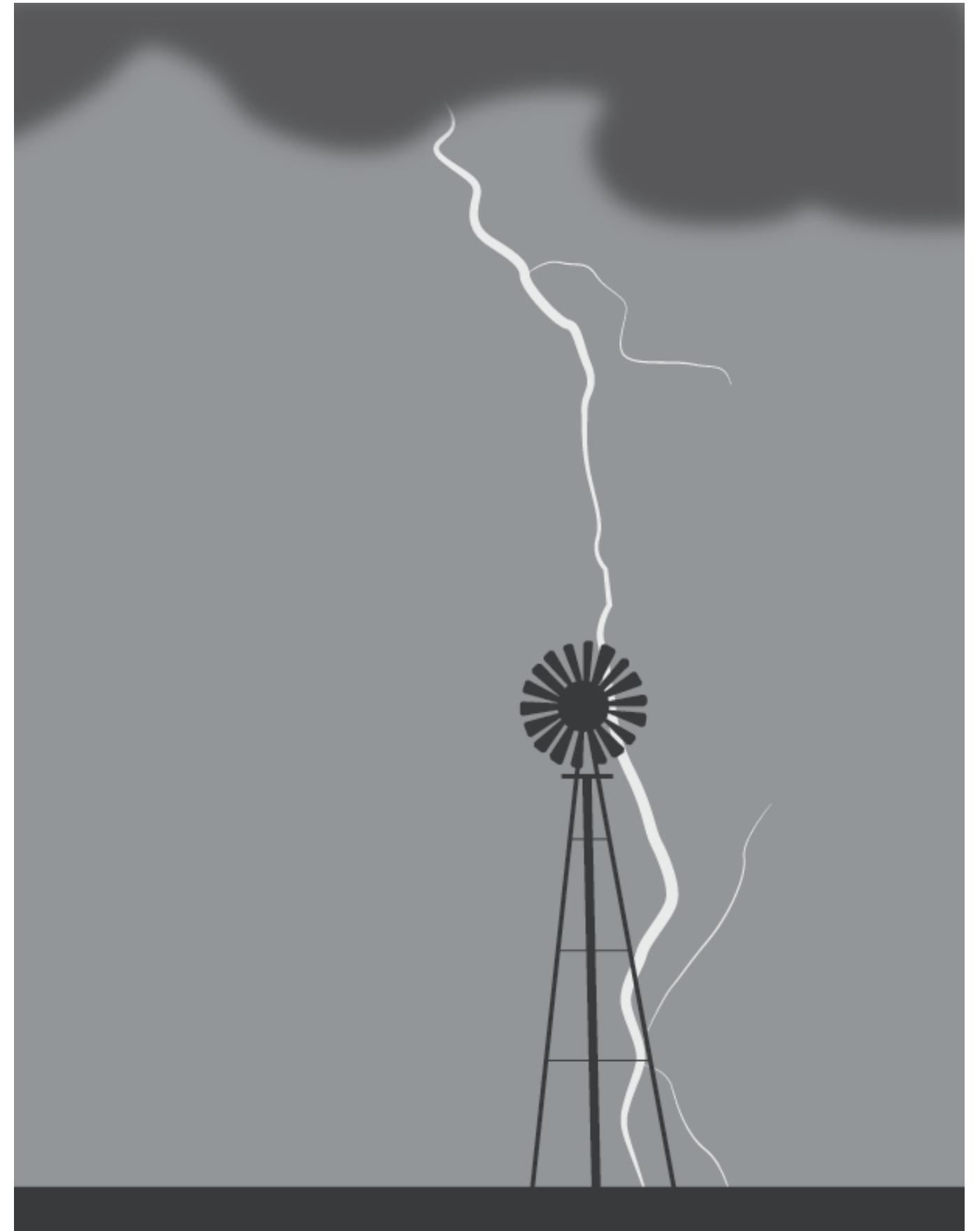
# sweaty jacket

ethan frobish

stolen jacket heavy  
with oil and dew hanging  
loose on a thin girl  
smelling like somebody  
she has mostly forgotten



