

TOUCHSTONE



Spring 2020
Kansas State University

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A Note From the Editor

Dear Reader,

This year's Touchstone comes at an unusual time in all of our lives. Amidst unprecedented closures and distance, alienating us from one another even as we all work together to protect our most vulnerable and the lives of all people, the things we read and write connect us. Even the production of this magazine has become distant, as our team began to work remotely midway through this spring semester. The work in this magazine was written, submitted, and selected all before our world changed, yet this magazine comes at a time inseparable from these unusual circumstances. We can only imagine the kind of writing and perspectives that will be inspired by this time in our lives, and as a result, what next year's magazine might look like.

For this year's magazine, the other staff and I can only hope that the words in these pages might provide a distraction, or a comfort, or a moment of intrigue amidst these days of solitude. The stories we tell define ourselves, our times, and our perspectives, so as you read, we hope you might be reminded of the connections and resonations shared across all people and places.

Yours,
Rebecca Nelson

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Celestial Bodies

Dené K. Dryden

Like many other humans on Earth, I saw a black hole for the first time on April 10th. The image — a composite made by nine telescopes and hundreds of scientists — became an ancient relic as soon as it was rendered. The black hole exists 55 million light-years away from us, a distance beyond comprehension. My eyes witnessed the glory of the supermassive beast, a force so dense it approaches infinite heaviness, as it appeared eons ago . A memory of the universe caught later in time. The computer screen gives it no justice.

So I go outside. The air is crisp on my arms, but the sky is hazy by smoke. Like the brilliant ring around the black hole, a strip of hill on the Kansas horizon blazes in its yearly fire-cleanse. Tilting my gaze from the now to the then, the stars tell the story of the past. The brighter ones, the stars which linger closer to us than others, which burn hotter, catch my focus first, then my eyes default to the constellations I know: a soldier, a ladle, a bear. Somewhere out there, somewhere within the Messier 87 galaxy, pinpointed by the virgin constellation's figure, the black hole continues to consume rocks and stars, strengthening its lightless intensity.

Fifty-five million years away from now, will the black hole see me in my stunningly short existence? Does the sun see new glimpses of my face every eight minutes, the brown marks it has left on my skin ? The moon, obligated to this dance around the Earth with us all — does it know me? If they could see, would they see my body as I see theirs?

•••••

The first body in space did not belong to a human. In 1947, fruit flies became the first bodies deliberately sent just to the edge of the Earth's atmosphere, 68 miles above our heads at the Karman line . Dogs and monkeys followed the flies into spaceflight; some returned home safely, and others made a one-way trip. Ten years after the flies, the first animal to orbit the Earth was Laika, a Russian dog. She sailed upward in Sputnik 2 and hula-hooped the planet. Laika died in the satellite hours after liftoff, all according to plan — not one that she had any say in. Sputnik 2 burned up in the Earth's atmosphere in April 1958, cremating the mutt with it.

Now we launch our own bodies into space, claiming a tiny piece of power in an apathetic universe. Several attempts at placing ourselves in space have failed: Apollo 1, Space Shuttle Challenger, and Space Shuttle Columbia. But the successes have outshined the tragedy. Human limbs walked on the lunar surface and united the segments of the International Space Station. Today those people float free around the station, sleep upright strapped to a cushioned wall, fasten themselves onto exercise machines, and step foot into nothing; the spacewalk is the ultimate human embodiment in space. Completely detached from anything earthly (save for the tether made from our oils and metals), the spacewalk is a dichotomy. The sun burns your back as you peer into the crystalline cold void of the universe. The body connected and disconnected. Reined but aloft. Dead and also alive, depending on the system's perfection.

Faith in your fellow astronauts, your team, your family, the awesomeness of the universe. Disbelief that you are where you are right in that moment.

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The Earth itself is a body, conceived about 4.5 billion years ago . This planet came about like most, if not all,

planets: The elements too heavy to exist in stars, supernova vomit, and the other by-products of stellar life are expelled into space, and large clouds of these elements begin to spin tighter and faster, increasing their gravitational forces. Gained-gravity flattens the cloud into a thin dinner plate. The center of that disk forms a protostar that pushes unnecessary materials away from itself. The expelled gases venture farther away than the solid silicates do, creating a natural order of the planets: rocky spheres at arm's length, gaseous beings more distant from the star. Earth, like Mars, Venus, and Mercury, is made up of tiny bits and pieces of the rejected star stuff that clumped together, eventually creating substantial bodies with gravitational influence. As these rock chunks found each other, mass and heat increased; the fetal Earth was mostly molten, a swollen red ball of ferrous fire. To this day, the Earth's body is still cooling from its heated birth, as evidenced by volcanoes, hydrothermal vents, and floating tectonic plates. It's not too romantic to say that the Earth — and everything on it — is made of stardust.

As it turns out, the Earth is not as round as it seems. Despite the planet's streamlined, spherical visage, the centrifugal force produced by the Earth's rotation causes the equator to be thicker than the poles — the Earth is an ellipsoid . It is still far from a perfect shape when we consider the distance between high terrains and sea floors, mountaintops and underwater trenches. Even sea level isn't truly level across the planet. The Earth is irregular and slowly changing.

I, too, have gotten thicker at the equator rather than at the poles. That accretion has been slow — it seems like my stretch marks appeared overnight, even though I know those scars took weeks to form. Striae connecting curve-to-curve on my skin, signposts of

puberty and sedentary habits. The hills of my figure are soft, but the granite beneath remains strong.

I remember the rapid changes in my body at the start of the high school volleyball season. My coach conditioned me with two-a-day practices in the mid-August heat, the lack of air conditioning in the gym pushing my blood into a false fever zone. Every pore open, watering the gymnasium air, sensitive to all touch. Bumping the ball stung. Good-job pats on my back chaffed. I could feel myself stretch taller after the jump of a reaching spike, an attempted block at the net. Gulped water sloshing in my belly during drills and runs around the court. After the first practice of the season, I'd try not to sit too long, to stave off the stiffness a bit longer. I sought to ease the trial that was moving my body the next day by stretching my arms, shoulders, core, legs, fingers into poses I hadn't assumed in months. I could feel the dullness in my leg bones, knowing that the pressure forced them to become stronger. I have yet to break a bone.

