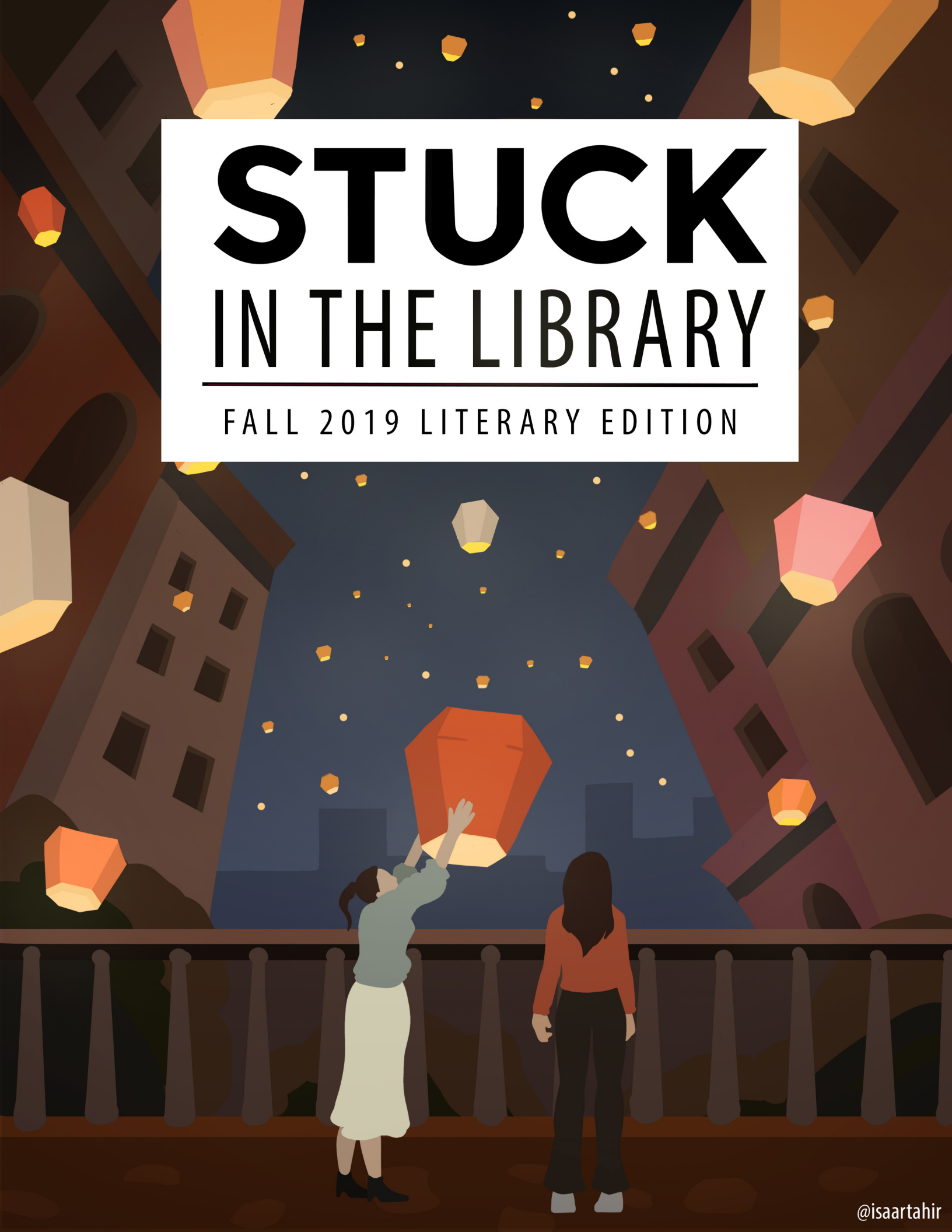


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“Writing is the most fun you can
have by yourself.”

— TERRY PRATCHETT



Rush Hour at Essex Street || Massimo Vendola

PROMPT 1
MTA

PROMPT 2
2AM

PROMPT 3
MYTH

PROMPT 1





@isaartahir

KID ON A SUBWAY

Matthew Dela Cruz

Fascinated, fascinated, fascinated
By the 4, 5, 6 glowing inside of a
Green circle or red diamond
Stuck on a metal car going
chooooooooooommm

Red, red, red
Was the number 2 at the front of the metal car
Approaching the station 5 feet from my face.
The breeze was delightful, and the smell
Brought excitement.
And the doors, oh yes those doors, went
ding dong...dadonk dak
You can hear it too, right?

I loved stepping into the metal car,
Looking out its window, watching
Everything zoom by.

I loved watching the train go up the ramp,
The light running to the window.
The sound of the tracks stopped bouncing back,
And all you could hear was quiet, peace,
Tranquility.

I loved watching the map,
All the lines of different colors
Moving this way and that, and
I would trace the routes, back and forth
And back and forth.

Up here, down there,
"Express" and "local" were the words I heard
My Mama and Papa say.
I took the 2 train to one stop,
Then the 4 to Brooklyn,
And then we took the 5 all the way back
To Morris Park.

I loved riding the train.
Each train station was a museum of beautiful
Bricks, stains, smells, trash, and everything.
The whole thing was a mosaic of NYC rolled into one.
You can't forget about the guys selling candy when they hop on the train, showing off their
Twizzlers, M&M's, Fruit Snacks, and other sweets for only a dollar.
A dollar: best deal ever.

I loved the bands that hopped on the train,
Playing mariachi and other music, and
I think I helped a poor person once because my parents told me to.

I would sleep every time Mama, Papa, and I took the 5 home at night. I would always lie down
on one of their laps, allowing the sounds of the train to become my atmosphere, my dream land.
The cold metal bars that I loved holding onto,
And the colored strips on top that showed you all the stops,
I didn't even know what they were for;
I loved watching each light disappear after each stop.
One after the next.

I'm a lot older now, and I'm not as excited about trains, but each
Small thing brings back big memories
Of times when I was happier.
And it reminds me to still be happy about
Where I am right now

Like a kid on a subway.

TIMETABLE

Micheal Drake

Bloody heels carefully fit inside shiny brown penny loafers. That's the problem with new shoes, sometimes even the right size requires walking the uncomfortable first mile. You learn to put on the Band-Aids and make sure the knee socks aren't the ones too worn and thin—but the lessons you learn can't change the old pairs with dried bloodstains on the back. Even with these precautions, you still feel the uncomfortable friction, the developing cut that will stain the Band-Aid red instead of the shoe.

There are still four blocks until the bus stop.

You trudge on.

One bus passes you by when you make it to the corner, another halfway up the next block—both crowded to the brim with people. Students in uniform and students dressed casual, unfortunate afternoon commuters, grandparents with their grandkids, a sleeping man with a bottle covered by a brown paper bag. The bus was always like this. People shoulder to shoulder; to their left a face they would see the next day, to their right a face they would never see again.

A throb of pain from the back of a foot. A third bus passes when you're a block away, and a fourth takes off before it sees you try to pick up the pace, as you try to ignore the pain of forming blisters just long enough to be able to make it up the block—but it's too late, and it goes, and you watch it cruise up the street until it turns the corner, out of your sight. Check the timetable. Thirty minutes until the next one.

You sit down, cross-legged on the pavement under the September sun, and you wait.

Life doesn't have a schedule you could check for what's supposed to happen, but when days begin to fall into the same patterns as the ones before, it was difficult to not become comfortable with the familiar. Wake up, eat, bus, class, eat, class, bus, home, eat, sleep; repeat, repeat, repeat. The same day over and over, the same times, same places, same faces. The hands of the clock ticked to a steady, unchanged beat that you didn't dare interrupt. Familiar. Comfortable. Leaving no room for possibility.

That was the danger—comfort. You put too much trust in the idea that life can be organized just like a timetable posted at a bus stop. That a day was just chopped up slots of hours and minutes and seconds, where what you expected to happen did happen, right when it was supposed to. No surprises. No changes. No waiting.

What could you do then, when that comfort is ripped from you? When the hands of the clock tick just too fast or just too slow, and you can't match its new tempo without tripping? It comes in the form of the bloody heels, the running with blisters and the bus stops. The waiting and the overthinking and the realization that no, you were never in control of your life—never, not once. You can fantasize and you can dream and pretend that life was as simple as hours and minutes and seconds you can organize, but you can never truly hold the power over things that happen, things you can never predict.

So you sit, cross-legged on the pavement under the September sun, and wonder how long you have lived thinking that you could avoid the waiting. How long you thought you could avoid another pair of scabs to pick off, another blotch of sunburn on your cheeks. You try to run from your reality again and again, yet how many times have you ended up here? Waiting for your bus home, waiting for the schedule to try and fall back into place?

How many times will you repeat the realization that nothing ever truly happens the same way twice? Your defense for not letting the world in, for not risking the pains that come along with joy, crumble apart with each unavoidable change? Is comfort worth a dull reality?

The bus pulls up to the stop. It's ten minutes early.

WHAT'S COOLER THAN BEING COOL

Silvan Carlson-Goodman

Just assume for a second that I'm not as cool as you think I am. It's such a strange trick of perception, the way that people seem all sorts of ways from afar. They say that the unknown gets a lot less cool when it becomes known. The coolest person I've ever known was an old friend of mine who used to spelunk through old abandoned subway tunnels to do graffiti. I heard stories about this, the coolest activity I could possibly imagine, half told in hallways between classes. Me and him had one of those odd kinds of high school friendships, the kind where I liked him and wanted to hang out more often and where he, in turn, never spoke to me outside of school. So I was as confused as anyone when I ended up at my friend's birthday party.

