



SEMICOLON LITERARY JOURNAL

WINTER 2019

SEMICOLON LITERARY JOURNAL

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Semicolons,

This has been a year of transitions for our staff. Two staff members earned their undergraduate degrees, two started graduate school, and three were displaced from Hurricane Florence. All began working various new jobs. One of our proudest transitions collectively, however, was starting this journal.

Grammatically speaking, the semicolon is a punctuation mark that indicates a pause. In the mental health world, a semicolon means that one's story is not over. That is why we began this journal—to be a safe place for work by authors who may struggle with mental illnesses and to acknowledge work about struggling and overcoming these moments.

semicolon literary journal is dedicated to the topic of mental health. We don't want to romanticize illnesses or only promote the darkness that comes with them. We wanted to start a journal that shows how we struggle and overcome as human beings. Our first issue reveals the good and the bad. When exploring the ways these experiences manifest in our lives, our contributors—both emerging and established voices—immerse us in the lyricism of their truths. The ways they express mental illness through their writing, whether through fiction, nonfiction, or poetry, are not the only ones that exist. These works may not be *your* truth, but we hope that you can find comfort in the fact that you are never alone, both in the bad days and the hopeful. For there is always, always hope. And it's okay if these words don't reach you right away. Keep breathing in. You're never too heavy to hold.

Much love,

Katherine O'Hara, Carey Cecelia Shook, and Tyler Anne Whichard
Founding Editors

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SEMICOLON explores the facets and intricacies of mental health/illnesses through the various ways it manifests in our lives. We aim to showcase fiction, nonfiction, and poetry by established and emerging writers. It is our hope that our journal becomes a safe place for those who struggle and overcome.

SEMICOLON publishes two issues per year. Submission guidelines, information, and past issues can be accessed at semicolonlit.org.

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Plagiarism of any manner is strictly prohibited. Each author has certified their ownership and originality of the works published in this journal.

CONTENT WARNING

This issue contains imagery and descriptions of self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and violence.

We believe that honesty is important in creative work, and we are honored to provide a space for so many talented writers to do so. However, please prioritize your own mental well-being while reading this issue.

October

WANDA DEGLANE

poetry

October begins in city's sweet drowning / our arms spread wide for lukewarm temperatures / October swallows the last of the heatwave in hesitant gulps / lies under bleak sun with a bellyache / October's blood is moon-mottled indigo / it steals the soft in me to make its own bedding / the sinews from my bones to polish its teeth / my dreams are recurring knife-wounds, my mother / hissing, *this is what it feels like to love you* / cold upon waking, organs turned inside out / an empty room like a corpse picked clean / October promises cinnamon-sweet release / but pushes me under too-familiar numbness when my back is turned / the rain spills steady like a lover / pretends it can't hear *stop* like a lover, too / I drown over and over / the sun no longer sets gracefully / but crash-lands into hell / bleeding heavy pink brushstrokes as it sails / the moon fizzles away against the night's bittersweet / and everything and nothing is happening all at once / my anger overstays her welcome / steals memories and / my mother's rattled desperation to light her own fires / I'm screaming at naked sound / sobbing hysterics at the way / even my own wrecked sense of semi-stability won't last / October sneaks in through my window / grinning wild like hunger / presents me with gifts of deer skulls and butterflyfish and half-singed sweet pea petals / it says, *rip them all to shreds in your fingers / cry and feel and scream and mourn / die and rise all over again.*

Hollow

KATHY CONTANT

fiction

MAYBE THE WORLD ENDS with a thunderous tattoo beat against my front door by a jaded policeman late at night. Or maybe the world doesn't end. The sun will still rise tomorrow. The birds will trill their early morning greetings. The neighbors will walk their children to the bus stop at the end of the cul-de-sac before leaving for work or the gym or the grocery store or wherever it is they go. Maybe the world doesn't end, but I do. And Tom, the one who will open the door. Who will wake me to come downstairs. Who will catch me in his arms when my legs can no longer support me and the weight of my grief. He ends, too.

There are two policemen. I suppose they have to work in pairs for safety. The older one, with his straggled salt-and-pepper hair and belly just beginning to bulge over his belt, he is the one who tells us that Nate had been found dead in his dorm room. He is very factual. He refuses to stray from the script. The other one, younger—his backside hugs the door as if he were afraid my cries would bring down the walls like Jericho. He shouldn't be afraid. God isn't listening.

Both of them keep glancing at me, the way that the dean of students will glance at me, and the grief counselor, and even Tom. I don't understand that it is fear. Fear that I will cry myself sick or hurt myself or worse. They don't understand that everything is meaningless, and life is very long.

NATE WAS A SURPRISE BABY. We had long since given up the dream of having a child. Thousands of dollars spent on doctors and specialists. Hundreds of dollars spent on all sorts of different strips to pee on. Hours spent fighting traffic on the I-77 in Charlotte trying to get specimen collection cups camouflaged in brown paper bags to the clinic before whatever timer they used expired. Having them tell us every month to call them to schedule a pregnancy test and never doing it because the blood on the toilet paper was answer enough. We gave up and decided to adopt a cat. We named him Casserole, because who doesn't like casseroles? And just like a cliché, a few months later we discovered I was pregnant when I went to the doctor because I thought I had the flu. He was due on New Year's Eve, and we'd joked that maybe we could win something if he were the first baby born in the new year, as if a baby weren't enough of a prize. Nate had other ideas. He came into the world on his own terms, three weeks early and ten minutes before the doctor arrived, who complained that the nurse told her my cervix was only five centimeters and posterior.

Nate left the world on his own terms, 18 years and 105 days later.

HUMAN KIND CANNOT BEAR too much reality. Tom calls his mother, and I sit outside, sucking on the end of a Marlboro Light. It tastes like ashes, but I chase it down with a bottle of Amstel Light from a six-pack I bought on clearance that has sat in the crisper refrigerator drawer ever since. I light another cigarette. I hear Tom's voice through the screen door, and I wonder who I'm supposed to call. My mom died when I was thirteen, my dad when I was thirty.

Tom slides the screen door open and kicks at the cat to keep him from running out. I know how you feel, Casserole. I don't want to be inside either. Tom shuts the door.

"I brought you another beer." He hands it to me and then stands beside me. We stare out into the yard and watch the shadow of our cat pacing back and forth against the back fence. It's quiet, and even the neighbors two doors down who shout at each other about things I can never clearly overhear have long been in bed.

"Don't let me forget the dandruff shampoo," I say. "At least I can take the whole bottle and not try to shove it into one of those tiny airport bottles."

Tom lays his hand on my shoulder.

"And don't forget the Pepcid."

"Do you want me to make a list?" he asks.

"Sure, that's probably a good idea."

When my dad died, I forgot to pack any shirts for Tom, and he'd sweated through a cheap Wal-Mart dress shirt as we braved the heat at Fort Jackson National Cemetery.

Tom turns to head into the house, and I remember who I need to call. My eyes burn and my chest tightens.

"Crap."

Tom turns back to me.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Lila. We have to tell Lila."

Lila was Nate's high school girlfriend. They decided to end their relationship instead of trying to keep it going long-distance: a surprisingly mature decision, especially for Nate, who regularly wore a unicorn onesie to school when he didn't feel like getting dressed.

They were still best friends and texted each other every day.

"Crap," says Tom.

IT'S 8 A.M., and Tom dials the number the policeman gave him for the dean of students. I am packing the purple suitcase, the one we got when the three of us went

to Disney World. It still has the yellow tag for the Magical Express wrapped around the handle. Nate had been thirteen and too cool to walk too closely to us as we wound our way through the parks. Not too cool to grab my hand, though, when the car dropped in the Tower of Terror and I screamed. I find three MagicBands in the side pocket of the suitcase. I turn the blue one over and see his name engraved on the back. I tighten my fingers around it before putting it back into the side pocket. I leave the other two on the bed.

Underwear. How many pairs of underwear should I pack? It's a fourteen-hour drive from Charlotte to Burlington, Vermont, so that's two days there and two days back. Or maybe it's one day there if we don't stop. I don't know how long we have to stay. This underwear math is too hard. I pack six pairs for each of us and move on to socks. I open the sock drawer in the dresser and start tossing pairs of socks into the suitcase. Black pairs, white pairs, the blue ones with the turtles, the Wonder Woman ones Nate gave me for my birthday last year. Soon the drawer is empty, and I still don't know if I've packed enough socks. It's cold in Vermont, and I don't want our feet to get cold, so I grab the laundry basket to start a load. Tom stands up from his desk chair, takes the basket from me and puts it on the floor. He pulls me tight against his chest and I soak his shirt with tears and snot while he kisses the top of my head. I wonder how I can be so full of grief and yet still feel so empty. I wonder if Tom cries when I'm out of the room, or if he's been crying all this time and I just haven't noticed.

I MASH MY GRIEF into a tiny ball. We have to stop at Lila's house on the way. I can't carry my grief and hers, so I keep mashing and mashing until it's small enough that I can hide it away.

Tom loads the suitcase into the car, after removing most of the socks and repacking it according to the list he made the night before. He opens the passenger-side door for me, and I slide into the seat. He shuts it softly, then walks around the car to the driver's side. He gets in and starts the car.

"Should we call her first, to make sure she's home?" he asks.

"No, it's 9 a.m. on the first day of spring break. She's home."

We buckle up, and he backs out of the driveway. I have to direct him to her house, even though we've both been there countless times, picking her up or dropping her off. Not as much once Nate got his driver's license.

