



The Merrimack Review
spring 2020

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Spring 2020

*Dedicated to Andrea Cohen and Danielle Jones.
Thank you for everything.*

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The Merrimack Review is a student-run literary magazine. We accept submissions from undergraduate and graduate students, regardless of academic institution or program of study, with the purpose of giving new and emerging writers/artists a space of their own. We are proud members of The Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, and are sponsored by The Writer's House at Merrimack College.

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POETRY

Grandma Josie, the Old Native Woman We Never Got to Know or Call Nōkhom

Robyn Katona

the first, and so far
last
visit we have,

she gives us four
girls earrings.
handcrafted,

mine are turtles
within a ring
of pink and silver

beads circling
the beast-god
that holds

Mother Earth
on its back.
then, her fingers

tightly pack tobacco
in a small
white roll,

and I look
at my digits:
long, and able

to untie any knot;
and I think how
her craft

is to try and string
every bead in one place
together again.

'60s Scoop

Robyn Katona

Scooped away
like skin grafts,
vanished
like tobacco smoke,
they snatched
Native babies.
Bystander adoption-ers
not caring how
the children came,
just ready to
bleach out the kids,
wash their tongues
sterile white.
Should we hate
these parents?

I look at my
white grandma,
with her Hungarian
roots. Wonder how
she adopted him,
but didn't care
to keep her son's
Native tree alive.
Why did they all
deforest my father?
What leaves were
on his tree?
He knows the stump.
Cree.
But oh, the tree
rings are not readable
to the descendants
scalped of their roots.

Conjuring Fire
Paige Caine

Pick
up the
match, try
again
because
you
are descended from
Homo sapiens who spun sticks together,
feverently, and tried again. Such a long, tedious task
back then — woman’s work— and it made their hands callous,
spinning, spinning , spinning warm live light from crisp, cold, dead limbs of trees.
When was the last time you stared into the flames of a fire and let yourself daydream?
Watched how they leapt, licked, watched yellow become orange become red?
See it in your mind now, see the colors dance and the tinder
fall. How long can you look? Till nothing but the embers
glow red deep into the night?
I’ve never been able to
look away. My mother tells me even as a child
I never feared fire. I remember camping, holding long sticks
into the fire my parents built until the ends caught. Then I would walk,
— you can’t run, or flame will blow out— protecting the small flame with a cupped hand,
to the nearest empty site and try to start my own campfire
in the unused iron-ringed fire pit.
How many times did I
fail?
lining it
with twigs
too wet,
leaves, still
green
before, finally,
I coaxed a flame to stay,
to burn, patiently, burn, devouring
larger and larger sticks, pieces of wood, logs!
Undoubtedly, I failed no more than those early humans
but we must carry on because what else
could protect us? Tell me, when
was the last time you stared into the fire? Watched the
light flicker, felt the heat, smelt the smoke
as it lazily drifted to the sky?
Imagine now how the flames leap,
lick, watch yellow become
orange become
red.

in the garden

Lauren Barclay

your hands travel,

each rendering small countries.

they touch somewhere beyond me,

deeper than the color of silence,

which

opens

and

closes.

you and I are only breathing roses.

A Prayer

Alexandra Hudson

I pray in the name of the body.
Hailing the temple I was gifted at birth
that I (for too many years) tormented.
Chipped and neglected toes suffocated
by blue nail polish's shoddy patch work,
overanalyzed eyebrows
tarred and feathered to fit in,
split ends that tickle my arms
like ants marching along my skin,
stomach rolls overflowing onto more rolls
like rolling river rapids,
full thighs pale and peppered
with moon-craters to play in,
for these, I pray.

I pray in the name of the body
blessed with the ability to bask
in the aftermath of lust-filled
discoveries of foreign territory
(there's something to be said
for mapping out a body so well).
Blessed is the ticklish spot
on the back of my knee that causes
me to convulse and shriek
in (dis)pleasure. Calling forth a rush
of childhood memories pinning me
down, blood-tinged cheeks, begging
for mercy between each spluttering howl
as I pray for it to end.

I pray in the name of the body
that charms the mind with dimples,
cries of snorting laughter,
and the barest touch of lips against lips
(relieving the nerve endings
like the first fat drop of rain on a muggy day).
The satisfaction of a large Chick-Fil-A lemonade
after a long day of work,
or when a dress ordered online
molds perfectly to my shape,
or receiving selfies as keepsakes.
For all the little things the mind
chooses to love,
I pray.

Ma's Famous Meatloaf

Alexandra Hudson

You're teaching me how
to make your famous meatloaf,

pouring grief, frustration, and soured
fear into ground turkey and beef.

Ingredients are tossed together
on instinct, no cookbook necessary.

Part of me wants to stop
and measure out every pinch of spice.

*Am I doing this right?
Exactly how much did you say?*

Then I'm wrist deep in the bowl,
my problems melting away with each squish

of cool meat between my fingers.
Of course, it ends with a misshapen,

discolored meatloaf. But you insist
we eat that one for dinner.

Orpheus & Eurydice Go Grocery Shopping

Annie Earnshaw

Her coin purse sits flat, flaccid
against her jutting hipbone,
tucked between Goodwill
and Home Depot receipts.
She shuffles nickels
like poker chips as he waxes
poetic on the sesame seeds
of hamburger buns and the glint
of cellophane as it gathers
around the neck
of a day-old baguette.