A few days into practice I'd feel my thighs harden with muscle, my tensile shoulders rotating in wider arcs. My hands and arms learned again to love the impact sting of the ball, my ears attuned to the solid smack of a good spike. Sweet, sweet endorphins rushing in my blood as I laughed with my teammates during agility drills. The soreness residing in my muscles deafened by rest, grit. My body in motion, slick and sweaty, powered by a diet of sugar-free soda and granola bars that should've made my equator pudgier. A transformation of endurance, stature, and speed in just two weeks.

How beautiful these transformations are, but so different; the past three years my body has played the slower game, filling and rounding and amounting mass. Curves following the same pattern as before, just with more material to place. Gradual shifts in size on a

timescale much longer than the volleyball body — a planet lost to new, less-sporty habits. I try to be a researcher of my physical form in the now; I practice geodesy on a 185-pound irregular ellipsoid. Through the slew of societal expectations, glimpses of my bodies past, and the wounds that cross my crust for a speck of time, I have to wonder — what star stuff am I made of today?



Outer space is a vacuum. Wind does not exist as it does on Earth; everything that is mobile is either pulled or pushed by another force. As such, the Sun pushes minute particles into space constantly. These particles, mostly protons and hydrogen nuclei, make up the solar wind that sprints away from the Sun at 400 kilometers per second. Earth's magnetic field (the magnetosphere) protects the planet from being pelted by the solar wind, preserving the atmosphere's integrity. The wind's force, however, presses the magnetosphere into an irregular shape, compressing the curve of the field between the Sun and Earth and lengthening the back end of the field like a comet's tail. The magnetosphere is a shuttlecock tip aimed at the Sun.

The solar wind reminds me of the breathing exercises I learned through my music education. A challenge: Take a piece of paper and hold it up to a wall at face level, maybe six inches between your mouth and the wall. With a deep belly breath, take your hands off the paper and blow air onto it, round and pointed in a steady stream. The goal is to keep the paper pinned against the wall for as long as possible, suspended in that spot only with the breath. It takes practice, technique, and control. The power and satisfaction from keeping that paper pressed to the wall, no hands, for a mere five seconds is strong, feelings that resurface when

I crest to the climax in a choral performance, hit the clarinet cadenza with accuracy and flair, fill my entire body with air and convert gas to fuel, vibrations to sound, and the breath into music.

I learned early on in my music classes to feel my diaphragm, tense the muscles under my lungs for the best airstream support when I sang or played my clarinet. However, as I grew more proficient with the clarinet in middle school, the confidence in my voice waned. I sang a lot. I'd rehearse Adele's hits in the shower, voice projected into a corner for optimal acoustic quality. I like to imagine that when I belted a verse through the hot water stream, like the solar wind, microscopic comet tails appeared behind the water droplets before they fell under the jet stream. In choir class, though, I was as self-conscious as any other 13-year-old kid. Comparing myself to the young singers I looked up to — budding starlets on American Idol, Selena Gomez, Lady Gaga — my childish voice seemed inadequate. I couldn't plant myself in the music, in my breath. I shared my concern with Ms. Whisman, the sage music teacher, who connected me with Jenny, a local vocal coach.

The next two years with Jenny became the most transformative period of time for my voice. An unorthodox opera singer with tattoos and a tongue piercing, she taught me to tap into my abdomen, feel the shifting and stretching when I inhale into my stomach or my back or my chest. She made me sing into the bathroom mirror, showing me how to look my worst critic right in the eyes. How to project my voice into the crevasses of the music store showroom, and hear it echo back; how to sit on top of low notes to escape the gravel at the bottom of my throat; how to lift the roof of my mouth to accompany the birth of a high G; how to squeeze every last drop of air out of my body and fill it up to the brim —

purposeful fasting and feasting.

Jenny freed me, in a way. Her lessons did not aim to make me the next undiscovered teen star, nor prepare me for a choir contest. She took up a shovel by my side, guiding me to lay the foundation for my life as a singer. Today I relish in how my tongue arches to fix the air flow, my jaw drops to form a warm sound on an open "ah." The fuzzy buzz on my lips in the split second of uttering an "m." When I sing, the wind inside me never moves on its own. It must be pushed — pushed with my pelvis, kidneys, diaphragm out of the lungs into the resonant chamber of my skull. Vibrations interpreted as sound, music, beauty. Behind every head in the audience, a comet tail waves away from the choir, flapping like a little flag.

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Every body in the universe has their own gravity . Objects with more mass exert more gravitational pull, which is why we fall to the Earth and the Earth doesn't fall to us. Every body's gravitational pull, technically, is infinite; though the power of Earth's gravity wanes with distance, its gravity influences celestial bodies light-years away. Given that everything is pulling everything else toward it, it would make sense to think that every star, planet, and space junk will eventually all crash into each other. Luckily, velocity intervenes. This is what keeps satellites and the International Space Station floating around the planet: Objects in orbit are falling toward the Earth. However, those objects are moving at a speed so fast on a trajectory so right that they won't drop into the atmosphere. Gravity and velocity are what keep the Earth and the Moon in tandem, the planets cycling the locally influential star. A dance between forces swift and strong – a balance.

An attraction towards another human isn't quite

as measurable as the attractive force of gravity. I unknowingly began to feel the pull in the second-coldest February I've ever known. I was a freshman member of the university band, trying hard to find my place, disembodied in that ensemble. Unfamiliar with the students and staff around me, swelling and breathing all together as we shook the air served as the closest thing to home in those first few weeks. Familiar with the physical properties of my bass clarinet; familiar with the soft sand of sheet music, the touch and the sound as we shift to the next page. Sewing my lips around the mouthpiece, nicking the woody reed with my tongue to the conductor's heartbeat. Subtle reverberations in my feet, brassy tones from tubas embedded in the tile floor. The alto saxophone seated right behind me, all alone in his bright trills and color notes that made me want to break my embouchure and smile.

