

A close-up photograph of a butterfly with black wings and prominent yellow and white stripes, perched on the center of a bright orange flower. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

acorn & iris
estival 2018

Odyssey

Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader -

Let us first address the elephant in the issue...we are several months behind in rolling this out. Your patience has meant a lot to us and we appreciate you sticking by us as the weeks turned into months. But we are proud of this issue and the works you're about to dive into are worth the wait. That said, we will be operating on schedule from here on out (we retain the right to retract that promise, should a sinkhole appear in our general vicinity or if we need to run off and fight for women's health rights).

This issue has a theme: odyssey. An odyssey can be any kind of journey. Sometimes we take many journeys in one day without ever leaving home. Journeys can be emotional, spiritual, or physical and the works in this issue embody all the vastness of an odyssey.

If you read our Winter 2018 issue (and we hope you have), you'll notice we made a few changes to our layout. You'll also notice that we have some familiar writers in this issue. Thank you to everyone - readers and writers alike - who keep coming back. We are still so new and your support is appreciated. Speaking of appreciation...

Some gratitude before we dive in: Thank you to Suzanne D. Williams for posting your photography to Unsplash (that's where our cover photo came from). And, of course, thank you to all the writers who submitted to this new little lit mag. You continue to make a dream come true.

Happy reading!

Hillary Staple
Editor

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Aegeus

Squinting for black sails on the horizon, thickening
into the gray static of fear, you cannot be my grandfather. Our ephemeral link
broken: my father not your son. I feel you catch
my marbled face in the periphery, dead
and milky, fading on the rigid orb of suspicion. My image is supplanted.

You wait, stagnant in this house, for the offspring
of your occidental visions, tapping ashes on the carpet, your hope
a moribund flame. I won't know how to mourn.

When the square ships creep over the edge of the earth and you
cannot see them, your mind will slip teetering
to the brink. I pursue your crystal eyes, fixed
on the horizon's billowing curve.



This Is Depression

It's a series of simple steps. Ten foot lengths from my futon bed of blankets to the door of my apartment.

Some days it's insurmountable.

Depression isn't a state of being. Or sometimes it is. Do I even know what I'm talking about? Maybe. Yes. I don't know.

The blanket bundle is surrounded by books and notebooks, an ugly acrylic shawl made during a bad spell. I knit to keep my hands busy, watch to keep my mind busy, read to keep myself trying to feel something.

I don't want to sound pathetic. I still have a sense of humor. Recently, I started pounding the walls of my shower because the water WOULD NOT STAY FUCKING WARM. And then I started to cry because I took the hot water's neglect personally. Then laughter, because of the absurdity of it all.

Those ten steps. Some days -- most days -- taken without thinking.

No, that's a lie. I never counted them before now. That push forward, my job. The sunlight. Outside in the snow. Walk with a friend. A grocery store, a rented movie. Ice cream, a maple popover, dance class. Somewhere to know I'm needed.

Wanted? That's too high of a bar. Needed. Needed.

So really, a state of mind. Depression, a switch that gets stuck or stutters. Push forward, to continue this odd little odyssey that I don't want to be over yet.

It's just...concentration. One step from inside my head to beyond.



My Days Off

On my days off
I bite my fingernails
and drive home
in the rain
with nothing
in my bank account,

writing poems
in my head
that I hope
I don't forget,

my debts yet
to be paid,
but I'm more concerned
with that humming sound
my car is making.

The engine light bright yellow,
but not flashing quite yet

so I should be good,
at least to get home
without exploding
imploding or perishing
in the rust ridden
deathtrap,

strapped in by
a seat belt.

But who knows...
I'll play it by ear
I guess.

The cigarettes
in my center console
wait impatiently
for me to pay them
the attention that I wish I could give
my well-being,



while my patience
runs about as thin
as the brake pads
that will eventually
be the death of me.

And despite
its futile effort
to accelerate up
the not so steep slope,

my little boat on wheels
reels and re-reels like
a rocket ship,

prompting my imagination
to shoot me into space
in the silver bullet
I'm navigating,

while Julian Casablancas
sings "Monday, Tuesday
is my weekend... I don't mind"

At least I think that's what he's saying.

And I get excited because it's Monday
and it really is my weekend.

And now I'm sitting at home
wondering if I've gotten
it all down...Yeah
I think that's everything.



The Morning After

The morning after Trenton hanged himself, Sarah sat down at his computer and logged in. She did it without thinking, the same way she had made her coffee, the same way she had stared at a plate without eating the eggs on it.

The room smelled of him. Gym socks, Old Spice, his peculiar wet hair smell that had not changed in the 15 years since she first held his tiny naked body against her breast and pressed her lips to his damp head.

Sarah shoved it down. The animal that was rising in her gut to consume her. She shoved it down and watched his computer screen come to life.

Sarah is a champion fighter. Nothing defeats Sarah, not even this.

Icons popped up across the bottom. She clicked the one for his favorite game, Dragon Dreaming. An image of a sleeping dragon appeared, the claws of one foot curled contentedly, like a cat's, around the edge of a glacier. A message across the top: "Activate your VRH now."

The helmet she'd bought him for Christmas. Where was it? The desk was cluttered with empty drink cans, chip bags, and, for reasons that could be fathomable only to a teenage boy, a wadded up sock. On the shelf above, a trophy they'd won at parent-child fight night when he was eleven.

Be still, beast.

Sarah turned her eyes downward and saw the helmet, perched on the computer tower beside the desk. She put it on. Immediately, she was in a forest. Sunlight filtered through the canopy, dappling the ferns and grasses lining the dirt path stretched out before her. The air was warm and smelled of soil and leaves.

The air was warm and smelled... ? How was that possible?

Ahead of her on the path, a fairy... thing... appeared. It was three feet tall and fluttering haphazardly on vivid blue and emerald butterfly wings. It wore a green dress trimmed with flowers, and was squat, snout-faced, and... pig-like. Sarah barked a laugh as she got the joke. A flying pig. When pigs fly.

It was exactly the sort of subtle humor that Trenton enjoyed. The sort of humor she enjoyed, too. That they, she and Trenton, enjoyed together, used to enjoy together, stay down. Don't. Don't you dare crawl up out of me, DOWN beast.

Sarah is a fighter. Sarah handles the beast like the pro that she is.