He rips a notebook
from the waistband of her jeans,
slips a dying pen
from the knot in her hair,
sits among ice cream
residue on the freezer aisle floor,
leans on the door that shelters
pints of mint and Chunky Monkey.
How lovely, how riotous
the sharpness of her jaw, the ache
in her cheeks as she calls his name.

Forbidden Reunion

Sarah Anastasia

just when i got to the top branch of recovery,
i fall, fall, fall
down, down, down
for you
into your laughter, your cologne sprinkled arms, your bed sheets
that are usually reserved
for your first choice;
the spice of danger
and the bitterness of depravity
have an aftertaste
that only the morning
after
will reveal,
but i push that out and pull you into me -
the dull pain of your thrust is only an epiphany that i've been unloved for
far too long
i thrash claw curl dig whisper cry out
innuendos, coded messages that raise our heart rates without breaking my heart
yet when you pull my hair,
you take my heartstrings with it
because it felt too good, too right,
and i didn't want you to ever stop,
which is so wrong,
because you always
inevitably
do;
despite my grown-up morals,
i can't help but feel with a young heart
and think with a lovestruck brain
so i'm content
with being
the other woman

Dark Spaces

Genevieve Clark

Go ahead and cast me out of the garden
and I'll be your Jezebel tonight.

Fallen am I, and your eyes skitter past me
because you're afraid I'll pull you into the dark tonight.

I was a rose girl, blooming in the Georgia sun.
I changed color with the seasons and I'm out for blood tonight.

Grave silence and dusty cloth around my mouth and hands
What do I have to do to make you hear me tonight?

Once you told me you'd show me the constellations
but I'm under the dark stars by myself tonight.

Find solace in dark spaces, the spiderwebs in the stairwell.
A ghostly voice singing reaches you tonight.

Roam the earth like a vagabond and howl at the moon.
I am Eve, cursed among women. My exile begins tonight.

Cloud Dinner

Billie Potts

apple trees shake in the wind
while their roots absorb a light drizzle
thunder booms from across town
time flows like corn syrup

until lightning scorches an apple tree
flames consuming its bark
as though they hunger for flesh

the farmer's plight
broadcasted on television
her torched orchard
nothing but puddles
and loose charcoal

kneeling before the remains
of the apple grove
drops streaming down her face
as reporters envelop her
like vultures to a carcass

Flower Girl: A Cento

Lily Kwak

This girl's like a simple flower
planted when the spring was young

In her head,
watered, tended, nurtured,
sprouts the sacred flower
sprouts the filthy flower

Flowers by day and leaves by night

Let the flowers make a journey,
bare feet on dew-grass

She could hear the river's quiet tune
and she weeps on the necks of trees

Fallen trees

Beside tree shadows

Made of leaves

Let's fly says the tree
Into what says the cloud

Umbrella

Lily Kwak

I sprout open upon demand,
a forsythia in a flood.
Your grip keeps me rooted,
water flowing over my veins.

A shield of sorts, I
am your guardian angel:
Angled yet rounded,
firm and elastic plastic.

All at once you
expose me, I stand
catching sharp droplets:
Bitter acid to the touch,
a salt-crust ed aftertaste.

The tension under your fingers
glazed with sweat
suffocates me,
rain whips my face,
I gasp for air.

Your pulse is on the rise,
I know your urgency.

You hold onto me
for dear life.

I glance down,
greetings to another gray hair.
Stress or genes,
Rain or shine?

And when the storm subsides
you close my wings and
fold my limbs,
I am just a thing.

할머니 (*Grandma; Harmony*)
Lily Kwak

Her maroon cardigan always
smells of flour and chocolate,
a hint of perfume and dense spice,
the kind that makes my eyes water.

We have the same smile, laugh, cry,
the same philtrum and dimples and
plump cheeks and tiny nose that
crinkles up in the presence of Gouda.

But, her uneven shoulders slouch
from tireless nights, long days
of worry for the people she left behind,
whose names are written
in tears on her pillow
every night: to never forget.

The tongue of her mother
she left in the North, those with whom
she shared warm blood, a heart,
whole dreams of family.

At sixteen, she walked alone.

She walked
past *Namsan* and *Kuwolsan*,
wilting peaks, fallen homes,
fractured trees and barren fields.

Now, the shadows sketched under her
brown marble eyes reach out to me
with broad eyelash arms,
pulling me close for an embrace.

We are one, but different
in the air our nostrils have carried,
hers of broken lands
and fragmented memories,
mine of tulips and harmonious songs.

When I brush her hair,
she sheds more thoughts than strands.

Ill, they say,
Alzheimer's, *confused*, *lost* –
I say free.

Ode to the Wide Mouth Comb

Dwight James III

Grip my mother's hair as she pulls
you through her scalp,
I watch her curls fall in the sink
like spit and sit in globs, rolling near the drain.

Rushing water detangles
edges that become a split road,
bending open like displaced bone
and she uses you to dig a part,
she moisturizes, her cracking scalp.
I wait at the bathroom door
for her to show me the wet black ball
like a dead black hole.

Look at it she insists.

I refuse and scold you, gold comb nibbling at her roots,
Why must you remind her she won't be here long?
Is this how you part the head,
make it bald, make it sweat with oil
make it shine even if she's dimming?

