

euphony

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# EUPHONY

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*Euphony* is a nonprofit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, essays, criticism, and translations. Visit our website, [www.euphonyjournal.org](http://www.euphonyjournal.org), for more information.

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## Managing Editor's Letter

Dear Reader,

You hold in your hands the first issue of the twenty-sixth volume of *Euphony*. As we have worked on this issue over the past months, the literary world has continued to face the emerging existential threat of generative AI. This is the first print issue of *Euphony* to contain a specific prohibition on the submission of works created using generative AI, though that rule has been present in our submission guidelines on our website for almost a year.

In curating this issue, we have encountered submissions with obviously human errors, but also striking moments of human intelligence and creativity. In both of those types of instances, we were grateful to be presented with a piece of a writer's hard work, crafted from their minds with care and dedication. Each piece in this issue spoke to us in some way, connecting us as the audience to the author. This interaction is arguably the reason we make and consume art, the capability of the artist to make you see the world in a new light or to simply feel some aspect of their experience. We are proud as a literary journal to continue to promote such human acts of expression and connection.

Thank you, as always, to the *Euphony* board—to Shiloh and Katherine, who have continued their roles from last year, and to Eliot, Kiran, and Juliette, who jumped headfirst into their new positions this year, bringing an energy and passion to *Euphony* meetings that make them an exciting place to be week after week. Thank you to our staff members, who show up at all points of the quarter to eat sandwich cookies and chat about submissions—this issue of *Euphony* would not be what it is without each of your unique voices. Finally, I want to thank you, the reader, for picking up this issue. I appreciate you for taking a moment out of your day to peruse this issue of human-made art, to dip into a poem or immerse yourself in a short story that will hopefully make you feel something, whatever that something may be.

I am excited to present the Winter 2026 issue of *Euphony*.

Happy reading,  
Mazie Witter  
Managing Editor

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***POEMS***

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# POETRY EDITORS' LETTER

Dear Reader,

We are delighted to bring you the first *Euphony* poetry section of 2026.

After months of deliberation over dozens of excellent poems, we were able to whittle this issue's selection down to six of our favorites. Our first poem, "Bird Alert," documents knowledge of moving things. Next, "Fishing for Winter King Salmon" uncovers a world of life hidden in a bleak, secluded winter scene. In a sketch of the gym bro, "Atlas" enlarges two mn to mythic proportions. "Scott" explores the intoxication and futility of intimacy with the nonhuman, while the satirical "In Houston It Is Impossible Not to Consider Traffic" skewers the paradoxes and fantasies of the capitalist system. Finally, "April 14th One Week After Week One" offers images of a primordial spring assembling itself petal by petal.

The poems in this issue are all survivors. At the center of each is its own inner heat, its own inexhaustible vitality. It may be dormant, carefully restrained, or just hanging on, but there is no mistaking it. These poems find reserves of energy in even the most inhospitable of circumstances. We hope you can borrow some.

We are extremely grateful to all of the *Euphony* staff who bring this magazine to life, to every poet who submitted their work to us over the past year, and especially to you, for picking up this issue of *Euphony*.

Thank you once again for taking the time to lend these poets your ear. We hope this work stirs your blood, rouses your senses, and gives you what you need to push through the dregs of this winter season.

Sincerely,  
Kiran Collins, Eliot Fairhall, and Shiloh Miller  
Poetry Editors

# Bird Alert

---

*Andrea Giugni*

I am always on watch but never  
for something like this. Tonight,  
509 million birds migrate

in the cover of night. Many more,  
I am told, than is usual. I dream  
myself barely awake, stepping out

in my bare feet to a door flung open  
by flight, my arms aloft, rising,  
through fistfuls of black feather,

ashy down, cricket arms caught  
between molars. I muster against  
sky, a thicket, my tongue a swarm.

My eyes coated with a nest's warm  
center, batting against the brush. Dark  
with the musk of movement. Years ago,

I watched a kitten shriek itself  
into exhaustion. Tracked the sheen  
of the gator's slow and unyielding eye

across the unmoving water. Lili says  
that's what happens. That we're animal.  
I'm exhausted by the excuse I know

is, on some level, true. I can't believe  
that scientists somewhere know every single  
bird in the night air of the city I live in

and they don't. What they see is what we tell  
them. Those, who, like me, use a microphone  
to log a house finch. Across state lines,

it's radar. The size and shape of the thing  
sending waves back. The names only  
approximate. The common poorwill

experiences torpor. Named after its call,  
a nightjar. I make myself sick  
with everything I've said while surviving.

