

The Avenue

Summer 2022



EDITORIAL

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EDITOR'S LETTER

Our summer issue is a triumph for those who worked on this project.

In spring, The Editorial Team put out a call for submissions. Two years into the pandemic, we thought introducing a theme – *Mirrors*, would encourage deeper reflection and camaraderie among our writing community. It turns out, like everything else about living through a pandemic, it was a source of angst; as if writing and submitting work wasn't angst-inducing enough.

So, we put out another call. This time without a theme. And we watched as your submissions poured in and poured out of you.

You sent us beautiful and heartbreaking pieces about losing oneself, "As they Fade" (page 13) and "Perfect Day" (page 22) and finding oneself in strange and unexpected scenarios, "Chasing Strangers" (page 15). You also let us see what *overcoming* looks like in "Hitting Diet Culture Rock Bottom" (page 24). With every written word, you humanized your experiences through thoughtful and relatable writing.

Here's to you. Here's to all of you, who contributed to making this edition of *The Avenue* a sort of travel log. We hope, in writing, you got to get away for a while. Happy summer, writers!

Nikki Palladino

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POETRY

Fresh Air for an Imprisoned Mind: Phenomenological Reflections on the Restrictions of Monadic Experience for Understanding the Role of Beauty in Conditioning Rational Empathy and Free, Determined Judgment

Keli Birchfield

Mirror, mirror
On the wall,
What might happen
Should you fall?
And smash to bits,
Small fragments sprawled
About the carpet
Like a glittering trawl?

An age of bad luck
Once and for all?
Self-estrangement?
An Eden dissolved?
Freedom's justice
But serpentine gall?
Would everyone panic,
Ensure you're resolved?

You *would* like that,
Blood spilt to recall
Your hidden reason
Hung in this hall . . .
Eidetic enchantment -
A world egg to maul!
I'll take my questions
To a window, enthralled

Our Zeitgeist

Bryan Keisling

On a thousand islands in the sea
Impossible explosions, unfathomable philadelphias
Careen my waking ears. Desire culminates in a
Pale apotheosis like a ghost. Forty
Septembers pass me by without warning,
Speaking with sincerity about the painted
Colors of a pained soul. And
I looked in the mirror
This morning and forgot how to smile.

I never agreed
To grow up, so leave me alone.
I am a Supreme Delusion, marked
By creative failures and forgotten Childhoods — unable to decode the entropy
Of universes I dive like doves as a spectator
Above this life that enjoys
Repeating itself. Kisses seem to
Blossom as they
Tremble on my lips, destroyed like a phoenix.
If Beauty is my
Beholder, it was sent at the behest
Of someone with a sick sense of humor.

Brevity of life, longevity of Love:
May you spare me a moment? And
Clemency is our zeitgeist who
Always glints before we sleep, from pole to pole,
Always pale upon the amber shores...

Impressions of Morning

Bryan Keisling

The mist cleared, transfixing the
Tropics. Deep and peerless, teeming
With pearls, starlight swirls the
Predawn skies, stained with spilled dark-blue
Wine. The Cross stirs above the liquid
Firmament, dangling like a rosary
Above the bower of
Banyans and sempiternal Ocean, immortalized
For mortal eyes, engaged in wandering struggle.
Looking over the lanai, onto
The ships cleaving the horizon,
Much has come and many more
Are disappeared.

Progenitor of every syllable, a quarter
Century's outpour is resolved.
The answer is immediate,
Edifying flesh. And I can only
Speak from experience.

The Morning Essay

Rachel Zablocki

She has felt the graceful decay of her soul for some time,
and it rests in the day but is restless at night.
So she cries to the owls and sings them to sleep
until she falls asleep to the blue birds singing
sweet morning glory.

Full Circle

Sonia Vazquez

My father, Miguel, the perpetual narcissist
Spent decades promising my mother that this time,
“I’ll be good, Rosario. Te lo prometo.”
But my mother, Rosario, would have a different story she’d take to the grave.

