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# NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Just four short months ago, we were surprised to be asked to be Editors-in-Chief of Loch Norse. We were thrilled, of course. But also terrified; we'd spent our two and a half previous years at NKU looking up to the leaders of Loch Norse, admiring their dedication and work ethic. We didn't think we knew the first thing about leading.

In the time since, we discovered that leadership wouldn't mean putting it all on us. We've had a fantastic crew behind us, and a fantastic pool of creators on campus submitting their work to the magazine. In this way, we realized our job wasn't very big at all, and have been more and more impressed by the people who submit, the people who edit, and the people who make this creative endeavor possible.

So from the bottom of our hearts, we'd like to thank everyone who has offered their talents and their time to this issue of Loch Norse Magazine.

Cheers,  
David & Charley Kalfas



## Rachel Sizemore

### *Blue*

It would be so easy to lie in the early tide  
and float away, following a large enough wave  
the salt and spray, the sand and heat,  
the melodic pulling and pushing  
pulling and pushing, pulling-  
it would be so easy to fall  
into the foam and be  
carried into the deep,  
that fragrant deep,  
where the water is the  
color of the heavens.  
I wonder if floating  
there, suspended, might  
be like standing at the end of time,  
watching the stars hang so delicately and  
the clouds move so lazily and the weight  
of being someone, being something, left behind  
so that you are weightless, a ghost, reflected in the  
sky and the sea.

**Brittney Menefee**

*I am missing a button on my coat and wondering if  
my other buttons feel lonely*

Our pond is frozen.  
I go there anyways  
and sometimes  
hope to run into you.

The ducks are gone  
and I think the fish may be dead.  
I wonder if you know.

Today I stepped onto the ice  
and I watched the tiny fracture spread.

It reminded me of your green leather couch,  
its insides bubbling out from underneath.  
It reminded me of myself,  
so I thought about something else.

# **Brittney Menefee**

## ***Bones***

Knees streaked with watery blue,  
fingers dig into shoulders,  
shaking from gravity.

I am a wire coat rack  
collapsing from  
luxury wool and pocket change.

## Lexie Stepro

### *when you only knew them by name*

we ran in the same circles, you and i.  
i always heard your name.  
when people die from drug abuse  
i make their obituary mine.  
i fantasize about my death  
until my nose starts to bleed again  
and my friends come to my  
funeral and my parents can't afford  
to get me embalmed well enough  
to make me look like i was ever alive.  
i died dead. been dead since march.  
just stared at the cocaine residue  
on my debit card for the third  
fucking time today.  
read the comments on the  
hometown article about your death  
again, wonder who will say  
stupid fucking junkies,  
good riddance. tried to type  
in my computer password and  
i typed in your name. i get locked  
in this cycle, and i keep hearing  
your name. get locked out of my computer,  
keep typing your name.  
it sounds like i made it up in my head.  
we barely even went  
to the same high school,  
but we ran in the same circles,  
you and i,  
me and you,  
i was next.

**Melody Lindsey**

***Drunken Thoughts in a Lonely House***

My sister, Alexis, is depressed - isn't that the way  
all poems begin? I think the house we live in

is filled with water and none of it has been  
touched by god. I almost ended my life.

I think suicide is like a metamorphosis.  
There, and then the body

becomes fruit in a heaven tree.  
Sometimes, a cocoon is dressed up in

the chambers of the basement. Nothing  
lives inside. It is a hollow house that

folds within itself from dust  
and that is that. Metaphors

are too obvious. Instead I will say

the music in the kitchen plays  
too loudly. My sister kisses my

hands like she is saying goodbye.  
My father is never home.

## Alexandra Purdy

### *Typography*

Times New Roman. Sophisticated. Formal. Classic. I wrote to you an invitation for dinner on Rodeo Drive, where you would dress in that silk red gown that I like so much. We would drink blood red wine and reminisce over the first time we met.

Comic Sans. Fun. Silly. Exciting. I wrote to you a short letter that made you tilt your head back, your long hair tied in a bun, bouncing, and laugh. You always said you loved listening to my silly jokes. As long as you're still laughing, I know you were telling the truth.

*Montotype Corvisa. Beautiful. Heartfelt. Somber. I wrote to you my condolence letter when your mother passed away. I am still so, so sorry you lost an amazing figure in your life. I know our kids look up to you in the same way you looked up to her.*

Curly. Childish. Girly. Cute. I wrote our daughter's first birthday card, inviting our friends and family to gawk in envy at the wonderful creature we made together. You told me you loved the card, loved our daughter, and loved me. I never doubted you for a second.

**Impact. Powerful. Demanding. Brash. I wrote to you once, and only once, a letter concerning my dissatisfaction with our marriage. Your lovely blue eyes filled with tears, your body crumbled under the pressure of my words. I didn't know what you were going through and I wish I could erase every word that settled, and remains, in your heart.**

Century Gothic. Small. Quiet. Forgiving. Every post it note I stick in your lunch box mimics this style. Laying atop your simple sandwich – 2 ham slices with mayo and American cheese stuffed between two pieces of white bread – I hope that everyday you're reminded how sorry I am for things I've done throughout our past that have caused you trouble.

Georgia. Womanly. Amazing. The love of my life. Your name. My favorite font. No matter what we've been through, what we're going through, or what we're going to go through, I know that as long you leave me a note in the morning, laying on our granite countertop, stained with tears, beers, flour, and love, I know that as long as you sign it "Love Georgia" I know that we'll always stay together.

# Emily Coy

## *Notes*

The therapist asks your name.  
Second session, nine AM,  
Thursday maybe?  
I look nicer today than last week,  
hair curled.

Forty minutes, one small strand after another,  
twisting around the iron,  
embrace after repetitive embrace,  
brainless and burning.

The therapist waits.  
The moment is celadon-glazed.  
I stare at the box of tissues,  
consider the lighting.

Dim, a single floor lamp,  
straining to illuminate the space,  
to send its faint beams  
four thousand miles away.

The therapist is patient.  
The ring on her left hand makes mine feel too light.  
I pull my legs closer to my chest.  
The box of tissues reaches out,

Soft, untouched, fragile,  
longing for someone's hands,  
anyone's by this point,  
because what purpose do they serve without them?

The passing seconds are never-ending  
but my synapses are shot  
and the letters I need are nowhere in sight.  
Just four, so simple, so common,  
like Love,  
or Wait,  
or Fuck.

Someone who used to be me  
finally squeezes the syllable past my teeth.  
I try to choke it back.  
Therapist notices, notes, moves on.

## James Drury

### *Playing Devil's Therapist*

It was a decently pleasant day when he strolled into town, that clean-cut, well dressed, raven-haired man. He looked up and down the street, and seemed pleased with what he saw: nothing but four-way streets all the way, perfect for exploring a small town such as this. It was rare for him to find a town such as this, arranged purely for efficiency, with nothing like a church or synagogue to break up the monotonous roads. He decided that he had to have some fun in this town before he moved to the next, so he went down the way until he found a place which interested him.

Dr. Noble was looking through the notes she had taken on her last client when she heard a hard, heavy knocking at the door. She quickly gathered up the notes and was in the middle of storing them away when the knocking came again, louder than before. "I'll be there in a moment," she said. "There's no need to knock the door down."

It was then that the door blew off of its hinges, bounced off of the wall opposite it, and landed in the middle of the room. A black-haired head peeked in. "I let myself in. I hope you don't mind." He strode in and inspected the shelves that had remained undamaged.

"The door was locked for a reason," Dr. Noble stated

"It was locked?" asked the man.

"Yes." Dr. Noble sighed and gestured to the chaise before her desk. "Take a seat then. We can begin in a moment, Mr. -----?"

"Fer," he replied as he fell back onto the therapeutic sofa and slung his arm over the back. "Lucian Fer, my friends call me Luci. I would think you've heard of me?"