# Fishing For Winter King Salmon

---

*Tina M. Johnson*

Night squalls spit snow into the air.  
Wolf moon breaks winter's smoky choke  
as pines along the island flare  
beneath hibernal whitewashed cloaks.

A fisher watches night buoys blink,  
the waves that yaw as tide goes slack.  
He doffs his boots and pours a drink  
to push the endless darkness back.

Bright salmon swim through shuttered night  
beneath the troller's bobbing chine.  
Not evening stars, but satellites,  
they tack the slate-black salty rime.

Kings share not the dull toils of men  
who must fish, fish, and fish again.  
For those not bound to law or Book  
the only fear's the sharpened hook.

# Atlas

---

*D. S. Maolalai*

on the tram track up chancery,  
coming from capel street,  
two men throw their shadows  
with the 10pm sunset.

they are out of the gym.  
are both wide at shoulder-height  
as sitting room windows.

muscles shine, shifting  
like seagulls in oilslicks.  
their tops cling like paint  
onto parking spaces. they move  
as machines do, pistons  
pneumatic and everything.

they don't carry the sky  
on their backs  
but they could if they wanted.

# Scott

---

*Dan Pinkerton*

The leopard paces, shudders, compulsively  
licks his paws. He growls and we come to imagine  
his growls an inhumane score, an avant-garde  
sort of thing. The leopard devours a selection

of objects we inventory with pad and pen.  
We name him Scott. Scott, want to go to the park?  
The Cub Scout meeting? (Okay, bad idea.)  
The zoo? Easy now, just kidding. That's a hell

of a coat you've got—the famed print of beauty  
parlor capes, gentlemen's clubs, a cousin's  
waterbed sheets, a steering wheel cover.  
Among big cats, lions and tigers get all

the credit, but wow! Yours is a certain brutal  
élan. Can I get you a glass of chardonnay?  
Maybe some Carole King on the hi-fi?  
Why do I feel this way, Scott, like a roller coaster

junkie or oxygen starved climber summiting Everest?  
Maybe it's the strident cast of your eyes, the way  
your muscles fire like pistons under that coat,  
how you seem so eager to meet my embrace.

Sometimes I think you might be a beautiful  
woman in leopard skin gown and false teeth and your  
growls are the coded missives of love. But then  
you go and eat one of the neighborhood pets.

# In Houston It Is Impossible Not to Consider Traffic

---

*Glenn Shaheen*

I do my best, I make it to the six  
square feet in the middle of the city  
park where you cannot see or hear cars.  
Eyes dimming, my eyes are failing, I'm  
only eligible for a surgery I'm not  
eligible for according to my insurance.  
According to my insurance, better off  
blind. But how would I get to work?  
Blinded, the blurred video of aerial  
phenomenon, hoping it's aliens, god,  
angles, angels, but, alas, pollution again.  
Nothing to unfurl. Final offer amidst  
the flowers in the shop designed  
to look like a natural wild field. Big  
deal, meet me there at the dramateria.  
There's wildlife here somewhere, I'm  
sure of it. Something is tearing open  
our trash bags. Some proof we haven't  
razed everything, but, alas, pollution  
again. It's bad business to go extinct,  
can't the Invisible Hand of the market  
save us? At least there are more roaches,  
that must be a boon for whatever  
animal loves to eat big fat roaches.  
Contact lens failing in the night,  
I pretend they're impalas on the ground,  
eagles as they bop into the porch light.

# April 14th One Week After Week One

---

*Terry Trowbridge*

Ten minutes ago lightning struck Lake Ontario.  
The bolt edged the crown of a neighbour's birch tree  
then craned a hard vertical plunge over the shore cliff.

The starlings, dug into their cliffside holes,  
feathered engines of erosion, were briefly illuminated  
in the way of Cro Magnon and paleolithic shadow toss.  
The rain pelted the shorebirds. That was ten minutes ago.

