

perfumed pages magazine

To your heart's desire

**INTERVIEWS WITH ADI
GUERRERX AND
GABRIELLE PAUL!**

**POETRY:
CAROL, BRAID,
CHRISTMAS MOVIE
AND MORE!**

**LOVE CHATS WITH
RUTH!**

welcome home

table of contents

written in order of
appearance

BRIGHTON

THE GUN DOG

Q & A W/ RUTH NIEMIEC

CAROL

YOUR GHOST (RUINOUS AND MORTAL)

BRAID

WAKING DREAM OF A BOY

FOR LUKE AFTER HE KNOWS I LOVE HIM

RUNA

ON BEING A REALIST

DISTURBING THE PEACE OF AN UNHEALED HEART

ENOLA

ANNIE E.M.

VIDYA JAIN, THE TIFFIN, AND THE WONDROUS CHERRY TREE

NOT JUST YET

AIMEE NICOLE

THE DAWNING OF THE DAY

DAILY NIGHT

CHRISTMAS MOVIE






table of contents

PARADOX OF DESIRE

FEATURE: QUEER SCI FI FANTASY, ADI GUERRERX

CAIT THOMSON

COLLECT LITTLE JOYS

SAME AIR

I JUST SO HAPPEN TO BE LUCKY ENOUGH

FOUR SEASONS: A SERIES OF TANKAS

BY ENOLA

THE DEVIL HAS ASTHMA I & II

THIS HOUSE BELIEVES I & II

GREED IS SOME NUTTERS INTERPRETATION OF MODERNISM

MAYBE THERE IS A GOD AFTER ALL BUT NOT THE ONE THEY TAUGHT ME IN

CHURCH

SKINNY DIPPING

ROMANTICISM

GROWING OUT

OLIVIA ROSE

INDULGENCE

BARCELONA

THIRD

DREAMGLOW

VIOLET PAYNE





table of contents

BREATHE, EYES, MEMORIES

FEATURE: GABRIELLE PAUL

GIRL OF HIS DREAMS

THE YOUNGEST CHILD

IN THE PICTURE

THE SECRET

DECADENCE

LUST (A HAIBUN)

WHO DO YOU LOVE?

"GIRL" IN YEARS

SOME UGLY TRUTHS I'LL NEVER TELL YOU

DROWN





letter from the editor

**SPECIAL THANKS TO
THE LOVELY PERFUMED PAGES TEAM
ENOLA, EMILY MURMAN, MATTHEW JAMES HODGSON,
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AFREEN ABEDIN, FOR HER PHOTO SERIES
ALL OUR CONTRIBUTORS
AND YOU, FOR READING THIS WORK OF LOVE**

**AS ALWAYS, WE'VE MADE THIS WITH LOVE JUST FOR YOU.
OPEN TO FIND SOMETHING TO KEEP DREAMING ABOUT.
HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY, FOR ONE AND FOR ALL**





**BRIGHTON
PALACE PIER**



Brighton by Poppy Lam

THE GUN DOG

Matthew James Hodgson

By grace and yet himself, in all his wiles
away with charm, I loved that dignity
and begged that he would linger still
among the smoke and joyous harmony.

An image of his departure survives
within my memory (drunk as I was),
and though I rarely worry that wanderers
should happen upon that hidden spot,

I am so incapable of revisiting it...
where once we spoke about our shared
loneliness, his spareness with words
that I so preferred in the hours of night.

At times, he thought to soften me,
and doting with no common sympathy,
would bring columbine, peonies, irises,
thinking me the sentimental type, prone
to fits of melancholia, roaming along
the stream at odd hours, confused at heart,
mostly living between all things and still
forgetting them to care too much for him.



Q&A

with Ruth Niemiec

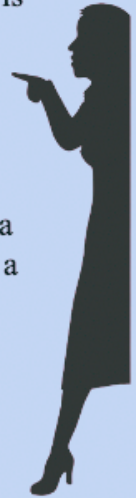
My partner and I had our first disagreement and I'm not sure how to navigate it. Is there something I should keep in mind when trying to address an argument?

Let me start by saying that having disagreements in a partnership is completely normal. Within reason of course.

You should always feel safe and comfortable sharing your ideas and thoughts with your partner and yeah, some days you'll disagree. One of the best things about a healthy relationship is when you and your partner can disagree and come back together with no bitterness and tension between you. You know you've struck gold when you start to disagree in conversation, and no one gets upset or raises their voice.

The first disagreement is always a little prickly. There is always the initial lingering thought that maybe the love isn't there anymore. It's natural to wonder why you've had a disagreement after cruising along in the honeymoon period for the first few months. It's a shock!

If you haven't been able to come back together organically to make up after the disagreement, you should gently suggest chatting about it with your partner - but make sure you ask them if they are comfortable and want to discuss the disagreement. Don't spring it on them in a heated moment - it'll only make things worse. Let them know you would feel better clearing the air. Stay cool, calm, and collected. Keep it casual. Keep it light!

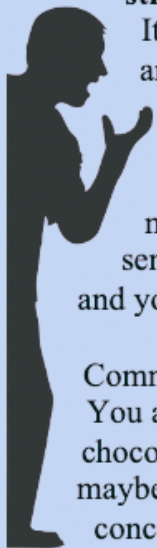


Sometimes I forget to prioritize my hobbies when I spend time with my partner. How can I strike a better balance between the two?

It's so difficult not to get completely swept away with love's current. It takes your mind and your time. It's not a bad thing! It's just the reality of love.

You must make time for your loved ones. Most importantly you have to make time to connect with yourself. The best way to strike a balance is to schedule. Plan, make the time. It sounds like an arduous task scheduling your love life, but it makes sense. If you are finding it hard to strike a balance between time spent with your partner and your hobbies, why don't you pencil in some time for yourself?

Communicate this to your partner and just let them know that your hobbies are important. You aren't going anywhere, but you really would like to go snorkeling once a month or eat chocolate and silently do a puzzle on the floor of your bedroom. They might be relieved - maybe they have been finding it hard to find the balance too and have just been too concerned about hurting your feelings to say anything.



The great thing about hobbies is you can do them together. You can be in the same room and still

be working on your hobbies. Depending on what they are obviously. You can't go diving and skiing at the same time.

As I grow older, I find myself losing touch with my sibling. Is there anything I can do to get our relationship back?

I'm sorry to hear that. The great thing is that you are aware that you're losing touch with them and you want that relationship back. Sadly, so many people don't even notice that relationship disintegrate.

You will find as you both get older; your relationship will change because, well, life changes. It may never be as it was when you were growing up – partly because maybe you lived at home with your parents for a long time and when you share a home with someone, spending time with them and bonding is a lot easier to do. When you get older, start your studies, start working and dating, schedules rarely line up.

The best thing you can do is text them, call them, catch up with them for coffee! Suggest to them that you would love to have more consistent contact with them because you miss them! You miss that connection!

Maybe you can both set aside some time in the week to talk on the phone and commit to making it regular. Scheduling catch ups and committing to them will give you a foundation to build on.

Even if I don't mean to, jealousy takes over my emotions and makes me standoffish. How can I better process these emotions?

Jealousy is a very powerful emotion and when it rears its ugly head – it's never for your benefit. The best way to combat it is to determine the root of it. If you are jealous because your partner is speaking to someone else at a party and they look like they are having a great time, you reacting in a jealous way may stem from low self-confidence or a lack of trust. If you trust your partner, do you think you would be jealous? Or would you have faith that they weren't going to do wrong by you?

Next time, instead of letting the jealousy take hold, why don't you jump in and be your charming self. Join the conversation! Confidence is your best defense against your own emotions.

If you can appear cool, calm and collected, levelheaded and mature, people will admire that, and you will be respected. Shake off those worries!

Being stand-offish and cold only opens you up for drama. You may alienate your partners friends. That's not the goal in any healthy relationship. Humans are social creatures, have fun, let loose. Go and find someone interesting to talk to – you might make a new friend. Don't be surprised when you gain a new level of confidence – trusting that you are great and loved.

Carol

The swinging and the singing of Christmas has always been lovely
but I admit it's made better with her, My Love.

Her darling face against my chest,
the choir in my head singing!!!

(they've been bundled up, murmuring beyond the door for some time)

Yes.

She.

This is how it's meant to be.

Suddenly everything's bright

You saved this for me, didn't you?

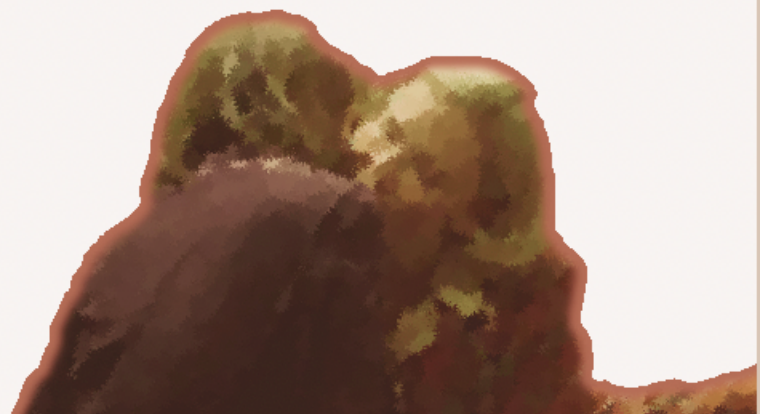
and you make my soul feel light.

All I had to do was wait.

Let's watch the toy train chug it's way around the tracks.

How many times have you been in love?

by Laura Kirkwood



YOUR GHOST (RUINOUS AND MORTAL)

Sometimes you sit in the car with your mother and you have everything to say and nothing to say at all. There's a cord around your neck and it strangles out a tune. You want to say, 'I'm sorry'. You want to say, 'I have nothing to be sorry for.' You want to say, 'I've never had the chance to be your daughter.' There's a cord around your neck and it strangles out a tune, distorted.

Here's what you *do* say: "Ma, you can take the car. I'm stopping here to buy groceries."

Your mother doesn't respond, simply shuffling out of the passenger seat in agreement. You put on a jacket. She doesn't say a word. You follow the incandescence of the flickering signs, gravel crunching under your sneakers. Your shadow follows you as the doors scream open.

i. MARIGOLD HL MILK (1 LITRE)

There's no love in the dimmed, blotchy lights of your television.

The word ghost in Chinese hosts a double meaning: First, the dead. The kindred spirits that find you through licks of smoke, living in the scratchy, bilious paper coating the walls. Second, White. White people. Pale-skinned and glorious, or so to speak.

You are neither one nor the other. You are your mother's daughter.

In fourth grade, you got a 97 on your English exam. You go home and turn on the television to catch the final 15 minutes of Nickelodeon's programming. You drink a carton of milk and lay on the couch, unfound. You follow the words as they trip through your tongue. You hear your name from the kitchen, but you know it's not meant for you.

Your mother speaks in frantic Chinese, boisterous laughter echoing through the walls. It startles you. The ghost, I mean. You can't follow, but you listen. The audio crackles. You stare at the corner of the screen, watching. The girl on the other side has your eyes, your mouth. She's your mother's favourite, but you're not. You're the future Harvard graduate. You'll make them all proud. Your mother ends the call. This time, your name is yours.



ii. GINGER ROOT

Here is a list of things you know about yourself:

- You were birthed in a shabby wooden home up North in Ipoh. Your mother wailed and wailed and the whole neighbourhood knew no peace for the 9 hours and 47 minutes it took for you to emerge. It must've been a little underwhelming, your silent weeping incomparable to your mother's cries.
- They named you 心宁. *Xin Ning*. Peace of heart.

- The township you were born in, Taiping, had seen its fair share of agony over the course of its 60-year history. Funny, for a town named after tranquillity.
- Hai Yan Middle School is all hands and knees. Red streaks down your arms – phantoms outlasting the quiet sting of wooden canes. The fields were too muddy. You've never played badminton in your life. Your teachers didn't have faces, just hands.
- All you'd ever had was a voice.
- You're behind on rent. Your Netflix subscription is about to expire soon. You don't know if it's better to buy whole milk or almond milk.
- You want to eat this list and swallow.
- Your ability to speak in your mother tongue is neither here nor there. You don't know a God and yet you speak to him in English. American.

iii. LOTUS SEEDS

What have you inherited if not pity? You dull hum of your family TV. Everything string waiting to be unravelled. Your it, but rather, for what isn't. Your childhood and all you remember is the underlying tune. Jumbled, messy – you lying on the carpet of her sister-in-law's body. Tranquillity. Peace of heart. Daughter.



search for love in boxes of oranges, in the you say is jumbled, messy. A bundle of heart aches – not with what's within mother sings a song to you in your paltry 'hm-mmmm-hm' of its in all the ways that your mother was, cabin, a ruinous child clawing out of her You know nothing.

The girl in the TV waves back. She'll haunt you, endlessly, clinging on to your shadow, tearing up the walls. But for now, under the glimmering lights of the television, hypnotic, she loves you like a mother would.

And then you hear your name.

iv. MANDARIN ORANGES – 36-PACK

Sometimes your mother tells you that you're the reason this house is falling apart. That you should've just stayed in university. That you could've made your family proud. Sometimes you get in the car and you take the 3-hour drive to the airport from Ipoh. Sometimes the cord on your neck stays.

None the wiser, you check-out with a 36-pack of mandarin oranges and sit in the grocery store parking lot. The flickering LEDs of the store follow you – comforting, haunting. You peel the oranges and you eat it whole, only stopping to spit out the seeds. You don't cry. Not once.

You are neither here nor there. Your phone dings.

Your Netflix subscription has expired.

Halle-goddamn-lujah.

BY NATALIE CHAN

Braid

I leave my hair longer than ever, let it wind down to the middle of my back. I try not to sit in the sun, which turns it from black to rust, or yank out the waves to brittle fluff. Black, the color of a half-mare's body in a Stan Rogers song, the embroidery on my Elizabethan shirt, the tea I drink routinely, and you love it.

The summer we met again I was vainer than ever, hoping that some strange witchery would keep us together through the clumsiness of courting. I may be black-haired and wide-hipped, but I am no Witch of the Westmorland. I could only manage sleek half-up half-downs and crisp middle parts for so long. And in my nervousness, I was silly. You fell in love with my awkward parts, my slightly stilted way of speaking.

I am almost never self-conscious in front of you. Yet now, in this first dark week of December, the middle of a lapse in my stability, I feel as tender and unfit as an overripe persimmon—hot and red and tense all over, close to splitting. Silent, I'm sitting on my bed staring at the heap of clothes across the floor. In my neglect it's crept across the carpet. In my neglect my hair's gone knotted. I practically itch when you look at me, and with nothing to say I let it down, blurt out the admission that I haven't brushed it in days.

You offer to do so with the eager sweetness of a teapot's whistle. I don't realize how tightly I'm holding my sweater sleeve in one hand and yours in the other until I get up to fetch a hairbrush. But you have seen me swing and snap like a heavy pendulum and have not left, so I let you go while I slip away and back again. Then there's the warm weight of you sitting behind me, the deep, resonant sputter of bristles through my hair.

You work your way from the bottom to my crown, never pulling, and every time you near my ears you cup them in your cool hands to avoid combing over them. Something shifts in me, then spreads from the nape of my neck to my forehead. It is as if I've just leaned back into warm lakewater. I focus on the feeling—more than anything I am aware of the steady breaths you take, your fingers along my tingling temples, and the smooth downwards tug of my newly-unsnarled hair.