My mother-
The caregiver,
The cook,
The referee,
The chauffeur,
The nurse.

Would show signs of her stress visible
In the deep creases that would form around her almond eyes,
In the white that would snake into her thick, dark hair,
In the extra weight that she would eventually learn to carry around
Like heavy, cumbersome bags of rice
And in the confrontations that would erupt, midday,
Outside of unfamiliar, city apartments belonging to one of dad’s lovers.

But I never knew my father like that.

My father-
The talented pannist,
The creative artist,
The avid reader,
The witty comedian,
The tall, basketball connoisseur.

He kept his secrets safe from his
Children, away and filed neatly in
Pine drawers crowded with confidence
And indifference. But he couldn't quite
Master the art of discretion when
It came to my mother. With her
His apparent affairs
Were as stark and apparent
As laundered bed sheets set
Out to dry in a hot July sun.

He was sloppy, left
Clues-- glaring, massive,
Destructive-- like tornadoes: attempting
Subtlety in stolen glances thought
To be left unseen-late night dropped
Phone calls made
To the house, brazen women openly
Staking claim to a man with a
Wife and five children and
What should have never been
Spoken became everyone's latest bit of
Chisme over *café y pan con queso*.

But Rosario was very good at plowing through the infidelity-
The muck that was always followed with tears, anger,
Morning pep talks to herself,
And empty promises made by him.

She kept herself going
Moving on, keeping pace –
Grocery stores, post offices, health centers
Gathering her babies like scattered pennies on the ground
And attending to this next task or that next errand
All while keeping her head held high and putting things in "God's hands."

Te lo pongo en tus manos, señor. Confío en ti.

She always did her best to pick up the pieces
Before any of us had the chance to notice
That everything had already been cracked wide open.

Because that's what she did.
She stood by her man.
Like a good, faithful, little woman.
So we, her children, could hang onto the image of dad that was
Untainted,
Unspoiled.

My father,
The saint,
My pride,
My hero,
The man who I would eventually measure all other men against,
Could never do wrong.



“Memories & Reflections” | **Krisann Janowitz**

As they Fade

Michael Brooks

The mind is a jumble
With recollections all a tumble
The mind is confused and filled with fraughts
Of forgotten memories and cherished thoughts

The brain is sick and severely diseased
The sufferer is often disturbed and displeased
But its owner knows not why that is
Because the mind has lost its pop, sizzle, and fizz

The mind is a terrible thing to waste
To a destructive invader that quickens its pace
For both family and friends the deterioration then
Is a slow and painful reminder of an undesirable end

PROSES

Chasing Strangers (NON-FICTION)

Giana Longo

I heard my father's voice from the week before like a tickle in my ear, "Ninety-five is only good when there is no traffic. This is ridiculous. I don't understand why you don't always take the boulevard." Because father, people on the boulevard drive as if they were handed their licenses out of a lost and found bin when they had never had one in the first place, and there is nothing nice to look at as I dodge them. Here, while I might be jammed between the same four cars for 45 minutes, I could at least watch the golden sunlight reflect off the buildings in the city casting shadows and light across my face, and the sky melt from blue to orange to pink, as I sit.

Despite the cold, I kept the windows cracked and the heat up. I needed to breathe, and even if it was smoggy Philly air, it was better than the heavy stuff that came out of my car vents. You would think that rush hour on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving would be the worst time to drive home, but I didn't mind it. I had nowhere to be and no reason to get there on time. When he pulled up along the highway next to me, I minded it even less.

I didn't notice I was singing the words to the song I had playing. One of my comfort tunes that was there as background noise for my thoughts. So many thoughts I was swimming in. Before my eyes flashed images and ideas, and I began to draft thoughts into words, and just like that the song I was singing was four songs ago and I was another mile down the 95 North with no recollection of how I had gotten there.

I glanced around me, making sure my daze had not almost caused an accident when there beside me in a nice black SUV, was a long dark haired, wool coat wearing, handsome as all hell stranger staring back at me.