Now, the clouds are peripheral, sun is central, colours alight.  
The year's first cloud of midges spears above the grass  
startling in the way of an eye-level asteroid field.  
Starlings swoop. Cycles begin.

One plum tree considers blossoms. Nine more plums  
consider the merits of pointillism, their bud clusters greening  
only in slivers; but aggregates insinuate leaf clouds,  
as do the starlings each streak, until they give shape to murmuration.

Spring is a season that does not descend, nor does it know direction.  
Spring has a thousand-thousand origins, all precise points.  
Here on the Niagara Peninsula, a mosaic that will not be equaled,  
until the escarpment falls one orange leaf in its own minute.

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***PROSE***

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# PROSE EDITORS' LETTER

Dear Reader,

As you settle into a comfortable armchair, take in the last few moments of sunlight on a bench, or lean against a counter waiting for water to boil for tea, I hope you're flipping through the pages of our Winter 2026 issue of *Euphony*. In this section, you'll find a trio of stories, each as unique as the places where you read them.

First, "Here Is Henry's Deer" is a piece of flash fiction that will take you tumbling through the fractured thoughts of the narrator as his car skids on a stretch of ice. A peaceful winter scene is the opening of "The Letter," but the snow quickly becomes a catalyst for wartime memories, tracing the endurance of friendship and love in the wake of distance and time. In "I Live Under My Boyfriend's Bed," domesticity and devotion become something far more unsettling and strange. The piece unfolds with a dry tone, making its startling take on intimacy all the more interesting.

The windshield's split-second skid, the snowfall that refused to remain benign, the room rendered all too familiar: if you read the three pieces together, you'll be able to see exactly how each pivots on an ordinary scene that is then quickly honed into consequence. The three stories we chose to include in this issue form a small but convoluted (hopefully unambiguous) constellation of unease and tenderness, an amalgamation that in and of itself interrogates what it means to keep loving as the world jolts and as devotion tilts itself into something uncanny and unnerving whilst the past resurfaces.

We hope you enjoy them as much as we did!

Best,  
Katherine Chen and Juliette Shapiro

# Here Is Henry's Deer

---

*John Brantingham*

When the deer pops out, Henry steps on the brake knowing this downhill stretch of road is covered with ice, and nothing he can do is going to save the animal, and here is Henry who is rushing to his son's apartment because he heard the kid was going to sign up for the Navy to fight for God and George Bush by lobbing shells on people in Iraq, and here is Henry screaming his horn, his car shifting sideways, and here is Henry flashing back to his father's suicide after the war, the sound of the pistol always there somewhere in the backrooms of his mind, and here is Henry watching the deer that has started to prance away, and here is Henry spinning so he is sliding backward for a moment, and here is Henry understanding that he would never have been able to stop his son, and here is Henry who believes in God, but doesn't like him much praying to his pop instead asking him to save the deer and then shifting it to Henry and shifting it again to both, and here is Henry sliding into the ditch and finally stopping and wondering if he hit the deer or not. He did not hear an impact, but that doesn't mean it didn't happen. He takes a moment to stare out at the street making sure not to look the way of the creature.

# The Letter

---

*Colby Galliher*

Eleanor snapped the Kit Kat bar in two. She placed one half on the side of her white tea setting. The other half she handed to her husband Mitchell, who sat across from her at the rectangular kitchen table. The lights in their small house were on and the kitchen was warm. Fragile curls of snow drifted past the window above the sink.

Eleanor watched the flakes as she lifted the cup to her lips and blew on her tea. The steam twirled in the air. She replaced the cup on its disk and peered into the little whirlpool, the swirl mirrored in her blue eyes.

“I can’t help feeling that something’s wrong,” she said.

Mitchell took a bite of his half of the Kit Kat bar. Contentment blanked his eyes. He chewed slowly, solemnly, as though he would eat nothing more that day. The skin of his throat pulled against the top button of his brown flannel shirt.

Eleanor looked at him.

“You agree that it’s odd?”

Mitchell swallowed and took a cautious sip from his cup, the tremor in his hand agitating the glossy surface of the liquid. He set the cup down, raised his eyes to Eleanor, and shrugged. His green-flecked irises asked mercy of her.

