

euphony

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Managing Editor's Letter

Dear Reader,

I'm excited to share the first *Euphony* issue of the 2024–25 cycle with you.

I don't know where you're reading this now, but I am writing this letter from a bitterly cold January afternoon in Chicago. Snow blankets our school's campus, fierce winds drop the temperature from 10 to -4 degrees Fahrenheit, and we all spend quite a bit of time rushing around with our heads bent against the frigid air, eyes to the ground as we make our way from building to building as quickly as possible.

You may be reading this from a similar place, or from somewhere entirely different.

Either way, I hope that these pieces offer you some respite from the business of life. They take you from the mountains of Tibet to a medical school, from snowy forests to the Texan desert. They offer you some humor in absurd medical diagnoses or irreverent takes on religion. They remind you to look at the sky and appreciate the simple beauty of flocks of birds moving in synchronicity. They move in tone from playful manipulation of words to tongue-in-cheek descriptions of a suburban neighborhood to solemn considerations of death in multiple forms.

Whatever you're looking for in these pieces, I hope that you find it. I hope that they offer you something—solace, distraction, or merely a minute to take a breath and read a poem as you rest, just for a moment, from the constant movement of the day-to-day.

Ayman, Shiloh, Katherine, and Maya, thank you for your work combing through submissions and leading discussions—it's your initial curatorial work that makes *Euphony* meetings what they are. To each and every person who attended a *Euphony* meeting last spring or this fall, thank you—this issue would not be possible without each and every one of you.

I am proud to present the Winter 2025 issue of *Euphony*.

Happy reading,
Mazie Witter
Managing Editor

POEMS

POETRY EDITORS' LETTER

Dear Reader,

It's January in Chicago. It was cold yesterday, and it is cold today, and it will be cold tomorrow. We have a long way to go.

While winter has no shortage of familiar solaces - stews and movies, a roiling kettle - it's also a strange season. It's a season of howling, of great beasts in hibernation. The Green Knight's beheading game, the anemic sun. Wind whisking snow into ghosts on the street.

Poetry, too, offers more than just comfort. Yes, some poems are as warming as a fire in the hearth, but some bite like a northern wind. Others are as stark and desolate as a snowfield. Still others land with precise softness, a snowflake on the face.

The first poem in this issue, "What You Say When You Die" brings an aching familiarity to the abstraction of death, while "SUBURBIA, ON ANY GIVEN DAY" cracks open a window into the minds of neighbors. The next two poems take language itself as their subject: "Story" lets familiar archetypes materialize and dissolve out of the dream-fog of language, while "Snow Leopard Villanelle" examines the cryptic connection between words and the world. "Coming Up Jesus" weaves together religion and poetry, sincerity and showmanship, while "Periodic" takes an unabashed fascination in tragedy. Closing out the poetry section, "Ghosts Come" gives a voice to the nonhuman, and "Strange weather we're having these last days" is a breathless account of the urge to be somewhere, something we are not.

This issue of *Euphony* invites you into stranger homes and stranger worlds. We hope you find comfort within these pages, but we hope you find it in places you never would have expected. And we hope comfort is not all that you find.

With gratitude to the team at *Euphony*, our contributors, and our readers,
Mohammed Lone and Shiloh Miller
Poetry Editors

What You Say When You Die

J.R. Forman

you think of hot evenings watching cottontails scatter
at the yip of waking coyotes
you think of watching clouds of heat lightning
glimmer like pearly gates
you think of baseball fishing in the pond
and across the water the boys are striking out
you think of working the sluice box
a few nights more and just maybe just maybe
striking rich you think of that old diviner
striking the cave rock for arrowheads
you remember striking out west for the territories

you say how many miles there are in Texas
you say you'll have a Mexican Coke
you say your daughter-in-law's pregnant
and your nephew's wife and your cousin's son's wife
and your own daughter
you say your father but not your mother have gone before
and rest in the sleep
you speak of your father but not your mother
you say you'll grow old before your cousin
can finish his story the one about sleeping at the Greyhound station
you say you don't know what happens now

you get your picture made with all the relations
you get your socks put on and your gloves
you get a new pajama set from Neiman Marcus
you get made up like you'll go to town or maybe even Dallas

you die simple-like
like taking off your coat

Story

Giles Goodland

The unnamed narrator coats the stones like rain. He says: There is logos inside the logo, logic in the log, but watch the long-sleeved willow in autumn as it sways: willow, hold your suede over the colossus of loss, your shadow strides the forest seeking seeking. He says: Where the blackbirds fire songs a story emerges. The king of the country of rain sets out to find the mouth. He writes in the dusk of the something thumping. Fump of a closing car door. Dense winds assemble limbs, light pulses on the pond after the thrown stone, one wind of the screw locks knowledge. Through stopped doors the whale booms. Where language rips language apart is where language starts.