Spring comes early in the South, and the dogwood trees are in full bloom. The white blossoms limned with blush arch across Lila's driveway like an arbor. Tom parks the car, and we just sit.

NATE AND LILA had spent a lot of time together the summer before he left for college. Not being a teenage boy herself, Lila was astounded by how much crap he had stowed away in his room when she agreed to help him get ready for college. Up and down the stairs they trudged with bag after bag of trash and outgrown clothes. Dishes I had long thought gone reappeared in the sink.

“How did you keep this all in your room?” she asked. “And why do you have so many pairs of socks?”

He chuckled, his laugh rumbling from deep within his chest.

“It’s not funny. You’re like a hoarder. You can’t do that,” she said.

He laughed again. “You can’t tell me how to live my life.”

She may have tossed a shoe at him. All I’d heard was a thump and more laughter. Later I took them for some pho from the Vietnamese place down the street before they left to go hang out with friends. I hadn’t seen her since. She’d been busy with her senior year in high school, and Nate was gone, so I didn’t think it was strange.

TOM KNOCKS ON THE DOOR, and I flinch. I hear her dog barking. We wait. The barking subsides, and Tom knocks again. More barking, but I can barely hear a shushing from behind the door. When she opens the door, I can see that we have woken her up. She’s wearing rainbow pajamas and oversized Killer Rabbit slippers.

“Oh hey, how are you guys?” She smiles.

“Lila, are your parents home?”

“No, why? What’s going on?”

I see her sleep-ruffled hair, and I remember the policeman with his rules and his facts and his script.

“Lila, can we come in?”

Her smile disappears and her brows furrow. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Lila, the police came by last night,” Tom says. “Nate was found dead in his dorm room.”

I watch her face. It’s an eternity of time for my words to penetrate, for her to understand. Her expression is frozen. And suddenly crumples.

“I don’t understand,” she cries. “We had been texting and he was going to get a pizza and maybe take a nap. I thought he just fell asleep.” I guide her inside, and Tom shuts the door. The dog butts his nose against Lila’s leg and whines.

“Why?”

I have no answer, not for the question she’s really asking. I hold her tightly and stroke her hair. The wispy blonde strands flow like silk between my fingers. Her shoulders shake as she sobs, and I keep stroking her hair. Tom buries his hand in the dog’s fur as he calls Lila’s mom, and we wait in the shadowed room until she arrives.

THE FUNERAL HOME CALLS as we merge onto I-77 North. The voice echoes through the Bluetooth system in the car. The funeral director tells us how much it will cost to prepare the body for shipment, but we’ll have to call the airline to find out how much it will cost to fly him home. He tells us how much the cremation costs are, but we can get a good deal through the Cremation Society of Vermont. Tom tells him that we’ll be in town tomorrow, and we make an appointment for 11 a.m. When the call disconnects, we listen to rock music on the iPod. There’s not much traffic on the road for once, and we make good time through northern North Carolina and into Virginia. I stare out the window and watch the scenery flash by.

“Someone once told me that they make really good sandwiches at Sheetz,” I say.

“Isn’t that a gas station?”

“Yeah, but Wawa is a gas station too, and people are all crazy about their sandwiches.”

“Huh. Maybe we’ll check it out.”

The hours blur by, broken up only when we stop for breaks or gas or food. We merge onto I-81, and I announce in unison with the voice of the GPS when we enter West Virginia, and Maryland, and Pennsylvania. It starts to get dark before we merge onto the I-78 toward Allentown. I think Billy Joel had a song about it, but I don’t care enough to try to remember. We leave Pennsylvania for New Jersey. Our conversations are limited to road signs and state borders. I offer to drive, but I know Tom will insist on driving the entire trip. He focuses so hard on the road that it leaves him no room to think. I focus on the road signs and the arrow on the GPS map. I think the doctors call it shock. I can only think about where we are. If I start thinking about where we’re going, then I’ll start thinking about why we’re going, and then I’ll be in a valley so hollow that there’s no way out.

IT’S ALMOST MIDNIGHT, and Tom begins to play Pac-Man with the lane dividers. We had planned on driving straight though, but the scant hour or two of sleep we’d caught the night before isn’t enough. I find a cheap hotel nearby, and Tom tries to take the exit to Newburgh, New York. It’s a toll road, and you have to pay to exit. I tell Tom that maybe they take cards.

They don’t take cards. It’s cash only. The lady in the tollbooth looks bored when she tells us it’s \$1.40. Tom starts slapping his pants pockets while I dig through the center console. The lady in the tollbooth sneers.

“Are you trying to tell me you don’t even have a dollar?”

I want to tell her that we don’t normally carry cash, and that nobody carries cash anymore really. Yesterday morning I woke up and it was a normal Wednesday and the department brought us Viva Chicken for lunch and my son was alive. Now he’s dead

and I'm sorry I didn't think to stop at the ATM to get cash for the toll road I didn't know we'd be on. I look at her face and the lines around her mouth that pull down at the corners, and I don't think she would care about any of it. Luckily, Tom finds a crumpled-up dollar bill hiding in the corner of his pants pocket.

"I'll cover the rest," she says and waves us through.

The night clerk at the hotel is alarmingly cheery. She hands us our keycards and gives us directions to the room. We drive around the back and Tom lugs the suitcase up the stairs. The stairwell stinks of stale cigarettes, but the room is clean and odor-free. We grab what we need from the suitcase, perform our ablutions, and collapse into the bed. It's a king-sized bed, and the space between us is wider than normal. Maybe too wide.

IT'S STILL DARK when we leave, and the lady who checked us in checks us out. Tom drives to an ATM on our way back to the interstate, just in case. It's just over four hours to Burlington, so we'll just have enough time to make it to our appointment. When I see the sign that reads "Welcome to Vermont," I remember that I just requested the first week of May off from work so I could drive to Vermont and help Nate move out from his dorm. He was going to live in a different dorm his sophomore year. I shut my eyes, but the tears still fall.

WE MISS THE FUNERAL HOME on the first pass. It was one more Georgian-style house on a street lined with them. Tom makes a U-turn, and we park in the back parking lot. We walk to the front entrance and ring the bell. A somber man in a three-piece suit ushers us in. He introduces himself, but I only remember that he's the funeral director. We follow him through what must have been a parlor when the house was originally built, past a grand staircase with polished wooden handrails. He sits us at an enormous black table. Flower arrangements are evenly spread across the top, with boxes of Kleenex within easy reach of every chair. He offers his condolences and a hot beverage and starts his sales pitch. I see a box neatly lined with a variety of tea bags. Chamomile, to soothe the more distressed patrons. Darjeeling, oolong, lemon zinger, which seems out of place, but I've never tried it. Green tea for the health-conscious, and Earl Grey, which is actually a flavored tea and not a style as I'd thought for the last twenty years.

The absence of the funeral director's voice pulls my attention from the tea.

"I can take you to see him whenever you're ready," he says. We stand and head out of the room to another set of stairs that lead down to the basement. My hand touches the bannister and I freeze.

"I can't," I say.

Tom reaches for my hand and squeezes it. "I'll be right back. You can come when you're ready." He follows the funeral director down the stairs. Once they are out of sight, I go back to the room with the table and the tea and sit on a chair.

A mother should be brave. There are all those stories about mothers who develop superhuman strength in order to save their children pinned under cars or cabinets or all the other objects that children end up under. Or they have some special intuition that allows them to prevent accidents or other danger. Nate and I went to the National Whitewater Center once and lined up for the Hawk Jump. We climbed up ten stories of steps, laden with safety harnesses and hooks. He went before me, yelling "Ooh rah!" and stepping off the edge of the -hundred-foot-high platform without hesitation. I watched him fall and heard him laugh as the power fan kicked on and slowly lowered him to the ground. I was next, and even though I could just barely hear his voice cheering me on, I froze. The guide counted down once, twice, three times. He had me back up slowly so he could unclip me from the line, and I walked down the ten stories of steps. Nate met me at the bottom and patted my shoulder.

"Sometimes it's more brave to know your limits," he said.

I grab a handful of Kleenex and press it against my face. I stand up, wad the tissue into my left hand, and walk down the stairs.

HE LOOKS JUST LIKE he did when he was home on winter break, swaddled in a blanket on the couch after staying up all night playing video games. Except he is on a slab in the basement of this funeral home. He will not awaken with a grumble because Casserole jumped onto his chest and huffed fish-tinged breaths into his face. I press my lips against his forehead, and his skin is so cold it burns. I brush the dark fringe of his bangs off his face. I watch his chest, waiting for a breath that will never come. Maybe they made a mistake. Maybe this will be one of those urban legends where they think he's dead and it turns out that his metabolic system just slowed itself down to imperceptible levels. My lips part with the start of a prayer, but the chill lingers and I stop. He is not here.

I don't look to see if there are marks on his neck. I never ask to see the police report. I turn away from him for the last time and walk to the display of urns on the back wall.

My dad had known he was dying, so I hadn't had to do anything at the funeral home but sign papers. He'd prepaid for the cremation, and he'd chosen a simple jade box that sat beneath a red, white and blue flag before the military honor guard had folded it and presented it to me. I didn't realize until now how many different urns he

must have looked at, or maybe he just picked one of the first he saw. What I thought was the back wall is a labyrinth of walls filled with shelves filled with urns. Wooden boxes, metal boxes, elaborately carved boxes, simple boxes, vase-like urns with matching mini-urns. Flowers and birds and butterflies and crosses and maudlin engravings. I barely look at each one, and each one is wrong. I hear Tom call my name. He stands in front of a shelf I already passed three times.

