



***CELLAR
DOOR***

FALL

2020

AWARDS

ART

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| FIRST PLACE | supper at emmaus
CAROLYN BUCKNALL |
| SECOND PLACE | flesh piece
NITARA KITTLES |
| THIRD PLACE | abstraction 2020
ELIZABETH TORRES-ALMAGUER |

PROSE

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| FIRST PLACE | beat beat beat swallow
ELIZABETH LEONARD |
| SECOND PLACE | tadpoles
LUCY MCCLELLAN |
| THIRD PLACE | on the road again
GRACE MORSE |

POETRY

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| FIRST PLACE | parasitic
CHLOE JOSEPH |
| SECOND PLACE | ashes to fall in love with
JUSTIN HADAD |
| THIRD PLACE | the criteria i sent to the realtor
ELIZABETH COLETTI |

JUDGES

ART Mike Keaveney is an artist and educator currently located in Philadelphia. Within his work he explores experimental photographic processes as well as ideas of environmental destruction and development. He received a BFA from Kutztown University and an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

PROSE Alan Rossi's first novel, *Mountain Road, Late at Night*, was published in February 2020 in the United Kingdom, Australia, and other countries. His fiction has appeared in *Granta*, *Conjunctions*, *New England Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Ninth Letter*, and many other journals. His non-fiction novella, *Did You Really Just Say That To Me?*, was awarded the third annual *New England Review* Award for Emerging Writers, and he was the *New England Review/Bread Loaf* Scholar for 2017. His fiction has received a Pushcart Prize and an O. Henry Prize. His work has been anthologized in Harper Perennial's *Forty Stories: New Writing* from Harper Perennial. He lives in South Carolina with his family and various cats.

POETRY Britton Shurley is the author of the chapbook *Spinning the Vast Fantastic* (Bull City Press, 2021), and his poetry has appeared in such journals as *Southern Humanities Review*, *Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, and *Southern Indiana Review*. He is the recipient of Emerging Artist Awards from the Kentucky Arts Council in both 2011 and 2016. He is an Associate Professor of English at West Kentucky Community & Technical College where he edits *Exit 7: A Journal of Literature & Art* with his wife, the poet Amelia Martens. They live in Paducah, Kentucky with their daughters and curate the Rivertown Reading Series.

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SAVANNAH BRADLEY

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

Like many of us, I am overwhelmed by the news, social media, and the constant what next. This semester has been a historic one, bloated by grief, loss, and uncertainty. The world is shifting beneath our feet. As each day blurs into the next, what we need more than ever is a panacea, a salve. Art teaches us one of the best ways to stay engaged — to question everything. To probe deeper, past the membrane of life, and find answers to questions you did not know you had. The stories, art, and poems in this issue of *Cellar Door* challenge what's in our orbit: systems of hegemony, institutional racism and violence, bodily autonomy, and even death itself. Reading and sitting with these pieces for the past couple of months have reinvigorated my sense of self in a troubled world.

This semester we lost two friends — Professor Randall Kenan and *Cellar Door* art staffer Sally Sasz. I was lucky enough to know them both, as a student of Professor Kenan's and as a peer of Sally's. The two of them encouraged me, laughed with me, and taught me — along with everyone who had the privilege of knowing them — how to forever engage more critically with art and with each other. They both had a rare gift, tying their lives together with an invisible string: they possessed a cosmic, unparalleled kindness. Both Professor Kenan and Sally were genius writers, creators, and even better friends. I'm crushed I couldn't thank them once more, and I am grateful that our paths got to cross, however briefly, in this life.

In Grace Morse's "On the Road Again," an anxious and reflexive prose piece that encompasses both fiction and creative non-fiction, she writes, "Perhaps this is the moment where I can tell him how beloved he is." We are asked, implicitly, to reconsider the moments in time pre-quarantine, pre-violence, pre-grief, where we could've acted but didn't, in an effort to salvage love and connection in a fractured world. A number of the poems in this issue reckon with similar ideas of waiting, watching, wishing; in Justin Hadad's "Ashes to Fall in Love With," he admits: "I can't imagine / a life where fear / is more important / than joy."

What we can learn from the art in this issue, and the art Sally and Professor Kenan made throughout their lives, is the triumph of joy over fear. I am not the first to write about how these are dubious times, but I can say one thing with certainty: *Cellar Door* cannot and will not retreat. While none of us can predict what the next 12 months will look like, here's what we can do: we can sit with our collective apprehension and bereavement, name it, and make it something tactile and altogether real through the art process.

The magic of that — art's ability to both comfort and provoke, occasionally at the same time — is something both Professor Kenan and Sally had a mastery of, and it is something we can witness for both wisdom and guidance in our own work.

That's what this issue is full of: the naming of what's vexing us. Work that comforts and provokes. Magic. The authors, poets, and artists in our Fall 2020 issue are relentless in their efforts to provide texture, color, and understanding to our lived experiences. We hope the work in this issue demands the attention and consideration it has so respectfully demanded of us.

It's been a true, humbling pleasure to assemble this issue. We've been holding these pieces close to us for some time now, and we can't wait for you to do the same. So, until we meet next time: please stay inside, wash your hands, order a package from your local indie bookstore, keep your loved ones close, and find joy wherever you can.

Best,
Savannah Bradley
Editor-in-Chief

In memory of Randall Kenan
(March 12, 1963 – August 28, 2020),

Professor of Creative Writing, UNC-Chapel Hill,
who first published in *Cellar Door* 1983-1985

and

Sarah Dudley “Sally” Sasz
(1998 - 2020),

Student, artist, and Morehead-Cain Scholar, UNC-Chapel Hill,
Cellar Door Art Editor and Staffer (2017-2020)

THANK YOU

To the Creative Writing Program and Department of English and Comparative Literature, for their ongoing support of student writers, editors, and readers.

To Bland Simpson, for his benevolent support of *Cellar Door* and other undergraduate literary causes.