"I may have," Dr. Noble replied while straightening a psychiatrist's diploma that had been knocked askew when the door met the wall. "Where might I know you from? Are you an actor, or an author maybe?"

"I'm the devil!" the man scoffed. "Did you not get that by the name? I thought I was clever when it came up with that a minute ago."

"Mr. Fer," Dr. Noble said, sitting at last across from him. "I have three patients already who 'are the devil.' You're going to have to offer some pretty compelling evidence if you want me to believe you aren't just suffering from a God complex."

"You just saw me blast your door off of its hinges." He pointed to the door. "How's that for evidence?"

"Circumstantial," she replied. "A decently healthy man such as yourself, with appropriate skills and tools, could knock down a vault door."

“Circumsta-- I vaporized your receptionist on the way in!” he cried, his voice filled with incredulity. “I’ve killed thousands, and taken the souls of more! I’ve beaten Paganini and Johnny at the fiddle, I’ve--”

“Mr. Fer,” she interjected. “I’m noticing a pattern here. You keep talking about your achievements as though they are you, but we aren’t here to discuss them. We are here to discuss you.” She opened her notebook to a new page. “I fear that you may be substituting your own feelings for a list of victories as a defense mechanism.”

“I-- what?”

“I’ve noticed already a tendency for the id and superego to overcome your ego, a classic superiority-masking-inferiority complex--”

“What does that mean? Are these actual things?”

“--I would believe in your childhood you lacked a secure base, that is, a parental figure with whom you could form an emotional attachment --”

“Can you hear yourself right now?”

“--and as is the case with most of my dealings with devils--sorry bad choice of words--I sense that this stems from an issue with your father.”

“Of fucking course it does!” the devil shouted. “Everything I do has to be because of him doesn’t it?” He stood up and looked down at her. “Everything you humans--” he said with hatred. “--can think of when it comes to me is that I have daddy issues! Not that I do what I do because I like it, not because I can be something better, but because HE--” He pointed at the sky outside the window, “--made me think it!”

As he finished, an alarm rang on the doctor’s desk. “Ah, it’s time for my next patient. I feel that we’ve made great progress today, Mr. Fer. You can schedule our next meeting with my receptionist on your way out.”

“Schedul-- I just told you that I killed her.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow and went to the lack of a door.

“Bast?” she called down.

“Yeah?”

“Are you alright down there?”

“Yeah, still got seven lives left.”

Dr. Noble turned back to her patient. “You see? No harm done.”

And just like that she went to filing her notes. Lucian, completely dumbfounded, just left. As he entered the lobby, he saw something else that he hadn’t expected to see. “Gautama?” he said.

The Buddha, sitting cross legged in the lobby, opened his eye slightly. “Ah, Luci,” he said. “Good to see you.”

“What could you possibly be here for?”

The Buddha shrugged and closed his eye again. “Anxiety issues,” he said.

**Rachel Sizemore**  
*And at Last, Rain;*

the city shrugs on her velvet dark coat and  
studs her ears with diamonds that  
shimmer when she dances on the wind to  
thunder like distant jazz, a drumbeat solo over  
the bruised sky, ripened like a fruit  
purple and grey and red and  
the clouds part, a smooth brushing,  
and from the streets there is rejoicing,  
shushing through the trees and  
aching in the sweet grass,  
the city splaying in fervor  
for a long-awaited reunion, to which  
the sky dips to meet her

## Melody Lindsey

### *Earth. Mother.*

Of course we lay flowers near a tombstone.  
We try so hard to stay alive,  
to feel connected to the earth,  
our bodies swell with water  
like flowers do  
before they rot away with the worms.  
And of course I want to thank god  
for making you.  
I tussle with memories  
knotted in my hair,  
pierce my fingertips  
with swollen jellyfish  
every time I write a name -  
and of course it's your name -  
just trying to thank you.  
I see flowers in my backyard  
and I want to thank you.  
It is hard being a mother  
and a dead mother all at once,  
whispering to herself  
late at night in the catacombs.  
What is it with the earth  
carving your name in silk  
beads of dirt,  
to which I can find no  
other meaning but  
to feel guilty?  
We are always  
trying to compile meaning  
in the dead:  
why else are we alive?

## T. Isabel Winkleski

### *There are things I cannot tell you*

There are things I cannot tell you  
I cannot tell you how it feels to fall asleep at a normal time  
I cannot tell you how it feels to hate reading  
I cannot tell you how it feels to be tall  
There are things I can tell you-  
But  
I won't  
I want you to suffer as I do  
All the not knowing?  
There are codes that people crack  
There are languages I don't understand  
There are signs that I cannot read  
Words are the clearest things for me  
Like diamonds  
Even then, there are diamonds through which I cannot see  
The blank space between the words- where you breathe and pause to look  
at me-  
I like those pauses  
They bring natural light into the room where she sits  
She's beautiful  
I love the way the light catches her eyes and brightens the flecks of gold in  
her hair  
When she's sad, her hair is black, but when she smiles, there is color and  
one can see it is brown  
Just like her right eye  
She prefers her green eye to the brown- her left eye.  
But she loves your brown eyes  
She's the first to notice them  
She's the first to notice many things  
Ironic, isn't it?  
She who notices cannot be noticed?  
Her walls are too strong  
Her guard too protective  
She wants to give you the password  
But  
There are things I cannot tell you

**Monique Segar**

***I am a Holy Woman***

I am dripping in shame  
the stench of infidelity lingers on my colored skin.  
I am often fishing in troubled waters  
feeding the wicked spirit that holds love from me.  
I am drowning in you  
knowing that the only man I have ever loved cannot know.  
I am resentment  
because someday I will be the reason you despise the female form.  
I am regret  
because I too hide skeletons.  
I am damaged goods  
saturated in devil juice.

# Meghan Moore

## *Holy Rules*

### **5. Honour thy father and thy mother**

The man that slept with my mother and ran away calls a jail cell his home and sends a \$40 check each month in arrears. At 8 years old, I begged my mother to tell me about him. She dug through her closet filled with photo albums and dusted off an old Polaroid. I could barely make out his features under the dark lighting, but his middle finger in the air was easy to see. I couldn't show that to anyone. I cried myself to sleep and wished for a different mother and a loving father, but I knew I would always be a bastard child born out of wedlock.

### **3. Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain**

It took two years before I could say goddamn it without cringing. Five years before Jesus Christ became part of my vocabulary in a way none of my grade school teachers could have imagined. Sometimes, when I think He's watching me, I'll curse to myself to get Him to go away. It doesn't work.

### **10. Thou shalt not covet.**

On my 13th birthday, my only friend invited me to his house. I ate cake and watched him play video games on a new, HDTV. I wondered why he never wanted to come to my single-wide mobile home to play, but I already knew the answer. The three-story home with stain glass windows told me that.

### **2. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.**

They crossed out Harry Potter off the list of Scholastic books that came around every spring. It was a book of witchcraft and Godless action according to the school. When I finally read it, alone in the cover of darkness, I realized they were wrong. I questioned God every night after that.

### **4. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.**

Adults conversed all around me on the church steps. They weren't exactly subtle with their words. "Where's her mother? How dare she work on the Sabbath!" They should have been happy an 11-year-old wanted to come to church alone. None of them knew what it was like working two jobs. I walked away and wiped my tears on my new dress shirt.

### **7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.**

I was too young to do anything but run away when I saw my friend's married mother kissing another man. I was supposed to be sat on the pews in between my mother and the stack of coloring books she had brought to entertain me. I wasn't meant to sneak out, open that door and

walk down that staircase. I prayed to God that night to forgive me for passing judgment.

