

wards

my story isn't over yet

issue 04 | fall 2019 | *Psych*

“I am a shelved
suicide note,

a testament
to perseverance”

from “Prayer” by Madison Zehmer, Wards Issue 04 page 23

about wards

wards is a literary journal based on its versatile title. Each issue invites writers to submit fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and essays based on a theme.

Our goal is to reflect a range of unique experiences and perspectives with each issue's theme. Wards are watchers, wards are storied places, and warding is an act of defense or self-preservation. Wards possess a unique point of view, and are often isolated. *wards* gives you a turn to tell your story. There are two reading periods per year.

Submission guidelines, prize information, and current theme:

wardslitmag.com/submit

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All submissions are given thoughtful feedback. Though we can't accept every submission, we will never send form rejection letters. We strive to build relationships with the authors we do publish, in order to promote their ongoing literary work.

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editor's note | Trigger Warning

Given the theme, there are triggers for just about everybody: eating disorders, self-harm, suicide, hospitalization, sexual violence, racial violence, gun violence, stalking, drugs, incarceration, bereavement, PTSD, OCD, depression, anxiety, etc. I trust that unaffected readers will respect that these topics are not “edgy” but central to lived experiences; and that affected readers know how to safely navigate triggers. That’s the thing: trigger warnings don’t coddle us, they warn us to psychologically gird our loins and be wary. We don’t refuse to go in, it just behooves us to know where the exits are in case there be dragons.

Here, there be dragons:

Charlotte Derrick’s *Howl, Howl* (p 52) does a psychological breakdown justice. The narrator seems to lack self-awareness except when her cruel inner voice beats her up; both voices use humor to mask pain, until the mask and the voice both become unbearable to her.

Jen Schneider’s poems (p 12) dissect first the dictionary, then a childhood classic to convey the experience of losing freedom. Truly, I’m excited about all the poets in this issue. There might even be something for everybody.

Eileen Collins (p 40) renders a whole and complex portrait in a short, expressive form. The nonfiction pieces in this issue range from alchemical recovery to unflinching confrontation, and all have a place in advocacy and in art.

I am proud of the courage and craft contained in these pages. The word “crazy” is only used twice, and never to describe a person. Is the man on the corner crazy, or is he dehydrated, hungry, sick, stressed, and traumatized? Does he need judgment or health care and a support system? Nobody is crazy. Sometimes, we hurt, we suffer illness. There’s hope.

As always, I am a grateful and honored reader.

See you in the stacks,
Rebecca



Postcard from a Forgotten Memorial Service

I have arrived in your bedroom,
daddy,

where are all the guns?
In the dream, you were wanted

for shooting at the president.
The projectile had hit his jaw,

way past his vain speeches, lodged like
a locket in his brain. If this be the sky &

this dream a star are we admiring a million light
years dead history or living it in tandem?

I want the head of the president for breakfast too,
served with a chili ginger syrup. We can get our tongues

forever tattooed so our mouths don't forget this feast.
I can get my hair styled thrice throughout the meal, donning

my new Burberry faux fur. It could be it, the ants sprawling
the sidewalk with their vanities whilst Lady Day is laid to rest.

Then it could be the only vacuum you clearly vacuumed
for all those Christmases Mum & I walked the G&S Kiddies

aisle without picking a can of Pringles or a schoolboy's uniform,
even the cheapest of a strawberry flavour or a can of milk.

It could be it: you walked into a room full of women & children
with a gun in your hand, you scanned the country you served,

looked us in the eyes & went ahead to break our hearts.

Folie à deux

I knew a boy who thought he could fly.
I never met the man who knew he couldn't.
The air was not a friend, not even neutral
As Switzerland; that was the boy's mistake.
It was what the man counted on,
Not a betrayal. He'd understood the atoms
Were unsociable, that they would not rush
Together, that they were too reliable
To move so far apart he'd be held by a vacuum.
The boy hadn't imagined wings, beetle-paned
Or burning, two gashes of blue flame,
His scapulae tinder, his heels dusky
In the light; flight would come from his paddling
Hands, the helium in his lungs. His breaking voice
Would be his rudder. The man hadn't imagined
Wings or fins to beat the current of inert nitrogen,
The syrup diesel exhaust of the taxis below.
He let his suit jacket flap, a loosened hide,
Waiting, shortly, for confirmation he'd been right.

Fran-Claire Kenney

Panic As A Party Drug

With this little puke-orange pill
You can see the future in six kinds of crazy
Amid a freeze-dried adrenaline rush
Think you can handle it?
You can see the future in six kinds of crazy
Rocking out from a distance
Think you can handle it?
These songs are a real head-thrasher
Rocking out from a distance
Your spine winds tight and alert
These songs are a real head-thrasher
So you'd better crack like a whip and move
Your spine winds tight and alert
Your heart sprouts throbbing tumors
So you'd better crack like a whip and move
And no, you can't regurgitate the orange pill
Your heart sprouts throbbing tumors
And yes, you can feel yourself rotting
And no, you can't regurgitate the orange pill
Eyes wide on the strobe lights now
And yes, you can feel yourself rotting
But if you move faster you might shout over the quake
Eyes wide on the strobe lights now
You are a mannequin puppet of hot plastic and voltage
But if you move faster you might shout over the quake
How the unknown grasps you by your rib cage
You are a mannequin puppet of hot plastic and voltage
Tied up in your own strings
How the unknown grasps you by your rib cage
Amid a freeze-dried adrenaline rush
Tied up in your own strings
With this little puke-orange pill



Paul Whelan

"You're Going to the Doctor, Monday"

I was pressured into leaving town
With them – my home friends –
And bringing my girlfriend,
We all had a few at this crawling pub
Before filing into an old warehouse
Where they now served food and drink.

It was a 21st.
The restaurant was hip and vegan.
They sold beer like tar.
I bought a pint and winced as
I drank it down.
Jake Norton was there, bragging
About getting laid
The day before.
Callum Wainwright told us what he
Would later be drinking,
Never buying a drink.
The birthday boy spoke little to me.

My girlfriend kept shaking me.
She was upset that I was so
Low, low as in worn out and slow.
I had lost my memory and
Was lacking in warmth.
I mopped up sauce with a handful of chips
And spilled it over my trousers.
Then I felt my mood sink deeper
And hung my head over the table.

I didn't want to be there.
I didn't want to be getting a train back.

I didn't want to be getting a taxi out of there.
Arrangements had to be made for me.
I was spiritually lost and
I honestly wished I was gone.

I wanted to die, finally and fully.
I slumped my face into my hands
With everyone around me laughing,
Thinking I was drunk.

On the train back, my girlfriend was distraught.
She told me she felt she had lost me
And she wished I would just come back.
"Now that," I told her, "would be
The worst outcome for all."



Cavity

The cavities hidden in my mouth, rotting my teeth
The cavities hidden below my waist, invaded by an army of one

If he locks the door, take off your clothes
Being scared is part of the fun
It only hurts until he falls asleep

It will *end*, it will *end*, it will *end*.

From a cloud in the sky, I watched myself die
Underneath him,
Nothing ever ends.

Does he know his sin?
The crime scene, he carefully destroyed before leaving for college.
He left the state of Texas.
This toothache has a name.

In fear I lay,

Not to tell, not to speak.
Not to eat, not to drink.
Not to tell, not to speak.
Not to eat, not to drink.
Not to tell, not to speak.
Not to eat, not to drink.

The endless decaying of my teeth

This my truth.

ISO rescue home for Doctor's receptionist.

When I say	you want. Do
that I don't care,	your pigeon
you do.	thing. But if
I don't move	you will
a muscle, but	not take
you're hit.	my message,

You even	I'll just go...
hit yourself.	Look out!
Hand slap	Not inwards
your breastbone,	where you think
breath	you know how
backing up.	people feel.

I repeat I	I
do not care,	am
while you stare	not
over your wounded	your
wing. You are pigeon	real
to me. Fly wherever	.

14+ W(D)ays to Describe my Detainment

In a system where one
is presumed innocent until
proven guilty,
I lived a detainment
of guilt, despite innocence.

This is my story.
One of *disgust, denied dignity*
and *deception*.
Don't know what else to say.

Yesterday, the reading cart
came by my cell.
Webster's Dictionary fell off, at the foot
of my bars. An omen.

I started on page 468,
with the D's,
and saw my reflection in the definitions.

Detain, Detained, Detainment.
Dark, Dank, Dreadful Yells
Dripping water from ceilings.
Spickets, too.