To Michael McFee for his decades of dedication to *Cellar Door*, including distribution of copies to the campus racks, and storage of boxes in his office.

To the artists and writers who create every day, for letting us share their work with the rest of campus, and beyond.

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ON THE ROAD AGAIN

My brother stands before my parents and me, shoulders back like he's giving a speech. His large, flat feet, protected by his crocs, are planted into our family room's Spanish floor tiles. When he was younger, we called him Little Biscuit, because he was brown and short and round. The nickname still clings to him, but he is tall now. His legs are long and lean. Waving his arms as he makes his claim about the world and how it works, he has abandoned who he used to be. Now, he is a tree.

Quarantine inspired Padre to open his own driving school — I was the intended student. There was a driver's license in my wallet; it had been there for two years, with my seventeen (and a half) year old face smiling in the center. But having a license didn't matter, not after having spent the last two years battling a vicious fear of the driver's seat. My career as his student began in April; early in the afternoon, when the New Orleans sky was still eagerly blue, I would receive a call to come downstairs. His white SVU, shiny on the outside from the previous night's rain, is parked in front of our house. In the beginning of our lessons, he talked a lot, guiding me through the city that I usually experienced in the passenger's seat. But eventually, our rides became quiet, almost comfortable, with the clouds looming above us as I pulled into the street. *Drive like you deserve to be on the road*, he would say. So what if you make a few mistakes. *Everybody makes mistakes on the road. A traffic ticket isn't going to kill you*, he would say. But as our lessons continued, it was hard not to think about everything I had seen on the news, all the protests and hashtags that had accumulated in the social media sphere. In secret, I wondered: *but what if it did?*

My brother announces once, loudly, that he is going to the store. The sky is gleaming with stars, black and beautiful, as if we are in a painting. Our grandmother has already given him a list, cluttered with things that are already in the fridge, like Lactaid milk and vienna sausages. I stumble down the stairs, my voice getting lost in the sound of my feet slapping against the bare wooden stairs. *Can I come with you?* I ask. His shoulders are suddenly tense, as if all the stress in his body has accumulated at the top of his body as a result of my request. Perhaps he wants to say *no, I need this time alone. Being around*

people is suffocating sometimes. It's why I dedicate my time to playing a sport that you can play alone. But our parents have already intercepted my question, giving him no choice. So, he says sure.

The ride is quiet. He turns a ten minute drive into seven minutes by driving over the speed limit. This terrifies me. I reach into my purse and realize my wallet isn't there. He's going 45 in a residential neighborhood; the signs say he needs to decrease his speed by at least ten miles. My breaths are shallow. I tell him to stop choking the accelerator. He slows down, unamused. I am, as usual, being overly critical. He tells me to relax. His mouth cracks into a half smile, showing off his invisalign retainer, the one he begged our parents to get him to fix the gap in his teeth. He is almost an adult, and yet he is still a kid. He skids to a stop at a red light. The wheels groan for a moment, and then we are still. The streetlight casts a warm glow over his face. I am angry that he is so flippant about breaking the rules, as if the rules wouldn't turn around and break us. I try to summon a breath. Sitting side by side, we are the spitting images of our father. My brother's skin is several shades deeper than mine. His eyebrows are decisively thicker. But we are the same. The light changes. He drives slower as some cars join us on the street. He cocks his head, hands gripping the wheel as he looks at me. I lean my head against the seatbelt. My body quivers silently as I imagine. His head on the pavement. An elbow in his ribs. Screaming. Spit collecting in his open mouth, dribbling on to the grass. The beautiful black sky watching, hopelessly. My brother becoming a battle cry, echoing across the country. My brother, the baby. My brother, a body.

The supermarket parking lot is nearly empty, with a few cars loitering around the perimeter as other people leave with their groceries. *Let's go*, he says. I slam the door behind me as I follow him. I have a clear view of his back, still unbroken by bullets and beatings. I try to smile away my sadness as he turns to look at me. Perhaps this is the moment where I can tell him how beloved he is. How important he is. I want him to know that our parents truly don't have a favorite, but that the pressure of being the perfect daughter exhausts me, and that I do understand what it feels like to have the weight of expectation threaten to crush me like a knee on the neck. Instead, I say *hurry up* as he presses the button to lock the car, its front lights beaming, then waning, until they eventually disappear into the darkness.

ASHES TO FALL IN LOVE WITH

when I reach / into the backseat / to search / for the drinks / it's because
denial / is too close / my friend / tells me / that he won't / swerve / and
if he does / I'd laugh / but T-Pain was playing / and I had / no reason
to believe / that the tree wouldn't sleep / on the windshield / but I do /

valets / circle in dark cars / parked illegally / and it's / too bad / galore
has us blind / keys pile / when the dams / of the rich / break / certainly
our belongings / are still there / I had no reason / to believe that / they
would be / but I do / nevertheless / so sadly / I trust /

fast food employees / like muddy / washing machines / ravaging /
through our favorite meals / why do we eat anyway / neither know /
nor ask / my thoughts / a disaster lacking gloves / I have / no reason to
believe / that what they make / is safe / nevertheless / I do / nevertheless
so effortlessly / I trust /

six people / die / get killed / fall / murdered / on roller coasters / each
year / but worlds spin / so much / in line / for the power tower / I can't
imagine / a life where fear / is more important / than joy / why do I
parasail / in my thoughts / like this / they said it was safe / to believe in
contraptions / so I do / and so damn easily / I trust /

I've never seen / my friends die / I just know / that they have / I know
/ sugar hung / like blood / from Collin's nose / I know Payton's / sandal
might still / be in / the river / I know / Evan's last meal / was not White
Castle / on Tuttle / why is everyone dying / and I might have / no reason
to believe / that their last words weren't / I love you / but I do / and I
trust / that they are saying it now

NITARA KITTLES



flesh piece

A YOGURT CARTON FROM THE 90s

Cleaning the sand
Topped with colored sprinkles
They asked for extra
Because they wanted more
A young boy wanted a Sprite
In a bottle
With a straw
A grown man wanted a bag of Lay's
They don't cook anymore
They're "on the go"
They're hungry for convenience
Hungry for brilliance
Jesus
A yogurt carton from the 90s
A fishing rope twisted with seaweed
A zip tie
A beer can arrives on the shore
Brought in with the other fellows
Used
And forgotten
Like that plastic Dasani
Here
Put it in my bag
Let's take it away from here
Off this once naked breast of our mother
Hide it so she doesn't see what we've done
The mess we've made
The shoes we've rubbed hard at the foot of her door
The welcome mat
Its lettering fades
Still works
But that's not the point

ENABLER

My woman is
the heavy-thumbed milkmaid
 who kneads out the knot
in my neck each night. By rote,
 I do not have to ask her for it.