The language of muscle memory only gets an instrumentalist so far — we students without music theory training, a minority in this group, often had to adjust to scales in keys we hadn't gotten under our fingers, the boundaries of bottom, top, sharps, and flats in chromatic routine. In the tinier group, the select woodwind ensemble, our conductor asked us to play an uncommon scale. I became more aware of my fingers, my tightened eyebrows as I tested the scale-to-scale translation on my bass, uttering notes quiet enough to mask my ignorance.

"Let's do that again; I didn't hear enough saxophone," the conductor said.

"It's because I didn't play." A chuckle. "I'm not very fluent in music theory, I'm just an English major."

A pull: In a band composed of future music teachers, I found writing kin. After rehearsal, my lips worn down from making music, I walked beside the saxophonist.

"You said you were an English major, right?" I asked.

"Yep, creative writing. Is that something we have in common?"

Gravity tethered us, the rubber band growing stronger each time we embodied the same wooden bench, lugging instrument parts out of cases to prepare for rehearsal. We'd talk, no hindrance from the wet reeds in our mouths — muscle memories from our childhoods with a clarinet, shared knowledge of the same keys, different fingers. I think the first time our fingers touched, I gave him a thermos of tea; we fell out of pattern for a few days when he got sick and missed rehearsal. Tuesday, I gave him a lemony tea with honey for his throat. Thursday, he gave the thermos back with a sympathetic smile.

"I appreciate the offer," Kyle said, "but I don't really like tea. I didn't know how to tell you the other day because it was just really nice."

I was oblivious to this gravitational pull until I gifted him more sustenance: a homemade shortbread cookie. I carried it in slick plastic baggie in my backpack all day, cushioned in my jacket so it wouldn't break. It slid between my sweaty fingertips when I handed off the cookie. How had I not noticed our orbital patterns, trajectories coinciding with the attraction between our bodies before? My hands, ears, hips, toes sensed the pull, but my brain didn't feel the weight until it was too late. I think I like him.

Proximity was inevitable. Our atoms sought to accrete together, the lumpy grasp of holding hands. The rough collision of bumping noses when we chose the same angle, fluttering diaphragms with laughter. My temple resting on his shoulder, a transfer of weight and gravity in a shared body, sitting on an arm of the Earth.

That third date, Kyle and I watched a play, bought frozen yogurt, then trekked to the earthy slope high above our city. If I had attuned myself with the soil as I sat there, I could've felt the planet's pulse. But that's not the thing I wanted to feel right then. Rings around Saturn above, an arm around my shoulder to stave off the chilly wind, we closed our orbit that night, questions and answers from lips that didn't know each other yet. We decided then to tweak our courses, let gravitational pull change a human constellation for the better. In less heavenly terms, we fell for each other. Soft fingers in tandem with tense spines, minds aware of a rubber band and the tension there, adjusting our velocities. An equation that formulates gravitational attraction, the correct card from a magician's hat. A pair of lucky blue stars.



Here's the thing about entropy. It seems scary because the boiled-down definition of entropy is chaos. But really, it's something to make peace with because it's happening in your body: the nitrogen atoms in your lungs bounce around when they're trapped in your thermoregulated chest. The water molecules you gulp constantly shift position in their fluid net. The hair on your head falls in different patterns, places. The strand that gets caught up in the wind and into your mouth is random, the skin you shed is random, the pattern trees' leaves glide into is random, and the air encasing us all — its pieces are in a random fashion. Places and objects, especially the atoms that create them, favor messiness over order. This stems from the fact that there's a better chance that the leaves will spread out all over the ground than falling into a tidy heap under the tree, like a little cushion. When I take a deep breath in and hold it, the air trapped in my lungs will have the same volume and pressure no matter what disorganized order the

the gaseous atoms take. Those atoms have trillions upon trillions of possibilities in my chest-space.

A higher state of entropy is a tendency my body leans toward on the microscopic level as well as the tangible level. Often I'm more compelled to get messy than to get clean. To shirk responsibilities and randomize my priorities. Finding ounces of time ticking away too fast, then too slow. Images and thoughts bouncing off the walls of my brain, disordered unless I set them in order, write them down. My skin would rather burst into freckles, dry patches, blackheads, and sunburns rather than melting its scars into nothingness.

These things are neither good nor bad, earthly or heavenly. Jupiter has pockmarks too. Particles in the rings bounce off Saturn's brain too. And perhaps my body is as subject to disorder as the planets are. I am one body, one life on a disorganized, randomized path that could have gone any other way. What if entropy led me to a different city, a different school? What if this universe's disorder brought me to the Oregon coast earlier than age 21, or what if it never placed me there? If the fixed number set of my existence found itself in a different pattern, I wouldn't have my life as it is now. It'd be something else, an altered story, a body of the same mass but with a new atom alignment. One in a trillion trillions.

As I look back at that image of the black hole, the image of entropy incarnate, I can only think of fate. I'm not particularly spiritual, but there's a destined feeling in my chest — my bones will collapse into that black hole one day. The chemical bonds and breakdowns occurring in my guts will someday cease, atoms once belonging to living cells now part of the burst of a supernova. Heart valves to meteor dirt. Eyelashes recycled into star stuff. Where all my atoms end up is random;

the ones I've shed and lost in the past may now make up a bamboo rod, a cowbird chick, a dandelion root, someone's favorite pebble. Tiny bodies, worthy bodies, all formed with resources rejected from stars and imbued with magic over and over again until this galaxy collapses, the stars burst, and all we know is remade with a higher level of entropy, creating combinations myriad, random, unknown...

How beautiful those bodies will be.