Looked up more D words
Doom, Dread, Death
Dirty, Delirious, Dismal,
Dang, Dances, no - dunces.
Days that neither begin nor end.

Day 1, Day 2.

Doctorless intakes. *Dismal* stares.
Days-old donuts. Dutiful compliance.
Didn't know anyone could touch me there.

Denied bail. *Denied* freedom.
Despite hair testing
documenting no match in *DNA*.

Day 3, Day 4.
Damn it. Denied visitation.
For reasons left unshared.

Day 5, Day 6, Day 7.
Dreamless nights. *Delirious* mornings.
Danger. Don't know who to trust.
Daring discoveries hidden in mattress seams.

Day 8, Day 9, Day 10.
Daily visitation granted.
Don't know what changed.
Dried jerky. Discolored dinners.

Day 11.
District attorney might *drop* charges?
Don't know what changed.

Day 12.
Dusk before darkness.
Now see the *dirty*
water puddled in the cell's
dirty corner. On the far right.

Day 13.
Days are getting longer.
Darkness becoming more *distinct*.
Demons less, no, more *damaging*.
Detox, Depression, Disease.
Everywhere.

Day 14. Day 15.
Dropped charges. No apologies.
Doors open. Doors close. Do you see me?
Forever *disgraced*.

Dang. Don't know what to say.
Done.



Riddles from My [Prison Diaries]
Thought over all [I] could remember.
Very uncomfortable, no room,
wasn't very civil. Severity,
rude rhetoric.
Silent for a minute.
Same year for such a long time.
No sort of meaning.
Time won't stand beating.
[I] went mad, dreadfully savage.
Mournful, tired. Bottom of a well.
Can't be civil.
Riddles, no answers.
Everything with an M.
Murdering. Mournful. Mad.
March. March. March.
Minute. Month.
Many. More.
I have to beat time, whisper
a hint. Same year for such a long time.

--- "found" in Alice in Wonderland's Tea Party chapter.

Available at: <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~rgs/alice-VII.html>

Relapse

I met with a monster
in the shape of a girl,
who gave me a vise
in the shape of a hat,
who sold me deceit
in the shape of relief,
like cool glass of water
that lit me on fire.
The false in the flames
was that *thin enough* would make
shiny piano keys
emerge from my sides
so everyone I loved
would hear the music I could tap out in the empty spaces
and fill up my ribcage with the waves mirrored back.
The lie was that deep hunger could take
those colorful plastic cubes
(the ones my third graders pull from Ziploc bags and softly
clack into equal groups,
the ones that litter the ceiling of my skull),
and arrange them like bricks,
coordinated and organized into city blocks,
perpendicular lines that cut
clean right angles,
and brighten white pages of erased pencil streaks,
and make the mess feel tidy:
trees planted in rows, the click of new marker caps, gums
scraped dentist raw,
the stacked addition problem
of a day's caloric intake, binoculars through the wrong
end with the future pinpointed up ahead,
fingerprints wiped away.

The monster, the girl
the stringy corpse
packed with crunchy moss,
pointy twigs,
forest detritus,
promised the prize of *satisfied*
but lied and really just squeezed tight
with spider long fingers,
made fists,
pounding on the trunk of a tree,
pounding on the pink folds of my brain,
bleeding red hot sap,
black shadows, invisible,
like heaviness in dreams,
slices like paper cuts
on eyeballs. She wrote down the physics of distance,
rate and time on the inside
of her gift, the hat,
and I accepted the equation.
The rate of my thoughts swelled
so quickly
that the distance between my illness and my self
cranked closer with each turn of the vise around my ears
until the sides of my cranium
were touching
and all I felt
was a doom, crisp
as new moon night with firefly stars,
the knowing gnaw of stalactite spears crashing
from lungs to intestines,
that piece of paper documenting absence,
the sucked-in photo negatives

to match my concave mind, to match the scars from last year's fire.
I so much wanted to fit
everything neatly into compartments
that I fell for a trick.
Now I'm a fish in a twist-
tied carnival prize bag,
the flutter of my self tucked away, divided,
the noises all muffled, the water
swallowing the circumference of my heart.
The larger my hunger, the smaller my vision.
The plastic bag blurries.
The map mirrors and bends back inward.
The monster steals the air
I am subtracting from myself.



Linda M. Crate

like you did
you were my guidance counselor
told me if i were more normal
i wouldn't be bullied,
a non-solution in a time where
death seemed a nice antidote to all the
symptoms of my pain;
but i convinced myself that i wouldn't
let my bullies have any power over me
told myself that i would live because i knew
i didn't want to die
just wanted the pain inside of me to wither
and rot away—
i was punished for being bullied
no one stood up for me,
and i was disappointed that you threw
me under the bus;
you're part of the problem
not the solution
part of the reason i don't trust people
especially those who try to help me
because i am afraid they'll just let me down or punch me
in the gut when i'm already down
like you did.

the dreams will give me wings
i've always been the one
who's felt too much,
i lock most of my words inside
know that most people
don't understand the intensity of
my emotions;
whether they be joy or pain,
love or loathing—
people don't understand or appreciate
my light or my darkness
or even me,
but still i grow in the darkness
reaching toward the light;
because i know something i didn't when i was
growing up—
i am divine, i am magical, i am a goddess; i
am a miracle and i am the roots of something powerful
i will not end myself before i've even begun—
saw how my uncle's sadness consumed him alive,
and i learned that i couldn't let the demons
devour me;
it is too late to save him
but i can save myself from the monsters
so even when it is dark and the oceans deeper than
i can swim i keep swimming against the tide knowing one day
the shores will come and the sun or moon will shine
upon my flesh and i will be saved by a moment
so sweet that the bitterness will fade
if and only if, for a blink of an eye, and i will remember
the dreaming and the dreams will give me wings enough to soar.



Laura G. Goetz

Xanthopsia

"Medication failure gave us Van Gogh's sunflowers."
I wonder when you, too, began to
See yellow.

I don't take that sunny outlook for granted.

As a child, I kept count of banana-colored VW bugs—
A model now
Going extinct,

Mirroring its buzzing counterpart slaughtered by climate
change.

You promise to reply to my braindump
When your thoughts are more in order,
Or disorder.

I hope for the latter, as
The best inspiration comes from smeared brush strokes.
Though,

"Medication failure lost us Van Gogh,"

Buzzes around my head.

Kristina Heflin

Bargain with Death

Take me instead –
I stand at the river's edge
The Boatman looks kindly on me
and says
You are living and cannot pass

Take me instead –
I stand before the scales
The Jackal softly howls
and says
You are not ready to be weighed

Take me instead –
I stand amidst the feasting hall
The One Eye watches me
and says
You have a battle yet to fight

Take me please –
I stand at your door and knock
You watch me waste away
and say
You are nothing to me now

Madison Zehmer

Prayer

I am more
gravesite
than garden,

born of unholy
soil, deep,
dark, raw.

more elegy than
hymn, more
dusk than

song. prayer
upon prayer.
more than

an apology,
I am a shelved
suicide note,

a testament
to perseverance
for the goddamn

sake of it.
flowers will grow
if I let them.



Things She Keeps In the Vault
(from *Things she Wants to Say but Won't*)

Post-War Mortem

That I loved your father
Before buildings burned in New York City
And schoolmates signed up to hunt bin Laden

I honored him through fifty-weeks-a-year absences,

Your lonely birth,
The Bush surge

I held him in those unwashed fatigues he'd worn
thin in the knees and elbows
After he returned from Kandahar with wandering, empty eyes
Gin bottles and a swiss army knife in his back pockets
And a stamp of the bullet that grazed his left jaw

But I couldn't protect him from the ghost of the boy who bled out in
his arms
Whose name he sometimes called you and often yelled out at dawn
Always at dawn as if to bid him adieu
Even as his ghost lies between us
In this lidless coffin that doubles as our bed

Color Lines

That I can't watch the news or read the paper
Without my palms sweating, my throat tightening, betrayal
suffocating me
Because every story of yet another woman raped
Unarmed black man shot
Or brown child snatched from their parents
Reminds me how deeply I cut myself
By still choosing you
"The Oppressor" as grandma calls you
But no longer with the fondness
That died the day Celeste, unarmed and driving
Was shot by one of yours
On I-94 on his way to see us

Voices

That I refuse to get over you
Because it gives me something
real to be depressed about
And is easier to explain to Ma
Than the voices in my head

Broken Women

That I don't love you
Because like the women in my family and the women before them
I don't know how to love a man
Who sees me in all my light and darkness
And the uneven shades of dawn and dusk in between them

A man in whose ears my voice is the singsong of nightingales
In whose eyes my smile is an opening lotus or that first slice of sun
that cuts through at daybreak
In whose nostrils my scent is a blend of lavender, fresh linen and
Coco Mademoiselle

The kind of man in whose embrace I feel held, safe
In whose collarbone, I can safely nestle my chin
Before whom I can lift the layers of masks that weigh me down day
in and day out
Who holds my hand and I just know all is well
Whose constancy mirrors the North Star

Or perhaps I don't love you
Because like the women in my family and the women before them,
You found me
When history and pain
Had left me too broken
Too wooden
To say yes



nonfiction



At the brink of the world

Perched on the armchair's edge, the old woman was conscious of her stroke-afflicted body. She willed herself to sit stiffly upright. It felt as though time was running out, but she had a story still to tell before she went home. As she spoke to the younger woman sitting across from her, her thin arms graced out the story, shaping a mirage that hung between them.

