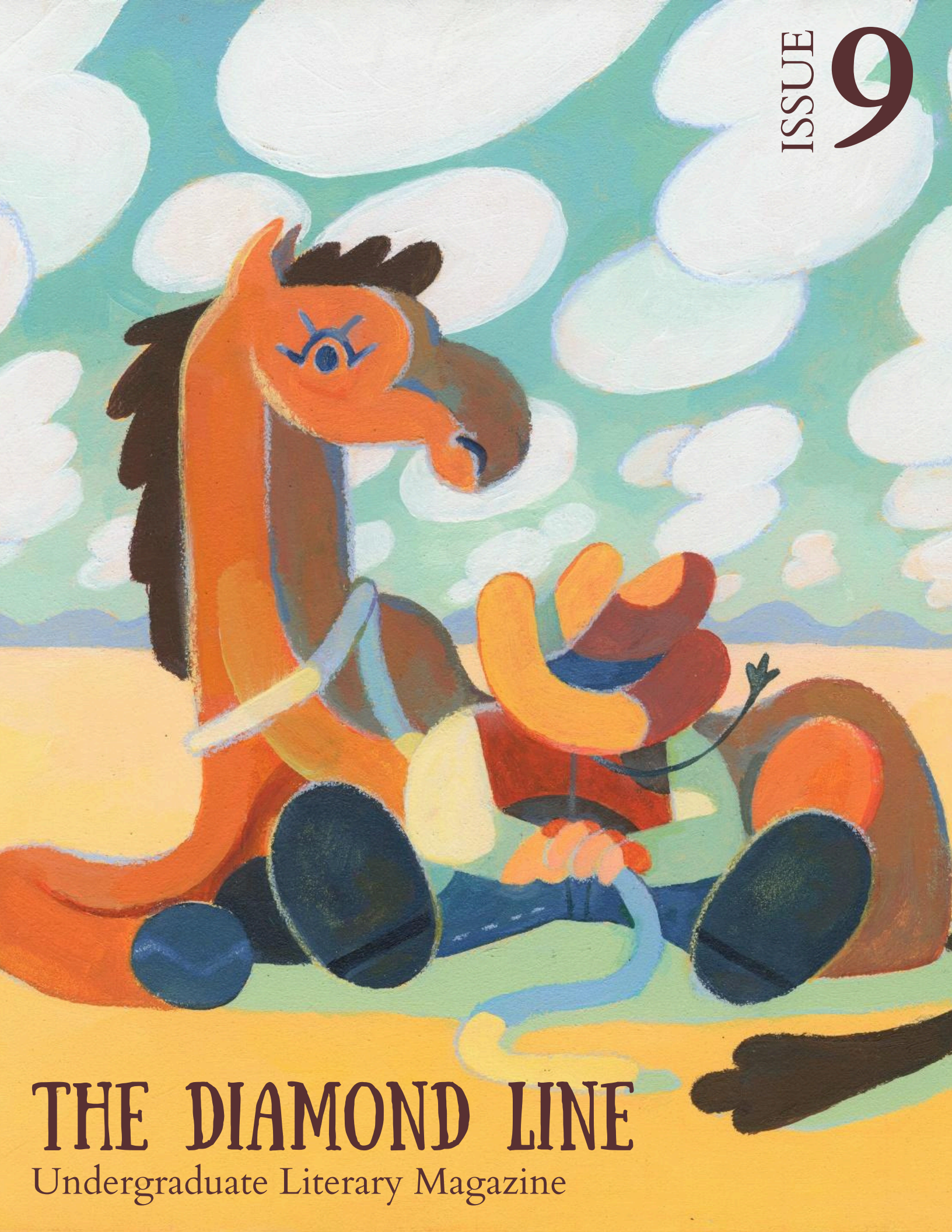


ISSUE 9



THE DIAMOND LINE

Undergraduate Literary Magazine

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

We are pleased to present to you the ninth edition of The Diamond Line.

The work that our team has put in this semester could not have been possible without the contributions from the students. We take pride in being an outlet for undergraduate students in sharing their hard work. We wanted this issue to be a place for students to showcase their creative visions as well as tell their most honest stories.

To encapsulate this, we have chosen the theme of “folk” for this issue. To us, folk is about the power and timelessness of sharing stories, and the human connection we gain from it. The pieces we have chosen for this issue intricately and beautifully weave together a tapestry that tells the story of the human experience. From the brightest days to the most solemn nights, these students have painted a picture of life in its most earnest. Like folk songs, we couldn’t get these pieces out of our heads. It’s our greatest joy to pass them down to you.

Yours,

Editor-in-Chief

Emu Grosche ★

Managing Editor

Arden Malloy ♡



MASTHEAD



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Nora Cowen is a freshman studying English with minors in Legal and Southern studies. She is a reporter for the Traveler hailing from mid-Michigan. Nora enjoys reading, hiking, and looking at flowers. She has previously been published in the Journal for Emerging Investigators.

Evan Meyers is currently a sophomore computer science student. He is also a passionate photographer who fell in love with the art in his hometown of Hot Springs, Arkansas. Beginning with digital photography, they later ventured into the captivating world of film. Evan shoots with a Canon R6 for digital, and for analog, he uses a Pentax K1000.

Jasmine Hsueh-Ting Lee is in her last year at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville pursuing a degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Journalism. She has been on both the contributor and the production sides of The Diamond Line in the past. One thing she'll never tell you is who her writing is about and/or for.

Josie Lockhart is a Junior majoring in Creative Writing. She originally hails from Sallisaw, Oklahoma and is a proud citizen of the Cherokee Nation. Her featured poem "NDN 1-8-3-8" is inspired by her indigenous roots and pays tribute to her family's history. Her featured photograph "Harvest" showcases another piece of her family's legacy- her uncle's tobacco crop.

Emma Ming is a double major in History and Anthropology, with two minors in gender studies and southern studies. She is currently a sophomore in the Fulbright Honors program. She's from Hernando, MS which is about 30 minutes outside of Memphis, TN for context. She is an amateur photographer who takes much of her inspiration for her work from the environment around her and natural settings. She enjoys photography as an outlet for creativity in between work and school

Mac Allen was raised in Northwest Arkansas and has been writing from a very young age. She is currently a sophomore, pursuing a degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. As a child, she and her brothers spent time playing in the woods and hiking through the Arkansas hills, developing a love of the natural world and its communities. Her poetry is a reflection of this upbringing, and utilizes snapshot imagery to weave narratives about humanity and our connection to nature.

Ally Iandolo is in her second year at the University of Arkansas. She is a political science and international studies major with minors in Spanish and legal studies. Originally from Olathe, KS, Ally has always been passionate about writing and poetry. She hopes to continue writing on the side as she pursues a career in law.

Grace Breed is from Plano, Texas, and is a Senior pursuing her Bachelors in English/Journalism. She has had a passion for writing since childhood. In her spare time, she enjoys traveling, music, and all things poetry.

Sarah Stark is a senior undergraduate student majoring in broadcast journalism and minoring in history. She is from Austin, Texas. A voracious reader, her lifelong love of Jane Austen, the Brontës, and modern adaptations of Shakespeare reflect in her work. She is inspired by the Romanticism movement, Taylor Swift, and the color pink. She is a fierce advocate of the Oxford Comma.

Kendyl Link is a current senior from Grapevine, Texas. She is involved in University Programs and GreekLife on campus.

In crafting my poetry, I often find inspiration from memories. These memories serve as a foundation for most of my work, and I believe poetry has the power to create fleeting thoughts tangible.

Wyatt Backer is a junior in his first year of English at the University of Arkansas. He's from Kansas City, and he thanks you for reading.

Lindsay Brassell: I am a senior graduating in December and moved here from Houston, Texas. I am a Creative Writing major and Theater minor. Writing, especially poetry, has been a form of escapism since I was a kid, and I hope that it will continue to be that throughout my life.

CONTRIBUTORS

Joshua Droll is a Sophomore Broadcast Journalism major from Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. While his focus is on Journalism, he also focuses his time on playing strategy games, writing poetry and plays, playing instruments, and acting! As a job, he currently coaches little league soccer!

Brenna Maxey is a former professional ballet dancer and current junior at the University of Arkansas.

Micah Stafford: *Vide* "Tonight" and purge yourself of this bourgeois infatuation with self.

Charlie McCormick: I have used collages and photography to mix and match imagery my whole life. My work mostly centers on the complexities of gender roles and spirituality and the intersections between them, but it is all up to interpretation by the eyes of the beholder. I hope my work invites people to interrogate the intersections of power, identity, and belief and how it plays into our everyday lives in the American South.

Marshall Deree is a sophomore Journalism major who has lived all over the world. He began taking photos in high school and hopes to someday have a job in the photojournalism field. He is currently a photographer for Hill Magazine and tries to find something new to photograph whenever he can.