I met his eye. He smiled. So did I. He pulled up a bit more in his lane. I accelerated to meet his gaze again. I did. Then passed him and switched

lanes, taking note of exactly where his car was behind me. His head had been tossed back lazily on the headrest, so as he gazed at me, he looked more than casual. I needed some space. But I wanted him back.

We began to play traffic tag. He would inch up, catching me staring at him, then I would fall behind him, a singular white car amongst the mass of automobiles making their way home for the holidays. There were so many people. What could have been a thirty-minute drive was taking me over an hour, causing the highway hypnosis that allowed my mind to circle itself endlessly. In that time roughly a million strangers in their cars had passed me on the highway, ignoring my very existence to try getting to their destination faster. Just as I had for the most part, ignored them, glancing over only every so often with no real effort or intention. I was thankful though, that during one of those ill-timed glances I stared directly into the eyes of the stranger next to me, and I'd found him.

Lackadaisical, and in just about as much rush as me, I was struck by the serendipity. Where was he going? How much longer was it taking him to get there than it should? I often wondered about the lives of those driving beside me on the highway, wondering their story, but I had never really made contact. But by some strike of magic, today he had been looking when I was, and we became a part of an ending and a beginning all at once. How often we are afraid to engage in such interactions. We, as two people on their paths to nowhere, could do so together for a small part of it. He would be only a moment, a moment gone, but why should I have been better without him?

I too, for him, was only a moment. A simple accident. I am sure I could not look as I am, with my life crumbling and being built up all at the same time. I could not look as if every thought behind my eyes was in a constant battle to be a story put down on the page. I looked like a stranger in the space time continuum stopped briefly beside him, and in fact I didn't have a story at all. I didn't have a life. I was an aberration for momentary entertainment during the commute home from nowhere at all.

I was glad though that for the over the next mile I got to play this game of cat and mouse with him, back and forth. He would catch me; I would catch him. I suddenly burst into laughter at the absurdity of it. I was no one, and he was no one. I have never met him and will never know or see again. Yet, I played a game with him down the highway, smiling despite myself. Giggling at the oddity of engaging with him. No future connection to speak of. A moment, and a moment passed.

In my hysterical fit of laughter, that he witnessed in our final encounter, life was absurd. I waved out the crack of window I had open, hoping he would remember me, knowing he wouldn't. I peeled off towards my exit, thinking perhaps I should have just stayed on the highway, playing this game forever, since after all, I was in no rush to get anywhere.

Brunto's Last Stand

Jimmy Hutchinson

A solitary spotlight shown on him now. Small children in the crowd began to laugh at his silly outfit and the ridiculous color of his deep blue mustache that without dye would surely be gray. At least, that's what he hoped they were laughing at. They could also be laughing at the fact that an aging man with a gut that could barely fit into his store-bought costume would be the director and star of the night's show. Regardless, the sound of laughter brought another smile to his face and made it easier for him to begin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, I welcome you to the experience of a lifetime and I thank you for your presence. I will be your host for tonight, and you may call me Brunto."

He paused for a moment to wait for cheers and applause and was met with the sound of mild clapping. The crowds, mostly children, used to go wild at his introduction. They were eager to see him, more clown than ringmaster, and the wonders he would bring about in his show. He still attributed their deafening roars to his tinnitus. He would tell jokes, perform tricks with torches of fire and rubber balls of various sizes and colors, and attempt to hold humorous conversations with the animals as they traveled around the ring. He became an icon for the sheer joy he took in each and every performance, as none were exactly the same. He was so loved that the show eventually adopted its current name from him – Brunto's Big Top. It was a nonsense word that he had come up with himself to get more laughs. A ringmaster named Matt Tucker was too boring.

Now, most of his jokes were met with silence and he was too brittle to perform most of his once famous tricks, so most of his previously ad libbed performance was reduced to a script that he had to follow to ensure the best reaction from the crowd. He didn't write the script himself.