**9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.**

If I got one more demerit, I would be suspended. There was no way I could fess up and tell the teachers I was the one who tore up the photo of Jesus left on my teacher's desk. I lied and said another girl had done it, but they didn't believe me. I was a sinner by trade and a demon child. They made me glue each piece I had torn back together until my hands were raw and blistering.

**8. Thou shalt not steal.**

The store was empty, but there were no cameras watching me. I thought I was alone when I took a pack of razor blades and stuffed them into my purse. I didn't know the store clerk had been following me. All I could think of was God's eyes watching me, cementing my trip to hell with each breath I took. I lied to my mom when the clerk called her to report I was stealing. I couldn't lie to God, so I left my Bible hidden under my bed. I hoped he would finally leave me alone.

**6. Thou shalt not kill**

"If you try to kill yourself, you're going to hell. You would be a murderer, do you understand?" The words of my principal raced through my mind. I was 12 years old when she dragged me to her office, face red with fury and venom on her tongue. I cried, but it didn't take me long to realize my friends had told her about my cuts and the suicide note I wrote during class. It was common knowledge now that I was a sinner who couldn't be saved, so I deserved to die and go to hell like they said.

After 50 pills, I stopped counting.

**1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.**

We played songs from Børns and Beyoncé as loud as her shitty car speakers would let her. She held my hand over the gear shift and laughed at my off-key singing. I didn't scold her when she blew through stop signs or ran a red light or two. Blood rushed to my cheeks when she glanced over at me, but I blamed it on the heat. Strands of platinum blonde hair fell into her eyes. I didn't think when I reached up to brush them away. My fingers burned touching her skin.

That night, I found god in her eyes and lips and smile.

**"He proclaimed to you his covenant, which he commanded you to keep: the Ten Commandments, which he wrote on two tablets of stone." Deuteronomy 4:13**

**Dave Orewiler**

*Perfect*

When you said I made you feel like seventeen again

I was happy

So with your head on my shoulder

We drove through the night

Smiling at life



**Fabio Souza: *Dues Baxio***

Scanography, family photos and flatbed scanner



**Kaitlin Peed: *Untitled***

Ceramic, Oil paint, and Basswood



**Charity Rust-Jordan: *Emerge***

Sculpture, vessel with ikebana arrangement



**Kaitlin Peed: *Voyager***

Ceramic, 18" x 9½" x 14"



**Chloe Collins: *Milk Tears***  
Mixed media, charcoal and acrylic gesso

## Dave Orewiler

### *Class of Twenty - Seven*

The deep bass ringtone echoes through the foyer. The sound mimics a heavy rock guitar, fitting, since the owner of the mansion is rock legend Robert James “BJ” McClelland. The tone is a musical burp: high, low, high. Each note is both familiar and a bit humorous to me. I’d arrived just moments ago, stepping inside to absorb the massive home. Flattered that BJ invited me to the event, I’m awed at the six-foot-wide clef note embossed on the floor, inlaid with handcrafted wood. The image is just short of gaudy.

The door chime rings again, breaking BJ from his efforts in welcoming me.

Her voice isn’t any more familiar than her face to me as BJ opens the front door. She stands on the chipped marble front step, arms wide as if her newly seen host is a holiday gift to be unwrapped.

“Robert James, love. I’ve missed you so.” A chestnut-haired woman with the most full-blooded red lip color I’d ever seen reaches and pulls BJ into an embrace. She closes her eyes, escaping into a recollection that is more than friendly. “What’s it been, five years again?”

BJ shares in the affection of her embrace, not sensing my slight hint of embarrassment or my awkward staring. Hesitant to cool this quasi-intimate moment, I put my rehearsed greeting in park. I defer to BJ, the host. Looking away, I take in the musical artwork again and dart my eyes sideways to burgundy-colored drapes that are coated with dust.

“Linda, babe, you’re still looking good.” There’s a twinge of innuendo in BJ’s response. The words still and good are equally emphatic with BJ.

I smile, BJ notices, Linda beams. She’s graceful, magical. “The timing is perfect, Linda. You always know how to make an entrance. Sexy’s what it is. Plain sexy.” Linda curls her arm around BJ, tossing her hair. She gives me a smile that melts my ego to knee level.

“Hello. Have we met? I’m Linda. Linda Bolero.” She warmly extends her jeweled hand toward me. It rests on my arm as softly as a butterfly.

BJ curses apologetically, asking for a reprieve from his clumsy manners, crude as they may be. “Sorry, man. My head must be up somewhere dark. But it’s been a few years since I threw a party. Sorry. Dexter, meet Linda. Linda, this is Dexter Davis.”

“Linda? The Linda Bolero? My grandfather grew up listening to your—”

*Crap*, I murmur, wishing I could have a vocal vacuum and suck the words back into my mouth. Though my blurting is factual, I hated the reference to her era. My Grandpa Charlie drove his first-date car and slurped his first French kiss to The Bolero's classic hit, "Hold Me Like You Mean It." The smash hit topped the charts his final year in school as a junior before he dropped out to work the farm. "Sultry. Sultry's what the song was," Grandpa had said. *Still is*, I muse. *Still is*.

The Bolero lead singer snaps me back to the moment and to her aura. "Please, it's fine. It was eons ago. And as they say, good music is timeless."

"What I mean is, yeah, well 'Hold Me' is forever. It's still the song in my head in the morning more times than I can count. I love that song!" Damage limited, I hope. Minimized more so by Linda's graciousness than by my feeble effort to smooth my verbal stumble. I am Star Struck.

"Dex is a rookie with us. First timer," BJ interjects, helping to take the redness away from my face. "Did you hear about the Honeysuckles? They came out of Pinebluff two or three years ago."

"You're a member of the Honeysuckles? Did you sing lead?" Linda's query is kind, uninformed.

"I founded the group. We mimicked Three Dog Night's model, having three of us split lead vocals on most songs. Musically, it worked and kept the egos in harmony." *Too much information!* I'm in the rock music foyer of the celebrated BJ McClelland and smiling with Linda Bolero. Take it slowly, Dexter. Slowly.

"I was so influenced by your work, Ms. Bolero. Linda." Past tense? I still am. I pause for effect. "You rolled out hit after hit. 'Last Chance,' 'Baby's Getting It,' 'Time Will Tell.' Love them all."

"Three Grammy nods and a half dozen top tens." BJ's eyes sparkle at his memorized news flash. "Wasn't 'Hold Me' in '58, the first year they were awarded?" He pauses for effect and, with a mischievous gleam in his eyes, looks suggestively at Linda. "Hold Me."

"I never forget the magic words." With this retort, Linda places her scented palms on BJ's bearded cheeks and, as if on cue, wetly kisses him full mouth. She eases back with a trademarked Bolero smile. "By the way, the Grammys started the year after Sinatra's peak. That sure boosted my chances."

What am I missing between these two? The blatant display of affection seems a bit much here in the foyer. I search for a tidbit to bring me into the picture. Somewhere there's a clue, maybe a rite of passage here. My pulse jumps at the fantasy of a kiss by—with—Linda Bolero.

BJ licks his lips to taste the crooner's kiss. "Three ceremonies and fifteen years. You're amazing, Linda." I push my hands into my jeans

pockets, realizing that I want to keep them safe and away from Linda. Not a natural hugger, I don't trust myself to reach out and express my attraction to her.

"Let's join the others." BJ resumes his host role and leads us back to the living room. Linda seems to know the way, stepping ahead of BJ. Her move is intentional, anticipatory. She's been here before and reflects an eagerness to see others.

"Don't mind the jerks, Dexter." BJ's admonition comes as a start. "All the dudes here received an invitation, though not all arrived here by choice. We each have a story to tell. Music kinda takes a backseat at these reunions."