“What do you think about this one?” He points to the middle of the third shelf. I lean in to look closer. The funeral director hovers behind us.

“That one is really meant for a young person,” he says. “It’s called gunmetal.” Tom nods. My fingers flit along the side of the urn. The deep gray stone seems to glow under the fluorescent lighting.

“Nate is young,” I whisper.

The funeral director starts talking about the urn, but all I hear is buzzing. I stare at the wall, at the shelf, at the urn. I don’t know how I missed it. “How did you find it?”

“I saw you looking at the maroon one with the butterflies, and I just found myself in front of this one. Maybe Nate knew we needed help choosing.”

I lay my head against Tom’s shoulder. “We’ll take this one.” The funeral director promises everything will be ready tomorrow afternoon.

TWO HOURS LATER, we pull into a tiny parking lot behind a yellow building trimmed with white. It sits at the middle of a steep hill, surrounded by other brightly cheerful buildings. The sunlight shines brighter here, and I blink my eyes until they adjust. Lake Champlain is in the distance, and its silvery surface sparkles. Everywhere I turn is another scene of panoramic perfection. This town is beautiful, and I hate it.

The dean of students meets us outside. He is a stereotypical academic in glasses and a tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows. He shakes our hands and offers his condolences. I wonder what I’m supposed to do with all the condolences. Do I collect them in a box until someone else needs them? I don’t want to keep thanking people for them. It just adds to the weight of it all. But nothing matters more than appearance, so I thank him, and we follow him into the happy yellow building so he can break our hearts.

THE DEAN OFFERS to have his staff pack up Nate’s room.

“You are more than welcome to do it, of course,” he says, meaning the opposite. “We’ll just have to figure out how to manage the situation without further traumatizing his roommates and the others in the dorm.”

Tom leaves the decision to me. I imagine what it would have been like in two

months if I could have picked Nate up from his dorm. Would he have shown me the room I’d only seen in pictures? Would he introduce me to his roommates or just try to rush us out as quickly as possible? I’d probably have to help him finish packing, like Lila did last fall.

“When would we be able to pick his stuff up, if your staff did it?”

He checks his phone. “How about tomorrow afternoon at 2 p.m.?”

“Thank you.”

The college reserves two nights at a hotel for us. It’s a spacious room with a view of the lake, and within walking distance of Church Street Market. I close the curtains. Tom looks at his phone.

“Hey, there’s a *Rí Rá* here.” He shows me the map.

“Really? So, we drove all the way from Charlotte, where we have a *Rí Rá* in Uptown, to eat at *Rí Rá* in Burlington, Vermont?”

“We don’t have to go there. We can just check out Church Street Market and stop in wherever you want. There’s a Ben and Jerry’s here, too. We can’t be in Vermont and not go to Ben and Jerry’s.” He keeps looking at the tiny map on his screen, his middle finger scrolling through the options.

“We’ll go to *Rí Rá*. Fish and chips sounds good.”

The desk clerk gives us directions to Church Street. It takes only minutes to cross the street and enter the market. The storefronts have all been refurbished, and the streets are paved with ruddy bricks. No cars are allowed, and pedestrians wander in and out of shops and restaurants, singly and in groups. Street musicians busk at the busier sections, and group of students holding signs stands at one corner. They are silent, and I wonder what they are protesting. From the corner of my eye, I glimpse a familiar boy walking by. I stop and gasp.

“Tom.”

“I know, Susie—he looks like Nate.”

We look around at all the people walking past us. The crowd is full of college students, and all the boys seem to share the same wardrobe. Tom is right, but he’s wrong, too. The boy with the galaxy cat T-shirt, refusing to wear a coat even though it’s forty degrees. The boy wearing the boat-sized Converse, whose mother probably threw her hands up in frustration like I did because he outgrew his shoes every few weeks in high school. The boy hunched under his hoodie, his backpack hanging from one shoulder. They all look like Nate.

After dinner, we walk down to the lakeshore. There are still random piles of dirty snow surrounding various trees that line the park. It’s night now, and the moon is tumid with its fullness.

WE PULL INTO THE PARKING LOT behind the yellow building promptly at 2 p.m. The dean again offers his condolences and shakes our hands and talks about the memorial service they are planning.

“It’s a tricky time, though, with the students preparing for reading week and finals. We don’t want to disrupt them too much.”

We nod.

“And of course, we’d like to bring you back for it, if that’s okay.”

It’s not okay, but maybe it will be. His staff helps us load Nate’s belongings into the car. Two large suitcases and five boxes. It seems a paltry amount and not nearly enough for a boy who once had so much that his girlfriend chided him for it.

The dean waves as we leave, looking as if he didn’t get what he needed from us. We didn’t get what we needed from him, so that makes us even.

The funeral director calls to let us know that Nate is ready. We drive to the funeral home and miss the entrance again. After we park, we enter through the front door and are greeted by the director. He leads us into the room with the enormous table, and I see the urn sitting on the table. He waits expectantly until Tom moves to the table and picks up the urn.

“You should carry him.” Tom hands me the urn.

I am surprised at how heavy it is. I hug it close.

In the hotel room, I place the urn on the nightstand next to my side of the bed. Tom flips through the channels on the television, finally settling on a documentary about Jupiter. I decide to take a shower. It’s a huge, stone-tiled shower with a rainfall showerhead. I turn the water hotter until it almost scalds my skin. I watch my skin redden as the water washes the grime from the lack of sleep and the long car rides of the past two days.

When Nate was in fifth grade, he had to make a model of a planet in the solar system. He chose Jupiter. We made the dough ourselves, and he added cinnamon so it smelled good. We forgot to get gloves, so our hands were stained red for days.

I stare at my hands now, and the tiny ball of grief I worked so hard to keep mashed down expands larger and larger until it bursts from my mouth with a strident, guttural wail.

Tom finds me in the shower on my knees, my head in my hands. He shuts off the water and grabs a large white bath towel from a shelf. He enters the shower and kneels down, wrapping me in the towel. We stay like that, with his arms tight around me, until I fall asleep. Somehow, Tom gets me dressed and into bed, because when I wake up, it’s 3 a.m. and I can’t sleep anymore. We fell asleep with the television on. The light

from the screen flickers, and I watch shadows dance across the ceiling. The sheets on the other side of the bed rustle.

“You up, Susie?”

“Yes.”

“Wanna leave?”

“Yes.”

I jump out of bed and start tossing things into the suitcase. We dress and I start zipping up the suitcase. Tom rounds the room, checking under the bed and in the closet to make sure we don’t forget anything. He turns off the TV and grabs the suitcase. I grab the urn from the nightstand and cradle it in my arms and follow him out of the room.

No one else is awake, and the harsh overhead lights and garish carpet belie the quiet stillness of the hotel. We wait several minutes at the front desk before a sleepy-eyed night clerk appears to check us out.

“We hope you had a good stay here,” she says, smiling.

“Yes, thank you.” Tom hands her the keycards.

“Have a safe trip.” She waves and hurries back to the small office behind the desk.

I wait in the lobby as Tom goes to get the car. The night is cloudless, and I finally see the stars, twinkling even though they have been long dead, until they fade in the headlights of the car. I open the passenger-side back door and place the urn in the seat. Tom turns around and leans back to help me. I pull the seatbelt strap snug against the gunmetal gray urn. I shut the door, then slide into the passenger seat. Tom glances up into the rearview mirror.

“Well, Nate, are you ready to go?”

I hold Tom’s hand as he pulls the car out of the hotel parking lot, and we go home.

Mothers Stitch

LAUREL PAIGE
poetry

Some mothers stitch
names into underwear.
Mine stitched
shame into my frown, into the scars
on my arms. Thread stuck
between my teeth.
My smiles said
yes this is handmade
but I used a pattern
and my smiles said
this isn't my own, never
will be
said *I only know one way*
to wear this and the color
never looked quite right.

the color blue

EMILYNICOLE MORELAND
creative nonfiction

I DYED MY HAIR royal blue when I was twelve years old. At first, the color was loud and bright, just like me. I screamed in the hallways when I'd spot my friends and they'd say, "A new color?" and I'd nod, telling them about the stains left on the sink back at home. They didn't know about the other ones, and I never mentioned them. I assumed everyone had those stains, too, but I was special because only I had blue ones. The dyed stains would fade, though, and so would my hair.

The other stains, though, never left. The purplish-blue blotches on my skin somehow always returned without a box of hair dye. I learned to hide them underneath my clothes and often wondered when I was alone if they would ever go away. Whenever one started to fade, they would give me another, and the stains continued to add up until they were all I could see. Still, no one else saw them.

The sky was a dark blue on my way back home that day. It told me there was a storm coming. I didn't listen to it and kept walking in the rain. My shoes were muddy when I went inside. I hated those shoes.

The blue soap in the shower always screamed at me. It told me that I was taking too long, that I would raise the water bill, that I was too dirty to ever be clean anyway. I never touched the soap, but somehow it always touched me. I didn't like that soap. I liked the soap that smelled like the sun, but eventually the sun always goes away, so my soap did, too. My soap left me. The blue soap told the sun that it was taking up too much space, just like me. I wonder if it lied to me. I wonder if the sun actually left me or if it was pushed away, too.

The razors he used were blue. They brought upon me the color red, and that was the only other color I saw between those walls.