SUBURBIA, ON ANY GIVEN DAY

John Grey

Steve is comforted by the fact that humans are top of the food-chain. His sister Keri's greatest wish is for some cute guy to stand beneath her window and sing Harry Styles songs to her. If it's the actual Harry Styles, so much the better. To their mother, Harriet, everything is a matter of life and death. Her husband, Frank says you have to make trouble's strength work against it. Harriet long ago threw up her hands at the ever-changing world of fashion. Steve's best friend, Kurt would like nothing more than an inner being. Keri's paranoid about all the minute creatures crawling on her skin. Frank was the oldest person in his graduating class to own a laptop. Keri's best friend, Hannah can't swim but can often be found posing, at the town pool, at the very end of the diving board. Steve considers his parents to be small-minded. Kurt so much wanted a drum-kit for his birthday but his divorced mom bought him a rifle instead. Frank has an abnormal fear of being sued for slander. Hannah's dad, Roy is always saying how there's more than one way to skin a cat. He can only name one. Steve longs for powers beyond those of mortal men. When Kurt grows up, he wants to be a slumlord. Keri's on-and-off boyfriend, Derrick collects critters in jars. Harriet considers rap artists the worst of humanity. In her teenage years, she worshiped Guns 'n' Roses. Steve has yet to find any use for his self-choreographed victory dance. When Keri is ten years older, she plans to take stock of her life. Roy has sold fewer used cars this year than all three of his co-workers. Hannah's often found on her front doorstep, rehearsing how to say goodbye to a guy. Kurt's experiences with bullies have been fearful and demeaning but, as yet, none have ended in bloodshed. Harriet possesses nothing that will increase in value in the coming years. Having lived all his life in the suburbs, Frank has never been in a position where he had to find a needle in a haystack.

When Roy writes out a check for his mortgage payment,
he deliberately doesn't cross the t's or dot the i's.
Steve, recently introduced to tacos, is yet to make up his mind
as to whether he likes them or not.
Frank, always a team player, once dreamed of being
the third guy from the left in a firing squad.
Hannah is comforted by the fact that no terrorist attacks
have ever been carried out in a suburban setting.
Roy is the only one at the lot who still reads the newspaper funny
pages.
Steve is a major reason behind Frank's vasectomy.
Derrick often says, if he had it all to do over again, he wouldn't change
a thing.
The frog (name unknown) in his biggest, smelliest jar is of a different
mindset.

Snow Leopard Villanelle

from a high school typing class

Raphael Kosek

*Snow leopards are graceful animals with soft fur
the students type over and over again as well as
They live in the high rugged mountains of Tibet.*

Does each word imprint like the leopard's paw
set down in stealth on the cold white world where
snow leopards are graceful animals with soft fur?

As their fingers search out the abstract letters clotting
on the screen, can the typists divine the leopard's hunger
as it roams the high, rugged mountains of Tibet?

Can they envision the bumper sticker, "Free Tibet"
taking on flesh as burgundy monks flood the streets,
while snow leopards stay shy animals, seldom seen?

Do they hear how the word *Tibet* tolls like a bell
thrumming some grave irrevocable message
in the high, rugged mountains of the mind?

Is it too much to ask of a person to remain conscious,
to set your fingers ablaze with the solemn knowing
that snow leopards are graceful animals with soft fur
and they live where you will likely never go?

Coming Up Jesus

Jeff McRae

Jesus had it going on for a good couple of years,
like Billy Collins—followers who said *mmm* when
he hit them with a perfect image, event attendees
who snapped their fingers and played bongos,

who caught him up when he took the leap of faith,
held him over head, passing him person to person
like something viral, a Best of the Net poem. Never
did they let him fall. And just like Collins they

wanted to touch him, be near when he left the stage
for dinner and drinks at the after-hours hang with
like-minded locals. Jesus toured a solid year, playing
small venues (*hilltop, outside town, tonight!*),

growing his base, hustling, honing his cadence,
tightening his timing, before hitting it big, always
performing the same material but changed it up
gig to gig, tweaks to make it new, keep his own

interest, working out other angles on love. At first,
reviews were few but his reputation grew and by
what accounts remain he killed, he slayed—
seekers arrived early and stayed late. Oh sure,

some nights they threw stones or soldiers cleared
the olive grove. Even Billy wrote a stinker or two.
For Jesus, parables were the glue for the whole
show—without them he was just another weirdo

standing in a river with a ragtag entourage. But
there was no doubt—the man was on to something,
all au courant—all these feeling you didn't know
you already knew and had never told a soul.

Periodic

Rebecca Myers

His final breaths
served as a reminder
that dying had been kept
from me all these years: Yes,
I wept, but more
because of the ecstatic
unbraiding that accompanied
the irregular pattern
of rapid gasps and
apnea -- to witness
this interstice as flesh
shut down was sad
but extraordinary, to exist
between halt and
resumption meant
I could never go back to being
the daughter who only hours earlier
had found the vibrant green
underneath the oxidized
pesto unremarkable.

Ghosts Come

Jane Wiseman

In the blackout storm, our wings
shear through ravages of cloud
seen only in flashes. Compassing
our trackway toward you, we wheel
into dirty weather.

We bring you gifts: A feather.
A pebble. We bring you stems
of bracken. We bring a heart.

