

& sour *sweet & sour* **sweet & sour**

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half empty mag



design by sonya p

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a note from the editors

welcome to issue 01 of half empty mag. what started as just an off-handed idea between two friends has grown and shaped to be something that we never could have imagined. we created half empty mag to celebrate the half empty glasses of life, the struggles and triumphs and the sometimes imperfect sides of writing.

“sweet&sour” instantly came to us, because we felt like nothing was more perfect for a magazine designed to embrace the leftover crusts of life than an issue focusing on the ups and downs, the bittersweet parts of our most beloved moments. we feel like each and every piece within the issue reiterates this theme, and we hope you feel both sweet&sour when you’re finished reading.

we are ecstatic to be releasing this issue, and we are incredibly grateful for the support and the work that has been contributed to it. sweet&sour would not exist without the brilliant writing and artwork that was submitted, and these artists are truly both the backbone of this issue and the most rewarding part of being able to put it together.

we thank you endlessly for the support, whether it be through reading and sharing our social media posts, sending in work for the issue, or simply the endless amounts of kind comments we have received. the ability to connect with others in this community has been the most rewarding part of this process.

we are delighted to share our opening issue with you—we hope you enjoy.

ireland and layla
co-editors in chief

3/22 *bee lb*

when i think of all the ways to ruin
the ways to be ruined, the ways to
ruin things. this body could collapse
beneath the strain of it, holding all
this useless knowledge. the tongue
is a trap i never learned to set. i find
my words caught and wounded.
when i think of all the ways to ruin
i must admit i think of you first
so desperate to please my tongue
unfurls, thinks itself into a passable
thing, an attempt made rudiment, unlikely
to sever. i must admit i think of you now
i think of your tongue and the mouth
that holds it. i think of the words you let
spill without thought. i think of all
the ways to ruin and the way you avoid
each. i wonder then what secrets
that tongue could share, if ever you were
so inclined. i think of all the secrets
you've shared; meaning none. i think of all
the secrets i've bared; how there will always
be more to pull. i burrow myself into this
familiar space. i've chosen still to seek
blame, to lay it, to be laid by it.

BEE LB (they/them) is an array of letters, bound to impulse; they are a writer creating delicate connections. they have called any number of places home; currently, a single yellow wall in Michigan. they have been published in Crooked Arrow Press, Badlung Press, opia mag, and Revolute Lit, among others.

loving memory of the errand boy *lorelei bacht*

The extraction of teeth liberates room
to take in more of you, precisely when
you decide to give less.

You turn to feeding fish instead. They
now receive your undivided attention,
your packed pellets of care.

I scoop up what is left of rice porridge
in our young children's bowls, their congealed
spit and salt, while doing the dishes.

I hunger and I thirst. I hurt for company
denied. Well, have you tried brewing
your own, they ask.

And I haven't. Alone, I snack on crumbs,
the rust of cans, my empty cupboards
never to be filled again

by the errand boy.



LORELEI BACHT (she/they) lives and writes somewhere in the monsoon forest. Having left her glass out in the rain, she believes that it must be half full now. Or is it half empty? Her recent writing has appeared and/or is forthcoming in *Feral*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Abridged*, *Odd Magazine*, *PROEM*, *SWWIM*, *Strukturriiss*, *The Inflectionist Review*, *Hecate*, and others. She is also on Instagram: @lorelei.bacht.writer and on Twitter @bachtlorelei.

ovis-sapphist *jem zero*

CW: homophobia, sexism

i.

there is a thing called

lesbian
sheep
syndrome

wherein two ewes decide
that allowing a ram
to ram his genitals against theirs
sounds like a less-than-pleasant pastime

their next steps are uncertain
where this hoof on this rock
and this grass in this mouth
make plenty of sense, figuring out
this girl and this girl
is a much more complicated formula

clueless about the art of mounting
sapphic ovine, instead, stand
side-by-side
waiting for nature to tell them what to do

when your sexual landscape consists
of standing still
the desire to move can be

paralyzing

like two hands in middle grade, chipped polish and bitten cuticles
wanting to entwine, except
last time

well

we don't talk about last time

a girl on the playground kissed another girl's cheek in the hollow
under an ancient metal play structure
scratched lead paint graffitied with elementary missives
like the historic bark of a great mother tree
she said it was an accident
because kissing is for boys and
she got bullied after twisting a comb in her hair too tight
until hacking it free was the only option

the lie twists in her gut so tight that she hacks the meat away
until she can rip it out

that girl crawls out of the gravel and stands up a
woman who feels ashamed for liking pierced nipples
a woman who already brushed the dirt off her knees and
learned the hard way how to be honest
about kissing another girl

today she is a woman still digging away at her own insides
hoping nature will eventually
tell her what to do

ii.

how do lesbians have sex?

sometimes, you don't know either

sometimes, you don't

upon which part of a woman's body do you put your hand
when you want to communicate, "i see you as a person with innate value,
and i want to bury my face so deep in your vagina
that my tongue shakes hands with your cervix"

living life in fear of men
hits differently when the shadow of their desire
falls a bit too close to your own
when you scoff at your peers
slurping the milk from a capitalist teat
but your gaze snags on a magazine cover featuring the current media darling

faux-imposing stance and matte lipstick in a shade called forbidden
a white button shirt that hangs open
down to her navel

you daydream of a woman with teeth
knowing very well that
this is not the fantasy being sold
and it's definitely not being sold
to you

how do lesbians have sex when we fear that every second spent wishing
we could melt the scent off her neck with our tongues
is another notch damning our desire to
be a mirror for
that which we loathe

when you clench your jaw against hollers from blurring vehicles
and lack enough tokens to summon, "my eyes are up here"
into your available dialogue options

then you stutter at the cashier's unpainted doe eyes
reminding yourself that no one
wants to be flirted with at work
and regardless

she's probably straight

iii.

wanting to fuck a woman is

misogynist

(yes/no)

wanting to fuck a woman is turning breathing body into sexual object
one that exists to be juiced, extracting warmth and moans, sloshed around
until the resulting pulp becomes a consumable dish

wanting to fuck a woman is embarrassing

wanting to fuck a woman is something to be
ashamed of

wanting to fuck a woman makes you worse than a man
who doesn't want to fuck a woman

this man wants to fuck an idea that moves only in ways he wishes
whose desire is synonymous with an abstract concept
modeling clay carved into the shape of a crude pussy and titled,
"woman" (in quotation marks)

wanting to fuck a woman is terrifying, so you want to be fucked by a woman
a woman who wants to fuck women

see example 1 (above) for more details

iv.