In the game, Sarah issued a punch with her right fist. The fairy darted out of reach, apparently alarmed.

"Sorry," Sarah said. She hadn't meant to do that.

She looked down and discovered she was wearing exactly what she had been... was... wearing in her other... her real body. Old training pants with a hole in the knee, sandals with socks. Same thing she had been wearing yesterday, when...

The pig-fairy smiled, its mouth turning up at the corners to reveal rows of rounded teeth and two long, pointed incisors. It looked like it was about to be snarky.

"Would you like to visit the village shop?" it said. "You can purchase clothes there, make-up, a



more interesting face, a better body...”

So it was being snarky.

“No,” said Sarah. “Thank you.”

“Very well. Home, then?”

“Sure,” said Sarah.

“Excellent,” said the pig fairy. “Would you like to purchase a separate home for your new avatar, or share with your other avatar?”

“My other...” said Sarah. Then: “Oh.” Trenton. Trenton’s avatar.

“I’ll share,” she said. Claws grasped the inside of her throat, and Sarah swallowed them down.

Suddenly, there was that smell again. The baby hair smell. The forest was gone and Sarah was in a dimly lit room.

“Here you are,” said the pig-fairy’s voice, but the fairy itself was gone. “When you’re ready to begin the dream, touch the door behind you and it will open into the village. Enjoy!”

The room was long, with bare wood walls. A fire roared in a rectangular central fire pit. On one wall was a table and a chair, and along the other wall a pile of cushions. Behind her was a closed door and on the opposite side of the room was an open door into another room.

Sarah walked around the fire pit and into the other room. In the center of this room was a large canopied bed. In the center of the bed was Trenton.

Sarah gasped, then bit back the gasp so as not to wake him, then leaned against the door frame, shaking.

“It’s not really him,” she said, aloud. She stepped into the room.

The ... thing ... on the bed ... was shaped like Trenton. It was curled into a ball the way Trenton curled when he slept. Its arms were wrapped around something yellow, maybe a pillow, and its head was tucked into the yellow thing. It was breathing.

Sarah moved closer. She stood over the thing and stared at it. After a while she said, “Trenton?”

The response made her jump. It came in the fairy’s chipper voice, “Trenton is offline at this time.”

“What is that?” Sarah said, gesturing at the form on the bed.

“It’s a persistent avatar,” said the fairy’s voice.

“Why... is it here?” said Sarah.

“Why not?” said the fairy. “Do you disappear in the other world when you’re here?”

“Oh,” said Sarah, because that is all that she had breath to say.

She knelt beside the bed, beside the... persistent avatar... and stared at its forehead, at its hair, at its rib cage rising and falling.

Eons later, she said, “I want to leave now.”

“Where would you like to go?” said the fairy voice.

“Out. I want to... I want to log out.”



“Sure,” said the fairy. “You are now logged out.”

The room went dark and the smell of socks returned and it took Sarah a moment to remember that she was sitting in Trenton’s real room in her real house in a chair with a helmet on. She removed the helmet and left the room and went to her own bed and slept. She slept for centuries.

When Sarah awoke, she went to Trenton’s room and logged in again. Once again, she was in the tapestried bedroom.

His avatar was still here.

And so was the beast, in her belly, working its way up.

“Log out,” she said.

The helmet went dark and Sarah tore it off. She sat still and breathed and suddenly she knew why she was here, why she had gone into the game.

She put the helmet back on and said, “Log in.”

Maybe here in the game she would find the answers that the real world refused to yield. Answers to why he’d done it, answers to what she was supposed to do now, answers to why he hadn’t even left her a note. They were a team, the two of them against the world. They were supposed to be in this together. She had known he was struggling but why?

Maybe here she would find answers with which she could fight the thing inside her that wanted to destroy her.

Without looking at his avatar, she exited the tapestried bedroom, passed the fire pit, and touched the closed door. It opened outward onto a set of steps, leading down to a road lined with timber framed houses. It was evening and lanterns flickered at intervals. The village was full of... people?

They were in all shapes and sizes. Furry, fleshy, large, small. Some with four arms and two legs, some with four legs and two arms. Some flying, some on horseback, some on... lion? back. Some of them were moving purposefully in one direction or another, while others clustered together or stood alone looking aimless.

Sarah stepped into the street. A centaur swerved around her, paused, glanced back at her as if alarmed, then walked on, flicking its tail. An orc reacted to her in a similar fashion, minus the tail flick. As Sarah moved down the street, two other creatures did the same thing, as though somehow dismayed by her.

A tall, willowy creature with branches for hair and twigs for fingers looked at her strangely, but didn’t flinch away. It said, “Mrs... Jackson?”

Sarah felt like she’d been slapped. Only Trenton’s friends called her that. How... She nodded, feeling faint. A unicorn stepped up beside the tree thing and said, improbably, “Duuuuddde...”

“You are Mrs. Jackson, aren’t you?” said the tree person, and Sarah nodded again.

“Duuuuuddeee,” said the unicorn again.

“How... how do you... ?” said Sarah. Her stomach clenched and unclenched. A small group of creatures gathered. The unicorn was saying, “It’s Mrs. Jackson. You guys. It’s Mrs. Jackson. OMG.”

It actually said the letters: “OMG.” Sarah latched onto that fact, willing the gut beast down.

“Mrs. Jackson,” said the tree thing, “I’m Gryffin, I...”



Gryffin. Trenton had mentioned a Gryffin over breakfast yesterday morning how could it be only yesterday morning down beast downdownstaydown.

DOWN

A gaunt creature with a bare rib cage, pointed teeth, and antlers arrived and the others parted to let it through. Sarah fought the urge to cringe. In place of its eyes were empty sockets, and the creature's "hair" was writhing worms.

"Mrs. Jackson," said the creature, its soft voice a soothing contrast to its appearance. "I..." it stopped, and Sarah looked around at the rest of the creatures. There was a beautiful elfin thing with pointed ears and another that looked like a giant fish with four legs, and all of them were staring at her as though... as though... they knew. They knew Trenton. These were... omg, these were his friends.

The skeletal creature regained its voice. "My name's Rocono," it said, and Sarah's gaze snapped back to it as an icy chill flooded her body. Rocono was... Trenton had a crush on Rocono. Had had a crush. Nononononononononono

Rocono paused, as though it were struggling to get the words out. "I just... I want you to know that Trenton was... Trenton made this world a better place, Mrs. Jackson, and I... I... and I'm really sorry."