Above you, we murmur
among ourselves on the rooftree,
the pattering, the paltering
of our nails just audible
beneath thunder, the spouts and gusts
of rain rattling the sashes.

You thought you dreamed us.

When you wake, we come in sunlight,
sheen of morning on our backs.
Our beaks full of birrs and musicks, we bow
to lay our favor at your feet.

We have crossed your threshold.
We have claimed your shelter.

Strange weather we're having these last days

Jane Wiseman

Startled awake, I left my frayed brain
resting in its head-case as I floated away
up to the ceiling, out of the long window
into the northern hardy redbud just outside
beginning its flower, tight pink nodules
studding the branches, while beyond it, a cloud
puffed up, harried off as the front came through,
high dark wall towering, leading edge of it
a yellow strip against the curtain of rain
hanging tatters from it, and I wished never
to shove back into the tight cabinet of skull but
sweep west with the storm's scud over the continent.

PROSE

PROSE EDITORS' LETTER

Dear Reader,

Every year, Chicago residents tend to lament the arrival of winter. From the vast gray clouds which coat the sky for weeks on end, to the darkness that settles in the early afternoon and the icy arctic winds which ensure the city lives up to its name, winters in Chicago bring with them a chill that extends far beyond the dropping temperatures. Thus, perhaps it is unsurprising that all of our selections for this winter's issue explore seemingly bleak themes.

However, to experience a cold midwestern winter is also to watch heavy snowflakes glide through the air, and to wake up to a world covered in a blanket of white. It is skating on frozen lakes and building snowmen and tracing the lines of angels in the middle of a blizzard. Much like these moments of beauty hiding in the chilly gray of winter, this issue's selections explore the intricacies of pain, aging, and loss. We begin with "Don't Be Afraid to Forget" which explores the complex nature of college relationships in the wake of a friend's death. The detailed narrative and honest dialogues capture the raw emotions at play in the face of life's tragic turns. We then move to "The Diagnosis", an experimental piece of prose which creatively parodies humanity's seemingly never-ending problems with an irony and wit that poke fun while arriving at a beautifully thoughtful conclusion.

"Miss December" is an experience of a short weight of loss, a suffocatingly gripping fear, and resilience. The story digs out the hard realities in these facets of survival—both against systemic neglect and personal grief—which culminate into an unyielding portrait of a young woman in desperate pursuit of hope. Our last piece, "something that knows it's dead," is a haunting exploration of delusion and decay that examines the tenuous boundary separating control from surrender. With clinical imagery and raw, unflinching descriptions of how the character unravels mentally, the piece depicts a world where the mind and the body struggle with their own mortality.

These pieces together broach the shadows of human experiences: grief, decay, and survival—all with unwavering honesty. We hope this issue offers a space to reflect on the profound complexities of the human condition, even in its darkest moments.

Please be aware that there is body horror present in "something that knows it's dead."

Best regards,
Katherine Chen and Maya Mustata

Don't Be Afraid to Forget

Griffin Gudaitis

While I was at Dave's wake, all I could think about was the last time he got laid. Since graduation, he'd been on three or four dates, but none of them really went anywhere. This thought just cropped up in my mind, not that it brought me any particular joy, but seeing that it wasn't going anywhere, I remembered the sound of his raspy voice.

"This is where the magic happened."

There was a pensive note in it as he stood over his stained mattress. It rested alone on his dusty floor, the one article of furniture left in his entire room. From it, I caught a whiff of expired beer or God knows what. To celebrate the end of our lease, he invited his on-and-off situation-ship over for one last time. Suddenly, I realized that this too was the last time I saw him in person.

I blurted out loud, "You guys remember when Dave fucked Stacey Gallagher?"

"Jesus Christ, Charlie." Morgan shot her eyes towards Dave's mom, who was chatting with his older siblings. Dave happened to look a lot like her, especially in recent years.

"I can't stop thinking about it."

Oscar gaped at me with a mouthful of shrimp cocktail. "You did not just fucking say that."

"You think I want to remember it any more than you do?"

"Then why did you bring it up?"

"Guys, shut up. Dave's mom is coming."

As Dave's mom approached, she waved delicately at us, the comic trio huddled in the corner at her son's wake. Morgan clenched her teeth as Dave's mom swept her into a warm embrace.

"Thank you all so much for coming." She turned towards me. "I hope the last-minute flight from D.C. wasn't too expensive, Charlie."

I felt guilty, not because I travelled the furthest out of us, but because there was doubt whether I'd make it to Dave's funeral.

"I wouldn't miss this for the world."

Dave's mom held my hand. "I know you wouldn't, honey. You were the best friends David ever had. He loved you all so, so much."

Morgan, Oscar, and I fell silent. How could we have been Dave's best friends? Sure, here we were at his wake, shooting the breeze and breathing in clean air. Meanwhile, Dave lay stiff cold some ten yards away from us in his coffin—his skin probably lathered in shiny embalming fluid to prevent rot and decay—like a repurposed doll in plastic casing. Had we actually been his best friends and not splintered off to

pursue our careers, there was a chance he would still be alive.