When I arrived, my friend was standing across the room, tall and handsome, with his long shimmering hair done up in a respectable bun. He shifted all his nervous energy from foot to foot, glancing around the mostly empty room. The other guests were a short man, done up like either a hipster or a thug, depending on what angle you looked at him from, a tall and very round man who I remembered from starting fights with teachers, and a rather small woman who was staring at her phone.

I asked my friend, "Is anyone else coming?"

He answered by saying, "Let's play a game." It was a simple game, one I remembered playing as a child. One person wrote a sentence, the next person drew a picture based on the sentence, a third person wrote a sentence based on the picture, and so on until the result was unrecognizable from the origin. It was like telephone but with pictures.

I thought it was kind of a dumb game. I knew I wasn't alone in thinking this because the large and obnoxious man stood up and shouted, "This game is dumb."

The woman, who was sitting next to me, leaned over to look at what I was drawing. "Wow, that's really good," she whispered in my ear while wrapping her hand around my shoulder. I froze, stock still, afraid to move even an inch. This sensation of a girl's arm around me was very new. Very, very, very, new. And I could not handle the flood of emotions that was coming with it.

My friend seemed to notice this happening and jumped up to exclaim, "Alright, that's enough of that, let's get out of here." Rushing us all out of the door, keeping the woman in the front and me in the back.

We walked through the crisp night air towards a subway station. We went down to the platform looking like nothing but some ordinary weirdos. We walked to the far end, looked behind us, looked behind us again to make sure, and when the moment was right we delved deeper into the darkness. There were lights but they were few and far between, silhouettes cast against the traffic signals leading me to who knows where. They kept laughing at secret jokes, talking about how Cynthia was sleeping with Mr. Torres, the social studies teacher.

I interjected with a, "Wait, really?" the laughter died down a little, "That's really serious, you guys, we should tell somebody about that." The laughter stopped completely and from the awkward silence, the shorter man told me that

"It's just a joke, dude, chill out."

"Oh."

My friend knew where to take us as we wound through tunnel after tunnel, away from where the trains ran into the older disused tracks. It was around then when a surplus of bottles of champagne seemed to appear out of nowhere. This too, was a first for me and the memories got lost between the chugs of the big thick bubbled bottles.

I remember chucking empty bottles against walls and feeling satisfied at the smash. I remember pointing the spray paint the wrong way and drenching my shirt with acrid smelling liquid. I remember hands pulling me to the side and aggressively wet lips pressing against mine until I remember a flashlight being pointed at us and my friend shouting, "What the hell, man? She's my girlfriend!" I remember something colliding with the side of my head and the hot taste of blood. I remember running. I remember emerging from a station.

But most of all, I remember thinking that if this was a movie I would have learned a lesson about how being cool isn't actually as cool as being yourself. But instead I remember feeling the coolest I had ever felt in my life as I watched the sun crest the horizon.

MY FRIEND ON THE D TRAIN

Robert Feinstein

We endured the same fate for some thirty years, my D train friend and I. There were amusing incidents during the three decades of our common bond, but most of our journeys were unpleasant, to say the least. When we first met, both of us were thin men with dark hair, thickly growing aloft. But now what little hair we have is silver. We knew that if we looked down at our feet, we would both, at best, see the tips of our shoes, the view in each case being obstructed by our burgeoning bellies.

We had only spoken very few times, during the decades we knew each other. But that was not really too surprising. This was New York City, and our morning sojourns always began in Brooklyn, to boot. Excessive conversation with someone you had not been introduced to was a definite violation of the MTA's subway protocol, akin to talking to strangers in a crowded elevator. It was rarely done.

I do not like watches, so I used my friend as one. His embarking station was always two more than mine. And like me, he always got on the second car from the front. This, I realized, without a shadow of a doubt. People are creatures of habit. All I know is that if he was riding with me, there was an excellent chance that I would arrive at the office on time, barring major subway delays.

I never once saw him on the trip back. Perhaps he worked different hours, or got a lift from Manhattan into Brooklyn.

One morning, we were on a freezing train. Not an ounce of heat was coming through the vents, but the air conditioning system was on full blast. The conductor had already announced: "Folks, we are trying to turn off the air conditioners and get the heat started. Please be patient." It was mid-January, and my friend angrily looked at me and said: "My guess is that they'll have the heat on in August." "You've got that right," I replied. And that was the end of our conversation. They were not able to fix the problem that day, as I recall.

There was one act he did that surely bordered on the verge of a subway etiquette infraction. However, it cemented our friendship. From the other end of the subway car, he meandered through a thick maze of passengers. He had not done anything like that before, and I, at first, did not know the reason he was doing it. But soon I realized he was coming over to talk to me.

"I just wanted to say goodbye," he chirped, as I shook his hand with some difficulty, amidst the sardine can milieu of the moment.

"This is my last day of doing this. I'm retiring today, and next week my wife and I are moving to Florida. We bought a condominium."

"It's been nice riding with you," he said.

"It's been nice knowing you," I replied.

And then the train pulled into 34th Street and he got off. I never did catch his name.

UNE MATINÉE À L'ENVERS

Isley Jean-Pierre

It's early in the morning
Holding a hot cup of coffee
You see pedestrians speeding by
And the speeding cars are just a blur
In the pressing hour
You glance at your watch
It's almost time...
You hear the roaring sound
Of a powerful engine
Followed by the unequivocal
Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep!
You feel intimately delighted,
For there is only emptiness
On the other side of the road
And you rejoice in the certainty
That it is really coming your way.
And there, making a right maneuver
Appears the spaceship eagerly awaited
You take a few steps and halt
Exactly where you know it's bound to stop
You turn around and ready your wallet
Only to look up to see
The infamous,
The heart wrenching,
And dreadful sign
NEXT BUS PLEASE.

AN MTA LOVE STORY

Michelle Sanchez

When people speak or think about the MTA, most of the time it is about how the trains are delayed or the bus is taking forever. When people speak about this, it's always in a negative tone and it is understandable because we all have places to be; but I feel like we tend to forget that everything happens for a reason when we're busy looking at the time or feeling impatient. The way I try to think about train delays, whether I'm at the station or inside the train, is that for some reason I'm supposed to be stuck here. Every single second determines our life and when I'm stuck at a train stop or the bus is behind schedule, I think of it as I'm supposed to be here right now. At the end of the day, I don't know if those 15 minutes of delay saved my life. Many times, because of delays, my path crosses with someone else's path.

We live in an electronic world and I, like many people, use my phone while at the train station or on the train or on the bus. I would be lying if I said I didn't give all my focus to my phone; but many times, I remind myself to look up. When I look out the windows, I see the world and picture this world beyond what I see. I look at the beautiful skies, the trees through the seasons and the people. When I see the sky, I think about the different places I have yet to see. When I see the trees throughout the year, I think about how blessed I am to be able to see this. It may sound silly and many would think I can see all of that while in a car, which is true, but the MTA provides something a car at times can't and that is physical contact with other people.

I have come across and I've seen all types of people while using the MTA. One morning I saw this man talk to this woman while riding the train. They had never met before and in that train ride they did. I'm not sure if they exchanged information or if they saw each other again or if they just went on with their lives. Later on that day, I thought if they did exchange information and they turned out to be good people, perhaps in a few years they would be married. I couldn't help but think that because of the MTA we meet a lot of people, but we just make the choice of whether we want them to have an impact in our lives. The man that day could have decided not to talk to her and she could have not paid attention to him but they made the choice to. Overall, they wouldn't have met if the MTA didn't exist.

I emphasize the words good people because the MTA also exposes us to really bad people. Racism is everywhere and the trains or buses expose us to that too, but this is just about an MTA love story. If I were to ask everyone I know who used the MTA often, I bet they each would have a little story to tell about someone they've met. A love story isn't all about meeting a significant other. An MTA love story can be about loving the world you see while taking the train or the bus. It can be about advice someone you didn't know told you while sitting in the bus. We meet and see so many people because of the MTA. The next time there is a delay just look around you and see the different people around you. Imagine stories about their lives in which everyone is happy because the truth is, everyone has their own things they deal with. If you see someone who needs help, and you are able to help them at that moment, help them. The MTA exposes us to the world and not many people have this—so shouldn't we feel lucky instead of unlucky?

TYPICAL NEW YORK NIGHT

Rdyk James

I've never liked this station. Every station in the city smells like an unholy mix of hobo urine and desperation, but this station is especially bad. As I trek down the dusty metal stairs that were probably built sometime in the fifties, I see the customary rat dart along the very bottom in some vain search for food. I give the little guy a humble nod, as is proper etiquette for a person entering another's rightful abode, and keep it moving. Somehow the J train visits this station less than all the others, despite it being a mandatory stop. If I don't hurry to the platform to catch the ornery thing when it does, I would surely miss it forever.

I don't register myself swiping my MetroCard. The process is so automatic I could probably reach into my pocket and do the whole routine with my eyes closed. After a trek down some more stairs I'm finally on the platform proper. A nice, deep breath of musty water with a hint of track trash reinvigorates my tired senses, and I manage to make my way down the platform to a wooden bench.

On the way I meet the other rightful denizen of the subway system: a homeless person. I don't greet him, but that doesn't stop him from following behind me at a distance that is nearly claustrophobic. He doesn't have the classic New York hobo smell, which is faintly distinctive of wet trash, but he does have the glint. It's a small thing, barely noticeable, but there's a glint that lets you know that the man isn't all there. Any noise, any sudden movement could set him off, and any sane person would be cautious to proceed.