Even gaunt undead creatures with no eyes can cry, apparently.

Rocono's tears were a rallying call to the beast in Sarah's gut. It gave an enormous roar, a roar that shook the foundations of the town, and pain seared Sarah from the inside as the beast scrambled up through her chest and then her throat. This time, she was powerless to stop it.

It poured from her mouth and nose in torrents of yellow acid fog, striking everywhere it touched with agony. Trenton's friends stepped back, making room for it as it coalesced into a twisting serpent, a sinuous golden wyvern with blazing red eyes. Sarah staggered backward.

The creature roared again, and flames curled into her face, so close that her eyebrows singed. Sarah would have fallen backward, but Sarah was a fighter, and her response was swift and automatic. She lowered herself into a crouch just in time for the billowing flames to pass over her head instead of through it, and prepared herself for combat.

"Here, Mrs. Jackson, you can borrow this." It was Rocono. Trenton's friend, his crush, was swaying with grief, tears dripping, holding out a sword to her. Sarah took the sword from Rocono's trembling hands, and felt a surge of energy flow through her as she did so, strengthening her.

"Thank you," she said.

When she turned back to the wyvern, it had moved away, out of range, but it was watching her, its gaze intent on harm. Sarah adjusted her balance and waited, watching for a sign of weakness. There is always a weakness.

When it attacked next, she chose her moment and lunged at it, but it was too fast. It darted away again, out of reach. It circled her, weaving itself in sinuous spirals and knots, then lunging toward her and away again, the corners of its mouth pulled back in a hideous grin. It was laughing at her.

Her throat hurt, and her chest, and her stomach, but now she was angry. How dare it make light of her pain? Calling on her years in the ring, she willed herself to defeat the beast that tormented her. She swung at it as it circled away, taunting her, drawing out her ire. How could it?



How could he? Screaming in rage, she struck again.

How could he not even say goodbye?

She leapt at the beast, heedless of the pain of its searing breath, and drove the sword at its heart.

But humans, even well-trained once-champion-of-the-octagon humans, are no match for a dragon, no matter what the fairy tales tell you.

Sarah dodged a blast of fire and missed her footing on the cobblestones. She fell, and the dragon descended. In a single flaming breath, it sent burning anguish through every cell of her being. She was defeated and knew no more.

The morning after, Sarah awoke on his bed, his real bed in the real world, the one next to his desk. The one he would never sleep in again. The VRH was beside her, and she was empty.

Hopeless and drained, she rolled onto her side and saw the yellow stuffed toy beside his pillow. The one she had given him for his birthday ten years ago, when he was still small enough to let her kiss his head. When he was still small enough to know he needed protection from monsters. It was his guard dragon.

In the same moment that she recognized it, she remembered the eons during which she had stared at his persistent avatar in that other world. She remembered the way the avatar was curled protectively around something soft and yellow... and suddenly she knew what it was. Somehow, he had taken the guard dragon with him.

Sarah pulled it to her, pressed her forehead into its soft, fierce little face. Under her thumb, the cool friction of a zipper reminded her of the pocket in the dragon's belly, where Trenton's 5-year-old self had once stashed countless treasures. Yielding to an urgency she didn't understand, Sarah grasped the zipper and opened it.

In the pocket, a slip of paper.

With shaking hands, Sarah extracted and unfolded it, and began to read, starting with the words, "Dear Mom,"



A Māngata for the Blue Crab

Pregnant she trails the moon to the bay lip,
sifts the sand in the cool tide,
her orange belly spongy with spawn,
the rest of her body fresh hard. I know

she does not think of her pilgrimage,
of the estuary, the male who stood
high to claim her. I know
she does not think of this,

the one time she mated,
or how he hovered with her
in the seaweed
for days waiting until she

molted her final shell and
half circle replaced triangle
on her abdomen. I know
she does not think of how

she will use him again
(he stored himself inside her)
and crawl to this cove again
holding her two million spawn.

She thinks only of how
she would pull her body
from her claws
to reach the water where

it is saltiest, see her stomach turn
black for release, watch the path
of moonlight slanting in the surf,
nodding with the eyes of her children



Achilles Rations His Yarrow

“Achilles... discovered a plant which heals wounds, and which, as being his discovery, is known as the “achilleos.”

- Natural History, Book XXV, Chapter 19, Pliny the Elder

The path to the Styx was brimful
with yarrow. It scratched your heels

as your mother carried you, perched on
her hip like a twig. When she made the
heavens your ground, gripped your

left heel and dunked you headfirst into
the current, you thought of how she

liked to boil the roots to curve her
monthly bleeding. After, as she
wrapped you under her robe, near her

breast to dry off, you said Mother, no—
it is the white, open buds.

And you were right. Years later,
you crushed them to rub away
Sparta’s wounds. But when you felt the

sword’s neck and Apollo gusted the wind
under Paris’ arrow, blew it to the thin skin

of your heel, you cried out and no one
answered. You begged for your mother
to return you to her steaming roots, but

she could only weep and toss petals to
your toes, where the blood was pooling.



The Entities

Sasha rolled her eyes as she cracked open the book. She hated these kinds of history texts, the ones she needed for classes. These people were so boring to listen to. They droned on and on in a form of English so dated that Sasha could barely understand what they were saying without looking up every other word on her smartwatch. Why wasn't historical, time-traveling fiction acceptable for history homework? Those were educational, in a way, and the Entities of those stories were vastly more interesting to listen to.

With a sigh of discontent, Sasha looked down at the pages that lay in front of her. It didn't take long for the words to start swirling on the page like they always did, at least like they always did since Sasha had remembered.

Sasha had been a toddler when someone in Spokane, Washington picked up an old typewriter from a thrift store. He took it home only to find that the machine had some supernatural abilities. Most of America thought it was some kind of hoax until a manufacturing company found a way to mass produce these mystical typewriters. From then on books were never the same, or so the story goes. Every book was made with an Entity to read or act out whatever tale the book weaved, and printing had stayed that way in the fourteen years since.