Dave's mom said, "There are beers in the cooler if you want to help yourselves."

...

By the time we got to the hotel, the thermostat sank to twelve below zero and the liquor started to flow. While I sat at the bar hiccupping, I couldn't make out what was weirder: the signed photograph of Barack Obama holding a slain moose by the antlers, or the fact that the Super Bowl was on the television. How could either of these details belong to the night before Dave's funeral? I wondered. I had never been to rural New Hampshire before, especially in the winter. At the bar, Oscar was doing Dave's impression of Donald Trump. Just like Dave, Oscar squeezed his eyes, wrinkled his lips, and pinched his fingers.

"I'm not saying all Mexicans are bad, but they're definitely not sending us their best."

I drained my glass of bourbon. "As terrible as it was, I have to admit that was Dave's best impression."

"Actually," Morgan said, "Dave's best impression was of you, Charlie."

"Yeah!" Oscar chimed in. "He had your laugh nailed. Just like Goofy. He even did the hiccups you get when you drink whiskey."

I suppressed the urge to hiccup and instead croaked like a frog. "Bullshit."

Morgan waved at me to hush. In one motion, she rolled her eyes, palmed her face, and sighed. "Don't people know words have meaning? Does anyone know anything? Guess it's time to write a short story about my high school girlfriend." Morgan rattled her fingers madly along the bar counter.

A week before college, my first-ever girlfriend dumped me, and the breakup triggered in me the need to write. For months, it was the only thing I could do. I would hang up all my stories by strips of packaging tape to the walls, and soon enough, my bedroom looked as though it belonged to a serial killer. It was only after Dave used half my stories to wipe up spilled beer that I threw out the rest. We hadn't known each other well then, even though we were roommates. He grew close to Morgan and Oscar long before he grew close to me. I shunned him for a week or two. Then we became friends.

I slammed down my glass. "That doesn't sound like me at all!"

I raised my glass but stopped short. "Okay, fine. He had a point. But did that asshole really have to die for me to find out that his best impression was of me?"

At the opposite end of the bar, several members of Dave's family booed at the television as the referee overturned a fumble recovery.

Morgan said, "When was the last time you talked to him?"

I thought it over. “A week or two ago. He went on a date and called to tell me. You?”

She bit her lips. “Two or three months. I don’t even remember what we talked about.”

“You keep in touch with anyone else from college?”

Morgan shook her head. “You?”

“No, not really.”

Just then, Oscar stood up and left. I went to go after him, but Morgan held me back.

“Oscar hasn’t seen or talked to Dave since graduation.”

Dave and Oscar lived less than fifteen minutes apart in Boston, just two stops away on the Green Line.

After I ordered and drained my re-fill, I said, “Did something happen?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Anything at all? Like an argument, a falling out, something?”

“As far as I know, they got along all right. I think Oscar just got busy with work.”

“That’s it?”

I watched a set of first downs on the television while I waited for her response. When none came, I looked over and saw that she was crying. She was silent at first but then let out a long, low moan.

When Dave’s family looked at us, I tried pulling Morgan away. “It’s all right. No one’s gonna judge you here.”

“Don’t touch me.” She shoved me, then hissed, “Ever since Dave died, you’ve been acting like you can solve his death like some fucking puzzle. You can’t. Picking apart the details of his death, re-arranging them like little fucking pieces...”

She stood up slowly. I reached for her hand.

“Where are you going?”

“To find Oscar.”

She let go and disappeared around the corner of the bar.

...

When I first heard that Dave died, I was convinced that in some way I already knew. I wondered a lot about where my thoughts came from, how they strung themselves together, and why I thought the way I did. I think more than anything I feared my own death. If I could unearth the secret to Dave’s, then by some sort of telepathic osmosis I could prevent my own.

The night he passed, he’d gone out with his coworkers. The toxicology report showed alcohol in his system, but the quantity wasn’t anywhere near fatal, nor did he have any drugs. Then, at some point in the night, Dave died. His roommates had left town for the weekend. When they arrived home on Sunday evening, they found him lying in his bed

as though he were sleeping.

Unless his family was hiding something, no one knew why, but by that point, it didn’t really matter. He was gone, and no amount of finger-pointing would bring him back.

Why did we lose touch after graduation? It wasn’t as if we took off to different countries, met our soulmates, or found our dream jobs, let alone jobs we even liked. Dave and Oscar stayed in Boston. Morgan moved to New York, and I went to D.C., where I worked for a lobbyist as a human sign in Congress. In all the days I spent twirling that fucking cardboard around, it never occurred to me how small my problems were. Not once. And even if some days were so bad, were they bad enough for me to forget my friend?

I could’ve just sent, “Hey! How are you?”

A single text message. That’s all it takes to stay in touch, and it’s the one thing I didn’t do.

Neither Oscar, Morgan, nor I said anything that night, but later on we partied with Dave’s extended family in a school bus. After we got kicked out of the bar and hotel altogether, we found it outside in the parking lot. It had been abandoned for the winter season. Once we pried open its rusty doors, three dozen of us piled inside to sing and drink together. That night, the night before Dave’s funeral, was the most fun I had since college. It seemed like the perfect way to remember him.