I was born and raised in this city, and it was a long day. I don't have the sanity to entertain him, so thus ignore him completely. Somehow it works, and the man saunters away to be entirely too close to some other poor loser. I must have appeased the gods of the MTA with my decision, because soon afterwards the J train comes roaring into the station. The sound of the metal behemoth screeching onto the rusty, decades old tracks of the station could best be described as "ritualistic cacophony," but to me it is akin to the sound of angels. I rush into a car, politely elbowing a lady as I do so, and take my rightful place on my throne squeezed between a fat, off duty cop and an old lady with a Macy's bag.

Truly, this is the city of lore.

As is customary, I place my school bag between my legs and hunker down for the ride. The subways zip along outside my train car's window, and I let the rhythmic flashing of the tunnel's lights lull me into a daze. The *ker-chunk, ker-chunk* of the train's wheels combined with the soft bump of the car itself is calming, and against my will I feel my eyes close. Gently I slump forward in my seat to let my arms prop on my lap, and I prepare to sleep right there. With careful consideration to position myself so that I would lean on the off-duty cop and not the old lady in the event of my nap, I let myself fall to unconsciousness.

I never expected to awaken to a dream.

The train had emerged onto the Williamsburg Bridge. At some point the old lady next to me had fled the car and was now replaced by this old man with an afro. That wasn't what caught my eye, however. In front of me, spread out over the wide island, was a canvas of lights. Resplendent and shining in a myriad of colors, my city's skyline shone brighter than all the stars ever could. Twinkling and changing, the lights of The City That Never Sleeps beckoned all who looked upon it with a mischievous glow. Each light of the ever-dotted expanse was the activity of a different life. Each life was a beacon that painted a beautiful picture.

I smiled as I settled back into my position on the off-duty cop's shoulder. My city is the best, after all.

EYE GAME

Nolan Patrick Frontera

I sit on the train across from you,
Just a quick glimpse, and I then look away.
You look back, and I look back too.
You look away, so I look away.
I look again. You look. I turn away.
You look, I see that you looked,
So, I look and you turn away.
We look. We turn away.
I look, we lock eyes for a good second.
I look away. I stare at my feet. You stare above my head.
You stare at your feet; I stare above your head.
Your stop finally comes. I look away.
You look, you grin, and you walk away.
I look and I grin. We never see each other again.
This is the eye game.

ALONG THE Q TRAIN

Johnny Lawrence

The Void's playing in the earbuds

My back against the door and my eyes stuck to the screen

This is my little world in a crowded train

Emerging from the Dekalb darkness

Beautiful scenery and landscape décor

Collision of cultures

Merge with towering construction

English is spoken with accents

Barres of concrete and translucent glass

The Spanish performer

Architectural prowess

The Indian vendor, the Russian conversation

Historic monuments

And the Caribbean music in my ears

Please the admirers

Separated only by the next stop

Bridges connect distances

Next to each other sit four continents

Part away by rivers and land-gaps

Diversity united

Exploits of imagination

Differences brought together

Meet wonders of nature

Meet the world along a moving train

Wherever I go put a smile on my face

My back against the door and my bag between my legs

This is my bubble in a crowded train

Until the heat of Atlantic jabs me to reality

PROMPT 2





@isaartahir

I FORGOT TO TELL YOU

Shannon Addonizio

When the boy you love
Says he doesn't know what he wants anymore
Tell him you don't either
Tell him that you need time to think
Don't tell him
That what you really want is for him to stay
Don't tell him that you want him to love you
The same way he loves his favorite song
Don't tell him that you want him to analyze the lyrics
that are your mind
Or memorize the chords of your body
Don't tell him that you'll miss him if he goes
And as hard as it may seem
Don't message him
Don't send him quotes
Don't send smoke signals or carrier pigeons
Stay silent
And wait
When he finally comes back
And says he thinks he wants to be with you
Tell him your heart is not a yo-yo
That you will not be thrown and taken back with the
flick of his hands
Tell him that you are a tattoo
A lifetime commitment
Tell him that it will take more
Than pin point laser surgery
To remove you.
There is no think
There is no maybe
Either you want me or you don't

When a boy tells you that you are too much
Tell him that you are only too much
For those who are too little
Tell him that you are too much
For those who are afraid to swim in the ocean
And dance with waves that threaten to knock them down
Tell him that you will not be shrunk down to fit his ego
That you are someone who climbs walls
And breaks ceilings
Tell him that you will not be confined to the four walls
He says he built for you
Why would you need him to build you a house
When you have already built yourself a castle
When he tells you that this
Wasn't what he wanted
Tell him that you feel the same way
Tell him that you have contorted yourself
Twisting your spine in shapes it was not meant for
Trying to convince yourself
That he is someone worth staying for
Worth trying for
But you are running out of excuses to make for him
When he comes back and says
He Thinks he loves you
Tell him thank you
And goodbye

WHEN ALL OF THIS ENDS

Zhrah Aziz

when all of this ends,
when the sun runs out of warmth, the music quiets down and no words make it home;

come back and lie beside me. put your head on my lap
and rest now, my beloved.

let me tell you all about my days and all the loneliness they brought.

come back to me and let me run my fingers through your hair,
I have made playlists out of sunsets, let me hold you as the skies shyly start to twinkle
and the darkness of the night follows.

when all of this ends,
when all the lights turn off and everyone puts their broken hearts into drawers,

come back and I'll show you the city on foot.

the street where I first fell in love,
the houses that I think are haunted,
and the boulevard where my heart first broke.

I think the city, whom I love the most at night, will have a love-hate relationship with you.
it's jealous you make me love it in the day.

when all of this ends,
promise you'll give this tragedy a chance

and please come back my beloved,

when all of this ends.

2:23 AM - WINTER, 2018

Naveera Arif

In a warm, tattered sweatshirt and plaid pajamas, I walk outside to greet the frigid winter air. The dark-night sky hangs heavy with thick grey clouds, and the street lights cast a foggy glow on the quiet suburban street. The silence is undisturbed and relays a sense of peace I dare not interrupt. I raise my hand, catching the falling bits of snow as they drift down from the heavens. The cold of stings my fingertips before succumbing to the warmth of my body heat. I breathe out, watching my breath swirl into the icy air as I take in my surroundings. My thoughts drift as if in respect to the all-encompassing silence of the deep night, and a calm settles over my body and mind. Closing my eyes and angling my head to the sky, I stand for a few minutes in the lightly falling snow, my nose growing red in the cold. Oh, how great a feeling it is to steal a moment like this.

ARE YOU THERE G-D? IT'S ME, M.

Mic Braun

it's 2 am and i'm wondering
in this sempiternal misery they call the night
potential loss is always prophetic gain
but they said that you are different, and i,
i believed them for a while.

lose you—here with me
somewhere in this inescapable realm
in this sermon of joy
in this temple of sacred piety

lose you—here with me
somewhere in this indestructible silence
in this flimsy box of stories i once glorified
in this wavering reality

lose you but really, lose me.
swallow me in your spirit
in this holy matrimony of questions and patience
in this lingering doubt of existence

it's 2 am again, and the past few years i've been wondering
in this cacophonic misery they call the mind
whether the wise elders were right
struggling is a human condition
arduous work cleanses, sets you free [in heaven]
but they said that about the concentration camps, and i
i can't go on believing [this way].

i've lost quite a few things in my life
[my will to go on to tomorrow,
the ability to survive today]
but i wonder whether i was truly ever lost without you

A DISCOURSE ON THE FORMS OF CHICKEN TENDERS, PARANOIA, MOZZARELLA STICKS, AND OTHER TYPES OF FEAR.

Aaron Guyette

Jack and Jill went up a hill and found themselves animated. Jill changed her name to Mary and very much like a Disney movie, on a day like today—sunny, blue, and serene—the cartoon birds, lizards, and gorillas burst into song, whistling and chirping away. Jack and Mary had had a picnic and found themselves asleep. They sprang from the ground and jumped to their feet and before they could speak, they were floating toward the ocean. With the smell of pie in the air and the cartoon smoke so fair, they streamed through turquoise delight and levitated toward an ethereal bright. The animals sang a joy so blunt it forced Jack and Mary through a medley of smells ‘til reaching the waterfront.

Paddles made of mozzarella sticks. The animals stood at the shore and bid them farewell, as they boarded a magnificent chicken tender boat. Golden brown and fried to perfection, Noah himself couldn’t have given better frying instruction. The animals sang goodbye and pointed to the horizon. In the middle of the Galapagos—reds and blues, yellows and greens—all faded to a deeper color of the ocean. Jack and Mary found no land in sight. Although there was a cave, above inscribed, “Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here.” Indeed, this gate was the gate to Hell. The water turned to Ranch dressing and storm clouds formed above. However, no storm can ruin a fine and decadent Ranch.

They found fire and brimstone, the demons down below, torturing those fair and those not so. But beware not, for Jack and Mary had a stereo aboard their fabulous chicken tender boat. The funk and rhythm spread throughout Hell, and the demons could torture no longer. They broke into dance, filled with sexy stance, and found themselves infected with joy, smiles, and prosper. The devil himself wondered what could cause such disorder that he called his personal doctor. Jack and Mary sailed through, dancing their asses off, and the devil’s doctor himself could not but sway his own ass side to side.

The Earth rebelled, and tsunamis rolled through Hell, and at the sight of such a spell, the demons said, “Oh shit. I forgot. We’re evil.” They tried to torture again, but the music would not suspend, and they continued to dance instead.