Everett Pledger: I'm a sophomore English major with a minor in French. I graduated high school in Little Rock but I've lived all over the country. I love reading and listening to music, so room is full of a collection of books, records, and posters. I have been writing poetry for many years, but this is the first time I'm sharing any of my work. After college, I hope to work in publishing and maybe even become a writer myself!

Austin Hughes is an illustrator and animator studying as a Drawing BFA at the University of Arkansas. His work is rooted in narrative, and he tends to incorporate elements of fantasy and humor into everyday scenarios in order to romanticize the little moments. He has experience with a wide range of media, styles, and projects, from murals to caricatures to short films. Ultimately, Austin's work comes from a dedication to nuanced entertainment and a deep passion for storytelling.

Nayra Torres: My name is Nayra Torres and I'm from Pea Ridge, AR. I'm a freshman Biology major here at the University of Arkansas on the Pre-Med track. I plan to head straight to medical school after obtaining my bachelor's and my overall career goal is to be an anesthesiologist. Art is just a hobby of mine that I do for fun, and this is the first time I will have shared any of my pieces with the public.

Taylor Trevino: I am a junior English Creative Writing major. I was born in Pasadena, California, but raised in Dallas, Texas. The poem I submitted is the first poem I've ever put out into the world. I write poetry very often, as it's a way for me to process and express my emotions or to say something I wish I had said in the moment. Mental illness, gender expression, sexuality and human connection usually inspire my poems. When I'm not writing, I am usually thrifting with my friends, taking pictures of my cats, painting or listening to a vinyl on my record player.

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FISH

Kendyl Link

Winner of the Felix Christopher McKean Memorial Award for Poetry, 2024

As I sit in my dad's car, I am holding the world between my fingertips. He always let me sit in the front, and I worried that I might lift and fly with all this power—the car was always cold. Icy. We never spoke on these drives. The world is gently gripped between my crackle chipped nails, and the fish rests warmly in my lap. I would pray that the fish wouldn't float away with me; I would squeeze my eyes so hard that it almost felt like crying. I held the fish between its home and mine, I waited until we turned the sharp corner that I knew all too well, and I squeezed my eyes tighter. We never spoke on these drives. The silence between us, I could never tell what it was. Understanding. Excitement. Delirium. Misunderstandings. It's alright, though. Dad and I repeated this drive once a month, because fish have a clever and incomprehensible way of dying. This bagged fish does not know the world like I do. Sit in the front, hold the fish. Squeeze my eyes and pray and take care as much as I can. Stay silent, for noise disrupts the fish.



GOOD SHEPHERD

Nora Cowen

Hymns top 100 of Sunday
Black robe turns to white and ribbon
Half whole step
Keys on organ short legs cannot reach the pedals

Stale wafer sour wine
Quench hunger till stale donuts
And goldfish dipped
apple juice

Sandbox parables
Familiar to recite as to teach
Verse numbers unknown but
The lesson remained

Mozart Bach for All Saints
Requiem Balm in Gilead
Incense deeply inhale
small white dove

Stained glass wood pews velvet bench
Strain Confession Nicene Lord's Prayer
Memory of recitation
Words to live and mean

Dusty Bible in hand
Dust off a verse a lesson
Young Baptism late Confirmation
Safety in candle glow

Mother
take me
To what
We know

Evan Meyers



BRIGHT FUTURE

JULY

july buzzes noisily at the window, but the
silence between us is deafening, the
space separating us an endless
expanse. our parents fill the remaining
seats at the round table, chattering on about
injuries, work, food. they sit shoulder to
shoulder, pressuring us together, yet somehow
we remain worlds apart with just one inch between.
the sky is darkening, spilling pinks and purples on
indigo canvas, and i remember the first summer
you looked at me like i was the last person
on earth to love you, hair flying in every
direction as tegan and sara blared on the car radio.
little did you know i would be daisy and you would
be gatsby, chasing a dream that would never become
reality, a july that would filet you at the ribcage and
splay you wide open like a beautiful cadaver. through
the noise i hear our mothers joke about us getting
married and suddenly i am gatsby and you are daisy,
and i am racing over that endless expanse of space
between us at the table into your arms. in another
life we own a round table of our own, the noise
around us not from parents but from friends or
children. in another life we are those children,
speeding down empty roads and chasing twilight
faster than the wind can whip through our hair. but
in this life is july, buzzing and chattering and
pressuring us together, us with one inch of space
between. our parents cannot know and will never
know of these julys but will speak of them
anyways, and we will remain out of earshot,
out of sight, forever lingering in that colorful
noisy limbo together.

Jasmine Hsueh-Ting Lee

PIETY



Charlie McCormick

SESTINA: A WOMAN IN PARTS

I'm afraid I can't say anything with my chest,
forever unsure of the next word offending you or any man.

I wonder if I scream loud enough, a cry
would slip out from under me. I wonder if I can be the woman
I need to be, or the man I could never be? Oh father,
why did you have to curse me with your beaten hands?

...

I've never been one to not lend a hand,
matter of fact, I'll give you everything I have in my chest
of drawers, but beware, I got all my bad traits from my father,
yet I wasn't spared the pleasure of being a man,
still forever cursed with being robbed of my womanhood,
I'll look to the sky after the mirror and cry.

...

I've changed since I last saw me, yet I still cry
whenever I feel any emotion immensely. Only a touch of a hand
would be so nice, someone to reach out and help my shell of a woman.
Mother, help me, I'm drowning, the weight in my chest, did you too
become a woman when a man
stole something from you first? What made you so intrigued by my father?

...

I don't know how to go any farther,
so i'll just sit here and whine and shout and cry;
sit and wallow in my own pity. Man,
I wish I had a seat at the adult's table, hand
me a plate, don't end my sentence with a sigh and an eye roll, hug my chest,
tell me that I'm beautifully made and intricately woven.

...

I first knew the fear of being a woman
when he hugged my throat with his hand. Father,
you were supposed to protect me, not hurt me and make my chest
ache and swell—still, i'll have to forgive you and hold your hand
in mass next Sunday when I pray to god and honor thy father because he is the man.

...

Every time my reflection stares back, I don't know who they are. Not a man,
barely human— slimy, disgusting woman
smiling back with sunken eyes and broken hands.
This thing is getting wrinkled and used day by day, it's father's
crow lines denting the face, a tear held in the corner, trying
to fall, trying to stream. It just stares back into my eyes and touches its breast.

...

I fear he'll never grow up and become the man my father
needs to be, yet, i'll never grow into the woman they all want me to be; so let's hold hands and cry,
hold hands and say everything we wish we could say in silence, and say it with our chest.



HARVEST

Josie Lockhart



NDN #1-8-3-8

Josie Lockhart

The pride of poverty to perseverance is passed down
in an NDN-weaved basket gifted one hundred years ago
from a Cherokee princess to so and so's full-blooded Irish grandfather.
Irishman took the princess and a brown baby prince was issued to them.

Ma left Pa in Cali-fornie and tramped her way to the copper-skinned "Cherky" prince.
Ma became a savage
she danced around fires and joked with Creator while she watched her
"one little, two little, three little NDN's" play stickball in the waving wheat that smelled like
assimilation and America- just like cow shit.

Ma toted her three little blue-eyed NDN's to Mr. Dawes to get their magic cards, oh!
Oh, those magic cards- stamped, "1/4."
That glorious, federally funded,
free English classes,
free haircut,
free boarding,
free American-ness!

One Little NDN and Two Little NDN went to Dwight Mission
and sang songs about rockets and bombs
while they put their hands on their earthly hearts.
Three Little NDN heard the land crying and began to cry with her all the way to Main Street.
It cried muddy tears as it plopped down next to a flour sack of a man's brittle bones
that wheezed, "just act civilized."
Three Little stood up and walked back to it's NDN house and watered the cracked,
cratered crust with it's half American, half "Cherky" tears.
Humming.
"One little, two little, three little 'Mericans."

Marshall Deree



GHOST TOWN GRAVES

THIS IS HOW TO TELL THE FUTURE

Sarah Stark

Look outside. When it's dark, take it with a grain of salt. Loosen your grip as the sun goes down. If it's only a whisper, ask for a scream. Casting a spell is uncomplicated when you know the right words, find the right talismans. You can see 'em leave from light years away, if you look real close. This is how you tell the future.

-

You met only a week ago, but it feels longer. It feels more like an eon. You'd been buying coffee (you get an iced chai latte every time, without fail) when you locked eyes with him. You were sold, easily.

A couple of glances were exchanged with growing intensity, and then you knew you'd gotten him. He'd made his way over and asked if next time, would you make this a partner activity—"since obviously we both like coffee?"

It is a strange thing, to be so totally aware that very soon, you would know each other very well, but you don't quite yet. Right now, it's a dance through the motions to get there. You want to ask him, "remember when we..." but of course there is no memory that you share yet. Soon you will, you tell yourself. Soon you will.