a tribute to guyana  
rebecca ducay



stormy day  
gail schneiderman

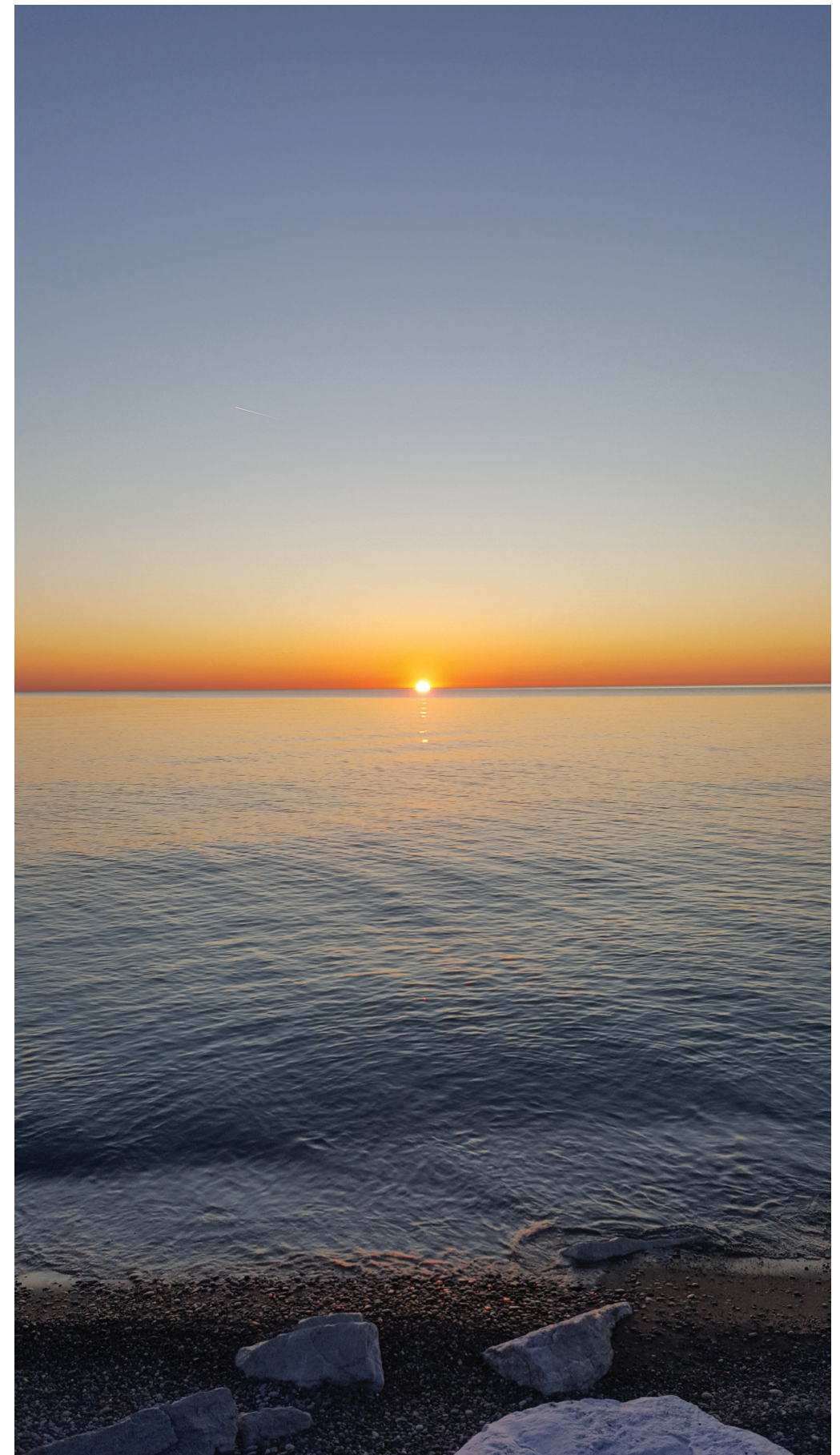


## it's something

mac dudley

so it's homecoming, y'know? not the most romantic night of the year, but a pretty big deal for the summer couples and freshman-year flings. small stuff, but a fun night, if you know who to go with; i decided that "no one" was a pretty good option for me. everyone kinda ignores me here-- my usefulness was decided the moment i walked in without drink or drug to offer, immediately settling my fate as the overdressed wall decoration by the east door. not that i mind; the aroma of misguided teen spirit and deviance is enough to chase me away from the real party. i'm scanning the crowd at the peak of the night--when the dj finally plays uptown funk for the second time--and, between all the barely standing stoners mixed with grinding upperclassmen, i see him.