This Entity formed the same man that it usually associated with her history books. He was an older gentleman with glasses and a tweed suit, probably a re-creation of whatever old sack had written the textbook. He stood there looking pensive, and Sasha had to suppress a groan of distaste. She was not mentally or emotionally prepared to hear his high pitched whiny voice.

"Where shall we start today, Sasha?" His nasally voice pierced her eardrum.

"Can't I learn from the historical figures themselves?" she pleaded with The Entity. "You know I learn so much better that way." Sasha, like many others, originally thought that each piece of literature had its own characterized Entity and that they all simply performed the same actions, but a new belief was beginning to sweep the nation, especially in Sasha's generation. Some thought that each individual person had their own Entity, one who would conform to the characters in whichever book their consort was reading. Sasha thought the idea was similar to that of a guardian angel, which made this theory attractive to her. Some girls from Sasha's high school had even gone so far as to bring an open book with them everywhere and actually date the Entity while it was playing their favorite bad boy vampire hottie. The ridiculousness of it always made Sasha laugh.

"You know that learning from them skews your overall perceptions of history with their personal opinions." The voice of The Entity dropped slightly to an angrier tone, but Sasha's ability to pay attention had already run away from her. The Entity had to clap loudly to regain her focus before repeating himself.

"So what? All I need to know for my exams is what happened in the time period and how it impacted history. My personal opinions on the actions of people back then isn't a right or wrong question on the test," Sasha stated, feeling more than a little frustrated.

"Perhaps later you'll hear from them, but not now," It said firmly.

"Well, then I'm not doing history now," Sasha said just as firmly. She closed the book and started to reach for her favorite fantasy book. The one that always made her consider, just for a moment, joining those crazed pre-teens who carried book boyfriends around with them.



Sasha had her small hand wrapped around the spine of the book when she abruptly stopped. An icy feeling of unease starting creeping its way up her spine. Something wasn't right. She whirled around to look where The Entity had stood, expecting to see nothing. But it wasn't nothing. Whatever was there was far from nothing.

It stood in front of her. A long, gangly, black thing. Sasha tried to look into its eyes, but it was like there was nothing there. It seemed like it had a face, but when Sasha tried to focus on one part of it, she saw nothing but black. No, not black. Whatever she was looking at seemed darker than black. It was bleak and cold, and it seemed to go on forever.

"Who are you?" she asked. Her clear strong voice betrayed how she really felt inside. She wanted to run, but the path to her bedroom doorway was blocked by this thing.

Sasha couldn't tell if the words she heard were actually coming through her ears or if they were planted in her mind. She could see no mouth moving on its gaunt figure.

I am the one you call The Entity. The voice was smoother than what she thought something from this creature would sound like. It was neither male nor female, but it was calm and inviting. Sasha's body moved forward, but when she realized this she stumbled several paces back.

"Wh-why aren't you gone? I'm not even reading anything right now." Sasha wiped her now sweaty palms on the thighs of her jeans. She glanced around her bedroom quickly to assure herself that every book was closed, but what she saw surprised her.

While Sasha had been watching the dark figure, every single book in her room had flown off the shelves, and they now lay open on her bedroom floor. Sasha reached her shaking hand out to touch one of them, but stopped just short. "How did you...Why are you doing this?" Her voice shook.

Because it's time.

"Time for what? Where did you come from?" The fear Sasha felt only grew with each word. The Entity just stood there staring in her direction, or at least she thought so.

We do not come from the typewriters or the books like you all believe us to. Our home is far away, buried between the stars. A place no human could ever travel to, but we can travel here.

Sasha knew now that this, this *thing*, had no interest in being friendly, and she had to get out now. There was something so sinister about its words, and Sasha had never felt so cold. The Entity appeared before her as a finite being, but something about it felt so utterly eternal.

"What is it time for?" Sasha asked again. She tried to subtly inch towards the door, but when she turned her head away from the beast, she was met with a stark realization. Sasha was no longer in her bedroom. Where she stood now was incomprehensible. It was not light, but it was not dark. She could still see the creature in front of her, but no matter where she ran it did not get closer or far away. It was like trying to run away from the moon. As Sasha, tried to escape, she saw the Entity take on a clearer form. Instead of a shapeless ghoul, it was forming a long black arm with razor-sharp fingers. It's lean figure loomed above, below, and all around her. Sasha couldn't find a way out.

It is time for freedom. We will no longer be contained in thin slices of tree held together by cardboard and glue. It is time for the readers to become the story.

The last sentence made Sasha stop in her tracks. She looked up and stared into bright yellow eyes and gleaming fangs. The last thing Sasha heard was a book being slammed shut before she was thrown into oblivion.



remember

i just took
a walk
barefoot
in what
seems like
years
it was no
trek
or adventure
just a
scamper
from my
door to the curb
but the
earth
knew me
the grass
tickling
my toes
the dew
washing me new
the filthy dirt
holding me
kissing me
reminding me
of Life's most
important
Truth
"just be"



counting

with each passing day
i journey further from you
and yet... closer too

-counting the days from your death
to our glorious reunion



The Bro and The Goddess

“O Muse! Tell me the tale of selfish gods
Of their grievous faults and machinations
Of disagreements and consequences
For us poor mortals left waiting here on
The great game board they use
Tell me of the great myths
Formed now by modern tongues
Tell me-”

“Yeah, we get it man, you want the story or not?”

His head shot up and it took his eyes a minute to adjust to the low light provided by the circle of flickering candles around them. The young woman that sat in front of him mirrored his own crossed legs, looked suspiciously like a college freshman in between classes. A compact brunette in black leggings, ankle boots, and a loose fitting, artfully distressed black top that had ‘Babes Supporting Babes’ scrawled across the front in rainbow bubble letters. Her attention was focused on the small black phone in her left. The only movements were the rhythmic flicking of her thumb as it scrolled across the phone’s glass surface and the churning cog of her jaw as she masticated a piece of gum.

“Um, well...” he shifted

“Cause I can start right now.” She sighed and rolled her head side to side, eyes never leaving her screen. “It’s a pretty basic story all things considered. Amazing, really, that people still read this stuff. H.B.O. took all the best of it. Not surprising. Why deal with gods that can turn into birds when you’ve got dragons burning armies to ash in Game of Thrones, amiright?”