Eleanor raised her eyebrows and upturned her palm in prompting. He cleared his throat.

“I think Vera’s fine. It’s only a few days after Christmas. Her letter’s probably just delayed. The paper said all the postal workers over there are on strike.”

He nibbled at the corner of his candy bar.

“Thatcher ended the strike in November. Like you don’t keep up with the news,” she said to him flatly.

He shrugged again.

“I’m sure the letter will come soon. There’s no use in worrying, Ellie.”

“Vera was always punctual,” Eleanor stated. “Every holiday prior to last year her letter arrived at least a week before the 25th. Then last year it came on Christmas Eve and now, no letter at all?” She shook her head. “No. I’m worried about her.”

She broke one of the segments from her Kit Kat and reluctantly placed it on her tongue.

“I suppose she never had that phone put in.”

“Oh, Mitch, don’t be daft. That was a bluff to placate me.”

She let the chocolate melt and then chewed it. But it tasted of sweet ash.

Mitchell leaned back in his chair and gripped the edge of the table. He turned his head and looked through the sliding glass door that led from the kitchen to the deck above the driveway. A layer of snow peeked above the sash.

She read his stirrings.

“Say what you’re thinking.”

He inhaled and his teeth scraped his bottom lip. His middle and index fingers tapped the table, as though he was calculating the risk of his words.

“People do grow apart, Ellie.”

“Not us.”

“All I’m saying is that it wouldn’t be unnatural. There’s an ocean separating you. You’ve seen each other once in the last 50 years.”

She scoffed.

“That’s nothing more than a question of money. It says nothing about our friendship.”

Mitchell was quiet for a moment. The steam from the two teacups lilted in the stillness of the kitchen. He bowed his head slightly and fanned out his hands.

“Of course. That doesn’t mean it’s not difficult to stay—”

“We made it through the bombings together!” she cried. Her eyes narrowed at him. “While you and your fellow Yanks spent the Blitz in a bunker making maps, Vera and I were trying to save people even as the Germans hit the hospitals. That’s not a bond that just goes away.”

“I’m not questioning your bond.”

“Then what are you questioning? I was godmother to her little Maeve before the poor child died, for God’s sake.”

“I’m—”

He looked into her half-squinted blue eyes.

“Nothing. I’m just saying nonsense.”

He hurried the remainder of his Kit Kat into his mouth.

Eleanor lugged her elbows onto the table. She studied her gnawed candy bar with aversion. She picked it up and placed it on Mitchell’s plate.

Outside the sky had darkened. The flakes, more shadow than snow, rushed past the window like ragged wanderers seeking a glimpse of warmth and light.

“I hate that I can’t talk to her. To not hear from her own mouth what’s going on. Being in the dark is torture.”

The short, quick flicks of her pupils tracing the flakes halted. Her mind went to cobwebbed places. To Joey, her older brother who went east to Australia when she went west to America with Mitchell after

their mother died at the war's end, the two of them fleeing their birth home in opposite directions like errant sparks in the night. She never saw him again once they parted, but the pain of their separation, her dislocation in a new country, were eased by the knowledge that worlds away he was up to the same tricks: tailoring, boxing, and gambling his earnings at the track and losing most of them like the kind fool he was. It had been a cherished comfort for decades, until an envelope arrived from a woman claiming to be his widow. Telling her that for more than twenty-five years, all while Eleanor went on believing, never doubting, that he lived, Joey had been a collection of bones entombed in the parched, red earth.

She stood up. She pushed her chair in and went rigidly to the sliding door.

Mitchell watched her with the second Kit Kat paused before his mouth.

"Ellie?"

She reached into the galley closet between the fridge and the sliding door and pulled out her long, maroon polyester coat. She wrapped herself in it and took a knitted scarf, hat, and mittens from the coat's deep pockets. She fitted her feet into her winter boots. Her movements were deliberate but brittle, as though any disruption would undo her progress.

She faced him. Only her eyes, nose, and mouth showed between the hat and the scarf.

"I'm just going to check the mail. I could use a walk down the lane anyway. All this worrying," she shook her head. "Some fresh air will sort me out."

Mitchell eyed her with concern.

"I'll come with you. You'll hardly be able to see out there."