"Now, you're going to want to pay attention to what we have in store for you tonight. Some of it may intrigue you. Some of it may inspire you. Some of it may even shock you."

As he finished the lights flickered to life to show the trapeze artists who had been waiting for the time to begin with the utmost patience. The pair were perched atop dual platforms at the top of the two columns that held up the tent, gripping the bars attached to ropes that allowed them to fly through the air. They leapt off simultaneously, met in the center, and let go of their own bars, only to grab the bars of one another a second later to return to the opposite platform. This was accompanied by blaring music that originated from speakers that were hooked up underneath the platforms. The music was a twenty second loop made up of loud horns and cymbals.

This act used to be accompanied by a live band that would play through the show. It was made up of ten men, each with their own respective instruments. They would sit and perform in their own little alcove that was situated next to the tunnel from which he entered. They wore outfits that matched Brunto's, with black and red stripes of varying shades of light and dark. They would play from a set of prepared songs, but not even he would know which set of music would accompany each act. It was just another part of what made each show feel so unique and special. When they first started making cuts, the band was one of the first things to go.

The pair up above swung back and forth another three times, and bowed on their respective platforms to be met with applause. As the crowd clapped, he noticed a child sitting in the third row from the bottom who couldn't have been more than thirteen years of age. His eyes were fixed upon his phone, and he assumed they had been since before the lights even came on. *Who would pay for a ticket for their child only to have them stare at their phone for the entire night?* The child was missing all of the magic and the excitement.

"Simply spectacular, ladies and gentlemen, simply spectacular. A true example of pure skill and elegance. Now, I'd like you to meet some good friends of mine."

The clowns entered the ring while riding in their cars that were entirely too small and were made up of colors of bright pink, sky blue, deep magenta, and daisy yellow. Each of the three cars held four clowns, and the roofs were so low that they had to place their knees in front of them in order to fit. They exited their cars with haste, and the same repetitive music that accompanied the trapeze artists began to play once more. They threw pies at one another, fell over again and again, and three reentered the cars to circle

around the group of other clowns like sharks surrounding a school of fish. He found himself to be laughing extra hard at their performance, partly due to its absurdity but more in the hopes that the crowd would notice him and join him. The children laughed once more.

While laughing, he found himself to be eyeing the same child as before, eyes still glued to his phone. He tried to control his glances, but the child's behavior was angering him. The men in the ring had worked hard alongside him to rehearse and perfect their act, and this young man could not even show them the respect to at the very least feign interest in it. If they only had more people at the show, he could focus on ensuring that they have a good time instead of worrying if this one person will ever put down his phone.

The clowns continued their act for another several minutes. More pies were thrown, more clowns fell on their faces, and the cars were driven around the circumference of the ring three times and driven through the tunnel to exit. Applause followed. Then, he saw Joe and three other handlers pulling on the guidance ropes of an elephant named Bessy.

Bessy was an ancient being, almost blind, and needed constant guidance by being pulled by ropes or being pushed by small carts that were typically used to transport various supplies around the tent. She'd outlived the rest of her companions by a good ten years. She was a pitiful thing to look at and should have been retired years ago, but the people loved to see her despite her slow pace. Once she had passed, that would be another act that would not be returning. Elephants were so difficult to come across these days, even more so in this line of work, and even if they could find one the deafening roar of protests of activists would put a stop to it. So, they made do with what they had.

"Folks, you're in for a heck of a treat. This here is the sweetest and my personal favorite girl on Earth. Say hello to Bessy!"

The small children in attendance were now on their feet. A good number had run down the stairs of the stands in order to get a closer look at the bottom and were now standing with their small hands gripping the guard railing. Some parents whose children were too young to comprehend what the large animal was in front them were gripping their children with one hand and pointing with the other while mouthing the word "elephant."

"Now, Bess is a little old but she gets energy from hearing the crowd. Let's give her a cheer!"