Endnotes for "Celestial Bodies"

- ¹Dennis Overbye: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/10/science/black-hole-picture.html>
- ²Fraser Cain: <https://phys.org/news/2013-04-sun-light-earth.html>
- ³Elizabeth Dohrer: <https://www.space.com/17764-lai-ka-first-animals-in-space.html>
- ⁴For this paragraph: Redfern, Martin. *The Earth: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 33. 2003, Oxford University Press. & Perlov, Delia, and Alex Vilenkin. *Cosmology for the Curious*, p. 194-195. Springer International, 2017.
- ⁵National Ocean Service: <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/earth-round.html>
- ⁶geodesy — a branch of applied mathematics concerned with the determination of the size and shape of the earth and the exact positions of points on its surface and with the description of variations of its gravity field. (Merriam-Webster)
- ⁷This paragraph: Redfern, Martin. *The Earth: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 6 & 7. 2003, Oxford University Press.
- ⁸Kevin Lee: <https://sciencing.com/gravitation-al-pull-6300673.html> & <https://sciencing.com/characteristics-gravity-8589279.html>
- ⁹This paragraph: Jeremy Fordham, <https://understandinguncertainty.org/another-look-entropy> & Paul Sutter, <https://www.space.com/43138-life-is-chaotic-entropy.html>

Somewhere Else

Rowan Taylor

Take me somewhere where nature weeps
For the breath that we have stolen
Where twisting vines grasp at fallen dreams and
Roaring waters rush over centuries
Reaching to embrace you

Take me somewhere where the city screams
For a power uncontained
Vibrant hues pouring life into long dead hearts and
Grand pillars striking raging clouds
To captivate you

Take me somewhere where the ground aches
For the ghosts of wild footsteps
Darkened caverns cloaking secrets and
Rumbling earth splitting ancient stones
Calling to your reckless spirit

Take me somewhere where the sky laughs
For the souls who dare not reach it
Where stars burn away cursed memories and
Winds whisper to expansive seas that fight on
To finally free you

Take me away from this place
Where the air sighs heavily
For what it could never hope to be
Light filtered through tapestries of muted grey and

Blankets of static clamping down
Stifling your desperate cries
That echo with the ashes
Of a dream called Somewhere Else



You're So Quiet, Elena White

We Disappear in the Silver

Adrianna Gordey

sea of wheat, the earth's white hair sprouting from its scalp.
Lying side by side, we hide in the giggling grain, gossiping
with it, the star's bedtime stories in the sky's ceiling,
the models of constellations suggestively winking,
reflected in our eyes and building celestial palaces in each pupil.
Our nervous systems fire rapidly by gas-produced spires.
The sparks of information intake like gunshots in synapses.
Before us, the infinity of the universe unravels,
strips into purity and reveals a world we have never seen.
The Moon's lean, mountain curved spine rises
from the depths of the horizon and walks across the plain,
perfuming the air with dust motes, fireflies, and indigo skies
as a wolf welcomes her return deep down
in the marrow of bones she gave him. Welcome back, Mother,
he growls as he prowls protectively in her inner thigh.
She looks down at us, hears the blood stomping in our veins,
the fractions of our beating hearts making a portion whole;
her hands are two clouds above us, thunder and lightning her fingertips
that whips the wind into shadows and shades. Offering each of us
a blade of the wheat we lay in, we slice ourselves open
and allow her to pour the contents of wind, earth, water, and fire
into our starving bodies.

Death's Humor

Kati Todd

Death clung to you
Like the smell of cheap wine.
It poured from your mouth
Soaking everything you touched
In its foul being.
You began to peel away
At the edges.
Your corners faded and shrank
Like old sun warped grapes
Until deep red liquid
Seeped from pale white lips
Staining you with mortality.

Accosted by Fate

Laura Ward

“Worry not. When midnight comes, you’ll be ready,” the wizard said.

The Chosen One smiled weakly, though she still seemed uncertain. The old mystic had spoken calmly and explained at length, but fear and confusion still chased each other across the girl’s face. She began backing slowly away, as if she could escape the future that the bones and scribes laid out for her.

“Listen,” he said, putting one hand on her shoulder. Indeed she listened, no doubt frozen in place by the wizard’s gravitas and quiet strength. “This is your destiny. You cannot escape what is prophesied, but do not fear. Your father’s gods will guide you.”

Earth’s hero nodded and walked away, clutching her purse tightly to her chest. Her steps were quick and determined as she boarded a subway car and disappeared. Surely, the old man thought, she’s setting off now to begin her quest.

When a policeman arrived and said “You can’t loiter here,” the wizard sighed in quiet relief. Looking up into the man’s stern face, the old sage immediately recognized the lines and features depicted in the ancient tomes. At long last, the wizard thought, he had finally found The Chosen One.



Old World, Jasmine Bates

The Spring of Stolen Souls

Taylor Jamison

At the edge of town, where the smooth curves of the mountains shelter us from the horrible world, lies The Spring of Stolen Souls.

That's the name we tell the tourists, at least. Its true name, the one that tickles our solves with irony, is The Spring of All-Truths. We lie because the spring and its precious knowledge is only for us; those who were born here and whose blood runs in time with the tributaries that feed the Spring. It tells us when to plant crops, when a mudslide is due, if this season's rains will be sparse. It answers any question one asks.

And this is why it is so dangerous.

The outsiders come with their impatient eyes, vampiric technology, and so many questions they don't have time to understand the answer to. They regard anything that cannot be answered in a single, factual sentence as useless. We keep them from the Spring for their own protection. Its truths would break their simple minds. The Spring has broken our own.

Ten years ago, when I was only four, my aunt Anui was consumed by a question. She claimed no mortal knew the answer. During the night, when the cicada cries covered sounds of sneaking out, she went to the Spring. She returned the next morning, her body fine, but something missing from her. Something that made her *her*.

She no longer speaks. Her eyes no longer hold the spark of wonder, of curiosity. Of living.

That is why we renamed it The Spring of Stolen Souls.

Exactly ten years ago today was when aunt

Annui visited the Spring. Today is when I learn the answer to her question.

The last of the tourists filter out of the village. They unconsciously navigate to their rumbling bus, their faces glowing white from phone screens. Mother, all fake smiles, acts the part of the archaic villager. She speaks in a ridiculous accent and wears dirty dresses. It helps with the atmosphere, she says. I see the way the outsiders look at her, like she's dumb. It makes me hate them even more. But we need their flimsy paper money. The sparse plots of village soil can't sustain our population, and their medicines work better than our herbs ever could.

I make sure everyone is occupied with the outsiders' sendoff, then duck under the rope held in place by the sign that says *"Upwards to the Spring of Stolen Souls – Do not go unattended. Do not go with something to lose."*

I know this mountain path like a childhood friend, even under the disguise of darkness and moonlight. I soon reach the familiar gate of tall, weeping trees, and pass through the slew of vague, red-painted warning signs.