You say you're fighting the urge to plait it and I say go ahead. As the evening blackens around us, casting shadows on my red walls, you weave three thick sections into a low, long braid. Suddenly I understand that witchery I strove for so many months ago.

by Emily Murman



Waking Dream of a Boy

By Clara Dunn

A girl sits up late without the light of a lamp. Her skin is pale in the blue-light of the phone her fingers are stretched around. She frowns, forehead creasing, not quite weeping. She navigates the screen with one finger and watches the green loop of a download. She watches the app bloom, sunset red, familiar with the little flame logo.

She sighs at emojis, blank profile spaces and snapchat usernames. She swipes left and wonders why am I doing this again. She judges boys by name, as if the collections of letters mean something, as if they give her clues.

This is a learned behaviour.

Jack – a loaded name, a cocked pistol inside the breast pocket of a tailored suit on a sure, sturdy frame. She closes one app and opens another, blinks back a burst of melancholy that comes from reading a tired, unoriginal nickname.

She sends: hey, are you up?

And the ether, the idea, the distant figure of a regular and unfamiliar boy writes back: yeah.

And this is all as inevitable as rainfall, the sudden deluge of a fat black cloud.

Her heart thudding, she sends: wanna play mine for a while?

He writes: wish you were here, riding me.

She writes: forgotten about foreplay?

He writes: is overrated, need you, your pussy's too fucking good.

And she's not aroused but she tells herself she can be. And she's not aroused but she puts her fingers to her clit anyway and starts to press. And she is aroused but there are lads passing by outside, taking wide drunken steps, bellowing. And she is aroused but it's hard to come with one thumb pressed into a phone screen and blue light hurting your eyes. And she is aroused but she doesn't want to talk around the ball-gag he's always dreamed into her mouth.

Still, she sends: I want your cock.

Still, she sends: how would you fuck me?

Still, the swell pushes at her ribs and rocks her body numb, until she might as well be pressing bloodied fingertips into stone.

She pulls her fingers from her cunt, absently sucks them dry, sends: stop, stop, I don't want to be fucked.

And he writes: liar.

He writes: you want me, always have.

He writes: You can't say you haven't thought about it.

And she blinks back tears, tries to breathe past the mass of tangled thoughts in her head, tries to order his words against her wants and finds them two puzzle pieces not quite meant to fit. Not complete opposite shapes, but two pieces jammed together, stuck in gaps just a millimetre off, twisting and tearing.

She puts the phone away, runs her fingertips over the waistband of underwear that's a colour she hates – but that he likes – and stares at the ceiling for a while.

Light comes in through the window – the rhythmic wash of headlights, the blue rush of police cars, the orange drone of a streetlight.

If the sun comes up, it is hardly discernible through the faded blinds.

She takes herself away, on a train, washes up on the riverbank of another city and wanders up and down, eyes on the far side, the financial district's recognisable skyline. She drifts into the safety of wood and thatch, listed building den of words and history. She stands with aching heels and listens.

Parting is such sweet sorrow that I shall say goodnight till it be morrow.

And her brow creases and she tells herself, I'm no innocent, never been out of anyone's reach.

I am your spaniel – the more you beat me, I will fawn on you.

And she bristles, clenches fists at the mirror lifted over the stage. She thinks, I am a glutton for punishment, for getting so lost in daydreams that day, night, food, water, run low while I obsess.

She knows the fairy-tale isn't real. She wants it anyway. But her play is still in its early acts, and like Demetrius, he hasn't been charmed yet.

Flat and shaking and quiet within white industrial sheets, she steps out of herself and goes back.

She sees again the bright, childish patterns of coloured tile in the dining commons. She smiles and chit-chats with the plump, motherly woman behind the desk, swipes a bent ID through the scanner, steps towards the sheet trays of predictable food.

She sits again at a table on the first floor, with her legs crossed and ankles sore.

She looks up once again to see the thick and tall body landing opposite, the definition only the stubble gives his jaw and the sweet, good-natured concern on his open face.

Anyone sitting here?

And she gestures again, says again, well there is now and sorry, do I know you?

He explains again his forgettable face and his little backstory and she smiles again and investigates him as he talks and at some point it feels as though he has always been sitting opposite, as though she invited him into that chair and again they leave together, walk down the broad stretch of campus highway to different classrooms in the same building.

And everything is possible and can all still happen again and nothing has gone wrong and no-one feels anything they shouldn't and –

A siren squeals by.

She lowers the blackout blind on the plate window at the foot of the bed.

She crawls under the duvet, pulls it over her head.

She squeezes her eyes closed.

At sunrise, she goes swiping again, armed with ideals.

A body beside her in bed, skin to skin, arms around her, his nose in her hair. A man to fry her bacon before she's stumbled out of bed weighed down with hangover. Tickles and play-fights to combat her blue drunken hours. Someone to distract, someone's eyes to track the blur of her fingertips across the keyboard and to whom there is music in the clacking of her nails when she types. Someone to hold her hips as she dances barefoot, wooden spoon in hand, leaning forward to shimmy over the heat of the gas hob. A man to make silence comfortable again. A man steady enough to trap her in place if or when she should spin out, to put his hands to her shoulders or cheeks and force eye-contact while he says it will all be okay. A man to understand that the battle hasn't been lost when she cries.

She sacrifices each of these with every left-swipe of a lanky eighteen year old in Nikes and a football jersey.

She closes the app again.

She throbs and stretches and shakes with the ghost of him in her veins, in her brain, with the fading memory of his fingers brushing accidentally over hers.

She drops into the thick, hot memory of his body sleeping not ten feet away, in loose shorts and tube socks, spread wide and snoring like a bear. She lay stiff as old wood, breathless, skin prickling at the closeness.

She yearns again to be the first to see his photos and films and be always his sweetest critic.

She opens an app and reads the messages again.

I miss you and I love you and I might be drunk but who even cares, it doesn't make it less true.

You shouldn't say that, you should be happy, you should move on.

She buys a plane fare by way of draining a bank account and her ears roar inside the anonymous airport walls and her feet are moving on their own and she is all head and walking feet and a mess of sensation in-between.

On the far side of the ocean, she steps onto a bus and starts the last leg of the journey back.

Curled onto a leather seat bust at the seams, cursing the twisted seatbelt, she lies to herself.

This journey is not about him.

This journey is about going home.

Home to the archway before the vast stretch of campus highway.

Home to the trees with the pink and orange leaves.

Home to the quiet goings-on of Main Street.

Home to the place that she met him.

The bus jolts and squeaks its way along the highways, through the industrial estate landscapes, around the lake with the movie-prop mountain. She recognises each signpost, each turn, each tree, even.

The beat of her nervous heart begins to slow.

She's said for years now that she doesn't believe in fairy-tales. But she does.

She believes in one particular fairy-tale. In this fairy-tale, she doesn't just imagine that her feelings are reciprocated, they have been the whole time. He's still shy and messed up and insecure, but he knew it when their eyes used to lock that she was *it* and he knew it when she hugged him goodbye and cried into his shirt and struggled to hold herself straight as she walked away.

Now, there is reparation.

He stops telling her to move on, stops telling her that he's not worth it, stops denying himself. And he says *yes* when she tells him those three words, he says that he cares about her too, because love is a process and he's still taking his first steps.

So when he hears that she's coming back, he agrees to meet her once more and they find themselves at the cafeteria or the Dunkin or the Starbucks or a bar. And they're sitting across from one another or in a booth or side by side, elbows on the sticky wood of the bar.

And the conversation goes something like this:

I love you. I did before I left.

When?

In the car, when you threw your arm over my seat as you reversed.

And she blushes. She knows he didn't notice her little gasp, the quick glance across, the heat in her cheeks.

I love you too, he says, slow but final.

When?

And he lists: when I saw you in that cheap green bralet, when you stuffed your face with microwaved smores, when we shared a single bed and a quarter of a movie, when you tried to play footsy, when you let me stay after the dorm fire.

She's breathless and staring into his eyes. The weight builds in her chest – the desperate need to be closer, closer still, to be on him and in him, the blood in his veins and cramped into the space inside his ribs.

Now, she is bold.

She reaches over and takes his hand.

In this case then, they are side by side at a bar, turned to face one-another, knees brushing.

She takes his hand, reaches up with her other hand and cradles his chin. She rises an inch from her seat. He leans down. Their lips meet.

And this kiss is *it*.

This is a kiss of movie proportions. The room drops away, spins, the whole nine yards. And maybe they go for a walk and kiss on street corners and under dead streetlights and part happily with that small satisfaction. And maybe they go back to her hotel room and hang the do-not-disturb sign and she gives herself to his inexperienced hands. And maybe they stay at the bar and kiss some more, just chastely, when the conversation goes flat, then go back to the blank hotel room to hold each-other, just for the night.

The point is, as we all know it must, the fairy-tale ends happily.

Back home, in a small-town that could be almost any other, she stands panting under the Greyhound sign, vision blurring at the edges, everything feeling somehow unreal. She listens to the chatter of the college kids and the rumbles of SUVs. She breathes in the petrichor and coffee and exhaust fumes but

when she breathes out, it doesn't shrink the pressure within, the push of thunder clouds against her ribs.

She sends: I'm back.

He sends: I'm gone away.

She thinks, maybe it's better, not to know, to stay stuck in pretty pink limbo where I can ache and wonder and daydream. She thinks, maybe we should still talk, maybe I'll know, if I just hear his voice again.

She sends: I'll say hello, to the haunts, but I'll be sad if I don't see you before I go.

He sends: I'll try, but the truck's a little messed up.

She walks, her steps criss-crossing, her head low. She bumbles into the hotel, swipes into the room, falls down into another crisp set of not-homely sheets.

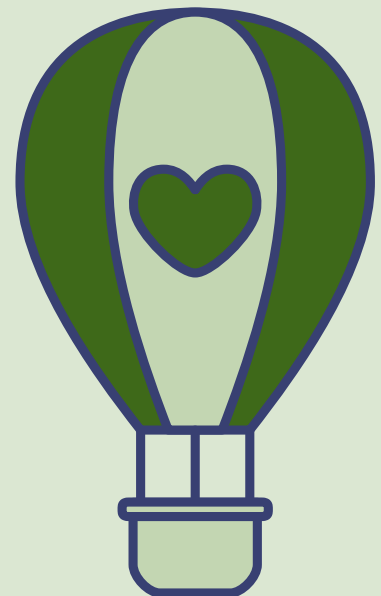
She sends: really, I need to see you.

She sends: you know I love you, right?

Three dots appear.

Three dots disappear.

The clouds burst. Her chest quakes. Her head explodes. Her heavy, empty body sinks. The white bones of her little fist grow old and brittle around her unringing phone.



for luke after he knows i love him

maybe it's ridiculous to describe this all to you. I know you were there, but I must— after all, I am a poet. there was something so ceremonious about seeing a shakespeare play together. writing about it chokes me up.

you know how dimly intimate the cave of the theatre is, even when the play's open air? the oaks became an apse around us, every cricket a chorister.

I loved you on this day. I wanted to say "I've been hoarding your name in my mouth for months. my full throat's become a beehive swaying in a rainstorm. look. look how long this love can hold its breath! I can hear it clatter in my ears."

by Emily Murman



girlfriend diaries by afreen



You Are My Sun by RUNA



Attraction by RUNA



Oxytocin, the Love Hormone by RUNA
Accompanied by the song "Oxytocin" by Billie Eilish



Der Kleine Tod (La Petite Mort) by RUNA
Accompanied by the song "Der Kleine Tod" by Rosenstolz



Together by RUNA

On Being a Realist

Claire Davenport

The mornings are endings now.
As I said, I've always been better at
Bad news than false hopes

But even still my legs feel too heavy to walk
And I miss you -
So much it's stupid, so much it's pathetic, so much

I could sing to an arena
And squint through the lights
And only look for you.

In the absence of your light I guess
I will need something else to burn,
Warm and bright,
I choose myself;
I always come home to myself -
Peeing off my tights, making
Kindling, but
The heavy chases me
Into my dreams,
Round the amygdala like a play park.
I dive deep under covers so he can't find me.
But you can't find me.

I wake up tired,
Like I travel in my sleep, like
I go back home.
And the bus shakes my bones
And his hands on my body are unpeelable.
Do you know how hard it is to make my coffee



With his hand stuck to my ass?

But it's tricky, you see,
Because sometimes when I dream
It's about you.

We live in the forest, we have
This kind of simple magic like
Sun through a skylight.

Or I dream a memory, everything
Blurry in the pub, our
Shoulders pressed together, suddenly I remember
What it is to desire, or

I dream the future,
But with a different past, I am
That kind of girl,
Not naïve enough to believe
Love can make us whole,
But desperate enough that
I hope one day I do.



disturbing the peace of an unhealed heart

The human mind is capable of so many incredible things.

Such as the way we're able to rewire the certain parts of ourselves that only exist as a way to hurt us.

It was only a month ago that I found myself coming into consciousness of the rewired, soundless thoughts running throughout my *own* mind. The ones that weren't plagued with the mental images of memories shared with him that I'd dreamt up in light of his absence from my life, but not yet my heart.

It was September, and I felt my life was beginning to not only look different, but feel different, too. As though I were in a phase of ending metaphorical chapters in my life just to begin new ones with more peace and stability than I'd ever known before.

During this time I'd recently written about him, too. Afterwards, I told myself that it was the last time I ever would, partially because I didn't think I'd have much else to say, and also because I'd spent long enough away from him to convince myself that maybe I really had found a way to fall out of love.

In this last piece I wrote about him, I mentioned that I'd learnt trying to seek something that doesn't exist will only ever hurt you more. Of course, I've loved and lost on this earth enough times to know this is true, but it seems that what I clearly had forgotten is just how easily a vulnerable, broken heart can be drawn back to what hurt it in the first place.

There's another well-known belief that our minds are capable of sending invisible waves of energy to those that we think about, and I think I believe it. In fact, I think I've even decided that him and I must be living proof of this psychological voodoo. That's why, when he walked back into my life on what began as just another insignificant September night, I realised I'd almost subconsciously been anticipating it since the very moment he'd last left.

"It's taken this whole time for me to realise that I'm never going to get what you gave me"
he began.

"...I really should've treated you better, and I don't know why I didn't..."

"...nobody is like you, and I took it for granted".

I like to think that he's ignorantly unaware of what he's doing. Unaware of the pain his silent departures and insincere returns, to and from my life, inflict upon me. I'd like to think

there's a reason for all of the complicated, one-sided love this relationship has left me subject to, and that one day we'll be able to move past this gratuitous standstill of love. That one day we'll stop letting all of these insignificant complications ruin what should have been months worth of mornings spent waking up to one another, but yet somehow all turned into months of silence and hostility instead.

It's this misapprehension that all of the pain he puts me through must mean something that plays such a significant role in my self-taught tendency to continue loving and trusting him when he tells me that he's ready to love me the way I deserve to be loved - even despite all of the times these promises have ended in tears as he, yet again, proves himself to be wrong, and me, hopelessly naïve.

Most frustratingly of all, if I had just listened to all of the internal voices that I've learnt to tune out - the past versions of myself willing me away from somebody I've already lost a handful of times - I, possibly, would have realised that my letting him back in is just an invitation for him to love and leave me, just as he has so many times before. If I had just listened to what I already knew, I also would have saved myself the inevitable end of us, for the *third* time.