he's got this light blue tie that kinda reminds me of the sky on one of those really good days; days when you can practically taste the spun sugar that hangs miles above your head, and the fresh scent of cut grass stings your nostrils, and everything feels new for that split second that the sun strikes your cornea. not that i've really had many of those days, but some childhood memories persist despite the years of gray skies and forgetting lullabies. that lame lopsided smile is plastered on his face, too, but it goes so well with his light-gray suit and slightly-ruffled hair that i can't be mad about it. at first, he was just standing off at the edge of things, pretending to watch his female friends enjoying their favorite sugar-rush pop songs, but now i see her: the barely popular, nice-enough art student with her short dress that guides waves of pastel down to just above the knees, silky ruffles that vaguely remind me of a dream i must've had as a child. she's inching closer, chatting him up just as easily as she pops her bubblegum in chemistry class (she sits behind me). as her hand trails lightly down his left arm, i can't help but be reminded of the way she sends brushstrokes careening down her acrylic canvas during free period, utilizing every inch of space she has to regain any semblance of original thought in this cookie-cutter prison we call high school. now she's filling a different kind of emptiness-- the one that stems from distant fathers and disappointing test scores, something that she knows he feels every night. something saccharine drips from every flutter of laughter she shoots toward him, like homing missiles aimed straight at the organ beneath his boutonniere. it hurts to think how easy it is to fall in love with those surprisingly well-manicured, paint-caked fingers and slim wrists; it's over before you even reach her shoulder, but the marble-like allure of her figure doesn't end at the elbow. collarbones jutting out, strong yet feminine jawline, and don't even get me started on the main exhibit: those almond eyes paired with a strong roman nose, leading the gaze to focus on her stunning cupid's bow. like i said, you're done for even before that point. and now that deity is leaning even closer into him; i can tell he's inhaling



sunrise  
gail schneiderman



her lemon-scented shampoo as she whispers an invitation or something into his ear, probably the same time she gets a whiff of his dad's cologne that he borrowed without permission. even under the dim, hazy lighting of the overheated gymnasium, his reddened cheeks grab my attention and pull me even further into this miniature love story.

i'm swaying slightly to the music, enraptured, as she makes her move to lure the poor lanky boy further into the hormonal mosh pit that's currently slurring the words to a summer classic. he looks like going for it; body language is screaming yes, smirk returning to reveal those pearly whites, eyes drifting over her flowery form, hesitating for the shortest moment longer at her sweetheart neckline laced with delicate floral details. she must've sewn them on herself; the petals are just lopsided enough to let everyone know the work she put into it. his eyes travel back up to scan the room one last time before taking the plunge, almost like he's searching for something, someone, some reason to turn away from a seemingly perfect opportunity to spend the night with an immortal. after an eternity of drifting, his hazel gaze latches onto mine. breathing stops. my heart is in my throat. he's caught me looking but i can't bring myself to break our connection; i think the whole school stopped singing for a second there. amazingly, i manage to curve the edges of my mouth slightly enough to let him know i've been watching for a while. his grin fades slightly, but the resulting expression hits me like a poorly aimed basketball to an already weak sternum. the pure emotion is indescribable--i don't think words could cover the tornado i can see in his one expression. i think he's...happy to see me, in the way that a sailor is glad to see a good storm--excited, but terrified, with a dash of concern for those around him. i break our staring contest to glance at his hand, which is slowly slipping further out of the angel's grasp the longer i stare. calloused fingers graze smooth ones, finally dropping to his side with little hint of the regret that i would've expected. she's just as puzzled as i am; this isn't the way it ever goes for girls like her, girls who can afford to smash a few hearts with their manic pixie dream tendencies. he doesn't care. long legs take one step, and then another, until he's practically gliding toward my stunned body by the exit. i open my mouth to speak, close it, open it again, and repeat the process about a dozen times over before he reaches me. fumbling with his silver watch, he acts like the time (9:30pm) surprises him. much closer this time, our eyes meet. his left hand reaches reflexively up to loosen his collar; that light blue tie is even more brilliant without the distance between us.

how can you describe the feeling of waking up? it's new and old, all at once, with the first few moments completely blank before everything that makes you, well, you, comes rushing back faster than a wave crashing against the shoreline on a stormy day. i guess that's sorta how being with him makes me feel.

"d-do you wanna get out of here?" it's a casual question with impossible implications. my breath hitches again, and i feel like my grade school asthma is about to come back despite years of medication.

somehow i mumble out a response, or maybe i just give a half-nod that probably looks cooler in my head, but whatever i do manages to light up his whole face. "cool." he says; i know what he means. he grabs my hand with his right, and suddenly i'm the one leaning in, hopelessly caught in the same trance he must've been in almost moments before. in the corner of my eye i catch her watching us, but just for a moment--she's already on to the next unsuspecting victim: a friend she knows from art class, pulling at the edge of her dress like it can't cover every insecurity she's trying to let go of for the night. as the siren once again charms a blushing beauty, i look back to my own.