My body tingles with the presence of life. It's the same feeling I would get when a visitor comes unannounced into our house. The Spring is sentient, full of old, overpowering intelligence. Its presence alone is enough to bring lesser minds to their knees.

The moon's reflection splits across the waves like two undulating white eyes. Inspecting me. Seeing through my flesh to that which really matters.

I clench my fists. I cannot be intimidated. Even if this is the thief of Aunt Annui's soul.

"I want to know the question Aunt Annui asked you," I say, still a small part of me feeling foolish for

addressing an empty expanse.

No answer, save for the lapping of the waves. My heartbeat races. I don't have much time before Mother starts looking for me. Before she connects the dots and sends the others after me.

"I can handle the answer."

A child's mind is like clay. So easily molded and influenced by larger hands. So easily turned into something ugly and irreparable.

The words vibrate within my skull, deep like a drum. It is as if the very core of the earth is addressing me. I gasp and stagger back.

You say you can handle the answer. Can you handle turning into something very different from this self that stands before me?

I gaze into the lake. Water mischievously nips my feet. I ball my fists. Aunt Annui haunted me for ten years – while she was still alive. I need to know what destroyed her, in case it is knowledge that threatens us all.

I nod.

There is another moment of silence. The waves still, and the lake becomes completely calm. A breeze flows through my ears. I feel the Spring breathe.

Annui wondered of the outside world.

Outsiders. Loud, pushy, stupid outsiders.

She doubted the village's isolation.

These words mask my anger. A cold fear creeps in.

And she asked me: "Why are we filled with so much hate?"

My whole body freezes.

It's a simple question. Hate and anger are easy emotions. They are raw, instantaneously ignited, and overpowering. They do not require time and trust, as

love does.

Her real question was: "How can we defeat hate?"

I told her hate could never be defeated.

I blink. My mind isn't shattered.

I'm just...confused.

As long as humans can feel love, fear, triumph, there will always be hate. So long as humans are different, there will always be hate. Hate can be damaged by logic, empathy, and generosity, but it can never be fully dethroned.

I feel the ethereal eyes of the Spring shift into me. My soul bends under its attention.

So, young one, are you now questioning your feelings about these outsiders?

I try to think back to what incited this consuming fire in my heart. The outsiders came into our village and disrespected it. But Annui, kind and smart Annui, didn't think they were evil. She gave them a chance. Something I never bothered to do.

The tides of the lake return to their mindless rhythm, and the godly consciousness retires within its depths. I see the headlights of the outsiders' bus snake down the mountain.

Mother always said that the Spring's answers only created more questions. My hate isn't justified. It feels weak, like it might be shattered at only a brief, knowing glance. It only took a small amount of thought for my hate to be shaken.

I walk back down the mountain path. Down to the village. These ways that had felt so familiar, now feel so cold. Changed.

Hate is easy, the Spring claimed. But so hard to banish.

I would try, I decided. Try to welcome the

outsiders tomorrow. Talk to them. Learn about them. As Aunt Annui had tried.

So then maybe they wouldn't be outsiders to me anymore.

They would be people.



Exploded Mind, Chloe Gillespie



Queen Victoria, by Jasmine Bates

Apis

Dené K. Dryden

a hum,
a craft of ink and compound needles, eyes
glance irate flesh.
crawl down the arm daggered, legs bursting
through thorax,
caressing collagen and interstitial drops like
sweet pollen.
flattened bug, black-white beauty, red like new birth
under skin.
a freckle suspended on a wing, antennae fixed to say
call me:
a tiny felicity, pupated in pigment; a stamp soon
enamored;
a visitor; a dancer; a curled carbon strand unwound
above elbow;
a honey bee forbidden from flight; an image forever
on the move.

Persimmon Grove

Taylor Jamison

“Do you think we’ll be okay?”

The question hung as heavy as the ripened fruit above them. There were no summer cicadas to fill the silence. Just the still night air and careful, measured breathing.

“Yes.”

She quickly turned to face her male companion. His confidence shocked her. Disturbed her. He usually only brushed her questions off with sharp reality.

“You do?” she asked.

He met her gaze. Unimpressed. This expression was familiar, at least.

“I believe that we’re not unique,” he began. “Our same feelings have been passed around again and again, through different generations and languages. Life, love, will always be like this. Unchanging.” His eyes shifted, piercing through her. “Eternal.”

She loosed a captive breath and leaned into the spindly tree. If it wasn’t for his twangy Ozark accent and boyish face, she might think him the reincarnation of an ancient philosopher.

“Tell me how love is unchanging, then,” she said.

He nodded. “This location is very proof of that. My family has lived here long enough to witness the carving of every name.” He traced the scars of the alligator-hide bark. “The names, the eras, and the circumstances may be different, but there was one thing that remained constant.”

He waited for her answer.

“Love,” she said.

He nodded again. She closed her eyes.

“Okay, I’ll humor you,” she said. “Tell me the stories of these names.”

He smiled.

1833. The Quapaw tribe and European settlers battled for the Arkansas territory. Homes uprooted and new homes planted.

The Quapaw tended this place first. They waited until the leaves turned the crimson of blood - a sign the persimmons were ripe. The first two names were children, only here for candy persimmons. They must have fled soon afterward. This is the only couple whose fate I don’t know.

Two new children came and gave this place a name: Persimmon Grove. They slashed through the Quapaw names and carved their own: Anabelle and Henry. They claimed this place and watched over it. There wasn’t much variety in the fledgling state, so they simply settled for each other. Their tepid love allowed the Grove to bloom.

1863. Mr. Lincoln required Arkansas boys to be sent to Fort Sumter. A request that caused the state to sever itself from the Union.

Two young men met in the secret night of Persimmon Grove. It was days after their friends and brothers had taken up arms, readying themselves for the rebuttal of the Union. Jeremiah’s family was prepared to defend their home with their everything. Alfred’s family was packed and ready to run northward.