the day you come out, you will remember the day you were born
in vivid detail

when they looked invasively at your crotch and assigned you a split-second decision
before they even knew your face or your name
you were 'boy,' or you were 'girl'

you were daddy's girl, or mama's boy
a ladies' man

or a reason for daddy to polish his gun on the porch when your friend comes over to
play

his name is nathan, and he is eight

before you know that you own something called a vulva, you know that you are
supposed to marry a man

know that you are supposed to be owned

you project this onto everything your young eyes touch and fumble

until your daddy's gun is echoing in the distance, nathan long gone, and you are a
teenager

in a dorm room, or somewhere less romantic

like the sanitation closet at your first job, a local ice cream parlor

and your coworker, who introduced herself as jana and smiled while chewing gum
is fighting you for the right to mop the floor

because the other person has to take the trash out
except there's a lot of trash today, so you suggest doing it together
hoisting up gooey bags of sticky-saccharine, jana's brown hands helping
push each one into the dumpster's waiting mouth

when you turn around, she is picking something discarded and insignificant off the
pavement
and her uniform shirt rides up just enough so you see
the sweat-speckled small of her back

why did no one avert their gaze from your developing crotch
and tell you
that 'vulva' does not mean
girl, or straight, or destined to be mounted

v.

two ewes stand side-by-side in a field of violets
unsure how to love without someone to mount them

the next time you are a 21-year-old virgin, you will grow
another universe inside
there will be tongues made of bronze
buttery and bold
enough to tell you where and how to move your fingers

when you finally isolate that tiny speck of unbleached lust
the excision will be peaceful
and precise

JEM ZERO (ze/zir) is: A disabled transmasculine. A queasy writer. A nonbinary artist. An autistic gay. Zir writing channels weirdness, vulnerability, and raw detail, striving to communicate the frustration of being limited by one's meatsack & brainjuice. Ze has nonfiction personal essays, short fiction, and poetry published with the Thinx Blog, Limeoncello Mag, and Gertrude Press, among others. Ze won Best Feminist Sex (by the Good Sex Awards) for a queer sci-fi erotic short. As far as art goes, jem primarily does digital portraiture with occasional photography.

Further eccentric nonsense can be found at: [jemzero \[dot\] com](http://jemzero[dot]com), [jem_zero \(twitter\)](https://twitter.com/jem_zero), and [jemzero \(instagram\)](https://www.instagram.com/jemzero).

halves *bryan drew*

say bittersweet
& i think of my mother
& before you say i write too much
about the emptiness, hear me out,
i've been thinking about chances,
about how i can really love her sometimes
there are moments where the killing
doesn't really matter
& it makes me think about her bed,
how it was always a sanctuary,
somewhere to retreat to when
i was on the brink of shattering & she never
made me talk about it
& this, later in life, has taken me out
a couple times
i've cried over the fact there's not much to say,
knowing that i could fix this but she would never admit
that something is bleeding & screaming
yet i still miss her,
the brushing my hair before school,
at least before it turned into
taking myself to the bus stop & eventually walking
to the building altogether &
the lying split me in half,
the inconsistency made me
into a tall child with a mind easily lost
but i would come together if it meant
when i begged for my mother
i wouldn't turn up empty handed

BRYAN DREW (he/they) is a 19 year old trans writer who's been writing since he was around 12 years old. Being from New York, and currently living in Boston, he spends a lot of his time in solitude, but not without the noises of the city. Writing about his transness and the problems society has with it, his struggle with bipolar disorder, among other things. Always using poetry to release what the world doesn't like to admit is there.

how beautiful this would be if we were not dead men

lorelei bacht

Sucker punch. Blow of tamping iron
to the stomach. Omnibus accident. I stand
stunned – her husband must repeat, repeat.

I discover: there is no word for pain, only
for paracetamol levels of discomfort. This
stainless steel beam is untreatable.

Unspeakable – it is: beyond. I must find,
I must make a valve, pressure release,
or coil, some manner of mechanism.

The blueprint: its own exit, etched
in pencil, the lead smooth on, smooth on.
Better the paper than my thighs. I trace

the whirls of agony, angles of confusion,
the supra-paracetamol, the ache. It does not
look human – which reminds me:

stories of airplanes lost in Uruguay.
Which one am I: the survivor, the dead? I draw
my bodily remains, lovingly rearranged

by the frostbitten hands of a dear friend.

LORELEI BACHT (she/they) lives and writes somewhere in the monsoon forest. Having left her glass out in the rain, she believes that it must be half full now. Or is it half empty? Her recent writing has appeared and/or is forthcoming in Feral, Anti-Heroine Chic, Abridged, Odd Magazine, PROEM, SWWIM, Strukturriss, The Inflectionist Review, Hecate, and others. She is also on Instagram: @lorelei.bacht.writer and on Twitter @bachtlorelei.

guys i meet before i die *rosaleen lynch*

I meet Bob in the back of a black Volkswagen beetle on the coastal road from Naples to Sicily when he tips the passenger seat forward and I squeeze in back beside him, another hitch-hiker like me, picked up by Daniel, not his real name, uses a Bible name for sinning, he says and hopes I'm a sinner too and I ask if he's worried he'll be struck down, as the back of my thighs clench on meeting the hot vinyl seat, and he says, 'Nah, only real gods can muster lightning,' scratching his beard, 'and they are Greek like me and look after their own,' and in the rear-view mirror he asks if me and Bob know each other, as if every hitch-hiker does and Bob says he thinks we've met somewhere and I ask if that line ever works, and he says it does but he's seen me at a hostel in Naples, that I came in late and forgot it was a shared room, and nothing comes back to me apart from the bitter-sweet taste of Limoncello and I ask if I was loud, and Daniel glances back in the mirror, and Bob says I was quiet as a church mouse but drunk, and the acid in my throat rises with the warmth at the neck of my T as he tell me that I stripped down to 'nada' as if alone in the Garden of Eden and climbed into bed over him and Daniel glances back in the mirror again and I turn to Bob and ask, 'So, anything you haven't seen before?' and he replies, 'Nada,' and Daniel says something about degrees of separation and introduces us, but I'm too busy trying to play back that night in Naples to catch his name, so I call him Bob, because he seems like a good guy I lie, like the one from Sesame Street, not the one from Twin Peaks, and when he asks what he should call me, seeing as we're all using fake names, I regret it as I say, 'You pick. What do I look like?' and he replies, 'Not like someone from a kid's show,' and I ask Daniel via the rear-view mirror if that's true and he nods saying that he bows to Bob's superior knowledge and changes gear to go uphill and says to Bob 'There are three Greek Fates, my friend, why not ask three questions and then decide?' and the car struggles up the hill, exhaust fumes blackening behind, as Bob says he'll have to think and Daniel and I nod in the mirror and I turn to watch the sea drop under us, and when Bob says he has his first question, I wonder why there's no barrier on the cliff and tell him to fire away, and he says, 'So Jane Doe, why would you get into a car with two guys you don't even know?' and I say, 'You're in a car with two people you don't know, Bob,' and I unclip the side window and push out the back pane for air, and he says, 'It's different,' and I ask, 'Why Bob, is that because I've got a gun and you don't?' and he laughs but I don't miss the glance to the leather bag on my lap, one hand resting on