You get sucked into big feelings easily. It's

a habit you've developed, making things bigger than they need be. But, you think, this is only because most don't know how to feel—it's something of a lost art. You feel sometimes that you're stuck at a more ancient stage of humanity, that your soul got tethered to several thousand years ago. And now you feel the hum of stars, of magic all around you. You know you're the only one who can see it, that it's probably not real, that really, you're hopelessly bored by the world around you—so you glamorize.

It helps you, even if ancient spells are so lonesome that you question their existence—at least you can feel old spirits and know their ways. You tell them stories, and they teach you their spells. Spells to find the right song, how to make people love you (it's mostly eye contact).

-

Since you both like coffee, you decide to get it together. He makes you laugh—a lot, like you knew he would, and he wears sneakers that aren't meant to look very cool and expensive, but they do. You snort when you laugh, always have, and he finds it charming. His hands are big and warm. They find yours easily.

When he gets up to grab your lattes (for which he pays—his insistence, and you try

to not let it melt you, but it does, oh it does), your mind wanders. You can make thirty-five seconds last forever, if you know the spell. You wonder if your otherness is man-made—do you make yourself different because you are the most superficial being in existence? Can he tell? Is any of my depth real, you think. CAN HE TELL?

You think of ages gone by, when he would've asked you to dance and climbed the ivy up to your window, but that's not real (you should know this by now, you've been wishing your whole life). You're here and now, and courtship is buying a coffee.

You can tell he had good parents; his teeth are so white—like a carnivore's. But he recounts to you all of his past hurts and you want to run so fast that you go back in time. You want to hold his hand while the other fifth graders are meaner than mean.

This is how you know you're in for it, when you'd move the heavens to heal old wounds for him. For this, you wonder; will he eat you alive?

-

You, for all your wild, are not immune to the humiliating vanity of humanity.

You spend hours on your hair, you worry about the mascara running out, you make fun of your least favorite friends, you can't remember the last time you missed a Vogue issue, you're hyper-aware of Taylor Swift's whereabouts. You are not some being of pure goodness and light, whatever stories you tell yourself. You must remember this—no matter what. To forget your alike-ness to everybody else would be

worse than being like everyone else.

-

In fact, you think, you are probably among the most hollow and selfish creatures in existence, past or present. You're afraid, so, so afraid of anybody (most of all him) seeing that ugly, rotting sore on your soul. All you are is a liar.

-

This time, you meet at night. You've been texting (though you tell yourself it's an exchange of love letters) in a constant stream. He sent you the music video he'd been telling you about, did you remember? He says you look just like the actress. You remember, and can't stop playing the song while you get ready. This is a feat, because you take two hours making your hair just so, and you trust very few people's taste in music apart from yours.

You ask the spirits, God, the universe, whatever (you'll pay for your blasé-ness later) to help you choose what to wear. You settle on the black one.

He's waiting for you when you get to the bridge (in between both of your apartments and the restaurant). His eyes—no, his whole face lights up when he sees you. You imagine yours does the same.

When you make your way there, you drink only things with bubbles, to match your giddiness. He's willing to talk about the personal lives of celebrities for an inordinate amount of time and he makes fun of the tourists speaking too loudly on the walk over, and even better, you make him laugh (this is a spell that's well and

truly real, the only one of its kind).

It would be sacrilege to suggest you part now, so you don't. You go back to his apartment.

-

When you wake, you sit up, and look down. You wonder if this is what they mean when they say they feel the presence of God. Divinity. Your bones have danced together—rattling, and you wonder if it's been this way always, in every life.

You forget that he can cast spells, too, and this is a dangerous thought to lose track of. How many women before you have gone mad because of their lovers before you?

Before you leave his place, although you're sure he couldn't forget you now, you spread out some of the contents of your purse around the place. Little rituals to make sure, make absolute sure, that he remembers.

You know you're a lot, too much really. There are two strategies when you are this way: hide it until they love you enough not to care (the lying way) or search for those that do not care (the harder way). You're trying out the latter now.

-

You think of the dog, sometimes, how she'd follow you down to Tartarus—a mean beast at seven inches tall. You miss her hair on your clothes and telling her stop barking, I have friends over. You think of the collar next to the ashes above the cupboard in the kitchen, a place you frequent, but in a spot you can avert your

eyes. You've started to forget the color of her eyes and you can't say her name, afraid of the spells it'd cast. You wonder if you're strong enough to tell him about the little ghost you're always chasing—is she somewhere? Unlikely, but how couldn't I try to find her—then you remember, she never liked strangers.

-

Things tend to blend together now. Meeting parents. Siblings. Telling him what you think of his writing (it's really and truly brilliant). Weekends away. Reading with his head in your lap. You start to think about rings. Every chance you get, your hands are on each other.

The middle, you think, is the sweetest. But you know when you're in it enough to realize that you've reached the decline. He's got a big nose, like you, which you in turn got from your father.

It's all so achingly lovely. Everything sparkles, shines. The two of you are outlined in starlight.

You have a collection of things, things that are yours, totally your own, despite none of them being your making. Things nobody could fathom like you can and do (you know this is ridiculous). Things that you love so much that you find it difficult to wrench your claws out of. There are a couple of albums among these, some lipstick shades, a Brontë refrain or two, the color pink, opals.

A person can't be one of these things, so he never officially joins their number. But in your secret heart he's right there with all of them.

But you forget your guardians telling you to loosen your grip, lest you are pulled away with him in no direction of your own.

-

In your infancy, your mother fought and staved off cancer. You can't, of course, call up any of the memories to the forefront of your mind—you were much too young to consciously remember. But your bones can't shake the feeling of impending doom regarding your perfect, perfect parents who have loved you so much. You've learned to live with it, pet and nurse the feeling, and though it stays with you, always leeching, it never surfaces. She'd been sick while carrying you, and you know the darkness might've seeped into your own veins. But she was so strong, saving you both—your father too, really—and you know that that's in your veins, too. Sometimes fighting a great beast isn't like Homer or Hesiod said it would be—swords clash and fall in all kinds of ways. And you can't escape the end of stories.

-

At the apex of your paradise, he gets the call. He's always, always wanted to write. Now they want to pay him to do it, but from miles and miles and borders away. Pride is the word—you've known of his brilliance all along, and now they see it too.

But the miles away. You can't leave. You're tied to this place, this land, to your parents, to your imaginary gardens.

It's a mundane end. A beheading with a dull knife. But it still cuts, and leaves

disease and rot in its wake.

You should have listened to the guarding spirits that follow you always and share their divinity with you. But you looked the old beings in the eye and told them you knew better—and now you're paying for it, adding another crack in the porcelain that can't be quite filled.

You help him pack things up, though your limbs do everything to prevent you from doing so.

You know what he means when he says it kills him that you're not coming. It kills you too. Maybe I'll make my way up there one day, you say. He smiles sadly. You feel close to vomiting, bleeding out, screaming—all of this feeling demanding a corporeal form.

The music swells, he leaves.

-

You know he'll haunt you, that this too-short time period will cloak your shoulders and make you shiver for years to come. You don't think he'll be able to scrub you off of him very easily—he'll find bits of you in the coffee shop or on the bridge or hear a Bleachers song or see the music video with the actress that looks like you. It hurts you so badly, cuts you so deeply to think of anybody else on the right side of the bed. You imagine he feels the same.

Chinks in the armor. You think of all the ones you've gotten. There are so many by now, but you've still got so long to go.

FOR SPENCE

Grace Breed

in memory of –
the boy with hidden feelings,
the boy with mysterious thoughts,
the boy with the gentle heart,
leaving behind—
A mother with a heavy heart,
A sister filled with grief,
And friends with never-ending memories,
in memory of –
the boy with cigarettes on patios,
the boy with pictures on the walls,
the boy with the purest soul,
in memory of –
the boy with thrifted clothing,
the boy with fluffy hairdos,
the boy with the beautiful laugh,
leaving behind –
Friends with a heavy heart,
A mother filled with grief,
And a sister with never-ending memories,
in memory of –
the boy written forever on the inside of our left arms
where we lay to rest one last time.

SMOKE IN THE WIND



Evan Meyers

DESERT CHURCH





DEAR MOTHER MOON

Sydney Breyare

The Sun

Everything I touch turns to ash,
You sit and wait for my direction,
I sit here big and bright,
I hold the Earth in the palm of my hand,
I miss my dear moon,
But it's you I wish to be by me,

My love please come back to me.

The Moon

I knew our love would not always last.
I am nothing under your burning complexion.
But when you leave, it is I who nurtures the night.
I take care of our stars, while you light the land.
Our blazing love erupted too soon.
The universe is the door, you are the key.

THE GARDEN

Joshua Droll

I want to be buried in a garden.
Not just any garden;
One that I build with my own hands.