Jack and Mary beached on the fiery floor, sailed ashore, and set foot on volcanic lore. The demons remember the need to dismember and charged forward. But to their best luck, a gigantic koala appeared. So, abstaining from fears, Jack and Mary boarded its back and rode forth to Heaven up above. The demons chased, and then they spaced, as though they had taken a few drugs. Why are we running? No need for cunning? I have no concern for those up above. Hell imploded, and the Earth exploded, immortal cartoon animals flew through the Universe, along with all manner of fried foods diverse. It doesn’t get worse, from the Earth’s sea purse, the cosmos aquatic animals’ traverse, until a trained nurse told them to disperse, leading them to find a new Earth. So, all was well, Jack and Mary swell, found themselves safe with plenty of space. The Earth below them, Hell behind them, Heaven around them, and koalas surround them, as they live the life of the doves.

NIGHT SOLDIER

Jasmine Hall

He smiled, laughed, and always had time to waste with friends. He loved, and his heart was as golden as the sun. Someone else came home last night. Nonchalant, distant, lying in my arms yet absent.

Missiles, bullets and IUDs firing in his head, he was silent. His brown eyes gone with the diagnosis.

By day a fighter, by night a stranger; my night soldier hugged no longer. My God, why did we let him go? My love, your mind is at conflict with your soul. Does he even know he is home? There's a celebration for you tomorrow, we should go. When I asked him, he said no.

STRANGERS

Anamika Kavi

Diamond memories burned to carbon dust.
Who spread our remains across the galaxy?
Allowing them to whisper,
Strangers.
Inhaling, I am consumed.
Remnants of laughter and,
Hallucinations of a smile and,
Fragments of a joke and,
Ghosts of a touch and—
And now we're just?
Strangers.
Stuck in the illusion of our friendship,
Merely a fleeting dream disappearing into the rising sun.

ALMOST WITCHING HOUR

Fatema Islam

The wind was whistling softly in the nearly empty streets where, save for a faint murmur of sound here and there, it was eerily silent. The moon peeked out from behind a cloud as the wind picked up in speed and sound, rustling the curtains of cracked open windows. The faint chiming of the grandfather clock was heard; the clock had struck two. A thin, pale hand with long fingers pushed back a gauzy curtain where a pair of dark eyes peered out.

“Hear that,” a whispery voice rasped out, “the clock has struck two. It’s almost time.”

Her shadow, making itself seen in the silver of moonlight, stretched and nodded its pointed chin once. A face peeked out further from behind the curtain; pale-brown hair, streaked with white, pooled down a thin shoulder as a surprisingly young face with large, dark eyes, framed by sharp features, gazed out the window. Painted maroon lips pulled up into a sharp smile as, behind curtains of cracked open windows, faces peered out at the moon. She waved to the curly haired child with the cheery smile who excitedly waved back in the home across from hers.

The moon peeked out further behind a cloud as the wind eagerly started whipping about. The chiming of the clock grew louder as windows were pushed open to let in the wind. As the sliver of moonlight turned into a wedge, the shadow stretched taller, spindlier, with spidery fingers becoming skeletal. She watched with a smile stretching further upwards on her face.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

The shadow nodded its pointed chin again and reached out skeletal fingers to brush her hair back. She bore it with a composed tolerance.

“You are such a mother hen,” she muttered.

The shadow smiled widely, revealing a set of large pointed teeth before speaking in a soft croon. “Is that not what you wanted?” it asked. “So desperate for companionship that you gave life to a shadow.”

She looked away, her painted lips pulling into a frown. “It’s not as if it worked anyway,” she mumbled.

The shadow merely smiled wider, a smile ripping into where cheeks could have been, had there been any, and said nothing more. The moon peered further out behind a cloud and residents opened their windows all the way, letting the wind play with their curtains, their hair, anything it could reach with its cool touch. The shadow’s smile grew smaller, almost as soft as the silhouette of hair that grew long and wild. A pair of cool slate eyes slowly dimmed into being.

“I’m gaining shape,” it crooned, “you know what that means don’t you?”

It reached out and brushed a skeletal finger along a sharp cheekbone of the girl. Even with her visible discomfort, it continued to run its finger along her cheek.

“Don’t be like that,” it crooned again, slate eyes narrowing despite the widening smile. “You wanted company. So desperate, so lonely. Haven’t I stayed? Have I ever left you?”

She bit her and nodded weakly. “You did; you never left,” she admitted quietly.

The shadow smiled as the moon bared itself from behind a cloud and shone soft and bright among the open windows. Casting its light upon the shadow, the shadow grew and twisted, its arms and fingers flickering between shapes until finally it settled. Tall and slender with slate grey eyes and spidery fingers, wild hair spilling along its shoulders. The girl watched with a smile sharp and wide, earlier unease gone for the moment.

The shadow stepped forward and cupped her face. It smiled with sharp teeth gleaming.

“I will never leave you, so lonely and desperate,” it crooned softly, smile almost gentle.

Her painted maroon lips twisted into something bittersweet, “I know.”

“Hush, you’ll never be alone.”

“I hope that stays true.”

The moon gleamed bright and white as the clock struck three. The houses burst with quiet life as those awake moved about in a flurry.

“Hear that,” the shadow crooned, “the clock struck three. It’s witching hour now.”

Painted maroon lips pulled into a sigh. “I know,” she whispered. “I know,” she gusted out as she lay her head on its shoulder.

TO DREAM

Em J

Your body is so tired
It feels heavy
To lift up each limb.
Walking
Makes you look like a “zombie”—
They said.
But you can’t care right now,
You’re on autopilot.

Talking
Takes too much energy
So instead you nod.
Plus,
You’re probably brewing
A throat infection
So, let’s minimize that.

All you can think about
Is that you don’t want to do this
Anymore.
You think about the night
And your mind returns to
2am
When you were picking up
The aftermath of male body pleasure
products
Off carpets and wooden floors
At work.

You’re thinking about sleep
And the lack of it.
How you’re about to run to your other
job
Where you try to educate the young
minds.
But you’re also thinking about freedom
And your lack of it.
How sick you are of being a working
slave
To society.

Friday morning,
You’re heading
To your mandatory school internship.
Free labor.
But you need it to gain
Eventual monetary freedom.

You used to think school was the
path
To liberation.
At least of the mind—
They fooled you.
You should’ve just stayed
Learning at the library,
Instead of acquiring debt
Through enrollment.
“But I need my degree for the career
I want.”

That happened
when diplomas began
to be mass produced.
Because now
You’re a slave to your student debt.
And this university
Gets richer and richer
As you work harder and harder.
And one day,
You’ll crack the code
To end this cycle.

Long term gratification.
You’re good at that,
Delaying your pleasure—
All for the long-term vision.
And maybe that makes you
a closeted masochist,
Because this life style is
Suffering,
And you keep returning,
you’re still fighting.
The struggle
Is not optional.
So maybe you’re
Inspirational.
But you’re not exceptional.
Join the club of millions of New
Yorkers.
The 99%.

Friday night is coming,
End your day and weekdays only job
To head over to your nights and week-
end
Where you’re supposed to be a food
server, but today,
Today at 2am you clean gum and its
rhyming word off the back room.
Sex parties,
Not in your job description.
But you’ve got to do what you’ve got to
do.
The pleasure is not yours.

This is the American dream.
Where the only people that dream at
2am
Are the poor and working class
They dream of comfort and safety
food on the plate
Or a changed world
While the rest sleep in
Or party their brains out.

This is the American dream
Working hard to get a step up
The hunger games.
This is most of New York
The city that never sleeps
We’re made up of dreams
The Dreamers never sleep.
Dreamers built the city
Providing you with comfort
At night
And day.

Dreamers are the turning tide to New
York
New World
New You
But do you care?
It’s 2am and I am writing this,
Because that’s my only true freedom,
Freedom of speech:
On my paper—
Not the media.
So, dream on
But don’t sleep on it
Because you have to be up by 5am

2AM

Helen Dang

I am awake
Awake in the middle of night
Alerted
Alarmed
From a bad dream

I want to go back to sleep
I thought
Tossing, turning, fidgeting
In my bed
I struggled
My mind restless
Thinking secret thoughts
I panic

Fear and paranoia get the best of me
When am I ever going to stop these thoughts?
Like a vicious cycle that never ends
My anxiety cripples inside me
Eating me up like yesterday's meal

I started going to my phone
Mindless wandering over social media's
Perfect standards that cannot be me

Ughhh, what am I doing?
I wonder
Frustrated with myself
My most inner darkest self
A secret I have contained
An inner demon
A monster unchained

I go back to bed
Knowing that it is 2 AM
Tossing and turning again
But with deep breathing techniques
I go back to sleep

VORTEX

Roksana Jasiewicz

You curse the rhythmic tick-tock of the old analog clock,
dreading the damned hour it brings.

Rustic gates of a vortex are opened with a groan as the
clock strikes two in the morning, committing you to three
thousand and six hundred seconds of torture.

A switch is flipped, sending you to the dark, mirrored world
of your own dimension—an alternate reality in which you
are engulfed in shadows.

Things that warranted you no worries during the daytime
are now eating you alive, gnawing away at your precious
soul.

All your insecurities, fears, and paranoia come bubbling to
the surface, choking you. You struggle to catch your breath,
clawing at your throat in an attempt to free yourself.

All feeble aims at silencing your roaring thoughts are fu-
tile—there is no escape.

You have never felt more alone here, the warmth of another
human being seemingly light-years away.

The silence of the void in which you are trapped is so deaf-
ening, you could scream.