The children began to squeal and holler at the top of their lungs in response. Bessy in truth could not care one way or the other what the crowd did, but it was another way to build up the excitement in the room by having them cheer. One of the handlers had brought along a large inflatable multicolored beach ball that she placed in front of Bessy as she was walking. Bessy most likely could not see well enough to "kick" the ball, but every few steps she would come up to it to push it along with her two front feet to

simulate kicking it. Joe and the other handlers led her around with the ball two more times, and then exited out the same way that she came in. If only they had attracted more people.

Finally, it was the moment he and the crowd had been waiting for. Joe had returned, this time directing the cart that was pulling the cage that held the lions. The children began to squeal once more. The parents gripped their younger children again, pointed and this time said “lion.” This crowd was hooked. Well, save for one. Brunto held the microphone back to his face.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to prepare you for my favorite event of the night, and I hope it will be your favorite, too. Feast your eyes on these ferocious beasts.”

The cart had stopped next to the large ring that had still yet to be lit. Once it was ablaze, the lions would be walked through it several times. Since the crew needed time to set up the ring and to make sure everything would run with ease once the lions had left their cage, a juggler entered the ring to distract the crowd while they waited. It would only be another minute.

From his position atop his stand, he had a clear view of the cage and the animals inside. Their names were Nada, Raion, and Senge. They looked so similar with their mouths that were agape, golden brown fur, and dark brown mane that was just a tad bit mangy that he often had trouble telling them apart from one another. Brunto knew their handlers made them antsy and irritable through lack of food and that the lions were more eager to be rewarded with food when they had successfully completed their tricks in the ring. And that also made them less predictable, however.

Their cage was metallic silver, and one of the lions – Senge, possibly, but he still couldn’t tell – had gotten up to walk towards the back of the cage. That’s when Brunto noticed the door latch that was normally left untouched and in place to keep the doors locked until everyone and everything in the ring was absolutely ready was unhooked. He was about to get the attention of one of the handlers when he hesitated.

He thought about Pottstown. How in the summer of 2015, the McGarry Brothers’ circus was on what was supposed to be its final run. The show had been on its last legs for a few years before this, and it showed in the fact that for their goodbye tour they could barely find any town that would host them. They were in the middle of a Friday night performance in the small Pennsylvania town when an elephant became agitated, possibly due to stress or fatigue. Unable to control the enormous beast, it trampled three people to death within the ring before the authorities could arrive to put it down. People swarmed to the remaining shows after that, and the show was still traveling. Brunto thought then about their own show’s numbers and how they had been dwindling.

The lion had moved right next to the unlocked door and stood there, waiting. He looked to see that the crowd’s attention had shifted from the

juggler who was still performing to the cage. He saw that even the young man had now put down his phone in anticipation of what would happen next. Joe walked in front of the cage door but faced away from it, conversing with one of the handlers who was working with the pyrotechnics. No one had noticed the unlocked door. With one easy push, the lion could be free. He could still say something. But, he didn't.

The lion took another step forward towards the door. He thought about how the cheers used to reach deafening volumes, and how their steep numbers used to make him nervous. Then he thought about all the blood that had been on the floor from a single swipe of a paw. He raised the microphone to his face.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please make sure you are paying attention. You will remember what you are about to see for the rest of your lives."

Perfect Day

Katie Shainline

One day, my husband, whom I'd been separated from, said "let me send you on a trip. One night, just go." He picked stuff out, asked me questions about things I liked, and then booked the trip. On the very 5-hour drive to the resort outside Pittsburgh, I went over a mountain and under two, and I called everybody. Just chatting about nothing. I had gotten to the point of broken and I wanted to see who would answer and who would take notice of how much my rambling sounded like goodbye. My mother-in-law talked to me for an hour. My younger sister for two hours. My husband for half an hour. No one else picked up.