Still, blue was my favorite color. My world was blue and my sense of normalcy was, too. I didn't know how many more colors were outside of those blue walls.

It was dark when I got out of the shower and went back outside. The only light was the gas station across the street: that blue light, the company name written in bright blue letters against a dark navy stripe. In those lights, I saw a silvery-blue car pull up. She

would listen this time, right? She would see the hurt and she would get me out of there. She would understand the way mothers should.

She marked my skin red and, next to the blue he left, she showed me her favorite color was purple.

“What’s wrong with you?” she said. “Why are you acting this way?” I learned the word *fault*, and it felt like stinging skin.

She told the blue man that she didn’t know why I was the way I was and that he was right, that I deserved it. When she left me with him in the driveway, I thought she would come back for me with my bags in her hands and we would leave.

That would be good enough for the night.

He brought the knife to me. Or maybe, if I squinted a bit harder, it wasn’t him. “Then do it,” he said. Or was it her? “If you think you’re so strong, you can do it yourself,” he said. Or maybe, if I listened closely, it wasn’t his voice. But it had to be—mothers don’t say things like this. Mothers call the police when others try to hurt their children. Or maybe they don’t.

I told the officer with the blue outfit that they were hurting me and wanted me dead. He looked at me in the pouring rain at 2 a.m. that Tuesday and called me an imaginative kid. He looked at the big kitchen knife on the wet grass and believed them when they said I got it myself in an attempt to end my life. I didn’t bother telling the man in the blue suit that they were the ones who brought it to me. I knew he wouldn’t listen. Both of the men in front of me were a hopeless shade of blue. I watched the sirens fade away as they flashed the only two colors I ever knew against the night. I felt my fight go with them.

My bed was not warm that night. I wore skinny jeans to sleep in—the same as every night—and the restriction of the fabric offered false security. I pretended it was real. From my spot on my bed, underneath my ripped purple blanket, I could see that he was watching a video of two women loving each other on his phone. It stayed like that until the video wasn’t good enough anymore and I was. I kept my eyes closed as he came into my room and laid down on my bed with me. I didn’t need to open my eyes to know what

color his boxers were. He felt cold. I could feel him touch me, an unwanted intimacy, and I knew then that the stains would never go away. No matter how hard I scrubbed for the years to come, they would always be there to tell me how dirty I was.

The world taught me that blue was a manly color, but I wonder if the people who say blue is for boys know what those boys grow up to do? Maybe they would pick a different color, or maybe they would say that not all shades of blue are bad. Maybe they’d only look at the brightest hues and be too fucking blinded to acknowledge the rest.

They tainted my favorite color. But in time, I relearned the color spectrum; I chose to teach it to myself and let brightly kind hearts guide my hand as I dipped into each shade over again and into new ones, too.

Blue is the color of my closest friend’s eyes: the ones she got from her mother. They don’t tell me I’m unworthy of loving or that I don’t deserve a family. They tell me that I’m wanted, that I’m safe. They held the last strings of trust I had and showed me how to create new ones within myself and with those who loved me: stains and all.

A whitish-blue—780E-3 sterling—is the color of her family’s kitchen walls, covering the old rusty red shade underneath. The walls gave me a home with a mug of my own inside of its cabinets, and the stains on their floors are funny memories that don’t remind me of the ones inside me. Jo’s bedroom was purple when I first made a home in it with cozy blankets on her floor. We later painted the walls together, and I felt at home with the blue splatters on my skin, knowing they wouldn’t be there forever. The water that runs down my body cleanses me quietly and leaves me with soft skin that smells like so-lace long overdue. The soap in their shower isn’t sunlight, but it’s something close, and maybe I am, too.

Cupboards at My Back, Constellations Below

E. KRISTIN ANDERSON
poetry

(a golden shovel after Kesha)

I keep looking under my fingernails and finding hot
clover, a wet tea of skin and hillside. We are in and

out of truth; I let shadows come whisper dangerous
because they have not lied to me. Remember: Even if

the tide comes heavy-handed, I'll still watch while you're
breathing sick, winding circles in the sand. This is one

of those stories where the girl dies and a whole sky of
clouds can't keep the northern star a secret from us—

a kiss to bless in salt and cinnamon. Show me, then,
the curse of the coast, the quaint recollections that roll

false from your plates and your spoons. I cut a meal with
bone and flame—and here the southern sky releases us.

The Kitchen Is on Fire Again

E. KRISTIN ANDERSON
poetry

(a golden shovel after Kesha)

When I became cold, the animals knew. And you
were the hail banging at the glass. Tonight I can't
remember the names of men—so I will imagine

that I used to hold them like fresh roses, letting the

stems bear those thorns. You think the immensity
here is the blood or the water—perhaps the slip of
the time in which I've ignored this withering, the

sinking to lace knotted by the dirt. At night I fuck

the sky—just another way to live. Still I move. I'm
collecting honeysuckle and foxglove—holy. It's not
only hunger. They know my teeth. Know I'm giving.

Parts of Us

NANDINI GODARA

fiction

MORNING

They met. They disagree on the day it happened but not on the time of day. Morning. She sat down next to her.

AWAKE

It wakes me up now and then. The horror of a life I'm not living sticks to my throat. A kind of smoky taste. Of a habit I told everyone I quit.

I haven't kissed anyone in a long time and it never bothered me because there was no one I wanted to kiss. Now it's different because you sat a little too close to me. Now it feels like I should be kissing you.

Today I woke up with the thought like what if I was in love with someone who made me feel safe. Like what if they loved me back and I didn't question it or sound shocked. I promised my friends I quit smoking and that I feel better about myself and my body, so I can't tell them how often it shocks me. Too often.

Today I woke up in a sweat, under my own weight. I'm told it's common to have bad days and that bad days can be conquered but it takes a whole person to conquer and I haven't felt whole in a while and so the day is winning.

Sometimes when I sleep, I hope the morning will change things, and sometimes it does; other times I cry on my way home but never when the signal is red, because they can see me then. The people in other cars. I like the slopes of roads because my foot is on the brake and that feels natural to me: stopping things before they start. If they start, I'm not in control, and we know how that went last time.

Today I woke up mourning myself. So when I wore black to work, I got asked questions like hey are you goth now. I didn't reply, so they thought yeah she's goth now. So much of my silence is translated to *yes*. The last time I made a sound, it echoed too loud in my empty hollow body and it hurt my ears, so now I cut the noise any way I can.

Today I woke up thinking I can be whoever I want, because I'm not who I used to be and that means a clean slate. Clean slates are good because you can draw in chalk and no one complains because chalk is in now. The new thing I am is in, now. It's okay to just be, now. That's what they're telling me. It's okay to just be, now.

Listen, I woke up today and it felt great, after a while. It felt great to open my eyes and panic for only a few minutes, because today I was prepared to be crushed. I was prepared and so it lasted a short while. What about this are you not getting? I already told you I'm okay. Listen, I don't really love you anymore. It's fine now. I packed up your last pair of jeans and they're kept in the corner, they're easy to find, just look. I'm fine now. This is a long call I know, but I'm fine now because look, I have to be.

Look, I woke up today and I stayed awake.

SUGAR

The coffee is full of it. That's the way I drink it. Isn't that what she said? That's the way I drink it. Many things were like that. It's just how I do it. After a while the taste starts feeling familiar. It carves a groove in your tongue and sits there and becomes family. Nagging you.

When you lose an important person it hurts, sure. The grief begins, five stages and all, but mostly you're trying to forget. Everything is put into neat little boxes and marked fragile. Then one morning you find yourself making coffee. On autopilot you add a spoon and a half of sugar. You sip it and there she is, sitting on your tongue. (Not like that, but yes, also like that.) She has cleverly distributed herself into so many boxes, too many boxes. She has left so much behind in you. You mark yourself fragile and the poor guy who's next has to handle you with care.

There's a dentist who comes cheap but is very good. Her clinic is a few kilometers away and sometimes you walk there. Last time you went, she complained about the growing film of plaque. Are you eating too much sugar, she asks. You immediately say no, because you don't like sweet things. Then you remember and smile exhaustedly. Yes, I've been taking some sugar in my coffee, you say. It's not much, but more than usual. She says it's evident. You get your teeth cleaned and for a while you feel free.

But you're beginning to like the taste. It's not about her anymore. You used to love black coffee, but it feels empty now. It's missing something. (Maybe it *is* about her.) You're in the grocery store and you know exactly where the sugar is kept and you've done the math on bulk buys. Your tea that you drink sometimes—you've switched from green tea to regular tea now—has a fair amount of sugar in it. When your dad comes over, he remarks offhandedly about how sweet the tea is and continues to worry about your job and if you're making enough and do you need anything. You say no, you're fine, and dismiss the other things.

An appropriate amount of time passes. You meet a new guy. He asks you out for coffee. You say yes because his smile is light and unburdened. (You don't know his burden.) When the waitress comes over, he gestures at you so you can order first. This is not something you ever thought about, but you find it charming. Then he says, I don't know what I want yet. And you find that even more charming because you feel that all the time about all the things. You've both ordered coffee. Black for him, milk for you. When it arrives, he takes a sip of his and you add two packets of sugar in yours. His eyes widen and he says, that's a lot of sugar. You shrug and say, that's just the way I drink it.

He nods as if he understands, then offers, have you tried black coffee before? You lie and say no, but you take a sip of his. You like it, you say.

And your tongue dances, ready for someone new.

