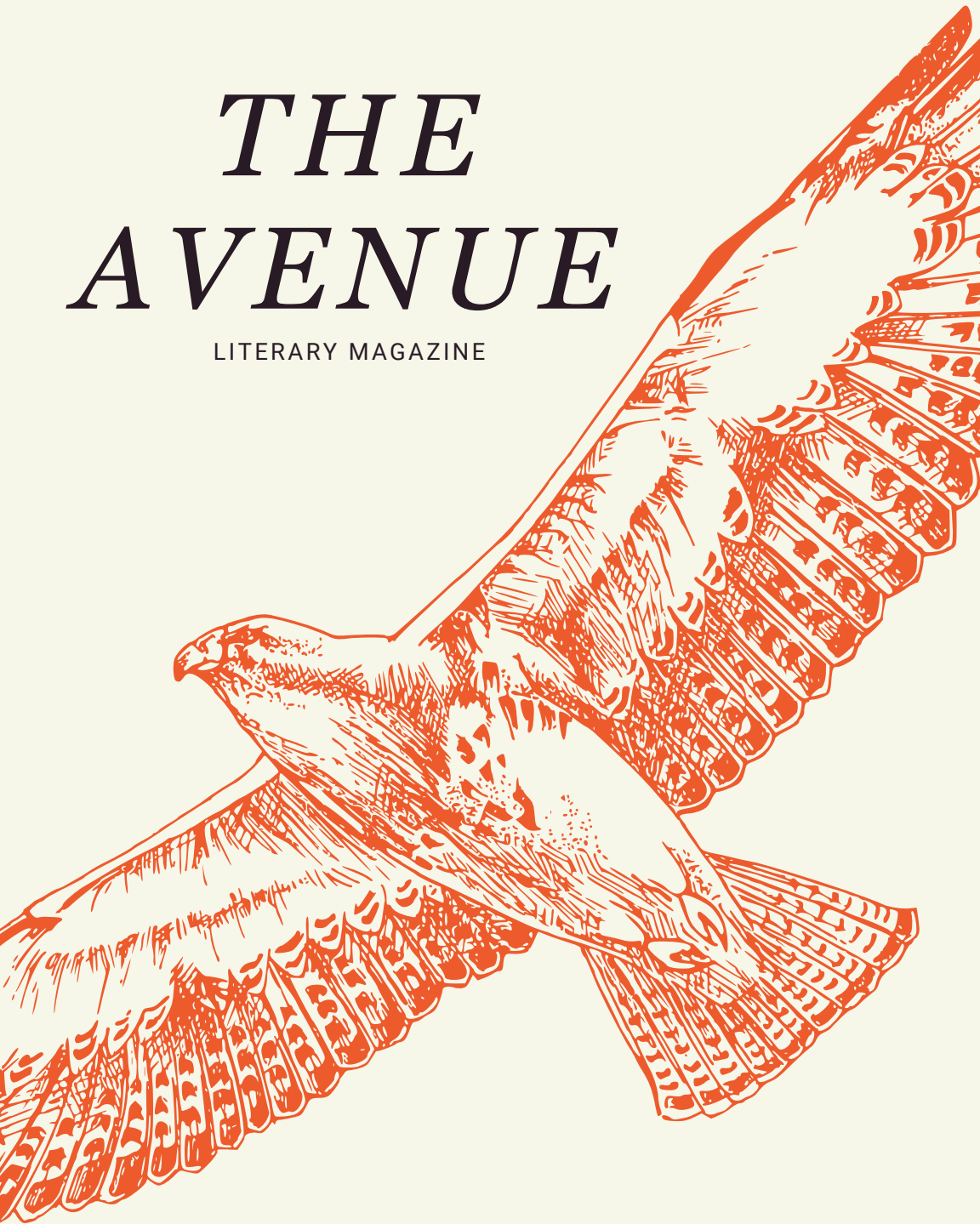


THE AVENUE

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SAINT JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY

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THE AVENUE

SAINT JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE WRITING STUDIES PROGRAM

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*POETRY
AND
PROSE*

If a bird would sing

Caroline LaNoce

If a bird would sing,
amongst the terror and rage,
it was my sign to go
I have thought about this many times you see..
 running away
 as fast as my feet would allow
Not considering the sweltering heat in early July,
Not envisioning the plump blisters on my coarse skin,
 splitting open and bleeding out,
 cherry red, my favorite color
Not sealing my eyes shut and standing still,
hearing the sound of my own heart palpitations bang like a drum
 pounding violently against my leathery chest
 And I think to myself..
 Oh how I think and think and think
If only a bird would have sang earlier,
 perched gently in its tree
 High up from the madness,
the Northern Mockingbird watching destruction unfold,
 singing his sweet song,
 the lullaby I never received
Watching me closely, and with purpose,
the endearing eye contact that failed to ever exist..
 I hear that song
 And I go

Nothing but the Moon

Sonia Vazquez

I interrupt the sound of the universe with my own voice

Looking for you

Listening for you

Sending silent prayers into the universe

Hoping that you will hear my pleas

And extend that heavenly hand upon my heart.

They say that if you do this enough -

Talk to you, call for you, believe in you

That you will help

Erase the pain

Quiet the noise

Quell the chaos causing commotion in my brain

But there is nothing here but earth and stillness

And the glow of the moon that has now sidled up next to me in bed.