That's not to say that every sunflower
Has to stand so tall
They meet the standards to be a partner
But that they all face the sun
And exist as they are.

Not all of the chrysanthemums
Have to shine so bright
They rival the city of Paris
Just that their colors show
And are a part of the bigger picture of the garden.

Not all of the crops in the
garden Have to grow so
lusciously They could feed a
village
As long as they feed one mouth
That'll do.

I don't need a grave
That stands so tall
It looms like the Eiffel Tower
Just that it's there
So this garden is unmistakably mine.
Not every flower has
To live so long
They witness the coming of ages
Just long enough that they live and
Then rest next to the hands that tended them.



THE OLD HOUSE



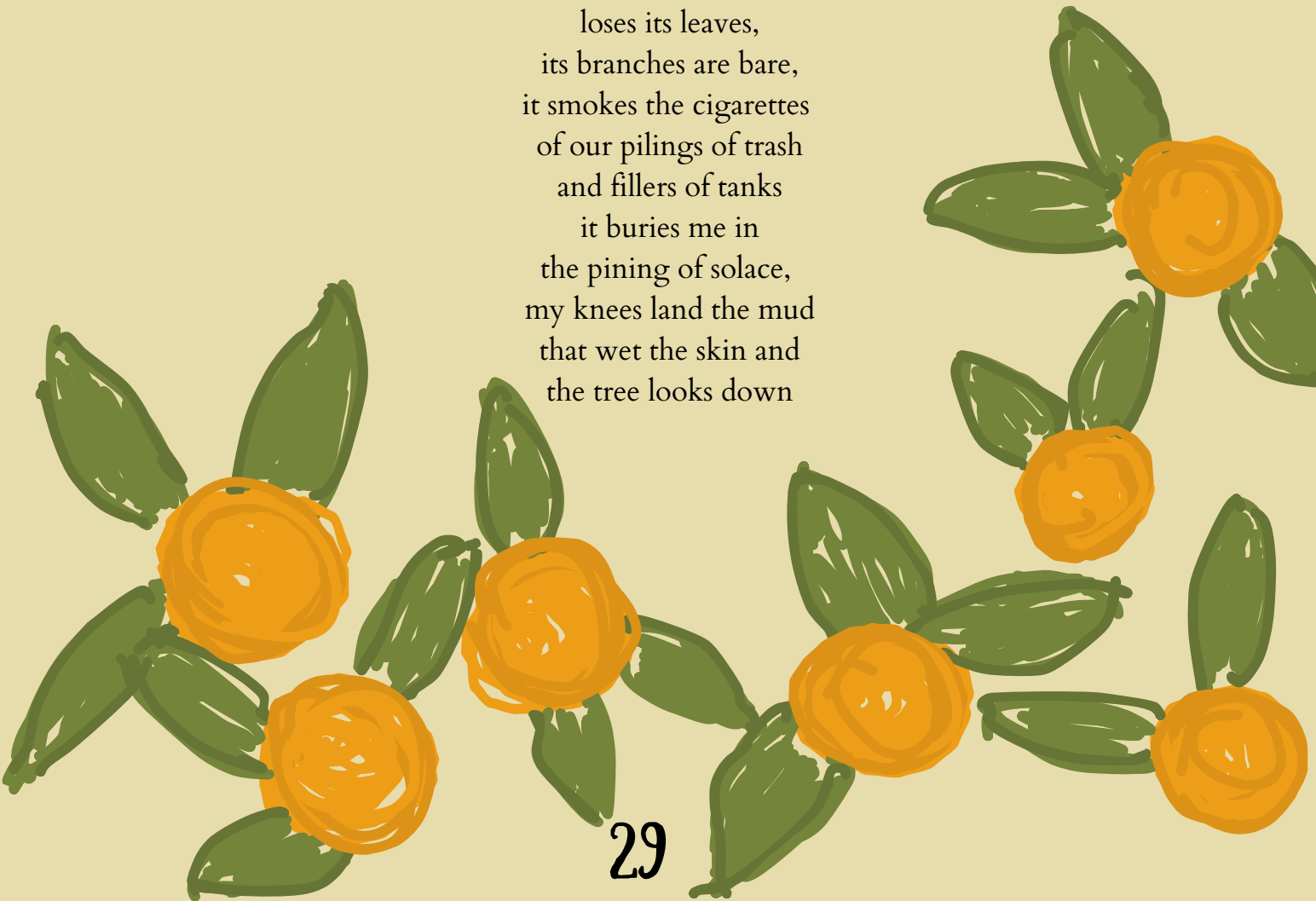
Emma Ming



OVERCAST

Lindsay Brassell

stood small,
adjacent to the mossy branches
of greens to oranges,
and oranges to reds
of hundreds of years,
mixed with our puny lives
then peering upwards
as the needles, leaves,
residue sticks to my eyes and
let it stay there,
burning my retinas and
blurring my vision and
for a moment, you look away
and the tree
loses its leaves,
its branches are bare,
it smokes the cigarettes
of our pilings of trash
and fillers of tanks
it buries me in
the pining of solace,
my knees land the mud
that wet the skin and
the tree looks down



PORTRAIT OF A WOLF IN WINTER

Mac Allen

Cold gnaws but not like hunger
teeth against frigid bone, ribs tight against skin
these are the starving months
hunger driving desperation driving death
last bastion of the days of plenty
she stands at the border of forest and plain
snow capped spruce and frigid grass
certain death ahead and behind
she might starve well before spring rains

These are the starving months
and she waits, belly empty
for hope in the shape of a herd
one or two wounded lagging behind she
and they robbed of wills and ways the snow
against her teeth whets her appetite the sun
lights fire to snowy fields as it sets too
hungry to sleep too hungry to hunt she steps
from the cover of trees

Spring will come when it pleases
bare tree branches bursting with buds
snow fields turned to fields of muck
it will come as it always does
in a raging storm and gentle breeze
the wolf will remain in the cover of this same tree
heralding its return, last bastion of starving months
somehow surviving another year, joy of life ahead
and the flowers will smell an almost sickly sweet




MORALITY



I CAN'T WASH MY HANDS

Everett Pledger



everything I have ever let go of is still with me
under my fingernails
somebody has to leave first
there is no other way the story can unfold
i know this
i know this
i learned this
i give myself a few months of happiness wariness
never at peace
you're drifting away
maybe it's in my head
maybe you're holding me tighter because you can sense i am drifting
there are claw marks in your arms
on your waist
on your heart
you don't see them
you don't know they are there
i see them
i made them
i tried to plead with you to stay
to chase me when i run
to fight for me
but my mouth stayed closed and my eyes stayed indifferent
i will not beg
i will not be weak
so i carry you underneath my fingernails
i clench them into my palm
punishing myself
blood drips down
i am the dying corpse and you are the angel
i love you as my teeth fall out
i love you as my skin falls from my flesh i love
you as i crawl out of my grave i love you like
something not worth loving back

PLESIOSAURS

Wyatt Becker

When God made Kansas, I think he got a little lazy. Or bored, or tired, or whatever. Get about twenty miles out from Kansas City going west and you can feasibly walk all the way to the Rockies, had you the energy, had you the gumption. Um, it's really flat. My Grandpa says it's God's most perfect little rectangle on his finely machined cue ball. It's a friendly place, too, barring any major transgression. The people who lived here since forever got along pretty well, better maybe than most in the world at any given point. I've never met any of those people, though. I've been told that herds of bison swam through the prairie like a bazillion fish through a reef, but I've also never met a bison, except for up in the Dakotas. The bison and their people are gone, and so is that reef that they used to swim through, but the land is still kind. It can only put up with so much, though. They cut the prairies down for corn and soybean and alfalfa and, chiefly, wheat. My great-great-grandparents were victims of Kansas' tough love, it was called the Dust Bowl, but they both made it through. The warmth of the land returned eventually, as did the wheat. I don't know much about that time—I never met either of my great-great-grandparents—but my Dad tells me that they would've loved me.

There's some tornadoes, too. I never saw one, but my uncle J—

“That's enough August, you can have a seat.”

-

I got a D- on that one. We had to do a presentation in our geography class about a state which was drawn from a hat, and I lucked into talking about Kansas. We were in Salina, a bullseye on the American dartboard, and I, like the 12 other students in the 5th grade, had rarely ventured beyond its borders. No one had been to a different country, one kid had gone further west than the Rockies, two had been further east than the Mississippi, and no one had gone north beyond the badlands. More than a few had been as far south as Texas, but no one had seen an ocean. Given our very limited perspectives, I hit the jackpot. I got to skip the reading, wing the presentation, and spend our dedicated preparation time reading old books about John Brown and newer books about KU basketball. I thought that my stellar fifth-grade vocabulary would carry me through. It was the first time I failed something at school, probably because I completely

ignored the guidelines to orient the presentation around the state's major rivers. No special points for my blasphemy either. I thought I had reached the essence of the state, something far beyond the function of its waterways or population demographics, but apparently, I had not.