Instead, mid-September, October and the beginning of November were spent refamiliarising myself with his back into our usual, well-him averting from any kind of about what it is that he really make peace with the likelihood what it feels like to be loved his adrift heart.



existence as we both fell rehearsed routine of honest conversation wants, whilst I learn to that I'll only ever know by such a small piece of

This time around he only stayed watched him from across the table chance to apologise for his abrupt absence intention of doing *any* of what he was promising me. I knew that he than he did in the past, because just like the past - he's *still* unaware of what it is that he has.

for a short while, and I knew as I dance around every silence - every from my life, that he had no true wouldn't treat me better

I know that I don't want to settle for such a small part of someone's heart, and I know that I don't want someone to be so unsure of me that they'll feel the need to leave every few months - only ever coming back to see if I'll still entertain the possibility of descending into another loveless attachment.

The past few months have taught me how to live without him, and I think I've grown comfortable in the peace that this time spent alone has brought me. I also think that it's this peace that finally allowed me to follow the instincts that have, for the past seven months, been trying to let me know that it's time to leave.

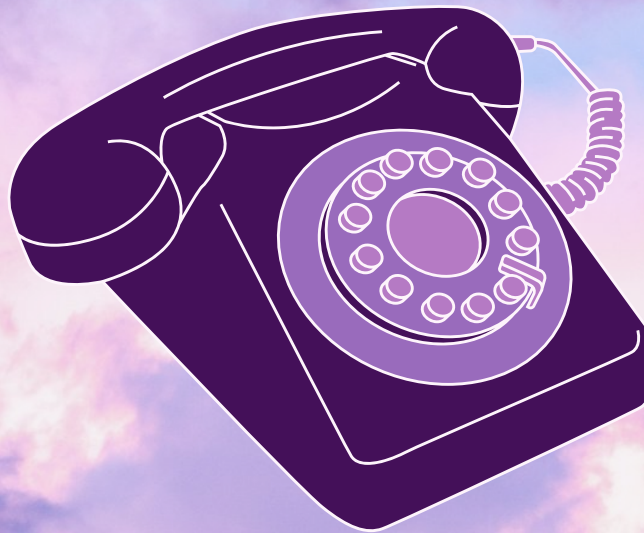
"Sorry I've been a little bit all over the place the past week...I've been coming to terms with the fact that I cannot be friends with someone I used to really love...and I'm also aware that things are probably going to end badly and you're going to throw me to the side..."

"...so I think it's best if we don't keep talking, because I don't want you to hurt me again..." "...You don't need to reply to this message and it'll probably hurt me less if you don't." "I'm sure you understand why I have to look out for myself."

I don't want to say that I'm not in love, because I am, but I think each day that's spent in peace is helping shift my love for *him*, into a love for what it is that I'm yet to know. I've spent so long blind to only the potential of someone's love, that I've forgotten what it feels like to not have to imagine.

And I hope to give myself this love that I've been chasing for so long - this love that was beginning to bud within me three months ago, before he *disturbed the peace of my unhealed heart*.

by Charlotte India Howard





Deep Water by Enola

November Porch

Leaves laden, pressed, and burnished
against the cracked wooden floor,
the air is crisp,
and the night is sweetly scented.

I'm being kept warm by the shelter of your arms,
and together we wait for the rain to accompany us,
for it to blend us like watercolor paint
becoming altogether one soft and subtle shade
within this dimly lit porch.

Lunatics

When the full moon pulls at the sea,
creating its waves,
it pulls at us too,
crashing us together,
dissolving us into sea foam.

I want my name on your lips.

Like lipstick that doesn't smudge,
or the stain after drinking hibiscus tea,
I want to forever be a hue pressed
against the tenderness of your mouth.

- Annie E.M



Vidya Jain, The Tiffin, and The Wondrous Cherry Tree

Being a substitute teacher means meeting all kinds of faces from all ages in life. Children from K-12. Young parents with their first child, old parents with their seventh kid. Little sisters. Big brothers. Grandparents. Aunts. Uncles. Godparents. Teachers. Principals. Superintendents. Out of all the faces I have met, there is one I will never forget. Vidya Jain.

It started off as a Monday in the middle of September. Sunny day with a light breeze. I packed my tiffin with chapati and chicken curry from the weekend. I added a few pieces of mysore pak that Anjali brought back from her trip to India.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather take a sandwich?”

My husband’s concern comes from a place of care. He has his own memories of office glares for bringing his “brown food” to work. I told him his ham and swiss sandwich was in the fridge. He sighed before patting my shoulder, calling me brave. He stole a piece of mysore pak and slipped it between his lips. I couldn’t help but shake my head before putting on my shiny black flats. They had a little red bow that matched the cherries on my patterned charcoal dress.

“Chapati but no sari?”

I pretended to throw my second flat at him as he hid behind the counter. I shook my head again hearing his laughter, a smile blooming on my lips before walking out to the car.

Upon driving up to the elementary school, I walked past a large cherry tree. The tree grew with serrated dark green leaves. Thin stems dipped at the ends with lush red cherries. Shiny as rubies as they dangled in the sunlight. Clusters of sweet fruit hung from smooth branches with a gentle sway. I nearly tripped on the edge of the pavement in awe of such a beautiful tree.

“Hello everyone! I’m Mrs. Das!”

I entered the classroom and introduced myself to the group of third graders I would be getting to know for the next three days. Their teacher, Ms. Smith, had been out with a family emergency. From the instructions she gave me, I anticipated a fun week. I put on a cassette tape of “Arthur” for the class to watch. After looking around the room of children giggling at Buster’s antics in the show, I noticed there was only one student who wasn’t white. She sat towards the door with a light purple dress with daisies on it. She hugged a book for the entirety of the episode. When the other kids laughed, she would nod and smile instead.

When it came for lunchtime, the class picnicked on some wooden tables outside along with the other third grade classes. It was fun to see what parents packed for their kids. Cheddar cubes. Hard boiled eggs. Strawberries. Macaroni and cheese. Hummus. Pretzels. Yogurt. I sat with the other teachers, who didn’t seem to be a fan of my tiffin carrier. At least they didn’t mind sacrificing some of their lunch foods to cheer up some kids who only had snacks to munch on. Yet, I could feel their stares piercing into my shoulders as they saw my “brown food”. They

couldn't care to even start a conversation. A familiar feeling. Why not enjoy the beautiful weather instead?

About midway through recess, I noticed how I was missing a kid from my class. After scanning the playground, I asked one of the kids who ran past my table if he saw a girl in a violet dress. I pointed in the direction in the wondrous cherry tree. I thanked him before running towards the back of the school. When I arrived, I was relieved to see the girl sitting under the tree, reading the book she hugged previously. I waved at her before settling on my knees a few feet away from her.

“What is your name, hon?”

“V-Vidya”

Vidya Jain! A memorable name on the attendance roster, indeed. A last name that meant “triumphant” stood out in many ways, especially as the only Indian one on the entire list. She shifted to the left a bit and asked me to sit next to her. As I moved next to her, I asked what she had for lunch.

“The other boys and girls threw it away. They said it smelled funny. I tried to get it back from them before they threw it away, but then one of the girls shoved me.”

She moved her dress to reveal her scraped knees, and her jaw dropped without any words to follow.

I took a deep breath and tried to gather myself. Vidya already went back to reading her book without a bit of disappointment coming through. I asked her what food it was.

“Amma gave me two samosas, pakora, Frooti, and three Parle-G cookies.”

It was “brown food”. Of course, those kids threw away her “brown food”. I took another deep breath before asking if she was hungry. She looked up at the shiny clusters of fruit.

“I had some cherries. They are sour!”

Her contagious giggles bloomed a smile on me. I picked one of the lower hanging cherries and popped it into my mouth. My lips puckered almost immediately. Vidya did not lie in the slightest. I whistled, it was so sour. At least I made Vidya laugh. I spit out the pit and checked my watch. Lunch was almost over. After telling Vidya this, she closed her book and hugged it again.



“Thank you for being my friend, today. I don't have many of those.”

She skipped back towards the playground. I got up and wiped off any grass specks from my dress. I couldn't focus for the rest of the day, and I didn't notice until my husband said I had been quiet all day. I made some milk couldn't sleep anyways, so I My husband wakes up from our next to me.

chai deep in the night. I might as well calm my nerves. bed and sits on the counter

"It used to happen to me a child. No one cared to without lunch on most amma to make me turkey would bring "brown food" to point in being the only one."



at school too when I was notice, so I would go days until I begged my sandwiches. No one else school either, so there is no

I poured the warm chai into some teacups sips and wrapped his arm around me. The couldn't stop thinking about this innocent girl. Only one. All alone. Under that beautiful cherry tree. If only someone else could...

and gave one to my husband. He took a few chai helped soothe my headache, but I

and gave one to my husband. He took a few

That's it!

Monday became Tuesday, except this time it was worth waking up earlier. My amma always told me that those who woke up earlier were the ones who had a mission to accomplish that day, which was indeed my own reasoning.

My tiffin was packed with all kinds of Indian goods. Chapati. Chicken curry. Maggi. Samosas. Mysore pak. Parle-G cookies. Jalebi. I packed a few boxes of Frooti with me too. I was certainly ready for lunch to say the least.

The moment lunch started, I walked directly to the cherry tree to see Vidya sitting there with her book. I noticed a few glares from the other teachers before walking over, but I was on a mission that day.

"They threw away my lunch again."

I showed her the delights I brought in my tiffin, and her eyes lit up. When I told her she could have some of it, she threw her book on the floor and hugged me around my neck.

"Thank you, auntie!"

We enjoyed our lunch under the cherry tree. Vidya only had one samosa, a couple of Parle-G cookies, and a few sips of Frooti, but I let her keep the rest of the cookies and the juice. At the end of lunch, I saw the principal of the school walking in our direction. She told Vidya to go along to class but told me to go to her office and to bring my tiffin with me. Vidya's eyes started to well with tears, but I told her to go back to class as well.

“Mrs. Das, do you realize that sharing your lunch with a student is frowned upon at the school? We work with children all the time, and we have to ensure their safety from the intentions of any strangers and bringing in foreign food goes against this.”

I took a deep breath, but I couldn’t hold myself back this time.

“Foreign food? Do you realize that Vidya goes hungry every lunch period because the other students throw away her lunch? Her lunch is also Indian food, and she doesn’t even get a chance to eat it. Other teachers give parts of their lunch to other students, so why has it become an issue when I do it? Also, “stranger”? Do you really believe that is the most appropriate way to address because I know you wouldn’t call me that if I wasn’t a —”

“Mrs. Das, I meant no—”

“No harm, isn’t it? Go ahead, look through my tiffin. See that I have nothing to hide.”

I opened each container in the tiffin. The principal held each one and held it up to the light. She sniffed a few of them before setting them back down onto her desk. She picked up one of the Parle-G cookies and lingered on it for a bit longer than any of the other treats. I encouraged her to take a bite, and she did so with some hesitation. Her eyes lit up, and she nodded her head.

“This is really good! More people should try these.”

I wish more people would give these treats a chance...

Once again, I had another idea, and one that the principal agreed with. Except this one meant a trip to the Indian store.

Tuesday became Wednesday. I brought a basket full of Indian goods. Parle-G cookies. Banana chips. Mixture. Murukku. The class had been a bit emptier since the kids who threw away Vidya’s lunch had received detention. The rest of the class looked puzzled by the basket, except for Vidya, who had a big, toothy smile on her face. I passed the basket around the classroom and asked them to pick something they wanted to try.

“Since it is my last day with you, I thought I would bring you some of my favorite treats. They remind me of when I was your age.”

At first, they met the snacks with some suspicion, but after encouraging them to try it, they took a quick liking to the treats. Right as the class ended, Vidya asked me to wait before leaving the room. After a few minutes, she came back with her amma. She was an older woman, who wore a green sari and golden bangles with her hair kept in a braid. She approached me and held both my hands.

“Thank you, mole.”

I bowed my head before Vidya hugged me one more time. Years have passed, and I have substituted for all kinds of classrooms. Much like the tree she sat under, she could never forget about Vidya. About fourteen years later, I received a Facebook message from her.

“Hi Mrs. Das! I hope you are doing well. I don’t know if you remember this, but I was a student in a third-grade class you subbed for. I used to sit under the big cherry tree with a book and you brought me Indian food when the other kids threw my lunch away. I just wanted to let you know that I start my job as a kindergarten teacher at the same school tomorrow. You inspired me to become a teacher and introduce young minds into rich and diverse cultures and make them feel included, no matter what background they come from. Thank you so much for being there for me at such a young age. I wouldn’t have done this without your motivational strength.”

My husband came to ask me about my tears. I reminded him about Vidya Jain, the tiffin, and the wondrous cherry tree. I asked him if we could go visit the cherry tree and see if it still stood on the grounds of the school. On the drive there, I wrote back to Vidya.

“Vidya,

Thank you for thinking of me. I am so happy and proud of you. I have no doubts that you will change the lives of the students who have your class and that you will inspire the best of them to shine through. You are just as your last name entails. Jain!”

Once we reached the school, I held his hand as we searched for the tree. It stood tall, the same as it did when I met Vidya. My husband picked a cherry off the tree and puckered his lips at the bite. I couldn’t contain my laughter.

“They are sour!”

Index

Amma: The word for “mother” in Malayalam, which is the primary language spoken in Kerala, the southernmost region of India.

Chapati: a circular flatbread made from wheat flour and water

Chai: tea

Frooti: a mango-flavored drink primarily sold throughout India

Jalebi: a sweet treat made from deep-fried maida batter in a swirl shape

Maggi: a brand of masala noodles popular in India

Mixture: an Indian snack that consists of spicy dried ingredients like peanuts, puffed rice, fried chickpeas and lentils and spices

Mole: A word of endearment that refers to a younger woman or girl; the word also means “daughter”.

Murukku: a savory snack that is crunchy and comes in a swirl

Mysore pak: an Indian sweet made with ghee that originates from the city of Mysuru

Parle-G: a brand of sweet biscuit cookies popular in India

Samosa: a fried pastry triangular pocket filled with spicy potatoes and peas

Sari: a garment typically worn by women that consists of a long skirt, a blouse, and a drape that goes across the body to cover the midriff

Tiffin: a type of lunch box that consists of stacked tins and a handle



28/10/2021

'Not Just Yet' by Frossi Pitsalidou

Pickling on a Saturday

Please breathe
 one full lung
 of all you have
 to offer down the
 throat of me
 and I'll hold it in
 as long as I possibly can. I
 swear this body
 sometimes feels like a
 bottomless pit of
 emotion, leaking all over the
 table like a wet rag.
 Maybe if you showed me
 some of yours
 I could show less of mine... jar
 sadness, jealousy, envy, and
 shame into a pickling set.
 Shelve them out of sight until
 the craving
 to burst subsides.

Silver Spoons

When you are finished
 using my body like
 a well-loved toy—
 one wheel hanging by the wire,
 an eye missing from its socket—
 Shift all focus
 to pleasure every cell.
 Suck on my neck
 as if it offers you
 the secrets of life and death.
 Dig into my sex
 like a mine full of silver
 spoons that will feed you
 for a lifetime.
 This well replenishes
 itself again and again
 for you, for a price.