The other week, she began, there had been a mouse. Gloomed by the dusk, she had reached, her thoughts already on her dinner simmering on the stove, to draw shut the lounge curtains. That was when she saw it – small, brown, frenetic. It had darted, she said, between her *Collected Works of Shakespeare*, handed down from her father, and her red leather Bible. It had run under her footstool, the one she had embroidered two winters before with the sharp green holly leaves and blood red berries.

She fixed her gaze upon her listener. Surely, she must remember the one? The younger woman nodded slightly, mumbled in the affirmative.

Over her knitting, discarded and with needles akimbo, two red stitches dropped and forgotten, the mouse had then scampered straight up the curtain that she had been holding.

Up and up the mouse had gone, at times an intrepid explorer, plunging into the velvet folds and then, suddenly, in view again, a poised gymnast, balanced on the brink of the world, the very lip of existence with a map of possibilities below. A cupboard to hide in; three tangled balls of wool to nest in; the tassels of a mat to be teased by.

The woman had stared closely at the mouse, mesmerised by her imagined sense of its exhilaration having scaled such dizzying heights. It had known, she was sure, how far it had come, and yet how much more there was.

The mouse had sat still. It had watched her watching. Whiskers tensed, the mouse had craned its neck to see what next there was to conquer. The grandfather clock in the hall then chimed the hour and the old woman, startled by its weighty solemnity had realised the time. Seven o'clock and dinner still not eaten.

The storyteller paused and her hands fluttered helplessly, brushed absentmindedly at her flat chest, wiped away the crumbs of the afternoon tea. On a knife-edge, torn with conflicting emotions, she began to speak again. A nagging feeling of dread tore at her chest. There was something that she had forgotten, she felt. A little hesitant now, she began to speak again.

The mouse had jumped onto the curtain rail and then had slipped. It had fallen between the rail and the wall. There it had hanged, caught by the head, pinned at its neck. Its eyes had bulged while its legs fiercely kicked, and its body jerked grotesquely.

The old woman shuddered. Whether it was out of revulsion or some sort of sick fascination, the other could not be certain.

It didn't take long, the death of the mouse. Some strangled squeals; the sickly sweetness of a urine stained belly. A final two gasps, which the old woman demonstrated with a sharp twist of her head. Uugh! Uugh! Then it was over. The life. The adventure.

The two women sat in silence, darkness falling between them. The younger one reached behind her to turn on a lamp. The old woman, happy to have shared her recollection, glanced over at the other who sat, motionless, a world away; one fat teardrop trembling on her upper lip. Hands tightly clenched, her fingernails dug into her palms. She willed herself to sit still, to sit stiffly upright. She was thinking of her son, only 24 years old and with everything to live for. He had hanged himself only a year previous. She thought of his legs jerking; of the final shame of wetting himself, clutching at his neck, clutching at straws. Again, she asked herself: what could she have done differently?

editor's note

This is a wellness check.
How are you feeling?
How's your breathing?
Do you need to talk to someone?
Make art? Blow off steam?
Take care. Love you.

The Big D

I.

Sometimes I want to forget that I have depression. Remembering how it has showed up in my life feels like dwelling on the negative or dipping a toe in poisoned water.

The fact is, it's not the remembering that's dangerous. It's the forgetting.

I've had depression since before I knew its name. I thought it was just the way things were, and that I could not handle the terribleness of life as well as others could. I condemned myself for being "weak" and "too sensitive." I see how many opportunities passed me by as I struggled just to get through the days.

After I got the right medicine, when I was in my early 30s, I finally learned that most people do *not* feel this way:

Like you're underwater.

Like you're moving through fog that is not porous like real fog, but actually resists you.

Like you're glued to the bed.

Like your face is made of stone.

You can't listen to beautiful music because you will cry.

Like you're heavy, very heavy – even if you're not.

Like you're on the edge of tears all the time, but never really crying.

Like your mind's not working.

Like you're alone, even if you aren't.

Like always/never: I always fail at everything. I never get things right. There's no gray area, except that everything is a gray area.

Like the only relief from pressure lies in giving up (a job, a social engagement, a project).

Like maybe a shower, a nap, or a meal would help. Then it doesn't.

Like (mostly) you wouldn't really kill yourself, but a fatal illness taking you away from the world would be okay.

If you ever believed in God, you can't imagine why you did, or why God would ever care about you.

Why would anybody want to remember all that?

II.

Fifteen years after I took my first doses of Prozac and began to get better, I was hired as a chaplain in a state psychiatric hospital. I'd had little experience with people with severe mental illness, and minimal training.

Being with the patients seemed natural to me. They were just people who were hurting. Yes, some had self-destructive ways of expressing their pain. Yes, they needed to be protected and offered healing. A few needed to be protected from what they might do to others.

Truthfully, though: How much weirder can people act than I did when I stayed in bed all day, unable to move, even though I was physically well and privileged in many ways?

So when people had alternative stories to explain how the world worked – stories the staff would call “ideations” or “prevarications” or “lies” – I could get the logic in what the patients were saying. I could admire the way their minds worked to make sense of unbearable things.

When people stayed in bed all day, or tried to kill themselves, or secretly planned to kill themselves at the first opportunity while pretending to be fine, I got that. I got their anger and sadness and alienation.

If I had never been depressed, maybe I wouldn't have understood so well. Maybe I would have been afraid or appalled, like many people were.

But because I'd experienced an alternate version of

my own consciousness against my own will, the world of the hospital patients seemed more real and true and compelling than the world outside the hospital.

I left that work 10 years ago, and I still feel that way.

III.

If depression is good for anything, and it's not good for much, I'd say it helps you develop compassion.

This is assuming you survive it, and that you start feeling better.

Because I started to feel better with medicine and therapy and positive changes in my life, I emerged from the bedroom with the chipped furniture and cheap curtains. I was able to have good relationships, including a marriage; to travel, to have fun, to do work I found interesting and that paid reasonably well.

There are still days, though.

Right now I have a good friend who is dying. If I visit her on Monday, I have to clear Monday night and Tuesday morning on my calendar for sitting numb on the couch and/or oversleeping in the bed.

I figure that's normal grief, but not if it happens every time I see her. And it does.

I went through a disabling physical illness a few years ago that required two surgeries. I thought I was emotionally well when I finished rehab, and went back to work.

But within six months, I started thinking about how great it would be to get sick and die. I hardly noticed this line of thinking at first. I got pneumonia and then I got bronchitis. I dropped all kinds of balls in my professional world.

One day I told my husband, who is a therapist, that I was waking up with yearning thoughts about fatal illnesses in my head.

Soon I was in my doctor's office. Then I was in a therapist's office – again.

Then I was better. And wiser. I tell myself regularly: Don't forget, you have The Big D (as we call it in our house). It might be kept at bay, but it's never completely gone.

It's a disease – dis-ease – and it can even bring gifts with it. I have survived it. I can do it again if I need to.

I have to remember this. Remembering is crucial. Remembering saves lives.

Taking a Stance

When your thigh gap starts to slim, and by that I mean the gap is getting smaller, you might feel a strange sensation. Every now and then, your thighs might... touch. Yes, that inner flesh of the left may brush against the inner flesh of the right. Ever so softly, a gentle caress, but it's enough to stop you in your tracks. Perhaps you imagined it. And, if not, it's surely all water. Your thighs are only thicker because you're bloated. Your period is... three-weeks-away-can-that-be-well-then-it's-muscle! It definitely is not weight that you've gained, no Siree.