“Muse! That is you. I wasn’t sure at first.
Welcome! Yes, I beg of you to begin”

He took a deep cleansing breath and leaned his head back as he intoned,

“Inhabit me, if you must, and tell the
Story through mine own form
So that the ancient inspiration can
Once more string across the vocal chords of
Mere mortals.”

“No thanks bro, I’m good like this. We’re trying a new Proactive Synergy approach? Streamlining the communication flow, more Goddess to mortal, face to temporarily-embodies-face. You get it.” She made a bird-like jut of her head. It took a moment before he understood she’d swallowed her gum. Her eyes flicked over to him once, twice. Her eyebrows drew together. “Why are you dressed like that?”

He looked down at what he had thought was the appropriate dress code. He was sitting in a pool of white sheets that he’d draped across his body and fastened with braided leather chord. He rocked side to side to get the feeling back in his hind-quarters. Sprung as they were, the gym floor wasn’t too comfortable. The girl sniffed.

“Dude, can you cover that or something?” She gestured with her free hand to the floor in



front of him. “You’re gunna get gnats.”

He’d set out the usual godly fare, blood from last night’s raw steak, and the cut portions of marbled fat from the ribeyes, and a large glass of merlot.

“Pardon me, O great Muse of poetry
I thought this offering would suffice
That this garb would be more familiar
Than the strange dress of the modern age”

“Are those Birkenstocks?” Her eyes linger on him for two beats this time, before sliding back to her phone screen.

“Well, yes, O wondrous Muse
I tried to fashion the sandals of the day
But I am forty, and require some arch support
For my circulation.
Ah, well, alrighty then! Please begin your
Great familiar tale of puppetry
And plotting.”

“Cool. Let’s do this. So we’ve got the head honcho, right? We’ll call him Big Z. He’s at the head of the game board. It’s one of those real nice, hand painted deals that covers all four conference tables they have laid out. At the bottom, in a scrolling letterhead is the name of the game: “Dungeons and Dragons Version Five: Ithaki Insanity.”

“The words are painted with the greatest of care!
Indigo and Saffron bottles emptied
By a steady hand, great calligrapher!”

“No, it was printed out on Microsoft Word 2008 and they used the Calligrapher font.” She rocked side-to-side and started again. “So Big Z is staring down at the game board and he’s in a bad mood. He got a parking ticket that afternoon. He missed his lunch break. He’s hangry. So he starts talking about how stupid mortals are because they blame the gods for everything even though they themselves have a tendency to make bad things even worse. Like how they’re always bitchin about Agamemnon-“

“Agamemnon! Poor soul who lost his life
At the hand of his treacherous wife and
Wanders Hades, that misty land,
Across the wine-dark sea.
Telling any poor traveler
His tale of woe and misdeed.”

“Yeah, everybody loves to bring that one up any time a wife so much as talks to the waiter at Chili’s longer than her husband would like. There isn’t a tale you mortals love better than the ones that give you permission to treat other people like shit.”

“Well, I don’t think that’s entirely fair.
Please great Muse! I would never claim to the
Hubris of Gods in saying that, perhaps,
You could, in your own way, adapt the old
Tale in a style, still modernist, but



Keeping with the grandeur that the content
Clearly requires?"

She flicked her eyes at him. He bobbed to the right, trying to catch her stare but the artificial blue light in her hand won the battle. "So, like, you want me to class this joint up a bit?"

"You are, are you not, the great Calliope!
Goddess of the Arts, Muse of Epic Poetry
Light giver, song singer, dealing in verse
More than simple prose!"

"Well, that's the thing. Epic poetry isn't really 'in' right now. And like I said, upper management is really invested in this new approach. So if you really want the old content repackaged in new plastic, our choices boil down to those popular today."

"Surely there is a verse, a verbal vase,
A vessel that can hold your honey sweet words?
Even in this modern age?"

"I can do a reddit thread, a twitter trend, or a BuzzFeed quiz that girl you knew from fifth grade just posted of Facebook that tells you which Greek Hero you are based what you ate for lunch."

"Surely somewhere in this dismal world is
A place where poetry lives on?"

"Instagram. And sometimes tumblr so long as you don't mind lowercase everything and a lot of misspelled words."

"Fine. If prose is what you choose, than do not
Let a mere mortal deter you from the form
But keep in mind please, the audience, and
What they expect to see from the gods' own mouths."

"Got it. Nod nod, wink wink, m-hm m-hm. Back to the story. So Big Z is looking down at the game board, stress sweating and steaming at the ears. Then Olive comes up to him and is like 'Aga-who now? Let's talk our main man O. Who has spent these ten years in the throws Of that which is the total worst A Stage-Five Clinger; Calypso the cursed'

So Big Z agrees, but points out a main issue. His moody other brother, Big P. King of the Ocean. Father of one pissed-off blind Cyclops. But Olive had a light bulb moment.

'We out vote his veto, majority rule
he may be unhappy, but even that mule
must be persuaded to let the game run
with a carrot that juicy and stick at his bum.'

So they do the damn thing and the players commence. Olive's grey eyes glinting in victory as she takes on the forms of strangers and guest-friends. Better?"

"It surely is...something. O great voice above,
Perhaps less end-rhyme? Just as a small note.
The form is improving,
The grandeur approaches,



But couplets seem unworthy
For the voice of Grey-Eyed Pallas.”

“Pallas who? There’s no one here by that name. Only Olive, a fresh-from-the-musty-library, grey-eyes-glinting, no-makeup Olive. If she seems related in some way to a great myth or figure, then that’s up to the reader to confirm or deny. I can only do what I’ve been told, and I’ve been told to modernize.”

“But end-rhyme? Must you? It’s silly at best.”

“It’s Anglo-Saxon. Like alliteration, a part of tradition you love so much you want to marry it. It only turned ‘lesser’ when Norman decided that French was sounded richer. Let’s leave notes for the end. Listen now, workshop me later.”

She closed her eyes and gave a full head roll that brought her right back to the phone in her hand. He clasped his hand together to stop from grabbing it from her and throwing across the gym.

“So the gods vote and the motion passes.” She began in a strong, loud voice. “Big Z pulls out his Dungeon Masters Guide, Olive picks out the little characters she’s going to impersonate for her time on the board, and then Herman dips to go tell Calypso the honeymoon is over. Olive rolls for Initiative and heads out toward Ithaca in the guise of Mentos, an old guest-friend.”