Pray It Isn't Loaded

BEBE BLACKWOOD
poetry

There's a girl upstairs and I need you to understand
you can never trust her

There's a girl in the back of the car I can barely drive
and no matter how she begs, I can never let her take the wheel

She'll run me off the road;
blink, and we're in a ditch,
blood like cherry drops and lime cordial and cruel summer air
all mixed together, sugar-sour in my mouth and nose and throat,
vision midday-dark with the beating of the drum

Heaven knows what she wants with me,
but given half the chance she'll take over the house, some kind of
invasive plant creeping over the walls,
slow as light

There's a girl with a knife and a mad philosophy of "stabbing that which offends"
and "gutting anyone who disagrees" and
if you've got any sense, you won't try to take either from her

There's a girl standing right behind me
with a gun to my head
and there's nothing I can do but say her name

The Weight of Hands

LIZZIE BANKOWSKI

creative nonfiction

THERE ARE A COUPLE OF WAYS to hold things. He, for instance, holds things tighter than I do: he grasps a beer bottle with a full palm while I balance a bottle between my first two fingers and thumb, as if that were enough to keep things from falling. He does the same thing with my hand. He doesn't just hold it—he takes it fully, wraps each finger between mine and maintains a squeeze. The pressure feels nice until the tips of my fingers tingle from lack of blood flow. I have to let go and pulse my hands like the tentacles of a sea anemone. Once the feeling returns, I intertwine our fingers as they were, and he adds the same amount of pressure. We do this over and over in the car, our hands resting on my left knee in the passenger seat, until we get where we're going. Even after we're out of the car, I still feel the sweat from his palm lingering in the cracks of my left hand.

Sometimes I have to remind him to wash his hands when he gets home. It's the first thing I do once I'm through the door, but to him it's an afterthought. He reaches out to touch me, and I ask, "Are your hands clean?"

He laughs and marches to the bathroom, knowing better. But until he washes them, I can feel the dirt on his hands—the skin is heavy, grainy, covered in a layer of the day behind him. When they are clean, his hands are cooler and smoother to the touch.

I know his hands well: the width of an index card with a sharp curve before his thumb. His hands are the one place on his body without freckles. Smooth, yet to be cracked from years of labor. Short fingernails with receding cuticles. He has come to know mine: chubby fingers, no freckles or scars or bumps, purple fingernails when they get cold. Otherwise indistinguishable.

AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, the anxiety attacks have come from small things—a comment from my mother, a changed plan, my bed not made the way I prefer, and on this particular night, dog hair on my pants.

I sit at the foot of my bed with an old-fashioned red cloth lint remover—the only one I could find—and swipe at my pants over and over, only to see more dog hair appear as I swipe. It looks like more, anyway. He sits a few feet away, saying things that sound like words of encouragement or comfort, but I can't hear him over the buzzing in my ears, customary to what happens next. I want him to leave.

The familiar feeling of the walls closing in and the air thinning creeps up. I throw the lint roller across the room and flee to the bathroom, leaving him with my mess. Looking in the mirror, I rehearse all of the techniques that a nice doctor once suggested to me. He hasn't been present for an attack yet, so I fight it off.

"I'll go get my lint roller from my house and fix this tomorrow," he says when I come back to my bedroom.

"You can just go home."

I wring and pinch the pads of my fingers, grabbing the skin where my fingerprint lies and pulling upward. I never look up at him, only at my fingers. But he grabs my hands and stops the pinching.

"There's nothing wrong with you," he says. "Sometimes the smallest things are actually the biggest. It's okay. It's perfectly okay."

The symptoms of my Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder manifested before I knew I had Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. I always felt a little off-kilter, but when I was nineteen I had an attack so fierce that I stared out the living room window, ready to run out the door in front of the next car that passed. Not to off myself, but to ask for help. No car ever passed. A few days later, a very nice doctor told me that I wasn't crazy and I wasn't losing my mind. Like millions of Americans, I had an anxiety disorder. She prescribed me some Xanax, recommended some self-help books, and sent me on my way.

I was able to chart my OCD from there. When I needed to medicate versus when I didn't. When I needed to be alone versus with people. When I needed to be wrapped tight in a blanket versus open space. When I needed my inhaler versus fresh air. I got it down to a science.

And then he came along.

Justin has never had anxiety, so he doesn't quite understand, but he tries. He is patient and attentive when I tell him that sometimes he is the source, like when he does reckless things or stands too close or hangs the hand towel up with the tag showing. There is a learning curve for us: he has never dealt with this, and I have never dealt with talking about it. Not with someone who doesn't already get it.

Loving him is like standing on a solid foundation that he built. So many things are certain, and everything feels like it's in its rightful place. Until it's not. Until I notice one of those small-but-not-really-small-at-all things. Until I think about planning a wedding or buying a house.

I mostly worry about what will happen when there are kids around, and they'll have to ask why Mom just ran in the other room and why she always picks her fingers and why the food has to be arranged a certain way in the pantry. I worry that Justin will have to explain these things, and he won't know how because I could never fully explain them to him in the first place.

I picture myself exhausted, bags under my eyes and purple fingernails, rummaging around our future house and organizing the toys of our future children in a certain way minutes before they wake up from a future nap or return from future daycare just to ruin the order my future self has restored. Then I picture how the spiral would go: picking my fingers, breathing heavy, pacing. And future Justin isn't home yet from his future job; thus, future me medicates so that she can avoid any future attack in front of the future children. But the future children see Mom take little pink pills all the time and wonder what they are. When they're big enough to reach the medicine bin at the top of Mom's future closet, they inspect the pills for fun because they don't know any better because Mom and Dad (but mostly Mom) never quite found the words to tell them what anxiety is and what Xanax is for. One of the future children tries to talk the other future child out of experimenting with Mom's weird pills because this future child has inherited Mom's obsessive-compulsive gene and needs control and order. But the other future child has inherited their father's reckless gene and takes one of the pills anyway. Come to find that the first future child turns out worse than my future self and has to count the times he locks the door, whereas the other future child realizes how relaxing Xanax is and develops a dependence on pills.

I try not to picture all of this, but once my brain starts, it doesn't stop. So I slow it down with my hands: I wash or dust or vacuum or organize. I move. I pick up whatever I can find that doesn't belong, and I find a place for it. I do this until I feel normal enough to be a normal girlfriend and future wife and future mother to future normal children. Until I feel normal enough to reason there's nothing to explain to Justin and no need to even try.

When we first decided to be together, I worried that neither of us would know how to place him next to the space that OCD fills in my life. I worried that his love would be too heavy for me—that I wouldn't be strong enough to hold it for him. In the past, I tried to carry the love of others just to find that it either fell apart like a house of cards when it touched my hands, or it felt like full tanks of gasoline, splashing onto my skin as I continued on.

There are a couple of ways to hold things. He, for instance, holds my love like a loaded gun: careful and gentle, but steadfast. He knows what it's worth—what it could do. And holding his love makes me feel lighter.

BARF

SARAH SHIELDS

fiction

FOR THREE MINUTES in line at McDonald's, we are Mom and Child: unremarkable. I hold my son on my hip, his body too warm in the ice-conditioned air of the restaurant, his weight getting to be too much to hold even for a short period of time. I concentrate on the menu, perfecting my order quickly in my mind so we are ready when we step up to the counter. We must be ready. We mustn't make people behind us wait for us to decide, for us to pay. Wallet in hand, my debit card is already sticking partway out. We must be so fast it will be like we never existed. Our stomachs rumble. We are next. We are ready. But we don't make it to the counter.

Without warning, my baby's body stiffens, curls, and he retches three times in my arms. Bright orange vomit half pours, half sprays over himself, me, and barely misses a young woman at the register who's just finished paying. She turns around to face us. Everyone turns to face us. Thick, Goldfish-cracker stew slides down our necks, chests, arms, legs. It plops in spoonfuls to the polished floor. Everything is momentarily quiet, shock-still—except for the fluorescent lights above us that sing. We are Song in the wrong key.

It's a perfectly normal reaction: customers pull their shirts over their mouths and noses; some gag; one girl seated nearby grabs her purse and runs out, abandoning a half-eaten hamburger. We are that song at the highest volume. You try, but you cannot quiet us.

My baby lurches again and another bucketful comes up. This time a bloated Goldfish, intact, lands on the bare toe of a man standing next to us. He lets out a tiny yelp and politely steps back. He asks if we are okay, is your baby okay, are you okay, but I am Stone and Graffiti: numb and freshly vandalized. My apologies trail from the ceiling like party streamers and ribbon uselessly to the floor. I am Murmur. I am Murmur. I am Murmur. My baby, an empty vessel, lays his head on my wet shoulder, too tired to care about the mess seeping into his hair.

Employees in dark shirts and visors hurdle over the counter. Mops and buckets swish and swivel. Customers slide backward like slugs away from the centrifuge of action, chaos to order. Splattered floor to polished floor. Unsanitary to sanitary. And the fluorescent lights sing like bees over the employees busy at their sudden task.

"Lucy," her eyes dark and sparkling under her visor, gently touches my arm. Please, I say, napkins. My eyes are hot. My face is hot. The air is Winter and I am Hell. I look for napkins. Oh hell, I can't find the napkins, I tell the air, I tell Lucy, I tell people staring at us, the lights humming merrily and starting to flicker. Lucy takes my face,

my body, my situation carefully into her gentle gaze. She takes my sopping, foul hand and leaves a generous stack of thin paper napkins in my palm. Take care of your baby, she says and is gone.