"let's go." i murmur, pulling back just before we attract any unwanted attention from the old-school chaperones and militant Sunday-school mothers who survey the room like hawks, waiting for a couple to get too handsy or rowdy with their friends. he nods, taking one furtive glimpse at our surroundings before grabbing my black tie and dragging me into a quick kiss on the cheek. a risky move, but a welcome one.

His car is an ashy gray lexus with trash littering the backseat, making it more Taco Bell receipts and Wendy's coupons than sitting area. Like a true gentleman, he opens the door for me, probably just so he can clear a large enough space out of the empty starbucks cups. Looks like he still never misses his morning coffee run; it explains why he's always late to US History. When he starts the car, the slight sputtering spurs forth memories of sophomore year rides to school on weekdays, all the honking in my driveway waking me up when i sleep through my alarm. It's hard to pinpoint exactly when those early pleasantries were siphoned off; i'd assume it was at some point during his courtship with my neighbor over winter break. As soon as school started back up again, the honking migrated to the next driveway over, and i was left on my own, forced to buy a new alarm clock that could rouse me in time to drive myself over before the shame of a lost friend set in.

It's been about two years since we last spoke--like really spoke, not just the casual greetings in sweaty hallways that leave a bitter aftertaste. This conversation goes down the throat like honey; i can't drink enough of his deep rumbling and rolling laughter. It's not exactly fixed. Sometimes the words don't exactly fit together, always backtracking over something better left unsaid, clicking into more comfortable topics before the 22-month silence can pervade our speech again. Hands search for each other at red lights, trying somehow fill the gaps we create with "um"s and "ah"s, squeezing tight for the brief moment before a green flash signals an end to the fluttering in my chest.

I thought our destination was his house, or maybe some fast food joint after seeing the state of his vehicle, but we glide right past his two-story townhouse and wind down the back country roads, further and further into the moonlit night, each passing tree taking us farther away from the humid climate of teenagers and filling my



lungs with fresher air. Honestly, the whole ride feels like hitting the restart button on a computer. It took a bit, but the sentences are coming out easier now, less stumbles and forgotten words, more unrestrained chuckling and loosening our ties. Wheels roll to a stop on a gravel road, crunching rocks with painstaking slowness as we pull into an oddly placed parking spot. I'm nervous, and so is he; his hands are gripping the steering wheel tighter than my ex used to hold my arm when she was angry, despite the fact that he shifted the car into park over a minute ago. Our talking quiets down. I can tell he has something to say.

It's an apology. Not the most well-worded, but his eyes convey something more real than i'm used to in this town of druggies and high-school sweethearts. I won't bore you with the details, but i think things are going to be okay. I hope. We had plenty to catch up on, after two summers away from each other, and i know we both were out far past curfew.

i'd say it was the perfect night.



untitled  
matthew pettineo



spring day in the mountains  
sophie luitjen



myrkviðr  
maryrose o'donnell

The wind blew through my bones, no longer the sweet breeze of summer, but a reminder that I'd been out here for far too long. Not that it would matter if the cold chilled me until all that was left was no more than a statue. I had no other option than to remain here, cracking stiff branches beneath my feet and brushing melting snowflakes out of my hair before it got wet enough to freeze.

While I always longed to get away from the noise of my neighbors—the inconsequential conversations and meaningless meandering—the absolute silence of the forest unsettled me. Though my home was mere days away, it felt as though there was a world between—a thick barrier of trees that cut off sound and left me with only the hum of animals moving about. And now that winter was closing in, those sounds faded away, much as the sun did earlier and earlier each night.

The sun slipped beneath the trees as my feet carried me through the woods. Perhaps moving at night was dangerous, but if I stopped moving, I'd freeze against the fallen logs I sat upon. I'd become no more than a part of the forest, rather than something living within it. There was nothing else to do, if I sat and froze I'd simply think about everything I lost. At least moving meant my mind worked to keep my trekking silent and my hands brushing against the trees let me learn my way back home.

Or what passed as home nowadays. A small lean-to, built over the months until the wind couldn't pass through because I'd thrown everything into it. Now that it was done it felt too small. My home, my old home, had never been large, but I felt suffocated in that little structure. I would only return there to sleep, but my dreams always kept me up.