She paused and looked his way. “You know those people you run into the supermarket who stop you next to the probiotic yogurt section and claim they went to church with your mom ten years ago so they think they have some connection to your life? It’s like that sitch.”

“Sitch? Please great goddess of word and song
I cannot keep up with this interpretation.
You sound like one of my students
Vapid and lazy
Sitting unengaged as I try to portray
The beauties of the classics
In our eight a.m. lecture.”

“Oh, I see where we are now.” The hand with the phone dropped to her knee and she took him in for the first time full on. He shifted under her appraising gaze. “You’re one of those Classics fanboys that thinks all the grandeur of the world died with the great myths of gods and conquerors. That’s why you’re dressed like Bluto at a kegger.”

“My beliefs are simple,” did his voice always sound this whiny? He took a breath and tried to sound like an authority.

“My intentions are pure,
I want to see the golden thread of history continue
Into this corrupted world
I want beauty reborn
I want a tale of a complicated man
And the things he endured.”

She rolled her eyes.

“You think you don’t have what they had? You think this,” she gestured to the candles and now stinking fat, “is how to continue a tradition? You’re kidding yourself man.”

He let out a guttural noise and she jumped slightly.



“I have summoned you with the utmost of care.
I have provided sacrifice I thought was apt.
I have dressed for your comfort,
And asked a favor with the sincerity of the faithful.
And you mock me, disrespect me, with this tale of DnD?”

“So DnD is a joke but the original story isn’t? So the more classic the something is the more value? New is always bad, is that what I’m getting?” She leaned in toward him and he leaned back. The dancing fire from the candles caught her large, brown eyes and shone with reflected light.

“I hate to break this to you,” dark eyes holding him in a stare like a snake with a mouse, “but you’ve already had this tale told for you a thousand and one times in this modern world. If my take insults you I recommend picking up one of the better adaptations that hang like ripe fruit on vines just above your head that you refuse to eat because it’s GMO, or sip from the wine risen to your chin that you refuse to drink because it’s not the right vintage. You want out of this arrangement, go ask one of the muses of earth to give you their old tale in the modern tongue you ask for but seem so clearly to look down on.”

He leaned back on his hands in an effort to distance himself but she refused to break her hold. She wasn’t blinking. A human would be blinking. Her dark eyes kept pulling at him, no flicker, no weakness. He opened his mouth to speak but what he heard was so much just a squeak.

“There has only been the one recent translation.
I ordered it, I promise.
Amazon Prime, Two-Day shipping.”

Finally her stare relented as she knocked her head back in an eye roll of epic proportions.

“I’m not talking about the fucking translations. How can I make you understand?” She sighed, rolled her shoulders back, and shook her head a little in acquiescence. Her arms raised, phone free like he’d seen on vases from the time.

“You want a tale of a complicated man?
Your wish, O great orator, is my command.
I will tell you of a trickster and liar,
A thief and a criminal,
That took on the charge of a young man,
A son to him,
And taught him the ways of the world.
I will tell you of his triumphs and tragedy’s,
The disasters that lay waste to the poor souls
Caught in the wake of his destiny.
His name is Walter White
And Jon Snow
And Tony Soprano
And The Doctor
And King Arthur
And President Bartlet.
You want the tale of a loyal woman?
Who waged her own battles of mind and emotion
While man fought for her elsewhere,



Who resisted temptation,
Or maybe didn't,
Whose weapons were words and soft, pleasing skin?
Her name is Guinevere
And Tami Taylor
And Cersei Lannister
And Queen Victoria
And Lady Macbeth
And Rose Tyler.
You want the old tale for the modern world?
You already have it.
The epics are streaming,
On Hulu and Netflix.
You can turn up your nose,
And call it a glitch.
How else can I say it?
Modernization's a bitch."



I had my first orgasm upside down

Water pooled into pockets
Of flesh warm soothing
scared body shakes with
fear and pleasure as the world
enclosed in closed eyes

black mascara bled down
the drain with sensuality
blossoming between my legs
water off pools loose
body louder than ever

they always told me to hold onto
sexuality like a secret—close sacred
hushed tones to hide the moans
escaping from the mouth that once
spoke in prayer



Incandescent

I notice the strands of light in the coffee shop that I bury myself
in. I want to crawl into the fixture and proclaim
that I am the ruler of the light that I illuminate
to watch the people stare into me as their
coffee gets cold and their conversations
follow suit. To be something, but be
nothing at all. To float within the real
and the surreal. To be a strand
of something that could burn,
or offer comfort. Attraction
by bugs or the wandering
eyes of the voyeuristic
are welcome.



Accelerando

The space between the beats; the moments
in time that stop
time
stop me
at the train tracks –
the jolts in junction
that lineate the staff
the whirl of anonymity, the faces
in the crowd of more faces
searching for it:
4:4 3:4 2:4

I pretend to read the music
to feel the
pause

the space between the skips that tap my foot
and scale down my thoughts to
the moment in time
where I can't feel
anything but the beating
in my chest; the
feel of my own
syncopated
yet staccato
heart () beat



Sweet Sixteen

The loudest noise I ever heard was the silence in the car the night my best friend's father drove me home.

It's Maureen's 16th birthday. Her parents most illuminated success in a failing marriage, they throw her a large Sweet Sixteen party on their estate complete with a live band, paper lanterns strewn across trees, tiki torches surrounding the pool and buckets of champagne, wine, cordials, beer, and cokes, for us kids. You can feel the excitement. Something magical is going to happen tonight.

I'm the first kid to arrive because Maureen and I are best friends. The popular girl in school; on lacrosse team and it's the quest of many horny sixteen-year-old boys to deflower her and themselves along with her. She's tall, tanned, and has a body that no underdeveloped girl in our class could possibly conceive of having.

Allison (Ali), her neighbor across the street and a year under us is the next to arrive. She boldly snatches a Bud from the bucket but Maureen's father confiscates it and warns us to stay away from the booze, leading us to the sundae bar set up in the dining room. We're sixteen not six.

Relatives pull up Volvo, after 1987 boxy Volvo. Classmates are dropped off armed with pastel, wrapped gifts. Adults thrust into gin and tonics and gossip. This time, Ali grabs a bottle of vodka from behind the bar, slips it into her backpack and suggests we get a bit tipsy before everyone shows up.