Metamorphosis

And in knowing you
 I underwent slow
 metamorphosis.
 Shed that scaly skin
 once infectious
 as medieval plagues.
 Stench lessened
 from packed pungent
 punch to the gut
 to withering garden
 following summer rain.
 I'm pink like
 a bubble bath now,
 lukewarm to touch.
 How quickly the stroke
 of you blushes me,
 all of the blood
 marathon sprinting to
 watercolor both cheeks
 in effort to worship you.

by Aimee Nicole

The Dawning of the Day

Fergal was sitting in his rugged rocking chair. He was gently swaying back and forth with his eyes firmly closed. The wrinkles on his forehead and around his lips were deep and harsh. His breath was rattling. Fergal was trying to get his regular afternoon- nap in when he suddenly heard a car. He opened his eyes. His big bony farmer's fingers tightly clenched the arms of the chair. Who was that? Nobody visited on Christmas Eve. Actually, nobody ever visited him. It was rare that anybody ever got lost and accidentally reached his old farmhouse. Fergal lived in the middle of nowhere in Mayo, surrounded by vast fields and dense pieces of woodlands. Just one bumpy narrow road led to his house.

Must be the postman, Fergal figured. But who on earth would send him a Christmas card? Probably the phone bill. "Bastards!", Fergal grunted. He put his glasses back on and slowly got out of his rocking chair. He was in no rush, and his bones were in no condition to be hurrying. As he sluggishly walked to the front door, he heard the tinkling of the letter slot. "Aha!", he snorted. These villains were bold enough to send the bill on Christmas Eve.

When he reached the hall, Fergal saw a beige envelope lying on the floor. He bent down. A sharp sting in his back made him groan, and his knees creaked like little twigs in a storm. He picked up the envelope and frowned. His address was written in a delicate handwriting. It looked familiar. Fergal narrowed his eyes and tilted the letter towards the front door window. Although he was wearing his glasses, he had some difficulty reading. "Now let me see", he murmured. He held the envelope very close to his eyes. Then, his hands began to tremble so badly that he dropped the letter. His whole

body was shaking, and just before he'd have fallen over face-down, Fergal managed to grab the door handle and steady himself a little. He slowly sat down and leaned his back against the door. The cold glass felt good. Carefully, Fergal picked up the letter and read the sender's address:

*Clíodhna Brown, 9 Robin Grove,
London N6 6PA, UK.*

Fergal shook his head. His hands were still trembling. Fifty years without a word from her, but he had never forgotten her. She was the ghost that lurked in every dark corner of his subconscious. Vivid memories and long suppressed feelings were rushing through his head as he read her name again and again. He hesitated a little, but then he gathered all his courage and opened the envelope. He pulled out two creamy white pages, neatly covered with Clíodhna's delicate handwriting. Fergal held the pages close to his eyes. With every word, every sentence, he felt the lump in his throat grow bigger. When he reached the end, he could no longer swallow the lump:

*I wish you a merry and magical
Christmas. I hope I'll see you soon. Love,
Clíodhna*

Tears were glistening in his eyes. His hands sank down, his head fell against the door with a dull sound, and finally the tears came streaming down his face, tracing the deep lines on his cheeks, covering every inch of his creased skin.

After a while, his stream of tears dried up. Fergal clumsily stood up. His legs were cold and stiff. He slowly staggered back into the sitting room and put the letter

on the small coffee table beside his rocking chair. He tenderly stroked Cliodhna's signature.

Then Fergal grabbed his walking stick and hobbled outside through the garden door. He had a huge garden. Magnificent fruit trees were framing the lawn that badly needed cutting; on the right there were a small dried-up pond and several vegetable patches that had degenerated into a brownish, muddy habitat for weed. More than ten years ago, Fergal had stopped growing vegetables. He rarely came out here anymore, he was too old and weak for the work and preferred to ignore the decay.

Fergal limped to his garden shed. It was covered with cobwebs and dust. He grabbed a pair of shears and some wire, and then he waded through the long, wild grass, towards the majestic Norway spruce that was towering over the garden. Small beads of sweat were glistening on Fergal's forehead. His heart was a little weak. He sighed with exhaustion and waited for his heart rate to settle. Then he cut a few small branches off the spruce. Fergal and Cliodhna had planted the spruce after their last Christmas together, just a few months before she married Spencer. Spencer, the rich banker from London, that Cliodhna's parents favoured over "that poor farmer in Mayo". The Norway spruce was the last Christmas tree Fergal had ever put up.

With his fresh dark-green branches, Fergal hobbled back across the lawn. Back inside, he wired the branches into a small Christmas wreath. It was plain and simple, but beautiful. Fergal smiled and mumbled: "Not too bad. Not too bad at all!" Then he put the wreath up on his front door. The sweet woody scent of the spruce spread all over the farmhouse.

When Fergal finally sat back in his rocking chair, he felt tired but content. For the first time in decades, he had a Christmas wreath and was kind of looking forward to listening to all the Christmas songs on the radio, which normally only annoyed him. He had been bitter for years, especially at Christmas. This time, however, he was feeling elated. Cliodhna was free. Spencer had died. Her letter said she would move back to Ireland soon. She had never stopped thinking of him, loving him. Fergal's light grey eyes regained their sparkle, after fifty years of bleakness.

By the time Fergal got hungry, it was dark outside. The days are so short, he thought to himself. He made his way to the kitchen. This year's Christmas menu consisted of two slices of brown bread with butter and cheese, and a mug of Barry's tea. It was the same meal he had every day. He always dined early, at around six. Then he would turn on the radio, listen to the news and go to bed at nine, if not a little earlier. In the mornings he usually got up at six.

Tonight, he would stay up a little longer to celebrate the beginning of something beautiful. Fergal found that his life had suddenly regained meaning, totally unexpectedly. He was savouring his meal and even lit a candle on the coffee table. Then he turned on his old little radio. As always, he needed to adjust the aerial to get a clear signal. He heard the last few seconds of White Christmas and grunted: "Ah, missed that old classic tune!" After that, they played a modern song Fergal didn't know. A bright male voice was singing:

"Is it warm where you are? Oh has the snow fallen down? Does the fire light beside you?"

Fergal immediately liked the song. It evoked memories of his last Christmas with Cliodhna, when they sat by the fire and watched the snowflakes dancing at the window. He suddenly felt as if he could sense her presence right there in his living room. It was magical. When the song softly faded out, Fergal turned off the radio and sat in silence. After a while he got a pen and paper.

Dear Cliodhna,

He stopped. Lost for words, he stared at the blank page. He found it impossible to put his feelings into words, to bridge fifty years of silence and longing. "If only I was as good with words as that young fella on the radio!", he grunted. Mindlessly, he scribbled some of the lyrics on the writing paper:

And it's a wonderful time, to make you mine. Though I know it's not that easy.

I hope that you find peace and your mind is at ease - this Christmas.

Fergal put the pen down again, too tired to write the perfect letter, and turned off the lights. Only the candle on the coffee table was faintly illuminating the room now. "Cosy", Fergal murmured and smiled. He gently hugged Cliodhna's letter with his large hands, leaned back into his chair and closed his eyes. The chair was rocking back and forth, soothing Fergal's excited nerves. He kept stroking the letter tenderly with his thumbs. After a while, his movements got slower and calmer, until the rocking chair finally stood still. Fergal was asleep. The rhythmic rattling of his breath echoed in the dark house. The candle was crackling quietly beside him, casting dancing shadows over his wrinkled, serene face. The flame kept flickering all night, watching over the old man.

In the morning, when the sun was slowly rising, the candle silently burned out.

For a moment, the farmhouse stood still and silent, as if the world had stopped turning. Then fragile sunbeams carefully broke through the windows, and with a gentle rustle, Cliodhna's letter slipped from Fergal's hands and glided to the floor.

by Christina Hennemann



girlfriend diaries by afreen



daily night by Alice Gautier

"When I read the details of your theme "To your heart's desire", I immediately thought about my parent's home, especially during Christmas, when the fireplace is on, the living room is decorated, there are garlands and dimmed lights and our cats are lying on the couch. So, to me, the end of the year is synonymous with reunion and warmth."

Christmas Movie

Dare to show me
a Christmas movie,
so cliché, touching
in the most predictable
way, so bad, but I
cry salty spheres of
non-remembrance.
I'm a cup spilling over
with spicy mulled wine,
too much heat to contain.
I burst out laughing frantically,
like a total psycho,
my crazy witch screech,
I laugh and roar,
at myself, the irony,
the coexistence of
bright joy and stinging pain,
but I feel human,
I'm alive, really alive,
with a strong pulse
and a sore heavy heart,
because I don't recall
Christmas at home -
not like in the movies.

by Christina Hennemann



Paradox of Desire

A cruising boat fluttered over the glossy sea. It was an hour past daybreak and serene air swayed over the coastal town. A rumbling bus dropped off its passengers minutes away from the shore. All except two were adults, the driver and an ex-drill sergeant named Benigno.

"Your parents' go-to destination for relaxation used to be this town." Benigno addressed the troop of yawning teens. They had been dropped off at the town as punishment for causing disharmony within their local church.

"But you're not here to relax." He resumed, "Your task is to come up with ideas to serve this community. Thaylen is in charge. Miss.Rogne's mother maintained a house in this neighborhood, use that house as long as you do not ruin her property." Turning to Thaylen beside him, he bid farewell and stepped onto the rumbling bus, "You will cooperate, son. You will be a fair leader. Got it?" His son clasped his heels and smiled, "Sir, yes, sir!"

The teens bemoaned in silence.

"Your parents get along like a family, united by the love of god. You should be ashamed of how challenging it is to integrate newer kids into our community because none of you can act mature. I expect you all to learn responsibility by the end of this week."

The first to disperse from the adolescents was a boy named Leise. His ash blonde hair

swept over the shoulders of his small, skinny frame. The sleeves of his shirt fell over his

fingers. A girl followed him to where the waves crashed.

"You're acting like you haven't seen a beach before." The girl said, amused by his shimmering eyes.

His priorities were caught up in the twirling waves rolling over the sandy shore rather than youth community service, "That's because I haven't."

"Really? Why not?"

"My family doesn't own a car."

"Oh." She said, never knowing a life without a car.

Leise undid his sneakers and clawed his toes into the wet sand. The broken shells under the surface made him giddy.

"You should see the beach at sunset," she suggested, "it's too early right now."

He plucked a clamshell from the sand. Cold like a pebble. Not plastic.

"Here!" She returned with a cone-shaped shell.

The absurd, childish lack of composure that came from picking up shells. He was embarrassed to admit that he liked something this unfruitful. He stuffed it into his pocket and scanned for any critical eyes. Maybe his mother would appreciate them, he thought, since such simple pleasures of life eased her from her corporate job. Perhaps after returning back from community service, he'd have a story to go along with it.

"Thanks," feeling rather bashful, "Cecilia."

An enormous teenager bulldozed into Leise. The boy plummeted into a collapsing wave. The enormous person was none other than Thaylen, followed by the laughter of his lackey, Drak.

“Leave him alone!” Cecilia screamed, “I’m going to tell your dad.”

The waves were stronger than Leise had anticipated; he strived to kneel upright on the moving sands and water.

“Are you picking up shells?” Thaylen jeered.

Cecilia defended, “It was my idea!” only to be ignored.

“Stand up, little mermaid.”

The girl sought help elsewhere.

“Can’t stand on your mermaid tail?” Drak taunted.

“Maybe he should ask the girls to stand up for him like he always does.”

Maybe I should, he thought. Leise slammed, “Do you like Rogne when she’s with her friends?”

Thaylen flinched and kicked him back into the water. The domineering youth had in fact been intimidated by some of the girls in the camp.

Leise jabbed Thaylen’s knees and he fell with a giant clatter..

“Leise!” a man roared. It was Benigno, followed by Cecilia. He glowered at the drenched Leise and Thaylen.

“Leise, Thaylen!” He barked again.

“Um, dad,” said Thaylen, “I just came to see who was taking a bath.”

Benigno boiled at Leise, “The kiddie pool suits you better. Get out of there!” His scornful face turned to Thaylen and Drak, “Are you trying to swim back home? Take him to Rogne’s, and start deciding what

you’re going to do. I’ll be back by 9pm and you better have something ready.”

The visitors explored the empty, quaint roads that inclined towards the sky. The stillness would be driven away by barks echoing through the neighborhood. Sprinklers among the grass buzzed in harmony. The old and retired in their front yards welcomed the strangers. The younger residents had left for education or work.

Then again, the tormentor followed Leise, and even he whispered in the quietness.

“How do you wake up every day feeling good about yourself? You walk like someone who’s been done by a horse.”

He kneed Leise’s rear.

“Piss off, lard-ass!” he stuck like a woodpecker.

“Awh, look, the mama’s boy’s fighting back,” said Drak, doing his part as the agreeable yes man. Moving along with Thaylen’s plans. Perhaps he too was afraid of getting on Thaylen’s bad side.

“Hey!” The cheerful, deep call diffused the fight, “Thaylen, what’s up man? How’s the leader thing going?” The young man hung his arm around the back of Thaylen’s neck. They were about the same height. Dark curly hair, woven to the back by a band. He had a slight stubble running down his angular cheeks and his skin was pale. His words resonated deep from his heart. He was a year older than Leise.

“Sup, Khayr. Aren’t you supposed to enlist in some basketball program?” asked Drak.

“Yes. This summer. Oh, Leise, what’s up? Any plans for this year?”

Butterflies. In his stomach. For a moment, there was no meaning to words.

“No?” he recuperated, “But I am going to take on a course on something I’m passionate about next semester.”

“He’s learning how to escort men.” Thaylen remarked.

Leise gritted his teeth and his ears went hot. The butterflies began to hurt.

Khayr responded deliberately, “Hey, Thaylen, I’ll see you at Rogne’s. I need to talk to Leise about something.”

“On what?” Thaylen and Khayr switched to Spanish, they teased each other, and Thaylen threw in more derogatory insults at Leise.

After the ordeal, Khayr slapped Leise’s arm, “and?”

“And what?”

“What’s the course?”

“They’re going to teach the basics of visual arts. I asked Cecilia to join.”

“Wait,” he burst a hearty laugh, “You asked Cecilia to pick up shells with you so that you didn’t look stupid.” He slapped Leise’s chest dry. “You said you don’t care about what others think.”

“I don’t, okay? I didn’t want that jackass to find out and give me a new name.”

“What’s the name today?”

“Nothing? Why do you even hang out with that loser?”

“I’m just making sure he doesn’t cross the line.”

“But he does cross the line. All you do is kiss his ass like Drak.”

“Hey, I’m not Drak. I just needed to get on his good side so that he especially wouldn’t pick on you.”

Really? He thought.

“I don’t get why he’s so disagreeable.”

“How do you even deal with him?” Leise himself didn’t want to deal with Thaylen,

since it often broke into arguments that got physical.

They approached a bungalow where the youths assembled in the front yard. Rogne stood on the front porch where everyone could see her. She had already begun discussing a few ideas for community service. One of them was picking up trash from the seaside.

Another teen claimed it was too generic, and it appeared that the beach had already been taken care of not long ago.

“How about we just bake something.” Said Cecilia. There was a silence of disapproval.

Rogne noticed Khayr and Leise idling on the other side of the fence. “Leise, what do you think?”

“I think some fences here-” while Leise spoke, Thaylen had arrived, “- are in bad condition. It could do some maintenance. I do admire the idea of picking up trash from the beach, and I want to be responsible for it.”

She pressed her lips, “Hmm. We’ve about 20 teammates. We could divide activities into groups. Or we could do one activity per day.”

“I object,” remarked Thaylen. Drak and Thaylen’s henchmen grinned, anticipating more action and drama.

Rogne prepared to derail him, and her girlish comrades rolled their eyes, “Do you have anything to add?”

“I think I’m the one in charge here.”

“And you’re late?”

“Late? I don’t remember telling anyone to meet at this spot at this time. You just ran your mouth as always.”

“And what are you going to do as a ‘leader’? You’ve never done anything.”