...

The synagogue was along Interstate 93. No one in Dave’s family spoke about him, which is something I think about whenever I go to a dark place. I didn’t understand any of the readings, either, since they were in Hebrew. But the rabbi said something that has never left me since.

“I would like to remember every face I see. After all, there really aren’t many Jews living in New Hampshire, but I didn’t know David Hanselman really at all. For those of you who did, I am sure he did beautiful things that you will never forget. I wrote down a loose quote from the poet Maya Angelou if you’d like me to read it. Okay, it says, ‘People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget the way you made them feel.’

“*Baruch dayan emet*,” he said. “Go in peace, David.”

...

After the service, we had Italian catered food in the basement. I forget who exactly told me, an aunt or uncle, that Dave’s body wasn’t embalmed as I thought it would be. According to Jewish law, it is forbidden to tamper with the body in any way at death to facilitate one’s journey into the afterlife. You let it take its natural course. I decided that’s the way I would go out.

Eventually, I went over to Dave’s mom. “I just wanted to apologize

for everything.”

She scrunched her eyebrows. “Apologize for what?”

I began to stutter until she candidly said, “I had a close friend from college who died.”

These were just about the last words I expected to leave her lips, so I listened.

“She collided with an eighteen-wheeler head-on. Died on impact. It was so random. We had just graduated three weeks prior. My friends and I made promises to always stay in touch.” Dave’s mom looked over to Morgan and Oscar. “But time passes on. I met my husband, fell in love, and had my kids.” She held my hand. “Don’t be afraid to forget David.”

...

Before I left, I grabbed a plate of food for the long journey home. Oscar hitched a ride with one of Dave’s hot cousins back to Boston, but flights from Logan were expensive, so I carpooled with Morgan to New York City to catch a train back to DC. I was set to return to work the next day.

About two hours into our ride, Morgan broke the silence.

“They haven’t buried him yet.”

I was surprised by how quickly I grew furious.

“Why do you say that?”

“The ground is frozen solid. They can’t bury him until spring.”

The Diagnosis

Sam Ramos

I never like to give this kind of news, but we ran some tests, and you have cancer. You also have long COVID. And diabetes. And rabies. And tapeworm. And athlete’s foot. And moody spine. You have boredom. You have bleeding. You have really thick hairs on your forearms. You have dropsy. You have hysterical legs. Polio. Dengue Fever. Bionic eyes. To expand on your eyes, you have cataracts. You have one blue eye and one weird eye. You have a lazy eye and also you’re missing an eye. You have very long eyelashes. You have Sickle Cell Anemia. You have Poison Ivy. You have chicken pox. You have a wandering uterus. You have gastroenteritis. You have the shits. You have the squirts. You have anal leakage. You have anal fissures. You have anal fever. You have anal tooth. Did you know you’re missing seven fingers? And I’m sorry to say that you don’t have a back. Your neck is longer than average. Your knuckles are made of squirrels. You have a glass jaw and lockjaw and you’re thirsty. I’m going to shoot straight with you. Okay? You have a bumpy tongue. You bite your nails. You’re rude to your mom. Your sister will never forgive you for breaking her plastic horse toy when you were kids. You feel a little guilty every time you kill any insect. You have a vasectomy, a mastectomy, and a tonsillectomy. You have ectoplasm of the liver. You have euphoria. You have insomnia. You have the thing the Beast had in *Beauty and the Beast*. You have Benjamin Button Disease. You have *Pulp Fiction*. You have non-fiction. You have the flop sweats. You have two uvulas. You have long hair. You have perfect teeth. You have BJ lips. You have hammer toes, depression, sad mouth, the blues, the hiccups, the stupids, and the gimmes. You tested positive for idealism. You tested positive for thinking too hard too often about too much. I know. The prognosis is not good. Most of these things can be addressed with a simple surgical procedure. However, for the rest, it’s going to take time and prayer. For now I can write you a prescription for the serenity to accept the things you cannot change, the courage to change the things you can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Also 30 minutes of exercise per day on your remaining leg, and plenty of water.