He pushed his chair out and began to rise.

"No, love."

Her words froze him. He squatted awkwardly above the seat, his right hand flat on the table. Several crumbs from their supper tumbled from his shirt.

"I'll be fine. I want to see the snow." She grabbed the handle of the slider and flipped open the lock. "You stay. I'll be back in a flash."

Before he could respond she was out the door. It slid shut behind her.

He vaulted up as fast as his old joints allowed and hustled to the glass. The reflection of the kitchen's interior fogged his view. He pressed his face to the pane and curled his hands around his eyes in the way of binoculars.

There was half a foot of snow on the deck. Boot prints led from the door to the stairs. A swipe of motion at their base flitted like a bat and

Eleanor was gone from view.

The kitchen was silent and the snow fell silently outside. Mitchell's hand fidgeted on the door handle, uncertain of its course.

\* \* \*

Eleanor stepped through the snow with her arms out at her sides for balance. The ancient copper beech tree opposite the cottage towered into the dimming sky. The woods abutting their acre hulked in dull shades of white, black, and grey. Only the gold-glowing windows of the house spoke of warmth. She pulled her scarf tighter and walked on.

The treads of her boots bit into the light powder as she plodded down their lane toward the neighborhood road. There was no sound save the scrunch of her footsteps. She squinted through the veil of snow in search of the mailbox at the end of the lane, but it hid in the storm's distortions of distance and depth. She trudged on, wheezing the dry air into her bewildered lungs, toward where she trusted the mailbox would be.

In the monotony of her strides she thought warily of Vera. There was the weekend of normalcy they stole on the rim of a continent consumed by war, when they sallied along the promenade at Morecambe on the Irish Sea. The hazy air was spiced by brine and fried fish. They attracted the steely eyes of dockworkers and shipbuilders; laughed at the gulls and children caterwauling down on the beach where saltwater pools glowed on the sand as giant coins. Vera's new white handbag, given to her by some hopeless suitor, swung proudly on her elbow. The two of them strutted, indomitable nurses with the world at their heel, even as the warplanes roared and dropped their payloads of fire on England.

As the memories rewound and played Eleanor could not help but giggle like it was 1941, like they were there in that dangerous and thrilling springtime again. She saw herself and Vera on the fourth floor of a makeshift civilian hospital in Manchester at the Blitz's height. The high, awful whine of incoming munitions pealed across the city, the brick and steel quaking beneath their feet. The two of them, alone, scrambled about a commandeered office to prepare it for triage: clearing paths for stretchers, hauling in armfuls of gauze and morphine and surgical tools. All the while they chattered to each other in deliberate defiance of the bombs that could erase them in one impact.

A deafening crash outside the windows knocked Eleanor to the floor. Supplies crashed down around her and she crawled under a chair and knotted her arms above her head, clamped her eyelids shut. The building shook and swayed with a pained groan. Out in the street the air raid siren wailed over the ambulance horns.

Eleanor opened her eyes.

“Vera?”

She crabbed out from beneath the chair. She pulled herself onto her feet, paying no mind to the ache in her hip where she had hit the floor, and scanned the office.

Vera was not there.

“Vera!” she screamed.

“Ellie...”

Vera rose from behind the barrier of desks. Her cheeks, the folds of her collar, and the white fabric of her uniform were all stained red. Her hair was wet and matted and red drips slunk down her forehead.

Her horror-stricken eyes found Eleanor.

“I’m dying!”

Eleanor clambered over the desks. Vera shivered and moaned as Eleanor frantically combed through her hair for a wound.

“Ellie, is it awful?” Vera whimpered.

Eleanor frowned. She peered over Vera’s shoulder at the ground. Among the debris she saw a broken vial. She sniffed Vera’s hair.

Eleanor spat out her breath and belly-laughed like a madwoman.

Vera pulled her head back and widened her eyes.

“What is it?!”

Sobs of laughter shook Eleanor’s frame.

“It’s iodine!”

Vera blinked into Eleanor’s face. She drew her fingers across her forehead and brought them to her nostrils. The dread ebbed from her eyes at the pungent odor of antiseptic.

“I—Iodine. Oh, Lord!”