A Book Sat on the Bed

Seungyeon Choi

I woke—warm hug, that sunshine!—
I waited for you. And now
morning, I'm by your bedside
holding your chilly hands,
fulfilling what? —your blue morning.
Today you leave,
afternoon you'll find me and
Read. Someone here alone
will linger on your bed. You're
The Book Thief, the canny little girl:
I'll do it, quench your shelves with papers
fill them up with my
body's scribbles. I stand—
or did I ever

wake? Would a book
be talking to you,
its lips sealed with a stiff hardcover
and feeling the tension
of a booklet within the pages,
no pages allowed to turn?
I love this moment. Is that right?
Long absence of those hours
of ink steeping inside, until dreams
finally brought you: my fingers
waiting for your fingers
hold and cuddle me like a sun.
And the sound of your footsteps
pacing up the staircase,
the impatient tread
of the fingertips on the last missing hours.

on happiness and its vestiges

Laila Durrani

that kind of hollow, singular sadness
which is uncomfortably and so palpably my own

i am listening to lover's spit under this coming-up sun and i know that something seismic is about to
alter me

i want so badly to enmesh october in my mind

all petrichor musings and searching for the moon

when my world was on fire and i was so nervous but we were smiling
and you were fresh-showered
and i told you everything

or that first day,
when i was on the verge of knowing you and summer still felt like something familiar

we were sitting on the porch
and you were swinging your legs
and i was thinking only of your scar
and of what it must feel like to fall down

i was near enough to kiss you
and i wanted only to rub your skin and feel raw and open and human

we talked about the beyond and the before- torso to torso and you still make me warm

i wonder when i will be able to recover those full-bloom, somewhere-intrepid parts of me maybe i
love you but anyway i want you and now i can't erase you

i'm dreaming of another lukewarm october with you
or maybe you've found some other girl who listens to the music we listened to and reads our books
and feels this tectonic shifting in the world which we felt and maybe october will still be lukewarm,
just not for us;
for you and i

i'll be fine on my own, right? ensconced in private nostalgias

now i'm left once more with these penumbral half-places and half-spaces, writing poems on
happiness and its vestiges;
of love and its adjacents

i think i know now what it is to fall down.

Exhale

Amy Marshall

The butterflies you placed
with delicate hands in my stomach
have escaped from my body
through soundless sobs and salty tears
staining my face like
raindrops on dirty glass

It Wouldn't Be Fair To Say Hawaii Is Just A Mountain

Caroline Mason

But one could argue it looks like a rhino's horn
Poking out from her watering hole.

The land is all green and luscious
Until the ash comes from somewhere up high.

Thick clouds hover and
Shut the door to the heavens for a while.

Bituminous black
Choking
Suffocating
To death.

Strolling through it makes the
Once mundane air delectably coarse
And my lungs itchy,

But it's okay.

The moon will peek through soon,
Piercing with light,

Sending streaks up the Rhino's horn
Revealing sea salt winds
Blowing from the continent
And muggy gray stars.

FICTION & NONFICTION

The Forgotten Corner of the World

Bryce Langston

Iris Furton died last week and the Tribune said the causes were unknown. The obituary was brief, the shortest on the page:

*Iris Furton, 43, died of unknown causes on October 27, 2009
at her home in Wauchula, FL. She is survived by her husband, Henry.*

No picture was placed with the text. Even if there had been, no one would have recognized her. Not the co-workers in the office which she was secretary of, not the congregants who shook her hand at church and smiled, not the neighbors along Greenview Street who saw her walk out of her house to grab the newspaper on her driveway. Iris Furton was terribly forgettable.

Lying in bed alone, the playful shouts of neighbors' children spilling through the half-open windows, Henry stared outside through the empty space where his wife used to sleep. His face lacked expression, and his body remained deathly still. On his nightstand, the alarm o'clock displayed illuminated figures:

*WED NOV 3
5:46 P.M.*

The alarm had sounded at 6 A.M., but Henry only rolled back onto his side to stare at the other half of the bed. It had been this way for the past week. He never once called his boss at Hank Goodworths Investments to let him know what happened, and his boss never called him. The last time the 55-year-old man spoke to someone was when he called the 9-1-1 operator for an ambulance.

In the living room, the furniture was uninhabited and the TV lifeless. The walls were as bare as they had always been, no pictures or decorations. A week ago, Henry and Iris were sitting in their armchairs, watching a reality television series and laughing. They rarely talked. It was what most people would consider a dull existence, but it worked for the Furtons. They were happy in their corner of the world —forgotten, quiet, but not alone.

On the afternoon of Wednesday, November 3, Henry Furton was alone for the first time in twenty years.

The Way of Things

Jacqueline Rosenbaum

The Man leaves his house through the side door and takes care when descending the patio steps. He's not as young as he used to be, and he knows it. The fish know it too, he remarks, as he leans over the pond's rocky railing and finds several white and orange spotted koi swimming over and through his reflection.

Balding, but, really, that's not new, and doesn't matter all that much. Would rather have steady hands than a full head of hair, he thinks to himself. He clutches the plastic container that must have held a quart of wonton soup many, many years ago, and just barely struggles with the lid, managing to get it open without sending all the fish food awry. A good day, others might think, though not him—has always considered himself strong.

The koi are as big as his forearms and he's happy to watch them grow summer after summer, year after year. He remembers the way his grandkids had flung the fish food from small, sticky hands, and how he had told them no, you may not climb in and swim with the fishes. A chuckle, now, looking back. The joke lost on the wide-eyed tots.