Miss December

Dominic Viti

In the winter of ■■■■■'s seventeenth year, bone cancer put her beloved mother to rest under the hospital bed's white sheets, the same winter her dog chased a rabbit into the woods and never came home, froze to death in the night's snow, a comforter that only brought more cold, so quick and thick the bark on trees cracked from the sap hardening beneath and branches fell on frosted sidewalks salted the blue of cold itself, the blue of her mother's broken veins the evening her stillness matched the town's silence, after the third teenage girl that month disappeared walking home from her low-cut, minimum-wage job at a restaurant whose bright orange big-eyed owl sign glowed and blinked and made a ticking sound that reminded the other girls it was just a matter of time until they walked home alone past the abandoned strip mall in the dark that would swallow them whole, leaving behind their kid brothers and sisters and unfinished journals and pop music posters wallpapering their bedroom their mother would leave the same way they left it, even though nothing would ever be the same, deepening the town's anxiety that spread its own cancer and boosted the sales of pepper spray and religious pendants and turned in them a fear with every locked door, every person padlocked, latch locked, deadbolted with fear that someone was still out there, prompting no action from police who said the girls were runaways, because they were too busy combing rich white neighborhoods for that missing white girl, ■■■■■ told her boyfriend, who for the entire winter break had been trying to make her come with the clinical groping of an oncologist checking for lumps, and since the results were negative, she broke it off to look for a job to save up for a one-way bus ticket to college, finally being hired by the local cinema to sell tickets and refreshments, learning quickly how to not burn popcorn and to avoid her manager whose hands always seemed to brush up against her body when they were in the dark theater or alone in the storage closet that made her go stiff as a broom, and because she never gave into his advances he reduced her hours and forced to quit and take a low-cut, minimum-wage job at the restaurant that was like serving a hundred of her manager, their eyes entering her top as though it were a screen, and every night against her mother's warnings she took the shortcut home past the big-eyed owl through the unlit parking lot of the abandoned strip mall where she'd bought her favorite summer dress but now bundled against the wind and cold, wearing headphones over her beanie even though her mother said music would hide an attacker's approaching footsteps or a car driving slowly behind her with its head-

lights off, thinking gunshots in the song were happening around her, pop pop pop, trembling to her core much in the way ■■■■■ felt when the night her mother passed she tried to forget by going to a party held in a foreclosed motel, beer ponging liquor on a changing table while taking uppers, downers, any direction she could smoke, sniff or swallow, waking the next morning in a bathtub with her pants off, unable to move or remember what happened until the last days of month, when she missed her period and puked in the hamper and took a pregnancy test that her stepfather found in the bathroom waste bin, telling her she was no longer welcome in his home, leaving her to stay at different friends' houses, talking about the girls who had gone missing, how their parents had forbidden them to work at the restaurant or walk alone at night, which made her friends' mothers lash out at them for not getting a real job and parading their bodies around for tips they spent at the bar instead of saving up to buy a car to get to and from work, not walking the streets like whores, advice the mothers wished they could have given themselves before getting knocked up by their high school sweethearts who knocked them down and abandoned them to raise three kids in a single trailer mobile home that only moved from fighting and fucking, where winter froze the pipes so they had no running water and bathed in snow they cooked on the stove and lived on food stamps and welfare checks with just enough money left over at the end of the month to turn the cable back on and see ■■■■■'s stepfather being handcuffed in the foreclosed motel for kidnapping a girl the same age her, the same age and description as the girls he claimed were buried in the woods, which made her friend's mother lash out at her, throwing birthday cake at her face and yelling to get the hell out of her house, so she had to wheel her bag alone in the dark toward the bus station, and right as her phone died and the music cut out she could hear the sound of someone walking behind her, whistling his own tune, and at the drop of a branch she bolted into the woods like a dog let loose, fast at first, then the snow got deeper and her steps got slower all while hearing him whistling patiently behind her, sensing time's terrible advancement had been stilled for her to feel the graveyard of not just her friends but her entire childhood buried beneath her feet, looking up at the sky hoping to see a cathedral of stars but seeing only darkness, ■■■■■ ran, ducked, leapt, screamed into the age of eighteen.

something that knows it's dead

Isabel Yacura

Her body is rotting.

Allison knows this, just as she knows the four chambers of the heart—two atria, two ventricles—and how to stitch a simple continuous suture.

When she slices open the cadaver, y-shape, petals of flesh blooming underneath her fingers, her advisor praises her steady hands.

Beneath her mask, Allison smiles.

There was a certain strange arrogance that divided students at Allison's undergrad. There were the athletes, and the non-athletes. Non Athletic Regular People, or NARPs, if you wanted to be a dickhead. They—the athletes—usually did. Blithe and narrow-eyed and strong, they walked campus like they owned it, which they did. They had the best dorms, the best parties, had the best people—if best meant most attractive, which in college it did.

They were also falling-apart people, and Allison watched with a strange vindictive pleasure as they dropped like flies around her. A torn ACL, a shattered patella, a strained shoulder that couldn't knit itself back together like it had before.

These shiny happy people, breaking into vivid mirror bright pieces. Littering campus with their loose tendons and blood stained jerseys. They called them NARPs—ugly, ugly, ugly—and Allison and the rest of the regular people watched with a sort of *schadenfreude* as the thing that set them above failed them at the last.

Arrogant until they weren't. And now she, two years out from undergrad, her first choice medical school, smug and pleased with the fact that two years ago, that had been their last hurrah, their last gasp of whatever the fuck thought made them so special. The mind doesn't break like the body does, doesn't snap under the pressure of catching a ball or a single step running wrong. She is above, and her mind will keep ticking, be useful much longer than some idiot volleyball player who God blessed with being a little taller than average.

The mind doesn't break like the body does.

Except when it does.

Allison's body is rotting from the inside out, except for how it isn't.