it and the strap across my body, so I don't ever leave it behind, and I ask for question two, and feel the sweat on my back chill, pressure easing off as the road levels and Daniel changes gear again and Bob asks 'So Jane Doe, why do you sleep naked?' and I say, 'Same reason you do, Bob, question three?' and Daniel slaps the steering wheel, and says 'Touche! We've had the spinner, the dispenser and now we just need to cut the thread!' and we round a corner towards the town and Bob asks, 'So why'd you really call me Bob?' and I see a sign, and say 'Sorry Bob, hold that thought, Daniel, can we stop? I need water,' and Daniel says there's no need and reaches for the glove compartment and I find the seat lever, 'Toilet too' and I start to push the passenger seat forward, 'If you don't mind, I won't be long,' and Daniel taps the indicator to slow and pull in across the road from a Cafe and I ask if they want anything, the air from the window no longer cold and they say they're good and Daniel holds the passenger seat to let me out and in the rear-view mirror, as I lean forward to grab the handle of the door, I see Bob watch my thighs peel off the back seat and I think of the hostel, but can't get a clear picture, and outside, on auto-pilot I pop the trunk, and Daniel's out, but before he says anything I tell him my money's in my backpack, and the weather's so sticky I might change and he nods and I ask, 'So guys, you sure you don't want anything? On me?' and Bob says 'Nada gracias' and Daniel waves me away and lights a cigarette and I wonder if Bob's come up from Spain as I run across the road to the cafe, or if he's being ironic using 'nada' instead of 'niente' and from the counter I see Daniel leaning on the car front, smoking and Bob still in back, face framed in the quarter circle window and I wonder why he doesn't sit up front, why no one sits in the passenger seat and I pour a glass of iced water from the jug, the glass frosting with the cold and behind the bar are bottles of Limoncello, and I remember the cloudiness of the drink that night in Naples and some guy scratching his beard, saying it was the 'Ouzo' effect, and I drink the iced water, and all I can taste are the lemon slices and when the guy behind the counter asks if the coffee is to go, I say no.

before *carlin mccarthy*



carlin mccarthy & after



CARLIN MCCARTHY (she/her) is a journalist and photographer out of Brooklyn, NY. Her work has been published in BuzzFeed, TimeOut and creatures mag among others. She is interested in capturing the everyday as cinematic and finding frames that make her say, "Oh, that's a good shot."

the heartbreak quiz *ana hein*

We've all experienced heartbreak at some point or another, but there are as many kinds of heartbreak as there are ways to break a heart. What kind of broken-hearted soul are you? Find out all the answers in this personality quiz! Circle the answer that you think best fits your emotional journey and you will be judged accordingly.

1) What do you think broken-heart syndrome is?

- a. Also known as stress-induced cardiomyopathy, broken-heart syndrome is when a part of your heart temporarily enlarges and doesn't pump blood correctly while the rest of it continues to function normally or more forcefully. It's often caused by an emotionally stressful event, which means a breakup or death of a loved one.
- b. It's the physical manifestation of true love when faced with its loss. You can't survive without your beloved. How romantic.
- c. It's a metaphor to describe the pain of a breakup. Your heart breaks, but not literally of course. It feels like it's fractured beyond repair. But it's just a metaphor.
- d. It's a heart attack with no heart damage or blockage of arteries. In other words, not real. Get over it. Only 1% of the people diagnosed with it die, anyway.

2) What are the signs of your broken heart?

- a. Shortness of breath, chest pain, and irregular heartbeat.
- b. Lying in bed for days on end, crying in the shower, and listening to Sara Bareilles sing about the girl she no longer is but once was.
- c. Trying to go about your life as if nothing were wrong while dying inside.
- d. Weakness for having fallen prey to the sway of your emotions in the first place.

3) How do you treat your broken heart?

- a. Angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors to lower blood pressure, beta blockers to lower blood pressure and regulate heart rate, diuretics to decrease fluid buildup, and anti-anxiety medicines to manage the obvious stress.
- b. Wearing red lipstick, a little black dress, and going to a club. Finding another heart that is also broken and making the most of the night. Maybe you can cobble together something brilliant from your collective pieces. At the bare minimum, you can have a good time.
- c. You don't treat it. It fixes itself. Or time fixes it. Or maybe it doesn't get fixed at all. Maybe you always feel the slightest ache in your chest for the rest of your life when thinking about those who no longer love you but once did. Maybe it was never broken, and you're lying about having loved them at all. If you really loved them, it would hurt even more—you'd never recover.
- d. Excising it. That way you won't have to worry about it breaking ever again. Better to feel nothing than pain. You can always keep it in a jar as a reminder.

4) Fun fact: during the cremation of the poet Percy Shelley in 1822 after he drowned, Edward Trelawny, a family friend, removed Shelley's heart—calcified due to tuberculosis—from the flames and later gave it to his wife, Mary Shelley. How fitting for a gothic writer. What do you think she did with it?

- a. Ummm, actually, Mary Shelley didn't have his heart—she had his liver. The heart is hollow and therefore quite easy to obliterate while the liver, which is the most solid of any internal organ, resists being burned, plus since Shelley drowned, it had the edge of being waterlogged. Trelawny simply mistook the liver for the heart, the more Romantic option of the two. Although, perhaps a liver works just as well since Shakespeare believed it to be the originator of blood, and thus, the host of love—a perfect symbolic equivalent courtesy of the best poet who ever lived.

- b. She kept it in her writing desk. She put it in a silk bag, wrapped it in pages of Shelley's poem, *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats*, and stowed it away with her pens and ink. Perhaps every so often she took it out and gazed at it. Maybe she used it as a paperweight. In any case, his heart was found there thirty years later by her only living son, Percy Shelley, after her own death, along with locks of hair from her two other children, both of whom had died just a few years before their father. Maybe she would have kept their hearts too if she could have.
 - c. She carried it with her—carried it in her heart.
 - d. Ummm, actually, Trelawny didn't give the heart to Mary Shelley. He gave it to Leigh Hunt, a publisher of Shelley's work who insisted he be the recipient of it at the funeral. He said his love of Shelley surpassed "the claims of any other love." Lord Byron eventually convinced him to relinquish it to its rightful owner. But who's to say Hunt's love wasn't just as present as Mary's, his pain just as real, his heart just as broken if in a different way? Why does only one person get to say his heart was—is—theirs?
- 5) What is the most painful way to break your heart?
- a. In the middle of a Chinese restaurant after you've just sat down to eat. Your partner stares down at their hands before telling you they love you like a sibling. You think to yourself that if that were true, why would they want to fuck you so much and why would they get so upset when your yes morphed into a no? You then have to sit through the rest of the meal and the 20-minute drive back to your house with them because they are your ride.
 - b. Unmatching with you on Tinder after one fuck, before you get their number.
 - c. Being told you have a mental disorder—manic depression to be exact—when you try to set healthy boundaries on your relationship. Your partner doesn't know that this term is out of date—they really meant to say they think you're Bipolar. Granted, they don't say this when they break up with you. You are actually the one who dumps them because of this comment. You know it's the right thing to do and you don't regret it. But it doesn't mean it hurts you any less.

d. You don't know real pain. Count yourself lucky this is the worst you've gotten. Your heart can yet recover.