The two men’s love only allowed itself in quiet corners, quick glances, and stolen embraces. Despite where their political allegiances laid, they couldn’t help

but hope that if slaves were really unchained, and talk of equal rights were true, then maybe, maybe, in the future a love like theirs could exist freely.

1943. A certain port in Hawaii had been bombed by a certain island nation. America was primed for war, not love. While soldiers fought to free those withering away in concentration camps, they imprisoned their own.

Jerome Internment Camp wasn't too far from here. My family invited well-behaved inmates to help pick the persimmons. Some wept at the sight of the trees. They reminded them of their own kaki trees in Japan.

This is where Gracie, a camp nurse, met Katsutoshi. She couldn't pronounce his name, so she just affectionately referred to him as "Kat". And that's what's carved here.

They shouldn't have fallen in love. Amidst all the suffering, prejudice, hostility, love shouldn't have bloomed. But when he gave her a picked persimmon and she gave him the gift of honest conversation, love couldn't help itself.

A year after the war ended, two years after Kat was released, they were married. They ignored the stares, jeers, threats. Because nothing was as bad as the war, when they knew their love would get them killed.

1976. The world was free, loving, and open-minded. But not open-minded enough, it seemed, for Claudio and Gloria.

This is the only couple Persimmon Grove has seen that is not a couple, but a trio. The third one made

out of love and not yet breathing.

But it didn't matter that Claudio and Gloria had loved each other for three months and were sure they'd love each other for eternity. What mattered was that they were fifteen, and firm Arkansans had already named their child "Mistake".

My mother helped Gloria give birth under the shade of the Grove. Mother left to get a washcloth and swaddling blanket. But when she came back, Claudio, Gloria, and Mistake were already gone. Mother carved all three names into the tree.

"And, right now," the thoughtful boy continued. "Two lovers still under the sacred tree, worrying far too much about whether they'll be okay."

She held her cheeks between her hands, burning in the night air at his unashamed declaration.

"Are those stories real?" she whispered.

"The names and dates are real. As for the stories...well, I can't prove it. But if I close my eyes and lean against the tree, I see them. The Quapaw children. Anabelle and Henry. Jeremiah and Alfred. Gracie and Kat. Claudio and Gloria."

He leaned into her, bumping their shoulders together. "And I see us, too."

She submitted, resting her head on his.

"I don't want us to be tragic."

"We're not tragic," he whispered above her. "None of them were tragic. They held onto their love. Didn't let the world destroy it. And that's what we'll do. If all of them can do it, then we can too."

He grasped her hand. His was sweaty. She smiled into his shoulder. So even he got nervous.

"Do you believe in me?" he said, so, so softly.

She thought of all the lovers who had met here, in this same spot under the persimmon trees. She wanted to be among them. She wanted to carve their names in the tree.

“Yes.”



A Deer Named Lee, Ben Trickey

When the Trumpets Sound

Laura Ward

The sun had not yet risen, and there wasn't even a hint of smoke in the morning air. By the time Jonathan reached his destination, the smoke would have gathered in great dark clouds, consuming all, before melting away again. He stepped from the street out into the woods, vaguely sorry that he would be long gone before the fire began to rage in earnest. The flames will be magnificent, he thought. The blood, the tearing flesh, the shattered bones: all memories of these things would be blasted away in the heat.

Once he was hidden among the trees, Jonathan pulled a notebook from his pocket. He used a pencil stub to jot down the morning's notes. Female, mid-forties: blunt force to skull. Male, late forties: laceration to throat. Golden retriever: escaped. Fire: Matches and kerosene in the living room.

With that, he began to walk. The road was long, and Jonathan's gait was slow. He thought about the fire. He had only seen its beginnings; there was more work to do, as there would always be more work to do, so he had no time to stay and watch. It had been years since last he had watched his work complete itself in ash and fumes. Maybe next time he would stay for a while, keep an eye on the blaze, but for now he had to keep moving. He could already hear the sirens blaring in the distance. There weren't too many sirens yet, not for what seemed like an ordinary housefire. Authorities wouldn't know about the homicides until later in the day, and they'd be sending out the dogs in full force after that. But they wouldn't find Jonathan, not so long as he still had legs to carry him.

Perhaps, once his legs gave out, he could steal a car. The trunk would be good for storing supplies, especially since some buildings are so fire-resistant these days. This last visit had been at a suburban house: relatively new, expensively decorated, and surprisingly efficient kindling. Most buildings presented a more interesting challenge, especially the larger ones, and some well-constructed homes needed nearly a carful of accelerant to coax into destruction.

But there was no need to think of that now. For now, he walked. The next town wasn't more than a day's journey, so he crept past its city limits around the time the sun sank below the horizon. He wended his way through the streets for a while.

"Sir! Excuse me, sir! I need you to stop where you are!"

Shit.

Jonathan stopped in his tracks, stood perfectly still, and waited.

After a moment, he found himself face to face with a police officer. She had short blonde hair, a kind face, and one hand already resting on her gun in its holster.

"Good evening, ma'am," he said, allowing the friendly southern drawl to drip back into his speech.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked.

"Oh, I just like to take walks in the evenings," he said casually.

"You're violating the curfew."

"Curfew?" He injected the requisite curiosity into his tone, careful not to give away his satisfaction. Curfews meant that each home would be full when Jonathan arrived. His work would be waiting for him wherever he went.

"Haven't you heard?"

"No, I don't get out much these days. What's going on?"

"It's not safe, sir," the officer said. "Not with the killer running loose."

"The killer?" Jonathan leaned forward a bit, as if in interest, let his eyebrows shift up his face, and built a mix of worry and concern into the lines around his mouth.

"Oh man, you really don't know, do you? They've been on a spree all over the county. Just this morning a house got burned down over in Bernville and everyone in it was killed."

"Oh gosh." He shook his head. "Why, that's just awful."

"It is, and we expect them to come through here pretty soon. Get indoors, okay?"

"Well yes ma'am, thank you for the warning."

"Of course. Have a good night."

After the police officer had receded into the distance, Jonathan checked his watch and took a long look at each of the homes around him. Soon it would be time to choose.

He had work to do.