One moment we are baby and mother, stinking and glossy with goo, and the next I am Bathroom Sink: cold water, streams and streams of cold water. I wash the mess from my son's shirt. He whimpers and points to the little pocket on the front of it. I dare not open the pocket and see a fish caught in there. I hurry. My hands are a cup and I pour over his arms. Rivulets of pale orange weep down the crisp white basin and into the drain. I rinse through his beautiful wild curls, unstick a clot of them from his cooling cheek. I wet a paper towel to blot his face. I don't even bother to clean up myself. It isn't worth the time. I think, this is the best we can do for now, but now we must do the hard thing. We must leave this bathroom and reenter the crowded restaurant. We must walk the distance to the door. We must go home.

I am Balloon, holding breath, remarkable enough to carry two hollow bodies all the way to the exit.

A Warning

EMILY PAIGE WILSON
poetry

—after Grace Paley

One day I forgot Wellness and my hair fell out.
My honey-hued hair which promised, when braided and braced,
to help me
escape
from my tower, my butter-brown hair

is fallen.

And my left leg, stride once wide as a sunset, has shriveled.
It lags behind the right, dark star dragging.
Because I forgot Wellness.

And wherever I go, I am known by how I say the word *sordid*
until it becomes a frantic chant, gorgeous as worship.

Because on one day, only one day, I forgot Wellness.

The Living everywhere, the Living who wear shades of purple
without asking for forgiveness, who speak language as if it were
a navigable map and not a diseased vine drying out—

Listen to me. Wherever you go, wherever the precious metals
of your moth wings drip, keep the yellow
flow of blood in your mind.

For I forgot Her and now I am bleached and badly limping.

Even my lover who keeps his depression locked
in a box like chocolate desserts

thinks I deserve
my sickness.

My Therapist Asks Me Why I Haven't Told My Parents Yet

EMILY PAIGE WILSON
poetry

My illness is a gold-plated
bowl of grapes—purple fruit rejuvenating

no matter how many hungers
I've starved. My illness is an invisible

ink-carved scar, plastic shine admissible
only when shellacked in black light.

What is to be said to parents
who've raised one boy with autism—

almost diagnosed as deaf when words
didn't form like the weatherman said—

another boy with diabetes—body shocked
by its own culprit sugar into comas?

What would I tell my brothers?
Hypochondria—suspended—upended.

If bones are too brittle a home,
it will make itself known elsewhere:

a pain with no preference: eyes, liver,
muscle mollusk music every tiny movement.

There will always be more grapes.
Yes, what would I tell my family?

Please, come closer. Cough on this
directory I've stitched together,

this incomplete catalogue of my indulgence.

You Are Alive

KEREN CHELSEA GUEVARA

creative nonfiction

YOU SAY THE WORDS out loud for the first time: “I want to die.”

You are lying down on the back seat of your mother’s car, and nothing has felt truer than these words. They taste like freedom, like breathing life into whatever dust is still left in your soul. No, they are not sad. The words are just words, the truth. They do not come with a hint of sadness or remorse. You just want to die, and that is that.

You do not see it, but your mother’s grip tightens on the steering wheel. She mutters a silent prayer to a god she cannot see. She chokes back on her tears. She says, “Why? What happened?”

There is an answer to this question somewhere. It lies in the scathing words of bullies, in the pressure to be perfect, in the failure, but you do not answer. Here is the thing: You do not want to answer it. If you dig deep within yourself to find the answer, you will have to face every living memory that has led up to now. Your bones ache of rickety age. Your lungs struggle. There is no time to reminisce. So you raise your voice in that way your defense mechanism demands. You say, “I don’t know! It just happened, okay? I just want to die.”

“Please don’t say that,” your mother says. “It hurts.”

This is where the gunshots are fired. You’ve got a gun for a mouth, and your mother has pulled the trigger. You want to become something more, or perhaps to say something more, but your words are bullets fired. The gunshots ricochet. Like this: “I just want to die, okay? It has nothing to do with you.” Like this: “Trust me, it hurts more for me than it does for you.” Like this: “I just want to die. I just want to die. I just want to die.”

You do not die that afternoon.

YOU HAVE STOPPED saying it out loud, but everybody around you feels it all the same (but your eyes are empty windows that scream the same words). At some point, you have resigned to your bed—a void filled with such a loud struggle. You only come out of the room to eat, but even eating is a task you put off. You want to be something more, to say something more, but you lost the words at some point.

When your mother comes to see you, she has worry written (plastered) all over her features. She prays for you in the silence of her room; you know this, but it is as strange and as unfamiliar as happiness. Even as she takes a seat at the foot of your bed, you know she is uttering a prayer. You do not mind. You do not care. You turn to face the other way.

“*Anak,*” she says. *Child.* “How are you today?”

There is no answer that she wants to hear, so you lie. You say you are fine. You say you are fine, that you are just tired. And, sure, you can’t remember the last time you *weren’t* tired, but that doesn’t matter. You do not mention the death on your body, even though she can smell it herself. Neither of you mention that you are decaying.

Somehow, you do not die that afternoon.

YOU CRY FOR THE FIRST TIME in your mother’s arms since death became your shadow. You want to rid yourself of this ever-looming thing, but it follows you around. In the kitchen. In the bathroom. In the bedroom. In corners of your mind even you do not want to explore. Still, you have tried so hard to hide it. Or to hide from it. You do not know the difference anymore.

“Please,” you say, “make all this pain stop. I don’t want to hurt anymore.”

You do not know whether you are asking for death or asking to remove death from your body. Is there a difference? Is there any other way out of death than *death*? Is there another way out of the sadness? Your eyes are tired and your throat is sore. You fall asleep in your mother’s arms. The last thing you see is her wiping at her tears.

You do not die that afternoon.

THE YEARS PASS.

You learn to carry your grief in your pocket. You learn that not all days are bad days. You learn that even the days that aren’t bad days don’t feel good either.

You do not die.

HERE IS THE THING about healing: it feels a lot like a thorn stuck in your chest. But instead of removing the thorn, you are looking for ways to keep the thorn there. You

KEREN CHELSEA GUEVARA

have to keep the thorn there. It is what keeps the death from moving from one point to another. It is what keeps death from swallowing you whole. Sometimes, the thorn feels a little bit too much. Sometimes, it feels like removing the thorn will be a much better option altogether.

But you remember the days without the thorn. You remember the stench of death and how easily it welcomed you.

So you hold onto this thorn. Stick it a little deeper into your chest. You take your medication when you need to. You visit the doctor. You hold on to love, even when you cannot see it. You tell yourself there is hope, even when you do not feel it. You repeat this over and over and over, until the thorn makes more sense in your chest. Until the thorn feels like home.

You do not die this afternoon. For once, you are grateful.

WHEN YOU SMILE AGAIN for the first time in a long time, your mother cries. She thinks you cannot see and that you do not care.

You're alive.

YOU LEARN GRATITUDE AGAIN, like a child learns how to take their first steps. It is a little scary at first, and you walk into it with your eyes closed. But as soon as your legs get a good grip of how to move, you open your eyes to look where you're heading.

You say the words out loud for the first time in a long time: "Thank you."

You are holding your mother's hand as you say it. You are smiling. Some days there is still smoke in your lungs. Some days there is still an inevitable shadow. Some days, *you* are the shadow. But you learn to be thankful. You learn to mouth the words again, even on the days you are tired. You learn to mouth the words again, even when they feel foreign on your tongue.

You are holding your mother's hand as you say this. The thorn in your chest is a thing that beats now. You are walking into the unknown with your eyes wide open.

You're alive. Today, you are alive.

For Tonight We Attend a Fertility Seminar

MARISA CRANE
poetry

I am terrified of having a child. There,
I said it. Is the fear gone yet? Has it grown
twinkle toes & danced offstage? You seem
so confident, so steady. I want to hold
on to you as I rock to & fro. Don't be alarmed
if I vomit over the side railing. Yesterday
I set up my new record player & cried
when a piece of it broke off. Of course, my tears
weren't for the plastic. *If I can't assemble this shit,*
how will I ever keep a human alive? I choked.
You wrapped me in your arms, but still I felt cold.
I am made of impractical atoms. They buzz about clumsily,
like June bugs. My blood spills here & everywhere.
Our child will soon inherit the mess I made. Babe,
a confession disguised as an observation: Post-baby our dynamic
will change. You will have less time for me—
of that I am certain. I have a nasty habit of measuring life
by the losses. There will be times in which
you say *I love you* & I will mistakenly
think you are talking to me. I will mourn
the sentiments that are not mine to keep.
This morning: You wandered into the kitchen,
eyes full of blue light. You looked at me
as if I'd spent all night building a tower to the sky—
absolutely dazzled. I worry I will become
less remarkable around the baby. A face you've grown
used to. Oh how I hate that phrase. It makes me want to
dig my own grave & sneak naps when you
aren't looking, until I am more sleep than awake,
until I am so close to death that I hold myself a wake.
Once you give birth, your precious eyes will shoot
in a new direction. How pathetic I am to act
as if there is only room for one
cannonball in your arsenal.

Hotline

SOPHIE ALLEN
creative nonfiction

BRIAN IS A RETIRED Air Force officer—he tells me so, voice tinny through my earbuds, a long-distance southern drawl—who went to college on the GI bill after serving for twenty-odd years. I can picture his fingers drumming on the plastic edge of his phone, can hear the soft tapping down the line. Tonight, Brian is my crisis counselor.