He hadn't always had the fishpond—got it when the last of his kids moved out, and, really, it was Gloria who had raised them, if he's being honest. It was Gloria, he remembers, who brought the grandkids out to the pond, and listened patiently as they gave each fish a name. It was Gloria who had sat on her knees, leaning over the edge, collecting fish eggs with a tiny net, and it was Gloria who brought the new guppies out to the tank in the garage, fed them and cleaned their tank until they were big enough to return to their home. It was Gloria who had told him that koi eat their babies, he thinks now, still clutching the plastic bin, realizing he has not yet fed the fish.

Two handfuls, one after the other. He sprinkles them into the center of the pond, and the koi gather at the surface, their tiny mouths a perfect O as they guzzle and swill, as they lunge for the flakes, furiously swimming away when there are no more, and the man wonders if a third handful would really be so harmful. He doesn't do it, though. Not today, and not any of the days before. Two handfuls, the kid at the pet store said. Two handfuls, Gloria had fed them. Who is he to change the way of things?

He takes a seat on the white bench in his backyard. An open space cleared and flattened purposefully, with the hopes of grandkids and Thanksgiving football games, all of which have been fulfilled, though not recently. To the right, a great big tree with a swing. He had put it up for Tara when she was a baby, and he was still only a father. Gloria had gone with him to Costco and picked out the set, a simple thing—yellow rope and wooden plank—and he had spent the afternoon getting the job done. Didn't need any help, just asked his sons to hold the ladder while he hooked the ropes around its tallest, sturdiest branch.

Had Gloria wanted the swing for Tara? Or for herself? The man could not remember. Had no intention of even sitting on it, just liked to watch it sway freely in the spring breeze. Edna had wanted the swing taken down when she moved in, of course, but hadn't put up a fuss when he said simply, No, he would not be taking it down. Gave her a garden by the pond instead. The man watched her now, as she leaned over and turned the tomatoes, checking for ripeness, for vivacity. Not quite as old as him, she was so sturdy, did so well in a garden. The grandkids aren't young anymore, but the man suddenly wishes they were, so that they could help with Edna's garden, enjoy the fruits of their labor, so to speak.

They're big now. Some have jobs and some are finishing up school, and when they come to visit, they drive themselves. It's funny, still, to see them seated in chairs around the dining room table, when they had once been far too rowdy, far too immature to sit still. Funny still, to see Tara's daughter and not see her as Tara herself.

A white wooden bench, he leans back, spreading his legs farther in front of him. The faint humming of the water filter and of Edna in the garden. The sun warm on his exposed forearms and shins. It's a Saturday and he's grateful for this kind of day: the blueness of the sky and crispness in the air. Though, he usually prefers going into the office or taking Edna and the car out to the city for Katz's pastrami. But there is something so pleasant in days like this, in the way of things.

He stands up, suddenly, wanting to grab the paper, the *Barron's*, and come back outside and sit with Edna. Maybe have another cup of coffee, maybe even a pastry, a couple of the store-bought Mallomars Edna keeps stocked in the pantry. Yes, grab a couple of those with the paper, make a morning out of it. He ascends the three stone patio steps, and Edna asks where he is going, and the man thinks he answers her, but, in reality, does not.

When he wakes, he finds himself in the Cardiac Care Unit at L.I.J. Hospital, and his eldest son, a doctor, is standing in front of him, holding his legs in the air. Pale, bony. Doesn't immediately register the legs as his own. The man asks him what the hell he's doing, and his younger son puts a hard hand on his shoulder. You had an event, dad, he says to him, though the man doesn't quite understand. One second I'm feeling nauseated, the next I'm here, he says. They show him scans, the tiny peaks and troughs of his heart rate, pointing furiously at the flat line. The man widens his eyes and arches his brows. He isn't a doctor but knows what it means. Don't tell your sister, he says. We already did, they say to him, and she's at his bedside within the hour. Frustrated, but not quite yelling. You can't keep these things from me, she says to him. It's nothing to worry about, he explains.

Meanwhile, they've come up with a plan. A pacemaker. Tiny. Little to no incision. Edna is there, fervent glances between the man and the doctor, go home Edna, he says to her, and the kids—old, but still his—echo this.

They discharge him the following day, bony legs, pacemaker and all. The kids drive him home, and sit with him at the dining room table, where Edna places bowl after bowl of chicken noodle soup and spaghetti with lamb meatballs in front of them. The man isn't quite that hungry, and isn't quite so thrilled about all the attention, but eats and sits because he understands that this is how it is done.

His grandkids come by some hours later in clumps, and for a time, there are many, many people seated around the table. You'd think it was a holiday, the man jokes, and the whole table laughs. They stay through dinner, Edna working overtime in the kitchen, happy to have something to do, people to feed, and the man is grateful for her. Grateful for all the kids who have come, happy to see them but happier to see them all together, getting along. They linger until they grow tired, and it takes many reassurances before everyone finally leaves him, and Edna helps him upstairs to bed.

The next morning, Edna calls him downstairs for breakfast—toast and cottage cheese—and he eats what he can. When he's done, he places the dirty dishes in the kitchen sink, grabs the *Barron's* and the fish food, and leaves his house through the side door, where the koi are already waiting for him.

River

Brandon Bradley

After four months at the United States Museum of Space Travel, Addison was more than ready for his internship to be over. He'd expected the opportunity to be wooed by space travel, but instead spent his days teaching children acronyms to remember the planets and played the same "First Man on the Moon" PowerPoint eight times a day. It was his last week now, and his supervisor asked him to polish the collection of over fifty old space satellites—all by himself.