When I arrived at my destination I was awed. I was on top of a mountain. The air was crisp and very cold. Everything was designed to look like a Tudor mansion. My room was gorgeous and the tub was big enough to fit three of me. It was like a dream. I sent pictures to the people whom I'd spoken with on the way there. It was kind of freeing being there alone with no one depending on me. No one knew me.

I went to the hotel restaurant and ate dinner alone. The waitress kept asking if a parent was going to be joining me. *The joys of looking young I guess. I was twenty-five.*

I politely told the waitress that I was alone. The meal was fantastic. Every bite was prepared with care. The carrot puree was by far the best thing. I told the waitress to thank the saucier for their wonderful technique and use of spices. She seemed shocked that I knew what everything was called and how everything was made. I tipped her well and went upstairs and read a book.

I was in a dark place when I left for that trip. I was so far down that rabbit hole that I was on a first-name basis with the Queen of Hearts. I left thinking that it wouldn't be that bad if I didn't make it back in one piece. What I found while there though showed me I wasn't in one piece.

I slept for only a few hours and when I woke up there was a breakfast provided for me. I looked it over and called my daughter. She was eating breakfast as well. She was so happy to hear from me. Apparently, Daddy had no idea how to make oatmeal the way she liked it. She wanted to know when I would be coming home. I told her I would leave in the afternoon. She smiled and danced away. Being the best oatmeal maker was not enough for me.

I wandered around the resort taking pictures. Looking at the different areas and just how lovely it was when I noticed it started to snow. It wasn't heavy snow. It was snowing, but so delicately that it just looked like fairy dust. My husband had prepared a day at the spa for me. I made my way there.

Every attendant inquired if I had done all this for myself. They all became so floored when I told them my husband had. They thought he must really have been paying attention to me. I began to think maybe he was.

Each treatment was designed to help me feel better not only physically, but mentally. There were entire sessions dedicated to people just talking to me about how I felt about life and then listening as I broke down about my life. How I had been wronged and how I couldn't handle it all. How I had gotten everything I had ever wanted and yet those things were what had broken me.

After all that, one man said to me, "but you are here and it was your family that sent you here. Maybe you try too hard to make them think you are okay? Maybe you should let them see you are hurt. After all, how can they fix a problem they can't see?" I think about that guy a lot.

I left the spa and went to the gift shop to make a commitment. I got my daughter a set of bracelets, shiny gold bangles that I knew she would lose her mind over. I would have to take them home for her to see them. I would have to live. I walked out into the magic fairy snow knowing I was going home, I would be okay, and that this was what I needed.

I called my husband and we talked most of my drive home. When I was no longer around he began to see all that I did. So, he sent me away to see that he could change and he could put me first sometimes. It was the perfect day.

Hitting Diet Culture Rock Bottom

Kaitlyn Mcdevitt

Many people cannot say that they have been dieting since they were five years old. Because of dieting all my life, I recently discovered I have BED (binge eating disorder.) Having BED explains why I ate so much at night, why I ate alone and was ashamed to eat in front of other people, and why I constantly felt guilty after eating, especially after a night of binging. My thoughts were consumed with food, my body image, and losing weight daily.

My obsession with losing weight came from my grandparents. They do love me but the way they showed their love was damaging to my self-confidence. I don't want to make it seem like my grandparents are horrible people, they are absolutely incredible. I cannot express in words how grateful I am for them both. They have supported me in all my endeavors my entire life and helped me in any way they could to achieve my dreams. However, when it comes to my weight and my body image and the decisions that I make about my body, their opinions and actions have taken a significant toll on my mental and physical health. Every time I was told "we are going to see your grandparents today," I felt my body shake knowing that I was going to be spending the night at their house.