“You wanna see what I can do?”

“Oh my god. Stop fighting, please.” Pleaded one of the teens. Aside from the henchmen, everyone was tired of the constant warfare amongst the few that led to the souring of the entire group.

“Guys,” called Khayr, “Let’s go inside and have breakfast, and decide where everyone will sleep. We’ve plenty of hours to go until uncle Benigno comes back. We’ll decide on community service activities after we are settled.”

Breakfast was handled by the housekeeper of the bungalow. She was a friend of Rogne's mother. She consented to their presence as long as they didn't wreak havoc on the property and trusted Rogne to ensure the house stayed upright.

Khayr had disappeared while the rest of them got settled.

"You're not coming with us?" Rogne forced Leise to answer for the second time, her friends anticipated Leise's 'correct' response. He gave into her request, informing them that he'd tag along for a while until Cecilia calls in the afternoon. They scouted through the coastal town and visited the sick, asking if they needed help with anything. School had ended, the kids returned, and they were inquired too.

A truck owner claimed to have met someone else asking similar questions. A tall, young man with a slight Arab accent. So that's where Khayr went.

They stopped by a restaurant beside a blockbuster store by afternoon and conjured promising ideas. Cars advanced along the road. The town didn't seem that soundless anymore.

Cramps built up in Leise's legs. Fortunately Cecilia showed up in a yellow sundress, carrying a box from the restaurant.

Several minutes later, they were at the shore, and Leise drifted into the beach like a dream.

“The town is a while away which is great,” she sat on a sandy mat with an overhead umbrella, “Thaylen won't be here since he's become obsessed with an abandoned basketball court.”

She continued, “Beautiful, isn't it?”

He agreed. Smiling. Lost in the breeze that lifted his hair.

“You're like a lost puppy,” she giggled. “No wonder girls find you fascinating.”

Puppy? He thought. She didn't mean to insult him, but how was that a compliment? He'd always been mocked for his small stature. “Is that all they see in me?” He wriggled his sneakers into the sand. “No?” She hesitated. “More like I've always felt like I can be myself around you. I'm guessing other girls feel the same. So they're not just around you for your face or due to pity.”

“I guess. Grew up with girls. Makes sense.”

Cecilia unpacked the box, two burgers, and fries.

“Leise, don't let Thaylen get to you. I don't get boys sometimes. Isn't he supposed to be jealous that girls trust you more? Why can't he try the same?”

“You know,” he croaked on his burger, “I try not to feel bad. Maybe he's jealous

because I'm closer to Sylvia or he sincerely has a problem with those close to Rogne."

"Did he really like Sylvia?"

"Yeah, but anyone would pick someone else over Thaylen. Jesus. Even Mrs. Benigno didn't believe he had a chance with her."

"How do you know this?"

"Mom. Isn't it obvious? She likes to gossip. Khayr pointed it out to her."

"Ah, okay." She said, However, he brought up Khayr again.

"Leise, what do you think about Khayr?"

"Huh?" He swallowed the last piece of Burger, "He's good."

"You... seem to like him alot."

"I just respect him. He's taught me basketball. He also shows interest in what I have to say."

Cecilia was deeply religious and innocent, his admiration of Khayr wasn't sinful in her eyes, but impossible. Nevertheless her intuition remained unsatisfied with his response.

An additional voice joined, "anything for me?" Khayr points to the empty box.

The coastline had slightly receded. Seagulls flocked back home, facing a blue, pink, and gold sky. Speed Boats were fastened by ropes to a fishing dock.

The three had gone to pick up shells, and then Cecilia cooked an excuse to leave. Khayr had met up with Thaylen earlier and playfully teased Leise for being called a mermaid.

"No, that shell is bad." He informed Khayr in pure mermaid fashion, "Look, there's a crack at the top. There will be better shells where the shore is."

"Why do you need these anyways?"

"I just like it." His feet splashed into the waves like a child crushing autumn leaves, soaking the edges of his pants.

"Can you swim?" Khayr asked.

He shook his head.

"You know, there's a theater nearby. Maybe we could go with Cecilia and Henry tomorrow? After we're done community service that is."

"What are we doing for tomorrow?"

"Haven't decided. I made a list so that no one argues. I'll leave it up to Rogne to decide which plan sounds good. If Thaylen disagrees, I'll have to be the negotiator."

Leise rolled his eyes.

"Do you want to learn to swim? I could at least teach you how to free float during this week. This month's kinda hot. So these are good days for a swim."

"I think it's just you who wants to swim."

"Haha, Yes!" Khayr slapped his shoulder.

"Khayr," the light boy spoke, he looked down into the clear water that shimmered gold from the sunset.

Khayr nodded, he was listening.

"How's... where are you going? This basketball program thing?"

"It could be for two months. At the University of Pyeawer. But if I'm good enough and get selected, I might pursue basketball as a career and cram there for two years."

"That's great." He muttered feebly.

"Honest to god, I'm excited. Not everyone gets this opportunity."

Leise's throat brimmed with agonizing grief, and gazed into Khayr's eyes, "Stay," and he could say no more.

“What?” Khayr snorted. He watched Leise’s head hang, physically recoiling from that request.

“Hey man, I really can't. It was super hard for me to get in.” He sighed, “Do you really care about me that much?”

“No. My mom likes you around.”

“Wait, you good?”

“I guess.”

Unable to understand the situation, Khayr rubbed the back of his neck. The sun had faded and everything turned blue.

The dark-haired boy pulled him close, hugging him by the shoulder, and they returned to Rogne’s. The shells in their pockets rattled like coins.

The roads glowed with lights. The houses they passed were packed with life.

Rogne waited outside the bungalow. Arms crossed. Four girls stood beside her like daggers.

“Khayr,” she said. “Get inside.”

Khayr complied. Everyone else in the living room was confused. On a chaise lay Thaylen, his hands and feet bound by ropes. Looking rather pathetic. He had knocked the furniture around him.

“What’s going on?” Khayr inquired, “Why is he tied up? Who’s responsible for this?”

“We are,” replied Rogne, “We had no other choice but to restrain him. If we called the cops, Uncle Benigno wouldn’t be too happy.”

“What did he do?”

“He vandalized the basketball court and put some kid in a headlock until we arrived.

Drak, Thaylen, and you aren’t allowed to leave until uncle Benigno arrives.”

“Wait, I’m not responsible for this. I wasn’t even with him the whole afternoon.”

“You were with him on the basketball court.”

“What?” he raised, “I swear, I wasn’t there! I just dropped him off.”

“There’s no proof whether the damages caused were with or without you, even if you left in the afternoon. You can explain when Benigno comes. For now, I’m in charge, and you will listen to me.”

Four hours remained until Benigno arrived.

The detainees were refused a drink and bathroom breaks. The five girls supervised, a few others guarded within the parameters since they detested Thaylen as well. The rest wandered out of boredom.

Leise and some others pleaded to let Khayr go, but Rogne insisted that he too deserved to be punished, since Khayr affiliated with Thaylen instead of going against him. So the blonde boy waited with Cecilia in the grassy front yard.

“That constellation there,” Cecilia pointed to the sky, “that’s the big dipper, and next to it over there, little dipper. And that,” she pointed at his face, particularly his nose, “is a face that looked like it cried.”

“I did not.”

“Then why is your nose pink and your eyes puffy?”

Leise frowned.

“What is it about beaches and rainfall that makes people emotional? Did he say something mean? If you don’t mind telling me.”

He breathed, “Khayr might not come back.”

“Oh...that’s...” she stopped.

He returned to star gazing.

“You know Leise,” she said, “It’s amazing how he joined us just two years ago. He wasn’t even part of the church yet befriended us. You’ve always looked up to him like an older brother. I understand what it’s like to look up to one and want them beside you.”

“Older brother?” That was funny. Leise assumed his admiration was indeed brotherly or out of respect. It took him a year to realize it was more than that. As if his desire was desiring itself, he unconsciously postponed the realization of what Khayr really meant to him.

Khayr suddenly dashed out a window and vaulted into the front yard.

“He’s getting away!” screeched Rogne. The door tore open and a few teenagers chased after the athlete. Khayr leaped over the fence, sprinting away like a bolt of lightning.

A teenager managed to close the gap between them. They howled, “Hey!”

It was Leise.

“What?!” Khayr yelled, still running.

“Wait for me!”

Enthralled, Khayr slowed.

Leise ran with Khayr, chasing his desire. But inside, he was flying.

by Fazila Nasoordeen



QUEER SCI FI FANTASY

ADI GUERRERX

We'd love to start off with the first stages of 'Queer Sci Fi Fantasy' and how you felt seeing it develop over time.

I started working on Queer Sci Fi Fantasy nearly a year ago while getting my home studio set up. It started out as a day scheduled to experiment with the new setup and space. The beginning synthline and melody came out pretty quickly. Over the following months came editing and eventually partnering with Weird Sister. It was definitely a relief to have it release within a year of its conception.

Your work shares a beautiful relationship with faith that is inspired by the sounds of your younger years. How do you think your style has developed with those origins in mind?

I do and lately I have been acknowledging my form of god. I appreciate sanctified spaces - but not in the organized religious way. Often the subject that's in the peripheral of when I'm writing is me. Like almost any lyric I've written could be a self-confrontation. Which until recently made writing very laborious. Now I'm softer with myself and even celebrate myself.



On the flip side, do you think your music has reflected the changes you've gone through as you've moved to bigger cities over time? We'd love to hear a little bit about your decision to pursue music, where it began, where you think it is now, and how the years have made a difference.

Well, I have always lived in big cities. I was born and raised in Miami then moved to NYC when I was 22. I'm not sure if my music reflects those changes but my creative process is very much affected by where I am. I'm now based in Richmond, VA which is technically the smallest city I've ever lived in. I think I have always been pursuing music but didn't know where to begin. I didn't grow up in a household with musicians or music appreciators. Besides my older sister who introduced me to a ton of pop punk and eventually screamo.

Who would you say are your biggest influences across popular culture?

I'm currently revisiting Frou Frou and Smashing Pumpkins

What would you say to someone looking to start making their own music, but they aren't sure where to begin?

Start sooner than later, haha. Pick a song you really like and pick it apart.

How do you think the overlap between visual art and music has contributed to your creative process, especially with this project in mind?

Alexa Taveras is an amazing artist and musician and working with them was also more like entering a community, the RVA scene specifically. Alexa has worked with nearly everyone here so it was an honor to have their hand in the QSF release. They are also a dope bass player!

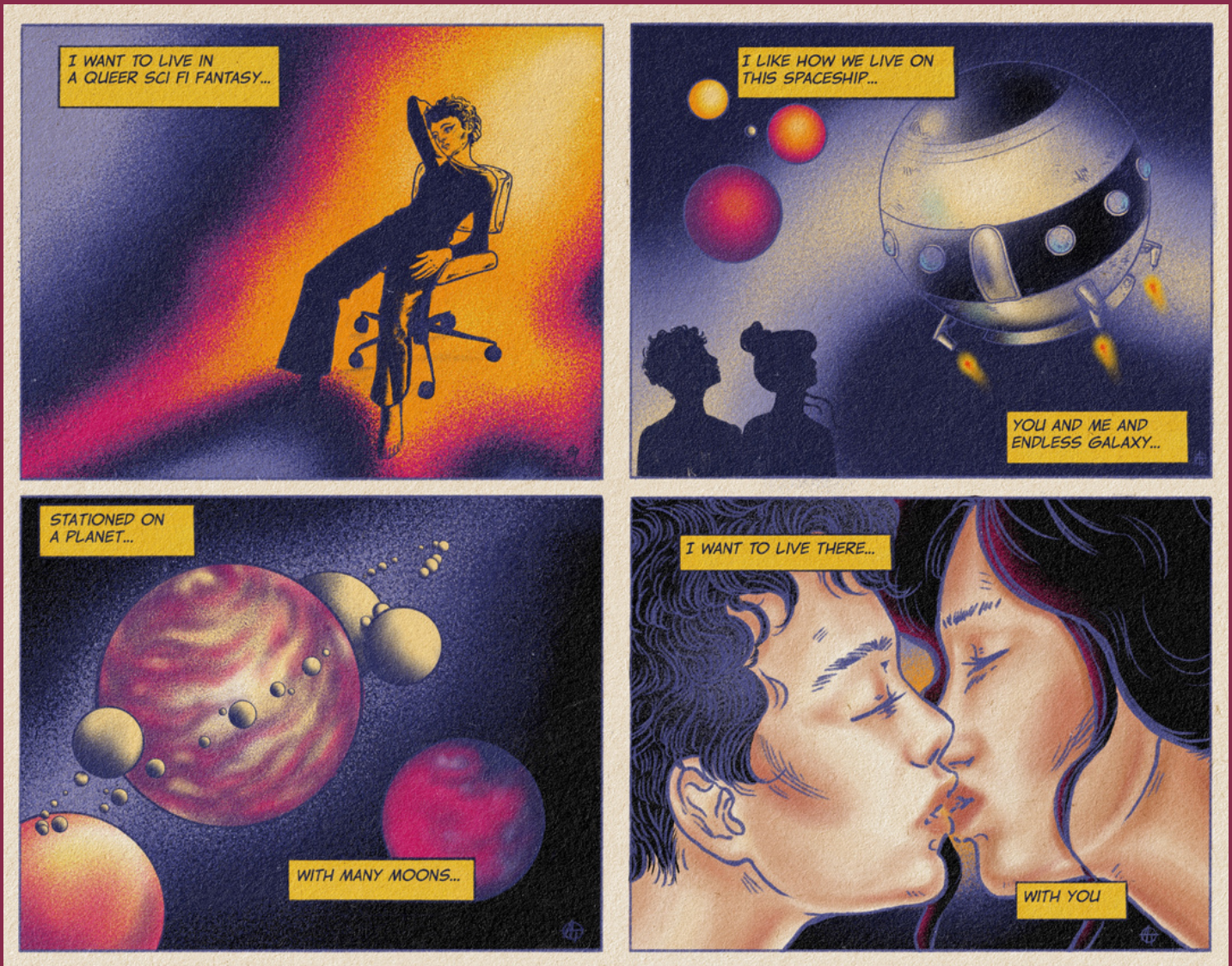
If someone wanted to start listening to your music right now, what are the three words you'd use to describe it?

Sad, gay, angry (lol)



How does love play a role in your life and work? Do you think it is a vital presence at the centre of your creative process?