As the sun begins to lighten the eastern edge of the black
sky, relief washes over your spent body. Your bones mend
and your muscles relax, your throat loosening.

You have survived another night, yet the thought of the
clock continuously ticking away cannot escape you.

2 A.M. will be upon you once more.

Will you be ready?

MY 2AM SAGA

Diana Harman

It's dark outside
The light has gone down
As I sit
In the silence of the night
I try to lie comfortably in my bed
As I shiver
Understanding
That my fears
At night are worse in the dark
At 10 o'clock
I lie in my bed listening
to my breath
At 11 o'clock
I lie there
Thinking of my family
At 12 o'clock
My heart starts to jump
out of my chest
I start to feel the extreme colorful pain
red, blue, and purple
At 1 o'clock
I try to count sheep
try to hide under my covers
Hoping my nightmares will go away
Like my nightmares are only in my head
And yet at 2 o'clock my face is red and stained
my body's exhausted
The world is silent and my brain
May stop
But it's just the beginning of
My 2 AM saga

AT THE TIME KNOWN AS 2 AM

Haya Khan

When the wolves are calling
The wind howls in return
A cycle which is befuddling
And in the process, things will churn

Each one seeking a response
In the dark, they yearn
They fake nonchalance
Until the time comes for when it is their turn

Waiting and watching
Mourning and listening
Dwindling and whispering
Riveting and twinkling

An echo of nothingness
Reflections of deceit
Those that are powerless
Nothing is ever concrete

Time slowly fades away
The night trickles through the cracks
Unrelenting to the vibrancy of day
Once again, they leave no tracks



See you Soon || Vicky Lee

TEA?

Vicky Lee

We talk with hushed tones, tiptoeing down the hall
The living room lights are dimmed
as we move slowly towards the smell of your window-box basil plant

Quietly, an orange frosted tabby watches us
from the window nearby

The kettle hums gently,
the blue flames licking wildly at the silver steel
I nestle the teabags in their small caverns,
cozying down in the nooks

The flickering streetlight leaves a soft blue shadow on your cheek
but even with my back turned
I can feel your eyes warming me up

From the dark I can feel your arms circle around,
encasing me in your smells of fresh linen and citrus shampoo
I trace the outline of your fingers,
Pressing them down like the keys of a piano

We shuffle back to our small cocoon,
letting our feet tangle under sheets
The mug stings my lips, but your gentle hand
sends a hot touch down my spine

Cheeks flushed from low whispers
and muffled laughs

I watch my smile grow sleepily in the ripples of the water,
your smile softening behind a curtain of steam

SECOND GUESSING

Galit Mamrout

it's completely dark outside. i hear no cars, no people, nothing—except my thoughts. i find that when the world is silent, all my suppressed thoughts come rushing in. i try sleeping before it happens but i can't stop the inevitable. i start questioning my life. why do i listen to people's opinion before having one myself? why am i so easily manipulated? why do i always put on a fake smile when i'm not happy? why do i feel like i'm losing friends? why do i feel all alone?

my anxiety spikes because i don't have an answer to any of these questions. i need to stop second-guessing every action i've taken. eventually, i fall asleep to push away these thoughts for now. but i know i'll revisit all of these questions tomorrow at 2am.

I SHOULD HAVE STAYED

Miles Mercer

That night no one was home
And we rolled around on the floor,
Making snow angels on your carpet
Covered in your cat's fur.

Tomorrow's weight of the initial day of classes tipped the scale, not in our favor,
And I should have held it down to be in the here and now.

And as we laid in silence

You took a sledgehammer to the mirror and asked me...
But I,
The dumb,
The anxious,
The unbelievably obtuse and earthbound person that I am said,
"Ten more minutes."

Ten minutes that lasted ten seconds,
Lasting for months in my brain as I go on with my days.
Sitting in a daze as I fade back to that moment at 2 am when you asked me to stay,
And I said "yes."

I put too much emphasis on the initial day of classes,
When I should've cared more about the here and now.

THE UPSIDE DOWN

Teresa Mettela

i.

i whisper sweet lullabies
until your eyes close
from exhaustion
and i listen as your
breathing evens out
seconds pass
like seasons
slowly but i'd never
know when they'd
come and gone

i wonder if you're
dreaming about me
the girl
whose arms you fall into
when everything else
is falling apart

all at once
i'm certain
that she is dancing
in
your dreams
tonight

ii.

love
my flaws
blemishes
spots
and
scars

mild
melanin
valleys
that have waged
battles
and
wars

what
is ugly
about
wounds
and
bruises

the marks
she gains
equate
the
beauty
she
loses

see me for more
see me for my
peaks
falls
dreams and
nightmares

iii.

i haven't said your name in so
long
i've forgotten how it sounds
and feels
rolling along the insides of my
mouth
bouncing off the walls of my
heart
the one you once held in your
hands
the same hands that held mine,
brushed my
hair back, traced my spine,
pulled me close

and ultimately pushed me away

how foreign
how alien
how unsettling

you're a stranger around here

VOID

Anastasia Mourzakhanova

It's 2 AM and you would think that I'd take pleasure in the thunder and lightning and rain
But all I feel is the cold because
for whatever reason you don't
want to touch me

It's 2 AM and the closer I get to you, the further you move away
I originally thought you were
asleep but now I know you're
not

It's 2 AM and I can't focus on the beauty of this night, the way the moonlight seeps through cracks in our curtains

All I see is the void in our
sheets where our bodies
should be intertwined

It's 2 AM and although you're within arm's reach, I've never felt further from you than in this moment
The darkness is kinder to me
than you ever were and in
that I find solace

It's 2 AM and the darkness beckons me to join
Engulfed in pure fear with a
twinge of pleasure and
excitement

It's 2 AM and I no longer fear the darkness around us as I do the darkness between us
I look at you but all I see is
uncertainty and the slow
boiling resentment you have
for me

It's 2 AM and my mind is racing, too anxious to take in my beautiful surroundings
The calm rain, the bright
lightning, the booming
thunder, and your beautiful
calming breaths

It's 2 AM and I'm sorry I'm not enough

INTIMACY

Rae Lilly Mizrachi

I could drink a case of you,
but you lost our love between
the hours of 12 and 2.
I don't trust you inside me anymore.
 Between blood and wine,
 metallic and sweet.

You left me alone as I was
 dipping,
 drenching,
 submerging my body
 in honeysuckle sap,
 in cool crystal blue
 meridian ocean
 enveloping me
 in cool warmth,

 in the dew of midnight.

I was waiting for you
 to pull me up.

I turned that icy blue
 blood thickening
 liquids inside me,
 expanding.
 I was freezing.

You threw me in your
 frozen rib cage.
 Beside your
 collapsed lungs.
 Beside your
 fleeting soul.

Intimacy is found?
Intimacy is found...

Intimacy is found
 between bark and trunk
 between water droplets and grass
 between rusty chains and child's play
 between cavern and echo
 between foam and wave
 between A and men

I could drink a case of you,
but you get me black out drunk,
staggering
 staggering
 stag
 ger
 ing home,
 alone.

What else is new?

Between sundown and darkness,
heat and vapor.

Between women and men,
men inside women
 dressed only by refracted moonbeams,
 enveloping each other,
chosen by liquid courage,
 rapids rushing through their veins.

Fingers digging into my chest
 marks of disdain,
 marks of regret
 you left when
 you kissed me
goodnight on the cheek.

I could drink a case of you,
but the bells would be ringing,
and I would still be running,
 from the cross,
 from you,
 from myself.

JUST FOR A MOMENT

Simran Rumi

The hours between nightfall and the first glimmer of daybreak hold the most pressing questions for me...

1:12 AM - Am I hungry right now?

2:47 AM - Does everyone secretly hate me?

3:01 AM - Was Princess Diana killed by the Royal Family? (The answer is yes.)

3:45 AM - Is it too late to start a book that will most definitely keep me up all night?

3:46 AM - Do I love her? *Can I* love her?

Love has eyes twinkling with mirth as the pale glow of the moonlight shines across her cheeks. Love holds the whisper of a touch, gentle yet uncertain, longing to fold herself amidst the crevasses of your thoughts. Love stretches to envelop you in her warm embrace, tucking your cold hands into the gaps of her denim pockets.

She folds herself into your thoughts, leaves her words lingering on your skin, the traces of her laughter hanging in the silence of an empty room. She is in the creases of your novels, in the scent of dried lavender, in the long brown strands of hair found on your coat.

She is everything you have ever wished for.

And as she kisses your brow goodnight as the first cracks of dawn peak into your room, you hold her closer. Longing, hoping, praying for this moment to last. Because for now, this is enough. This is love. Even if it is for just a few hours.