"I need the recommendation letter," Addison whispered to himself, a brief reminder of motivation. He reached into the bag at his feet and pulled out a blue microfiber cloth. The satellites lined the perimeter of the circular room, protected by a red, velvet rope. He'd wiped what felt like thousands of antennas, solar array panels, and cameras when he reached the youngest satellite of the group and noticed the fuel tank lid wasn't completely fastened. He shrugged, grabbing the lid and wiping it in the cloth. There was a faint noise that sounded as if someone had rubbed sandpaper against a concrete floor. Addison paused his wiping, looking around him to inspect where the sound had come from. There was no one else in the room, and the door remained closed.

"I'm trippin'," he said to himself, shaking his head. He reached to refasten the fuel tank lid when he heard the sound again, this time realizing there was something crawling out. He took a slow step back, but was restricted by the velvet rope as two stone colored, webbed-like hands the size of a soda bottle cap appeared. Next came the head, which Addison later realized was the biggest thing on its body. It had two deep blue glistening eyes and two small holes between its eyes and toothless mouth that Addison projected must've been its nose. It stared at Addison, blinking its eyes.

"No freaking way, man," he said inching forward. He threw down the lid and knelt, his hands stretched flat to see if the creature would come to him, but it didn't move. He balled his hands into a fist, this time extending only his index finger. The creature reached out its webbed fingers, wrapping it around the perimeter of Addison's finger.

"That's it, little Buddy. I won't hurt you." He used his other hand to try and touch its bare head, but it closed its eyes tightly and shrunk its body down. "Oh, no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," he whispered. "Okay, Addison, finger. Try the finger." With its eyes still closed, and one hand still wrapped around Addison's finger, Addison used his other index finger to softly pet its head. It's skin felt smooth, hard, and cold like a granite countertop. As Addison rubbed its head, it opened its eyes and again stared at him. Addison stretched out his palm and this time the creature crawled into it. Its body was as light as a paper clip and no taller than a Zephyrhills water bottle.

"Can you...talk?" Addison asked it. When it didn't open its mouth he assumed the answer to that must've been no. The tiny ears on the wise of its head wiggled each time Addison spoke. "Alright, think Addison. It hears you. Where should you take him? Wait, no, I don't know that it's a him." He looked at the creature standing in the palm of his hand. It blinked its blue eyes again and the ends of its mouth curved up in what Addison assumed to be its best attempt at a smile. "You need a name. I think I'll call you 'River,' like the color of your eyes."

"Addison?"

He turned around, moving his hands behind his back to hide River. He hadn't heard his supervisor open the door.

“Yessir?” He answered.

“How are you coming along with the polishing?” He was standing with his body still behind the door, revealing only his head.

“Pretty good. I’m almost finished,” Addison responded.

“Excellent. You’ve been awesome these past few months. I’ll have your recommendation letter ready Friday morning.” Addison smiled and nodded as his supervisor closed the door. He pulled his arms from behind his back, but River was not in his hands. He hadn’t even felt the creature leave his hands.

“River?” He whispered. “It’s okay, Buddy. Addie won’t hurt you.” He felt a gentle tugging on his pant leg and looked down to see River’s deep blue eyes staring up at him with the same subtle smile as before. He knelt, reaching his hand out and River latched onto his fingertips, then crawled into his palm. Addison thought about what River’s fate might become if he told his supervisor, anyone at the museum, or anyone in the world of science for that matter, what he’d just found. He needed to research first and figure out exactly where this satellite had been and how NASA had missed this. He looked around the room once more, then raised his hands so that River was eye level.

“You, my friend, are coming home with me.” River wrinkled its nose and smiled, opening its mouth to reveal a long, pink tongue.

A Cappuccino at the Edge of the Table

Natalie Novak

They like to take snapshots of me, little Polaroids they keep in their pocket. Muted moments captured. A tug in the arrow of time. The portraits express my past and adapt to my present. Painted sketches of who I appear to be. But the thing about pictures is they may be worth a thousand words but images can only hold one truth: the one they choose to display. And while photos may look better in black and white, I prefer to live in the grayscale. I am not a bad person. I don't care what anyone says. But it's not so obvious anymore. To narrow in on my life and cast judgment is tricky. It's difficult. It takes effort to form opinions, too much brain power. I don't respect it. I don't condone moral over-exhaustion. Life is easy and I'm not quite sure why others see it any other way.

The table wobbled when I leaned my arms against it, greeting me the only way it could. The others, propped up on pink sugar packets, paid me no mind. And that was fine. I didn't come here to be noticed anyway. A breeze brushed the back of my neck and motioned my eyesight to the right. A café in a cemetery, how about that? The marvelous part of this place was not the coffee nor the cemetery itself, although it was beautifully kept. It was how the whole scene, every facet of it, managed to keep the sounds of the city at bay. From the outside, you'd never know what was hidden behind the doors of the Jacobi Café. A stranger to the area might even stumble in, unaware of the serenity peeking behind the patio. They might order something, just grateful for the peace and quiet. An escape from the past or the unwavering present. The stranger might look around at the books stacked gently against the wall or peer into the pastry case for a sinful treat. They might even glance outside and discover the precious paradox of the place. A quiet patio, reserved for smiling spring days when the sun delivers the leaves a warm glow. It was pleasant, not at all like a cemetery.

A slim waiter approached me and asked if I'd like anything else. Is that what they're called at a café? Waiters? His tired eyes beamed at me. I paused for a moment, as if this was the decision it all hinged on. All the cosmos in its totality rested on my choice here. I looked around to the others sharing the space with me. There was green tea and there were blueberry scones, cappuccinos and croissants. How awful.