My Firebush Tree

Samira Naqrouche

I saw an egg dropped while I was raking the leaves---
Under my beautiful firebush trees--
I was very curious, so I pulled my sleeves
Excited- wondered of what else to find,
within my firebush branch's knees
I looked up- and saw the finest crafted nest
how meticulous- how wonderful;
the power of nature strengthened my beliefs
I could not help it to notice the mother dove's grief
Her eyes shined with tears; I could see the pain-- with no relief
For losing an egg, a potential baby-bird- that pain not many of us
can conceive
For your loss, I will grant you all the space in my firebush trees
I will grant you the wind, the rain, and the breeze
I will grant you all my landscape with the
charming bushes, flowers, and bees
I will grant you all the world's oceans and seas
For your loss, I will kneel into my knees--
and ask for forgiveness, cry, and wheeze
I will make it right -- for you and your baby-doves to see the light
-- to grow and soar anytime, day or night
I promise you and your baby doves that there will be no fight
They will grow, spread their wings and soar to the highest heights --
I am sorry for disturbing your peace
If I only knew what was within my firebush trees--
I would never rake them and cause you great unease--
I want you to know that I love you as I love all living
things in nature including light bugs, birds, ants and bees.

*Philadelphia Chinese Lantern Festival in Franklin
Square*

Callie Crouch

I'm trying to find myself here
standing under the lambent lights
of a fish with a forehead horn
and wings,

a Chinese lantern that's
mismatched and perhaps
explains why my arms
feel like they're where
my legs should be

this evening.

I'm relieved the woman I hit
with my car on the streets
of Manayunk is just bruised
but I can't stop thinking about

the way her body felt,
touched against my
headlight, then on concrete; and
someone please tell
the mechanical lotus
to stop opening up to me:

I don't deserve it.

The Man Who Was Almost Not a Man

Jonathan Procopio

“You don’t say,”

the whiskers on my mustache waved hello
to a marine vet in sunglasses who hopped up
ladder to my train in SeaSide Oregon

bound for elsewhere, it was all a sea
and last week he held his wife at gunpoint
fellow marine with a seven year old daughter
tsk tsk tsk we were taught until we
were the ones who said it

I dialed up the dispatcher who gave us green lights
we could safely slither around the mountain
and we could bullshit without remorse

“if you want to be more a man
start by throwing those books
away and start hitting the gym”

Is the pen mightier than the sword?

Half a dozen men sleep naked
in a Davenport jail cell
wishing they had known

and yet would being a Workshop grad
in another universe have done them any good anyway?

“If you carry a gun you don’t have to fear nothing
for the rest of your life” he says excitedly
from his leather conductor seat and being
who he was offered me a chip from his Pringles cup
before settling into a new conversation on
the futility of education and if it had all been a dream
then why is it reality—I stopped him

Ribs
Stella Chiavon

What a privilege it is to feel at home within yourself.

To clean and decorate your
mind like a room painted
yellow. To rearrange furniture,
hang only favorable

memories in frames.
Ribs aren't a cage,
a prison made of callused bone.

Rather, they are supportive,
the stiles and rails.
What a privilege it is to view
your skin a wooden cottage

or a brick wall.
Thick enough so words
can't penetrate or

overstay their welcome.
What a privilege it is
To run your fingers

along your arms and legs

and not feel hair,
but tall green grass,

a lawn where you can grow
the most beautiful
Peonies.

What a privilege it is to look
At yourself and admire the
flatness, or smirk at the curvatures

acknowledging them as your front
porch. Or a tire-swing tree.
A place oozing contentment.

What a privilege it is to feel at home within yourself.

a lawn where you can grow
the most beautiful
Peonies.

What a privilege it is to look
At yourself and admire the
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What a privilege it is to feel at home within yourself.

An Ode to the Loose-Leaf

Lauren Warner

Here's to the shredded sides of
The royal blue and red stripes
That turn to confetti and travel
The classroom floors.

Here's to the ripped three hole punches
And the stuffed-into-the-binder
System of organization and the papers
That will disappear into thin air.

Here's to the 30 second lesson plans
The ideas that come to mind
Mid lesson and mid night
The chicken scratch magic.

Here's to the love notes, the
Secret messages and the doodles
The inside jokes and the weekend plans
Scribbled in and unevenly folded up.

Here's to the shaded drawings
And the works of art
The number two Ticonderogas
Telling a story through the shading.

Here's to the notes, the bullet points
And the essays, the hand written
Stories and the organizing
The brainstorming genius plans.

Here's to the paper airplanes
The balled up basketball to the
Trashcan and the back of the
Classroom origami.

Tommy
Maureen Berner

“The word for love habib, is written from right
to left starting where would end it
and ending where we might begin”
- Brian Turner, Here Bullet (1)

The first and only thing I knew about him was he deserved to be
where he was.
Because, well, he'd been there and seen some shit.

That's it. That's the gist. The boy could do ANYTHING and de-
served to be considered elite.

Elite, if getting your face blown off for people who don't give a fuck
about you is some type of
badge of honor.
But it is.
We just don't consider it anymore.

I too had experience, but on the home side of things. At the time,
20-year-old me only saw my
own pain. A young, selfish girl who upon her first experience of an
arrival home from hell,
ripped up the “just in case letter” because well, if he couldn't tell me
in life ... why the fuck
would I care in his death?

Kind of cutthroat.
Yup. I know what I am. It has served me well. So that about sum-
marizes that.

My first experience found his “Say Anything” in me and somehow
after many, many mistakes
God decided it was time I found mine.

20 years later that matured version of a selfish girl was taught a
lesson.

A lesson that came with blue eyes, a crew cut and staunch faith in
God, Country, Corps.

Exactly what I had been running from...yet craved.

But our story was brought on by another woman’s tragedy. A wom-
an who lost a hero ...

an actual hero, a national hero...

or enemy ...

depending on who you’re talking to.

Real LOSS. Real fear of the unknown. And there I was smack in the
middle of it... trying to help

a young woman navigate a life she did not ever expect to have to
endure.

What felt like her ending.