NEVER LET A WRITER FALL IN LOVE WITH YOU, SHE'LL SUM YOU UP IN 24 LINES

Vanessa Sirico

2AM isn't a time; it's a perception
It's how the moonlight seemed to make all hues look the same
But the park lamp emitted a distinct dim-green glow onto your tranquil stare

I shared most of my 2AM's with you
We'd sit under the hard-to-see stars; you never knew how humidity felt
The continuous smacking at the mosquitoes biting our ankles seldom mattered
It was worth being together
Talking about God's legitimacy and that one time you cried when you were nine
I wish you knew how much I cared

The memories become increasingly blurred as time goes on
But I know it was around 2AM when we stayed up playing Monopoly
You kissed me on the forehead
As if that would make up for your being unfair

We would lay in bed for hours, needing nothing but each other's touch
There was no such thing as being too close
I recall it being 2AM when I fell in love with you
Head to chest, I listened to your heartbeat
My fingers intertwining through your curly hair

My 2AM's are now breached with discomfort and the smell of a hazy green
I miss arguing with you about how your brown eyes are actually a dark hazel
Maybe if I let you win, you'd still be here
I always think about calling
Knowing you would never even dare

2AM was never a time, it was always a feeling

PROMPT 3





@isaartahir

OUR MASKS

Malak Abuhashish

The spiral staircase swirled amongst the thousands of books plastered over the walls of the room. Each book was drowned in blue, different shades of hard covered thoughts soaked the room in the color, perfectly still and fixated upright as dust collected atop each book's arid cover. Each book wishes to blare its name to be heard, almost as if they scream for a fingerprint to scarcely surface their forgotten title; yet alas they remain neglected. Entering the room, a boy emerged from the depths of the home as his eyes were set on the staircase, each creak that sang from the floorboards felt familiar as he walked up the steps. Walking up the banister, eyes glancing over the rail felt as if the books choired beneath the sea of finely pressed ink. At the end of the steps, a deep and drowning hallway connected his path. The boy slowly peaked his eyes into the hallway as he saw an overarching silhouette etched into the fibers of the floorboards. His curiosity overtook him as he continued to stumble towards the path. Melancholic paintings with great golden frames were splattered across the hallway walls. They echoed of past relatives as each relative was linked underneath a pale porcelain *mask*. The masks resembled the "Sock and Buskin" symbols of comedy and tragedy that were planted above theater walls. However, these masks were different. The comic eyes were swapped for sadness as the exuberant and bright smile shared a face with eyes that weep. The boy's eyes scanned each grandiose painting as he caught the eyes of his late grandfather wearing his very own *mask*, glistening almost as if it were brand new. His chest was puffed proud, with a smile you could catch from miles away. A warm smile coupled with eyes that whimper, eyes filled with despair. Eyes that call names knowing they cannot be heard, old eyes with so much to say and no one to say it to. It was almost as if one cannot tell the difference between him or it, sewn into his being and embedded into his soul. The facade of emotion, the fear of recognizable sadness, as each man's somber eyes were always behind a bright and smiling mask. Each man's pain and wonder behind the same bright and smiling mask. Each man's hurt and heartbreak behind the same bright and smiling mask. The boy shook off his grandfather's captivating aura and continued to stroll through the hallway, only to meet with the shadow's source—his father. He was sitting alone with his back hunched over, hushed between a frame and two chairs, eyes mesmerized and focused on a locket attached to a metal chain. His head was lowered, shoulders slumped as he held the locket cupped in the palm of his right hand. It held a picture of his late wife. In his left hand, he held his *mask* which trailed in cracks amongst its edges—unlike his fathers. The sight of his son sprung him upright, "son!" His loud and cheery voice eroded but his eyes ached of bitter tears from the night before. He gripped the locket, closed it shut and frantically shuffled to stuff it into the pocket of his neatly pressed trousers. Now cupping the porcelain *mask* in both of his aged hands, he firmly planted it against his face. He wiped his eyes and continued smiling from ear-to-ear, "you're up early aren't you?" The boy nodded and returned the smile, but he quickly furrowed his eyebrows in thought, as he always wondered what age his mask would come in. He dreamed of the day where his sadness could hide behind something tangible, something safe. He stared deep into the maze of his father's tired and lonesome eyes hiding behind his familiar smile.

DELUSIONS

Ahmad Asif

I believed in something
So did he, and her
And they, and them
We held it close to our hearts

With unwavering faith
Held on to the truth, the facts
They believed too
So they labeled it folly

Forced to defend ourselves
Prove true to our faiths
They believed what was said
So they sent us away

Behind bars, we had our own room
Not quite spacious but we were protected
Our words were heard
Those that heard scuttled about on all
fours

They came to get us
Tying back our arms
Hurriedly escorting through the winding
corridors
Beyond the iron gates, the crowd awaited

They were chanting
Once again demanding proof
My compatriots began to sob
Overwhelmed by the support
Their heads down
Hair hung low
Tears creating a trail
As they were escorted after me

This wasn't the time to cry
"Your heads should be held high
Chests puffed with pride
The crowd carries our strength"

Ahead of me, I see a rope
I've seen them raise people on it
Putting their head through the hole
As their legs dangle below

The sobbing grew louder
I could see them struggling
Resisting their escorts
I guess they were shy of the crowd

The crowd grew louder
More demanding
More impatient
Yelling for me to prove my faith

Alas, I had finally realized
I could not tear out my brain
Or my heart
And show them what was inside

The rope tightened around my neck
My companions had now been silenced
Accepted their fate
That they were on their way to meet what
they believed in

The floor gave out
And I closed the book
Wondering to myself
How would I prove my own faith to be true
and not a myth?

THE LAST DETAIL

Toni Coleman

I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and—as it generally happens in such cases—each time it was a different story. My obvious novice wasn't from a lack of trying though (everyone tries; somehow), but after months of intricate acrobatics over rushing-strangers, even the best journalist will call it quits for his mental health, if only to call it bereavement.

My story—in every un-ironic sense of the word—began almost a year and a half ago, when my supervisor pulled me into her office with a surprise job. The previous night, after having spilled her sixth red-glass all over her new apartment—but just before that night's back-to-back cable-special, *Sleepless in Seattle* (a divorcée-classic)—April had the innovative idea to send me on assignment to West. With our paper's audience faithfully dwindling every quarter, I needed a real miracle—some divine inspiration through my penship—to save our numbers; to save my income.

My job: to write on any and everything weird; this is where my inconsistencies start...

Borrowing my roommate's red car (he only uses the machine for storage anyways, because our apartment's too small), I had left on a Thursday morning. The big city was easy enough to escape—when I younger, I had the dumb idea the surrounding ocean would swallow anyone fleeing the island (in fear of being alone) but I was wrong—and finding my way onto the singular road for West wasn't all too difficult either. At the time, everything seemed to flow like fated-air.

But I'm from a car-less childhood; and, instead of understanding my easy navigation to West as ominous—or even slightly uncanny with the many intuitive left-right turns scattered throughout my long, eleven-hour drive—I thought of myself as truly independent and adult-like.

Look at how I'm supposed to be here!

Watch me be incredible!

I'll be the one to save the Galstove Paper!

As for the actual ride to West, it was more or less a trance-full endeavor. I vaguely remember hints of screaming-blue in the long miles of chugging dairy-trucks, but after an hour of smelling nothing but cows' shit, my brain (which I won't apologize for) must have turned my consciousness off, saving me—I can only guess—from even-more unnatural aversions. (Probably donkey shit?) After I broke myself away from this guided traffic, the roads got smaller and smaller. Eventually, (and I do remember this clearly) I had to skirt past an elderly man. He, wearing bright canary robes—with fabrics that crinkled at any movement—was dancing (offbeat) on the lone, car path.

Hindsight being my best frenemy, I had disassociated this eccentric man and my blank-drive to West as unrelated (unimportant), deciding both were nothing but viscus-runoffs of either my tainted imagination or nearby locals trying to prank a “yuppy-tourist”. Either way, the whole experience played out as pseudo-familiar, like I should have expected it to happen as it all did. Had my roommate's car floated off the ground—the moon rising as the sun disappears behind the mountains—while I pushed past the town's welcome sign, I wouldn't have questioned anything (especially right now). I was antsy to find a place for sleep and food; then, I had my story to write!

Thankfully—and this lies the entire reason my supervisor sent me here—West is a popular tourist destination for the people of Middle City and Fourside; them being the closest landmarks. What was unexplainably strange though (and what ended my naive sense of new-authority) is that West has no motels, no hotels, no B&Bs, no place to sleep other than the homes of its citizens.

Aren't we different?

West has a population of about forty to seventy-three people (mainly of the middleclass, with children rarely going outside), give or take a season. Its history is one of paranormal patchwork and half-truths. Officially, the town founder—Lucian Polastien—discovered the crater that forms West's foundation sometime after the winter war of 1789—but officially, no one ever asks. The details would otherwise get lost in situations where habit—the monotony of society—overturns any sense...It was outside a local grocery (Wiley's) that a younger woman named Ronda helped me.

After connecting the words big city, news story, compensation, supernatural, and city back together again, she (thankfully) told me I could sublet her sunroom (\$17 a day; \$25 if I wanted food); plus—according to Ronda—the people of West don't like outsiders much. Like vultures don't like chewing. Tourists are one thing; assimilation is a worldly-other. But for me (and my special connection/contribution to Ronda), I could stay, however indefinite.

I can stay, overnight...

See, while the town and its animated inhabitants attract the sheltered family out of their mundane lulls (i.e. my supervisor sending me in place of her) for vacations, committing them to ghoulish-picking and knick-knacks during the day; everyone knows to escape West with the sinking sun. That's their myth: when the night comes, so do other monsters—or, according to Ronda and her friend Truman (the man was always nice to me), when the sun goes away, so do our inhibitions.

The grand plan (originally) was to stay in West for a little over two weeks, collect as much information as I could (to craft my sellable narrative) on the locals, then return to the city. But, the amount of fantastical story available in West could choke out even the best of classically trained orators, which I am not—not even by the greatest stretches of my own imagination. But I do like to meditate. So, instead of denoting or remembering my encounters, I found my mind preferred to sulk and relax, to absorb, to assimilate—to mend.

Have you ever felt completely understood?