I called the hotline after sitting for six hours staring at my blank computer screen, thinking of nothing. They transferred me to this man who tells me his old-school study habits, who keeps going after I pull my earbuds out of my phone, after I sit on the snow-covered ground and let icy wetness seep through my pants.

It doesn't feel so cold out here, though my hands are red, meat-raw across the knuckles and dark-veining down to my wrists with the frigid air. It's twenty-nine degrees Fahrenheit, says the little thermometer stuck to the bricks outside the library, and I don't feel any different in the tips of my ears, fingers, or toes. I am empty, if emptiness feels like something coagulating in my throat and a heartbeat striking the back of my head.

I can't remember when I last ate. I know I haven't showered in four days because my hair falls grease-tangled across the back of my neck whenever I move, and I can feel the grime over my skin. Brian's voice drifts dreamily through the snow and I hang up. The silence blankets me for a moment before it starts to creep, oppressive and eerie, down to the small of my back. I miss his voice in my ear.

I call the hotline again. The recorded options play over and over and the wind picks up, snaps a twig against my thigh and I am still not cold and this does not hurt.

The walk back across campus is slow, except for how I can't remember any of the landmarks I usually pass, except for how I shed my coat and still can't feel the wind. My cheeks are wet—I remember that salt water doesn't freeze except at extremely low temperatures, and I realize my hands are shaking.

The hotline call has disconnected. Poor service. I have stand-up comedy saved on my phone because I like hearing someone speak when I wake up in the middle of the night, and I like it even better when I know exactly what they are going to say. It doesn't matter that the jokes are no longer funny. It doesn't matter if they ever were. Brian made a joke about his time in the military and I don't remember what it was.

There is a pond in the middle of campus and I like to sit near it. I think I would like to go to the hospital.

i was where i belonged

ELI SAHM
poetry

locked up behind eyelashes
impregnable as bars and pulsing through
the first time i saw my baby brother
how i loved him so much
like myself
i wanted to kill him
like my dad
the therapist says
i'm obsessed with oblivion

when my dad was eighteen he found his dad
hanging in the shed like a boring miracle
on a spring morning so green it hurt the face

there's no way to come remotely close to the immense everyday
commonplace monstrosity of what actually happened

how when he opened the door the body wasn't
spinning slowly as i always picture it
but the shed was so still
that when he laughed
face-to-face at the calm
togetherness of the work boots
the sound dropped from above
outside him like he was sharing it
with himself

My Girlfriend Called Me “She”

SJ GRIFFIN

creative nonfiction

I FEEL LIKE a Dr Pepper can that’s been shaken up. There’s so much to say around the pressure building from the back of my throat to the top of my skull. Now it’s gone down my throat, all the way to my stomach.

I CAN’T SPEAK to why I still think my gender isn’t valid, to the point that my dysphoria doesn’t matter. That my pronouns don’t matter to anyone besides me. That I will dress to pass as female eighty percent of the time, even when I’m not female inside. I am genderfluid, so my gender fluctuates within and beyond the binary spectrum. I sometimes feel feminine, sometimes masculine, sometimes both or neither. I go by they/ them pronouns because most of the time I feel agender. It’s not hard to pass as feminine when I feel like femme or neutral, but I’ve learned to mask my masculine side very well. I’ve almost smothered it.

No one around me understands my gender because society has told them that there is a binary, and anyone outside of that binary is *ill*. My own girlfriend slips sometimes and says “she” to refer to me because that’s what she’s been conditioned to see.

My girlfriend is trans, and you’d think she’d be the best of anyone about it. She is the best, but only because no one else cares. But she still slips up. Even during sex a couple days ago.

I’M NOT GOING to get into that right now. I know not to open a shaken soda can if I don’t want a mess.

I SLIP UP, TOO. I’ve referred to myself as “she” a few times since I came out. It’s a hard habit to break. Especially since I try to pass as female most days, and that makes it hard not to see my outward appearance as who I am.

Why am I caged by social constructs?

I know these constructs aren’t who I am. I know that they are mere Merriam-Webster definitions, and neither “man” nor “woman” describes me. But I still find myself ashamed to admit that I don’t fit either of those definitions. I worry that transphobic

people—who think that my gender doesn’t exist—will think I say I’m genderfluid just to be special, and I worry that other LGBTQ+ people will think I’m not actually genderfluid because of my presentation. I’m either too different or not different enough.

Whenever I tell someone my pronouns, I have the urge to say they don’t matter that much. If you slip up and say “she,” it’s okay. But that’s not how I truly feel.

EVERY TIME I HEAR someone call me “she,” they’re shaking the Dr Pepper can even more.

WHY SHOULD I APOLOGIZE for my gender, when you should apologize for imposing a gender on me? Why should I feel ashamed, when you should be ashamed of not respecting me as a human being?

I’ve struggled with this for so long. I always blame myself for people not caring. Because I’m a *snowflake*. Because there are only two genders. Because I was born female, so that makes me female. I shouldn’t try to be difficult; I should just make everything easier for myself and other people. I should just get over this *mental illness*.

I realize those are the thoughts I’ve been conditioned to believe. Just like the concept of biological sex and gender and the binary. But those things aren’t the same.

Identifying as a gender outside of the binary does not mean I have a mental illness.

But it makes me feel physically ill to mention my pronouns to someone, just because I fear their reactions and thoughts about me. It makes my heart flood with panic and carbonated bubbles, amplifying the pressure throughout my whole body as it pumps in waves through my veins. I already deal with anxiety, and it’s made worse by the fact that I have to worry about my gender, my future, and even my safety, which are all dependent on others’ perceptions of me. I am constantly on the verge of exploding.

MY GIRLFRIEND CALLED ME “SHE” as she was touching me. I froze, but she kept going until she saw my face. When she released me, I curled up in a ball, shaking for half an hour until the carbon dioxide built up enough to force the can open.

Misophonia

EMILY BANKS

poetry

That's when I started noticing
how loud she chewed—somewhere between
New York and New Orleans where we'd see
her mother's body buried.

My first time on a plane. As if a switch
was hit and then the gum
between her teeth, the squelching sound
saliva makes as lips smack shut,
was all I heard. Her mother was dead
and we were going to look
at her dead body, face powdered
and perfume sprayed so we wouldn't think
about what cancer does and I hadn't decided
yet whether I'd look.

That's when I realized other people chewed
with their mouths closed so nobody
would see the meaty insides of their lips,
wet muscles of their tongues, but my mother
would make you look because *the body*
is always beautiful, or something
she would say. The last time
I'd seen her mother, I saw the way her gums
had dried a porous brown and I tried
not to calculate how old she was.

The white-toothed stewardess
motioned safety instructions for just in case
our plane would crash. That's when I started
hinting, asking, "Aren't you finished
with that piece of gum?" and holding out a wrapper
for her to spit it in. Her mother had just died

and I knew I shouldn't tell her, but it felt
like shards of glass grinding into my ears
and she just laughed, then said she was laughing
so she wouldn't cry. That's when I started
moving my chair away from her at meals,
my eyes fixed on some corner
of bookshelf space. I did decide to look
at my grandmother, dead, her face
still pretty and I wasn't afraid
like I was scared I'd be, but the skin of her cheek
felt like cold wax when I leaned down to it
and I tried not to think that I had kissed
somebody dead, that I had seen a body,
dead, for the first time and all the chemicals
that stiffened her, concealer caked to make her
look alive would seep away and leave
her bare and then—I wouldn't think. That's when
the wet noise of consumption wouldn't stop,
a rapid beat like droplets on my skull
and after, her tongue wandering her teeth
to gather bits of food that might decay.
That's when I knew some sounds you can't drown out,
even with the hard part of your palms
pressed down over both ears, folded
into themselves, heating to red
as your plane flattens out and hits the ground.

Jupiter

DIANA CLARK

fiction

“She is entire. She makes herself wide / so nothing can hold her; she holds all inside.”

—*Eighteen*, by Lauren K. Alleyne

AFTER THE ASSAULT, Nessa’s told lots of things. Things like, “You’re too nice, people think you’re flirting” and “You’re too pretty” and “How did you not see that coming?” Nessa doesn’t know how to be cruel. She didn’t see anything coming. And so she is left with the only thing she has the ability to change.

The first thing she does is shave her head. Nessa’s hair is mermaid-long. She cannot afford this anymore. It is too risky. So Nessa buys an electric buzzer. It feels cold in her hand, the silver metal heavier than she expected. She does not cry as her hair falls to the ground, curl after dark curl, her mother’s voice at the back of her head from when she was a child and asked for a pixie cut. “*You don’t want that, baby; men like girls with long hair.*” Once she is finished, she runs her palms over her scalp. It is fuzzy, peach-like. Nessa enjoys the way it feels. She has not enjoyed anything since his hands, on her and inside her, the ones that took everything but the word *no*.

Once, when Nessa was younger, she liked a boy who looked like the moon. Her mom did not like this, either. “*Nessa, baby, I know he is funny and I know he is smart and I know he loves you like Jupiter, but if he cannot take care of himself, then how can he take care of you?*” This was when Nessa’s pizza turned into smoothies and her ice cream turned into kale. And this is the most important part, she thinks now, the most important thing she must do.