Lantern Still Life, Chloe Gillespie

to synchronous Coriolis, i beg (a prayer)

Dené K. Dryden

"The atmosphere is not firmly coupled to the solid planet, so, as winds blow away from the equator, they have a momentum that is independent of the rotating surface beneath. ... This leads to rotating systems of high and low air pressure, the weather systems that bring us rain or sunshine." The Earth: A Very Short Introduction by Martin Redfern, 2003, Oxford University Press. page 11

vibrant air finds time
to rise and fall, formulate
the next misgivings.

Coriolis, i
know the wealth She stow'd in you,
circles infinite,

find the time to know
me: a young pressure system
in cheap-fabric shoes.

i profess routine,
your kin, the balance, is strange
to my atoms' sense.

i am warm'd as you,
Coriolis, but cannot
find a solemn pace.

masterful dances
in atmospheric relish,
your art in the life

of us all, in breath
we know wind, wild, dirt, you.
do not break for me

but carry me high
when winds rush from Gaea, mount
pressure along bands

of flush'd equity.
mentor me the static beat
of cyclic pathways.

free me, Coriolis.
break my secular pattern.
let the tides fall in time.



Isomorph, Elena White

The Man Behind the Scarlet Door

Haley Reiners

“This is going to be interesting. I can sense it already,” Cademus said, leaning his head against the black leather of the driver’s seat headrest.

Kiara looked across the street to the same front yard she’d been coming to for the past few weeks. Two blond haired little boys in matching t-shirts were playing fetch with their dog, Comet, just like they did every day when they came home from school. He was a white and black husky with forest green eyes, and he wore a royal blue dog collar around his neck. “I haven’t even told you what I’m going to do.”

“That’s what worries me.”

“If you’re so against it, why did you come out here with me?”

“Would my refusal have stopped you?”

Kiara propped her feet against the dashboard.

“Do you really want to know the answer?”

He sighed and raked a hand down his face. “I guess not.”

Kiara folded her arms over her chest and looked back out the window. Instead of looking at the boys in the yard, her eyes immediately drifted behind them to the stunning Colonial style house. The style of the house was a commonality in this particular area of North Carolina, but there was a certain degree of elegance to this one. It was covered with crisp white paint and black trim that outlined the house. The front porch was as wide as the house itself with four white circular pillars, and in the center stood a scarlet red door with frosted glass and a brass handle. Light gray and maroon shingles entwined with one another to create the sturdy,

angular roof of the house. Below the roof were three white windows resembling miniature houses that protruded out from the exterior. Every aspect of the house spoke of elegance, refined class, and beauty, and each of those very elements made Kiara feel ill.

She turned back to Cademus and finally noticed his raw and bruised knuckles. “What happened?”

“Oh, this,” he said, glancing down at his hand before settling his warm brown eyes back on her. “Just a typical Tuesday night at the Delgado house.”

“What did he do?”

“Dad was sitting in his recliner watching the game and drinking a beer. My sister was lying on the living room floor, drawing in her sketchbook. There was a glass of water on the floor next to her. When Sara went to get up off the floor, she knocked over the glass. Dad got so pissed he forced himself out of his chair and went after Sara. He yelled and screamed before he pushed her into the wall so hard her head bounced off it. I only gave him a small taste of what he’s been dishing out.”

“And your mom?”

Cademus shrugged a shoulder. “You know how she is. She’s too busy trying to save the world instead of trying to save her family.”

“I’m sorry, Cademus.”

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “Now are you going to tell me what we’re doing exactly?”

Kiara looked down at her black combat boots. The thick black shoe laces weaved and entwined with each other into two simple bows that rested against her ankles. Normally the boots evoked sensations of vigorous strength and determination, but those feelings had vanished and left her feeling confused and emotionally drained. She had felt like this since she had discovered the truth. The perplexing truth that seemed impossible

and made her doubt everything she had believed to be true.

The only thing Kiara knew was that she owed Cademus an explanation. She knew she had been distant with him the past few weeks. She had even been withdrawn from her family. Kiara felt like she was trapped inside a thick, blinding fog, and it was all because of the family who lived in the elegant Colonial house.

“Do you remember the DNA project we did for biology class a few weeks ago? The one where we sent in samples of both our parents’ and of our saliva for DNA testing to determine our ancestry?” she asked.

“Yeah. What about it?”

Kiara gazed upon the chipped violet polish on her fingernails. “My results didn’t correlate with those of my parents.”

Cademus straightened in his seat, his sole attention focused on her. “What do you mean they didn’t correlate with each other?”

“My results matched with my mother but not my father,” Kiara said. “My dad and I do not share any of the same DNA.”

“Okay, let’s not jump to any conclusions. Maybe the lab the school sent the samples to made a mistake.”

“I’ve had the test done three times, Cademus. The results came back the same each time. My dad is not my biological father.”

“Have you talked to them about this?”

“No,” she said, folding her arms over her chest. “I keep telling them I haven’t received the results yet.”

“And they believe that?”

“They have other things on their minds. Our ancestry is the least of their concerns at the moment.”

Cademus looked out his window to see the two young boys and the husky still playing in front of the

house. “He lives in that house, doesn’t he? Your biological father?”

She nodded her head once, her throat suddenly too tight for her to speak. A brief silence fell between the two before it was filled by the sound of a car driving up the street. It was a black, four door GMC Terrain with silver side mirrors that allowed Kiara to see her reflection as it drove past. Droplets of water fell from the hood of the car, making it appear as though it had just been through the car wash. The car parked in the driveway of the Colonial style house, and a moment later a man wearing dark gray slacks and a royal blue button-down shirt stepped out of the car. The little boys ran toward him as fast as their little legs could carry them, crying out the word daddy. The man squatted down to hug them, his auburn hair a stark contrast to the blonde color of his sons. There was so much love and utter joy exchanged through the hug. Kiara looked away.

“How did you find out who he was?” Cademus asked.

Kiara stared out the front windshield of the car. “A few weeks ago, I was in the attic searching for something that represented my heritage for our class presentations. Instead I found an old box full of letters addressed to my mother.”

“They could have been from your dad while he was deployed,” Cademus said.