Two weeks soon turned into another, and then another, and then another until eventually these elapsed-swatches of time equaled a little over a year. Maybe it's because I had met a vampire my first night in West; maybe it's because Truman was so nice to me (and I loved that); maybe it's because I never loved my job; maybe it's because April and her barrage of investigation showed up, reminding me of the chaotic big-city; maybe it's because I've always wanted to run away; maybe it's because I don't know myself; maybe it's because I'm afraid of living a (boring) lie...but I couldn't leave, even if I looked crazy; I can't.

All my time in West and I had only a fragmented description of what it truly was, an underserving string of words hardly resembling the famous tourist spot I was (at first) forced to. Now—only being at my beginning—I want to call West my “home”, be part of its never-ending story and learn every-last of its details (I want to find myself, somehow). This coming Friday—just like every week when it doesn't rain terribly—after the bus of crowded tourists arrive, me and a group of Western citizens (all seven of us in neon animal suits) will scare the new-families, stomping and twisting about like raging demons. And these paying people will enjoy our antics, laughing with their pictures—and we, the wild animals, will be happy and completely free!

That is the difference between us and them.



Furry Photographers || Nicole Rodriguez

LA TERRE PRÉCIEUSE

Mariam Esa

Legend has it that La Terre Précieuse used to be the greatest land in all the world. My grandmother told me that it was the most bountiful area, with the most fertile soil for farming, and the healthiest animals. It was rich in gold too; the villagers would mine and keep to themselves what they would find. Merchants came and went, for this land was the best for trade. Every season made them grow more in wealth. The land prospered, the people prospered, and all were happy. That is until the tyrannical rule began.

One of the villagers, who would claim to be a descendent of royalty, felt it was unjust that he be treated as an equal to the others; he believed he was the rightful king. His arrogance and anger grew and so he decided enough was enough. He sent for people he knew, powerful friends and family from across the lands, and promised them a life of royalty should they assist him in establishing himself as the King of La Terre Précieuse. The people tried to resist, but they were not fighters. And so, what happened was inevitable. Having created a powerful army, the villagers were forced to submit to his rule or meet their death. The new King was quick to change the way of things. The people still mined for gold, but it was all for the King. They still farmed, but the crops belonged to the King. The animals were now all the property of the King as well. The prosperous people soon became poor, being given only rations from the crops they grew themselves. Only the royal establishment ate meat. Anyone who tried to keep gold for themselves, to harvest extra crops for their families, or to so much as speak ill of the King was made an example for others.

It was said that one day, he called all the people of the village and ordered them to a single task: to build him the grandest castle in all the lands. Having no choice in the matter, they quickly got to work. It was then that something very peculiar happened. With every small addition to the castle, the land with which their village resided on would rise ever so slightly. It went by unnoticed at first. However, the news quickly spread when one of the children nearly fell over the side of the land that now resided ten feet in the air. The people were baffled by this and some even mustered up the courage to tell the King of this. They begged him to not have the castle built, that it was cursed, that they would all perish if it reached completion. The King grew furious at this and ordered them to continue building or they would be thrown off the side. After some time, the castle reached completion and the people grew fearful—they would surely all perish now, right? For a few days, nothing happened. The King boasted that his castle was the grandest of all and that he was right in that it was not cursed. Still, the people were afraid that some imminent doom would befall them.

Nearly two weeks after the castle's completion, it happened. The clouds above them thickened and darkened and began to swirl viciously. The wind picked up, drowning the sounds of screams that came from everyone in the village. The ground shook once and then began to steadily rise again, into the mouth of the great mass of dark clouds that began to envelope them. That was the last anyone ever heard of La Terre Précieuse.

TO KALI MAA

Kali Norris

Fiercest, most resplendent—
I worship you with middle fingers,
and every second I'm meant to kneel.
I walk the blade of your ram dao—
you, deep blue devi,
gilt goddess,
crucible of all that is crushing.
I am but a drop of your wrath,
rhapsodic and without mercy.
Death even of death.
Slayer of ignorance,
I keep your image bright
in catcall curses.

APPARITION

Quentin Felton

No man's pitch sinks deeper than the well in your diaphragm, than the ditches swept under your rug of a chest, coiled & conditioned Half-light heaves in twos, then fours its waltz giving head to shadow whenever you chew my name, pound phonetic into syllable into love-notes blown under unmarked covers, graves castrate Lonely's a lighter fluid gulping the groin (*but how big could it be if it doesn't exist?*) Here, where girth births as space in between, pubic proof of penetrative daydreams sucking teeth to questions of realness, as if vastness was never worldly, as if a boy's best friend isn't his lover imagined as if it's unfathomable for me to sneak you thru the back door while the whole house sleeps soundless boundless bottomless Babe, let them wonder who's the top, the flame, the flaming curled by chiseled cedar, warmer than the other's lack of self Let them mop flesh from desire, flicking us into the air for all to rim, our gasms shot to rumor They know I'm no stranger to love that melts, yet still, I pray you stay long after fantasy hooks the headboard, its wings hung over wood like varnish, like a cremated creek spooning delusion.

MEDUSA

Melissa Morales

A half-suppressed laugh
echoes from the back of the room.
I roll my eyes as I continue writing
a story on the backside of my looseleaf.
*Once, Aphrodite fell to Earth
and was given a new name: Nyx.*

The pencil slips through my grasp.
Vile little thing.
Like clockwork,
a hand reaches out and tosses it to me.
I mumble a “Thank you” as I burn
like a candle wick on the linoleum floor.

“Hey, what was your name again?”
I finally look up.
The doppelgänger of mystery and perhaps sin
looks at me through disheveled hair
and eyes so green I forget I still have
pencil shavings in my hand.

*I am red
Red mouth
Red face
Red heart gushing on the floor
Metaphorically, but also maybe literally*

He gives a heavy chuckle,
reaching down to pick the
wreckage off the floor.
Citrus. Sandalwood. Calloused palms.
That’s when I say my name.
He gives me a baffled look
and asks, “Why do you always have that on?”

Tongue-tied and tongue-tied and oh
I am **so** tongue-tied.

I shrug and finish writing.
Distraction. Temptation. Distraction. Temptation.

Later I grip the train’s handrail
until it leaves a mark on my hand.

That’s when *she* asks about him.
Super subtle, as her
fingers fly across her phone screen
in a text-induced ecstasy.
A smile lifts at the corners of her lips.

My teeth clench together
I bite down on my tongue
hard and taste blood.
burning burning burning

*I am red
Red mouth
Red face
Red heart gushing on the floor
Metaphorically, but also maybe literally*

*I want to laugh
I want to cry
I want to because I want to because **I want to***

*I am green
Green with envy
Green with lies
Green tongue
Green teeth
Green heart gushing on the floor
Literally, but also maybe metaphorically*

A quiet hymn keeps whispering my name
I want more. I want this. I want it all.

When I get home,
I finally take the hood off my head.
But before I can look up,

I
t
u
r
n
to
s
t
o
n
e

DEMON

Shionodo

Here I lie
Like a dead corpse
Memories like claws
Tearing me down
Regret after regret

A heavy sadness weighs down upon me
Like the thick blood dripping from my wrist
A sign of being alive
I feel no pain
For I *am* pain

There is a hollowness that embodies my very being
With my empty screams
I grasp onto thin air
Perhaps this way
I can latch onto some kind of hope

Rouse the fighting spirit in me
Awaken that passion again
Extinguished by hopelessness and misery
Maybe this way I can regain what it's like
To be human

Rip out my heart
Let it bleed me out
It doesn't function
Like the way my brain functions
Skin and flay me
For I feel nothing
Maybe this will bring back
The sensation of feeling

Choke me
Out of my transparency
I can't make a sound
Cut me open
Maybe this way
I'll be able to cry for help

Rouse the fighting spirit in me
Awaken that passion again
Extinguished by hopelessness and misery
Maybe this way I can regain what it's like
To be human

Gouge out my eyes
I can't see
Past the paranoia that rules me
Maybe this way I can see
Better than the bats that rule the night

Cut off my ears
I can't hear
Above the whispers of my negativity
Maybe this way I can silence them
And listen to a better tune than my own insanity

Rouse the fighting spirit in me
Awaken that passion again
Extinguished by hopelessness and misery
Maybe this way I can regain what it's like
To be human

Rip my face off
It gives no value
To the essence of my being
Maybe this way I'll become the thing people fear
A monstrosity

Here I lie
Like a dead corpse
Drenched in my blood
Fingers reaching out in agony
Mouth agape in a silent scream

WHAT LIES BELOW

Nadia Rykova

On an unremarkable street, deep in London, commuters and common folk hurried past Walt Hamish's bookshop, while he, in violent contemplation, stared at their moving figures. The business procured him little revenue, yet his devotion to philosophical fiction kept him tied to the books lining the walls. His newest curiosity lay somewhere within Kantian ethics, and he left his post to read more upon it in the downstairs study. It was an intimate space, marked by hours spent pouring over texts in never-ending survey. Walt barely slept.

Decor remained an unfamiliar concept to Walt, evidenced by the windowless study lined with bookshelves and small trash bits. A sturdy table was pushed against a wall, a wilted plant hanging above. He hated the thing, yet it remained.

Walt opened the door and found the plant gone. In its place, a golden-framed canvas towered over the table. Painted on it, a messy tangle of human sin. Cannibalistic representations drew the eye onward to adultery, which flowed smoothly to mass murder and so forth. Demons, angels, beasts, and gods battled from all directions. Lore, some of which Walt recognized, some he didn't, left not an inch of space on the canvas.