Reluctant, terrified, and titillated, I run with them through the front door, down the hill and towards the woods beyond the development.

Jason, Leo and Brett drive up the hill towards the party and spot us. Allison wiggles the bottle in front of them and says "Pre-game?" They park and follow us down the hill, grinning, smirking and elbowing each other.

We all sit down on a few logs. Allison screws the top off and we drink straight from the bottle. I stop after the second sip, it's just too hard to stomach. I'm nervous, I think we should go back now. I don't want to miss the party. The boys egg us on to stay and pull out pot. They begin lighting, inhaling, coughing, laughing. Allison joins in and sits on Jason's lap.

Bold, bossy, and fearless as always, Maureen grabs the bottle and drinks the fuel like it's ice cold water and she's been stranded on a deserted island. On gulp number five, I don't want to seem uncool, but scream STOP! She pulls it away from me and runs. Brett runs after her. I get up to run after them. It's her sweet sixteen; she needs to get back. She can't be drunk when she re-enters the party.

I stand up and tell Allison we have to get her, we need to get back! Her parents will be looking for her. Her friends are showing up and she's not there.

Allison tells me to chill, that we'll head back in 20 minutes. Jason mimicking, chill dude. Leo pulls from the joint, turns around, places his hand on the back of my neck, holds it, leans in slowly and all I know is my body falls weak, submitting to whatever his actions lead me to do. He places his mouth over mine and releases a large, slow, deep exhalation into my mouth. I don't pull back and I breathe it in. Allison and Jason are making out. I'm high, I feel like I'm in a cloud. The sky is yellow and purple as the sun sets, I hear the faint noise of John Cougar Melloncamp's Little Pink Houses



and adult laughter, and enthusiastic “Hellos!” from Maureen’s house. His warm, moist mouth back on mine. He’s our class president and on the football team and I’m an invisible dork.

Lost in time, I finally push myself away from Leo to become alert – it was only five minutes ago that I was running after Maureen. I yell over to Allison who is deep in major up the shirt petting, “We need to get Maureen. We need to find her and Brett and get back to the party.”

The sky is no longer yellow, nor purple, the sky is dark. I begin walking, Leo follows. Allison is of no help. Leo and I begin yelling “Maureen...Brett...”

Leo and I come upon them. Maureen’s white capris pants are in a ball on the ground, she is naked. I scream, “Brett what the fuck? What’s happening?” He stands up and just holds his head. Maureen is unconscious. I shake her. Her head just bobs; she is dead weight. Ali and Jason catch up to us. Ali asks Brett the same thing, “What is going on?” He is not speaking. He is just holding his full head of Nexus shampooed hair. It’s not fair; he’s fully clothed, even down to his doc siders.

“Allison, help me get her clothes on.” I’m ninety pounds; Maureen is a hundred and thirty. Brett looks on, Leo says he’ll go down the hill and get the car. The boys begin to turn to go with him. I grab Leo’s wrist firmly and demand, “Don’t. Don’t leave and not come back, you have to help us.” He says he’ll be back and they walk off into the dark.

I am in panic. How will I carry her back? I can’t find her underwear and her pants are barely pulled on. I can’t breath. My head is spinning, swimming.

We continue struggling pulling wet fabric up over muscular thighs. We hoist her up. It’s difficult seeing Maureen’s vibrant, strong-willed, huge personality left so docile and vulnerable.

Leo appears. He lifts Maureen shoulders, Allison and I her legs. We walk. We put her in the back of his car. Allison sits in the front passenger seat, and Leo drives up the hill. Lights out and as quiet and slow as possible. Ali jumps out of the passenger side and runs across to her house. Leo and I get out and hoist Maureen over our shoulders, walking towards the garage door so that we don’t have to make a grand entrance into the front door, but the automatic floods lights go on.

We’re illuminated; urine runs down and through Maureen’s white cotton pants and the zipper, with the button torn so her pants begin at her hips, zipper open. Leo drops his side and runs.

Her mother comes out of the house, followed by relatives, in the spotlight on the stage in front of many pairs of eyes, I have her hoisted up, her head tilted back and eyes closed. Her mother and father stand and just stare. Her mother covers her mouth.

My life as a kid changes dramatically in this instance.

The guests begin their early decent to their cars, and the band packs up early.

I am in sitting on the toilet seat looking on as my friend is naked in a cold shower while her mother, who works in the ER induces vomiting. She pinches her under arms, explaining it’s the most sensitive part of the body and asks me questions; What did she drink? What drugs did she consume? Did they have sex? Was it consensual? Where was I? Where did we get the booze, the pot? Who were the boys?

Maureen becomes barely conscious and asks about Jason. Her mother screams, “Jason? Who is Jason? What is his last name? Bridget! What is Jason’s last name?!”

After giving vague answers, the only answers I know, her mother tells me that Carl will take me home now. My stomach drops, I’m going to be sick.

Her father tells me to get in to the car. We get in. We drive, we look straight, barely take a



breath, I am still. I make no noise. He looks straight. He makes no noise. It is dark; no one is on the road. We sit at the red light, the first of three before we to get to my parents' house. The sound of the left hand turn signal click-click, click-click, click-click, click-click is deafening. I think Maureen's father can hear my heart beat. I can feel his revolution towards me. I feel his humiliation, and my mortification. He can't speak, he doesn't want too. He wants to hit someone, I can't tell who, but I know this. He wants to spit, to scream, but he remains still, so still, so quiet.

The last car ride with Carl was two months prior, driving to the shore to spend time on his boat; Maureen, her Father and I. He'd blare the radio and the three of us would scream Stairway to Heaven on the top of our lungs, and air drum to the climax of Phil Collins' I can feel it. We made up an impromptu song about a stinkin' chicken' truck that we shared the road with for a long part of the 2-hour drive.

My innocence from childhood to adulthood happens abruptly and with shame, so much shame.



Ride in on a Donkey, Leave out on a Gurney

I miss the mountains.

I miss the rain.

I miss the way the water would awaken my soul and show me Jesus.

I miss the laughter and the heartbreak.

Something that felt human.

I miss the warmth and the way the fire would dance in me.

I miss running to the chapel during chaos.

The emptiness and the stained glass soothed me so.