I notice his sweat-dampened satin shirt: an ivory-silver with billowing sleeves. Definitely seventies, along with his tightly curled mane of hair now smattered with white. McClelland, the typical rock star. He's crusty yet friendly with a drained talent bucket that is now as rusty as his voice. He'd not been on my list of favorites. The Brash, a heavy metal group born in New York City, had drugged, plugged, and forced its way to the top of the rock music world. BJ was its charismatic lead singer and acidhead. The group imploded somewhere between the Nixon Watergate scandal and voting out of Jimmy Carter. Now, an eternity later, the rocker's chocolate-leather pants were put on wet and dried to a nearobscene tightness. His face is gaunt; his eyes are foggy but still focused. I never knew if he kicked his addictions or not. And there were many demons.

I'd entered the expansive chamber as a social and musical counterpart of both BJ McClelland and Linda Bolero. He, the screaming singer who drew crowds by the thousands; she the crooner-turned actress; and me, the harmonizing balladeer from the deep Southwest. I'd only appeared in a few larger venues, always a lower card at the larger festivals of summer. My one kudo nomination came three years before the Grammy categories—and total number of awards—were sliced by half. My award—our Honeysuckle shared award—for best Americana album for 2011 is merely an asterisk.

"BJ, who's your new sidekick? You decide to go folksy on me?"

BJ flips him the bird. The Brash front man's smile is split between friendly familiarity and contempt. "Go to hell, Stanton."

"Been there, done that." Stanton reacts. "Trapper. Trapper Stanton."

The burly entertainer looks larger than life, standing some six inches taller than my six foot frame. His muscular hand grasps mine with an intentional but not injury-inducing

squeeze. Trapper displays his uniform: a red and black plaid shirt, sans sleeves; cream colored cowboy hat with sweat stains and fingerprints just below the brim (and more than likely on top as well). Well-washed black jeans sport small blotches of gray and are lopped over the top of snakeskin boots. Real snakeskin, not fake, I conclude. His exaggerated belt buckle is smoky-gray pewter with an embossed American flag. I draw my eyes away so as not to stare at his midsection. I think the buckle reads ‘God Bless Vets.’

“Dexter Davis, Honeysuckles.” I offer. The clue is intended to avoid another age-based comment as I did with Linda.

“Up and Ready? Wasn’t that the name of your disc back a few years? Had it. Loved it!”

*Really?* I think. Trapper Stanton, the biggest—in both size and image—country music star in the past decade knows my work? I’m leery, but he’d done his prep work. Sign of a great entertainer. Know when and where to flatter your audience. But again, though I never felt comfortable accepting BJ’s invitation, I deserve to be here. I qualified.

“Thanks, Mr. Stanton. I’ve been a huge fan of yours. I’m flattered that you’ve heard my music.” Nice, Dexter. Play it modest. This guy sold one-point-two and hit platinum his first year alone. Gold is for amateurs. Our initial release, ‘Up and Ready’ was gold, and that only meant half a million in sales. Trapper was double platinum several years running.

“Crunchin’ country, Mr. Stanton, is what I call it. Rough, good, and powerful crunchin’ country.” Hopefully, my intimidation is hidden but not my admiration.

“Good choice of words. And I’m just Trapper to everyone. Started out as Tommy. Trapper had a ring to it.”

His biceps have a masculine strength to them, as do the scars marking his forearms. The image of his now-damaged arm is not repugnant, but it is alarming. The etchings on his forearms are a mix of tainted purple burn marks and healed incisions that vein up and down as if made by a drunken tattoo artist. His cheeks look scuffed, as if he had shaved with a steel wool pad. The story of the crash was spewed nationally within an instant. Homemade videos, some distasteful, showing the burning wreckage, were in millions of mobile phone boxes moments after Trapper’s classic car caromed off Tennessee’s Highway 44. The rare Jaguar convertible was original to the core, with no airbags or safety belts, leaving Trapper unprotected. The singer, though sober, was projected onto the dry, rolling landscape. The fiery crash shattered the calmness of the wooded countryside.

Following Linda, BJ, Trapper, and I saunter through the aged-stained hallway. We pass by a partially opened pocket door that shed

filtered lamplight into the living room. Peeling flowered wallpaper is the backdrop for dozens of musical monuments and awards. Gold-colored discs of assorted sizes hang in the balance among plaques and other honors. Tributes to artists from various decades, like the bluesy Robert Johnson, hang on the walls.

One string of awards on the back wall is eerie: Malcolm Hale, Brian Jones, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison in annual and sequential order. I didn't intend to zero in on the plaques. More so, the display jumped out at me. A Spanky, a Stone, a Pearl and a Door one year after the next; a string of stars who fell like dominos.

I recognize one of the smaller discs as representing my CD, only separated from the others by a darkened font claiming: "'Up and Ready' 2011 Certified 500,000 sold." I'm somewhat embarrassed by its hanging. The modest disc looks childlike next to the traditional extended-play version that is larger, more impressive. Alongside Bolero's three consecutive platinum circles, 'Up and Ready' looks not lonely but isolated. Three million versus my paltry five hundred thousand in sales: Linda is a star; me and the Honeysuckles, simply a speck.

But I'm qualified to be here, I remind myself. Though, maybe I don't deserve it. The invitation to the event smells sweet to me, yet bitter.

"Davis?" BJ's voice snaps me back alert. "Stop being so starry-eyed and wake up. Here's someone I'd like you to meet."

The burning blush on my face is apparently noticeable. I see Linda smile politely; Trapper is engrossed in working the flock of musicians and singers like the country-rock politician he is. I spin back toward BJ and I am pulled there by his knuckled clutch on my inked bicep.

"Dexter. Sandy Giles. You remember Giles from Papillion? Pop trio out of N'Orleans? Sandy's the most famous ex-band member ever to be named to the Hall of Fame. Some sax player'll do anything for a trip to Cleveland. Cleveland, bloody Cleveland." BJ's voice echoes a bit, bouncing around until it lands on nearby ears.

Sandy's hand is on my shoulder before the next blink; his right-hand clutches mine in a sincere but weary shake. Bent fingers curl around mine as his eyes reflect a painful grimace.

"Dexter, nice. Hadn't heard much about you, no offense. I'm not in the loop as I was a few years back. BJ colored in the squares for me. First time?"

"First time. Friendly group. I recognize a few people. I'm enjoying it so far," I half-lie.

"It gets better. The first year is the toughest. Denial, coming to this place and having to mix with pricks and saints at the same time." He struggles to inhale, then continues. "It's kind of like the record release

parties. Always inviting friends, but the occasional snake crawls in.” Sandy’s admonition is both accurate and obligatory. “Problem is, attendance each year is mandatory. I never figured that one out.”

Mandatory? The word hadn’t gotten yet to me. I didn’t check my inbox when I left. What would happen if I didn’t show?

Glancing about, the group is about twenty now. Others had filtered in as I listened to the idle chatter and the how are – ya’s? An echo bounces off the musical memorabilia-covered walls as BJ breaks in with his announcement. “Ladies and gentlemen, and Trapper.” The age-old joke is stale; not so the hors d’oeuvres I long to suck down.

BJ picks up a statuette from an end table near the couch. “It’s my pleasure to introduce you to the newest member of our motley crew.”

His formality is unnecessary. I and others know what is about to happen, though I only recently imagined going through the actual ceremony here at the mansion.

“The Class of Twenty-Seven was established somewhat by accident.” Several attendees chuckle at this; Trapper does not. “I came here over a decade ago. I’d just finished a twelve-city tour with the Brash and did my usual routine with a double groupie and a triple scotch back at the hotel in Brussels. It was my birthday. The tour had pulled in the money and all of Europe was scarfing up our albums. See our platinum over the fireplace? Ours. Mine. I put it there ’cause I run the show.”