Kiara shook her head. “They weren’t from my dad. The letters were signed by a Mason Everitt, and they stopped right before my parents moved down here to North Carolina for Dad’s job.”

Cademus’s face pinched together as though he had swallowed something unpleasant. “Kiara—”

“I didn’t want to believe it at first, but it was hard to ignore after I saw this,” she said, placing an envelope

in his hand.

Cademus opened the envelope and pulled out the photograph. Several moments of silence passed as he stared at the photograph. After what felt like hours, Cademus looked over at her. "You have his eyes," he said.

"I know."

Cademus set the picture on the center console and rested his head against the steering wheel. "What are you going to do?"

"I ask myself that same question every time I come here. I've yet to discover the answer."

"How long have you been coming here?"

Kiara untied the rubber band that secured her hair in a bun, allowing her raven hair to cascade down her back like waves of the sea. "33 days."

"Why do you think you keep coming here?"

"I suppose I'm curious. I would be lying if I said I wasn't. I wonder what sports he likes to watch, what his favorite food is, how he would react if he knew about me," she said as she watched the man and the little boys walk into their house for the 33rd time. "Every day I sit here and wonder who I would be if I had grown up knowing the man behind the scarlet door."

He opened his mouth to respond but was cut off by a high-pitched chiming noise. Kiara sighed and looked at her phone. "It's my mom," she said.

"It's getting late. Let's get you home," Cademus said, starting up the car engine.

He put the car in drive and slowly pulled away from the curb and onto the street. Kiara glanced at the house as they drove past it, and the image of her father and his sons tightly embracing one another played in her mind the entire ride home.



How Much Further, Elena White

The Oak Tree

Erin Smee

She got home from work early today, having taken the afternoon off to make it to the real-estate office before it closed. The agent had called and said the gift was ready, and that all the papers were finalized. As she parked her car in her driveway, the gift in her hands was cold and sharp, digging into the soft flesh of her palm where she gripped it. A key to a brand-new vacation home she had secretly saved for, any extra dollar she earned over the years leading to this moment. Todd had always talked about wanting to get away for decades now, and this will be the perfect thing for them.

When she made it into the house, her husband's office was empty. The black leather chair was turned away from the desk, the computer monitor dark. She scratched the back of her hand and began to walk up the stairs to check their bedroom. As she climbed, she let her left hand trace along the glossy railing. She reached their door and it was shut, a wall of white, carved wood staring her down. She reached out and turned the silver knob slowly and pushed.

There, in the middle of the room, he was propped over a tanned woman in their bed, pale blue sheets bunched around their legs. One of Todd's calloused hands was pressed against the tan woman's breast, the other invisible between their bodies. Her hand on the doorknob went cold and slick, an icy, clawed hand wrapping around her ribs as she absorbed the scene. For a second, her feet started shuffling backwards and her head bowed to face the ground, the door about to shut softly on its hinge. But then she heard a soft, feminine moan emanate from their bedroom.

As she stood there, she remembered how when she was younger she used to look for any excuse to climb the highest tree in the backyard.

First, after her eyes were fully opened in the morning, she'd stumble blindly to the bathroom to brush her teeth. Her hand would pat pat along the edge of the counter where Mommy would leave the sparkly purple tooth brush just for her. An arm would reach out to tug the small stool perfectly into place beneath the sink. A small step up, water turned on, bubblegum toothpaste applied, brush here, brush there. Mommy always made her sing the ABC's four times before she could stop.... x, y, z. Spit into the sink, rinse, water off, lean as close as her legs could manage, inspect her teeth, that big one in the front is falling out now, step down, leave the room.

Second, skip down the hall just for fun back to her bedroom. The light coming through her butterfly drapes seeming a little brighter, the sugar-scented air freshener Mom tried to hide in the corner smelling just a tad sweeter. Pajamas off, Mommy said yesterday that today would be hot so those green shorts from last year she'd grown out of would have to work. A scratchy blue t-shirt today, ball cap from the baseball game they'd gone to back when she was finally big enough to have her own seat, where are her favorite sneakers?

Next, rush downstairs, one hand grabbing at the railing carefully. Going just fast enough to make the descent swift and just slow enough that she doesn't fall. Her socked feet slip a little on the chestnut floors as she lets the smell of coffee guide her to where Mom is. "Mommy where are—?" A hand stretching into her face, nails pretty and white-tipped, holding the worn shoes by their fraying laces. Black and pink stripes cover the sneakers and from this angle she can see the silver heart

she'd inked underneath the big toe of the left shoe. Big smile, apologetic giggle, where had she left them this time? tugging the comfortable sneakers onto her feet as quick as possible, finger catching on the worn suede at the tongue. Funny, it seems they are pinching her toes a little today.

Then, grab the binoculars hanging from the peg by the back door and take the applesauce cup already waiting there. She stops for a quick look—good, she'd been given the strawberry flavor for breakfast today. Reach up on tiptoe to swing the door open just enough for her to race through it, sharp slam as she tugs it shut in her haste, clean morning air filling her nostrils, wet droplets of dew splashing on her legs as she dashes through the yard. The grass seems to be on the long side now, the tree in front of her eyes growing larger and larger.

Finally, finally, she gets to climb the tree. Staring determinedly upward, she knows her foot will start in the small notch here, that her left hand will tuck into her side to carefully cradle the strawberry applesauce, that her right hand will pull her body up to this branch.

That day on her way down the oak tree, the world seemed to dazzle. Lips sticky still from strawberry goodness, the bill of her hat falling slightly crooked across her forehead, binoculars banging against her chest as they swung pendulum-like from her neck, two bright green leaves tucked into her pocket so she can place them on her nightstand.

That day she was just about to put her foot on the last branch when it just didn't go.

Slip, skid, scream, smash!

She was lying on her back now, stomach in her throat, back smarting painfully, rocks digging into her thighs.

In that first second she didn't cry or move or breathe or blink. Just stared upward at the impossible height of that oak tree and wondered how she got here. She simply could not comprehend how that one action had led to another.

This is the day she remembers when she was about to shut the bedroom door.

"Todd?"



Koi, Jasmine Bates