6) Who is your broken-hearted icon?

a. Romeo and Juliet

b. Bella Swan in *New Moon*

c. Daisy Buchanan

d. None of them. They aren't real; they're all fictional characters. Their emotional pain is designed to caution, to amuse, to function as allegory, not be relatable in its outlandishness. No one could possibly feel that much.

6) Who is your heart-breaking icon?

a. Your first partner—the one your friend sets you up with—the one who takes you to the movies to watch bad YA novel adaptations of books you both adore—your first love—your high school sweetheart—the one you slow dance with under the stars—the one who takes your virginity and then dumps you two weeks later. You date for a total of two months. It's your second longest relationship of the four official ones you've had.

b. The sexual partner you want to be romantic. You have feelings—they don't. But they do find you hot, so maybe if you keep in their orbit, one day things will change in your favor. They don't. You hook up twice over a period of two months before they say they can't do this anymore. They never once kiss you.

c. Your current partner should they ever decide it's time to jump ship. You live together; they moved across the country in the middle of winter to be with you. Your friends have bets on when they will propose. You can't imagine your life without them—every time you do, you start to cry, sob really. So God only knows the state you'd be in if they actually left. You've been dating for almost nine months, your longest relationship to date.

d.

You gave these people you knew for a second the power to hurt you. Your heartbreak is your own damn fault.

If you answered mostly A's... you're a realist. You look at problems objectively and take things... very literally. Do you even have any feelings?

If you answered mostly B's... you're a sentimental wreck. You let your emotions overpower you to the point of wallowing. Surely none of this is really hurt that much?

If you answered mostly C's... you're a contemplator. You abstract your feelings to the point they aren't real anymore. You're probably an artist who can't face the harshness of the world. Buck up.

If you answered mostly D's... you're a heartless bitch. You scoff at the notion of attachment and pain. Did you ever value the people who loved you and the impact they had on your life? What a monster.



ANA HEIN (she/her) is an undergraduate student at Emerson College pursuing a BFA in Creative Writing with minors in Comedy Writing and Performance and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Her work has been featured in *Critical Read*, *Digging Through the Fat*, *Blind Corner*, and *Fearsome Critters*, among others, and has won multiple Editor's Choice Awards from *Teen Ink Magazine*.

too late *ivan de monbrison*

Ночь в моей голове,
Звезда на лбу
Сияет.
Это безумие ... любовь моя.
Завтра на твоей кровати,
Ваше тело будет холодным.
Я поцелую тебя в рот,
и твой рот улетит,
как бабочка в воздух.

The night is in my head,
With a star shining on the forehead.
This is crazy ... my love.
Tomorrow on your bed
your body will be cold.
I will kiss you on the mouth
and your mouth will fly away
like a butterfly in the air.

ivan de monbrison

the crow

Церковь пуста,
Без звука,
Ветер дует снаружи,
Хотя деревья почти не двигаются,
Мы идем по двое,
Но все же мы как чужие друг другу,
И ворона кричит на нас как
Мы идем рядом с ним.

The church is empty
without a sound,
the wind is blowing outside,
although the trees hardly move,
we go two by two,
but still we are like strangers to each other,
and a crow screams at us
as we walk by.

isle of the dead

miriam meeks

CW: sexual content

I stopped by a few days after the funeral, wanted to give her room to breathe. My grandmother always used to say, “Grief suffocates. Sometimes all they need is space.” It was several days before I saw my grandmother after grandfather had died. Now I made my way outside of town to make certain the vastness didn’t kill my friend.

The day was dreary, not unusual in this part of the country, but I felt God was mocking her by making it more so. Despite the gloom, it was warm as it neared the end of summer. The house sat on the low hill as always—its shingled roof falling to bits, the lamppost at the gate rusted and unlit. The house of my childhood: a beloved time of hide-and-seek and make believe and imagining lives across the channel. I knocked and readjusted my basket of bread and produce.

The mist was heavy this morning and I squinted to find the isle to the west. Barely a smudge visible, large as my thumb. On a good day its pointed ends were visible as well as the fall and rise of the hills. Sometimes a sheep or horse could be spotted, though this was now unlikely. It’s been deserted eight years now.

The isle where souls went to die.

I’ve pictured my grandfather whittling away at scorched kindling or taking strolls on the cliffsides. Grandmother now joined him, pulling him away from peering over the cliffs. Children’s stories to make the grief more bearable. Six years since I have lost her. Now I lived alone in our tiny cottage at the town’s edge.

Four days since Eliza has lost her mother.

And now she lived alone in the great two-story Georgian her family inherited. Too much room for so young a person. The voices in the house started getting to you at that age.

Several seconds have passed since I knocked, and I’m jolted out of my reverie with the isle across the channel. No answer. I knocked again. Footsteps clopped on the other side of the blue door, its paint chipping away. I lifted a hand to push the peeling piece down into submission, then the door flung open.

Eliza Dunne. Not yet twenty with palest of pale skin and darkest of black hair. Her eyes were ringed with golden sadness and her skirt mussed with wear. Did she shake with relief when seeing me? I must have imagined things.

“Eliza, how are you?”

She melted at the question and ushered me in with such desperation. She took hold of my arm as we flew through the house, aimed for the sunroom at the back end. I felt as if she supported me in our journey there, not the other way around. Misty clouds and green moors greeted us at the windows; the isle taunted us beyond. Eliza gestured for me to sit at the card table with her. I set the basket down and sat. She turned on the lamp behind her, setting about a glow in contrast with the gloomy view.

Eliza turned to me, wanting to say everything but stopping herself. Society taught women to keep our mouths shut. I took her hand in mine and asked again:

“How are you?”

Eliza cried. We sat in the hum of her cries for several minutes. My hand began to ache, but I felt guilty in thinking of letting go.

“I know you miss her,” I said.

She nodded. Retrieved her handkerchief from somewhere in her skirts and calmed herself. She relinquished my hand and sighed.

“I’m getting on with it.”

I pressed. “With what exactly? The losing her? You need to allow yourself time to—”

“It’s keeping the house in order. Her will. Stupid things.”

“Do you need any help?”

She shook her head. “Most of it’s done. Father’s lawyers. He handled the estate before he passed. It went to Mother initially, but I knew it wouldn’t be hers forever.”

Her father had been a cruel and cunning man. We used to hide in cupboards when he returned home from the pub. I already knew what she’d say but asked anyway.

“Who’s he left the house to?”

“Some awful cousins in Galway.”

I scoffed. Forcing it, as I sincerely prayed for her escape from this hellish house. It’s isolated for a reason—its very presence bodes ill.

I summoned courage for my intent of this visit. A way into town sat a boarding house for single girls. I considered living there after losing my grandparents but wanted to keep their house in the family. Though I stayed put, I devoted my time and money to serving the boarding house and the girls within. It was a suitable place for someone like Eliza. And she would be close to me.