And here HE came. Our beginning.

A hero. An actual hero.

Not once. Not twice. But countless times.

With that hero, as many others, came loss.

Not once. Not twice. But too many to count.

With me came a lot of loss, also.
Not once. Not twice. But too many to count.

We forget about loss. What it does to us as humans. But we are human beings ... even the strongest, most cutthroat ... are human beings, after all. “Remember when you didn’t want this?” ... has become our daily inside joke or battle cry....

depending on the day...
because who in their right mind would want something so easily lost?

People like to discuss and hypothesize about how our soldiers must feel coming home from war.
That, I can never answer. None of us can. I think it must be different for each. I can only tell you how it feels from the other side.
Usually, it begins with late night bourbon-infused conversations or simple holiday greetings that end with small glimpses into how a young, strong boy becomes the beautiful soul of a genuine, loyal man.

A man I now trust with my life.

Who we ALL unknowingly trust with our lives.

And dancing and laughter....my God the laughter.
Do not focus on the dark days. They are the price paid.

Because trusting my life with a man never came naturally.
Should it? Yes.
In this case... MY case... it didn't. But that's a story for another day.
Instead of shrinking into oblivion though...

I chose the man of all men. The man that could keep the girl ... THE
WOMAN... who takes care
of herself and everyone around her ...
Safe.

And he came... with blue eyes. A crew cut. A staunch faith in God,
Country, Corps.
And the purest heart that ever was.

OOhh-Rah.

*CREATIVE
NONFICTION*

Home Movies

Bridget Shirley

I have no home movies. The technology has always been available - born in 1991, it has been accessible, and perhaps even affordable, for my entire life. But there are no tapes, or more modern video files, to chronicle my childhood. At best, you might find me on the fringes of the home movies of my cousins, just left of center as we sing happy birthday.

My mom made the deliberate choice not to take home movies, choosing never to buy a camcorder when my brother and I were younger. She was always afraid that something tragic would befall the family in our childhood, and that she would find herself stuck watching the family tapes for the rest of her existence.

Nothing happened. My brother and I are now both healthy adults, one might argue that we're even productive adults, and our childhoods were largely untouched by tragedy.

As I get older I wish I had materials to reference my younger self. I have the photos. Photos of my toddler self confidently walking across the beach. A snap in front of my family's home as I look slightly uncomfortable in my communion dress. A picture of me in the kitchen on the first day of 9th grade, an awkwardly short haircut, and the prominent braces to match. But so many of them are staged, an interruption of the moment it represents.

There are moments I wish I could watch play out.

I wish someone had caught my reaction the moment that Barney showed up to my second birthday. I had been obsessed with the purple dinosaur's TV show, and requested to watch it each morning. In anticipation of my birthday, my Aunt Ellie hired someone to show up to my birthday party in the costume. It was a nice sentiment. Of course, even then I was suspicious of anyone in a full body costume. I found them distressing. So as the dinosaur

approached, I fled to my mother. I didn't leave her side for the rest of the party. I might not have enjoyed it much, but my cousins and neighbors appreciated the party visitor. Was my panic obvious then? Or was it quiet, the way it is now?

When I was still young, I remember being like a fish to water. At a family friend's pool, I was so confident jumping into the water. Repeatedly. Was I as confident as I remember then? Was it one of the last times I approached something with nearly zero fear? Or would the video catch me slowly taking those first steps into the water, acclimating myself before I would boldly jump in with my swimmies?

At my kindergarten graduation, we were tasked with sharing a short sentence that started with one letter of the alphabet. However, there were two special positions - A and Z - in which the student would have to read a slightly longer passage. I was initially given the esteemed honor of the letter A, but the stress of being up in front of the audience, having to say more than anyone else, stressed me out more than a kindergartener should be stressed. My mom asked my teacher to have me switch with another student. But when I did finally say my sentence, now buried in the middle of the alphabet, was my voice small? Did it shake in that way it sometimes still does in front of large audiences?

I want to see my face during my middle school dance recital. I had begged my mom to let me enroll in dance classes again, after taking a bit of a sabbatical when I chose to join the school band. I practiced for months alongside my peers as we learned routines for tap, ballet and jazz. I even learned a solo dance to "Colors of the Wind" from the Pocahontas soundtrack. I painstakingly learned the appropriate positions of my arms as the song began. Going into the recital, I was ready for the performance. I didn't feel particularly nervous. It took place in a church in Prospect Park, my mom and Aunt Kay were in the audience. The first of my dances was an

ensemble tap number. On that community stage, the lights bright, my dance teacher made her small cues from the front of the stage. I began the dance, only to have a minor existential crisis a mere minute into my performance. What was I doing? Why was I on a stage dancing to some old song, with a ridiculous dance routine? And there was an audience, sitting still in their metal folding chairs. It all seemed so silly in that moment. I wish I could see a video of that performance. I finished out the song, and finished out the recital, but I need to know if, in that moment, you could see the wheels turning in my mind. It felt like a record scratched in my brain, but was it possible to see it on my face? Did my steps even stutter? It was my last recital. Forever, this time.

I'm less eager to see more from middle school or high school. Those memories feel a little more crisp, the moments more memorable, or at least they seem a bit fresh. I don't need to be reminded of how unruly my hair was before I learned how to manage it. I remember the moments singing along to music videos with my friends, but I don't need to hear that screech of my voice.

At times, though I wish for those home movies, I'm glad I am not an adolescent now. My digital imprint mostly just includes time since high school. A time when I had things a bit more figured out. My hair better styled, my braces gone. My actions a tad less cringy. I would hate to have every single moment of my life posted to the internet, the way I see some family and friends do with their young children now.