The two of them tumbled as one to the floor, every muscle relaxing like melting pads of butter, their stomachs gripped by pangs of beatific laughter. They forgot, or denied, for a moment the world in flames. Without one another the fear might have been crippling. But together it was all one terrible excitement.

The joyous tears were hot on Eleanor’s freezing cheeks. She forgot the chill that had snaked up her spine when she thought about Joey; she was awash in her and Vera’s aliveness. She wiped her eyes and could see the mailbox ahead of her. A fresh sense that it harbored the annual letter, vindication of their bond’s invulnerability to time, entropy, and death, propelled her forward.

A muffled cry rose from behind her, just audible in the nocturne of snow and darkness. She twisted around. Mitchell called to her from the deck. His crooked torso leaned over the railing, his hands cupped around his mouth.

“Ellie! Come in!”

There was something frantic and protective in his voice. She watched him in the deck’s vestibule of light, then turned back towards

the road and trudged on to the mailbox.

At its front she pulled the scarf down from her chin. She panted. Exhaustion seared in her legs. Her gloved hand rose from her side and grasped the tongue of the mailbox door. She pulled. Snow sloughed off the mailbox's top.

The door resisted, glued shut by the cold. And as her hand strained harder, Eleanor realized that she was hoping the door would not give. That she might have one more night on earth with Vera still alive, with her world, her illusion, intact. Far down the dark lane the outline of Mitchell's figure shuffled towards her, the snow still falling, burying the land like fallout.

The seal broke and the door jarred open with a creak. It was a creak of no weight, of emptiness as answer.

# I Live Under My Boyfriend's Bed

---

*Meredith Riggs*

I live under my boyfriend's bed. It's not the most ideal living arrangement. He thought it would be the most cost effective way for us to live together and still have our own personal space since Chicago has been getting more expensive lately. We're both in law school and neither of us wanted to take out more loans than we needed to, so he came up with this. I've actually grown to quite like it. I like that even when I'm alone, I can still listen in. It makes me feel closer to him.

When I'm scrolling on my phone before I go to sleep, my boyfriend brings his girlfriend over. It's not like the three of us are all dating each other. He is dating me and he is also dating her. She seems really nice and I actually laugh at the jokes she makes when they're having sex. I've never seen her before but I hope she's pretty. It would be bad for my reputation if my boyfriend's girlfriend was ugly. She also thinks that she and my boyfriend are going to be together forever. Last week, she told him so when they were getting ready for bed. He didn't respond at first. But after he came back from the bathroom, he told her that he thinks so too. Sometimes, I think my boyfriend forgets that I live under his bed.

This is strange because most of the time, he knows that I'm listening. When he gets up for water, he'll get a glass and put it on the ground, instead of the nightstand, so I can have a sip too. In the middle of the night, after his girlfriend has already gone to sleep, he'll kick off one of the blankets over the side so I don't get too cold on his wooden floor. Whenever I crawl down there after a long day of studying, I find a little handwritten note that says I love you. I know it's a new one everyday because there are little doodles of us together, usually holding hands or cooking in the kitchen, designated by the frying pan floating mid air over my head.

We live across from my favorite Korean restaurant. This side of town is getting a bit too gentrified for my liking so it's a bonus that my friend's parents own the place. This is actually where my boyfriend and I went on our first date. He tried tteokbokki for the first time and I made fun of him for eating with a fork but I don't even hold my chopsticks right. Whenever my friend's dad would come by and ask if the food was okay, I'd request a new song for him to play. My boyfriend says he was humiliated but I know he secretly liked it because under the table he was bouncing his foot to all the songs. Now he's a regular just as much as

I am. My friend's dad loves my boyfriend and thinks he's way nicer than the assholes I used to bring around their restaurant because he doesn't yell at me and seems engaged in our conversations.

After a few months of dating, we were walking home from the restaurant and we made a pact. We pinky promised to never introduce each other to our parents. I didn't like my family and he didn't like his. Families are complicated, and he was my first boyfriend to really get this. We aren't exactly low contact, but we're close to it. My last boyfriend, James, always wanted to hang out at my parent's house with me but then would get mad at me when I didn't want to pay for his gas. He was a bit of a bum. I don't have trivial problems like this anymore. Me and my boyfriend are peas in a pod.