From the time I was five, Mom told me that I needed to lose weight. By age seven, I read the size tag "Extra Large" with disappointment and felt faint trying to run on the treadmill as part of my training with a bodybuilder. By age eight, I was at fat camp having my weight read aloud to dozens of camp members and camp counselors. At age twelve, I was put on a low carb, low calorie, low sugar diet, and taking pictures of my weight three times a day. Thus, my eating disorder began. I lost fifty pounds within a few months, and was hospitalized at age thirteen for two weeks for my gallbladder, which was

failing because I'd lost too much weight too quickly. One year later, my binge eating began. I would seclude myself in my bedroom and eat four bowls of cereal, chocolate, and a tub of ice cream all in the span of an hour.

Every year, I used to stay with my grandparents in West Palm Beach, Florida. As soon as I would drop my bags to the floor of my room, Memom would bring the scale in to record my weight and start tracking my weight loss throughout the week. I've felt shame my entire life every time I've had to step on a scale. It's like if you've ever stubbed your toe so hard you fell over and cried. That is what shame felt like for me. Sudden and powerful. After this, the anxiety of having to go to my grandparents' every summer was overwhelming. I would eat anything I wanted and sneak snacks throughout the night the week prior to my trip. I thought that if I ate everything I wanted the week before, the crash diet with Memom wouldn't be so bad. It never helped; it only made it worse.

During these trips, I would meet with a personal trainer every day. She was a bodybuilder. Watching her train me in the mirror of the gym made me feel so insecure. I stared at my stomach comparing it to her six-pack of abs. While doing squats and jumping jacks, I felt tears come to my eyes. I drank lots of water so I had an excuse to use the bathroom during the session and cry. At the time, I wasn't even sure why I was crying. I just felt all of these insecurities and emotions come up all at once.

Camp Pocono Trails seems like a wonderful place to camp out and have fun but, it's more like a weight loss prison. It hurt my feelings at eight years old to find out I was being sent to fat camp. I felt betrayed by my grandparents and anxious about what to expect. It was a lot of pressure going to a camp to lose weight where I was expected to come back "looking good" and somehow also show Memom I had a lot of fun. It felt more like a bribe to lose weight than an opportunity.

One summer, my grandparents decided to have my mom and I do a custom-made diet that they planned out for us. This diet consisted of lots of low-fat foods, little to no carbohydrates, low sugar and high protein. Breakfast consisted of an egg or fruit with turkey bacon. Lunch was always a salad with some sort of protein like chicken or tuna fish. Dinner always included a large amount of vegetables and some sort of meat.

It wasn't a bad diet, I didn't mind the food. But I felt like I wasn't allowed to be a kid. I was thirteen and learning to restrict myself from cravings. My mind was being trained to think that I couldn't eat certain foods or I was going to be fat and die. The rules of the diet (or "lifestyle change" as my grandparents called it) required me to send a picture of my weight on the scale every day to my grandmother. Because of this, I was hesitant to accept her deal. I was scared that I would have to send my grandmother pictures of my weight my entire life. In return, if I lost one hundred pounds, I would be rewarded with a vacation cruise of my choice. So, I agreed. I regretted that decision later on.

Right before going home, I was sent to a hypnotist. Memom thought it would be a great idea to try it for the start of our new diet. I was completely clueless about how ridiculous this all was. My eyes fixated on the crystal pendulum, hoping the amethyst would blast its magical powers into my body and make me skinny.

After losing fifty pounds within a few months, I was hospitalized with gallbladder failure. One night, a sharp pain hit the side of my stomach. Imagine having a period cramp but also being stabbed in the same spot over and over with a very sharp knife.

For hours, I screamed in agonizing pain until it finally went away. This happened every night for several weeks. I was terrified. I thought I was dying. The first thought that came to my mind was “Memom was right, being fat is going to kill me.”

The hospital was the breaking point for my obsession with weight loss. I was used to weighing myself (completely naked no ounce of clothing or jewelry on) three times a day. When my mom wasn't in the room, I begged the doctors to let me get on the scale and check my weight. They didn't let me. I wasn't allowed to eat anything so I knew there was a chance I was losing a lot of weight. To relieve stress from not checking, I placed my hand on my collarbone, feeling the hollowness get deeper and deeper the more I didn't eat. It was terribly satisfying.