Her gesture lives
in the punched-out
 rosette of her elbow,
the working groove
 of its opposite crook.

Nightly, she does this,
my frantic little woman.
 She hands me a glass to suckle
the cramp, lathers white
 the day-old wound,

 her fingers
doomed by that kind of
 terminal kindness.
Whatever I do, I do not
 shake her and the blind
inertia running

right out of her knuckles.
 My woman's hands are a soft hook.
Her face is the lit dome
 that I look up
and out through.

HALF LIKE YOU

I had walked through the forest, under the stars, over a bridge. At this point I should have reached the diner. Instead I watch my black-haired reflection in a lake, where the ripples and shadows mar my face, turning me older, more like my mother. Glass shattering against marble. Two voices screaming. I chuck a rock at the lake, biting my left canine hard on my tongue. Far too early to backtrack, too soon to look her in the eyes again, but then a raucous yelp sounds to my left.

Fighting my way through the bushes, I take a moment to realize the noise had been a laugh. In front of me is a festival of sorts—a brilliant contrast to the world behind. Trees around the clearing are strung up with lights. Those or the unabashed smiles seem to illuminate every face as if each person had fallen from the same constellation. They certainly dance like stars turned human, celebrating as if it's their only night on Earth. Dozens of bodies fill the space, wearing reds and pinks and golds shouting against the dark night, twirling like children to the performers' flutes and drums. The embellished hems of their skirts shine under the moonlight, occasionally lifting enough to see their bare feet twisting and stepping all over the grass.

Enraptured by their movements, I wander closer, and then through. I stumble around their elegant limbs as I watch their heads fall back in laughter, how their arms intertwine at the elbow. One woman's stubby dark fingers reach towards the sky and curl around the moon. I've never seen a hand so intricately carved, checkered with infinite wrinkles and veins. My father once had gorgeous hands—smooth, uncomplicated ones that curved around guitar strings and stroked my hair as I slept. Now they're all angles, lines, bent fists pounding at the door, flat against my mother's cheek.

Beyond the clearing of dancers is a marketplace overflowing with heavy saccharine smells and kids getting tugged along. I stroll through tables of goods—multicolored fabrics and blinding jewels. One display draws my eyes: a white silk scarf embroidered with bursting silver flowers and acanthus leaves.

I curse myself for being hooked by it, since it's precisely the melodramatic style my mother would love. My fingers run along the smooth

length of silk, testing its verity. My mother adores this fabric, said it reminds her of her vacation to Italy, where she danced with men who juggled fire and tussled with a shop owner — she had stolen a silk dress straight off his mannequin. Sprinting through the stone streets. Boundless, unashamed. It was as my father said — the hopeless woman was too enamored with pretty things.

“Buy one, get one half off,” the salesman says.

“I only like the one,” I reply, touching the scarf. “Any discounts?”

“No, but perhaps there’s an exception for a pretty lady.”

I look away. He talks about his other wares, but I don’t listen to his words, only the hum of his voice. It’s deep and dissonant with his face, startling in its softness. I imagine I’m hearing it from off to the side. If I look at him too long, I would notice the same thinning dark hair, wide black eyes, wrinkled brown skin on his forehead. I don’t get a good look at his nose, but I wonder if he has the same bump on the bridge, the one that adorns my face like a parasite. When I was younger I wished for my mother’s flat one.

I know I’m not beautiful like they were. Not because my mother never tells me, though she doesn’t, or because my dad wrinkles his nose when strangers point out our resemblance, though he does. My old boyfriend would swear I was pretty with long lashes and smart and capable of taking care of myself — yet never warm. Never vivacious like their old photos. I can’t be mad — I see it too.

It’s the way hugs and compliments feel foreign but how easily my fists clench and voice rises with rage, acrid words pouring like lava when I’m scared. When my boyfriend pushed me too hard about my parents, so I shifted to how ignorant, how vain he was to think he understood. When my mother sits by the window and blinks and doesn’t move—as if my bitter words could reignite her fire.

It’s the way I still keep the rose gold necklace shiny and clean but could never keep the boy. A year has passed. He’s with another girl now, but on colder nights I catch myself wondering. We were halfway through falling, the point where velocity is highest, and that was when I had to pull back.

Afraid that if I went any farther I would plummet past some invisible line where I would never want to leave. Not even if he rotted into something poisonous and cruel. Not even if my loved ones begged me.

It's the way I'm standing here in the dim light while everyone else is spinning around — stiff, awkward. They could always hide the tension unnervingly well, with bright pink lipstick or a well-timed joke. I remember learning we get 50% of our genes randomly from each parent. But I didn't get the charm, the beauty, the dazzle. My body, my soul — their worst halves, combined.

Earlier today my mother was crying. Not the silent tears she ignores while she's shouting to get her point across. The full sobs, the ones we never show each other. I take mine in the car. We hide it so well; I forget my parents have them too.

Still, it's hard for me to hold any sympathy for her. She knows the solution but she doesn't leave him, she keeps us both anchored to this house. I think its sentimentality, or obligation, or fear — and I know it's complicated but for me it never was. While she was crying I started tying my shoes. My father turned off his TV and headed to the living room, towards her — he couldn't hear his damn show. Shut up, bitch. I bit my canine on my tongue, focused on the pain. No one heard me grab the keys or walk out the front door.