She knows it isn't, knows that she's fine. She drew her own blood, ran it through tests. Volunteered to go under the MRI. Knows that

there's no way her body is actually decomposing, one vestigial organ at a time, her appendix putrefying to black slime in her abdominal cavity, her—

She's not. She's *not*.

But at the same time, there is a sort of bone deep truth, like her marrow has rotted out and replaced it with this axiom, that she is festering.

She split open that cadaver, with her perfect autopsy and perfect slices, revealing the body's organs, wet with cancer and not yet congealed blood. And it got *in her*.

That's all she has. That's all she knows.

That it got *in her*.

It's not cancer, she says, frustrated, asking for tests that she cannot justify. It's not. She knows that the death itself, flecks and specks of it, has gotten into her, has taken root. Is liquifying her organs, like a potato sack left in the back of a dark cupboard. Her nerves clotting. Bones growing flowers of mold, the gray green spores digging into the calcium, feathering out in fractal structures in her femurs. She is rotting from the inside out. Except it's not her body, it's her mind, because that's the only real explanation she has.

She is, at the end, just like those hated golden geese. Her brain is snapping under the strain.

Unless—of course.

Unless she is rotting.

She's not. She's not.

She leaves Anatomy and hacks into a tissue. Something wet and strangely cold lands in her palm and she folds the kleenex round it, doesn't look at it, keeps it in her hand till it warms to her skin and she can find a trash can and drop it in. Her eyes averted the whole time.

It's not real. It's not real, except for how it is.

She hunches late over her textbooks, spinning a highlighter between her clumsy fingers, dropping it half the time. Her knuckles solidifying. Rigor mortis. She feels like she can't get her shoulders from around her ears, feels like her bones might be calcifying into crawling craving hunchbacked submission.

"Do you think you have cancer?" her primary doctor says, tentatively. He's an older man, veering towards just plain old, with white hair and a mustache and a gaze that says he doesn't know what to do with Allison, with her neatly cut hair and ramrod posture and half a medical degree. Doesn't know what to do with someone who swears they're not ill, swears they're not sick they're decomposing except maybe slap them with Munchausen or hysteria, like she's a Victorian woman whose uterus has gone wandering.

Allison stops going to the doctor.

Allison starts painting her nails again.

Layers and layers of black and red, alternating, so that she can't tell whether it's the endless polish that's staining the keratin or something worse.

With the polish and rivers of acetone, she can pretend her fingernails are peeling, corroding, changing color like something gone to seed because of the chemicals.

"Your skin looks really good," one of her—not friends, Allison doesn't have friends, not exactly—classmates says, looking her over with an assessing eye. She's a pretty, bouncy thing, someone Allison hates on principle, with her blonde ponytail and her legs sculpted by running endless miles. She's extremely smart, and Allison sits behind her in both the classroom and rankings in biochemistry, and Allison hates her, hates her—

"Thank you," Allison says, politely. Gives her a smile.

"What are you using?" the blonde says, returns the smile, something hopeful in her eyes. She shifts from one white sneakered foot to the other. "I'm breaking out like crazy, right now-- I think it's all the stress? And they tell you to drink more water, but like, I don't want to have to pee every thirty seconds on the floor so—"

Allison imagines spitting in her mouth.

Imagines hacking up black putrefaction, like ink or ichor, out from the cavity that is her body and spitting it at her open, laughing mouth. Imagines the splatter of it across her high cheekbones, the way it would clump together in the blonde. The way it would never come out, never scrub away, would rot her away just the same it's rotting Allison away.

Allison swallows, thickly. Her mouth tastes like mold. "I think it's the rice toner," she says. Smiles with her lips closed, so the blackness in between her teeth doesn't show.

"I'll try that!" Blonde says, smiles, genuinely, at her.

Allison goes home and rubs at the skin of her arms until her forearms are red and burning, like she's been out under the sun for days and days. Till it's pink and scaly and all the hair there has been abraded off, till she is a smooth glabrous thing, a creature that has never seen the sun or the warmth of day.

She's not sick. She's not ill. She's not dying. You can't be dying if you're already dead. She's just waiting for everything else to catch up. She's a walking corpse, and Allison doesn't understand how no one else can see that.

Understands suddenly, cold pang of dread, how no one else can see that. Allison doesn't imagine her mind. The mind is a thing she rarely thinks about. She eschewed as many philosophy classes and papers as she could get away with. So she does not imagine the mind coming apart.

Instead, when they pop the cranium off another cadaver, Allison looks and sees her own brain instead.

A lump of white meat, cracked open like a crab leg. She can almost see the final fatalistic sparks of electricity that could've bounced between the neurons as they fought for life, even at the end.

Sees her own brain, unraveling. Turning to soup in her skull. Pictures taking the wrinkly folded up mass and pulling it like taffy, stretching it, till it's just long lengths of flat white tissue. Ironing out all the pesky things she doesn't like about herself—her jealousy-fear of other women that manifests as a spitting hatred, her ingrained disdain of anyone she considers less than her, that poison that lives in her brain that she cannot get rid of, an abscess she refuses to lance, the surety that she's right, that they are less, her childish fear of spiders crawling in her mouth in the night.