And yet, you're making mental plans to restrict your sugar intake, your fat intake, your carbonated liquids intake, your joy intake. You're considering researching cleanses, making plans to hit the gym twice as long the next day, deciding to park in the far parking lot, debating taking a laxative for good measure. Later you'll check for stretch marks on your thighs, gripping that soft flesh in your hand and squeezing lightly, silently furious with yourself and the obvious lack of willpower. You're sure that your entire identity is now compressed in that tiny gap, and that it's still shrinking.

But you might begin to help yourself without realizing it, too. You'll take a new stance on the issue. It will begin, literally, with how you stand. Standing, you'll widen your legs a little more than you did before. You'll walk with lengthened strides, perhaps feeling less and less the touching of your thighs. And, in doing these things, your mind will become marginally more clear, you'll focus less on the lessening of the gap and more on the way your body can still move. Your body is a vessel that wakes up with you every morning and has never missed a meeting or canceled an appointment. Despite all you've done to it, it's still very much there for you. And if your thighs wish to touch each other, it's easiest to let them.

Patterns

Count the little holes in the acoustic tiles until the ceiling fades away. Step on a crack and break your mother's back. Wash your hands until the skin is angry and raw and scrub your arms while you're at it. Count your steps to the front door and back to your room where you'll open the window to blow the smoke outside and your mother won't know because she buys you the nag champa incense that she still thinks you like so much. Maybe you do. You can't remember really liking anything.

Count the orange Tic-Tacs while you place them in lines. Two four, two four, two four. Ration them out, they're all you'll allow yourself today. Write in your journal in tiny swirls that wind around in concentric circles so they'll have to keep turning the book if they want to read it. But you know no one will read it unless your mother is snooping through your stuff again. Write that she's a bitch and leave it for her to read, navigating the circle and squinting through her glasses. Through her tears. Write something nice about her on the next page because you feel bad about that. Something that will make her laugh and think that maybe you're okay after all. Something that will let her stop hovering. Stop snooping. Leave you the fuck alone.

Count the pills you've hidden to see if there might be enough. Line them up. Blue pink, blue pink, blue pink.

Paint red spirals on your ceiling and write "*keep your head above the water*" even though you know that you probably won't. It's getting harder to keep breathing and you are really tired of the struggle. Breathe in, breathe out, keeping your heart going at its own rhythmic pattern, even though it's not a part of you anymore.

Count the squares in your floor tile—black white, black white, black white. Then practice your flute for five

hours straight because you can't get it right. You can never get anything right. Stop playing the flute because it's pointless and no longer gives you pleasure.

Listen to your CD of the Gregorian Chants. Make it play over and over on a continuous loop. Let it take you away from this, at least for a time. Rest. Close your eyes against the pattern of the tile and the spirals on the ceiling. Quiet for a moment the existential crisis.

Count the thin scars on your thighs where you barely felt the razor as you lined them up, two four, two four, two four until you ran out of skin.

Turn on the tiny blue lights over your bed that you still think are beautiful in the almost total absence of beauty. Look for constellations there. Find Estella. Find Nova.

Watch the smoke of the incense rise to the ceiling. Keep your head above the water.



fiction



Upstate

There was something particularly weak about this arm: a slim white bar, raised and lowered in choppy, clipped motions at the behest of the lot attendant. In length, it fell considerably short of crossing the lane that was its charge. Eli stared the arm down, knowing he never would, but thinking he certainly *could*, drive right through it. It was so flimsy as to be dangling from its mount, blown back and forth by the light winter wind. He broke his stare to receive his change from the attendant. The arm pointed skyward, inviting him in.

It looked like every spot was taken. Surely they'd know if the lot was full, and would stop taking money, but Eli couldn't fight his growing disbelief as he crawled up and down the aisles, cursing under his breath whenever a small car came out from behind a larger one. He found an empty spot, quite exactly on the side of the parking lot farthest from the building, but seemingly the only spot available *at all*. There had certainly been cars in line behind him, the tops of which he saw now, prowling like shark fins above a sea of snowy roofs.

He'd arrived early, as was his habit. Compulsion, if he was being honest. Half an hour early. Eli promised himself he'd stay in the car for fifteen minutes, rather than spend the time standing awkwardly in the waiting room. He let the car idle to keep the heat running. His dry, aching eyes found the digital clock in his mother's Civic three times before even a minute had passed.

His first effort at passing the time led him to trace the lines of filth on the windshield. The dirt outside, and the discolored globs of whatever residue his mother's e-cigarette excreted on the windshield's inside. Before thinking about it, he reached and brushed his fingers against the windshield. It was cold, and his fingers left a smudge, but above all it was

disgusting. Eli tried to fight it, but afterward kept smelling the tips of his fingers, fascinated by the scent of the sedimented second hand e-smoke. When he looked at the clock again, only four minutes had passed.

He looked past the intricate line work on the windshield, out into the parking lot, and ultimately at the broad side of the hospital. The rhythm of windows, the jutting upward motion of the lot attendant's booth, the dead cars gathering snow, the leafless branches of trees sprawling in threadbare bursts through a grey winter sky, all these made Eli think of a scene that might be used in one of those spot-the-difference books. In his mind, he cast the scene at night, throwing on the tall lamps overhead and lighting up the windows. Fluorescents buzzed, despite the viewer's distance from the building, and despite it being winter, crickets chirped, much in the way they had when Eli had spent his time looking at spot-the-difference books on summer nights, nestled in bed between his parents.

He didn't try to imagine where the differences would be. Where some designer might change a color or shorten a lamppost didn't interest him. Even in playing at the picture books on those warm nights of his childhood, the differences hadn't interested him. He'd really just enjoyed looking at the pictures. They were quiet.

When again he looked at the clock, a meagre seven minutes had passed. He began to feel guilty for leaving the car running. Not in any sort of environmental sense, but because he had no intention of paying his mother for the gas he used. When he shut the car off he broke his promise to himself and made for the hospital entrance. Passing row after row of cars, he found himself hoping that they all belonged to visitors like himself, but knowing otherwise. It seemed like a good thing to hope.

On his way to the fifth floor he noticed, labeled in black capital letters, a light, presently unlit. This was probably for the best, as its label, etched into the metal of the elevator wall, read: HELP IS ON THE WAY. *Oh thank God, it's about time.* Eli tried his hardest to think up a situation in which this light, if lit, would be useful. Obviously the light's purpose was to alert people stuck in the elevator to the fact that something is being done to unstuck them. Still though, it didn't seem like the type of thing that necessitated communication by LED.

Help not having become necessary on Eli's ride, he stepped out into the world's tiniest vestibule. The room was exactly no wider than the elevator entrance, and only a few feet deep. To his right hung the heaviest door Eli had seen since his class trip to Attica. One end of an intercom sat just next to the door, which Eli smirked at, thinking it should probably be labeled with something like: PRESS HERE FOR HELP. He did just that, despite the lack of written instruction.

"Hi there, what can I do for you?"

"Um, hi. My name is Eli Donovan. I'm here to see my sister. Sara Donovan?"

"Oh yes, we weren't expecting you till three. Pretty strict on that, buzz us at three and we'll get you on in."

He had a whole ten minutes, but it seemed absurd for him to take the elevator down and come back up. So he stood in the vestibule, eyeing the heavy door with trepidation. There was nowhere to sit. Eli prayed that no one else got off the elevator to join him in the cramped waiting cell.

From the other side of the wall, Eli heard a sudden swell of violence. There was a shriek: the shriek of a young woman, followed by a slew of muffled commands. There was a crash: the sound of at least two bodies hitting the wall and then the floor, very near to the door Eli found himself just outside of. There was crying. There were nurse's orders,

ebbing quieter, as if to let the patient's moans stand out in the soundscape. There were pleads: "Get the fuck off of me," the words choked out through shuddering sobs.

"Get the fuck off me," again and again, pauses in between to gasp. Eli shivered with an instinctual fear, a desire to be farther away from the situation than he was. Until a rage took hold of his body, freezing all his muscles in place with the exception of those around his jaw. By voice he knew it wasn't Sara, but he couldn't help imagining his sister being held down, begging. Eli imagined himself being pinned to the floor. And what a fight he'd put up, wind up in a straitjacket, probably on a different floor.

"Hey Eli, come on in, walk straight back to the desk if you would please."