I’m sure the old rock star has a direction with this. He meanders, the polite-but-restless team impatiently eggs him— begs him —on. He’s come to a fork in the road. Now he’s going to take it. My amusement at the quote triggers a smile. Outwardly, it works. I look pleased when I need to. Dexter, I coach myself, eyes up.

“We’ve been growing as a club, but this is the first time we’ve added a new member to the Twenty-Sevens for three or four years now. Some of us as musicians caught the wave of stardom by accident. The impeccable timing of a trend with the most opportune good fortune. Others bought their way into the limelight. They had Sugar Daddies, biological or seduced. Some, like me, are just that good,” BJ boasts. Guffaws dampen the air with mock aggravation. Trapper rolls his eyes.

Linda nods in her customarily charming way. She’s the benefactor of family money, coming from a long line of historical catusup makers. Trapper glares as if he wants to kick the rock runt’s aged ass. I peruse the mixture of faces. BJ’s review will be mixed.

“I just met Dexter. His is the epitome of the Americana sound, electrified folk with the pulse of country. He’s good at it. Worked hard and made it happen. It’s a shame to see him give it up so early.”

Surprisingly, I feel emotions. Stronger than I expected, though I can't say I was predicting any at all. Still, BJ's insinuation stings a bit. Though he only mentioned how stardom was achieved by some, the same could be said of how membership was obtained into the Class of Twenty-Seven. The similarities are uncanny: some were sworn in by hard work and persistence, having tried but failed to get in multiple times before succeeding. Trapper didn't really try at all but became eligible at the peak of his fame and of his musical career. Linda's selection came after three decades of consideration. Hers was not so much a lack of qualifications but rather genre. Since when do singers-turned-actresses qualify? Linda stayed true to her personal charm by always being classy. I admit, however, that though her fame as a crooner of finely tuned standards from the forties made her famous; in later years, she turned to film and did quite respectably. But she is here, and I don't mind.

Me? I didn't plan or think about membership. I'd been touring, tired but healthy and feeling indestructible just past my twenty-seventh birthday. The cough started during a gig in Munich, our first of a six-stop tour through Europe. I'd blamed the flu-like symptoms on fatigue and on being road weary. I noticed my soaking of two shirts during a performance. But this was a draining perspiration along with a 105-degree sizzle of a fever. By the third stop, my weight was down seven pounds, and my bass player and drummer had similar symptoms.

My downward health slide was quick, the cause only guessed at by well-trained medical experts. The trip to our next gig in Cardiff, Wales, was a fever-induced blur. Concluding it was the flu, I was poked and stabbed and fed numerous bacteria-fighting meds and injected with IVs. The isolation was the loneliest part. Quarantine is not lonely in itself; it's the lack of freedom to leave that triggers a gut-level anxiety. My stomach was already twisted from the illness. I didn't need the magnified worry of being trapped alone in a Welsh hospital bed.

I do remember the other trip. It's not like it really was a trip. More like a zip, a whoosh, and a flashing whirl through a peaceful tunnel toward a light. The luminescence at the end of this quick journey still impresses me. The warmth of the light was soothing and continues to linger over my skin. The impetus, whatever or whoever it was, deposited me in front of this mansion. No taxi or anything. Just the whoosh.

So, upon reflection, I didn't plan or think about membership. But here I am. BJ's voice drones away amid my introspection. I snap alert. Am I still smiling?

"And so"—BJ beams—"it is with great pleasure to introduce to you the newest member of the Class of Twenty-Seven: Dexter Davis!"

The cluster of singers claps politely, with body language that reflects sincerity. My face heats up, triggered by a degree of modesty from the attention I'm absorbing. I nod. Linda smiles. Trapper closes in on me with a hard and hearty slap on the back.

"Welcome, Dex!" Trapper's grin matches his countrywide girth. The remnants of his car wreck are still etched into his skin.

Linda remains poised and natural as one who never ages but ends up looking as magnificent as when she first took the stage five decades earlier. A few other seasoned entertainers are more aloof, hesitant in their greetings and acknowledgements. Familiar but nameless faces dot the room. No one else comes forward.

And BJ? He is still as ragged and rough as he was as a nineteen-year-old rocker. Emaciated but highly energetic, he slurs no more now than when his recreational drug use splashed all over his life. He winks a "nice job" toward me. I sense that he has a good heart, just a much-worn one. This is his party and my recognition.

I scan the room, stumbling over what to say. Only a meager thank-you tumbles out of my mouth. Damn nervousness. This verbal snub is not from Linda's stardom like before. It's related more to my twenty-seven-year-old personae and bashful shadow.

Sandy steps over and shakes my hand. "Congrats, my man." I see the nearly healed hole in his throat. The fleshy spot was an air tube opening until the very end. His voice remains caustic, not gravelly in the traditional sense but more like a lumpy computer-generated sound that is easy to understand. What I mean by easy is that I pay close attention when Sandy speaks.

I don't dwell on membership. I accept the honor, if you will, of being in the rare company of great singers and musicians who stepped away from the stage. Some, perhaps, were shoved off. Each of us was snatched away years before some had predicted: Trapper, the aggressive country star taken by a flaming car crash; BJ, following one too many needles or snorts; and Sandy, who struggled with throat cancer and was gone more than two years before he hit thirty.

Me? Was it an infected handshake from a well-meaning fan? Tainted food perhaps? Maybe. Maybe it was some type of serious flu that turned fatal. Was my demise accelerated by a soiled needle from a hospital caregiver?

Each of us were twenty-seven years old when taken. Musicians, all.

Time doesn't stand still here at the mansion. In limbo or purgatory or whatever this is, each of us morphs slowly. Each of my now-fellow members seem to have evolved since I last saw their photos. Trapper and Sandy's scars are matured, perhaps fading. Linda's face is etched with age

lines that are artistic in their placement and curves. And my fever-reduced weight, if there is such a measurement here, is stable. My jeans no longer need the leather belt. My whoosh to the mansion created a coolness, a calmness in my body.

Membership has its privileges. Keep in mind, membership in the Class of Twenty-Seven isn't the end of the world. It's the beginning of another one. It's the beginning of some other beginning's end. Yeah, it's in a song I heard by Dan Wilson of Seismic. Is he here?

With congratulations and accolades over, each of us mixes and mingles and hobnobs within the rooms of the elegant mansion. Soft music is playing covers of my modest list of hits. I'm flattered but sense that the gesture is to be expected here at the Class of Twenty Seven's induction party.

The bass guitar-chord sound rings again from the door. BJ, not expecting anyone else, breathes out uneasily.

"I wonder who that could be."

### **Requiem for the Stars**

Robert James "BJ" McClelland, rocker. Born June 24, 1951

"You do what I do and play what I play. You'll get what I get—and deserve it."

Died August 7, 1978 of a self-induced drug overdose, believed to be accidental

∞

Linda Ann Bolero, crooner. Born January 12, 1937

"I never dreamed that I'd ever say I love you, right from the start."

Died September 9, 1964 peacefully in her sleep of an aneurysm

∞

Thomas "Trapper" Stanton, country singer. Born December 12, 1977

"Let's get swampy and dirty."

Died June 1, 2005 in an automobile accident

∞

Sandy Raymond Giles, jazz musician, saxophone. Born April 8, 1958

"Sideways, we enjoy the view. Just me and you."

Died November 29, 1985 of esophageal cancer

∞

Dexter Daniel Davis, Americana singer. Born May 13, 1987

"I'm just another dreamer in a local band."

Died August 11, 2014 of an influenza-like virus

∞

Shelby Lynn Hess, country/pop singer. Born March 17, 1991

"The thought that I love you? You figure out if it's true."

Died April 10, 2018 of undetermined causes.