My mother once told me I should get out more, said I wasn't adventurous enough, not like her. She had traveled the world by the time she was my age. Ridden camels, hunted deer, eaten French delicacies in Moroccan restaurants.

She's adventurous enough to stay with a pretty man who rips her spirit apart. He yells about the unfolded laundry or the dirty counter or the money she sends to her good-for-nothing sister until she finally screams What else is it for? His eyes go wide. He shatters dinner plates while she hides behind the couch and keeps her afraid of leaving their four walls and afraid of living inside them. He makes his daughter go searching for miracles in the night.

Standing in front of me is the salesman, head framed by the stars, still rambling about his prices.

“Here’s my money,” I interrupt, letting pressure off my tongue I hadn’t realized was there. The taste of copper coats my next words. “I want the scarf.”

It could be worthless. It could be the match to her fire.

“Ah, miss. You’re 30 dollars short. This is handcrafted, you know, from Bengal.”

I sigh and nod as an itch invades my fingers. I place the white silk back on its hook. The man begins to turn away, and without a breath, I grab the scarf and run. I fly straight into the night, back the way I came.



i am nineteen (fall of man)

***TIRED OF THE PHALLUS, ARTIST
GOES IN SEARCH OF THINGS THAT
REMINDE THEM OF PUSSY***

Slip one finger into foxglove bloom
until tip is pruned from the toxic contractions

Use teeth to dusk a mango's skin
spit-slick it's juiciness with tongue and cushioned teeth
lick up sweet fibers, dripping slices, slipping down throat
whole

Separate egg yolk from white and beat into a meringue
finger the fat until it explodes blood spot up

Feel how sweaty sweet thighs push between wide slats
of the folding striation in plastic fabric chairs
indentations pressed up like stick-and-poke tattoos
make-shift markers of gluttony, of lust

Press lips against fizzed up metal pop-tab of something carbonated

Massage the crescent of flesh between thumb and palm
proper, until it is red and aching
points of pressure appearing like bright lights against

inflamed flesh

Carry a candle holder, empty and waxen

Press hand to belly and laugh
Drink coffee with no milk and sugar

Then drink only milk
Only eat a tablespoon of sugar all day

When a friend laughs, press a hand to their belly to feel the vibrations

Eat a cucumber, skin on, but spit out every seed.



dystopia

CRAB POTS

We drop turkey necks and chicken parts down the center column for the crabs to come pick at. Braided line knotted twice around the dock railing anchors the wire cage to keep the tide from pulling it down along the shore line. Soon enough blue crabs scuttle through the side tunnels to get to the pink trappings. Three days later we return & with line in fist, pull the cage back over the railing to expose eleven angry crabs clattering like a box of disheveled plastic toys. They pace the length of the cage, climbing over one another; an avalanche of nervous legs. Their frantic search for an escape is too little too late. We only keep the good ones (boys five inches or bigger) and drop them into a white bucket. The crabs quiet & lay still at the bottom of their plastic prison. Even animals know when it's time to ask for their final forgiveness.

BEAT BEAT BEAT SWALLOW

They make her listen to the heartbeat before she gets the abortion.

She knows it's a part of the law. It often is, especially in the South; listen to the heartbeat, see the ultrasound. Watch what's happening in your body and believe that it is a person. They think they're doing something, by making her go through all of this. They think she'll come to her senses and realize what she's giving up.

So she lays back in the chair they'd set her in and lets them smear cold jelly all over her stomach. The technician press the plastic ultrasound wand into her skin, and she listens to the odd little heartbeat. It's fast and it sounds like it's underwater. There's an odd little sway in the middle of the heartbeats, like a gulp or a swallow, before it resumes the regular rhythm. It's a beat-beat-beat-swallow. Beat-beat-beat-swallow.

Beat-beat-beat-swallow.

Again and again, looping over itself in her head.

She wonders if it'll keep beating in her eardrums, once the technician ends the transmission. If it'll haunt her at night. When she was little, if she'd pressed her ear into her pillow hard enough, she could hear her own heartbeat pounding out against the pillowcase. It always sounded like footsteps in the snow, like someone trying to trudge their way home in the middle of a blizzard. The "crunch of the snow" actually came from the compression of her ear against the cotton fabric of her pillow, but the end result sounded an awful lot like someone stomping around in cheap snow boots, like the little thrift-store polka-dotted ones that she used to have as a kid. She'd press her ear against the pillow and imagine a cartoon heart, wearing her worn-through boots and trudging through deep furrows of snowflakes.

She comes home from her OB-GYN visit at four o'clock. She heats some ramen in a beat-up aluminum kettle for dinner and watches cable television, sitting on the floor instead of her sagging futon. She finishes her noodles and sets the bowl on the ground next to her, and realizes that her gaze has shifted to the off-white wall behind her TV instead of the *Jeopardy!* clue flashing up on the screen.

Her head feels oddly empty. Or maybe it sounds oddly empty. She realizes she can't hear the odd, beating pattern that she thought had been tattooed onto her memory receptors and cerebrum. She shakes her head, tapping the inside corners of her ears with her fingers like she's trying to shake out water, and shuts off the TV. She heads into her bedroom, flopping face-first onto her twin-sized bed. That's how she spends three hours of the night after her OB-GYN visit: laying down and waiting for everything to coalesce into some kind of heartbeat-nightmare.

She even presses her right ear into her old cotton pillowcase, so hard that the shell of her ear begins to ache. The pillowcase is aged and falling apart—it's the one where the seams are coming loose, and she can stick her pinky finger in between the loops of thread that tie up the front and back pieces of fabric.

It's her favorite pillowcase, though. It's got an old Pooh-Bear decal on the front, faded and crumpled with age, but if she breathes deep she can still smell the old linen-lemon detergent that her father used when he was still alive and she was still very small and wearing thrift-store snow boots. It's almost like that lemon-linen smell impressed over and over again on the fabric, until it left an echoing effect on the case.