\* \* \*

The truth is my mother is distant, but she never would've wanted me to live under someone's bed.

"It's shameful. Do you not feel weird about this?" She asked. I held my breath. She used to feel pride that he's the president of the Space Law Society. This was my chance to marry up, since we all knew that my righteous goal of saving the earth wasn't going to make me any money.

"When you and grandpa and grandma came over here, you lived in a one bedroom apartment," I shrugged. "I don't see how this is that different."

I am not an idiot.

"We didn't have any money. We didn't speak English. It was just different for us," she responded. I could almost hear her grimace at my words. I had to stop myself from shouting that she still didn't have any money. My dad was on the call too. He didn't say much. He never does. Whenever it came to disputes between my mother and I, he just sat and listened. I would never want to throw something like that in his face.

"We can send you money," my dad finally said solemnly. "It's no problem anymore."

"You know I never ask for money." A ball was starting to well up in the back of my throat.

"But you could."

"I really have to go, I have a lot of homework to do tonight." We exchanged *I love yous* and I hung up.

\* \* \*

On the first of October, I started to stalk my boyfriend. It just sort of happened. I follow him from around the corner in the hallways in the law building and down onto the concrete by the lake and down back

alleys where he takes his walks and up onto rooftops where he smokes with his friends from undergrad and then back into our apartment where we pay equal shares of the rent.

He never notices me. Or maybe he does. When he picks up his pace, I get worried that he sees me so I step into a store briefly or turn a corner. As the week passes, he never mentions it. I return home at the end of each night, maybe twenty minutes or so after he had taken his jacket off and put his backpack down, and he never says a word. We invent a new routine for ourselves: He cooks and I study torts and we start exchanging small talk. The small talk evolves into laughing so hard that we start crying. The crying stops being from laughter and starts coming from a place of love. I think about how he treated me like I was brand new when we started seeing each other. We then have sex and right before I'm about to fall asleep, he pokes me and I remember that my pillow is underneath his bed. I yawn and crawl from the bed, down to the wooden floor, limb by limb. I cover my naked chest with my hand because the night light is still on and even though he's seen every part of me, it just feels embarrassing now. When I wake up, I can see his girlfriend's feet dangling off the side of the bed. They look nice, I suppose. I can hear her chewing. I wonder if she also goes to law school and I also wonder how soon after I fall asleep do they start having sex with each other. It makes me feel better that she's probably having our leftovers for breakfast.

On the seventh of October, my boyfriend starts walking faster than usual. And I mean, even faster than his usual running-away-from-me pace. He was actually running away from me this time. So, I speed up too. We turn onto Damen Ave and I realize he is taking a different route than he normally does. I feel the adrenaline kick in and I run faster than I have since being out of high school. I start running like I want to kill him, and like wanting to kill him was the only thing in this life that could ever make me happy. Was he afraid? I duck around pedestrians and ignore the lights at busy intersections. He is the only thing I can see. As I get closer to him, I swear I can hear him laughing.

He really starts to slow down, but I can't. I want to break his entire body in front of the employees of his favorite record store, and then have his "party funeral" that he would always fantasize about right there so the cashier with the bad mullet and bootleg Vampire Weekend merch could bless his soul. I need to catch up with him. A part of me started to wonder if this whole issue could have been resolved if I had just come out to him as monogamous when we first started dating.

He comes to a full stop and I almost run him right over before catching myself on his right shoulder. We looked at each other in silence. His face is illuminated by the purple neon sign that only reads KBBQ. I hadn't realized where we were. Without saying a word, he nods

before slipping inside.

\* \* \*

The only worse place to be than under your boyfriend's bed is the parking lot of a Sam's Club in the backseat of a dusty hatchback, in the same way that the only age more miserable than twenty four is twelve.

"You're not making enough money right now," my mother said. The midwest heat was putting her on edge.

"And what are you going to do about that?" My father asked. He loved to taunt her with rhetorical questions.

"Get out."

"Yeah, alright." We conveniently reached a red light.

"I'm being serious," she responded. Her voice was getting louder. I continued to eat my hot dog in the back seat. I turned the volume up on Adam Lambert's *Whataya Want From Me*. It was one of ten songs on my iPod, and my favorite as of late because he had blue hair on the cover art and my mother had blue hair right now. I remember feeling self conscious about having a young mom, for no good reason except for the most basic eccentricities like dyed hair or visible tattoos.