“Have you thought about moving into town?”

“No. Should I?”

I took her hand again. “There’s a boarding house just around the corner from me. Loads of girls staying there. You know Cara and Dillie?”

Eliza’s mouth turned in disgust. “Those stupid girls?”

“They’re not stupid—”

“They are. I’d rather die than go there.”

“Then where are you to go?”

Eliza stood. Fleeing an argument like a young child. She wrapped her arms around herself and stared out the sash windows.

“Liza—”

“Must I give an answer for you?”

“No.”

I joined her at the windows. Looking sidelong at her as she searched for something in the distance. Like always. I’m known to keep two feet on the ground, and she was everywhere but. The sun came out the briefest of moments, then clouds hid it away. There was the promise of rain and I turned to beat the onslaught home. Eliza’s skirts rustled.

“You’ve always been so worried for me.”

I went back to her. “Of course.”

“Why?”

I found I could not answer so I shrugged. She smiled at my dismissive behavior. I was always the sure one, she the uncertain. At least when it came to some things; there were moments I didn’t have answers for. Like things of the heart.

Eliza took my hand. “You always take care of me. I’m undeserving.”

I laughed. “No, I don’t think so.”

The Eliza lifted my hand and kissed it.

A friendly act, one between kindred spirits. Then why did my heart race?

Eliza did not let go but stared back at me. My nerves on fire, I suspected she knew my turmoil. Her hand swiveled and the pad of her thumb pressed against my wrist. There. Heartbeat betrayed me.

“Alma.”

Later, I would not remember this moment vividly. I foolishly entered that state of reverie as I was so in shock of what Eliza did. She kissed me. Or I kissed her. What did it matter except for the hearts wanting, mouths beseeching? I took hold of her as I’d always wished to. Why did death bring us together?

In a whirlwind, Eliza’s blouse was discarded on the ground. Did I unbutton it? She was earnest in her actions, stripped down to her chemise in seconds. My dress followed suit almost immediately, my naked skin sweated in the balmy heat. I thanked God for the isolated Georgian home on the hill with its sunroom overlooking the moors. It was only us.

The rain unleashed on the moors. I found answers to my childhood dreams and fears in her arms on the floor where we used to play jacks. We played together; now we loved together. I held back the tears of relief from wanting for so long. Eliza wept openly. Grievous yet joyous. I didn’t understand it. How she found solace in this from the death of her mother, I thought as I felt parts of her I’d imagined touching.

It was when she tasted me that I realized. The saddest parts of us only find peace in those grand moments which transcend. Then I prayed that this moment would last eternal.

But it ended and we found ourselves wrapped up in each other on the lush Persian rug her father brought back from his trip to the East. There was a moment long ago that I remembered our lying in the tall grass of the moor as I trailed a stalk of grass down her skin.

Alternatives to my desires.

It wasn't until Eliza turned to me that I noticed a strand of her dark hair between my fingers. She smiled. The rain turned to a drizzle. I dozed until I heard Eliza's whispers against my chest.

"Alma, my love, I can't do this anymore."

"What do you mean?" I asked as I brushed her hair. "We've only just begun."

"I don't mean us. Though I wish it could go on," she buried her head again. "It can't."

I sat up, my heart aching in worry. "Liza—"

"This world screams too much for me. It's loud."

"Then we'll go someplace quiet. Away from the home of your father and mother. To hell with them."

Eliza laughed. "That's just it. I have to go be with my mother."

My blood chilled. "What?" I dared ask.

Eliza stood and donned her chemise. "I have to go. She's waiting."

"Waiting?" I took the wool blanket off the chaise as Eliza slipped out the back door. "Eliza!"

But she was down the first slope of the hill, headed towards the cliffside. She stopped at its edge, toes skimming the plunge.

I drew up beside her and pulled the blanket tighter around me. An early autumn chill crept in from the seas. "Where are you going? Where's your mother?"

She did not answer but pointed across the channel to that lone behemoth which haunted me. The Isle of the Dead.

"Eliza. Listen to me." I begged. "Your mother passed on. She's no longer here. On Earth."

Eliza shook her head. I turned her to face me.

"I'm here," I said as I took her hand and guided it to my chest beneath the blanket. She took hold, and I leaned into her hand and against her.

I kissed her neck and murmured, "Come away. Let's go inside."

We returned to the warmth of her childhood home as the rain poured again. I took her in my arms and with my body professed the love I'd always held for her since we were small. She kissed me and cried my name. We fell asleep tangled up on the wool blanket.

I found a part of myself I lost long ago that night. But lost another.

At dawn the crows cried, and I sat up half-awake. The empty space beside me was an abyss. No Eliza; she was not in the sunroom. I went through the rest of the house and found scarred and hollow rooms. My heart plummeted to the ground as I remembered her words last night. The glint in her eye as she pointed across the channel. Yet naked, I ran out of the house and clambered through wet grass. The day was clearer than yesterday, and the mist gone. I teetered at cliff's edge where Eliza stood not a day ago, telling me where she was going. What she had to do.

I searched the rocks on the shore for her and felt relief when I saw nothing. But I was shaking with frenzy. Praying she was not lost to the water. Falling to my knees, I wept for the girl I loved and the woman I held last night. She told me her intent—I would not find her on this land. The wind picked up and dried my tears, cut goosebumps across my bare skin. I felt the house's presence like a bruise. The glass windows moaned against the wind.

I was not afraid of ghosts until I entered that house and found they lived there.

I glowered at the isle which boasted and mocked me. Gone was my love and the isle took it. The ghosts of my past now haunt me from afar. I stood in contempt and wiped the salt and tears from my face. The sun glittered against the channel and the sky shone blue. My eyes flickered at signs of movement in the distance. For on the shores of the Isle of the Dead, were two figures walking hand in hand. They paused. One raised a hand in farewell.

It was not difficult to start the fire. A toppled kerosene lamp, a candle left by a curtain. They will never know. I took the woolen blanket and the blouse and skirt she wore last I saw her. Nothing else in that godforsaken place amounted to keeping or cherishing. I dressed quickly, lay the flames and departed as quickly as I could.

Later they'd explain the accident which took the Dunne's Georgian home as just that: an accident. The cousins from Galway were outraged and blamed it on Eliza's clumsiness. She became "that poor girl," and "helpless, pitiful Dunne," in the town. I could no longer stay; my love for her grew into an angry and brittle thing. Moving to the abandoned shepherd's cottage outside the town's borders seemed the only choice. I found myself alone once more.



Now I find myself wanting to cross that channel.

MIRIAM MEEKS (she/her) is a graduate of SCAD, where she earned her MFA in Dramatic Writing. During her time there, she was involved in the Nailed It! Writer's Room. She also wrote an animated short titled, Drawn Apart, alongside Emma Oliver and Abigail Taylor-Sansom, for which they won a Southeast Emmy Student Production Award in 2019. She's usually found in a bookstore, having worked as a bookseller for the past four years.

more to me *sarah eckstine*



SARAH ECKSTINE (she/her) is a photographer and artist who received her BFA from The Maryland Institute College of Art in 2020. She currently attends Illinois State University as an MFA Candidate.