Love for me has become much less mythical and more rooted in agency. I choose to love myself the most everyday so it helps every decision thereafter haha. Not to say I love myself therefore I have no self doubt, that's incredibly unrealistic.



queer sci fi fantasy

a non comprehensive list of ways to make me fall in love with you
(after laura jean henebry)

Speak to me in your foreign tongues of fresh pasta and warm bread.
 show me your capacity for passion and tenderness. your ability to
 let things rest and rise. your intuition to taste when something is off.

humor me about astrology. i know its illogical but suspend your
 disbelief in the face of my well intentioned search for meaning.
 instead tell me about your thoughts on every other subject, your
 curiosity for the universe.

ever so gently, be honest with me. understand that, while i want the
 cold hard truth, it must be delivered in a lambskin envelope. learn
 the subtle differences between control and love, and the blind spot
 that appears between the two.

fall asleep with a smile, dimples on your cheeks. when i ask you
 about it in the morning, confess that you were thinking of me.

read the book of my trauma, dog-ear the pages, make penciled
 notes in the margins. know it inside and out, for a history not
 studied is doomed to be repeated.

laugh with me and at me, fill the short time we've been given with
 the sound of genuine joy. nothing is worth taking too seriously
 when everything around us is exploding.

love me, all of me. maybe some parts more than others, but leave
 no piece of me out in the cold. love me like a \$12 orchid from the
 grocery store – light and praise while i bloom and patience for the
 times in between. patience because i will always bloom again.

by cait thomson



a spell for falling in love
(after rebecca tamas)

first put on an old t-shirt and lay down some drop clothes,
 this will get messy / next, find a sternal saw – but any sharp
 object will do in a pinch / now this next part is not for a weak
 stomach / you have to get in there and really start opening
 things up / but gently, there is an art to it / the sternum needs
 to be wide enough that your heart will catch a chill / but not
 so gaping that you lose it altogether / now carefully soak up
 the bloodshed with shameful poetry / there, you're almost
 ready / carefully, so not to attract any vultures, go lay in the
 grass and marvel at the stars / with your vulnerable chest open
 to the sky / and wait

things i whisper to my belly

i'm sorry / for the poking / the prodding / the squishing / the squeezing / the relentless name calling /

thank you / for keeping me alive / for protecting my baby / for stretching as she grew / and returning to normal / we
 both know you worked overtime for her /

but still / i'm sorry / for those times i put on spanx / and slimming mom jeans / and drank lemon water instead of
 coffee / we both know that wasn't worth the trouble /

thank you / for tolerating the spicy food / all the pickled jalapenos / the buffalo sauce / the bibimbap that makes my
 nose run / we both know they are all worth the pain /

i'm sorry / i sometimes get high on friday nights / and watch twin peaks / while eating bags of chips / and dollar
 store sour candy / but we both know i'm just so inspired by cherry pie /

i guess / i'm just trying to say /
 i love you //

by cait thomson

girlfriend diaries by afreen





collect little joys by Ella Breunig

Same Air

10/31/2021

It feels like we are lovers.

You come over and we just hold each other while we look out the window, down at the cold outside, down at the groups of people walking by below us, down at the light of the streetlights hitting the pavement. We lay down and feel one another's backs. Instead of kissing, we rub our faces together with our eyes closed. You sit at the edge of my bed, looking at me when my back is turned, waiting for me to button your shirt back up. We pseudo-sleep, remaining just awake enough to remember that you need to go back home soon. You hold me again. We know everything about each other and that barely scratches the surface. Your body heat is on my pillow long after you've gone home, pressed to my face.

We are not lovers.

-

When you're wide awake and I'm one more second away from sleep, I tell you that your touch makes my body feel like it's there, feeling you more and more the longer my eyes stay closed, that your skin on mine clears my head, that I feel totally and wholly clean when we are in the same air together.

-

I sit next to you and hold your hand with both of mine, I tell you how beautiful your face is, how good you are. It's the same every time. I wish I could tell you different things, better things. I tell you how cold it is where I live, that no matter how much I shower, I never feel clean. I feel the cleanest when I'm showering before you come over, when I pull you in, when I can feel the sweat across your back. My skin raises but doesn't crawl.

-

Fully clothed now, we hug. There is a vision of a black landscape behind my eyes. A faint gold strip, slightly curved, glitters somewhere in the middle of it, like the beginning of a sunrise. This is what will remain when the empires fall, when the seasons stop shifting.

Greta Unetich (they/she)

I Just So Happen to be Lucky Enough.

I once wrote a short piece titled 'Let's talk about my inexplicable love for big cities, and the absent life I've made for myself in the very heart of them,' and in that piece I wrote: 'Finding the right words is the hardest part, but I'll find them. Probably when I meet her.' Well, the thing is, I met her. She's what keeps me warm, but in a literal sense too. In a 'I'd rather sleep with you tonight' sort of way. It's mid-November and I'm fueled with festivity, in fact it's my favourite time of year. Squeezing your loved ones tight and saying thank you for a gift you may or may not have even wanted, but it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because they're right there with you, and no other moment is going to be quite like that one, because the festivities will inevitably go away, and we'll be right back to where we started: January 1st. I suppose this is my case for why Christmas is an experience like no other - the good, the bad, and the ugly. With no affiliation to the 1966 classic. Autumn through to winter brings a sort of joy that's only applicable to that time of year, right? That wall of snugly heat that hits me as I wander my way into the local pub, or the giddy feeling that I get as I carry myself home, admiring the merry holiday lights.

It's a beautiful time of year, if not the most beautiful, sometimes undoubtedly so, but all good things can be ugly too. For me, the end of winter is profoundly ugly. Not because it's cold, or dark, but because those moments we anticipate come to an end. All that excitement, that joyful build up, it falls away to reveal the year end. But alas, we start anew. However, I'm not here to talk about "the new." I'm here to talk about the good. The brews, the homely fires, the jazz I fall asleep to, and the lover I get to share it all with. That's what I mean by "the good." Sharing these festivities with the woman I love completely is a great gift and writing about love is the greatest gift of all. So, perhaps consider this a sort of diary entry, a log, whatever best suits your agenda. I like to think of it as a memory. Because a memory is something you can get back; it's always there. Of course, not in a physical sense; but it's there. And I think that's what brings back that familiarity over, and over again. But now I have an "additional familiarity," a woman like no other, and so maybe this is an oath to her. Do lawfully wedded Christmas partners exist? Of course not, because I made that up for the sake of this extract. My point is all of this makes my year end – all of it. I just so happen to be lucky enough to share these frigid nights with someone new.

Extract written by Gia

four seasons: a series of tankas

Skye Cabrera

spring

flowers have blossomed
roses are flooding my thoughts
sent one to my love
please write me back the same way
show me the garden in you

summer

sea blues warm our soul
the birds sing along with us
drinking lemonade
you hold up your rose to me
i'm happy that you are mine

autumn

leaves become orange
it's the beginning of fall
we cling onto hope
but roses wither, my love
and this is the end for us

winter

december rolls by
white blankets cover the floor
the stars have failed me
what strangers we are again
farewell, my dear lifeless rose



Butterflies by Enola

The devil has asthma ii

One wasn't enough

There is a familiarity
 With a stranger
 I know and I don't
 A foreign domesticity
 A knowledge of the scraps of people
 An extent and transcendence of awareness

The soft whispering poems of that evening
 glisten on your tattooed arms
 and my hesitant fingers
 And I know you – enough
 And the song ends – enough
 And the bowl is empty – enough
 And the sun sets – enough
 And strangers stay strangers

Sometimes,
 you meet poems in parks and play
 cards with them
 Most times,
 even less than half is abundant

This house believes (i)

He doesn't smile
 He lights up stars

I feel his hands
 In mine
 Knuckles, destinies, fingers,
I only feel his hands in mine
 Not a word, not a movement, not me

.

I always imagined my hands
 In his ...

Anyway,
 I wrote him
 A bouquet of
 Wilting parentheses

Amidst soft semantic scents
 I still hold his hands
 I will forever hold his hands

This house believes (ii)

Oh, what a Dorian Gray

Borrowed sins
 Borrowed beauty
 Borrowed indulgence

He is Gandolfi's Endymion
 Still as stone
 Not a word, not a movement
 A turquoise dream in frozen sleep

I welcome every night
 With open arms

The feast of him

Greed is some nutters interpretation of modernism

Cash is the drug of choice.
I'd hidden mine
under a large rock like in
the film Treasure Of The Sierre Madre
guarded by a growing monster.
What's in your symbolism?
Thought about such things afterwards.
Oh yeah I see what you mean,
kept hanging around like coincidence.
No water but plenty of booze.
Cigarettes I enthusiastically smoke them
despite my spotty lungs.
Everyone knows the heart pumps blood in
you get out what you get out.
Surviving is not the point.
I've left a little do ray me for you
if you happen to find this note.
The likelihood is you won't.

by Colin James



Light of Love by Jack Clarke

maybe there is a god after all but it's not the one they taught me in church

i have been wanting you for days but we have been making pancakes. when you finally breathe into my ear i crackle back to life. i am starving so i touch every fragment of you. when your thigh slides between my legs i see the god i actually believe in, the god i can taste, the god i can feel, the god i can smell. you write a poem between my legs and call it moonshine. i write a poem inside you and call it orchid. you crack open the moon and watch as yolk spills out. use me, own me, make me. together we carve orange slices out of these bodies, display them, eat the whole damn platter.

by Eryn Johnson

skinny dipping

we take off our clothes.

do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of god?

we wade into the lake.

do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of god.

we press our skin together and i am honeysuckle.

and such were some of you.

you drink me.

but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the lord jesus christ and by the spirit of our god.

you baptize me with your tongue,
we are sanctified.

by Eryn Johnson

Romanticism

Romanticism, i have a knack for it, but i don't really have much else going for me. *romance* (on the other hand), i have no mind for it.

all i think i want is to scale grand obstacles to see beautiful places. i'd like to yell from the tops of mountains, but i won't want to hike down them; i have a fear of heights (but only on the way down, you see).

i want to cross counties, allow their oceans to chase me while i outstretch my hands for the horizon. in every one of those moments, i want to come upon the same startling revelation: i can't romanticize the ocean, but i can romanticize its gentle creatures, and maybe, i can romanticize its' hurt.

to know solitude; to sit and dwell in my own hurt: to travel the world without it ever knowing i was there. could i make it alone? probably not. and there is a certain loneliness in this world that is so great, i think i'd rather die than to feel it. the only logical option would be to chase it.

i want to exist in a place not made for me. a great poet would say that it is this that makes up my soul, but i am not a great poet, so this lesser one knows that wind and time want nothing to do with me. we are not congruent, we are divisive and where they wish to distract i simply hesitate (*i don't know how to walk forward*).

and the winters! i want to make it through a winter without loneliness freezing me soar, but in that same winter, i want dozens of sunrises to bathe me gently as frost nips at my fingertips.

i think of places that look for philocaly, call forward the beautiful and pull them in with a lull of extravagance unparalleled, and i cry, "*here!*"

take me! truly, i must be orphic enough for you, am i not?" i liked the little girl who used to think like that, i wonder where she is now.

i want no eyes nor ears of any human near me as i scrub myself clean in the chilled waters of a midwestern lake in the peak of night. i want the water to swallow me whole and for no one to notice. if i were simply standing in the lake, i would wish to have the will to wade deeper. who would know? (*who would know?*)

maybe i want to sit in a busy cafe and not be noticed, but be seen by someone i used to know. maybe i want to survive the simple way people exit one's life. i want to feel human without knowing that real humans feel irreparable pain.

i want to be an adult and bloom beautifully: i want to know how to live: i want to learn those secrets and not share them. i want an understanding with the universe despite my unimportance (i want to be special to at least someone), for someone to know that there's a beautiful part of me that has always existed: they just never sought to look in me for her: to be special to myself, just for a moment or two. i want to be a secret of the universe, something hidden in plain sight. i want to be the feeling of when something is missing, but you can't quite figure it out.

By Caleb Sa

growing out

by chloe lin

we did all the things couples are supposed to do—text each other good night, FaceTime every morning, hold hands on sunset-ridden summer days—but it was always wavering & curious & something didn't fill.

it wasn't exactly a mystery, what that "something" was, when you broke up with me two months later. it was then i saw your relief for the first time, that this wretched conversation, one you had locked away in some dusty shoebox was finally pulled out from under your bed. it felt as if someone blew hot air onto a car window & wrote "FUCK YOU," except that window was me & i couldn't see through it.

like when we dated, you pulled out your seventh grade glasses & shoved them onto my face, all blurry & foggy with old fingerprints; fingerprints that pressed onto my back; you were indentations & remediation. trace your thumb into my warm breath & let it sit; settle the fine lines & dust away the pleasantries.

i watched as they escaped—the bubble tea, the grass, the lies—out from beneath the loose lid & i wondered if i should throw mud & the wrongs & maybe, text messages, i had things the world went quiet i lost it back for me.

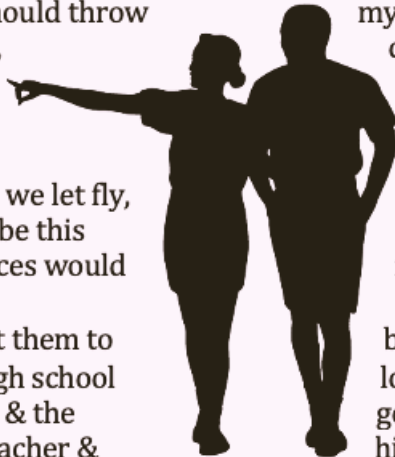
maybe the remnants we let fly, didn't want them to be. maybe this would hit the edges & the laces would other.

but maybe i did want them to it, i've always wanted my high school the children's place receipts & the of talking about our math teacher & want to go after we graduate. sit on the same bench every friday & watch the sun go down into its hazy pink state.

we could have done all those things, but the sunset would have become 5:30 p.m, the bench a placeholder, carrying us to make up for the love that couldn't. i guess that's what made the break up easier; the bench is just something i put my backpack on & the sunset is still magical.

love has no instructions. love is not guaranteed. no matter how many hearts i drew onto that window pane, they all faded into the steam. the steam was always the breadwinner; it was never us & it never will be. ~~we~~ i tried, but it was too foggy, too dark—too much. and maybe that's how it was supposed to go.

the lovers encounter the conflict, but cinderella's feet have grown. the fence has started to splinter. the receipts have flown away & i think that's something worth remembering. i watch the translucent slips flutter against the azure & realize that you are a thing of the past, a ~~good ugly bad pretty mistaken~~ mere thing of the past.



a porcelain-coated ode

on a barstool in your kitchen, spooning frosting out of a can wearing a hat which makes your ears stick out
 —there is nothing more fascinating, nothing so inspired. when i was a girl i had Madame Alexanders resembling you, cherubfaced with cornflower eyes, cheeks painted apple, and each day i admired them, smoothed their ringlets, never dreaming they'd take life in the form of a lover. especially not one half a foot taller than me who could grow a beard if he wanted. if i was an artist, or at least a doll maker, i would like to capture you exactly like this, in a red flannel with Betty Crocker on your tongue.

the whole gist of you and i is quite artless, quite lacking in style. even when our fingers brush on the countertop my heart starts skipping rope, like i'm sixteen again instead of twenty-something and i'm writing in my diary about a dollfaced boy, dotting all the i's in your name with hearts, like walking down the aisle with an onion ring around my finger cause what sixteen year old can afford diamonds. but heck, you could propose with a Ring Pop and i'll say yes. as long as it's the strawberry flavor and you promise never to cut that dark mop of wisteria on your head, i love those curls so.

a pause in the universe

i am lying in bed beside you,
 and your body blanketed against mine is so warm my limbs cannot help but melt to sugar.
 it is only hours before we must wake up, ingest styrofoam cups of burnt cubicle coffee,
 blink heavily in stiff office seats

so we hide from the morning like this,
 whispering, careful not to stir awake dawn.
 in this late night seventh heaven, too serene to spoil with sleep
 (counting sheep is useless
 when your lover's gaze is softer than wool)
 i sometimes forget whose hands are whose.

and those arms, moonlit and sculpted in tattoos, are such masterpieces. i think if he saw you, Michelangelo would have been jealous.
 then you cough, divine,
 and your ashy throat chokes out nicotine stardrops like a chorus of raspy midnight angels.



indulgence by Ella Breunig

Barcelona

i didn't have an urge
to tell you
before.
but that was before.
at the bar
i felt that kind of fuzzy
where you feel so good
that you're scared to forget any detail
that the morning will disappoint
and you were giving me that look-
that look you gave me in Barcelona
that felt almost cinematic
a look that lingers just slightly
too long.
we were drinking.
i was further gone than you.
after those long looks
those short drinks
i came and sat on your lap
my hand on your shoulder
and that look came back
so i leaned in
i kissed you
and you kissed back
and my hand moved to the nape of your neck
and your mouth was so warm
and your hands found their place
on my waist-
and i felt home
and i felt every cliché available
because i had always loved you

i woke up.
i didn't want to-
i know i have to tell you.

by Lily Rose Winter

Third

When I had walked back into the room
and the drink had created almost a hum
and I saw you lying on the bed
with your hands behind your head
and I couldn't help but stare
at your perfectly symmetrical face,
not quite being able to believe that this was
the third time I had taken you home with me.