Her conviction that her body has died long ago, and she's puppeting it around through sheer stubbornness.

When her left molar pops out of her aching gums, Allison touches the tip of her tongue to the gaping hole and calmly replaces it, held in place with a piece of sterile white gauze.

Psychology is a soft science, and Allison would never deign to lower her gaze down to it. Besides, she's not crazy. Her brain chemistry is just out of balance.

She refused the referral her primary care doctor gave her, and the half-tilted question, the vague sense of pity inherent in therapist. She goes to a psychiatrist instead, gives a toneless, flat bulleted list of her delusions. Sits on a too-comfortable velvet couch, refusing to let her spine touch the back, no s-curve into something like submission.

"We can start you on a low dose of Chlorpromazine," the doctor says, peering at her through coke bottle glasses. "I'd be interested in discussing—"

"I wouldn't," Allison says, and takes her script and her doctor's furrowed brow with her to the pharmacy, even as her stomach bile arches its way up into her esophagus, burning away wafer thin layers of mucosa, muscularis mucosa, submucosa, and muscularis propria. She says their names like a prayer, in her head, an orison to the two to three cell thick stratum slowly dissolving in the ossified white husk of her throat.

Her nails are peeling.

Allison stands in line at Walgreens and peels them off in thin layers, sheaves of wheat, blood and bone pooling underneath these strange unfurling petals. She doesn't look down at her busy, nervous hands. Stares straight ahead, is polite to the pharmacist (couldn't even be a real doctor, had to settle for tossing round pills like some sort of Vegas dealer for pharmaceuticals) and leaves.

When she walks through the automatic door, there's a call for clean

up in the pharmacy department—biohazardous material on the linoleum floor.

There is iron under her tongue all the time these days, perfumed with mildew.

Allison's hair is complimented by an old woman at the grocery store. "Beautiful!" she says, admiring. "So thick and healthy. You're lucky to have your youth—"

Allison stares at her, and wonders if the woman can see the bloody flakes coming off her scalp, like the devil's own dandruff. Corpse hair doesn't really grow, after all. It's just the skin shrinking as the body—

She goes to class, writes notes in her strict up and down print. She's fossilizing. Her outside become a shell. Something pretty and rigid and smooth like an oyster, like an eggshell, hiding the deformed chick beneath, her brain's decaying oozing half hearted attempt to make sure the heart stays pumping.

It is extremely funny, in a way, that she cannot keep food down anymore. Or digest it, maybe, is the better term. It is extremely funny because she is losing weight by the hour, and everyone keeps asking what she's doing, because she looks amazing, Allison, really.

Allison does not look amazing. She looks dead. She squeezes her dry eyes shut—she's going through dry eye drops like crazy, now, about a bottle a day, as her eyes are refusing to hydrate on their own.

There's something in her eyes. She rubs at it, instinctively, and then harder and harder and harder and harder until her eyelashes are stuck under the lid, until the eye itself seems liable to snap off the ocular nerve, rolling around in the socket like a cue ball, turning around to look into the back of her skull and see—

Nothing. Nothing there anymore. Just rot and ooze and empty, empty, empty.

Allison sighs, opens her eyes. Black before her. Gives a shake of her head, feels them resettling in her eye sockets. Vision returning, running through points of exposure, opening up the lens to the sky. Clicking like marbles. Like glass. Like stone.

Allison makes a decision.

Allison stays late, in the lab. Working on her cultures. Waits till she is the last one there, the last one in the building, the last one in the whole entire world, maybe.

She thinks it would be funny. To be the last one in the world. There wouldn't be a single live person on planet earth.

She goes down to the morgue. She feels at home, there, and smiles at the thought. Her lips crack as she does so, at the corners. She can't really feel how far things are supposed to stress. Or stretch. Doesn't really get the natural limits of the body anymore, just what's in and out of habit.

It doesn't matter. It's not like she's bleeding.

She goes down to the morgue. Turns on the lights. Lays out her tools. Carefully, she scrubs in. Takes her time. Cleans her fingernails, what's left of them, scrubs around her delicate wrist bone, goes up to the elbows. Across all that smooth skin, with no give, no warmth.

The last thing she does is turn on the recorder. Microphone hanging above the table like a noose, or a face coming out of the clouds. A vision. A saint. A hallucination.

When she puts herself on the table, she has to give a little hop, to reach. It's a little too tall for her.

Allison clears her throat. "The patient is a 25 year old woman with no major personal or family history of medical issues. However, for the past seven months she had been suffering Cotard delusions, being convinced that her body, particularly her organs and the inner workings, were dead and decaying within the shell of herself. This, obviously, is untrue."

She swallows. Picks up the scalpel. Her voice doesn't waver as she says, "Beginning the autopsy with a y-shaped incision, starting underneath the left clavicle." She has to push the scalpel hard against this hardened shell of her former skin, the angle wrong, her grip strange, the strange carapace she has formed around her inside fighting her, here, at the last, but even it splits under Alison's single minded determination, her diamond sharp mind narrowed to this final point.

Underneath her steady hands, her corpse blooms.

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