Sarah's work is focused on her nearly decade long struggle with chronic illness and chronic pain. She has interstitial cystitis, a chronic bladder disease, and was diagnosed with multiple sexual dysfunctions after years of being misdiagnosed and not having her pain believed by doctors. Her photographic work of the subject aims to show an unromanticized version of sex and sexuality, how chronic pain affects her daily life, and how she has begun to heal, physically and emotionally.

inanimate love *bee lb*

my life is a tribute to the objects i love,
each thought leading to an object of desire.
each day spent chasing the wonder of
consumption. the rooms of my heart are
lined with tiny trinkets, each one
spun a tale of forgotten joys.
cobwebs gather in the lining of my love,
blown away by lips seeking to recapture
emotions once lost. the key to holding
is a murky mixture of entertainment
and anticipation; both diminished in the
palm of any hand. and so the chase resumes.
my life shapes itself into a mouth seeking fill,
each whim followed to the end of the trail,
stopping just short of fulfillment. each attempt
to feel full ended by the need to find new,
to lick at the lap of luxury until your tongue
is both sore and a remnant of beauty.
i've strayed from the point, which is only this:
i surround myself with objects, trapping my love
within. i make wounds of my lack, surrounded
by excess. i hide my heart in the ease of
consumption. i pretend i do not know what i'm
doing. in this feigned ignorance i find a mirror.
i am unwilling to look too closely.

BEE LB (they/them) is an array of letters, bound to impulse; they are a writer creating delicate connections. they have called any number of places home; currently, a single yellow wall in Michigan. they have been published in Crooked Arrow Press, Badlung Press, opia mag, and Revolute Lit, among others.

a flooding

karl khumo calagan

It's been six months since our grounds ran dry. The riddle of where all the water was from was one I stopped trying to solve, but where it's going, though—it's as if all the world's forests have turned insatiably thirsty, drinking up every last pint. The rivers and lakes were fountains replenishing themselves but never quite spilling, by some miracle.

My mother never thought the sudden bawling of clouds that one Tuesday morning would never actually let up. The rain was only half of a two-person love affair, one-sided to an outsider.

Give it time, she'd said.

Puzzles were now a mainstay on our 10-year-old rug, a new one almost every week. My mother hated going out in the rain. And so we've built our little sanctuary indoors, a moat of pillows and warm blankets around where our pieces laid disheveled, a twister through stables with towers of hay. Now is a painting of a family of zebras. My favorite was the one right before it—the Brooklyn Bridge from a snow-laden window in Dumbo—mostly because it took us forever to solve, hours on end forcing pieces together.

When my mom's mind wanders in search for a connecting piece, she starts speaking, and out pours the most mundane of stories—about how she believed chemtrails were laced with toxic chemicals for mind control, even though rich people breathed the same air as us and therefore automatically renders the conspiracy moot, I thought, or how unstoppable she felt juggling climbing the corporate ladder and raising me by herself all those years ago. Her voice always eases at a mumble. At first I thought she was talking to herself. I felt like an eavesdropper to an exchange I belonged to.

My mom stopped telling me stories as soon as I stopped needing to be tucked into bed. She got buried deeper and deeper into reports, contracts, and newsletters, or whatever people who worked at an office did, until the rain came. Since their stay-at-home orders, I'd been her guy at the watercooler.

One morning she made me a cup of coffee—her favorite type of brew, she'd told me. Of course she hadn't yet known I wasn't much of a coffee drinker, but I'll tell her someday else.

People got used to the constant thumping on their rooftops, of the incessant pouring, and of the solemn glumness tied to each drop. With the rain came my mom cooking me breakfast and laying with me on the living room floor trying to beat a puzzle-solving world record that probably hadn't yet existed.

They say a rainbow always comes after the rain, but will it ever grow tired waiting?



KARL KHUMO CALAGAN (he/him) is a queer Filipino writer, reader, and lawyer aspirant. He enjoys horror movies, thriller and queer literature, and get well soon by Ariana Grande. You can find him blogging over at karlcalagan.com and occasionally tweeting @karl_writes.

third wheeling *madalynn madigar*

Out until 3 with them, seeking to lose all sensibility
A feeling not reckless but found only in abandon,
 only achieved by crushing pearls I might otherwise clutch
in favor of watching them draw dicks in the dust of the car butt window
I'm always taking a backseat to romances no matter the persons,
 but it is on tonight I watch these two deniers stumble
across the record store's sunmelted crayon interior,
caressing each other without realizing it, in the purest of ways,
 through the hyena laughter to their dirtiest jokes. Around the edges
of A Love Supreme, I'm pretending I don't see them spin past as
naive magenta-cornflower swirl, pawing through vintage Playboys
 to find the editions of their late 90s birth months and guffawing
at now long-wrinkled titties forever immortalized in a crisp plastic
that their 1974 mint condition fingers crinkle. Surely they too must want
 a wrapping together made of a hazelnut-mocha ritalin resin which protects
against the water damage from that tearful worn out slang of immaturity and
infidelity
and a time when they can't be a tumbling down turntable blaring
 parental advisory full-sugar soda fizz and instead go flat on being the
name brand of zoomer fucks Desirous of Everything at the Same Time.
How soggy, how real, how unchill, lame, not lit it will be when it all
 goes out of fashionable fun and I'm their dutiful trailing Kerouac no more:
I'm merely a third wheel bolted onto a bicycle with the only purpose of
buffering the (at)traction of the two real wheels. And when their
 welding starts to creak and rust, on one inflated summer day, I'll
 loosen the metal and softly,
 tenderly,
 roll away to find
 more mad passions of
 a someones else

MADALYNN MADIGAR (she/her) is a person currently living in Montana where she occasionally reads, writes, and pursues a Master's in literature. She aspires to one day command a fleet of roombas.

trivial conversations *kalyani bindu*

So, do you write songs too, play the piano?

Shall we sing about this plastic air that we
keep biting off of, frozen in a can somewhere,

guarded by a crab on the banks of a river

meandering in circles, every dance a time-
paradox that eats itself endlessly.

The air waits for the song, the crab for a choice
that sounds like something gushing out.

So, do you sing about crabs too, pulling pincers
first and the shell next, arching the quiet corners
of your mouth to sound like lacerated muscle?

Imagine trying to sound like water in supple skin
waiting to break and the opposite of that.

Do you think of breaking stretchy skin, every pull
only a dance away from disembowelling a tomb?

Imagine that.

The pun is on the one that could not stomach
a song, the one that we buried in haste.

Three years from now, we will sing of trivial fossils
and clear the air.

So, do you think of metaphors too?

Every time I ask you about a song, look under your
piano for scraps of tender greyish-white meat.