She presses her ear down into the pillowcase, and waits to hear the beat-beat-beat-swallow, instead of her own heartbeat. Waits for a tiny, baby-sized cartoon heart to pop up in her imagination, trying to trudge its way forward through the deep snow.

She waits for it, and she waits for a phantom gasp of pain in her lower stomach to accompany it. A twist borne not out of medically-induced cramping, but instead out of guilt and shame. The kind that her Southern state demands out of her.

She's only able to hear her own heartbeat, slow and steady against her Pooh-Bear pillow.

She eventually falls into a deep, restful slumber around nine o'clock.

The father doesn't know, and in her opinion, it doesn't matter whether he knows or not.

She's an eighteen-year-old mechanic-in-training, and he was a boy with shoulder-length hair and squinty eyes that she matched with on a dating app.

He promised her a lot of things, before they met up. The only thing he'd been actually able to deliver was craft beer, which he carried in loose cans in a reusable grocery bag all the way up to her sixth-story apartment. He used the stairs because the elevator had a permanent out-of-order sign taped to its doors.

She'd needed to show him where, exactly, her vagina was on her own body, and he used an old condom that he'd ripped out from a faded Trojan wrapper in his wallet. By the time they got around to everything, they'd gone through half of his craft beer and an old bottle of wine she'd nicked from a corner store, and they'd done everything on her sagging futon. Neither of them had taken their shirts off.

He'd enjoyed himself.

She'd been glad that, at the end of it, no one could call her a virgin anymore.

She pushed him out of her front door before he could suggest a round two. He'd texted her ten minutes afterward. It had been a long message, and it began like this: "Hey, I had fun tonight."

She'd deleted the rest of the message before she could even read it, and then she'd blocked his number.

She'd finished the rest of his craft beer sitting on the futon, in the V between the cushions where the frame slumped so low that the bottom edge of the cushions brushed against the floor. Her underwear was settled around her ankles, and she'd unhooked her bra and pulled it out from underneath her shirt, throwing it carelessly on the dingy floor of her apartment.

When she'd finished all of the beer cans and crushed them up in a pile next to her recycling bin, she'd been dismayed to find out that she felt bloated and nauseous, and not at all different from how she'd felt before she'd even met him.

They call her name at the clinic, and she gets up and goes with the attendant calmly.

The doctor makes plenty of small talk, and she responds nicely. Provides her name, birthdate, prior medical history. She comments about the nice weather, how it's faded nicely from a sweet, airy summer to a heavier, but clean kind of autumn.

"All right," the doctor says, once everything's done. "If you're ready, then we can get started."

She presses a hand against her stomach. She takes a deep breath, and then another one, and wonders whether she *is* ready.

She closes her eyes, and imagines her rundown apartment with her small and thin stack of twin bedsheets, and her sunken-in futon, and her worn-down Pooh Bear pillowcase that had started pilling at the corners. She imagines a beat-beat-beat-swallow heartbeat, sinking deeper and deeper underneath the snow without any snow boots to help it along.

And she opens her eyes, and she feels the exact same as when she'd closed them the first time. The exact same as when that boy knocked on her door with a bag of craft beer slung over her shoulder. The exact same as she's always felt.

"I'm ready," she says.

Two months later, at a referral appointment for birth control, a nurse practitioner asks her, "Are you or have you ever been sexually active?"

"Sure," she says, and doesn't say much else after that.

Mostly because there's not much else to say.

PARASITIC

What is a body if not a home.

Live in the dirt under my nails why don't you. I picked a scab in the bath and a green sapling worked its way up from the weeping pink pit. And I knew who to blame. No one else fed me seeds. Flat on my back in the grass, you pinned me down with syrup-sticky hands and your mouth sweet-and-sour from sucking on the rinds. I wanted to see who could spit their seeds the farthest, you said those kinds of games are for children and kissed yours down my throat.

That was summer, when I dreamed of mutualism, a dance with steps we didn't have to learn. I scratch your back if you'll scratch mine, scratch our names into a tree if you chop it for timber, scratch your eyes out if you tie my blindfold tight.

It's winter now and the skin of my hands is chapped, knuckles red-capped like garden gnomes. My lips are worse and when you kiss them, seemingly gentle, skin peels away onto your own. There is blood under my nails mixed with the dirt and you won't let me trim them myself, but you cut too quick, leaving the tips raw.

What is a body if not a home. I left your cupboards open and crumbs between your bedsheets. You chided me as you scraped toothpaste scum off the bathroom sink. When I took my posters off your wall, paint tore away in shallow lesions like those on my shoulders and the backs of my legs. Debt sits cold and heavy in my gut. I would rather you sit there, burning like a fever.

ODE TO ISOLATION

And the blinds that don't close all the way,
the unchanging glow of streetlight seeping
through the window like mist while I lay awake.
And the cicada I cannot bring myself to move.
It dropped dead in the doorway mid-flight
Two days ago (or was it three?)
and has since hardened like stale bread.
And to my body, I have not been there all week.
From here it appears more prison than four walls,
All flesh, skin, skeleton and deep breaths that ache.

From here, I see the inbetweenness. Fever:
The great equalizer. Now nothing matters.
Not aching loneliness, not acid regret in my throat,
Not days reduced to tick marks in my diary.
In limbo decay is simple. Watch my muscle atrophy,
tendons snake backwards like shoelaces through eyelets.
Forget how to cry, how it feels to be held, what my voice sounds like.