## Ariel Yisrael

### *Jinx*

I wish that I didn't have siblings  
Why did my mom have to have so many kids?  
Doesn't she know...?  
I'm scared voicing my fears might put them into the air and make them so  
It's something I've always believed  
Did she not know that in 2018 there would be at least 19 mass shootings?  
Didn't she know?  
If something happens to my family I'll die with them  
But if something happens to me...  
It would be fine  
It would be better  
And right now those seem like the options  
If by voicing this fear I'm jinxing someone  
Of the two options  
Please don't let it be my family

**Melody Lindsey**  
*At Night, Ignoble*

it is late  
and the fountain outside  
slinks and churns with the streetlamps  
the old people next door are fast asleep  
dreaming of another life  
a younger life  
when their skin wasn't so purple  
beneath the moonlight  
and the cars are blinding and blurring away  
with the rest of the world  
and i am beneath my sheets  
wondering if the people around me knew  
i wouldn't make anything out of myself  
or if i knew all along.

**Rachel Sizemore**

***Sunset Across a Foreign Plane***

At dusk the air is  
sweet lavender, sprigs  
of wheat that dance in  
fading light, that flutter  
along lily-white calves that  
chew the yellowed grass,  
unbothered,  
their eyes dip, fanning  
ink-dark lashes on  
an unblemished cheek  
the clouds search for the horizon  
and reach reach reach  
their purpling fingers there  
and cowed, the sun winks  
out of existence, quick,  
sweeping,  
serene as the morning return

## Emily Coy

### *Glow*

It's harder to notice things in the daylight than at night. This seems like a fallacy; however, the night in its stillness often provides a sense of clarity that cannot be attained during the morning rush and the afternoon schlep. Take, for example, the passive action of sitting by the lake with a friend. During the day, the sun shines harshly on the water and the passersby are boisterous and ever trekking onward toward their next journey. Once evening approaches, around seven at night, the area enters a state of repose which allows one to see and hear and feel those elements hidden by the glare of the sunlight and allows all senses to come together simultaneously in an explosion of feeling.

The weather surrounding our 7 pm rendezvous starts out fair (a sweater is not necessary at this point), but grows colder as the sun begins its descent. The sky is cotton candy, blue mostly, with wisps of pink. We sit on a rough wooden bench facing a building with ivy draped over it like strings of expensive pearls, the kind handed down from one matriarch to the next, beautiful and solemn. The lake stretches out in front of us, a daunting teal that will evolve suddenly into a satin navy blue. Fish sputter about the water in a frenzy, searching for food, finding some, but not enough to sustain themselves. They move, like one body with many hungry heads, to a new, unexplored region of the lake. Crickets singing out unabashedly provide the soundtrack for the evening. They are heard but not seen, like the cool wind blowing our hair, like a heartbeat.

The sun continues its swan dive; most of the light visible now is emitting from the moon and the streetlamps and his laptop screen. We are thirty minutes deep in the movie musical I am watching for my sociology class; it is disgusting and gory and so terrible that it is wonderful. He claps at some points to express his amusement, and the sound of his soft hands thunders across the quiet expanse of space, ripples the lake, shakes the grass. The gnats sometimes interrupt our viewing. They buzz in our ears, play hopscotch on our skin, find a home on the screen. I get an almost-splinter on the back of my thigh through my leggings, a sharp and brief pain; I gently work it out of my skin. We hear an ambulance and discuss possibilities, straining to hear each other over the incessant, annoying wail of the siren as it slices through the air, demanding to be heard over the cheesy, vulgar dialogue (ours and the film's).

I can faintly make out the yellow bikes that meander by us on the far side of the lake, their riders perched upon them like delicate birds. Riding a bike quickly can make one feel like a bird, unafraid to explore, even in the night. I wonder why these people insist on riding this late. I am

still thinking about intention. Their tires whirl as if calling out for us to join them. Those too weary from the day to bike stroll along the water instead; they are friends, couples, loners. They are ghost-like in the softness of their outlines and the silence of their movements. To them, in our stern, shy stillness, we must look like statues.

An hour or so later, I notice the disappearance of the ducks we had watched as the sun went down--a mallard with a bright blue feather on his side, another that was always left behind. They must be afraid of the dark. I am jealous of the way the fowl lazed around the lake, tracing patterns in the water like a child finger painting on a piece of flimsy computer paper. He is a bird and I am a duck. We are both in love, just with different people.

The moon grows higher. We grow colder. The wind nips at our skin like a hungry cat. He gives me his sweater. He stays cold. The sweater smells hard. It is not a fresh scent, but it smells clean, like earth, like stable, solid ground. In my mind, I am expanding this moment. I am picking apart the stitches in the sweater, the muted reds and yellows and greys and blues. It looks thrown together, a mishap, unintentional, threads of different widths and curvatures interwoven; however, it is very intentional, even if the intention wasn't acknowledged at its inception. I wonder how often she has worn it. I am wearing black fleece leggings that hold me like a security blanket and a worn black and white striped shirt and this all unintentionally goes perfectly with his sweater.

The sky is now completely black. We eat while we watch the movie. He grazes on M&Ms, shyly at first, then wholeheartedly. The smooth rainbow candies, the same shape as a full moon, gently crunch under the strength of his jaw. The plastic brown bag crinkles softly in his lap. I eat dried apple slices; as the credits for the first movie slide down the screen, I tell him that M&Ms are too sweet at 10 pm. The slivers of apple are hard and crunchy and stick to my back teeth as though they are two lovers saying goodbye at an airport terminal. The shiny white packaging states that they are made from Washington apples, and they taste almost exactly like them; they are just missing the freshness, the juice. I imagine how they would taste if this were present.

The lamp to our right keeps flickering on and off. The ringing of his phone startles us like a house alarm and interrupts the second movie. I hear his soft syllables and reassurances; they are a security blanket to the voiceless, bodiless girl on the other end. He hangs up. He did not pause the movie, perhaps by accident, and the second he gets off the phone there is again and immediately laughter. His laughter is like the moon above us, to the left: bright and full. My laughter is more like the flickering lamp. Our

laughs harmonize and ring across the water like a hymn; there is something sacred there.

The sky is black like the way he takes his coffee, and the syllables I am swallowing taste the same. There are trees and flowers and bushes encasing us in a cage of flora and safety, and it's all lovely, but the chill in the air reminds me that it is almost fall and that this too will end. The second movie ends. We are still rooted like dying trees. I tell him I want a garden. We both have black thumbs. I am still wearing his sweater. It is midnight and the air by the water is unlike anything else. It is clearer in the dark, uncluttered by the scents and sounds of the masses. It is peaceful and smells sweet; if this air had a color, it would be pastel blue. Night air moves through the lungs easier than day air, despite the viscosity of this accidental moment. Traveling through this air, his voice is a deep lush valley which sinks lower into the earth to match my occasional whisper. There is a foot of night air between us on the wooden slats of this bench. Physically, we are careful not to touch. Mentally, we share a seat.

The lake water ripples, cascading from within itself. Continuous, uniform shapes emerge and disappear, like the way hearty conversation flows back and forth between two generous mouths. Our lake ripples echo with tales of Europe. In my mind, I am expanding this moment, watching the light of my phone screen illuminate his face as I show him photos of my journey, peeling apart the shades to find the exact color of his eyes, feeling the goosebumps that have yet to cease, even with his sweater.

In the ivy-pearl draped building before us, there are two lights illuminating two rooms on two different floors. He wants to explore, but my body is sinking further and further into the bench. It is nearing two in the morning, and the building is imposing, cement on cement on cement. It wears the ivy-pearls as a tomboy would: begrudgingly, dutifully. There are two figures, a man and a woman, bustling around those rooms. I wonder if they feel the presence of the other. Watching them do their strange dances from this bench is like watching a puppet show. I feel tension like strings and wonder if we are the puppets. I wonder if one can blend accident and intention.