As I get older, my memories seem less reliable. They all seem just a bit fuzzier, slightly modified by the intervening years. I want to remember the former version of myself, hoping that they provide some further insight into the version that I am today. Or, to the contrary, I wish they would confirm what I suspect, that I've always been like this. A little nervous, a little serious, a little silly. A little too loud when I shouldn't be, and a little too quiet when there is air

to fill.

I want objective proof of my behavior and my actions. The small expressions I made when I didn't think the spotlight was on me. Instead I just have my own perceptions, or the perceptions of family and friends, viewed through their own lens tinted by time. It seems a little inadequate.

Changes
Anna Kalafatis

It's amazing how much can change in just one year.

I visit the small island of Karpathos, Greece often. My grandma, or yiayiya, lives in a village called Volada on one of the island's many rocky mountains. My dad was born in 1966, on a floral couch in the living room of my yiayia's pink stucco house. She still has that couch. I refuse to sit on it.

This summer, my parents and I braved the nine and a half hour flight from Newark, NJ to Athens; followed shortly by an hour and forty minute flight on a 40 passenger propeller plane from Athens to Karpathos.

"This runway used to be the only paved road on the entire island," my dad said as we landed, "the Italians paved it during World War II." A fun fact that lost its appeal after the first time I heard it in the summer of 2007.

There's only one gate at the airport, separated on the outside by two sliding glass doors. One door has an icon of an airplane taking off, the other has an airplane landing. Arrivals and departures. We picked up our rental car at the gate. A white stick-shift Citroen that we don't have in the States. My mom let me sit in the front so I have a better view of the scenic drive to yiayia's house. I opted for the windows down over the air conditioning.

I let the salt air flood my lungs as my chestnut hair whipped in the wind. Newly added guardrails are all that prevents a car from plummeting off the edge of the road. Small prayer boxes every few kilometers reminded us of this scary reality. My dad beeped around every turn as the roads are misleadingly two-way.

As we climbed the windy road up the mountain I noticed the forest of charred pine trees. What was once a lush green mountain-

side looks like the set of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. I remember the strong scent of pine trees that used to invade my nose. A Christmas tree farm in the summer heat. The fragrant signal that we were approaching yiayia's house. Now, I struggle to pick up the scent of anything but the breeze; odorless mountain air.

It's amazing how much can change in just one year.

Yiayia was waiting on her marble front steps as we arrived at her house. Her short gray hair looked white in the hot afternoon sun. Her crooked fingers were wrapped tightly around the iron front gate for balance. Her black dress matched her black Adidas slides that we gifted her last year. Always black. Only black. A black widow.

My grandpa, or papou, died when I was twelve. It was on my dad's birthday, and one of the only times I've ever seen him cry. On laundry day, my yiayia's house looks like a pirate ship with black sails suspended on string in front of her house.

Yiayia asked if we could use our rental car to drive her up the mountain to her garden house. Last year, we had a huge barbeque there with the entire family. She grows grapes, tomatoes, almonds, loquats, pomegranates, plums, peaches, and probably more that I haven't even discovered on the sizable property. The plum juices would drip down my sunburnt cheeks whenever I took a bite. The tomatoes were always juicy and sweet, validating their classification as a fruit. Plump bunches of green grapes would hang down from the trellises that covered the outdoor patio. I would pick the fuzzy almond hulls right off the tree, peel them to reveal the hard shells inside, and crack the shell open for my one nut prize. I was excited to eat almonds that didn't come out of a blue cylinder.

We drove yiayia half a mile up the mountain. The dusty paved road turned to rock and sand after the first turn. Our Citro-

en was driving over crunchy pita chips. When we arrived, the oasis I remembered from last year looked brittle and barren. A water shortage on the island and my yiayia's inability to drive up to the house everyday had a detrimental impact on the once thriving garden. The few bunches of grapes that hung from the trellises were small and sour. Goat droppings and dried up leaves covered the patio floor. My yiayia was so disgusted and disappointed that she demanded to leave.

It's amazing how much can change in just one year.

Later, I decided to go for a swim. There is nothing like the crystal clear water of the Mediterranean. I've found snails with bright shells, rock crabs that look like granite, and eels that slither in pods on the seafloor. Fish of all sizes and colors would dart and dash between rocks, their scales reflecting the sunshine, giving the illusion that there was glitter in the water.

The sand was scalding hot when we arrived. Tourists were bronzing under the Greek sun in clunky metal lounge chairs. Evenly spaced straw umbrellas were aligned in neat rows. We scoured for an open umbrella setup and found one in the third row back from the water.

"Kalimera, 20 euros please," a caramel man in a bucket hat and sunglasses said to us before we even got settled.

"Wow, it was only 12 last year," my dad replied with an uncomfortable chuckle as he handed over a 20 euro note.

"More tourists makes island more expensive," the man said with a thick Greek accent. He tucked my dad's payment into his fanny pack and walked over to a blonde woman who was shaking her empty plastic cup at him.

"Do you want a frappe?" my mom asked me as she stared at the woman and her drink. "I can call him back over."

“Maybe after,” I said, looking out at the small waves crashing on the beach, “I wanna jump in first.”

I slid off my flip flops and hopscotched through the scorching sand to the sea. A tourist boat full of people was just pushing off from a rock it was tied to. In all my years of coming to this beach, I have never seen such a large tourist boat dock on the rock. The boat’s deep horn sounded as I adjusted the silicone straps around my high ponytail. This year I brought high quality goggles with me from the States. No more cheap crap from the souvenir store. I wanted to see the shimmering fish in high definition.