KALYANI BINDU (she/her): Indian writer and researcher. *Two Moviegoers* was her first poetry collection. Her poems and essays have appeared in the *Kali Project: Indian Women's Voices* (Indie Blu(e) anthology), *Better than Starbucks*, *Ethos Literary Journal*, *New Asian Writing*, *Madras Courier*, *Muse India*, *Modern Literature*, *Asian Signature*, the *Indian Express*, and others.

what a day *e.f.s. byrne*

Big Johnny sat back in his armchair. The hard, black plastic groaned slightly. He sighed with pleasure. They knew each other well: they quickly made each other comfortable. Big Johnny held a drop of whiskey in his left fist and grey haired fingers stroked the pale golden hue lovingly, before rising it gently to a cracked lip. It needed watering, but he left it as it was.

Big Johnny took a deep breath, leaned into the chair, his arms spread over the armrests, blue-blooded veins rippling with the effort across the back of once strong hands. A line of photos crossed his vision, framed memories in need of dusting. Red vessels stretched and tattooed a bulbous nose as he snorted and let his eyes close beneath drooping eyebrows.

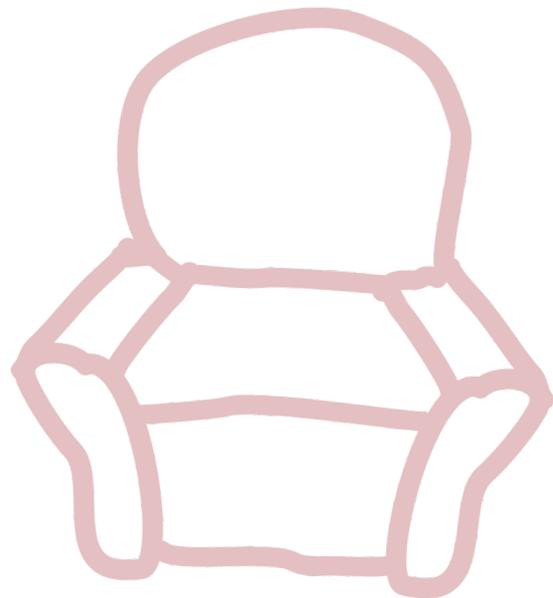
Outside, the air was whistling, birds dive-bombing, sunlight fading behind the curtains. There was a whiff of spring, the dampness of stale newspapers and long drawn curtains. Big Johnny sighed. It had been a great day he told himself, letting the words float silently in the depths of his throat. He remembered his mother soothing his locks, whispering those very words every time he came home from school crying. His wife said the same the day he lost his job, except her tongue held a bitter streak, a resigned bite that forced her out the door and him to stay inside, locked away in the fear of failing over and over again.

He woke a few minutes later. The news was blaring on TV, headless voices crying out for help, bleating untruths over bereaved beliefs. He leaned over, groped for a cushion on the floor, threw it across the room and swiped the screen a knock out blow. It fizzed, went silent. He didn't want any more nonsense spoiling his perfect day.

That brandy at breakfast had warmed his spirits, the beers over lunch watered it down well, the bottle of wine at the Chinese, anis at the station, carton of wine in the park, a rush of gin somewhere down the line. It was all coming back. A full day indeed.

The armchair swung gently under his weight, back holding him softly as he threatened to drop into sleep. He moved a little, twisted his waist until one shoulder drooped lower in search of a cushion that had slipped beyond his reach a long time ago. He would get up in a minute and fill his glass. He could see the bottle staring handsomely, lording it over the empty kitchen fridge as daylight faded into darkness.

The phone rang. "It'll be Jill," he thought. He waited for the piercing interruption to fade. She'd ring again tomorrow.



E. F. S. BYRNE (he/him) works in education and writes when his teenage kids allow it. He blogs a regular micro flash story. Links to this and over fifty published pieces can be found at efsbyrne.wordpress.com or follow him on Twitter @efsbyrne.

all hard and no soft *maggie petrella*

take cinnamon sandpaper to my nerves
and dull the feel of you

bring a file to the edges of my chest
make it sharp like yours:

all hard and no soft

MAGGIE PETRELLA (she/her) is a rust-belt-raised poet based in Baltimore, MD. Her work has been published in Back Patio Press, Southchild Lit, The Daily Drunk, and others. She can be found online at maggiepetrella.com or on Twitter at @maggie_425.

deficit of departure *ross scott-bucleuch*

picture
attempted joy
but abort at derelict hello

discretion
measured in local eyebrows

months of carried manners
for dregs of promise

erased applause
a moat of jaded stillness

confess to unoriginal worry

just not to me

ROSS SCOTT-BUCCLEUCH's (he/him) poetry has previously been published in The Neo-Decadent Cookbook from Eibonvale Press, Beir Bua Journal, Tattiezine and Fur-Lined Ghettos magazine. His debut poetry chapbook Fang Coda was published by Salò Press in 2020. He also runs the tape label Steep Gloss, which specialises in collaborative sound works of all things sinister, delirious, bewildering, melancholy, abstract, dadaist, etc.

good days *gissel gomez*



GISSEL GOMEZ (she/her) is a seventeen-year-old artist. She is the Editor-in-chief of her school's literary magazine and hopes she can make people stop and stare with her art.

sugaring snow *jane ayres*

i am easy want
making the stalks grow
strangely

slither without sugaring
or diluting your
self

the squash & the squeeze of it
the one-ness / the when-ness
slowly extending

spiralling
(e)motionless
no longer swimming
no longer making waves

a little piece of sugared snow

UK based neurodivergent writer JANE AYRES (she/her) completed a Creative Writing MA at the University of Kent in 2019 aged 57. She is fascinated by hybrid poetry/prose experimental forms and has work in Dissonance, Confluence, Ink Drinkers Poetry, Lighthouse, Streetcake, The North, The Poetry Village, Door is a Jar, Kissing Dynamite, (mac)ro(mic), Versification, Crow & Cross Keys, Ample Remains, Sledgehammer and The Forge.

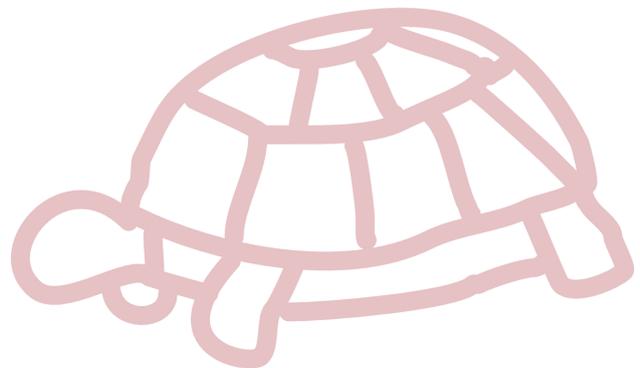
shell shock syndrome *kaja van den burg*

I am a turtle ready to crack, you say
hiding in my dugout like a solider
I bury my thoughts in the sand
like my children

I like the idea of carrying my home
with me every step I go
and it is true I do move on slowly
fighting for every metre of land

I do not want to crack, I think
too scared of the explosion
why should I give up my defence
we all become weightless under water

(it smells of gasoline
and I long for the sea)



KAJA VAN DEN BURG (she/her) is a twenty-something bilingual writer and blogger from Germany. She's an enthusiast for rain, books, art and people. Her work can be found on her blog www.ausdemakörbchen.com, in *Apropos Magazin* and various other lit mags, and on the lithe EP by FRANKLY SAID.

liminal faces *natalie timmerman*

Even amongst the maroon skies, the rusted frames of once running cars, and the dark puddles upon the fractured asphalt—maybe of acid, maybe of bourbon, maybe of drool or blood—you're a strange sight. Standing in the highway's intersection, feral but on two feet, shaking but stiff. Yes, you're a strange sight. I never thought I'd come across you again.