And though the drink had gotten us here
I always wake up with a head full of regret
that I couldn't piece together all the things
that you had said to me-

by Lily Rose Winter



dreamglow (interlude)

[chorus]

like stars among the city lights
i have big dreams that outshine me
you can't see me at night
no matter how hard you try

[verse]

my daddy told me to chase my dreams
'cause dreams aren't granted by wishing hearts
even though i was born from the sea
with a pisces soul, i still ran far

[chorus]

oh, now my dreams have come to align
so luminous and violent inside me
that i can no longer see the stars at night
no matter how hard i try

by Vio

When I was 13, I stopped liking Christmas. My parents split up a month before and we still spent the holiday together pretending to be happy. After that, every merry person and decorative bauble that I saw irritated the hell out of me. I became furious whenever I was forced to acknowledge the time for giving, because I couldn't understand why people could choose to be happy and kind once a year; the insincerity of it all was enough to stop me believing in the magic. New Year's Eve was a night full of hype that led to nowhere, a glittering ball of disappointment. I hated counting down to a new month that people would call a fresh start, and watching the fireworks explode in the sky like shattered garbage. Waiting for the impending doom of January, to hear about how people failed their resolutions before they'd even begun. Each year as we approached the end, my lack of spirit got worse, and the only reason I wanted to get to New Year's Eve was because that would mean it was all over.

Then, I met you.

You brought the joy back into my least favourite season. I no longer dread seeing the fairy lights go up, all the happy families, the overpriced food and obligation of gift giving. You make me want to bake cookies, dance in the kitchen to Darlene Love, and watch a festive episode of my favourite series as I wrap presents for your parents. Weather warnings of snow doesn't mean travel issues, but the possibility of getting stuck with you. Burnt dinners, seasonal traffic, end of year deadlines – I find it impossible to be kept down when I get to come home to you, the only gift I ever really wanted.

After losing the special connection to Christmas that I had with my family, I found it again with you. You helped rewire my brain and change the connotations I made in my mind, and now my brain feels like a snow globe clouded by happiness when I think about spending Christmas – and every single one to come – with you. The end of the year now means starting a new one together, but with a new resolution; to never be without you.

- Violet Payne

Breath, Eyes, Memories

Everyone has their own special place.

It may not seem like it, but we all hold dear the memories that bring us back to a certain point in time. And space.

It is equally true that everyone has their own triggers, apparently insignificant images, gestures, or - in my case - sounds that may result in one's strong physical or emotional reaction.

I'll give you an example.

I was twenty-five when my husband died. Now, you may be wondering how old I was when I got married. The answer is eighteen. Yes, you heard that correctly. I got married right after finishing my last year of high school.

It was a torrid summer day. I had bee stings all over my legs and my shoulders were sunburnt for all the time we spent outside. The ceremony wasn't that exciting, and the only entertaining thing was the sweat coming out of our guests' foreheads and armpits and places you would never talk about publicly, dumping the overly priced clothes they probably rented. They tried to fan their faces with everything they could find around, eventually using their hands, wondering when the torture was going to end.

However, they couldn't really complain about the location: an Italian-styled villa, with plenty of willow trees and a garden that could host the entire eighteenth-century French court. My soon-to-be husband and I were allowed to spend a

few days there before "the big day." To us, however, those were the big days.

The three days we had initially scheduled eventually became three weeks. My parents complained, but we didn't care. We had saved enough money to afford it. We enjoyed the most perfect early summer weather, not too sticky nor chilly. Every day, we would wake up before sunrise to go jogging, or he would watch me stretch in front of the mirror and do my dance exercises. Oftentimes, he would be counting with me. *One. Two. Three. Four. One. Two. Three. Four.* I would then stop and sit on the floor for a while, looking at the fluffy clouds observing us. In those moments, I would fantasize about our first time.

I was a virgin back then and my parents wanted me to marry one. When they met Hans for the first time, he assured them he was indeed a virgin. But he wasn't. And, when he confessed that to me, he made me promise I wouldn't say a word. Not just to my parents, but to anyone. In his - *our* - community, you're not supposed to have intercourse before marriage. My parents were really strict about that. So strict that they didn't let me date anyone in high school. Every time I would mention a guy at the dinner table, the first thing my mother would ask was: Is he a brother?

I would promptly respond no, avoiding to mention that they might not even know what our community is about. But that's not the worst part. The worst part WAS the way she behaved when - and if - the guy in question was allowed to come to

visit us. She would demand that we kept our door wide open so that she could see what we were doing on the inside. *No secrets*, she said.

Looking back at it in retrospective, her behavior reminds me of one of my favorite books, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. It's the story of a young Haitian girl named Sophie who moves to Brooklyn to reconnect with her mother Martine whom she hadn't seen for a long time. Unfortunately, living with her mother doesn't turn out to be as she expected and she soon grows to dislike her. I particularly remember the scene where Martine touches Sophie's genitalia to make sure she's still a virgin. I used to fear my mother would do the same to me, so obsessed as she was about our family's reputation.

That thought alone is traumatic to me, but *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is, to this day, one of my favorite books.

Anyways, going back to the wedding, I don't see why some couples would want to spend thousands of dollars to feed a bunch of people they haven't seen for ten years or more. I'm not against traditional marriages - I want to make it very clear - but I don't like this fake servility, this need to please people at all costs.

There are so many reasons not to care about pleasing people at a wedding. Number one: no one cares about you or whether your marriage will fail or succeed. Number two: they're only here because they, too, are victims of social norms and feel that they *have* to be there for your big day - and maybe, just maybe, they change their mind afterward because of the free food and cheap entertainment. Number three: they're all in it

for the drama, and nothing more. I remember someone once said: when you are struggling, 70% of people don't care and the other 30% is glad you are struggling.

Moral of the story: keep your judgment—and your problems—to yourself.

So, after all, I'm very glad our guests had to suffer because of the heat. It was the least they could do considering that they have been stuffed with food like pigs only a few hours later.

But Grier, you might ask, why did you have a regular marriage if you despise marriages?

The answer is, my parents. Specifically, my mother. Unfortunately, she didn't get the marriage she wanted to have, so she made that heavy on me. She wanted to make sure she "approved" - or whatever that means - of the man I was about to spend my whole life with. What scared - and still scares - me the most about this is the term "for the rest of your life". Like, why do I have to swear loyalty to a man that I may not love anymore at some point?

In a way, this is why I loved Hans. When we were alone, we promised each other that we would be realistic about our relationship, that we would never try to make it work if we ever realized it didn't. We would just react like mature adults and announce our separation to our family. And just come apart. No drama. No words, not a single tear. Just a look and we would understand when it's time to call it quits.

But such a thing never happened, because we were so in love. And our marriage day was great. It wasn't perfect but, to me, it was just right. I was with the man I

loved, in a place that reminded me of my childhood. What else could I ask for?

I had never been a particularly optimistic person, but spending time with Hans changed my perspective on the world quite a bit. He was rational but hopeful. Rarely worrying if the situation didn't require it. He learned it from his mother's death. After that, nothing was as painful and shocking for him. Now, he could handle almost anything in the world.

I should have learned from him when it came to criticism. People thought my decision of getting married at a young age was due to an unhappy youth. It couldn't be farther from the truth. Yet, I still struggle with all these people commenting on my private life, just because we are part of the same community. I hate the way some feel entitled to talk to us young adults as if we were children.

Once, I even heard a stranger say to my mother how surprised she was that I could dance that well. As if only child prodigies could do amazing things in their lives, and us average people were doomed to a life of mediocrity and forced satisfaction.

If our "leaders" told them to take a gun and kill themselves, would they do that? I'm worried that the answer may be yes.

The truth is, I truly, deeply, helplessly loved my husband. He was the only one in the entire world that could understand me - or so I thought, at least. He moved from Switzerland eight years before, when he was around my age, and he started working in the ballet company I was a part of. That's where I met him. Luckily, all these years spent in Hudson, Texas didn't ruin his adorable German accent.

Many times he told me that his higher aspiration was to become American because Switzerland was, quote, "too traditional for him". He didn't like the closed-minded people, the gossiping spreading around his hometown.

Deep down, we were afraid of the same things. Being judged negatively by others. Having to give up our freedom to follow social norms. It's something that none of us could stand. He said he had felt freer since he moved here, but he believes that was because he had me around. We resolved to keep to ourselves the things we didn't like about our environment, like the color of my dress for the wedding or his hairstyle. But our common decisions went beyond looks and clothing.

Together, we decided not to consume until we got married, and we did wait. No matter how painful and boring the ceremony was - he agreed to disagree with my mother regarding the wedding choices - we could wait to finally be alone in his house, and... I'm sorry. Thinking of him fills my eyes with tears, of how loving he was towards me. Old-fashioned but never old. He meant the world to me. He still does.

Going back to what I was saying, I had a fairly normal childhood. I started dancing when I was three years old. Not by my own choice of course. My parents were both working full time and they wanted to find something that would keep me busy in the afternoon. So they enrolled me to dance school.

The first memories I have of it are people clapping because I performed a pirouette correctly. I must have been eight, I think. The five years before have been erased from

my memory, disappeared. Starting a life-long hobby as a child is beautiful, but you inevitably forget the excitement of the beginning - some people don't even feel it because, like me, they are too little to realize what is going on.

Instead, the friends I met later on in my career would describe their first day at the Dance Academy with such a wealth of details. Although they had started just one or two years earlier and were still learning most of those basic tricks I had learned before the age of ten, I have to say I envied that feeling quite often.

Dancing became my life. I loved it. Classical music became my favorite kind of music, and I would keep practicing even after I came home in the evening. My parents were delighted to see my passion growing as time went by, and, at the age of sixteen, I became the youngest leading dancer at the Ballet Academy of Texas, where I played the protagonist at their annual performance of the *Swan Lake*. The *Swan Lake* is one of my favorite pieces of classical music ever. Every time I listen to it, I immediately feel like dancing. No matter where I am - the living room, our backyard, the street, even the laundromat. If I hear a melody by Tchaikovsky, I *need* to dance to it.

The next step would have been auditioning for the Bolshoi Ballet Academy and move to Moscow, Russia. Graduating with a maximum score and become one of the greatest ballet dancers on a national or even international level...

But. With hindsight, I thought it was better to major in a normal subject - like psychology - to be able to stay next to my

husband and the kids that we wanted to have. I thought this is what I was meant to do with my life. No surprises whatsoever. Life always finds a way to surprise you though.

When I was twenty, we decided to have kids. It wasn't random I agreed to have them that young.

Twenty is my favorite number because it is an even number. It is a two-figure number including the number 2 and you can divide it by both 5 and 10. My mom was born on February 20th, 1963, two months after my father.

Also, Hans and I met on that same day, the 20th. It *had* to be my lucky number, I figured. The perfect mathematical number. I thought nothing could go wrong. I had everything that I wanted. My life was the best life I could ask for.

The day I was supposed to give birth, Hans and I were so excited. He even dressed up for the occasion. *Twins*, they had said. My body was preparing to deliver a pair of babies. When we spread the news, everyone was shocked. Shocked that my tiny body would be put under so much pressure. Some - including my parents - even feared that I wouldn't survive the surgery.

However, their worrying was useless. The birth went smoothly. Too smoothly according to the doctors. They were surprised that the boys - Carlos and Christian - weren't opposing resistance to their cold, decisive hands. But the doctors couldn't figure out why.

Then, when the first one got out, they immediately realized he had no pulse. *A stillbirth*. They thought the second one could be saved, but that effort, too, was in vain.

They both had died of asphyxiation because they couldn't receive enough oxygen from me. *Me*.

They hesitated before asking me if I wanted to see them before they could *get rid* of them. I said yes. Of course, I couldn't live without seeing them at least once in my life, whether dead or alive. After all, they're my kids.

When I held them in my arms, I did my best to restrain those same tears I was determined not to shed during my wedding. I just held them close to my chest until it was time to go.

In the following years, Hans and I tried again and again. We tried to conceive one healthy baby without succeeding. And, soon enough, my husband died of a broken heart.

He thought he had disappointed me and my family, that he wasn't worthy of being called a man. But, until the very end, I kept repeating to him he was the most courageous man I had ever met. He passed away anyways, but at least he knew he hadn't disappointed anybody. And least of all, me.

I can still hear his voice sometimes. His German-sounding voice calling my name from the kitchen; him trying to talk like a Southerner with his funny accent; my husband, my one and only, telling me he loves me in our bedroom paradise. His breath, his eyes. These are the memories I will hold on to for the rest of my life, the good and the bad.

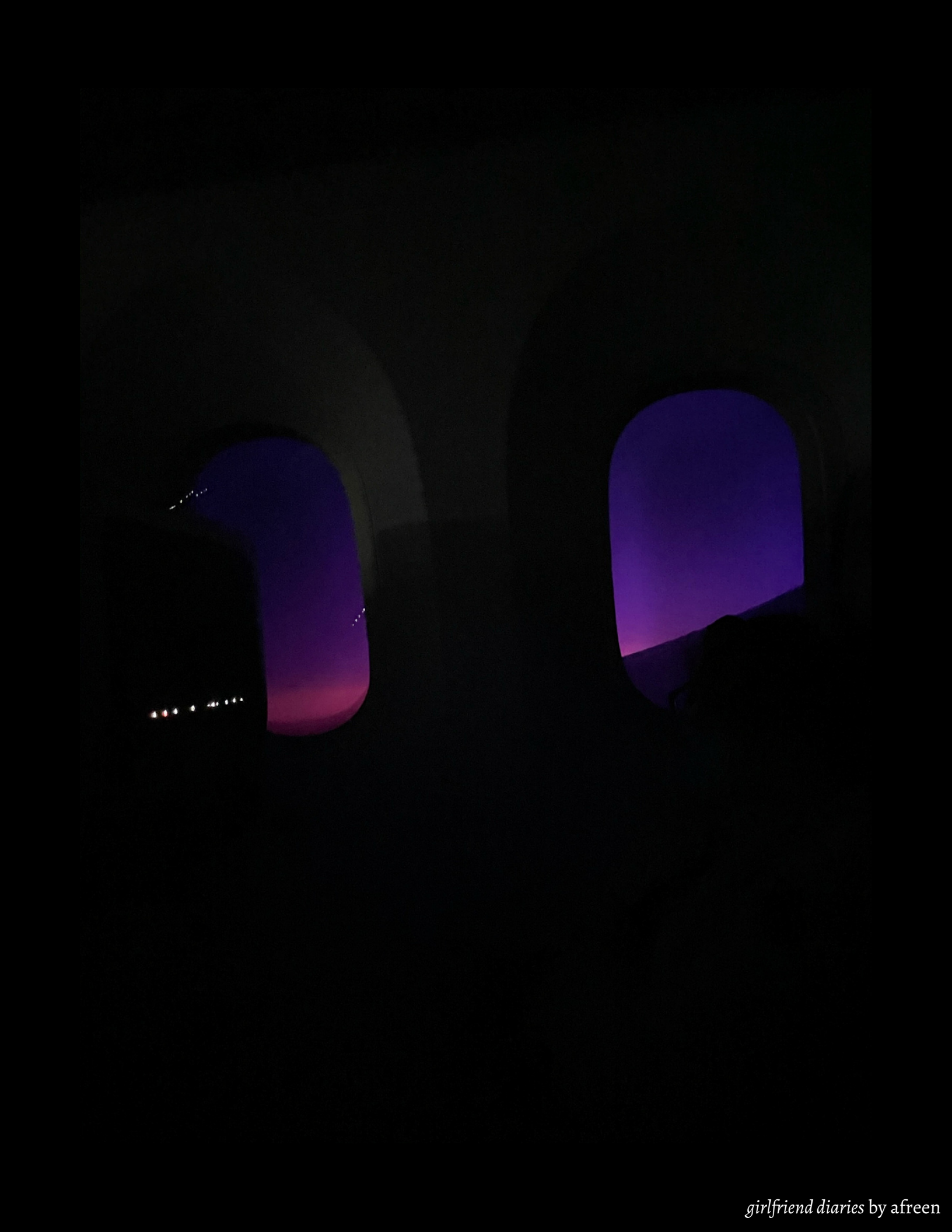
My husband's death released me from the fear of prejudices I had grown up with. Suddenly, I didn't care what people thought of me, not even what my parents

thought the proper behavior was for a twenty-five-year-old widow.