I found a narrow strip of tourist-free beach and with a running start, dove headfirst. The cool water felt like silk on my hot skin. The bubbles subsided in front of me and I saw a swarm of reflective bits, but it wasn’t fish. Fragments of plastic garbage were suspended in the sea around me. The debris was concentrated around the rock that the tourist boat was tied to. Images from my environmental science class of turtles stuck in plastic rings flashed in my mind.

It’s amazing how much can change in just one year.

I brought my goggles to visit the marine life of my favorite beach in the world, so I was determined to find some. The plastic began to clear as I swam further from the docking rock. I was relieved to see the crystal clear water that I remember. I breast stroked to the cove where the rock crabs congregate. Their rocky shells blend in with their habitat acting as a strong defense to predators, and a fun game of hide and seek for visitors like myself. As I hovered above the rocks with my face in the water, I did not see a single crab. My mind wanted to think that they honed their camouflage craft, but my gut knew the truth.

I swam even further into the cove where the fish and eels

commute from rock to rock like caffeinated New Yorkers. Last year, I saw a school of fish that reflected rainbows in the water like an oil spill in a parking lot. The temperature of the water dropped as the seafloor beneath me got deeper. Chills covered my arms and legs, but I continued to search the rocks for my fish friends.

I saw only two fish.

I quickly jolted backwards when I saw them floating by the rocks. I have never seen fish like these before. Their bodies were like red and white zebras and they had matching striped spiny appendages that pointed in all different directions. They were the size of a foam football and they levitated in the water in an eerie way. Even my jolt didn't startle them, as if they were scared of nothing. I turned around and swam freestyle straight back to the beach.

"See some cool fish?" my mom asked when I made it back to our overpriced beach chairs.

My cousin John was sitting in the other chair. He's 35 and has also been coming here since he was a kid. Now, he brings his own two children every summer to explore the island and visit our yiayia.

"There was nothing," I said, grabbing a blue striped towel that resembled the Greek flag.

"Nothing?" she said, her eyebrows lifted above the rim of her dark sunglasses.

"I don't know what's worse," John interjected, "the tourists or the lionfish."

"Are those the freaky looking fish with spikes?" I asked him.

"Yeah, they've been popping up everywhere," John lifted his bucket hat and wiped the sweat off of his bald head before placing the hat back. "They're invasive, and fuck up the whole ecosystem. I read somewhere that they eat up to 100 fish per day and they have like, no predators. It's so bad in Florida that people are getting paid to hunt them."

“Wow, that’s horrible,” my mom said, while rubbing her tanning oil in. “Did you want that frappe now, honey?”

One of my favorite parts of Karpathos was that it never changed. It was my own secret slice of paradise. This beach was my escape from the murky polluted waters of the Jersey shore. The rainbow fish were the reason I refused to eat fish growing up. The rocky mountains inspired my passion for hiking and the outdoors. Nowadays, it feels like everytime I turn on the t.v. there’s another natural disaster. Wildfires. Earthquakes. Flooding. Other environmental disasters aren’t natural. Oil spills. Pollution. Nuclear Warfare. Hearing it on t.v. is one thing, but seeing it right in front of my goggles?

It’s terrifying how much will change in just one year.

A Picture of Paint: One Man's Attempt to Control the Weather

Kevin Priole

When I look to nature, I see an evolving canvas with amended brushstrokes of beauty. I cannot say that I always exhibit such an overarching taste to nature. Perhaps I could see such a take within the changing arrangements of the clouds and of the sky. I tend to take more of a stationary view towards nature's beauty. More akin to a slideshow or a static photo album. Namely through a season. One beautiful season that I feel some just do not talk about enough. Summer. Good ol' summertime.

I see it as the true cornucopia of the eye's wondrous gaze. The trees are at their peak with a rich collective aura of green. The streets stand short and clear, freed from dents of debris or surprises in heavenly dew. Well, perhaps if you do not count the discarded grass trimmings amongst neighboring lawns. Most of all though, there is no snow. Nothing for the earth or humanity to clean for days or weeks at end.

But, I must not forget about the skies. Oh, those bright blue skies. Unlike any other dreadful season during the year, the sky's eyes seem to wake the morning brighter than ever. More vibrant than ever. The clouds breezing their ways across the day's scape, draping its shatters of powdered cauliflower. Its sight is strange yet still captivating. I normally do not care for it whilst being an ant on the ground; though, I quite like its look on the sky.

And yet, I would truly narrow this painted picture even further. Even the good ol' summertime has its damping quirks, for it remains hampered by excessive toils of rainfall or heavy overcasts of deadly heat waves. Hardly showing those delightful flickers of a cool breeze. Especially these kinds of days. Experiencing a gentle breeze is like if someone left a freezer open for just one whole second. It may not be enough but at least the air was there. Though, in

this proposed image of nature, I would hope for rather frequent assemblies of currents. All throughout the day. Letting the air make its stay despite the heat's heavy rule amongst midday. Too often does such relieving air circulate but not until the day has long but passed. It creeps its way only in the lonely pits of night. It is like a deer retreating into the woods from approaching headlights.

Even as I say all of these things, I know that they cannot be true. The weather does not bow down to any of our needs. Not to one person or to many. Not even for our collective aspirations.

Summertime for me has always been a symbol of endless venture. Endless possibilities. For me, it is a time when the world smiles at me and I smile at it back. Then, the winter rolls around and frowns with its forlorn of frost and evening decay. What should I do in response? I frown back at it and wish. Oh, how I wish and how I wait.

“What I would give for it to be 70 degrees today,” I think to myself amongst winter's venomous chills. But alas. I know that it cannot be true.

Even so, who am I to steal the rest of the world from you? One person's seasonal prison is another's heavenly delight despite the illusion of control amidst preference. I suppose those forces that lie amongst clouds and above understand how to remain utterly impartial. To be as random as a slot machine. When it rains, it rains. When it is sunny, the Sun will seize the day.