He didn't have much of a choice. The door buzzed. Eli knew this would be his only opportunity to open it. He did just as he'd been instructed, though slowly, and looking right to catch a glimpse of the commotion he'd heard. The girl he saw was older than he thought, maybe eighteen or nineteen, nearly his age. And she was on a gurney, rather than the floor. Only two hospital staffers were on the scene, rather than the five or six Eli had imagined. One held the patient down gently, if it could be called that. He was mostly just leaned over the girl, hands on her shoulders. The other nurse prepared a syringe, not in a hurry. The anger in Eli dropped off, leaving an empty feeling in his stomach into which the feeling of his own stupidity slowly dripped.

An older woman pointed him to a binder, where he signed under his printed name. He was given a visitor's sticker to wear. Another woman, again roughly his age (as more and more people seemed to be as he got older) appeared beside him, explaining that she'd escort him to Sara's room.

"She's just finishing group, so you'll be alone in there for a minute. Hope you don't mind."

Sara's room looked surprisingly plain. It looked, Eli decided, a lot like his friends' dorm rooms did. It was bigger, even, and private. A plain twin bed sat against the wall at knee height. Sara's own blanket and pillow dressed the bed as warmly as they could. Eli took a seat at the room's particleboard desk, on which his sister kept nothing at all. He looked out her window over the cold parking lot, seeing that cars were still paying to get in. There must be some other section of the lot he didn't know about.

On a hunch, he stood and rifled through Sara's blankets. He found her stuffed bear, and smiled. The bear was roughly the size of an average pillow. She'd had it almost all her life.

He remembered a time when their father had taken the two of them, and one of his 'friend's daughters,' to the county fair. The girl's name was Alex. Alex thought it'd be funny to stick the bear out of the window as the car drove. When the bear flew out, both girls cried. Their father stopped, and told Eli to look after Alex and Sara while he himself searched around in the dark.

The same orderly that escorted him into the room appeared again, with Sara in tow. Eli, still rifling through his sister's sheets, gestured toward the bear, offering his excuse to whichever of them cared to consider it. He looked his sister over. She stood shorter than he did, not that he was tall. She wore a knit grey hoodie over a salmon shirt, jeans but no belt. She wasn't allowed to wear a belt. Nothing like the white gown he'd been imagining. Only two facets of her appearance indicated that she was a patient here. The first and most apparent: a neon yellow wristband. The second: her socks. She'd been given thick socks with rubber treads on the bottom. She wasn't allowed to wear shoes.

"Can I get a pair of those?" Eli asked. The idea of the



socks really did strike Eli as both comfortable and ingenious. To his relief Sara laughed.

"Mom already stole a pair. Says she wears them around the house every day."

"I don't doubt it. I wonder if I can buy them in bulk. Make them my regular sock."

"It would be hard to put shoes on over them."

"Does mom come up to visit a lot?"

"Yes," Sara sighed.

They sat, Sara on her bed, Eli on the chair at her desk. Eli glanced at the door, which the orderly had left cracked open. He assumed they weren't allowed to have it shut, until Sara stood and shut it.

"Has anyone else visited?"

"Just Emery."

"Oh? That's awfully sweet of him. How'd that go?"

Sara showed him the whites of her eyes.

"Horribly," she sighed. "He just kept talking about himself. He wouldn't shut up."

"I think that's what people do at our age."

"Not like him. It isn't even just how obsessed with himself he is, it's that hearing him talk is offensive. He tells me about all this shit he's into that nobody else enjoys, him and everyone else. Everyone has this sad plight to come off as unique and its like, if you *really* knew..."

"Really knew what?"

"What it's like. What alienation is like. People try so hard to be misunderstood, disconnected."

Eli pondered a moment.

"Seems to me like everyone's always reaching out. He came, didn't he? To visit, I mean."

"He came to tell me how uniquely he lives his life, and so that he can tell other people about me as a unique part of

it. He wears me like a pair of fake glasses."

"Ew, I hate those. But, they don't seem to offend people who wear real eyeglasses."

"Needing your vision corrected isn't the same as being alone."

"Alone?"

"Don't you feel like we're in the most isolated time, ever?"

"I think maybe that's inherent to—"

"Hardy harr harr," Sara interrupted.

Sister and brother fell silent. Each stared into a separate corner of the room, for nearly a full minute.

"So," Sara picked back up, "did mom mention anything about getting me out of here?"

"You know her, she said she wants to have a plan in place first."

"Well I don't have one."

"I don't think she expects *you* to have one. She wants for herself to have come up with one for you."

"Of course she does."

"She mentioned a different school, have you heard about it?"

Sara brought her knees to her chest and nodded.

"What do you think?" Eli continued.

"It sounds like the requirements to graduate are different, so with where I was at our school, I won't graduate late."

"In a hurry?"

"For what? I just hate to be behind."

Eli stood and looked out the window. The world outside slowly revised itself into pinkness, imbuing the early afternoon with the feeling of a long evening beginning to close. The browns of trees marched toward blackened

silhouette. Traffic noise picked up, as the first-shift employees started making their ways home for the night.

"Are you coming Tuesday?" Sara asked.

"What's Tuesday?"

"Movie night. Mom's been coming."

The young orderly popped her head in. "Visiting hours are ending in five," she announced. Echoes of the same announcement trailed her down the hall.

"What's playing?" Eli asked.

"I'm sure some saccharine, empowering shit. Tell her to bring pizza."

"Mom, or that woman?" Eli pointed in the direction he imagined the orderly had gone.

"Mom."

Eli stepped out of the room, expecting to find an escort but instead finding himself alone. He remembered the way out.

"Mr. Donovan?" The woman beckoned from her desk.

Eli almost didn't turn around, having so seldom been referred to as "Mr. Donovan."

"If you don't mind just signing out before you go?"

Eli signed the binder, and rode the elevator back down, its only passenger. Help was still on the way. Eli smirked, but didn't laugh. The sun had set in full between the time he was looking out the window and the time he stepped out onto the street. The cold and the dark held the world still, a quiet through which headlights and taillights moved rhythmically like sped up video. Snow fell gently in traffic's glow, each flake maintaining a safe distance from the others. They all wanted room to move. A crossing guard had to hold up a stop sign to get Eli into the lot where, inexplicably, every parking space was still taken.

Howl, Howl

I was outside his house again.

It didn't take long to find him. I'd wandered the length of the Lisburn Road, checking Tinder every so often for the change from one mile away to less than a mile. The radius spanned from Ashley Avenue to Cadogan Park and I drove around these streets, marking off each one until I found him leaving a house on Melrose Street one morning when he was on his way to work.

Paul had told me he planned to move back in with his parents. He couldn't afford the £360 a month rent of his old flat, or his utilities, or his groceries, or a girlfriend. I told myself that he was just visiting a friend, or maybe he was staying over at their house for the weekend. Lots of his friends lived in Belfast. Come Monday, he'd get the train back to Moira and it'd all be forgotten. But when Monday came and his location stayed at less than a mile away, I couldn't help looking up his new house on PropertyPal.

The new house cost £580 a month, but it wasn't worth the money. It was like any other student house; the front door was chipped and peeling, the garden ankle high with yellow dandelion heads. Inside wasn't much better. The landlord had posted photos to make the rooms appear much bigger than they were. He was living in a shoebox cramped full of IKEA furniture. But the location was convenient. Premier Student Property pointed this out in their description:

"This one bedroom, one reception mid terraced property is situated just off the increasingly popular Lisburn Road and is ideal for students and young professionals."

His house was only three streets away from mine. Maybe he was trying to get closer to me.

You really think you're that special? Wise up. It was the only house available at such short notice.

I switched on the radio and sang along to the music.

He'd left his house around seven o'clock. I thought he was going out to do a food shop at Tesco. He hadn't done one in a while and he was getting a little too skinny for my liking.

He didn't come back until eleven and instead of groceries on his arm, he had a girl hanging off him.

You see? He's trying to get away from you.

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. She was very pretty. Her hair was long, black and smooth, and it swished down her back. She was small enough to rest her head comfortably on his shoulder. If I did that, I'd get a crick in my neck.

He's always hated how tall you are. You're a giraffe compared to her.

But I made up for my height in other ways. I had curves, unlike his other girlfriends, whose bodies resembled planks of wood with a pair of tits nailed on.

Curves? It's called fat. You're a fat, gangly giraffe with a shite haircut and an inferiority complex.

The new girl was another plank. No hips, no waist, she was straight up and down, but she was wearing fishnet tights. Paul loved fishnets. When we were out in public together, he'd finger the black knitted diamonds on my thighs and tell me how hard he was going to fuck me once we were back at his flat.