"I'm sure you are," he said, tapping his fingers on the wheel as if he was bored of her presence. It should be noted my father was not a young dad.

"I'm going to kill myself," she groaned. I saw my father's eyes dart to the rearview mirror, making eye contact with me. I quickly averted my gaze.

"Don't say that," he rolled the windows to the car up.

"You're going to wish you believed me," her voice was calm as she unbuckled her seatbelt. I thought about how our trunk was packed with tons of meat and treats all in bulk, even though my mother had insisted on being a vegetarian as of late. She was bad at shopping.

My father immediately unlocked the car door and got up out of the vehicle. *This is so humiliating*, I thought to myself. My mother followed suit, slamming the door behind her. I slouched down lower in the seat so the people in the cars wouldn't be able to see that there was a child in the backseat witnessing this. She walked around the front of the car, and he went around the back. They switched seats and she ended up behind the wheel. She did not bother to adjust the seat or the mirrors. The light turned green.

Growing up, I always thought my father was the God of conflict de-escalation. He was the only person who knew how to handle me and my mother. He was the one who bought me the iPod. In hindsight, he was another man sent straight from hell, or maybe he was just born in the 70s.

The rest of the car ride was silent. We arrived home and I helped unload the groceries while my mother went upstairs to paint her nails. My father and I didn't acknowledge each other as we heard her talking on the phone to her friends. I boiled a hotdog since they didn't let me one while we were shopping. Neither of us knew what she was saying because my Khmer skills resembled that of a three year old and my father never bothered to put in any effort but I figured it could not be good. She was a bit melodramatic like that.

By the time my hotdog was done, I could hear them laughing in their bedroom. We had spaghetti for dinner that night, and then I got sent to my room so they could watch *Million Dollar Baby* together.

\* \* \*

The only thing you need to know about my boyfriend's girlfriend is that she is irrevocably beautiful, whatever that looks like these days. She is so beautiful that my stomach twists inside out just getting a glance at her. I move over to a book stand outside the bookstore across the street. My boyfriend's back is facing me so I can only see that between bouts of laughter and forkfuls of rice, his girlfriend is solemn. I know that feeling all too well. I still watch them talk for an hour. I don't really know what I'm thinking about. I might be mad or confused. The worst part of me knows that I'm not confused at all.

My boyfriend and his girlfriend come outside and they hug, swaying side to side for a moment, before parting ways. I continue to pretend to browse for books, as I watch my boyfriend jog across to meet me. I can feel his eyes on me. He starts to fake browse as well. We stand there in silence for a few moments until he finally breaks.

"I love that one," he says. "I read it in high school." I am holding a copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* that looked like it had been read by a thousand different people and wouldn't make it to another reader before falling apart.

"I've never read it," I shrug. "How was dinner?"

"It was good," he replies. "I ordered the tteokbokki for the first time in a while. It made me think of us and that one time you tried it."

"Oh, I'm sure," I can't stop myself from smiling. "That was so embarrassing."

"You've been in more embarrassing situations," he slips his hand in mine.

We walk and talk all the way back to our apartment. There are a few moments where I think about killing him again, preferably by pushing him straight into traffic. But I never do. By the time we reach our block, my negative thoughts fade out so much that I begin to walk with a pep in my step.

At home, we go through the usual motions. He still cooks for me despite just eating dinner. I guess it's a labor of love. I even find a little "I love you" note earlier in the night than I usually do. It's stuck to my toothbrush holder instead of under the bed. After we have sex, I push the blanket off myself to begin my typical crawl to the bottom. Except this time, he pulls me back and moves the blanket back on. He holds on for dear life. I freeze until his breath falls into a rhythm. He's asleep.

Out of habit, I lean over the side of the bed to drink out of my water cup. To my surprise, it is actually still there, filled to the brim, despite me no longer living under my boyfriend's bed. As my fingers graze the top of the cup, a manicured hand reaches out from underneath the bed. She is so silly. I am faster. I drink about half the cup, set it on the nightstand, and fall asleep content.

# CONTRIBUTORS

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