I'm older now. I understand nuance. I've been further west than the Rockies and I've been further east than the Mississippi and I've seen an ocean and I've been to Texas. I don't get Ds anymore, I go to Law School. I moved away from Salina, my sister did too, and Mom and Dad moved to Kansas City where they could have easier access to healthcare and whatnot. I moved up north to Chicago to go to school and my sister moved out west to Sacramento to continue her career as some kind of tech engineer. I always see Mom and Dad on my holiday breaks from school, and I always make an effort to go down to Kansas City sometime during the summer, but I hadn't seen my sister for almost two years. One day, she sent me a text asking if I'd like to go see Grandma and Grandpa, who were buried out in the Gypsum Hill cemetery, and I obliged. Her flight into KCI was late by a few hours, so we only made it to Emporia before we had to stop for the night.

This wasn't a very happy trip. The two hour ride from the airport to our shitty Econo Lodge was nearly silent despite the amount of catching up we had to do. She sat in the passenger seat with one leg curled up like a cat that hasn't decided whether or not to itch its face yet. I used to get mad at her when she did that, insisting that, if we were to get in a car accident, the airbags would shoot her knees through her head. I jokingly referenced this, and my energy was not reciprocated. With the

vibes in turmoil, I just sat sentry in the driver's seat. I'd never learned how to break through in these situations and thought it would be best to do nothing at all.

It was around 11:30 when we got to our exceedingly cold and uncomfortable room. It had a nice warm brown color scheme, but the mattresses felt like oatmeal and the sheets felt like hospital gowns. After two or three hours, it was clear I was not going to sleep that night, and I went outside to my car to get some air and have a cigarette. Some minutes later, my sister followed me outside.

"You smoke fucking cigarettes now?"

"Uh, not really. Someone left these in my car."

"Sure bub." She said that incredulously, and extended her hand, requesting one for herself. Me smoking isn't a secret, but I knew she would ask for one and I felt bad potentially igniting a bad habit for her, so I tried to keep them hidden as best I could. But it had been a long day, so we shared a cigarette leaning back on the hood of my car.

I asked: "Do you wanna go check out the prairie?"

"Sure."

It was a thirty-minute drive out to the prairie reserve, which was apparently the biggest one in the country. That always made me sad, it felt too small for that title. Still, the first sight of the wind rolling through the tallgrass is enough to make anyone weep—I certainly did. Even as a

child, it felt like seeing an incomparable display of bravery. We found a shorter grass area and flopped down. Light pollution was low in this part of the state, but the Flint Hills were especially clear, and on some nights you could see those cloudy bands of gas way out in space.

To break the ice, I said,

“Y’know this used to be an ocean?”

“Yeah, you and Dad used to smash open rocks like all the time. You found that snail that one time.”

“...”

“It was a trilobite.”

The sky had a certain intoxicating effect, kind of like a campfire without the warmth or the brightness. It was less comforting, but more hypnotic. The moisture and length of the grass made it pillowy and less cold than the air, and even with the looming threat of chigger bites, it beat the hell out of Econo Lodge. After a few minutes of idle stargazing, I asked,

“Y’know some people say they’ve seen the ghosts of plesiosaurs out here, swimming through the sky.”

“We have three generations buried in that graveyard with Grandma and Grandpa, and now we can’t even go back without paying for somewhere to stay.”

Taken aback, I could only muster a “what?”

“Why did we leave? Why did everyone leave? Why did you leave?”

“Uh, Mom and Dad supported it. I got that big scholarship in Chicago and—”

“You took it why? For a better paying job?”

“I mean, I suppose that—”

“Do you even care about the money?”

“...”

“I thought that’s what Mom and Dad wanted me to do.”

She replied, “Yeah, me too, and now everyone is fucking gone. Everywhere I go is unfamiliar. I’m locked into a job I hate and I can’t get out until I pay my college debt. I have no home anymore.”

Some time passed, and she said, “God, I just wanted to work in the library. But that’s not what the kids with the good grades ever did. And you, you wanted to be a dinosaur scientist. God, I fucked up.”

Trying to be funny, I retorted, “It’s called a paleontologist.”

I didn’t realize she was crying, or I would not have made that joke. It was a bad joke anyway.

Furthermore, she was right. Mom and Dad didn’t have college degrees, but we always had enough. We had enough for Thanksgiving meals, fireworks, high school baseball, a Wii, and a couple shitbox Toyotas for the two of us when we got to driving age. I was 17 when I got the letter in the mail from the big university up north, and I made a bad, naïve decision. In many ways, I’m still just 17. I want to see

my Mom and my Dad and my sister. I want to eat at Thanksgiving and shoot fireworks with them. I want to comb the exposed limestone for crinoids and trilobites and mosasaurs. I want to drive my shitty Corolla to go see Grandma and Grandpa. Laying there in the prairie, I couldn't help but feel that I had made the wrong call.

Now we're both crying. Our tears fell and blended into the already damp prairie grass, and through our wet eyes the cosmic clouds and stars joined together like black and white watercolor. Some of them looked like plesiosaurs.



BEAUTIFUL, TINY DANCERS

Ally Iandolo

Being young and standing there,
watching the billows of smoke fill the sky
as a golden spark sets the logs ablaze.
Hues of red, yellow, and orange spin around the bonfire
Like graceful, tiny dancers in the night.
Crackles and pops arise out of the dullness beneath,
From withered wood that has long forfeited its purpose.

Being young and standing there,
hearing the whispers of the inferno
pulling and aching for me to come closer.
“Back away from the fire!” a voice calls,
distant in the cool breeze that blows against my cheek.
The voice is ignored as I am entranced
by the delicate twirling of the ballerinas.
Reaching out, I feel the warmth on my hand,
a warm hug in loving arms
where everything is safe and sound.

Being young and standing there,
unaware of the imminent danger lying ahead,
completely engulfed by the beauty
and not seeing the agony.
My fingers spin into the tiny dancers
and I am ripped away from the enchantment
and see not dancers, but vicious snakes snapping out at me.
The place they have conquered is not beautiful, but
destructive
and the feeling is not of warmth and happiness,
but of scorching heat and suffocation.

Being young and standing there,
Finally realizing the pain, not the beauty
and knowing the truth after so many long years
of enchanting lies disguised as tiny dancers.

STARLIT FLAMES



Marshall Deree

TONIGHT

Tonight
Now—where we lie,

a barefoot sky imprinted,

A work of the void which cradles us,
Cuts us, casts us in clay—

Pisces swims the underside of the earth,
And the night is working its engines
Of aquamarine tide,
While the lilies melt
In arias
Like silverfish



Bathing in starlight—remember the rooves, blue, gloaming, lit In memory,
shaded away and faceless—

And then went the Draconids, a sail of silk
Across the eyes where storms bore holes like saints' sleep—see The trees
which breeze with breath

From the winds of the world,
The leaves lash the dark, see them—

Across some angel's sword,
A sinew of soul escaping
The Pentecost of our

Becoming—where we lie, the sleeves of our husks deny the moon it's divinity, It's sapphire,
skinned like a beach with time,

Our departure spoken of, spilled over,
With words of mist mouthed
Open, oystered, empurpled,
An egg-white dawn—

MINER HYMNAL

Brenna Maxey

They kept the windows open for a week after Ira died.

Catherine didn't understand the custom. She watched with thinly veiled disdain as they hung a sheet over the single tarnished mirror in his room, the bottom of the discolored fabric swaying in the November breeze.

The morning after he died, John woke her and told her to dress; they were to go to the camp and pay their respects to his widow. Catherine hadn't wanted to—she'd seen too much death in recent months—but her husband was insistent. Ira had been in the mines since John was a child, and his wife had always been kind to Catherine. It wouldn't be proper for her to hide away in her house on the hill forever.

She insisted on taking the car down, as her shoes were not meant for the uneven terrain of the Appalachian mountains; the instability, of course, had nothing to do with the glass of brandy she had downed at breakfast. John had only given her a tired look.

Vernon, the foreman, drove her down.

They'd opened all the windows in the house before she'd arrived, all wrapped in sable, half-lidded, hanging off of her husband's arm. Her face bloated with the sun—it swelled in the morning with her

brandy and set with the number of cold creams she rubbed into the skin of her face and neck before bed. At night, she studied her face at the vanity; the months of furred brows and the ritual puffiness had creased thin lines into her fair skin at only thirty-two.

"It's freezing, John," she said, tugging his arm, "can't we close the window?"

He shook her off gently, "It's custom, Catherine. The windows will stay open for a week, so his soul isn't trapped."

Catherine only pressed her lips together. A useless practice, she thought—Ira had died in the mines, what good would windows do his soul now? His widow, an old woman with a pinch pot mouth, dabbed at her wrinkled face with a ratty slip of cloth.