Too much choice. That was the problem. Too many types of coffee and flavor of muffins, varying sugar packets and the options of seating. I don't want any of it. That's what I tried to tell them and what I always told them. In choosing we solidify our fate, but what if that didn't have to be the case? I want it out of my hands. All of it. That's what I told her all those years ago. I apologized because that's what good people do. I showed regret and accepted the consequences of my actions. Holding her hands in mine, I cried. My voice quivered as I looked in her eyes and saw the pain stare me back in the face. There was only one problem. I wasn't to blame. And I couldn't keep pretending that I was.

I didn't approach the other women. I didn't even give them a single moment's thought until they gave me one. And at that point, it was out of my hands. They led the whole ordeal start to finish. I accept I could have stopped it. But who am I to deny life playing itself out in front of me? And all of a sudden I found myself begging the woman I promised my life to, to forgive me for countless moments outside of my control. When you choose not to choose, how can you ever be at fault? That's when it all went awry. I accepted the consequences of actions I had not taken.

I had been acted on, not the other way around. And I wasn't sorry for it, so I made it known. I took it all back.

She threw her shoe at me, a hairbrush, and the ring. She called me a liar and a cheat and I couldn't defend myself because there was no other way to put it. Like a spindle or a loom, she sewed it all together: the narrative of how I broke her heart without even trying. But narratives have a way of unraveling the more you wear them. They get loose with frayed edges until they're so worn no one can recognize what they once were. That's where those snapshots come in. She captured the moment to her liking and kept the picture with her always. And as for me, I had no choice but to carry on and accept what was given to me.

"Tea," I said. "Preferably black, if you have it."

I'm not good at making choices. I know that about myself. And I think that stands for something. Self-awareness is the first step to self-improvement. My only problem, and I know this, is that I don't really feel the need to change. I've made my peace with who I am and what I've done. If others feel the need to skew the angles in their direction then fine, I'll do the same. I've said it before: I am not a bad person.

I was very happy to find this place. So rare to find a hidden corner in a city. Cities are exposed, emotional. That's why they're so loud. But here? Ethereal. It's as if the entire world vanished around me, save a patio with plastic red chairs, a couple of customers with quiet thoughts, and a peek into the divine. The smell of coffee poured through the air and fused with the cool scent of spring. I watched the leaves sway gently in the breeze, with bursts of lavender following below. A brook, or perhaps a fountain, gibbered in the distance as waiters stacked empty plates inside. The sun greeted the headstones individually, taking its time kissing each marbled soul.

The light bounced off the graves like a cue ball sinking each stripe and solid into their respective pockets. Back in college I had a friend with a lot of money whom I only ever saw by the pool table at our local pub. It was strange, but in a distinctive way. The endearing kind of strange. The brand of strange that attaches itself to an individual. That was what drew me to him and it wasn't long before we were in business together. I use this phrase loosely, "together." It was less a partnership than a deal. He'd give me money, I'd make more money with it, and then I'd give part of it back. That is, until I couldn't and there was no more money to be made.

"Just a little more," I told him. Time, money, anything. I just needed a little more and everything would be okay again. Except it wasn't. And I quickly came to realize it.

That's when I left. I took it all and moved away. There was no time to think but I knew it would be fine. It always turned out fine. My father always told me that when life gets hard, there's nothing a good woman can't solve. So I sought her out and never looked back until now. I was sure then that my friend would understand. He was strange that way.

I didn't feel bad then. I still don't feel bad. When life gets hard you have to fend for yourself. You can't rest on structured moral codes. You're not a bad person for doing what you have to do. I am not a bad person. What would you have done?

There was a particular energy on the patio that I am quite fond of. The essence of companionship radiated across the tables, while still respecting individuals' need for solitude. It was a place to feel alone together. In the world, for the moment, here. We were all wanderers stopping by for a sip of something sweet beside the city. Watching our world tumble slowly around us, like a wash cycle in a glass case.

The waiter approached me once more and gifted me a tea set with steam slipping out into the air. It was elegant, ceramic, and dark. His slender shadow lurched over the table like an umbrella shielding me from the sun's rays. A subtle smile, warm and concealed, invited me to engage.

"Your friends find it odd you work in a place like this? A cemetery?" He grinned at my question like he'd heard it a million times.

"I guess they would if I did. But I'd hardly equate serving tea with taking care of dead people."

"But you must see the irony of the place. A café in a cemetery is an unfamiliar thought to most. And to some could be seen as undignified."

"I don't see much irony in it. Just two complementary sides to a coin, if you ask me. And as for undignified, take a look at the patronage. I'd hardly describe them as unruly."

He was right. The clientele was by definition vanilla. But at least they were the pleasant kind. The folks you mock with your friends behind their backs but don't mind chatting with when you're alone. They were French Vanilla. I'll stick to my guns on that one.

I still haven't decided what I value in a person. I'm not one to solidify convictions. I like people who make me feel good and who respect my apathy toward decision-making. Those are the strange ones. Slightly off, entangled in their own thoughts, creating a world just for them. Like wildflowers they can't be planted or tended to. Only admired by visiting strangers, bewildered at the sight. So far, that's all I've got. And I'm alright with it.

I observed the tea set carefully. Beverages are rarely presented in such exquisite tableware. The delicate curves of the cup supported the ribbon-like handle, all placed atop a thin and fragile saucer below. To the left stood a covered sugar bowl, stout in its stature. Accompanying it was a dainty pitcher of cream. It was dark as night and held a swirling starry galaxy that could spill out in one accidental knock of the table. Beside it all was the mighty teapot, gazing over its subjects. That was my favorite piece. Sophisticated and just round enough to hold in the golden-brown sea.