He always fucked you from behind so he wouldn't have to look at you. He may as well have stuck a bag on your head and be done with it.

Paul fished for the front door key in his pocket. The girl rubbed his back with the tips of her fingers. Her nails were painted pale pink and sharpened to a claw point. She laughed at something he said, and he turned around to face her.

I knew how this exchange would go. Paul would tell her that he'd had a nice evening and that she could help herself

to a drink while she waited for a taxi. He wouldn't want her waiting out in the cold, but the girl insisted that she'd be fine. She'd already booked the taxi through an app on her phone and they'd texted her to say that the car'd been dispatched. She wouldn't be waiting for more than five minutes, hardly any time at all. Paul would nod, wish her goodnight and shut the door behind him, and that would be the end of it.

But it never goes the way you think it will, does it?

Paul found the key and twisted it in the lock, but his other hand slipped up the girl's skirt. She bit her lip shyly and shook her head, no, not here, wait until we're inside, but then her head was tilting back, and she was gasping as his fingers pushed inside her, pulled back and thrust again, willing her to come as if he knew I was watching from the top of the street.

She was the third girl he'd brought home that week. He still hadn't swiped right on my Tinder profile.

"He's your...what?"

I sighed and tried to explain it to her again. Rachel, my counsellor, didn't really 'get' the whole spirituality thing. She looked at me like I had two heads any time I brought it up in our sessions, but that was atheists for you.

You were an atheist once. Now you're just another one of those tree-hugging pagans you used to laugh at.

When the university pushed me to get counselling after they found me crying in an Animal Behaviour seminar, I asked them for a spiritual counsellor. Not a religious one, I didn't want anything to do with Christianity, neither the Protestant kind nor the Catholic. The university took this into consideration and gave me Rachel, the exact opposite of what I wanted. I couldn't say too much about it, though. They were paying for it after all.

"My twin flame," I said. Rachel nodded, scribbling



something down in her Moleskine notebook.

She says all sorts about you in that book, you know. There's a reason she says it's 'confidential.' She doesn't want you knowing how mad you are. Lunatic. Psycho. Those are the kinds of words she uses.

"And your other exes, did you think they were your—" She had to stop herself from making a face when she said it. "—twin flame?"

"No," I said, which wasn't strictly true. At the time I thought they were the other half of my soul. The connection I'd had with them was instant. It was like I'd known them my whole life. I'd have done anything for them if it made them happy.

I couldn't imagine being with anyone else. Their love made me feel whole. I never wanted it to end.

But it did, just like it always does.

"If Paul is your twin flame, why did the breakup happen?"

It wasn't the first time Rachel had asked me this question, but she was never satisfied with the answers I gave her. Relationships were cyclical. They had to end so they could begin anew. She liked to point out that my other relationships had never started again.

There's a reason for that, too. It's written down in that notebook of hers.

I laughed at Rachel's ignorance. They hadn't happened yet. That didn't mean they wouldn't. Rachel was stuck in the present. What was happening now? What are you feeling in this moment? But what about what had happened? And what would happen? There was no such thing as foresight or hindsight in CBT, and I hadn't even told her about the tarot readings yet.

Shortly after Paul had left, I stumbled across the

mystical side of YouTube. It was a tarot reading that drew me in: *'They Can't Hold It In Anymore...They're Still In Love With You!!!! Taurus Love Reading, October 2018.'* I didn't know much about tarot before that video, but when the tarot reader pulled The Moon card from her deck, the card for Cancer, Paul's sign, I knew that her reading was for me. Every message resonated – a third party situation with a Queen of Swords, The Wheel of Fortune upright, signalling change, and the final card, The Ten of Cups. True, everlasting love blessed by the Divine. It was only a matter of time before my spirit guides would bring me back to Paul.

Where are your guides now, Kiera? I haven't seen hide nor hair of them. What's that about then? Are you going to explain it off again with another reading by Mystic fucking Meg? Fucking coward.

"You can't predict the future, Kiera," Rachel said. "Fortune telling – or I suppose in this case it is literal fortune telling – it's often linked to anxiety and depression—"

I'd already gathered up my coat and bag when the little silver egg timer Rachel used to time our sessions buzzed on her desk. She tore a page out of her notebook and held it out to me. The top of the page read: Unhelpful Thinking Styles, but I pretended not to see it and rushed out the door.

A Tinder notification pinged on my phone, but it wasn't Paul I'd matched with – it was his friend, Conor.

Conor wasn't my type. He had short brown hair and a patchy beard that made him look like he was going through a second puberty at the age of twenty-six. He'd listed 'musician' as his profession on his profile. The furthest he'd toured was The Red Devil bar on the Falls Road, where he played Wonderwall to ex-IRA men who were just trying to have a quiet pint with their mates. Being a breakout rockstar wasn't really a thing in Belfast.

I typed and re-typed my opening message three times before I was happy with it and hit send.

"Is that a Fender CD-60S in your profile photo?"

I didn't want to give away that I knew who he was, so picking out something from his profile seemed like the way to go and working out what kind of guitar he had wasn't exactly rocket science. I Googled Matchett's Music and scrolled through their selection of instruments until I found his guitar. It cost £169.

Congratu-fucking-lations. You know the basics of stalking. Who'll you be going after next?

The other guitars that the site listed were a minimum of £500. The music thing didn't seem to be going too well for him.

"You know about guitars?" Conor replied. "Do you like music? What kind of bands do you listen to?"

I switched over to his Facebook profile and skimmed through the music pages that he'd liked and wasn't surprised in the slightest when Bob Dylan appeared at the top of the list. He looked like the type.

Everything I needed to know about Conor was right there in front of me, but just how much did he know about me? I'd never met any of Paul's friends when we dated.

Because he never wanted you to meet them. You were just a cumrag to him, just like those other girls off Tinder.

But I'd seen my name pop up multiple times in texts and Facebook messages he'd sent to his friends, including Conor.

Because you memorised his passcode and went snooping through his phone when he was sleeping.

Did Conor know my full name? My age? Did he even know what I looked like? If he did, he wasn't letting on.

"I've never met a girl who listens to Bob Dylan," he said. No surprise there. Any time I heard his music, I wanted to throw up a rope.

The next time you do, you should tie it around that fat neck of yours and hang yourself with it.

I was about to type a reply, something along the lines of a favourite Bob Dylan song or album, when Conor sent another message:

“Listen, I don’t want to be too forward or anything, but do you maybe want to go for a drink some time?”

I could barely make out the words on the screen, I was so excited. Would Conor tell Paul about our date? He was bound to tell Paul.

Do you hear yourself right now?

They’d been friends with each other since primary school. They told each other everything.

Jesus fucking Christ, you’re pathetic.

And maybe – just maybe – Paul himself would be there.

“Isn’t it a little soon to be getting into a relationship?”

“We’re not boyfriend and girlfriend yet, Rachel. We’re only going for drinks.”

I liked the way it sounded in my mouth: drinks. Paul and I went to a gin bar along Botanic Avenue for our first date. I hated gin, but I didn’t tell him that. He’d never taken a girl there before and it made me feel good that he’d chosen me of all people to take there for the first time.

And how many girls has he taken there since?

“Right. Drinks,” Rachel said. She went to write something in her notebook but stopped herself and shook her head. “I’m sorry, Kiera, but I can’t let you do this.”

“What? Go for drinks?”

“Drinks, talking to someone, even being on a dating app. It’s far too soon. You’re not ready–”

“Yes I am.” I said it as calmly as I could, but I couldn’t keep the tremble out of my voice. I hadn’t told Rachel that

Conor was Paul’s friend. She wouldn’t understand. I wasn’t going to actually do anything with Conor. I just needed a way to get to Paul.

You know better than anyone that if it took getting your arse ripped apart by Conor to get to Paul, you’d do it. Because what are you? Pathetic. Say it with me, Kiera. Pathetic. P-A-T-H-E-T-I-C.

Over the last six months, Paul hadn’t answered any of my messages or my phone calls or my emails. I’d gone so far as to send a letter to his parents’ house, but Royal Mail posted it through my door the following week with their address scored out with a giant black X and a note attached threatening legal action.

Even they knew how pathetic you are. Give me p. P! Give me an a. A! Give me a t. T! Give me a–

“Did the tarot cards tell you that?”

Rachel’s question caught me off-guard. We’d had twelve sessions together and this was the first time she’d ever directly asked me about the tarot readings ever since I’d mentioned them.