"I'm sorry, Omie," John said, offering her his handkerchief. Catherine caught a glimpse of the embroidery as it switched hands, the initials 'CL' and 'JMC' entwined with painstakingly stitched flowers. She'd recreated her wedding bouquet on the fabric: lilies, baby's breath, violets artfully arranged on the muslin square.

"He wouldn't've wanted it any other way," the widow, Omie, sniffed. "My Ira knew what 'e was doin'." She wiped her nose with the initials; the 'C' came away smudged with mucus and coal dust.

“My condolences, Mrs. Slacum. I will pray for you both,” she forced out.

“Thank you, Mrs. McCannon.”

“Cat,” John’s hand slid to her lower back, giving her a gentle push forward, “would you walk Omie down to the hall? The women are gathering to cook a dinner in Ira’s honor.”

Catherine’s jaw clenched, but she gave a stiff nod. Vernon opened the door for her, and the two women filed out into the brisk morning air.

The walk would’ve been easy for anyone else, but Omie’s joints were stiff and the chill wasn’t helping, and Catherine’s little heeled boots caught every rock in the ground. They moved at a glacial pace, made slower by Omie’s droning. She prattled on about Ira and lanterns and the proper way to peel potatoes, as if Catherine would ever deign to pick up a knife and toil over vegetables.

When they arrived, Catherine excused herself as Omie hobbled into a chorus of sympathies from the women. She dug around in her little purse until her fingers wrapped around the ornate cigarette case she’d inherited from her grandmother.

“Catherine!” Eula called, waving her over. “Come sit a spell.”

Catherine bristled at the unwelcome familiarity. “Mrs. Dawkins,” she greeted, striking a match and lifting her cigarette lamely in excuse. Eula, it seemed, took the gesture as welcoming, and joined her on the porch.

She took a drag to hide an exasperated huff, her eyes lifting to the obnoxious shade of blue on the porch. “An interesting choice,”

Catherine mused, smoke curling around her fingertips as she gestured to the ceiling.

“Y’all don’t paint your porches in New York?” Eula leaned over the railing, stretching herself out like a cat. She was pretty, if in some simple way. Her dark hair needed a trim, but it was full and long, and her coal-black eyes swallowed all light. She was the foreman’s wife, and a bit daft, in Catherine’s opinion, but the closest thing she had to company.

Catherine sniffed. “No, we don’t have porches.”

“It keeps haints out,” she explained, straightening up. “The blue,” she waved her arm, “is like water. They can’t cross it. They’ll put up newspapers, sometimes, too. They read and forget what they’re doin’.”

“Haints?”

“Spirits,” Eula mused, a wry smile on her lips. “There’re lots in these hills. Women who wander the mountains at night with lanterns, lookin’ for dead husbands. Miners, too, whose souls got lost tryin’ to leave the mines. People who haven’t fully gone to God, y’know? We open the windows and cover the mirrors so they ain’t trapped here.”

Catherine flicked the ash off onto the railing. “A priest would serve just as well.”

“Our reverend drinks shine and stumbles into Sunday service. You won’t find God when you’re diggin’ to hell.” Her voice got low. “They won’t tell you this, because it’s against God, but they take tins of morphine down there. Just in case.”

“Are you implying that Ira—,” Eula cut her off before she could finish.

“Might’ve. Better that than whatever else’s down there.” A woman inside called for her, and Eula pulled away from the railing, smoothing out her dusty skirt. “Don’t tell Omie,” she added, turning back to Catherine. “She’s a woman of God.”

-

John stayed down in the camp to handle the day’s paperwork, but Catherine fled to her secluded house on the hill as soon as she was able. The sun was low in the sky when he finally returned, finely dusted in a layer of black powder.

“Change,” Catherine didn’t even glance up from whatever she was pretending to read. “I will not have this house covered in coal.”

John didn’t fight, just kicked his boots off at the door and trudged into their bedroom. She took a drag from her cigarette. The ornate gold bangle on her wrist clinked. It had been her mother’s, once, though she had no memories of her wearing it—jewelry was prohibited in mourning at that time.

Her mother had endured a rest cure when Catherine was still a girl—melancholia, she heard them whisper, while hidden at the top of the staircase. She couldn’t have been more than seven, but she remembered watching the Lady Linton descend the staircase in the foyer for the last time. Her beautiful mother, with her fair hair and sculpted wrists... Catherine had few memories of her from before the dark mourning veils took her face.

Was this what her mother had felt? This deep, gnawing despair, a despondency she could not drink away. Catherine glanced up at the painting on the wall, her mother’s work. She shared her face, her grey eyes,

her fair hair; would she be damned to share her fate?

Her eyes flicked downward when she heard his footsteps returning, and only lifted when he turned his back to her to pour himself a glass from the crystalline decanter. It clinked softly when he set it down.

“I know this has been hard on you,” he finally said. Catherine tapped her thin cigarette on the lip of the ashtray.

“You moved me away from my daughter. From my family, my friends, my home—”

“We didn’t have a choice. My grandfather gave us a good price on this—”

“My father would have given you another factory if I had asked. We could have stayed in New York, with Eleanor, with—”

“What were you going to do, waste away at her grave until we put you in next to her? She was my daughter, too.”

She half coughed, half choked on a sob, dropping the cigarette into the ashtray as she seized. John was kneeling at her side in a heartbeat.

He carded his fingers through the loose strands of her fair hair, careful not to catch the tangles too hard. She had grown thin in the past few years—she never truly recovered from the birth of their daughter—but she was near frail now.

He could still remember the night they met. How she’d danced in the ballroom, her father’s only daughter, the diamonds at her throat glittering in the candlelight. At twenty-six, she had been late to wed, and then there was talk as to the punctuality of their wedding—in the end, it hadn’t matt-

ered, they had lost the child a month later.

“We’ll take some time off, take a train to Schenectady, see your brother and father. I promise.”

Catherine only sank forward, resting her head on his shoulder. They stayed there in silence for a few moments, til their breathing matched. He led her to their bedroom, watched her plait her hair, and stayed with her til she was sleeping.

-

She dreamt of the miner’s widow.

Her face was shrouded by a black veil, but the hunched back and short stature were unmistakably Omie’s. In her liver-spotted hand hung a lantern, much like the one her husband would have brought down to the mines with him. She wandered the woods on the hillside, her lantern lighting the way.

Compelled to follow, Catherine did, trailing after the woman at a distance. She prattled as she oft did, but only about Ira. His bootprints, she said, were in the dirt. He had been here. He wasn’t gone. Catherine couldn’t see any bootprints; the world around her was hazy and tinged with shadows.

The shade rounded a tree and shed the widow’s form, taking the tall and austere shape of a Victorian woman in deep mourning. Catherine could still remember how the stiff crepe of her mother’s dark veils scratched her cheeks when she went to hug her as a girl.

The late Lady Linton lifted the light to her veiled eyes. She didn’t speak, only spread her arms to her daughter. Catherine nearly threw herself into her arms. She held her,

clung to the fabric of her mother’s dress like a child. The fabric grew softer and the frame shortened as the shade took a new form. Catherine stiffened, tried to pull away to look at the new form, but could not break its grasp.

Eula, beautiful, black-eyed Eula, sank her fingers into Catherine’s arms. Again, she tried to wrench herself away, to escape the woman’s suffocating embrace, but she would not release her. She only smiled before shoving Catherine into the mines below.

She woke clutching at the bedsheets. John didn’t stir, just shifted deeper into the pillow. She watched his chest rise and fall beneath the blanket, a slow, steady rhythm. She could count it like a waltz—inhale, two, three—accompanied by a symphony of cicadas—exhale, two, three. How long had it been since she saw him sleeping? He always rose before she did, and she was always too busy reading before bed to mind his sleeping form.

She would watch Eleanor sleep. That first night, after everyone left, they hadn’t known what to do with the swaddled baby in their home. Catherine had spent every waking hour at her cradle, counting her breaths for fear she’d suddenly stop. She did the same in the days before her passing, when Eleanor couldn’t breathe without coughs racking her tiny frame. It was all so sudden—John took the first train home, but he arrived hours after her passing.

She couldn’t imagine a world without him now. She fought the urge to run her fingers through his dark hair, smooth the sleep-tousled curls against his forehead, but she didn’t dare wake him. It was only twilight, she would leave him another hour of peace.

She rose silently and took her coat and cigarette case to the porch.

It was colder than she would have liked, the coat not enough to keep the chill from sinking through her white nightgown. It took her two tries to light the cigarette; her hands, stiff from sleep and cold, fumbled with the lighter.

In another life, they could have been happy here. She could have been like Eula, content to gather stinging nettle to make tea for the arthritic women and black psyllium for snake bites, peeling potatoes til her hands were cracked and bloody. Would John have loved her if she had calloused hands? She thought of Eula's, her spindly fingers, tree sap running down the rivulets of the bones of her hands as she collected the soft inner tree bark.