"On second thought, I'd like a cappuccino, please. Could you make that happen?" My eyes darted back at the waiter's lucent gaze. I'm not good at making decisions. I know that about myself. He nodded and glided away, tea set in hand.

I miss her. Not a day goes by that I don't. I'm not heartless and I'm not deranged. I'm not a maniac, lunatic, nut-job, or basket case. I know who I am and I thought she did too. I thought she could look past it. Everyone has a breaking point. I'm curious if I'll ever reach mine someday, or if I already have.

A cloud came over the sun, allowing only a few rays to poke through to the grass until all the sunshine disappeared. The cemetery looked different in this light. Gloomy, unsettling. It was as if all the leaves departed from their branches and smothered the wildflowers below. The trees were full but they felt bare and for the first time, the gravestones appeared ominous. I tried to welcome the wind again, but the breeze felt cold and it disturbed me. Everything became a shadow of itself and I feared it would stay like this forever. The others seemed unbothered by the shift in atmosphere, which led me to question myself. I was distressed, this I knew. Why did I find this so troubling? The question itself concerned me.

Friendship is complex and tangled. It's its own language, knotted with jealousy and good intentions. Getting lost in the muck of it all is too easy. Going into business together is easier. Fucking it all up? Let them eat cake. The power that lies between minute interactions should not

be overlooked. Wives, business partners, estranged college roommates. Hints hide in plain sight. I'm not sure if I'm drawn to certain types, or if I really do skew the ratio of control in my favor. I've heard accusations of both. At the end of the day, what does it matter if those relationships are terminated anyway? I guess I can't help it. I really thought he'd understand. We were both strange that way.

Once more, the waiter advanced toward me. He placed a cup, saucer, milk, and sugar at the edge of the table then skirted away. No words, no glances.

"A cappuccino," I thought. "That's it."

I reached for the milk, then the sugar. My arm hung stiff in the air. Perhaps the choice was obvious. I couldn't decide. There were too many options, like combinations on a lock code. My pupils rattled and the muscles in my hand began to tense. A drum beat erupted in my ear.

Running away wasn't easy. It may feel that way now but it wasn't at the time. I messed up. I truly messed up. He trusted me, I mean, we were really on track to something. It was very crowded one night and the bar was playing old-school rock and roll. No one found it familiar except us and the bartender serving cheap beer beneath the glow of a neon sign. We hunched over the pool table, sheets of paper quilting the green velvet in a chaotic splendor. Illegible scribbles danced through the lines, revealing themselves only to us. It was a symphony, a ballet, a late-night showing at our own museum. We wasted away into the evening, transforming our futures beside the bar lights.

I don't think I'm a bad person but sometimes I worry I might be. You read books and hear stories about the awful men who steal money from the poor. Sometimes you even get a white collar tale of deception. And in the rarest of cases, you get me. I was the guy who'd pitch you on something in the back of a class you weren't paying attention in. Sell you on a non-existent company, with non-existing finances, but with all the charm of a world-class conman. I was the reckless business partner who tried to get ahead on someone else's dime. They had no idea. How could they? How could he?

I stared at my paused arm, cemented in place. I never realized how many choices went into a cup of coffee. The milk. How much? What kind? Any at all? And sugar. Is it really necessary? Can it be appear in the absence of milk? How much? What kind? Do I even want this? Any of this?

It combusted, the whole plan. All it takes is one Archduke Ferdinand. A seemingly simple system disrupted by a single cosmological constant. That inevitably, no matter when or where or who or how, order will dissolve into disarray. And those pieces, those shattered parts, prove that life is easy. A choice does not exist in a vacuum. There will always be causalities. I refuse to be one of them.

People started talking and I didn't care to stay for the conversation. The money sat there taunting me. I had no control. Like a machine, I was programmed to take opportunities as they came to me. And here was the perfect one. No consequences, all gain. I didn't care anymore. I didn't care about the people I stole from or the man I called my best friend. My loyalty dissolved, like a notebook held underwater. Ink spilled out the sides and clouded my lens.

But this coffee, this damn cappuccino sitting on the edge. It taunted me too. The foam leaf bubbled gently atop a caramel pool. It was radiant. I was scared to touch it. The fleeting beauty of a cappuccino is known only to those bold enough to touch their lips to the rim. Those strange ones who walk the arrow of time rather than pulling it back in their own bow. The only choice I've ever made was to let go.

My hand dropped to the table and the beauty of my surroundings settled in for a final time. Closing my eyes, I felt the energy of my environment course through me. What an unusual place. I wondered who constructed it. Who felt so deeply for these departed souls? How did they know the dead needed company? How did they know that I did too?

Cappuccinos are not served with milk. I stared at the pitcher perched by the sugar. Why would the waiter give me milk? It didn't make sense. Surely, he was smarter than that. He seemed good for it. So why the milk? Why the milk? It was on me, it seemed, to do something about it. To not reach for it. To let the opportunity go by. An experience untouched.

He probably hates me. No, I know he hates me. That Polaroid, ripped and worn, I bet he wears it on his sleeve. And now, oh god, where is he now? I hope he's okay. I've never had a friend like him until her. I hope she's okay too. I'm not a bad person. I hope I'm not. And this milk. What do I do with this milk? Certainly, it was given to me for a reason. There's sugar too. Both, yes, I'll use both. An even ratio.