“What do you mean?” I asked, shifting in the armchair. I couldn’t get myself comfortable. Every time I adjusted myself into a new position, the cracked leather squeaked. Even when I wasn’t moving, the chair seemed to squeak.

Rachel carried on, “I looked up some of these tarot readers on YouTube. I didn’t realise how popular they were. How do you know which one is meant for you? Is it intuition, or is it the reading that best fits your narrative?”

How could Rachel just sit there when there was so much noise going on around her? Why hadn’t she complained to the university? How were they spending over a grand on a single projector but couldn’t spare her a few shekels for a good chair? Cloth, she needed a cloth chair. Next had nice

armchairs. They had a grey wing backed chair that was on sale for £83. It would go with her office's muted colour scheme.

"Kiera? Can you hear me?"

I wanted to show Rachel the armchair on Next's website, but my hands wouldn't reach for my phone. They lay there, stiff and limp, in my lap. My hands seemed whiter than usual and the skin was pulled too tight around my bones. Had they always been so tight? Without thinking, I picked at the raised pink lines that ran along my wrist.

Pick, pick, pick. No one wants to look at your ugly arms. Even Rachel can't bear to see them. Put them away before she chucks up all over you.

Rachel was in front of the chair, pushing her pen between my fingers.

"Kiera? Take my pen. Draw on yourself like I taught you to do. Okay?"

But I couldn't stop picking the skin. Whose skin was this? I pinched it between my fingers. It was elastic, loose, like real skin, my skin. When I let it go, it tightened around my wrist like a vice. I held out my arm and showed Rachel the skin, pull, tight, pull, tight, and decided that the skin couldn't be mine. I had to return it before it crushed my bones. My eyes were stinging, and my mouth hung open in mourning for my bones, my poor, poor bones. They'd be dust soon enough. Rachel said something like, "I'm going to make a call, Kiera. Stay in my office. I won't be long. Do you hear me, Kiera? I won't be long," but I couldn't be sure because her voice sounded far off, like it'd come from another room, another building, another person. What if it was the person who had my skin? Rachel, Rachel, what if it was the person who had my skin? But Rachel was on her way to reception and I couldn't wait for her to make the call, I had to find my skin, Rachel, my skin, my skin, I have to find my skin.



But where would I even begin to look for it?

I had to postpone drinks with Conor while I was admitted to the Royal hospital. I wasn't happy about it, but I knew if I said anything about it, I might be kept in longer than the seventy-two hour crisis period, so I agreed to meet with the consultants, the psychiatrists and the local mental health team and answer their questions how I thought they wanted me to answer them: Yes, I was receiving treatment. No, I was not a danger to myself or others. Yes, I was taking my medication regularly. No, I did not wish to harm myself. The individual assessments lasted up to an hour each and the final decision came the following morning: I had to stay the full seventy-two hours, but sectioning wasn't required. I was relieved. Nothing could stop me from seeing Paul.

I'd been checking his Facebook profile now more than ever since he'd changed his status from 'single' to 'in a relationship.'

He never changed his status when he was seeing you. You weren't even friends with each other on Facebook. You were just a cumrag he could brag about to his friends and discard without a second thought when he was done with you.

The relationship post had hundreds of likes and heart reacts, and equally as many comments from his friends and family, congratulating the couple for making it 'official.'

I was ready to get angry when I read those comments. Official? He hadn't even changed his profile picture to one that included the two of them!

Green isn't a flattering colour for you, cumrag.

Paul and the new girl had been spending more time together, that was obvious. She stayed at Paul's house most evenings and left early in the morning. Paul hadn't brought a girl home since meeting this one, but that didn't mean shit.

Whatever helps you sleep at night.

He didn't even seem to bother showering when she visited. He always showered and wore his best shirts when I went to his flat. And she didn't put in much effort either. She'd rack up to his house in trackie bottoms and a t-shirt, her dark hair pulled up in a lank ponytail, and he would answer the door in his dressing gown and slippers, sleepy-eyed and greasy-haired after a long day at work, peck her on the cheek, and then the door would close, and the cycle would repeat itself.

It wouldn't take Paul long to get bored of her. He hated routine.

Doesn't seem that way to me, cumrag.

Paul had told me so himself. He probably hadn't told her that to spare her feelings.

Or maybe he was trying to spare yours?

It wasn't her fault she was so boring. Not everyone could be as dynamic as Paul and me.

Dynamic? That's a big word for you. Have you been reading the dictionary in between these stalking sessions of yours?

Maybe he needed to be with her to see that she was exactly what he didn't want. As soon as he saw me in my new dress, talking and laughing and drinking with Conor, he would realise what he did want: me, me and only me.

He may have wanted your cunt once, cumrag, but that was all. He never wanted to get to know you. He never wanted to introduce you to his family, or his friends. He never wanted to live with you. He got what he wanted. He doesn't need you anymore.

I opened Tinder and sent a message to Conor:

"Hey! How does Thursday suit for drinks?"

That gave me two days to buy a new dress. Thank God for next day delivery.

I never thought the dress would be delivered on time. The confirmation email said that Hermes would deliver my parcel between 10:11am and 4:32pm. When nothing turned up by 4:33pm, I watched each minute pass by on the clock. 4:41pm. 4:56pm, 5:09pm. Finally, there was a rap at the door at 5:22pm and an elderly man with a smile too big for the job he had handed me my package and asked for my signature.

I ripped open the package and stroked the dress in its bag. It was a ribbed material, soft, black, 95% polyester, 5% elastine, according to the tag. I slipped it over my head and stared at myself in the mirror. It fit my curves perfectly. That was the only word I could use for it – perfect. I caught myself smiling as big as the Hermes driver. How rare was it to find a dress that was tailored to your body?

But that feeling of knowing things were working out for me, slowly ebbed the longer I stared at my reflection. The dress didn't fit me as well as I'd thought. Because of the ribbing, the dress clung to my body, squeezing bulges of fat to the surface that hadn't been there before.

Hadn't been there before? Fuck right off. You tried fooling yourself by buying a size six dress. When was the last time you could fit into something that small? Ten years ago? I'd say it was even longer than that.

I turned to the side and wanted to throw up at the sight of my bloated belly.

How many weans are you growing in there, then? Two? Three? I'd say it's no more than four but the way you're going, it could be anywhere up to five or six.

And my arms, oh, God, my arms. The sleeves cut into my pits and the urge to take something sharper to my skin swelled up in me.

Go on then. Break the blade out of your sharpener and slice it down your arm.

I didn't want to go back to the Royal and make Paul wait. Conor hadn't mentioned him yet, but it would be a lovely surprise when I'd see him nursing a pint at the bar in his best shirt, the first two buttons undone, collar ironed into two sharp points. I couldn't do that to Paul after all the effort he'd put in.

You think he'd go that far for you now? Who's the one who pushed him away? It was you, Kiera. You were the one who was always checking his phone trying to catch him out. You were the one who was always starting arguments to make him prove to you how much he liked you.

I grabbed a pen off my desk and drew blue lines on my arm. It'd been Rachel's idea, to use a pen when I didn't feel so good. The pen was meant to give the same sensation without going as far as self-mutilation.

When that poor bastard caught you outside his house, he didn't even call the police. He fuckin' should have, the way his parents nearly did, but the poor bastard felt sorry for you and sent you home in a taxi, and even paid for it.

I rucked up my dress and dragged the pen across my stomach, in the dips where the skin stretched purple and flabbed towards my legs and groin.

You did this to yourself.

My abdomen burned redder and redder, but I wouldn't break the skin. I had to get ready.

*Go deeper. You want that rush, don't you? You want to feel good? Go deeper, Kiera. Do you hear me? Go deeper. I said **go deeper**–*

My phone pinged with a new notification. It was a message from Conor:

"Still on for later?"

I swiped my phone open to reply to him when Paul's face appeared on my screen. I'd forgotten to close his profile

when I last checked it. Seeing his face instantly soothed me. It was as if a balm had been smoothed over my stinging belly. But when I refreshed his page to see if there were any new posts on his profile, his picture changed to one of him and that girl.

Jessica. Her name's Jessica. Jessica Doyle.

Their arms were wrapped around each other and she was kissing his cheek and he was laughing happily at the camera.

Jessica Doyle's kissing his cheek. Jessica Doyle's kissing his cheek. Jessica Doyle's kissing his cheek. Jessica Doyle's kissing his cheek. Jessica Doyle's kissing his cheeeeeeeeeek.