While I may sit here hoping for more, I realize now that I already have it. The mere feeling, the desire for more. Perhaps that is where the true joy lies in the seasons. Knowing that they will stop around again like an occasional weekend festival.

Perhaps I dread summer's parting so much because I can still see its remnants laying themselves before me. I gaze out the window to see its final hello through the tattered line-lights of blue, white, and even orange horizons. Even on the ground, I see the

streets littered with leaves left into nothing but crumbling corn chips, waiting for the end of a careless boot.

Despite it all, I realize that it is hard to say goodbye. But, it is easier to say hello again.

Love Comes in a Casserole Dish

Michaela Schuster

Love comes in a casserole dish, held by her hands, nails painted red. He knows she likes red. It reminds her of the sunset and their trip to Hawaii. He stood in the water as the waves tickled, well, grasped his ankles, with his 35mm Nikon to get the perfect shot of her. She, with the golden curls clipped haphazardly on the top of her head, and she, most incredibly, watching him from the sand. His photos are a hobby to her, a sentry for him, and love's handbook to me.

Love rides like a 1992 Ford Mustang. She is always asking him to drive, although she made sure that the radio never played anything but Patsy Cline. "Walkin' After Midnight" plays then ends and their sweet duet stumbles off softly into smiles. He starts singing his own rendition still with a chuckle in his throat.

"I am sixty and it will take long to walk, but I will drive. I will drive with you for miles along the highway. Well, that's just my way of saying I love you. And," he adds, his voice falling out of sing-song, "I always have two cigarettes in the ashtray. One for you, and one for me."

Love tastes like butter toast and milk. I tiptoe out of the spare bedroom, wrapping myself in a homemade bed quilt. I find her on the back patio with a cup of coffee and a picture book. I sit on her lap, she reads to me, and we listen to the oohing of mourning doves. We head inside just in time for breakfast and this morning's episode of Sesame Street. Mornings in the ranch home by the lake become routine. I soon will know no other bed than the one by the window in the spare bedroom, and wake up to no other sound than the birds playing in the bushes.

Love grows with hyacinth and palm. I spend hours in the front yard with her to nurture our garden. After, she sits in her green lawn chair with a glass of lemonade to admire. He stands in

the grass, admiring too, wearing his sandals she keeps asking him to throw away. This grass supports the feet of her children, his children, and now me, and our Easter tree he makes from a stick in the yard each year. A butterfly bush is tucked between other non-butterfly bushes and the side-porch steps. I ask if this bush really will bring butterflies to our house. He says let's wait and see, it's not up to us where the butterflies find their home.

Love feels like too tight of pigtails on a Tuesday morning. Here, from the bathroom sink, she pulls my hair into two parts and wraps elastic onto my scalp. Behind the hair brush tickling the curves of my ears, I hear him slightly opening then closing the front screen door, keeping watch for the school bus to come over the hill. My stomach hurts most mornings, so he gives me two kisses on my sheepish walk to the bus, one for my tummy and one for my cheek.

Love is math at the dining room table with him on a Thursday night, right after *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* ends. We sit here each night for twelve years. Our routines are as steady as his hand gripping a Ticonderoga pencil to a pad of paper. The questions become more difficult. Addition to algebra, algebra to calculus, his number 5 looking more like an 'S' each year, a seventy-year-old couple raising a teenager, more classmates asking why I live with my grandparents.

Love answers its own questions. It is an invisible force of nature. It defies age and normalities. Love makes all sense, love makes no sense at all. Love does not require reason. It somersaults on the trampoline in our backyard. Love conflicts with fate. Love becomes fate. I lived with my grandparents so my partner's hand can now lie in my lap as I drive. I always drive, not because he asks, but because I want to. I lived with my grandparents to learn that love extends to all things- to the plants hugging each window of my home, to my dog snuggling into my side, her paw occasionally landing on my lap-

top keyboard and I have to backspace. I lived with my grandparents so Patsy Cline and Johnny Cash could find life on the turntable in my bedroom. I lived with my grandparents to have photos sprawled across my bed of horseback riding and princess costumes. There is one photo of Pop in his Dale Earnhardt denim button-up eating a plate of casserole, another of Gram sitting in the grass, waving at me in her gardening gloves.

I can't help but to reach for my phone. I lived with my grandparents so that my fingers would know this pattern by heart. I trace nine digits across the screen, the same digits I once dialed to be picked up after a sleepover at Becky's. Two ring tones, then, "Hey Mac, how's it going kiddo?"

FICTION

Chicken

Sarah Lomanno

The floor tasted like coconut. How had she never realized this before? It didn't smell like coconut, so she had never thought to taste it. Nick asked her to do it, so she did. She got down on her knees and bent over and smelled the floor, smelling nothing, and then stuck out her tongue and licked. Coconut. It was unmistakable. Definitely coconut. How strange. The living room floor tasted like coconut. And to think she had spent ten of her thirty-four years in this house and had never tasted it before. Never thought to.

"Did you know that the living room floor tastes like coconut?" she asked Nick.

"Yes," he replied.

"How long have you known?"

"Oh," he paused, "well. Probably for a few months now."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" she asked, trying to make eye contact with her husband.

"Oh. I don't know," he began. "I guess. Well, I didn't want you to find a way to fix it."

"So you've been licking the floor?"

"Not like all the time."

"How often do you lick the living room floor?" She couldn't decide whether she should be appalled.

"Like once or twice a week," he admitted.

She thought about this. Imagined him making sure she was in another room, or at the grocery store, and getting down on the floor. Placing his palms on the hardwood for balance and leaning over, taking a quick taste, and sitting up again.

"Do you always lick it in the same place?" she asked.