The cicada buzzes to life:
Wings beating into laminate, stirring the air,
Screaming like a woman, flying over me,
Disintegrating, snowing ash that settles on my eyelids,
In my mouth, nose, lungs. I inhale the desiccated cicada.
The flutter of wings in my chest startles me back into my body.



space field

8:00 LECTURE

They keep battering themselves, the moths, head-on
against the brittle invisible, hovered wing-
chinked and beaten
by something that could name knowledge. They don't make
a sound, no more sound than the caesuric
lapse a dry mouth makes
creasing in a reading caught between the rattle
of infinitives in the sticky wear of a tongue
stalling its own murmuration rates. I apologize but
what is the duration again— between detection and release—
how long can attention hold
a ticking, a teething
of minutes before
collapsing, the rough of a match struck/and not lit,
the rupture of air
between knuckles,
two wingbeats
or something like those shallow speeds in a lumpy swallow-
ing noise. It is nighttime, and my eyes/ears have frayed to tatters
by fault of chance splittings with incandescent
bulbs in the ceiling, which
hum too only as long as I can
stare— burning
their blots, as though anyone was
listening, going deaf
as if not already blinded
by the indigo spilled
in the room, blinding, in fact, but
no more blinding, than, say
the flimsy nothing of windows
on either side, stiff and almost
a mirror of the room, with the exception of all the moths, flinging
the white of my distractions
in eye
untethered in
the too-bright hush, holding enough for layered
clappings, limply steady
as if mimicking, the useless
and tireless evening poundings.

TADPOLES

When, two days before spring break, Bailey asks her to take care of the tadpoles, Maya is terrified. They are sitting across from one another in fourth grade science class, Ms. Barlow's guinea pig failing miserably to make it through the Lego maze between them.

"You have tadpoles?"

"I caught them at the pond yesterday," Bailey says proudly. "Their names are Angel and Amy." Bailey really likes the name Amy. Maya does not know why.

"Oh, that's cool," Maya says lamely.

"So can you take care of them for me? I need someone to watch them while my family is in New Mexico. It's just for two weeks."

Inconsiderately, Maya's mind goes to Gandalf, her recently deceased gerbil. She feels a twinge of sickness in her stomach. Two months ago, she got too lazy to give him real food, and started just dropping treats into his cage. When Gandalf stopped eating, Maya had assumed he wasn't hungry. About a week and a half in, Maya looked at him for the first time in days and found him shivering in the back of his filthy cage. Mom and Dad had been mad.

"Why didn't you feed him?" they asked.

"I thought he didn't want food," Maya had said pathetically.

Her parents had taken them to the vet with grim, disappointed looks on their faces, and Gandalf had come out in a cardboard box. He was buried in the backyard now. A few weeks ago, the neighbor's dog Pepper had gotten in and dug him up, so they had to rebury him. His body was all swollen and hairless now, like a drowned rat in the sewer. Maya thinks about it when she can't sleep.

Bailey doesn't know how Gandalf had died, and Maya suspects that if she did, she wouldn't have asked her to take the tadpoles. However, Maya doesn't want to disappoint Bailey by making up an excuse she

will be bound to see through. Bailey is proud and hard-headed, the sort of kid who refuses to admit when she loses at board games, and always gets to choose the premise when playing pretend. Once, when tearing up, Maya blamed her wet eyes on allergies.

“I know you don’t really have allergies, Maya,” Bailey had said bluntly. Maya had been embarrassed, but she had appreciated the honesty. Bailey knows Maya well, and still likes her, so far. But that could change.

“Look, if you don’t want to watch them,” Bailey says, “I can just ask someone else.”

Additionally, Bailey is cooler than Maya, and troublingly capable of ditching her for a new best friend if she wanted to.

“I can watch them,” Maya says.

From the table, Ms. Barlow’s Pickles squeaks angrily, and Bailey scoops him up to scratch his head. Pickles looks over with beady black eyes, and Maya could swear the guinea pig is glaring at her.

Maya lives in a one story house with a wild garden. It is wild not because it is not taken care of, but because her mother loves it so much that she plants more and more until the flower beds are spilling over at the brim and the front door is obscured from the street by foliage. In the back of the house is another garden, but this one is kept off to the sidelines so that Maya has room to play. Her father’s office looks out on the back garden, and sometimes when she gets bored of playing she lets herself into his office to bother him while he works. She likes to explain to him in great detail the plots of the book series she reads, and usually he makes an effort to show enthusiasm, at least until she’s on the third or fourth installation. Around then he tells her she should read more non-fiction, and forces some lengthy World War II memoir on her that she never gets 20 pages into. Maya likes her house, because it is so small that her parents are always within earshot. Whenever they talk of moving somewhere bigger she protests.

After school, Maya goes to the backyard to visit Gandalf’s grave and pray. Beside it are the tombstones of the three orphaned bunny babies that she tried to save last spring, each with a faded Sharpie inscription.

She'd tried to make them a new burrow when Mom had accidentally dug them up in the garden, and given them iceberg lettuce from the fridge, but in the end, they were picked off one by one by cats. Maybe Maya shouldn't have moved them.

She kneels in the dirt by the graves. The soil is damp on her knees, a coolness seeping through the worn denim of her jeans. Purple and yellow spring wild flowers poke up around the miniature graveyard. Birds gossip in the trees above. Maya thinks about Gandalf's body underneath the dirt, wonders if it's still as swollen and tortured as it was a few weeks ago or if his skin has begun to peel and reveal his tiny skeleton. She wonders about the baby bunnies beside him. Surely they must be nothing but bone by now. She tries to clear her head of the thought. These are not the images that she wants in her head during prayer.

"Dear Lord," Maya thinks (she rarely prays aloud), "Please let the soul of Gandalf and the baby bunnies rest in peace with you, and please let them know that I love them and I never wanted them to die. And please forgive me for my neglect, and please help me take good care of Bailey's tadpoles and keep them happy. Amen."

Maya doesn't know if she actually believes in God, but she likes to pray just in case. It is the sort of prayer her mother taught her: upfront, and from the heart. Maybe too informal, but it makes her feel better. She takes a deep breath and walks inside, ready to redeem herself.