My arm shook as I reached it out, hovering above the pitcher's handle. It was a mistake, how could I have known back then? I can't help this, it's who I am. My arm moved to the sugar bowl. I want it back, I want it all back. Take it away. I was screaming but no one around seemed to hear. Where was the waiter? I needed him.

Somehow, above my thoughts and my screams the birds started chirping. They sang a song for me and all my companions in the field beside. A café in a cemetery, what an odd idea. I can only imagine how strange a person must be to create a scene such as this. The clatter of plates from what I presume to be my waiter erupted from the side door, and I felt welcome here. My memories echoed through the air, painting my portrait with soft strokes. I'm not a bad person. I'm not a bad person. I'm not a bad person.

Mending Barbed Wire Fences

Isobel Cassidy

Tonight, Grant's supper will be peanuts. The jetway rattles underfoot, he has to duck his head to board, and he's hurried down the aisle by business suits and Hawaiian shirts. The plane, he discovers, is not much bigger than a coffin. He doesn't even like getting in elevators. He makes eye contact with Evelyn, the woman he'll sit elbow-to-elbow with for the next four hours. The grandmother he hasn't spoken to in ten years.

"I had to tell *three* people I was saving this seat," she says.

Evelyn's a photograph that hasn't aged, perched in her seat as if sitting for a sermon. A cherub's haircut, white like an ivory brooch. A black scarf around her shoulders, always ready for mourning. He's lucky he could find an appropriate suit jacket in time. It's packed away for now, until Atlanta.

He distracts himself from the funeral by noticing she's not wearing the ring. She doesn't comment on his dirt-clad jeans and boots, but she leans away from him.

"I'll catch you up on the names of the little ones," she says, "You can show me pictures of the ranch. How's that sound?"

His attention diverts to his broken watch, then to his lap, like he hid a script somewhere and forgot the lines. His tone is barely more than a mumble.

"Don't got pictures."

"Of course not. I might as well be seated next to a statue."

The plane rumbles. He grabs the armrest like it's a parachute.

She rolls her eyes and almost pats his arm, like a butterfly hesitating to land. "It'll be boring, I promise."

The floor thunders like the beginning of an earthquake. The oppressive hiss of air conditioning does nothing for the sweat at his temples. He wants to ask her to close the window, but she's gazing at the Las Vegas skyline like it's an old favorite painting. It makes him wish for a barbed wire fence to slice his fingers on.

It's like he's back in her study, hunching at her desk with a detention slip, waiting for a scolding. But the wrinkles at the corner of her mouth carry the weight of a hundred lectures, each one ending before it began. She'd sigh, pat his arm, tell him to wash up for dinner. It taught him the value of making people wait for your words. If you wait for it, maybe it'll mean something.

A hundred letters under his bed, never sent. A hundred times he'd pick up the phone, just to replace it on its hook and disappear, into the sun and fields all day.

"I wish you'd just spill it for once," she says. Her stare is hard coals boring into him. "I'm not mad at you. I just want to know what I did."

"Nothing."

"Nothing? So, you disappear? No calls? You don't want me to visit. Why?"

"I never—"

"Really? Because you never told me where you live. Don't think I didn't notice."

The armrest is his lifesaver again. "That's not it."

"You're still mad I didn't drive you to that football practice. Is that it?"

The airplane is dark, like nightfall at 4 P.M. He bites hard on a peanut fragment stuck in his teeth.

"Just shut up."

She places a hand over her chest.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Forgive *me*.” She’s smiling, wrinkles twisted up. “I won’t bother you again. And tell the others I don’t need help flying.”

A peal of lightning interrupts them. Passengers mumble to each other. A bell sounds and the pilot speaks, but Grant can’t hear him. The wings are jittering and flapping like an injured hawk. The nose of the plane pulls him back in his seat. The cabin becomes a bronco, kicking and bucking. Infants wail. Out the window, ashen, black clouds rise. It’s unnatural to see them at eye level.

It was a steel grey evening, the night Grandpa died. He was a shell of himself in bed. Just molted snakeskin, caught in a brush, fluttering with every puff of breath in his chest. His hand could disintegrate into flakes. Holding it felt weak, like saying *there, there*.

His grandmother shouts next to him. With wide, unseeing eyes, her hand is over her mouth as the plane continues to climb and drop in the sky. He recognizes it.

Stepping into the room, before she realized he was there, he saw those silent gasps from under her horrified hand.

He left as quiet as a shadow. It was just a glimpse, but it chased him from that house. He couldn’t drive far enough away.

She must see that as the day she lost both of them.

He reaches to her shoulder and pulls her close.

“It’ll be over soon,” he says.

The plane collapses into Atlanta like a weathered ship into port, and only then do they let go of each other’s hand.

The cabin bustles around them as she gazes at the seat in front of her. He wants to say he’s sorry.

“I’ll get your bags,” he says.

He tells her he’ll wait in the terminal, reminds her not to forget her scarf, asks if she already has a hotel room set up.

The stewardess hands the wheelchair over to him. Evelyn’s hand remains over her mouth, now curled.

“I’ll rent a car and drive you around,” he says.

Those wrinkles deepen.

His throat is full of gravel.

“I just felt that nothing would’ve been enough,” he says. “Please let me drive you around, Grandma.”

Her hand is dwarfed and pale on his sun-beaten forearm.

“You don’t know how much it meant, that you showed up and held his hand,” she says. “That’s all I wanted.”

Contributor Bios

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