"No. I've tried most of it by now."

"Does the whole thing taste like coconut?"

"Yes."

"What about the other rooms? Have you tried the other floors?"

"Yes," said Nick.

"And?"

"You should try the other rooms yourself. See what you think they taste like."

"Does each room taste different?" she asked.

“Yes.”

“Why are you telling me all of this stuff now?”

“Because I want to see if you can taste the floors too. At first I thought it was really cool, like I had a super power, but then I thought maybe there was something wrong in my brain. So, I just thought I would see if you could taste them too.”

“And how did you find out about this? That our floors have different flavors.” She was genuinely curious.

“I was drinking water in the living room and spilled some, and I didn’t feel like getting up to get a paper towel, but I also didn’t want to forget about it, so I leaned down and licked it up. I was already sitting on the floor because I was stretching. I tried it again a few days later, and it still tasted like coconut. So then I decided to try the other rooms.”

Haley decided not to be annoyed by the floor-licking. Or at least not to say anything out loud about it. Instead she asked,

“Which floor do you want me to try next?”

“The bathroom.”

“No. Pick another one. I’m not licking the bathroom floor.”

“Okay. Try the kitchen.”

Haley went into the kitchen and got down on her hands and knees and licked the floor. She recognized it. What was it? She closed her eyes and tried again. Swedish Fish. It was definitely Swedish Fish. Her kitchen floor tasted like Swedish Fish.

“Okay, I think I know,” she said. She got up and opened the drawer on the side of the kitchen table. She took out two scraps of paper and two pencils. “Let’s each write what we think it is and see if we have the same answer.”

Nick took his slip of paper and his pencil and turned around to write on the kitchen island. Haley wrote her answer on the kitchen table.

“Okay, let’s swap,” she said.

They passed the papers between them. They had both written “Swedish Fish.”

Nick smiled, pleased. Haley put her hands on her hips.

“Does it still taste like this even after I clean the floor?” she asked.

“Yes. It always tastes like this.”

Haley thought for a second and then went to the kitchen sink. She opened the cabinet under the sink and got out a cleaning

wipe.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s go to the bathroom.”

Abra Para Kalameh

Christina Tsakiris

December 24, 1982

My eyes widened in shock at the atrocious site I found in front of me the second Mama flipped the light switch by the door of the bedroom Lisa and I shared.

“Mama! No! No, no, no, no, no!” I shrieked.

“Tamara, cut it out, what’s the matter with you?” said Mama staring down at me with sleepy eyes. She always looked tired after dinner these days, which made me sad, but what she laid out on the bed made me mad.

There, under the dull light bulbs sticking out from the ceiling were the twin beds Lisa and I slept on, one foot apart. And there, on the beds were our dresses—the matching white ruffled-sleeve dresses with skirts that looked like something only bagpipe players should wear.

“Mama, why are you making me wear this ugly dress to the meeting?”

Mama pulled the dress off the bed and spread the skirt over my head, signaling for me to lift my arms up and slide them into the sleeves.

“Because, the Christmas party is after the meeting, and you can’t wear blue jeans at a party, you wear a party dress.” I knew from the tone of Mama’s voice that if I continued to complain, punishment would follow.

As usual Lisa put up no fight and dressed herself in an instant. Within minutes, Mama combed our hair, slipped on our white church socks and led us downstairs to the coat closet in the foyer.

“Ok, koritsia, girls, get your church shoes and coats on, I

I have to make a phone call,” she said, still in the no-nonsense voice. Now, she had grown-up business to take care of.

I opened the door to the closet while Mama continued towards the kitchen where a phone rested on the breakfast table. I sat on the marble floor and retrieved our black penny loafers from the neat line of shoes sitting under the hanging coats. I buckled my shoes first before helping Lisa with hers. Though Mama was in the kitchen, I could hear her end of the conversation on the other side of the closet door.

“Hi, Michael, It’s Dina,” Mama’s voice sounded soft and weak, probably because she was so tired. I also could sense her sadness. “I’m sorry to bother you. Are you eating dinner now? Ok, sorry again, I just wanted to ask if Petros came to work toda—oh —ok, ok.” A long silence followed.

The last time we saw my father, my baba, was not that morning, but the morning prior. Mama handed him a brown paper bag containing a Kraft cheese singles sandwich and a banana before kissing him good-bye—the same thing she packed for me and Lisa every day. I ate smushed banana while I watched the kids in my class eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and granola bars. Once the ice cream line opened, I watched in envy as they ran to the line to buy chocolate éclair bars. I wondered what Baba saw people eat at his job and if he ever got jealous, but he accepted the brown paper bag thanking Mama and promised he would come home right after work. Like many other promises he made, he didn’t keep it.

“I’m gonna ask Jeremy to hold his breath again. It’s so funny when his face turns purple,” Lisa said with a giggle.

“No, we don’t need money,” Mama said, still on the phone. “It’s ok, I work—yes, thankfully. No, no, I understand, but thank you—yes, thank you. I’m going to a meeting now with my children, so I have to get going—thank you again. Good night.” I heard the phone hit the receiver with a loud BANG that echoed throughout

the walls of the kitchen, reaching my ears in the foyer. I saw Lisa flinch along with me, but after a long pause, she pointed to her coat on the hanger signaling me to take it down for her. I zipped up her powder blue coat before zipping up mine. Of course, our coats matched as well.

“I like Jeremy, he’s so funny,” said Lisa, tossing her skirt like a can-can girl.

“I like Rob. I hope he asks me to dance at the party,” I said feeling the blush pinch my cheeks.

“*Tamara!*” barked my mother shutting the closet door. “What sachlamares, *nonsense*, are you saying now? You’re only seven, now come on, it’s almost 6:00. Let’s go, we can’t be late.”