Last I saw of you, your fingers, still pink with fresh burns of failed fires, gripped tight onto a machete. As you waged the blade, you bared your teeth. You held a thick determination in that focused face of yours.

Now, you wage only a foaming mouth and a pair of wild, ravenous eyes. It's a wonder I still recognize you: my girl, my girl.

Is anyone awake behind those eyes? Does that tormented mind hold anything other than hunger, thirst, and rage? Does it remember our hushed conversations beneath the newborn flaming sky or the way you'd put your chin on my shoulder? Do your lips remember how to upturn into a smile, not a grimace, a smile—a gentle one—with those little creases at your eye's corners? Does it remember me at all, your girl, and does it remember the fall of man? My mind still does.

When dust consumed what the crimson fog and locusts couldn't. When the factions first raised their tattered flags. When society fell into the rubble and flame. When our homes became the liminal spaces—abandoned parking lots, airports, and malls—and liminal spaces became our homes. When we still fell onto our knees and prayed to the deaf gods for relief; when the world toppled off her axis and outgrew herself.

We laughed when they called it the end of the world because, for us, it was only the beginning. A messy, new beginning.

One pigtail at a time, you cut off all your hair, but you still loved to braid mine. You called me a new name, and I called you a new one, too. Hand in hand, we trudged across the abandoned highways. Before the asphalt had split. Before the roaches had overtaken the shallow fissures.

When the nights on the side of the roads were deathly silent, when a foe could've been hiding behind the guardrail's tarnished metal or in the shadows, you rested your chin against my shoulder and squeezed my hand. You never said it, but such a squeeze told me, everything will be *all right*.

And I believed it. You did too.

But as we stare at each other across the foggy roadway, teeth exposed, backs hunched, breaths feral and rough, bodies circling each other, ready to make the first move, to lunge, to strike down or be stricken down, it is clear we were wrong. Whatever we believed, we believed in vain.

Everyone else, they have become liminal faces. Faces with no soul behind the blank mask, only the heart of an enemy, only a greedy mouth, only hands that'd be better broken by my stone than breaking mine with stone. Faces that'll be seen and gone, seen and gone. All but yours. Yours, even in its primal state, I still recognize. Never liminal, never just seen and gone, but remembered. Never just a transition between wraths and fears.

You straighten your sunburnt shoulders. I straighten mine. Your wide eyes tame. So do mine. "My girl," you mouth through cracked lips. Yes, it's you.

We step closer. I don't remember your name, and you don't remember mine, but we know each other's faces better than we know the cycles of the sun. Your hair's grown to your shoulders, scruffier, too—knotted and gnarled. My braids rest limp, soaked in sweat and mud. But there's still that gash through my brow, and there's still that scab on your chin. I'm still missing that tip of my middle finger, and you're still missing that first canine tooth. Yes, I'm still me, and you're still you.

Crunch! I leap to my toes, and you let out a snarl. Our heads shoot back and forth. What's come at us now? A scuttling swarm of termites? A buzzing cloud of wasps? When you let out a screech, I nearly sink my claws into you.

Not a screech—a laugh. A garbled, eye-crinkling laugh. You lift your foot to reveal a plastic bottle beneath. A bottle with dirt around its lips, that's all.

That's all.

No monsters in the deep, no predator, no man, just you, me, and our frenzied minds. You share the laugh with me, and as I join in, I stumble towards you.

Inches away now, we share a sigh. We share a tear. We share a hug—an embrace, a messy, shaking embrace. Your manic heart rattles against mine.

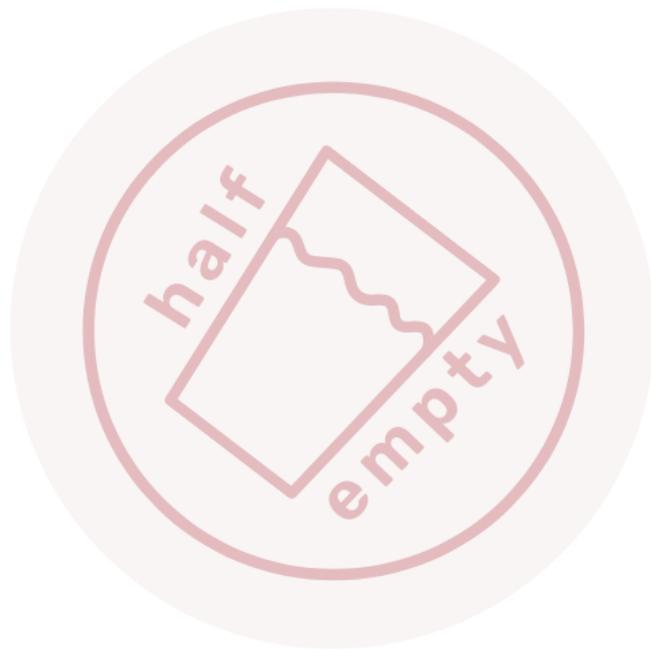
And carefully, your scuffed-up hand grips around what's left of mine; the blood on mine mingles with the dirt on yours; our fingers, gashed and burned, intertwine.

With your breath, calm on my neck, you take me back. Yes, you take me back to the days before catastrophe. I think we called them the “good days”. Does your mind remember those days? Mine does. Maybe yours does, too. God, I hope it does.

When “rabid” and “wild” were foreign terms. When anarchy still had a name. When the only animal coats we wore were faux and bloodless—when we were bloodless. When we saw faces, faces that weren't just liminal, that weren't just passing predators and prey. When we saw faces who held souls behind them—faces we loved, hated, pondered about, and worried for. Faces that watched the stars twinkle above, asked, “do you think we're truly alone?”, and raised no weapon, no fist, no claw, but instead glowed at the fact that maybe, in that vast expanse of darkness, we might not be.

When we laughed at the idea of the end of the world, because, for us, it was only the beginning.

NATALIE TIMMERMAN's (she/her) writing revels in the unpleasant: the gritty, gruesome, and the gross. An upbringing swallowing down her severe nausea from anxiety inspired this style, as many deemed her suffering “unpleasant.” In a way, it's a reclamation—a celebration of what makes us human: unpleasantness.



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