Opening Conor's message, I typed out, "Yeah, definitely!" and then deleted it, retyped it, and deleted it again. I did this typing, deleting, typing, deleting, until the screen read, "I'm sorry, I can't."

You'll not do it. You're too chickenshit to back out now. Delete that message and—

I closed my eyes and hit send.



8 of Cups
from The Slow Tarot
Artist: Lacey Bryant
Modern Eden Gallery
purchase: <https://www.moderneden.com/>



help lines & some resources

**Your local library, school, community center,
crisis center or shelter**

U.S.A.

NAMI (Nat'l Alliance on Mental Illness) 1-800-950-6264

or text "NAMI" to 741741

National Domestic Violence Helpline 1-800-799-7233

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255

LGBTQ - The Trevor Project 1-866-488-7386

Substance Abuse & Mental Health 1-800-662-4357

Canada

Directory: <https://suicideprevention.ca/need-help/>

Some Other Solutions 780-743-4357

French language: 1-866-APPELLE (277-3553)

First Nations & Inuit Crisis Line 1-855-242-3310

U.K.

Samaritans 08457 90 90 90

Papyrus HOPElineUK 0800 068 41 41

Domestic Violence 0808 2000 247

National Bullying Helpline 0845 22 55 787

Ireland

Samaritans 116 123

Pieta House 1800 247 247

Bodywhys (Eating disorders) 1890 200 444

N.Z.

Directory: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/helplines/>

Lifeline 0800 543 354 or text 4357

Australia

Lifeline 13 11 14

beyondblue 1300 22 4636

author bios

Lynda Scott Araya is currently on leave from her position as Head of the English Department and Literacy Coordinator at a provincial secondary school in New Zealand. She lives with her husband at their recently purchased Bed and Breakfast and small life-style property in the countryside. Every day, she wakes up to farm animal noises and stunning mountain views. She hopes to do a lot of writing in the tourist off-season.

Akpa Arinzechukwu is the author of *City Dwellers*. Their work has been published or forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Sou'wester*, *The Southampton Review*, *Kenyon Review*, etc. They are shortlisted for FT/Bodley Head Prize for Essay Writing.

Daisy Bassen is a poet and practicing physician who graduated magna cum laude from Princeton University's Creative Writing Program and completed her medical training at The University of Rochester and Brown. Her work has been published in *Oberon*, *The Delmarva Review*, *The Sow's Ear*, and *Tuck Magazine*, among others. She was a semi-finalist in the 2016 Vassar Miller Prize in Poetry, a finalist in the 2018 Adelaide Literary Prize, and the winner of the So to Speak 2019 Poetry Contest. She was nominated for the 2019 Best of the Net Anthology and was doubly nominated for a 2019 Pushcart Prize. She lives in Rhode Island with her family.

Connie Clark served as a chaplain in two state psychiatric hospitals for 10 years. During that time, she received many more gifts from the residents than she could ever return. She is a poet, essayist, and Episcopal priest currently at work on a book-length memoir about her psychiatric hospital ministry. She lives near Charlottesville, Virginia.

Eileen Vorbach Collins is a Baltimore native. She has a degree in nursing from the University of Maryland and a masters in pastoral care from Loyola College. Her work has been published in *Anastamos*, *the Santa Fe Writer's Project Quarterly*, *HerStry*, and others. Eileen's essay, *Love in the Archives*, received the Diana Woods Memorial Award for Creative Nonfiction and will be published in *Lunch Ticket*.

Linda M. Crate's poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines, online and in print. She has six published chapbooks: *A Mermaid Crashing Into Dawn* (Fowlpox Press, June 2013), *Less Than A Man* (The Camel Saloon, Jan 2014), *If Tomorrow Never Comes* (Scars Publications, Aug 2016), *My Wings Were Made to Fly* (Flutter Press, Sept 2017), *splintered with terror* (Scars Publications, Jan 2018), *more than bone music* (Clare Songbirds Publishing, March 2019), and one micro-chapbook, *Heaven Instead* (Origami Poems Project, May 2018). She is also the author of the novel *Phoenix Tears* (Czykmate Books, June 2018).

Charlotte Derrick is an emerging prose writer from Belfast, Northern Ireland. She recently completed the Creative Writing MA at Queen's University. She is the winner of Spread the Word's 2019 Life Writing Prize, and her work has been featured in *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Coming Out* and *The Open Ear*.

Christopher Edelen was born in Boston, MA. He writes fiction and poetry, and writes for the web series "Pretty Dudes." Christopher currently lives in Los Angeles with his dog. Most recently his work has been featured in *Parhelion*, *The Helix Magazine*, and *Ripples in Space*, and is forthcoming in the *White Wall Review*. Follow him on twitter at @AuthorEdelen.

Laura G. Goetz is an overly enthusiastic medical student, writer, photographer, runner, biker, and research dork, with a penchant for cooking without recipes and referencing Audre Lorde, Donna Haraway, and Buffy. Currently based in New York, her goal (as both an artist and a doctor-in-training) is to help people feel seen. Her prior training includes an MS in transgender hormone therapy and BS in biochemistry and gender studies, focusing on interdisciplinary scientific research informed by individual embodied experiences. More of her poetry and photography can be found in *The Intima*, *Ponder Review*, *SIREN*, *Vitality*, and *Reflexions* magazines.

Kristina Heflin is a riding instructor, originally from Northern California. She has served on the editorial board of the literary journal *Flumes*. She has been published in the literary journals *Flumes*, *Canyon Voices*, *Fearsome Critters*, and *Broad River Review*; the websites *2Elizabets*, *the write launch*, *Underwood*, *Shelia-Na-Gig* and *Passaic/Voluspa*; as well as the anthologies *Diverse Minds* and *The Beckoning*. Future publications include *Duck Lake Journal* and *Coffin Bell Journal*. When she's not writing, she enjoys riding her own horse, Lucero, and hiking with her dog, Jessie.

Ellie Herman is a licensed social worker working in mental health in Pennsylvania. She shares her recovery story however she can, hoping to reduce the stigma surrounding eating disorders and mental illness. Ellie has been published by *HuffPost* and *Recovery Warriors*. She can be found on medium.com, @ellis__peters (Instagram & Twitter), and ellie.herman113 (FB).

Fran-Claire Kenney is a writer, filmmaker, and student living near Philadelphia. She has appeared or is forthcoming in *New Pop Lit*, *Coffin Bell Journal*, and *Wards Lit Mag*. She tries to be productive and is probably eating a really good chocolate bar as you're reading this; maybe she tweeted about it, check her out on Twitter (or YouTube) to know for sure.

Abam Mambo is a native Cameroonian and naturalized American writer and lawyer. Her prose has been published in *Farafina Magazine*, *The Kalahari Review*, and *Whistling Shade*, and her poetry was recently published in *Awakened Voices Magazine*. Her poem "Sisters" was shortlisted for the Charles Bukowski Poetry Prize. She lives in Singapore with her son.

Belen Odile lives in Texas with her black cat and blonde rabbit. Living in recovery from anorexia, Odile spent 14 months in hospital treatment for the disease that almost took her life. Mental health, equality, and RAINN advocacy are dear to Belen's heart. She is now a birth doula and artist.

Katherine Page is a writer and elementary school teacher currently living in Leadville, Colorado. She has had writing published in *Open Minds Quarterly*, *Bluestem Magazine*, *Awakened Voices Magazine*, and *Chanter Literary Magazine*.

Jen Schneider is an educator, attorney, and writer. Her work appears in *unstamatic*, *otoliths*, *Voices on the Move* (forthcoming), *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, *LSE Review of Books*, and other literary and scholarly journals.

Paul Whelan is a 21-year-old poet and fiction writer from Sheffield, South Yorkshire. Having recently completed his BA in Creative Writing at York St John University, he divides his social life between the two cities. As well as attempting to redraft his first novel, he is actively involved with the local graduate project *Forge Zine*.

Susie Wilson is a poet living in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, completing an MA in Creative Writing at The Writing School, Manchester Metropolitan University. Her work has been anthologized, appeared online and has been set to music and performed at the Royal Northern College of Music. She is currently collaborating on a jazz album. Her poetry often tends to explore the political through the personal and/or the natural world.

Madison Zehmer is a senior at Wake Forest University, majoring in History with a concentration in Jewish History and minors in Psychology and Jewish Studies. She loves cats, Judaism, and film. Her long-term goal is to go to graduate school for History or Jewish Studies.