“Do you have the Abra Para tape?” I yelled, as I ran after Mama to the car. She patted her purse signaling she packed it in there.

I began to sing my song as soon as Mama turned out of our development.

Abra Para Kalameh, la la la la la la la

You make me a sergeant of your love

With the kiss of a velveteen dove

“Those are not the words,” yelled Lisa.

“I make up my own words,” I said sticking my tongue out and smacking her on the shoulder.

“Tamara, what did I tell you about being nice to your little sister? I never see Rob and Jeremy act like that,” said Mama turning into the parking lot of the YMCA. Mama was right. I never saw Rob and Jeremy fight, but Jeremy was eight, and I did see him kick snow at his girlfriend, Holly, the day before outside of school. Rob was fourteen and a lot older than us, more mature. If only I could be a lot older than Lisa, and closer to Rob’s age.

Patricia made us sit in a circle on the red carpeted floor of the meeting room and asked us to hold hands. I held her son Kevin's beefy hand, wishing it was Rob's, who was sitting on the other side of him. My other hand gripped Lisa's while she held hands with Jeremy. Jeremy held hands with Patricia. I stared down at my lap, waiting for Patricia to lead us in the prayer.

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

"Kevin, can you tell us one good thing about your week?" said Patricia acknowledging him from across the circle.

Kevin said something about Atari, something about Coleco-Vision, and something about hockey.

When it was Jeremy's turn, he said something about Atari, something about his new baseball autographed by some Philly's player, and something about Holly. Soon after that, I tuned out, as I usually did in these meetings, and I sang my song in my head.

*Abra Para Kalameh
I wish I could play with my Barbie dolls.
Abra Para Kalameh
I'm wanna dance later with Robbie*

"Tamara, Tamara? Earth to Tamara!" said Patricia.

"Earth to Tamara, come in Tamara," I heard Jeremy say in his Mork Ork voice. I looked up to find everyone in the circle laughing, but I knew that they were laughing at Jeremy.

"It's your turn, sweetie, are you up to participating today? Can you tell us one good thing about your week?" asked Patricia. I shrugged in silence as I always did in every meeting. Patricia asked Lisa the same question. Lisa did the same shrug. I wondered if Lisa was copying me or if she had the same problem that I did. English wasn't our first language, and we didn't always have the words, but if I did have them at that moment, I would have probably talked

about the Christmas Choral concert at school, and the snow, and the Washington Township winter poetry contest I somehow miraculously found the words for, and how I won. I would have talked about sharing the news with my baba, who hugged me tight and told me he was proud.

We walked into the banquet hall. Patricia led us to a long table towards the center of the room where a large cardboard box sat at the end overflowing with bags of pretzels, chips, cheese puffs and Oreos. Patricia removed everything out of the box one by one and spread them throughout the table. I spotted the large white pastry box that had been hidden in the bottom. She lifted the lid to reveal rows of vanilla and chocolate cup cakes with red and green icing topped with white jimmies. My eyes widened with excitement.

“Can I have one?” I asked, pointing to one of the cupcakes.

“Of course, sweetie,” said Patricia smiling down at me. “I got them for you. Your mom told me cupcakes make you happy.” I looked down hoping she saw the gratitude in my smile.

“Can we play catch?” asked Jeremy removing a baseball from his coat pocket.

“It’s your party, you guys can do whatever you want,” said Patricia.

I looked around, confused. Was this the party? Why did Mama make me wear this stupid dress? There had to be some kind of mistake. I had to do something. I wanted music and dancing so badly my words were ready to burst out.

“This is the party?” I asked placing my hands on my hips, thinking about the Abra Para tape that Mama moved to my coat pocket. This did not look like the parties I saw kids have on TV. “A party is supposed to have music and dancing and lights.” Everybody stared at me, dumbfounded.

“Well, I’m sorry” said Patricia, chuckling. “There’s nowhere

to play music here, and we only have these fluorescent lights, but you can still dance if you want to.”

Suddenly, I felt hands on my shoulders that whisked me around and found Rob’s eyes smiling down at me. “You want to dance, we can dance,” he said, placing his arms around my back, slightly lifting me on to my toes. He moved me from side to side in a kind of dance I saw boys and girls do on TV, but a slower one. I didn’t hear any Crystal Gayle or Air Supply, but Rob’s high voice singing to a sweet beat seemed good enough.

“La di da----, lad di da----, la di da----!”

Pressed against his stomach, I asked through shy laughter, “Oh, Robbie, what are you doing?”

He stepped back to lift my hand high in the air. “We’re dancing, doll,” he said, nudging me to twirl around, and amazingly, the bagpipe player skirt twirled with me.

I realized, ever since Kevin recommended the Christmas party for our little Gam-Anon group, I dreamed about dancing with Rob—and it happened. Maybe this meant that I could dream of many things that I could make happen. I could dream that one day, Mama and Baba will stop fighting. One day, I will have enough money to buy anything I want, like chocolate éclairs. I won’t be carrying a calculator in my purse, like Mama, to add up the numbers stamped on stuff in the shopping cart at the supermarket before getting to the check-out counter. I could buy prettier dresses that make me look like a movie star. I could dream up anything, and it will come true.

It wasn’t exactly the place I dreamed up with Rob rocking me, listening to his la di da’s, listening to Jeremy bounce his baseball against the wall, listening to Kevin rustling the bags of chips, and Lisa laughing while biting into her cupcake, it felt dreamy enough for that moment. I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to know what I was going to find once I got home, or the day after, or the day

after that, but it was a new happy place to later escape into. Christmas, friends, dancing, cupcakes, la di da, la di da. Abra Para Kalameh, I can do magic.