I trace the grid within the black fence on the far end of the lake with my eyes while he speaks. I think about never-ending mazes. I think about the illusion of protection the fence provides. Yes, it would prevent someone from falling in, but it is short enough to jump over, if one were so inclined. There are spaces between the black metal bars big enough for a foot to fit, out of curiosity, and then for two feet to fit, in the spirit of testing limits. It does not matter if one falls in the water. What matters most is if falling was one's intention.

The sky is black, but everything is glowing. We are drenched in shadow, but we are so much brighter in the dark.

## **T.D. Daurs**

### ***Questions***

I was walking down at the creek with my little brother. This is something we enjoy doing every now and then for fun. I carried him on my back, because he didn't want to get his feet wet, or maybe he's just lazy. He asks me questions as we go.

"Big brother are there sharks in the water." I tell him no, sharks live in the ocean.

"Big brother, why is that tree lying down." I say because it fell over and can't get back up.

"Big brother what are those foxes doing." I say you really don't need to know.

He asks so many questions. "Big brother what's this, Big brother what's that?" I try to answer him when I can. But then he asks those questions I just can't answer. Those questions about why the world is how it is.

"Big brother why do the army men shoot each other?"

"Big brother why did our neighbor call me a chink?"

"Big brother where did you get those scars?"

I want to tell him, I really do. I want to tell him and have him understand, but he's five and the world is a good place to him. He doesn't know that when the army men shoot each other, they don't always get back up. That people die in war and that it's not like the video games. I can't tell him that though, because his father is in Afghanistan, and he doesn't know that if he is shot he doesn't get a respawn.

I can't tell him that chink is a term used by white men for the Chinese building the railroad to describe the sound their hammers made when they hit the railroad spikes. That because his eyes are slightly slanted due to the fact that his father is Vietnamese he's worth less to some people because he's not the perfect shade of pure blood. That eventually his eyes will round out enough for him to put on a good smile and just be white.

I can't tell him, that his older brother once thought that the edge of a knife was his only way to feel something other than sadness. That even though most of his scars have faded the images are still burned into his mind and he still sees them on his skin. That when he looks into the mirror the glass still spider webs out into shame and hatred because it still remembers the blood running down his arms and chest from the wrong answers he tried to mark out.

I didn't know what to say so I just hugged him tightly and said with tears in my eyes, "don't ask those questions."

He hugged me back and said, "It's ok."

There I was, standing in the middle of a creek, being comforted by a five-year-old. And I wondered, is it really ok?

Is it ok that we live in a world where we can't feed our children but we can sustain a war for thirteen years on a meal of blood and bones of good men and women? A world where it's more acceptable for a cop to beat an innocent black man to death than it is for two men to love each other.

I still can't tell him those things. But I can tell him that war happens. That there are men and women out there fighting for his right to breathe. That if his father falls he isn't dead, because his heart is still beating. That he breathes with his pulse, that every heartbeat, is an I love you.

I can tell him that the word chink doesn't just offend my every sense but that it doesn't fit his soul. That he doesn't have to hide behind an ivory mask. That his parchment skin is beautiful. That his heart, is beautiful. That they are all just jealous of the dragon that rages through his blood. That I have so many scars because I could never find that wrong answer. That I look at myself in the mirror and see battle scars that I wear proudly like a trophy from a battle no one knows I fought. That my girlfriend thinks that my scars are sexy, and I agree with her. Not because they are masculine, but because I am alive.

**Emily Coy**  
***Infiltration***

You are the anarchy that fell from God's smile

Crash-landing onto my brainstem and helping yourself to the attic behind  
my irises

Twisting and shifting my thoughts with bright bare hands thin fingers

Swirling my perceptions of this and that and now I can only see green the  
way that you do

Your nails comb through my white matter and turn the spaces in synapses  
into pinprick samples of the universe

My temples pound in time with your pulse running through small wrist  
veins

Drowning out the sound of (drowning in the static of) every bird that trilled  
in the Before

Leaving only the sounds of the After which ring vaguely with the tapping of

Your tiny bones dancing out your name behind the confines of my once-  
shelter skull

## Mariah Jones

### *The Golden Period*

The Neue Galerie sat on the corner of 86th Street on Fifth Avenue in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, in a tall brick building lined with rows upon rows of windows. It was nothing spectacular, and Penelope huffed begrudgingly as she trudged towards it, feet crunching in the deep snow beneath her boots. She could see the air that escaped her lungs. Her cheeks prickled as the cold wind beat across her face, eyes and nose watering in its wake. She stuffed her bare hands deeply in the pockets of her coat, wishing she had brought mittens- and more so, wishing she had not enrolled in an art class this semester to begin with.

She had avoided taking the class for a while, having always been more of an analytical thinker. She saw things as they were, and thought herself quite intelligent because of this. To her, and her family of accountants, objects and images had a singular use or meaning, and Penelope had accepted this long ago. Plus, there was no money in the field, which caused her to shutter more so than the cold surrounding her. To pay thousands to improve upon a skill for nothing? She could not comprehend the appeal. Nevertheless, she vowed to push through the course, and maintain at least a C. On the path to becoming an accountant, this university-required art course was simply a bump in the road.

“An extremely unnecessary bump in the road,” She mumbled under her breath as she walked the remaining distance, now standing at the entryway.

Penelope opened the door, and it creaked loudly beneath her hand. From what she had read, this museum had only just opened in 2001. Her eyebrows drew tight in confusion, should the door be this creaky? Was it some artistic choice, to add an air of ‘age and refinement’? She chuckled at her own joke, knowing this ridiculous thought to be untrue, but funny nonetheless.

She shuffled through the threshold and into the gallery, where a small wrinkled man sat at an obscenely large desk, dozing peacefully. His nose whistled with every haggard breath he took. A bell sat before him, and Penelope could not seem to find the nerve to press it. She cleared her throat instead, which did nothing to rouse the tiny man. She did so again, louder, adding a bit of force to it, to which his eyelids fluttered. She muttered a greeting, and he simply grunted. Rolling her eyes, she pressed the golden bell, the shrill rrrrrrrng bringing the man to the world of the living.

He blushed a bright cherry red, eyes going wide in panic. “Oh, here old Malcolm goes again, sleeping on the job! My apologies, ma’am, these tired eyes just can’t seem to stay open on days as slow as these.” The man, Malcolm, fumbled around, reaching into the desk drawer, and producing a museum guide. He handed it to Penelope with shaky hands, a near toothless grin on his face. Penelope reassured him that it was alright, and paid the price of admission silently.

“Do enjoy our exhibits, ma’am! If you have any questions, don’t be afraid to ring that bell again,” Malcolm wheezed a small laugh, and Penelope responded with a quick nod before sauntering into what she knew would be the slowest few hours of her life.

Penelope wandered throughout the large room aimlessly, trying to find some kind of deeper meaning to the shapes and colors and swirls. She had been assigned to attend the Neue Galerie and write a paper on her favorite piece. While the temptation to just google all of the works the museum had to offer was indeed strong, she had to bring back her ticket of admission as proof. Her professor, Mrs. Sanderson, was just as strict as she was passionate. The old woman would go on ever-lasting tirades about the power of art and emotion, flitting around the classroom like a little bird while Penelope drooled on her textbook in utter disinterest. So here she stood, bored beyond reason, attending an art museum on a Saturday; a Saturday in which she had glorious plans to hole up in her room and watch bad reality tv until her eyes strained with exhaustion.

In the midst of her pouting, Penelope caught the faintest scent of smoke. It wafted through the air lazily, assaulting her senses and causing a small cough to shake her frame. She fanned her hand in front of her face, whipping around to find its source.