At that time, I had just graduated college and I had nothing to lose. I found a job as a psychologist and, at the same time, I enrolled in the Ballet Academy again. Since I gave up, I had never stopped dancing, not even for a day, and my skills were still better than most of my younger peers'.

This time, I did experience what that first-day excitement feels like, and it was the best day of my life. Every time I tie the laces of my dance shoes, I feel him next to me. Even now, I like to think he's proud of me when he looks down from above.

by Marilù Ciabattoni



FEATURE

GABRIELLE

PAUL



How were you introduced to the world of music?

How do you think your style started out, and how has it grown over time?

I was introduced to the world of music at a young age. I was always an imaginative little girl and would sing to myself while making up melodies in my head as I played outside. I've always been attracted to strong voices. So once I started taking voice lessons at 14, I realized I could use vocal dynamics to portray my emotions in song. Any source of passion can sound so beautiful and make so much sense in the arts.

If someone was looking to add your songs to three different playlists, what would they (ideally) be named?

I'd say the 3 playlists would be named "Noir Erotica", "Float" and "Melting In Clouds". Someone expressed to me how they felt like they were "melting in clouds" when they listened to my song 'Untruly' and I've never forgotten that.

I've also been told my music is erotic and fitting for those 3AM moods. I'd like to think my genre of music is for those types of situations and for the people who reminisce those moments of ecstasy from their past.

How do you think your background and identity contributes to your art form? Would you say that they are inseparable from each other?

My background and identity are definitely present in my art. I always write about certain moments with people that I cannot get over. I was raised Roman Catholic and then became my own person who did stray from my conservative upbringing. I've always been fascinated with religious concepts and showing how passion, obsession and addiction is a spiritual experience. I've lived through many times that were both heaven and hell in my life and I try to showcase that through the love and numbness I write about.

What do you think makes you connect with R&B/Soul and Dream Pop for Bedroom Velvet? And in general, what would you describe your 'sound' as?

'Bedroom Velvet' is supposed to be a song about perfectly visualizing a single moment in your life with someone. It's about remembering specifically how you felt in that moment and what were the sounds, visuals, tastes and feels from the bygone memory that gives you a euphoric flashback. I'd describe my sound as something you'd listen to in an intimate moment of feeling high off of your own dreamscape.

What's one thing you could talk about for hours on end?

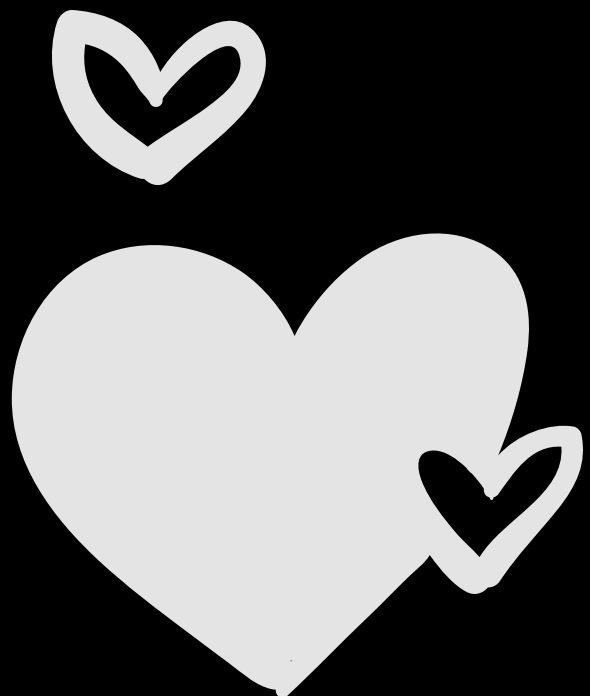
One thing I could talk about for hours on end is human behavior and why people do the things they do. Everyone has a reason for why they live the way they do and I find people's personal lives and "flaws" fascinating.

What would you say to someone looking to start making their own music?

I'd say to them to just find what makes their sound distinct and nurture that part of their craft. Whatever fixations or struggles they experience in their life, I say write about it. Make sure to enjoy the process of writing as you would as a form of escapism so then you're constantly inspired and it's not only thought of as work.

What role do you think love plays in your life and work?

Love is a spell and it remains a driving force in my work. A lot of it is dark and tormented but that's what I do love about it. I think it definitely seeps through in my lyrics. A lot of us would die for the kind of love we dream of. The fantasies we crave are what make us the most powerful, in my opinion. It makes us unstoppable.



Girl of His Dreams

He tells me he loves me. Casually
calls me the love of his life, asks for
a date. Twice. Twice again, and
thrice thereafter.

I shy away, knowing full well how
this could end. It's too soon for me
to be brave though and so we both
wait me out. We know what we
never really discuss, but it's there,
in the background.

He promises I'm the girl he waited for,
and I promise he's the boy I'm
holding on for. I just need to screw up
courage. I can't fail, surely.

I behave nicely, when we go out. I'm not
biting and sarcastic and cold, and he
feathers kisses on my face.
(am I red from kisses or sunburn?)

Too nicely, maybe, but I never could tell.

We verbally build our future together,
spend time together, warm and flushed
with affection,
and never once does it occur to me:
I should be wary.

I should be wary though.

He tells me later: *I'm not feeling it.*
he tells me: *I care too much to drag this out.*

(Does being the girl of your dreams

mean you have to police what I feel?)

He told me once: the feeling is all there. All that we need is to make it reality.

(No one ever said dreams were good)

Girl of his dreams: he told me many things and didn't mean a lot of them.

by Sarah Little

girlfriend diaries by afreen



the youngest child

there is no sympathy for the youngest siblings. parents spend all their love on the oldests, maybe even the middles, and there's none left for the youngests. they have no support, nothing to go by, and the shirt on their backs isn't even their own.

it's a horrible feeling for the youngest siblings when the olders come home from college. for weeks, months, they've perfected their homes, their lives, their day-to-days to be okay without a whole chunk of their family, and in a flash, they're back, shoving themselves into the lives of the left behind. after a semester of grand adventures and new friends and unknown places, they expect to find a home in their childhood bedroom again. this isn't their home anymore, it's the property of the youngests.

after a semester of being compared and mistook and led astray, the youngests are expected to not hate their siblings. they set unreachable standards for them and then left, and the youngests, they're just supposed to be more perfect. the youngests don't live pretty lives; they live a life of practicality, but deep down, they would give everything to be like the olders. to read books for fun, to be vegan just because, to go to college and study art and move to new york, to have the love of the parents, but that's not possible, not for the youngests. the youngests have to fight to stay afloat, and that's something the olders will never know.

the youngests spend the holidays crying in the bathroom and holding back tears in the family photos, wishing on any star that will listen that they'll be the oldest in another life.

by Holland Tait

in the picture

i want to be like my sister so badly. she lives a pretty life, one that is ready for pictures and instagram posts. her day-to-days are straight from pinterest, and her grand adventures to the grocery store look like a pristine youtube video.

though she's my sister, i'm not in her life. i have no place in her feed. my life doesn't fit into hers. i live a life of practicality, but i wish it was pretty. i don't have the time to make it look nice, just living takes all the energy i have.

so i sit and i watch her read books for fun and go on runs just because and pack her boxes for new york and make vegan cookies. i like her posts, knowing i'll never be in the picture. it's embarrassing for her, to be seen with me, to know i'm related to her, to have me around, so for her benefit, i'm not around. i spend the holidays out of the way. i don't want to ruin her pictures.

by Holland Tait



Two bodies, One Soul by Jack Clarke

The Secret

*This zealously guarded recipe
Preserved as part of my legacy
Into a poem I must weave
To give you on All Hallows' Eve*

1 honey-glazed dusty boy

Flecks of soft pink on top

With a personality akin to komorebi

He made us spirit stars

1 ball of cottagecore sunshine

Outgoing and yet so grounded

Delivering rainbows through the fog

You'd be lucky to have her jelly babies

1 badass hand on their knife

Full of fluff on the inside

Reflecting my chaos with a raised brow

String and Stetson to boot

1 laughing fragment of my soul

Drumming the tunes in my heart

Electrifying all our atmospheres

Walking around with them after dark

1 ancient rotting best friend

Always two steps from falling out

But with the assurance of staying forever

My emotional support animal

Put them all together on a hill

In one Pride Picnic

Life gets so much better

With a group built on comfort.

by Udita Mukherjee

Decadence

This pocket of time is a gift,
to be unwrapped slowly
and savoured.

Skin touching cool sheets –
I allow my head to be cradled
by the tender embrace
of a soft pillow.

Our house is blanketed
with a rare hush;
I luxuriate in it.

Gradually, I succumb –
eyes closing
as I
 sink
 into a doze,
lips curved into a gentle smile.

by Ellen Clayton



Lust (a haibun)

Clouds dance in the sky, smokey wisps and velvety puffs jostling for space amongst a blanket of blue. I lay on the grass with you, heads pressed close together, staring up above us. My heart beats faster as our fingers entwine and the touch of you sets my pulse racing. It is blissful - cool earth connecting my spine to the world beneath me. I am grounded, but floating on lust. I languidly point out shapes in the clouds. You are quiet - until, "they just look like fucking clouds". We laugh and laugh, tears leaking from my eyes and glistening on the blades of grass interwoven with my hair. Romance isn't all Shakespeare and Mills & Boon. Sometimes, it's cackling at your lack of imagination and butterflies beating their wings in my belly. It's encompassing, this desire, instigated by your lightest touch. Your hand on my thigh takes my breath away. Let's linger; stay awhile.

My pulse racing, lust.
Romance, butterflies, desire.
Linger; stay awhile.

by Ellen Clayton

What do you love?

(after Rebecca Green)

The patch of soft skin behind your ear
that I nuzzle into while we have a bedtime snuggle.
The rapture written on your faces
as we read a story.

The way my baby's whole body moves
when she smiles -
as if joy cannot be expressed by
mouth muscles alone.

Crisp leaves crunching under chunky boots
on an autumn day,
weak sun on my face
and fresh air filling my lungs.

Winter on the beach - wind whipping my hair,
taking my breath away and
salt stinging my eyes.

What do you love?
The smell of mum and dad's house:
a clean scent of fresh laundry,
a visceral pull back to childhood.
The tickle of my sister's hair on my cheek
as we press our faces together, hugging tightly.

Inexplicably - I love his hands on the
steering wheel. Strong and steady,
the sight sending flutters through me.
The quirk of an eyebrow when my hand
dances up a denim clad thigh.

And nights where cold lager slides down my
throat in a pub reverberating
with a cacophony of laughter and cheerful chatter.
Then looking in the mirror,
cheeks flushed with joy and booze -
and smiling at the version of me who looks back.

by Ellen Clayton

"Girl" In Years

I lay in a bed with my hair spilled around me
 –and this is me; not the other me, but me–
 restless eyes,,
 stick a flower on my tongue, give it a little
 sun
 and help me grow a little while longer.
 take off my shirt to go along with the sticky
 air,
 and wonder about the day I'll do this exact
 thing somewhere off the grid;
 8 years and I'll find it.

studying sappho, and evelyn hugo –mom,
 I'll be a rich white man in a sundress,
 practicing my sun dance– it's the only way
 I'll get what I deserve.
 I can't handle the thought of it.
 take 8 years and give a little longer.
 I dream,
 with my heart in a storage and I play with
 my hair now.
 Can't wait for the day it gets taller than I
 am;
 wouldn't be too hard to do, wouldn't be too
 surprising.
 Don't have a space crises, get over it; use it
 to be a demon
 and use the ladies against me,
 for only a nose bleed, a
 psychoanalysis of the destruction.
 use it to be loved
 again.
 one of the few things you haven't seen yet–
 at least not in the crimson way
 you wanted it.

and in 8 years, they'll study me.
 they'll study the poems I made and what
 songs I listened to in the same day.
 they overlap and then sometimes they don't
 and then sometimes it's all just too
 personal.

cause my blue bloods been showing green
 through my skin lately.
 I want to know how many times I will

change as my heart gets passed around
 and how many times I'll realize I've
 changed my own stubborn mind.
 and i'd like to know when i'll feel stable and
 free.
 a yellow color, slowly evolving.

I cant remember too much of the years
 before now.
 I could jump or I could breathe the wind
 inside of me and use it as power.
 sometimes I try this with pain,
 but I'm sure not to make a habit of it.
 there are few things I can't do with my
 mind:
 like seeing the future and the very moment
 in history I'd go back to for a different
 present.
 actually I can see it all.
 i can see great minds and contradiction–
 yes, I can see myself in this view;

the closest I've ever been to the sun.

I can feel the world in the tips of myself.
 I am something barely breathing.
 I am something that became fully
 conscious the night I touched the moon
 when it fell into my lap.
 an 8 year old who had already discovered
 the 42 secrets of the universe, lying there
 in her backyard. at 8 years you don't know if
 it's a mistake or if it's fait, but you already
 know what you're gonna do with it.

by Trin

Some Ugly Truths I'll Never Tell You

- i. When I watch the sunset, all the colors melting into night and city light, I think of you. I don't know why. Maybe because it's beautiful, maybe because it's fleeting.
- ii. I still remember how you smile whenever you lie.
- iii. Sometimes, I am angry. Sometimes I want to rip my skin off everywhere you touched me, to break myself into pieces just to make you watch.
- iv. If you were to call, I'd answer.
- v. Last winter, I got my wisdom teeth removed. I ached for days. I know some things are better off gone, but I was tender, all soft and sore, running my tongue over my gums, tasting the tang of blood and regrets.

Aiden Nelson



girlfriend diaries by afreen

drown

Perhaps I can hold my breast in the water and not want to
bury it.

I'll let it sit inside my hand cold
and wet
and imagine it is no longer mine
but a gift I left
on your bed to understand
the deepest sore it tears to
against the bone
and through the heart.
Do not tell it its fate, my love,
let it touch the edge and scream.

by Eavan McNeil





by Eavan McNeil



fin.