The painting then began to leak, its contents spilling out of the page and into Walt's study. Walt blinked. He mentally counted the time it would take to scrub blood off of his wooden floors. How peculiar it was to him that all the questionable acts of the human race fit into one room. He thought about all the ruined books.

The new guests noticed Walt. A hello seemed improper, so he quickly left, shutting the door behind him. He pushed a dresser across it too, just in case.

A bell rang. Walt climbed the stairs. He asked what the customer needed. She politely asked for an Oscar Wilde novel, explaining that it was a school requirement.

Walt nodded. "An excellent choice."

The girl paused. "Do you hear screaming?"

Walt looked at her. There was indeed screaming and wailing from below.

"I have new pets," he said.

EVERYBODY LOVES A SINNER

Justine Victoria

you told me you loved me
and i asked why
because i was not the comb
to help you detangle yourself;
i could be the fingers
that caress your soft strands
to utopia, to euphoria
but you don't realize
i have them tied
like ropes on a needle

you put your head
on top of mine
and prayed to god
to smell like me,
live like me,
feel like me,
have me.

everybody loves a sinner
who's been touched
by *nobody*, nor god,
but the hands of her own;
i like to know
i know myself
before somebody else does

i straddle your hips
on my bed where i lay naked
as words come out
of my lips
bloody with filtered sins
and righteous hands
that measure dreams,
and you ask for my fingers
to grasp your breathing neck
as if handing your life
to my grip

and you have me,
for an ounce of what i've become
for some time
for your pleasure
as you hide yourself
under my comforter
where i cannot see you

nor can you see me
because you are blinded by my sins
and nobody sees the sinner
even on the same ground
i pray to be

THE ROAR OF THE MINOTAUR

Jon Rakh

Look upon thy window.
See it transform.
Look into thy mirror.
See it deformed.
A twinkling creature,
a body lukewarm.
The smiling god,
Cursed the unborn.
Birthed by a god,
Who is no more.
The violator of beasts,
The maker of feasts.
Poseidon, at least.
Athena's red heat.
Made her unleashed.
"Follow the line of monsters you have made, of the lives you have changed."
"Though let's worship still the same."
Punish Medusa, for what she did not want.
Worship Poseidon, he "responded to the flaunt."
Ignore Athena, who did nothing but haunt.
Alas they say,
This is life.
And life is this way.
For the roar of the monster, the Minotaur,
Should not be ignored, for the monster did not wish to be born.
But alas, for curses unknown, for stories long lost, and gods long unworshipped,
We choose to punish the monsters, but they did not deserve it.
Instead of the sea, worship the plea.
Instead of the sky, worship who died.
The Roar of the Minotaur.
Not a growl, but a plea.

THE BEAST

Fritz Philogene II

10 years after my “incident,” and I’m heading back to headquarters, ready to relax after a successful mission. My stomach growls; my body hungers for nourishment, but I know that the foods in the assortment will never be enough to satisfy this beast, this hunger that dwells within me.

The beast cares not for the concerned glances of passersby and allies as it swallows every meal before it, craving more.

Chrissy would always tell me, “You *can* chew your food, you know.”

Brook would always jest, “you should eat a bit slower,” with a smirk on his face.

The beast cares not for the horrified visage of enemies as it unfurls its wings, descends from the skies, and devours them, savoring every last morsel.

But I cared; I cared when the people around me would gawk and glare at my eating habits.

I cared when I was met with the faces of horror as I struck down many a foe from the air and had to feed this hunger. The sickeningly delicious crimson flowing down my throat. Yet it still wasn’t enough.

My friends—my teammates—treat this as if this were a normal occurrence.

The beast reminds me every time I look down at my hands and see pitch-black scales from my forearm to fingertips and claws as sharp as daggers.

It reminds me every time I expel a horrifying stream of necrotic energies, eating away at the flesh of any unfortunate to stand in my way.

It reminds me every time I swing my disgusting blade to eat away at my enemies’ souls and cleave them in twain, or use my claws to rend their flesh, satisfying the beast’s hunger, if only a little.

Jack would always quip, “Hey, save us some of the action next time, huh?” as a way to lighten the mood.

It reminds me every time I am injured, and the wounds close up nearly instantly, leaving barely visible scars.

The beast reminds me of what I really am every time I look in the mirror and see a face of brown littered with scales of charcoal and cursed with piercing emerald eyes.

It lies to me, telling me how I must “keep it together” and that I “must conquer this beast!”

As if it were so easy, like I could tame this massive beast, this growing hunger, this bottomless void.

I can still taste the copper in my mouth, taste death sizzling in my throat.

I can hear the gurgled cries and the shrieks of fear of my enemies; I can feel the flakes of skin and shavings of metal underneath my claws.

Where others see a den of thieves, I see the horrified faces of my foes—all manner of man, woman, and child—strewn before me. A buffet for the beast to dine on.

This is a sight all too familiar to me—it’s the culmination of the beast’s desires. Shutting my eyes and closing my ears cannot remove this image from my view.

“Hey, it’s Grandark!”

The sounds of my friends calling for me rouse me from these thoughts. The feeling of Jack clasping a hand on my shoulders brings a small smile to my face; they were waiting for me to come back.

I always seem to forget that my friends told me they understand my burden. They understand that, no matter how hard I resist, I must feed this beast, this endless void.

The Void is the reason I still draw breath.

The Void is my source of power from which I borrow my strength.

The Void is what drives me to find the ones who did this to me—who forced this endless burden upon me for the sake of science—and end them rightly.

As long as I have my friends, I can keep going.

As long as I satisfy this beast, I can soon end my pain and end those who ruined my life.

ADELINE

Gina Riviaccio

Once upon a time, in a land far far away, there was a princess named Adeline who was tired of being “rescued”. She was a kind princess. Beautiful. Sweet. A paragon of perfection itself. She was doing everything in her power to prevent hunger, poverty, and homelessness. She gave up her riches repeatedly and denounced materialism and capitalism. She spoke about the value of education and science, and funded programs for children. But a quick Google search of her name brought back more conspiracy theories about her being held hostage than it did about any of her humanitarian efforts. Apparently, the only thing that mattered was the fact that she rarely smiled.

Large groups of men thought they were entitled to her time, and when she didn’t make public appearances like the princesses before her, and when she didn’t smile at the sexist reporters who asked her inappropriate questions, and when she shut herself up in the castle for moments of peace, they decided it was their duty to rescue her. They were cowardly men. When they found out she wasn’t in need of rescuing at all they returned home tight lipped with their metaphorical tails between their legs. They remained silent on the subject. They let other men think they went on a dangerous mission and saw horrors they couldn’t bare tell stories of. And so the conspiracy theories grew. Articles upon articles surfaced about how to storm the castle, how to get her out of there, how to rescue her and finally see that beautiful smile.

And as the years went by, the kind princess began to grow angry. The royal family was friends with quite a few witches, and Adeline decided that it was time to learn a few spells. But when she asked the witches about dark magic they were horrified. They were sweet old ladies—they weren’t going to give her the tools to do that kind of magic. Adeline smiled her prettiest smile and told them she just wanted the men to leave her alone. She was just being dramatic. Making a joke. She wasn’t *really* going to use dark magic. So, when their sweet little god daughter started to visit more and more, they never suspected she was reading their forbidden books. They never suspected their adorable princess was sneaking around in dark corners of the forest and befriending the evil creatures. And as the years went by, they certainly never suspected she was the wicked witch of the woods that folks were so terrified of.

Adeline, the kindest princess, whose reputation precedes her, began to smile in public. It was a dark and sinister smile. But no one suspected a thing. Instead, the conspiracy theories started to change. People thought her new smile was forced: a painful smile she wore because people on the inside demanded she kept up appearances.

Little by little, dead men started to turn up on the path that led to the castle, eyes wide open in terror, after a dark spell had failed to do its job and left them dead instead.

But no one suspected the kind princess.

When men stumbled out of the forest, disfigured and unable to speak, no one suspected they were the same men who had tried to rescue the princess.

They wanted to keep quiet when she sent them home? They were too cowardly to admit they were wrong about the princess needing to be rescued? Well, now they couldn’t warn others if they tried.

Hordes of men were turning up unable to speak, unable to communicate at all, with various ailments. *Painful* ailments. Horns protruding from their forehead, their own blood leaving burn marks as it dripped down their faces. Fingernails ripped off and tiny trees rooting into their nail beds. Wings that tore through the flesh of their backs every. single. time. they spread to their full size.

But no one suspected the princess.

The spotless reputation of the kind and beautiful princess grew. Her charity work became more well known as larger and larger groups of men were suddenly unable to speak. Unable to add to conspiracy theories. Unable to overshadow all the good she did with their *stupid, entitled opinions*. Adeline finally got what she wanted: *very* few men tried to rescue her as she got older. But every so often there were some from her youth. The men who hadn’t forgotten the conspiracy theories. Men who swore they would be the one to finally rescue her. They turned up disfigured too. But even then, when they were found writhing in pain with her signature burned into their skin and a smile carved into their mouths, no one suspected the kind princess, Adeline.

I KNOW WHY MY CAGED BIRD SINGS

Hassan Elsebai

I know why my caged bird sings
Why this caged bird cries and screams
And her polar shifts from autumn to spring
Alien, illegal, and undocumented are meaningless words in her dreams
So, years are lived in sleep
Fact-less fears and a populist present constrict her iron cage
And constrict her iron clips of anxiety and depression
But still no iron nor rust prevails in her dreams
Borders are merely lines and seas' ships
An "impractical" illusion of a reality without iron
A day without cages nor clips
Is why my caged bird sings

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