Slumped in the corner of the room was an absolute giant of a man in a worn leather coat, a cigarette dangling from thin lips pressed tight in a grimace. His hair was a dark unruly mop, sprouting from his head in thick curls that greyed at the root. His skin was a light brown, tattered with deep white scars and age lines. His dull brown eyes stared on at the piece in front of him with what Penelope credited as the most torn expression she had ever seen. He stood unmoving, the cigarette burning up and littering ash on the floor beneath him. The museum had large non-smoking signs at nearly every entrance, yet here he stood, billowing streams of smoke like an old chimney.

Penelope shuffled quietly toward him, not to bother the man, but to view the painting that had caused such an expression to grace his tired features. Perhaps she could feel a little bit of what he was feeling, and pour it all into a shitty five-page paper. Her attempts at stealth were in vain, however, as the large man followed her movements with his eyes. She

offered an awkward smile, tilting her head towards the painting, “Pretty picture. It’s got nice colors,” She said awkwardly, stuffing her hands in her pockets and craning her neck over the large man’s shoulder.

It was indeed a beautiful piece. The label beneath read, “*Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* by Gustav Klimt.” The painting shone bright gold, with fluorescent whites, yellows, and reds surrounding the frail form a pale faced woman. The subject looked to the viewer with an innocent pout, hands crossed neatly over one another. The man glanced back at the artwork, staring into the woman’s oil eyes for a few lingering seconds before clearing his throat and acknowledging Penelope’s presence.

“Klimt’s pretty well known for his color usage. This one is from his Golden Period. He painted tons a’ pieces just like it, said the golds made him happy.” He spoke in a deep, scratchy voice, words laced with a thick Long Island accent. His words lacked h’s and r’s, and were spoken quick and sharp.

Penelope raised an eyebrow, not having pegged the guy as an art enthusiast, despite their current surroundings. Perhaps the lit cigarette and general look of discontent had led to this assumption. That being said, she knew an opportunity when she saw one. A couple of minutes of talking to this guy and her paper should write itself.

She feigned interest, “Oh, cool stuff. Don’t suppose you could tell me a little more, could you? I have an assignment, and I’m not much of the artsy type.”

The man chuckled, plucking the cigarette from his lips, “Google could probably tell ya’ much more than I eva’ could, kid. Better whip out that smartphone I’m sure ya’ have and start plagiarizing.”

Penelope rolled her eyes, scoffing. “As much as I would love to, it’s not that kind of assignment,” she huffed, “I’m supposed to write about how all this shit makes me feel. To be honest, though, it doesn’t make me feel squat. I figured since you were over here brooding and having an existential crisis, I could just feed off of that.”

The man threw his head back in a loud, bellowing laugh. “Existential crisis? Ha! I guess ya’ could call it that,” he raised an eyebrow, before sauntering over to a narrow bench parallel the painting and ushering for Penelope to join. She sat beside him, a fair amount of distance between the two.

He crossed his legs and stubbed the cigarette out on the bottom of his boot, before placing it into his pocket to finish later. A toothy smile crossed his rough features, and he spoke in a quiet voice, “Y’know, I was like you when I was young. I neva’ saw anything in these paintings either. Not until Jamison.” His words cracked on the name, voice deeply melancholy despite his grin.

Penelope could feel a story coming on. This could be emotional essay writing gold. “Jamison?” she asked, egging the older fellow on.

The man took a deep breath, eyes closing as he drifted into what Penelope knew was a memory long since passed. “He was an artist- a painter. Sculpted a bit too. Hell, he probably coulda’ done anything given the supplies. Cocky son of a bitch— got this pompous look in his eye every time he made something new.” He chuckled, wheezy and hallow. Penelope nodded along, interested.

“He was so damn critical. Said most mainstream artists were ‘too afraid ta’ experiment,’ too afraid ta’ ‘dirty their portfolios.’ Jamie wasn’t afraid, though. He’d try a new style every week, cover the whole apartment in paint. Drag me ta’ every showing,” his smile dropped, “And there I was, a dirty Long Islander, following this refined boy through every damn exhibit he dragged me ta’. Big, stupid, clumsy Curly, a bull in a china shop, trying ta’ drink fancy wine and be all refined and shit.”

The man, Curly, paused. He sat thinking for a long while, lips pressed yet again into a tight grimace. Penelope almost regretted opening this can of emotion, but she figured the man was telling the story more so for himself than her. She waited patiently, unmoving.

Curly took a shaky breath. “He would ask me how the paintings made me feel, and like you, it was all just paint to me. Paint and shapes. Neva’ really felt much of nothing till he left.” He looked at the golden lady with remorse, chewing at his bottom lip. “Now they all make me feel the same. He was my golden period. Now, I’m just as hollow looking at Frida as I am Monet. Probably couldn’t even look at a four-year old’s finga’ painting without missing that dumb motherfucker.”

Penelope placed a hand on Curly’s shoulder, squeezing lightly in support. She knew it was probably a bad idea, but the curious little voice in her head drowned out her better judgment as she asked in a hushed voice, “What happened to him?”

“Gotta’ job offer in Vienna. Birthplace of Klimt himself.” Curly gestured to the painting in front of them, “Jamie ate this shit up, loved everything about Klimt. Went on and on for hours about the guy’s usage of light and color and shapes. Asked me what I thought about it, and you know what I said?”

“What?” Penelope asked, intrigued.

“I said, ‘I don’t know much about all that, but you sure look pretty talkin’ about it.’” Curly laughed, a cheeky grin on his face.

Penelope laughed as well, and extended her hand out for a fist bump that Curly gladly accepted.

“Pretty smooth, Old Man.”

“Oh, ya’ know it. I felt sooooo smooth,” nostalgia coated his laughter.

He laughed for a few more moments, before continuing his story. “And then this guy, he just smiled and smiled and looked at me with those big dopey eyes like I said something worth something, y’know?” His chuckle faded, eyebrows drawn tight, “Made me feel real good. Made me feel like maybe I was something worth something.”

Penelope could see the sorrow in his eyes, the stress in every age line, and the regret in the way his hands shook. The gaps between his story grew longer and longer, but Penelope was quite invested now, and sat patiently. The silence was comfortable.

A long moment passed. The two stared at the Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I for a long while, one with longing and the other with newfound interest. Malcolm could be heard snoring from the other room, the sound echoing throughout the gallery.

Curly cleared his throat a couple of times, searching for words he had probably swallowed down long ago. He spoke softly, deep voice strained, “He went to Vienna. He begged me to come with him, but I just couldn’t. I stayed. Born and raised in Long Island, a sick Ma’ to take care of.... I had to let him go. I couldn’t keep him stuck in the slums.”

“Poor thing bawled his pretty blue eyes out. I didn’t let him see me cry, figured it’d be easier for him if he thought I didn’t care.” Tears welled up in Curly’s eyes, “He called me his muse. I told him he’d find another. He probably did. I hope he did.” The man’s head hung low, regret coating every word.

Curly took a few breaths, collecting himself.

He looked up at Penelope, and smiled again weakly, before speaking in a shaky voice. “Listen to me, kid. Art doesn’t have to mean shit to you at first glance. It took me 26 years after he left of staring at this painting to put how it makes me feel into words,” he extended his hand, and when she placed hers atop his, he squeezed lightly. “Some people can’t find meaning in art. Others can. Make sure to fill your life with a good mix of the two.”

Penelope smiled, squeezing Curly’s hand right back and nodding slowly. His words hit a part of her analytical heart that she has been ignoring for quite some time.

She thanked Curly for his story, and the two exited The Neue Galerie silently. The rugged man stood at the front of the museum, re-lit the stubby cigarette, and told Penelope to get home safe. She walked about a block before looking back, the tall building now a dot in her vision. She felt different, in some way. She trudged through the snow yet again, but

now looked to the billboards and graffiti surrounding her in a new light. Perhaps, she thought, this was the beginning of her own Golden Period.