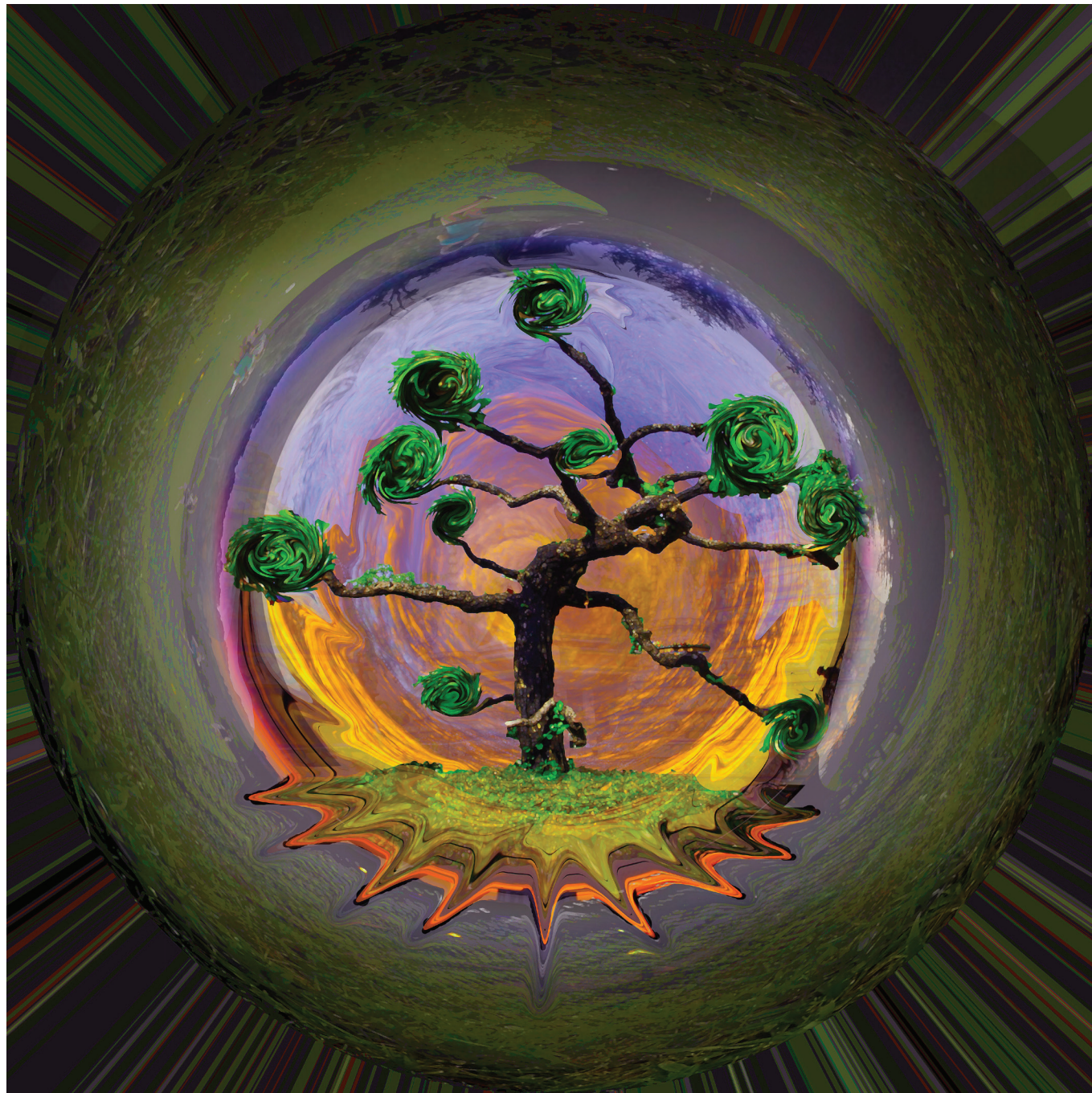
My hand brushed over a bush, ripping a small leaf that I cradled in my palm. A small thing, barely holding onto the colors of fall, the bright foliage of summer already long gone. The edges curled inward, protecting the center, but my hand closed all the same and it crumbled between my fingers and fell to the ground.

I watched the pieces fall, moving the toe of my boot to catch them on the leather. A visible breath left my lips as I brought my face out, looking through the trees. The sun was nearly gone, but my stomach knotted at the thought of returning to my shelter. So I walked on instead, catching new, dying leaves as I walked until the sun was gone and only the bright moon above gave any guidance.



frozen  
lily holmes





at the intersection of nature and technology  
lukas kulbis



populus amicus  
lukas kulbis



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chppublications@gmail.com  
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dream beyond infinity