Nessa orders takeout. She orders takeout from every store in her area that delivers. An extra-large pizza with all the toppings, a foot-long Italian hoagie, a thirty-two-ounce oyster pail of chicken lo mein, a bread bowl of penne vodka, a lamb gyro with extra tzatziki sauce, a bacon cheeseburger with fries, and a chicken chimichanga slathered in queso. She replaces her liters of water with liters of soda. She packs her freezer with cartons of ice cream. She gets out of bed only to use the bathroom and answer the door.

Nessa does not realize she is still at risk until several weeks later. How the delivery man lingers. She is wearing her robe, one of the only things left that she can still make fit. The man in her doorway grins. A different kind of hungry. “I like a girl with meat on her bones,” he says. Nessa goes cold. Looks at his hands. They are different from the ones that crawled into her skin, peeled back her flesh and sucked at the pit, but they are still there, still waiting, still tap-tap-tapping on the cardboard box, waiting for

her to blush or to smile or maybe just waiting for the fear. Nessa doesn’t know what to say, so she asks if he’s remembered her side of ranch and if the breadsticks are extra cheesy.

She must not stop, Nessa realizes. The door has been shut. The man has left, and Nessa knows she must keep eating.

German chocolate cake, banana bread pudding, Nutella-stuffed cookies, ice cream sandwiches. She eats until it hurts and then eats until it doesn’t.

One morning she wakes up, covered in plaster and dirt. Around her, neighbors gasp, scream. Children gawk and point, their mouths unabashedly open. Mothers pull them away or cover their eyes. Nessa blinks. Her brain is clouded with sweet and salty. She wonders briefly if she is still asleep. The morning air is cool on her face and smells of honeysuckles. I’ve become too big for my house, Nessa realizes. She sits up slowly, brushes the dust off of her peach-fuzz head.

Nessa walks through the neighborhood, careful not to bump into houses. It is not long at all before a man in a top hat approaches her, eyes round with want. “You there!” he shouts.

Nessa looks down.

“Yes, you! Do you want to join my circus? You’re bigger than an elephant, you are. Taller, too. You and me, we could make a fortune. Whaddya say, kid?”

But Nessa doesn’t want to be revered. She does not want to be looked at in wonder. She wants people to never want anything from her again. I must get bigger, she thinks. I must become impossible to hold.

Nessa eats. She raids one of the better movie theaters, sticks her hand through the roof like a child with a cookie jar. She sucks on the plastic pipes that lead to the soda fountain machine. She takes the rotating hot dogs, the nachos with their fake cheese, the soft-baked pretzels, the entire popcorn machine. She eats until she fits comfortably inside the city’s football stadium, cradled there like a tub.

She watches the news on the giant TV. Sees herself. In the sky, multiple helicopters. The reporter is saying they’re making a special tranquilizer, just for her, one as big as a rocket ship, one that will put her down forever. I can handle that, she thinks. Give me bullets as big as jet skis, swords bigger than tree trunks, a cocktail of the deadliest poisons. I’ll take anything, Nessa thinks. Anything but his hands.

CONTRIBUTORS

SOPHIE ALLEN is a student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She used to work in a haunted convenience store. Find her on Twitter at @sallentxt.

E. KRISTIN ANDERSON is a poet, Starbucks connoisseur, and glitter enthusiast living in Austin, Texas. She is the editor of *Come As You Are*, an anthology of writing on '90s pop culture (Anomalous Press) and *Hysteria: Writing the Female Body* (Sable Books, forthcoming). Kristin is the author of nine chapbooks of poetry, including *A Guide for the Practical Abductee* (Red Bird Chapbooks), *Pray, Pray, Pray: Poems I Wrote to Prince in the Middle of the Night* (Porkbelly Press), *Fire in the Sky* (Grey Book Press), *17 seventeen XVII* (Grey Book Press), and *Behind, All You've Got* (Semiperfect Press, forthcoming). Kristin is an assistant poetry editor at *The Boiler* and an editorial assistant at *Sugared Water*. Once upon a time she worked nights at *The New Yorker*. Find her online at www.EKristinAnderson.com and on Twitter at @ek_anderson.

LIZZIE BANKOWSKI is a documentary filmmaker, nonfiction writer, and environmental advocate. Born and raised on the waterways of Virginia Beach, Virginia, she has cultivated a deep appreciation, respect, and love for Planet Earth. Lizzie uses documentary filmmaking to foster positive environmental and social change. Her prose has appeared in *Runestone Literary Journal*, *Atlantis: A Creative Magazine*, and *Mangrove Literary Journal*. Her films have played at Wilmington Female Filmmakers Collective ChickFlicks Festival, Visions Film Festival and Conference, Gold Reel Student Film Festival, and Cucalorus Festival. Lizzie is currently directing and editing a documentary short about local and sustainable seafood in Virginia Beach.

EMILY BANKS is a doctoral candidate and poetry lecturer at Emory University. She received her MFA from the University of Maryland and her BA from UNC-Chapel Hill. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including *Cimarron Review*, *storySouth*, *Yemassee*, *Free State Review*, *Muse/A Journal*, and *Pembroke Magazine*. Her first collection, *Mother Water*, is forthcoming from Lynx House Press.

BEBE BLACKWOOD is from “down near London” and lives in northeast England. She writes poetry about whatever is on her mind (usually too much) and fiction under a different name. She is inspired by everything and anything. When not writing, Bebe can be found talking to her cat (who is a very good listener), singing, and daydreaming.

DIANA CLARK is an elephant enthusiast and an MFA fiction candidate at UNCW, with special love for LGBTQIA+ literature, magical realism, and sci-fi. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Peach Mag*, *The Passed Note*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Longleaf Review*, and more. In 2015, her piece “Singed” was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. You can find her reading about pirates in Wilmington, North Carolina with her cat, Emily D.

KATHY CONTANT is a first-year MFA fiction candidate at UNC Greensboro. She graduated from UNC Charlotte with a BA in English and a minor in linguistics. She lives in Greensboro, NC with her husband and two cats who hate each other.

MARISA CRANE is a lesbian fiction writer and poet. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *X-R-A-Y Magazine*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Okay Donkey*, *Cotton Xenomorph*, *Riggwelter Press*, *Maudlin House*, *formercactus*, and elsewhere. She currently lives in San Diego with her wife. You can find her on Twitter @marisabcrane.

WANDA DEGLANE is a Capricorn from Arizona. She is the daughter of Peruvian immigrants and attends Arizona State University. Her poetry has been published or forthcoming from *Rust + Moth*, *Glass Poetry*, *L'Éphémère Review*, and *Yes Poetry*, among other lovely places. Wanda is the author of *Rainlily* (2018), *Lady Saturn* (Rhythm & Bones, 2019), *Venus in Bloom* (Porkbelly Press, 2019), and *Bittersweet* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press, 2019). She is the editor-in-chief of *Honey & Lime*, a brand new literary and arts magazine.

NANDINI GODARA is a freelance writer from Bombay, India. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *PANK*, and *Pidgeonholes*. She has done nothing of note except try to write and get better at it. You can find her on twitter @nandini_godara.

SJ GRIFFIN is a senior at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, double majoring in creative writing and psychology in an attempt to comprehend their existence. They love traversing their native North Carolina backwoods and baby-talking to all dogs they encounter. They make it through life with undiagnosed-yet-very-real depression and anxiety. Follow them on Twitter @born2blossom.

KEREN CHELSEA GUEVARA is a poet, student, and creator from Laguna, Philippines. Her writing revolves around the presence of God or the lack thereof, girls, depression, and love. Her work has been published in *The Melanin Collective*, *Sula*

Collective, *Germ Magazine*, and *The Fem Lit Mag*. She published her first paperback poetry collection *GIRL / GOD* in 2018. One day, she hopes to make enough of a difference in the world. For now, she writes.

EMILYNICOLE MORELAND is a writer in Raleigh, North Carolina and she is constantly distraught over the fact that polar bears will never know what trees look like.

LAUREL PAIGE is a graduate of the MFA program at Queens University of Charlotte. She's intimidated by social media and talks constantly about her dogs, Lady Blackbeard and Madam Poe. Because they're just that awesome. Honestly. Laurel lives in Madison, Wisconsin, where she works at a software company and gives readings at meaderies. Her work has appeared in *Firefly* and is forthcoming at *The Conglomerate*.

ELI SAHM received his MFA from the University of North Carolina Wilmington. He was a finalist for the 2016 NC State Annual Poetry Contest and his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Your Impossible Voice*, *Occulum*, *Rabid Oak*, *Show Your Skin*, *The Indianapolis Review*, and *Cotton Xenomorph*.

SARAH SHIELDS is a writer, visual artist, and mother of two living in Southern California. Her work has appeared in *Pidgeonholes*, *Memoir Mixtapes*, *CHEAP POP Gigantic Sequins*, and others. Sarah has struggled most of her life with anxiety and depression in multiple and recurring forms. She continues to battle self-destructiveness, social withdrawal, and public visibility issues. Sometimes she is strong and sometimes she is not. She is thankful for understanding people in this world and those ready to lend a friendly hand when needed, as it is in her heart to do the same. To see more of her work, please visit her at www.saraheshields.com or follow her on Twitter @saraheshields.

EMILY PAIGE WILSON is the author of *I'll Build Us a Home* (Finishing Line Press, 2018). She has received nominations for Best New Poets, Best of the Net, and the Pushcart Prize. Her work can be found in *The Adroit Journal*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *PANK*, and *Thrush*, among others. She lives in Wilmington, NC, where she received her MFA from UNCW. Visit her website at www.emilypaigewilson.com.