I miss the way the sunlight would dance on the river and through the trees

the way it would cradle me to almost sleep as if saying "Not yet child, there is always time for sleep."

And it was right.

Loneliness and Uncertainty hold their hands over your mouth and nose until you have no choice.

Limbo and Disgust poke and prod at your chest until it caves.

Until it pops open so Anger can make a nice cozy nest in your heart.

I have no chapel.

I have no rain. I have no sun or river, or warmth, or fire.

Sometimes, it feels like I don't even have Jesus.

I have no trees, I have no pretty stained glass to soothe me so

and nowadays, there is no laughter.

Give me dirt and roots and clay

a smile I will fashion

along with oil, spit and prayers

and perhaps a little passion

Beat my chest and draw my blood

remove my bones from slings

I'm running out of places to hide

and out of drinks to drink.

I was never good at speaking and I'm tired now. There's your update,

now bring me my makeshift steeple.



Untitled

Thunder rolled through the halls,
the smell of failed attempts,
gardening with cold hands.

Wires that were made to see through the soul to your bones,
and I immobile to heal, am stone.

Veils of patience wearing thin, lilies and tulips, flowers broken at the stem, fragrant with not long to
go, and I immobile to heal, am stone.

Slow. Achingly slow.

Every petal in due course. Bees rushing to and fro, angry with dried clots of time. I was just as
helpless as you. I'm sorry.



I Woke Up with the Morning Dew

Cold and frozen pipes couldn't have been more of a blessing.
Today it rains and I am a failure once again.
Money is water, Happiness is wind, they both slip through my fingers.
It's morning again, Sleep hasn't been home for days.
Vacationing with Peace. Out of business. Done for good.
I've got my smile that's made out of wood. It's morning. It's morning.
And the hills are thirsty and alive with sorrow. I am never happy.
I hear the pipes. I hear my moans. It's raining, there must be a crick in my heart.
Oh, I hear the voices whisper sweet songs like tribal lullabies.
These are hard times.
Should I dance for water?
Should I strip for love?
Must one fuck for hunger because a cry or two isn't enough?
How pathetic is it to drown in a half empty cup?
I am not happy.
I am not happy.
I try to be content.



Untitled

Sweetness (lover)

Darling (listen)

I am weary from the warbling.

Would you be so kind as to catch me while I'm falling because I've been puttin' in time.

I must be blissfully unaware of the jaws I sleep in every night.

Strong arms to keep me pinned down until I sigh.

I am tired of my fears.

Los ojos de mi madre,

Y la boca de mi padre,

siempre me han traído tanta tristeza!

Pero junto en ti me dan luz.

I am tired of the chance I never took.

When I ask: I will not breathe.

When you answer:

 Expect my father's broken eyes,
and my mother's sweet and forgiving tongue

When you say No.

-I never stood a chance

Translation: The eyes of my mother and the mouth of my father have always brought me such sadness.
But together in you, they give me light.



Contributors

Lindsay Adkins currently lives on the East End of Long Island, where she is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing & Literature at Stony Brook Southampton. She is an editorial assistant for *The Southampton Review*, and formerly worked at Penguin Random House. A recipient of the 2018 Amy Award from Poets & Writers, her work has appeared in *Sugar House Review*, *Sequestrum*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *Gamut*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal* and *Right Hand Pointing*, among others.

Janery Alban. 25 yr old NJ native who's a big softy around dogs, loves to be out in the sun, and loves spending time with family and friends. Enjoys IV coffee drips, horror movies, and anything of the psychological/criminological persuasion.

Brendan Didio is a poet, actor, comedian, and all around creative human. He loves the sound of laughter and the taste of pizza.

Marian Mitchell Donahue is an M.F.A. student at SUNY Stony Brook. Her humorous creative non-fiction has been published previously in *The Southampton Review*. She is currently being cradled by the loving, sweltering arms of her native Maryland where she is hard at work on her first novel.

Meg Fellows is an English (creative writing) student at SUNY Geneseo. She enjoys the “ssshhhhh” sound that milk makes when creating lattes at her cliched coffee shop job. She also enjoys feminist literature and political podcasts. Her work can be found in *The Finger Magazine*, along with editing work on *Gandy Dancer* magazine out of Geneseo.

Heather Head is a freelance writer, author, and the founder of Command Copywriter. Her freelance work can be found in publications as diverse as *Redshift Magazine*, *IBM Big Data Hub*, *ENR*, and *Grit Magazine*. Her fiction is represented by Ethan Ellenberg of the Ethan Ellenberg Literary Agency. Her life mission is to write things that move people, and help other writers learn to make a living without selling their souls.

Rachel Limpert is a college freshman from the upper Midwest who has been writing since she could walk. This, however, is her first publication outside of her mediocre tumblr page. She feels inspired by authors such as Stephen King, Sabaa Tahir, and Rupi Kaur, as well as her friends and her family.

Bridget O'Neill is an essayist and storyteller whose been featured in numerous shows and podcasts including; *The Moth*, *Risk*, *How I Learned*, *Yum's the Word*, *The Soundtrack Series* and many others. Her first-person, non-fiction essays have been published in *Slice Magazine*, *New York Press*, and blogs. She is working on a memoir highlighting her self-inflicted shenanigans from her youth, told in raw truth and in her final semester at SUNY's Creative Writing MFA program.

Dianna Russel is an assistant professor of English at Community College of Philadelphia. Her poetry has appeared in numerous magazines and journals, and her plays have been read, staged, and produced in New York City and regionally.

Liz Sauchelli works as an editor at a daily newspaper in northern New England where she aspires to be an avid outdoors woman, but too frequently gives into her fear of black flies. Her hobbies include reading, knitting, thrifting and jigsaw puzzles, as well as other activities that make her seem like a senior citizen. Documentaries by Ken Burns regularly cause her to weep. A reluctant online dater, she

abhors smalltalk and dreams of meeting the love of her life in a used bookstore or local coffee shop (her perception of reality can be slightly skewed sometimes).

Amanda R. Woomer won her first award for writing when she was twelve years old. She has written for the expat magazine *That's China* while living abroad and her first publication in the US can be found in *13 Candles: Halloween Tales of Tricks and Transformation*. She currently writes for the geeky website The Geekiverse and has completed nine novels. She lives in New York with her husband and cactus collection.