The image dissolved with the curling smoke from the butt of her cigarette. It twisted upward, mingling with the breath she exhaled til the vapors entwined. A strange stillness settled over her, watching the smoke climb the sky. The sun was beginning to spill over the horizon. She let her gaze fall.

Eyes. There, in the trees, shimmering like emeralds in the light. A large feline form slunk just out of the tree line. It sprang forward on six legs, not four.

"John," she called, "John!" She flew away from the railing and into the heavy door. It yowled behind her as she slammed it shut. "John!" She screamed again, throwing herself into their bedroom. She shook his shoulders with such fervor that her hair came loose from her braid.

"Christ, Catherine," he groaned, shaking her off.

"John, there's something out there. It was a cougar, or a panther, or something, but it had six legs. Six! And the eyes," she gripped his shoulders once more. "It was horrible. Horrible!"

John just pressed his hand to his eyes. "Cat, there are mountain lions in the hills, but they won't come this close to the camp. It's early, it's dark, you imagined it."

"I know what I saw. Get your gun, I want it dead."

John only sighed and shifted her off of him. To Catherine's chagrin, he took his time shrugging on his coat and lacing his boots. He took the rifle from the wall and sleepily trudged through the house. He pushed the curtains back, cringing at the light, but looked out before opening the door.

"Nothing, Cat," he said, looking out into the placid morning. Beneath him, her half-lit cigarette blossomed where she'd dropped it in her panic. He smothered it with his boot heel. "You could've started a fire."

"I swear to you, I saw it—"

"You haven't been sleeping, it was a trick of the light." He ignored her further protests. A sudden flash of movement from the corner of her eye had Catherine reaching for the barrel of his gun. It was only Vernon, smudges of coal already painting his face. When John looked at her hand, wrapped firmly about the gun, there was nothing in his eyes. He shook her off, taking the gun down the stairs with him to speak with Vernon.

She had seen that look in her father. It was her father that sent her mother away. Was John capable of the same? Ship his sick wife away to rot in isolation, take a new one,

one who knew the hills? Would she wear her things? Talk of his melancholic first wife down at the camp while Catherine's bracelets clanked on her wrists? Sleep in *her* bed, smoke *her* cigarettes...

She watched white-knuckled. Vernon shook his head, John said something, Vernon shook his head again. Were they talking about her? Deciding what to do with her? The two men nodded, and John returned. Vernon stayed below.

"The cage is broken," he huffed, rubbing his temples. "I've got to go down and look at it, see if we can't do anything to fix it."

She only nodded. He looked as if he were going to speak again, but he said nothing. John only pressed his lips to her temple and told her he'd be back in the afternoon.

-

The mine collapsed shortly after ten.

A worker struck a pocket laced with pyrite, and his pickaxe sparked, igniting the firedamp in the cavern. Afterdamp came from the firedamp, rich in carbon monoxide, strangling the oxygen from the lungs of the burned, twisted men who weren't lucky enough to die in the initial explosion.

The camp was pandemonium: men ran with damp rags held to their mouths, watching the plumes spiral into the sky like God had put out a cigarette on the side of the mountain. When the papers were drawn up, they counted sixty dead. Fifty-nine miners, and John McCannon.

-

Her fingers trailed absently over the stit-

ches, the flowers of her thread bouquet preserved forever. The last time she'd embroidered had been for her Eleanor, an everblooming garden to follow her into the earth and clothe her in petals for eternity. Would she have to do another, a handkerchief to place in an empty coffin?

Vernon waited for the other shoe to drop, for her to wail and throw herself to the ground, but she only clutched the cloth with shaking hands. She set the handkerchief aside only to down the rest of her glass. Wordlessly, he poured her another.

"You know why we left New York, don't you?" Catherine asked, gingerly lifting the crystal glass—a wedding gift from her aunt, the finery now out of place in the Appalachian forest.

"I don't, ma'am."

"The factory went under. We took what was left of my inheritance and bought this godforsaken place before she was cold in the ground. Our daughter passed in early spring. She was four." She watched the dark liquid swirl in her glass.

He had known, of course. "I'm dreadful sorry, Mrs. McCannon."

"My family has always had ill luck, I suppose. I had a brother who died in infancy from diphtheria. It destroyed my mother. As a girl, I never understood why she had changed so suddenly. But," her fingers tightened, "I lost my Eleanor, and I knew why my mother was the way she was."

John didn't like to talk about it."

"No. He wasn't there." She drank deeply, bitter notes in both the whiskey and the words. "We had too much grief in too little

time. The factory burned down two days after Eleanor died. And, now he's moved us here. There isn't even gold in these mountains," Catherine sniffed. "I had gold from my grandmother. Earrings, necklaces, all sold for this."

He remembered how out of place she'd looked that morning on the train platform: a tall, austere woman in cleanly pressed linen, everything about her severe. John had been friendly, happy to be back in the mountains he'd grown up in, and Catherine was an afterthought, luggage brought along on a rickety train. Eula'd brought gossip home that night about the new lady of the camp: the former Miss Linton had grown up in a mansion in Manhattan with maids and coaches and valets. Rumor had it that her father made \$192 a week off of his factories, and that wasn't counting the generational wealth the Lintons apparently held.

How small she looked now, a diamond set in cheap metal, clinging to her crystal glasses as if they could restore her to her former finery.

"It doesn't matter now," Catherine conceded, setting the glass down with a clink. She fidgeted in her seat, shifting her weight uncomfortably as she struggled to settle into the cushion. "Clinging to the past will not bring it back. My mother died shortly after Thomas did, and I thought I'd die with Eleanor. I begged them to bury me with her. 'Put me in with her,' I said. 'She doesn't like the dark, she needs her mother.'"

The silence lingered.

"John wanted us here, and here we are."

"We'll try, Mrs. McCannon." He stayed intentionally vague—they might be able to

recover his watch or his boots, but Vernon knew there wouldn't be a body.

Catherine hummed a single note in response, but it was clear she wasn't listening. Her gaze had fallen on the window.

The mining camp had settled into an uneasy sleep, half of the inhabitants somewhere below, blanketed in soot and lulled by the bell-like sound of drops of water falling from stalactites. She remembered what Eula said, about miners and morphine...

He wouldn't, she decided. He would return as a Lazarus, back from that sweltering underground hell.

Faint lights—lanterns, she supposed—danced in the trees. They wove through the spruces and the hickory trees as if to taunt her, winking as they passed behind the leaves.

"I thought you weren't sending any men out tonight?" She asked, watching the lanterns wind up the side of the mountain.

"I didn't." Vernon rose from his seat an inch, peering to where Catherine's gaze was fixed. "Why d'you ask?"

"The lanterns."

"It's just the candlelight, Mrs. McCannon, from your table." He lingered in wait for a response, but the woman said nothing. She watched the window with an unreadable countenance, one that unnerved Vernon, though he couldn't say why.

He took his coat and left her to her thoughts.

-

It was Eula's idea to visit Catherine the next morning. She packed a small basket with bundles of sage and maypop and a jar of a honey and whiskey tonic that she had mixed that morning to soothe the poor woman's nerves.

Vernon, without realizing it, had consented to join her over breakfast; he'd been chewing a particularly thick piece of bacon and nodding along to whatever Eula was saying without truly listening. In truth, he hadn't wanted to see the widow again. Her face in the window haunted him; he could still see the candlelight dancing in her grey eyes, and something in his bones told him she had stayed there even after the wax had burned out, til nothing was reflected in those eyes but the dark mountainside.

Eula wasn't perturbed—she'd helped many a miner's widow through the weeks following a death—and had him shooed out the door moments later, still working on that piece of bacon.

They meandered up the path, stopping every so often for Eula to sift through the foliage for anything she was low on. There was a doctor in town, but no one in the camp could afford that. He was only called for in dire straits, and even then, there was oft little he could do. Eula filled that gap. The women of her family knew the land and had passed their knowledge down through the daughters, leaving a wealth of herbal knowledge.

Vernon had seen her talk warts off of hands and break a baby's fever with boneset, and many a miner had benefited from a bundle of ginseng and tobacco that was believed to help with black lung, but he wasn't sure that her tonics would save Catherine. He tried to warn her of this on their walk but she wouldn't hear it.

Eula was on the third verse of a somewhat flat rendition of "Lorena" when they rounded the path up to the house. All the windows were swung open, with no sign of the heavy curtains Catherine had brought from New York to keep out the chill. Vernon frowned, gesturing for Eula to stay back. She furrowed her dark brows but took a step away from the porch.