The next day, Bailey delivers the tadpoles in a large mason jar filled with green-brown pond water. Maya keeps the tadpoles on the counter that divides the dining room and the kitchen so she can watch them when she does work at the dinner table. The two tadpoles (she doesn't know which is Angel and which is Amy) swim in bored circles. Twice a day, Maya sprinkles some fish food into the jar and they lap it up eagerly. As for water, Maya's off the hook. At first she assumes that the gulp water up as they swim, but when she asks her dad tells her that they absorb it through their skin. Maya's just glad to have one less responsibility.

The tadpoles are cute, like big fat commas with tiny faces. Maya likes watching them, although sometimes she starts wondering if they miss their home. Mom and Dad have never let her catch minnows or

tadpoles for herself because they say that they are happier in the wild. But at least now they always have enough to eat, and they will always be safe in a storm.

When, soon after arriving, the tadpoles start to grow legs, Maya is enraptured. Every hour, she stops by the jar to check on their progress, leaning into the glass to stare. She wonders if they can see her giant eyes. How surprised Bailey will be when she comes back from her trip and finds her tadpoles are frogs. It's happening so fast, fast enough that the tadpoles have to be feeling the change in themselves. Maya tries to remember back to when she was unformed in the womb, to recall the sensation of limbs sprouting from one's side. All that comes to her is a fuzzy feeling of pink. She is proud to be facilitating the tadpole's transformation. Now, she thinks, they will be more hers than Bailey's. The thought gives her a mean satisfaction.

The next morning Maya wakes up at 6 A.M., as she always does, and pours herself a bowl of cereal to eat at the dining room table, the comics section of the newspaper spread out in front of her. Midway through watching Sarge beat up Beetle Bailey, she remembers the tadpoles suddenly and glances up at them. Floating in the jar, she sees what looks like a fully formed frog with a tail. In excitement, Maya rushes over. When she gets close, her heart squeezes in fear. One of the tadpoles is still swimming in the jar, its legs still inchoate, but the newly turned frog is floating at the top of the water, alarmingly still, its legs splayed out limply. Maya taps the lass, first gently, then harder.

"Wake up," she says "Wake up!" The frog doesn't move.

"Mom!" she calls. She runs down the hall to her parents' door and knocks frantically.

"Mom, Dad, wake up! It's an emergency!"

When her father grumbles for her to come in, Maya bursts through the door.

"I think one of the tadpoles is dead," she says.

Mom and Dad rise wearily from bed, their faces grim and tired.

When they see the contents of the jar, Dad squeezes Maya's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Kid," he says.

"Frogs can't breathe under water," Mom said, "I'm sorry honey, I should have thought of that before."

Maya weeps bitterly all morning. She hates crying, both because it makes it hard to breathe and because she knows she cries more than most other kids, but she figures she owes the tadpole a proper mourning anyway. She puts on the black velvet dress she wore for her witch costume last Halloween, and buries the dead frog with the other animals, marking its grave with a small stone. Mom put rocks in the jar so that the remaining tadpole would have somewhere to sit once the time came, and Maya monitors it determinedly. Bailey comes back in three days, and they decide not to ruin her vacation with the bad news. Maya is afraid of making things worse in the meantime. Whatever she does she has to keep the remaining tadpole alive. She already can't imagine telling Bailey about the first tadpole — she doesn't even know which one it is who died.

Maya hates feeling guilty and she hates it when Bailey gets mad at her. Bailey is smaller than Maya in height but bigger in personality. She knows all of her weak spots, and never seems to have qualms about prodding at them. This time, Bailey will hate her for sure. She'll never speak to Maya again. She'll tell everyone in school what Maya has done and they will say she is a murderer.

Maya says a prayer before bed that night for the frog's soul and for forgiveness, even though she thinks God probably could have saved the frog if He was there and really cared. Afterward, she can't sleep. She looks at the clock beside her bed over and over again until it is 2 A.M., and she knows she probably won't get more than five hours of sleep tonight. Now, on top of worrying about her conscience, she is worried about her brain, because the school nutritionist said that 9 hours a night is necessary for healthy brain development. She lies on her back in bed, focusing and unfocusing her eyes on the glow in the dark stars on her ceiling and breathing shallowly. Finally, she hops out of bed and knocks nervously on her parent's door across the hall.

They have told her that she is too old to sleep with them now, but she figures tonight might be special circumstances and she is right: when she pokes her head in and asks to join them in a loud whisper, they sigh and roll their heads back to look at each other and say, "Alright, but you better not ask again for a long time." Nestled in the warm space between her parents, Maya pretends that she is a part of them, with no self to make choices or apologies for.

By the next morning, the remaining tadpole has climbed up onto the rocks. It crouches there, lonely, not quite a frog. It still has a long skinny tail. Maya watches it like a hawk. She make sure that it eats, keeping her eyes on it until all of the fish food is gone. She speaks to it through the glass.

"I'm sorry you're all alone," she says.

But the frog avoids eye contact.

It is so small, smaller than the dead one was, probably small enough to sit on Maya's finger, if fear of hurting it hadn't kept her from reaching into the jar. But for some reason Maya suspects it is a boy frog, and has a resigned feeling that the other was his sister. She hates thinking about what the frog felt when she died, but does so compulsively anyway. She imagines the excitement of growing lungs, but then the terror of gills closing up, how the frog just treaded water helplessly until she was too tired to go on. How her brother must have watched her with his little eyes, scared and confused, unable to help. Thinking about it makes Maya's stomach hurt.

"I'm sorry," she says again.

In the evening, Maya stands and watches the tadpole-frog, or the frog-pole, as she has begun to think of it sometimes, while her mom makes dinner in the kitchen. He is sitting in the crevice between two rocks, looking very still. Maya makes a face at him to try and get his attention but he does not move.

"Mom," she says, "The tadpole is sitting really still."

"I'm sure it's fine, honey," Mom says. "Just leave him be for a little bit."