The stairs groaned under his boots. The door, slightly ajar, creaked as he pushed against it. There were papers everywhere. Torn from books, magazines—Vernon recognized a passage from the Book of Mark—even letters, all plastered on the walls. John's handwriting, in ledgers and notes, and what could only have been Catherine's: a thin, sprawling script whose ornamentation was near illegible to him. Diary entries, maybe, dates scrawled on the upper corner of each page.

"Mrs. McCannon?" Vernon called, taking another step into the foyer. He was careful to avoid the overturned bookshelf at the entrance to the living room.

The room reeked of cigarettes. Books were everywhere, discarded like old toys around her. She was at the center of it all, an ill-fitting evening gown slouching off her shoulders. It was wrinkled, a gaudy blush color, and the force with which she moved threatened to rip the fragile fabric. She had done her hair at some point, it seemed, but the pins were loose and strands tumbled from the updo. Her beautiful copy of *Dracula* was her current victim. She wrenched the pages from the spine with fervor, tossing them into a pile to be put on the wall.

"Mrs. McCannon," he repeated. A pin flew from her hair as she whipped around. It landed somewhere in the graveyard of books sprawled about her. He knelt slowly,

arms out so as not to startle her.

“Don’t just stand there,” she snapped, shoving the crinkled papers up at him. “Put these up, now. They were here last night,” she whispered, her nails digging into her arms. “That damned widow. Your witch of a wife. They won’t leave. Where is my rosary?”

Vernon lifted a book and pushed the beads towards Catherine. She grabbed it, pressed the cross to her lips, and reached for another book.

The door creaked. Eula had crept in, basket tucked in the crook of her arm. Even she could not hide her shock at the state of the widow’s home. Catherine’s eyes slid from his and landed on his wife. Her face took on the glassy countenance of the night before.

“Get out. Get out!” She screamed, hurling the carcass of a hardback at the woman. “Get out!”

A book clipped Vernon’s shoulder. Eula tried to move closer, but her husband stopped her, pushing her out the door just in time for another book to sail past them.

“I’ll take her to town in the morning,” Vernon’s voice was low. “She needs a doctor.”

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It came as a surprise when one of the workers pounded on his door late in the night. Eula stirred beside him, mumbling if everything was okay, but he quieted her. At this hour, it was likely only a drunken fight between miners, especially with tensions running high. A small crowd had gathered around the canteen near his house, all half-dressed and half-asleep.

Mrs. McCannon, clothed in a dressing gown and silk robe, thrashed against the hold of two of the workers. Silver glinted in the moonlight at her feet—John’s knife, he realized, from the carvings on the handle.

She struggled weakly, her narrow chest rising and falling sharply with her shallow breaths. He had seen this look before—a doe, wounded, not yet dead, in the moments of madness before the hunter delivered the final shot. Her grey eyes, so often half-lidded and glazed over, sparked with an inhuman disquiet.

He held out his arm, gesturing for the crowd that was beginning to gather to disperse. “Mrs. McCannon,” he started, extending his free arm to her, “it’s alright.”

“Let me go, I need to go to him,” she thrashed against their hold again. Vernon nodded and the men released her, though warily.

“Mrs. McCannon,” he said again, taking another step closer. He moved again, finally catching the blade of the knife under his boot; if she reached for it again, disarming her wouldn’t be trouble, but it would only serve to stress her out more.

“No,” she snarled. Her fingers bunched in the fabric of her robe, her skin nearly translucent in the moonlight.

“Catherine.”

“I can’t, I don’t know, I, it was there, and,” she couldn’t find the words to finish. Her eloquence, her propriety, all had escaped her.

“Let’s get you into the office, it’s too cold,” Vernon said, taking her thin arms and steering her away from her ramblings.

“We’ll get you home soon.”

“I can’t,” she repeated, “it’s gone.” Weakened from the struggle, she allowed herself to be led away.

When he had her safely in the office, sat in one of the old chairs, he called over another man. “I’ll get Eula to come down and stay with her,” Vernon muttered, glancing over to where the slip of a woman sat. “She ain’t well.”

It wasn’t long before Eula swept into the room in a flurry of ‘oh, Catherines,’ and sighs of sympathy that would have normally driven the woman mad. She let her rub her arms and brush her hair back and spew her sympathies. Catherine wanted to snap, to shake the woman and tell her she was wrong, that John had escaped through another exit, that he was coming home, but words did not come. A strange silence had settled over her. Eula finally released her an hour or so later, settling to sleep on the chair opposite her.

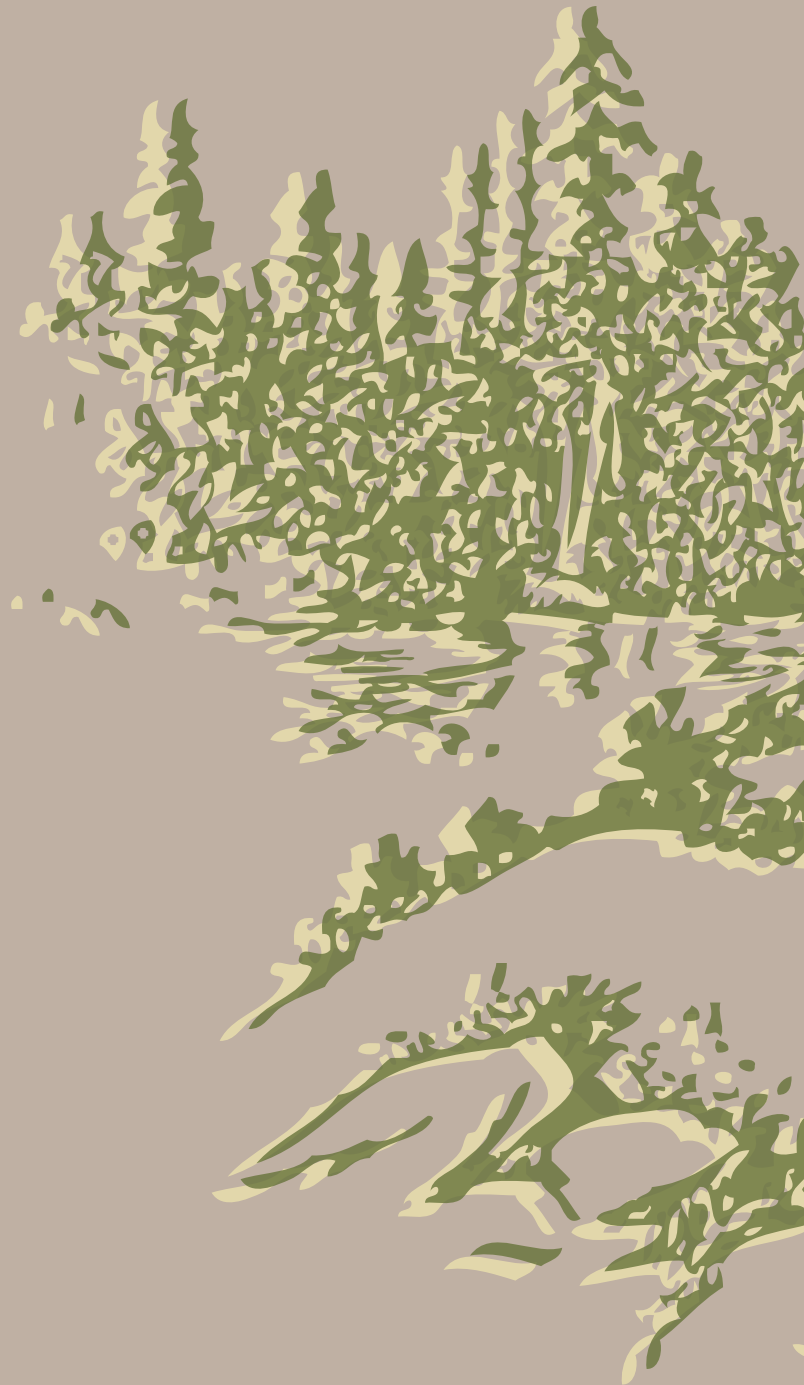
There were no lanterns dotting the side of the mountain tonight.

John was still out there, and there was no light for him to follow. They’d damned him to die in the dark, the fools, why hadn’t they sent anyone? It didn’t matter—Catherine knew. Her light would guide him down the mountain, back to the house they shared. They’d be back before Eleanor woke, and if she did, Catherine would brush and braid her hair and send her back to bed. Everything would be as it was.

Her bare feet made no sound on the wooden floor of the office. Eula slept in the old chair. A train sounded in the distance, the wampus cat snarled. The world moved as it always did. Catherine wrapped her

shoulders in the sable she’d gifted him the day they married.

She took the lantern from the porch and walked into the woods.



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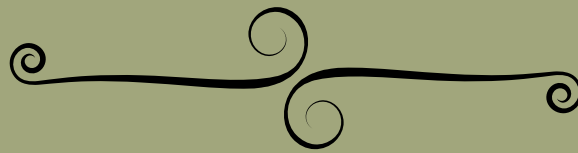
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