Maya frowns and turns back to the jar. The frog still has not budged. She hums softly to get his attention: still nothing. A sense of panic rises inside of her, the same way that she feels when she is trying to awake from a nightmare. She has to know if he is alive: she has to make him move. Maya extends a finger and taps on the glass right where the frog is. It startles, shifts. Relief! But then — a pebble from above him loosens. Maya freezes as it comes tumbling down. Her relief turns into terror as she watches the stone fall directly onto the frog. He flattens instantly, only his bandy legs visible, splayed out from beneath the rock

“MOM!” Maya shrieks “I squashed him, I squashed him!” The jar is too high for her to reach into, and she bounces nervously on her toes willing the frog to live.

Mom hurries over and reaches into the jar to pull the rock off of the frog. When she does, he remains flat, his little tongue sticking out slightly as though he is an ill-fated looney toon.

Maya’s face crumples.

“I killed him! I kill everything! Bailey’s going to hate me.”

Mom wraps her into a hug, and Maya buries her face in the softness of her mother’s flesh, hiding in the familiar scent.

“I’m an idiot murderer,” she says.

“Don’t say idiot. And you’re not a murderer, it was an accident. Bailey might be upset but she’ll understand.”

Maya shakes her head without removing herself from her mom’s embrace. “*You* don’t understand.” Her eyes hurt from crying and she feels evil and stupid. She thinks about how she must look to the animals: giant, bumbling, destructive. And she loves animals. It isn’t fair. It occurs to her that if there is a God, He must hate her, and she clenches her small fist until her nails dig into her palms.

“I think God is punishing me,” she says.

Mom shakes her head. “That’s not how God works.”

“Well then I don’t believe in Him.” Maya hopes God can hear her declaration and that he regrets what He has done.

Mom is unmoved. “Okay then.”

Most likely Mom will tell Dad about this later, and he will bring it up to her when she is stuck in the car on the way to school. He will tell her that she does not have to believe anything, and that they will love her no matter what, but that having a connection with God makes life a lot more beautiful. He will tell her she still has to come to church on Sundays, even though Mom doesn’t even like church that much because they always call God “He.” Whatever.

“How am I supposed to tell Bailey?”

Mom sighs. “I can call her mom and talk to her if you want, and then maybe pass you over to Bailey. Does that sound good?”

Maya nods reluctantly.

While Mom dials Bailey’s family, Maya’s stomach is in knots. While she speaks to Bailey’s mother, Maya sits in the computer chair with her knees to his chest and spins back and forth nervously. Her stomach wooshes with each lurch.

“We lost the first one a few days ago when its gills grew over, and then today there was an accident with the second,” Mom is saying, “I know, I’m sorry, Maya feels really bad.”

As she listens, Maya’s breath grows shallow.

“Okay, yeah thank you. I’ll ask her.” She pulls the phone away from her ear. “Do you want to talk to Bailey?” she asks. Maya stares back at her, widening her eyes to illustrate her fear.

“It’ll be okay,” Mom mouths. She extends the phone and Maya takes it. It feels cool against her ear.

“Hello?” she says into the receiver, trying to keep the water out of her voice her voice.

“Hi.” Bailey’s voice on the other line is apprehensive. “My tadpoles are dead?”

“I killed them,” says Maya. She can feel herself losing control of her voice. “It was an accident. I’m sorry!”

Bailey is quiet for a second.

“It’s okay,” she says finally. “Can you stop crying?”

Maya sits up. “Really?”

“Yeah, it was an accident. I’m sad, but it’s okay.”

“Thank you,” Maya says, her heart swelling. Perhaps God does not hate her after all. I’m sorry, she tells Him silently, ashamed of her outburst. And then, as an afterthought, Amen.

“It’s okay. Maybe we can have a funeral for them when I get back,” says Bailey.

“That’s a good idea. I am really sorry.”

“I know. But maybe my mom will let me get hermit crabs now.”

“Yeah, maybe. I don’t think I’m going to be allowed to have a pet for a long time. But now I’m too scared anyway.”

Bailey laughs a little. “Yeah, you did kill both of my tadpoles. And they’re just tadpoles! They’re so easy.”

“I didn’t kill them until they turned into frogs. That was the main problem.” Maya feels herself getting sad again.

“Yeah, okay,” says Bailey, perhaps noticing.

There is a pause.

“Well, do you want to play Webkinz?” Bailey asks. “The hotel has a computer.”

“That sounds nice.”

So, they log on and watched their virtual pets play virtual games together, and Bailey usually wins but Maya doesn't mind. She is just happy to play together and be forgiven, to forget about her mistakes for a little bit, as though maybe it is okay that she made them. And best of all, imaginary animals live forever.



supper at emmaus

*THE CRITERIA I SENT THE
REALTOR*

I'd like to live
in a home with windows straight through,
like a Waffle House,
a box glass on three sides.
Put me up on a hill
where people can look into and out
the other side and scorn the way
nothing is hidden from them.
Not the trucker hunched like Goliath
over a stack of pancakes that will sit heavy
in his stomach on the long drive before him.
Not the mother drinking her third cup
of tongue-blister coffee
while her children smear syrup
on laminated menus.
Nobody in a Waffle House has any secrets.
When you enter, you sign on
to be an exhibit in this odd
museum of mundanity,
something that passers-by can point at
for a brief moment, something
that will cause them to wonder
what has brought you
to ten p.m. breakfast in the glass House
that never closes, your meal made
a monument that says: I'm here
for you to understand one moment of a stranger.
Do feel free to imagine my life.
If you please, make it strange
and somehow significant.



abstraction 2020



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INFORMATION

Cellar Door is the oldest undergraduate literary journal at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Published twice annually, the magazine has continually published the best poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and art of the undergraduate student body since 1973. It welcomes submissions from all currently enrolled undergraduate students at UNC. Guidelines for submission can be found online at www.unccellardoor.org. Please note that staff members are not permitted to submit to any section of *Cellar Door* while they work for the magazine.

All undergraduate students may apply to join the staff of *Cellar Door*. Any openings for positions on the Poetry, Fiction, or Art selection staffs will be advertised online. You may contact us via e-mail at thecellardoor.unc@gmail.com, or DM us @unccellardoor on Instagram and Twitter.

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