For a long time, my mom was very unaware of the impact Memom's habits had on my mental health. My mom would always encourage me to listen to her mom and do well on the diet plans. She thought no matter what, Memom knew best.

During my teenage years, my mom and I weren't very close. As a teen, I would fight with my mom constantly, thinking she didn't understand how insecure I constantly felt around my family. I thought my friends were the only ones who understood me. Sometimes while in an argument with her, she would find a way to call me fat. At the time, I don't think she realized that this behavior wasn't okay and affected me mentally. I felt that because she supported Memom and her decisions about my weight at that time, I shouldn't respect her as a parent. It took me many years to bond with my mom and see a different side to her and understand why for so long she supported Memom.

My mom relied on Memom a lot throughout her life. Before I was born and after, she suffered with a severe addiction to drugs and alcohol. Memom was her main supporter and helped her get eighteen years sober and become the amazing person she is today. After long talks with my mom about my grandmother, it seems like she felt that she should support her mother's decisions because of how much Memom has done for my mom in her times of need. As she got older, she started to realize that not every decision Memom made was the right one. As I became an adult, I was able to finally talk to my

mom about how I was really feeling and help her realize all of the diet culture trauma I have been through. Also, as I got older, my mom recognized all of the negative comments she used to make about my weight and apologized.

After graduating high school and college, I gained about 120 pounds. I was so unhappy with myself and my body. I felt terrible physically and mentally. After spending so long being forced to restrict my eating and my own family members shaming me, I eventually began hating my body. I tried to avoid the mirror at all costs and wore baggy clothes so no one could see my stomach. The panic attacks got worse and so did the binge eating. Nighttime was when I would devour all that was in my fridge and cry myself to sleep. I became socially distant and hated attending family and friend gatherings.

After lots of thinking and research, I decided to have weight loss surgery. If I was going to diet again, I wanted to do it on my own terms. I saw many successes with weight loss surgery from friends and colleagues, so I decided to try it.

I dedicated an entire year to preparing for it. I lost twenty-five pounds dieting for the surgery. This took me a few months. It wasn't easy. I barely ate the few months before and tried to exercise as much as I could while juggling school and work. I scheduled and went to every doctor's appointment by myself to get approval for the surgery.

As the date of the surgery crept closer and closer, Memom continued to get herself more involved. She wanted to attend my doctors' appointments and nutrition classes so she could learn about what I was about to part-take in. I slowly started letting her come to these appointments, later realizing that was a big mistake. A part of me thought I could control her and her actions. I really thought I could set boundaries for myself. That never happened.

Seven weeks after my surgery, I was able to eat regular foods. Memom was more obsessed with my weight loss than I was. I received constant phone calls from her asking me how my diet was going and if I was eating the correct foods, and she began tracking my weight again. As the weight loss became slower over time, my grandmother became disappointed in me that I wasn't meeting my goal weight in her time frame. Because of this, I began to distance myself from her unintentionally. She started asking my mother how I was doing. I felt bad for not calling but I couldn't take one more comment about my weight loss. Memom isn't evil, she is just stuck in a terrible mindset about diet culture.

I do love Memom though. We always create so many amazing memories together, like going swimming, shopping, to the beach, and playing cards. And Memom & Poppop brought me to water parks and zoos in Florida and we always had an amazing time. Memom has showered me with so many precious gifts that I have cherished my entire life. Both of my grandparents are so generous. But Memom continues to express her love by trying to change me.

During a visit to see my grandparents for Fourth of July, we were having our morning breakfast and I decided to have two eggs, bacon, and fruit with a coffee. This may seem like your typical breakfast but, to Mom, it was going to be the death of me. Once everyone left the room, I was scolded for eating two eggs. Even though it had been a year since my surgery, in her mind, she thought that my stomach would only be able to hold very small amounts of food for the rest of my life. As time goes on after weight loss surgery though, you are able to eat more food than just a few bites.

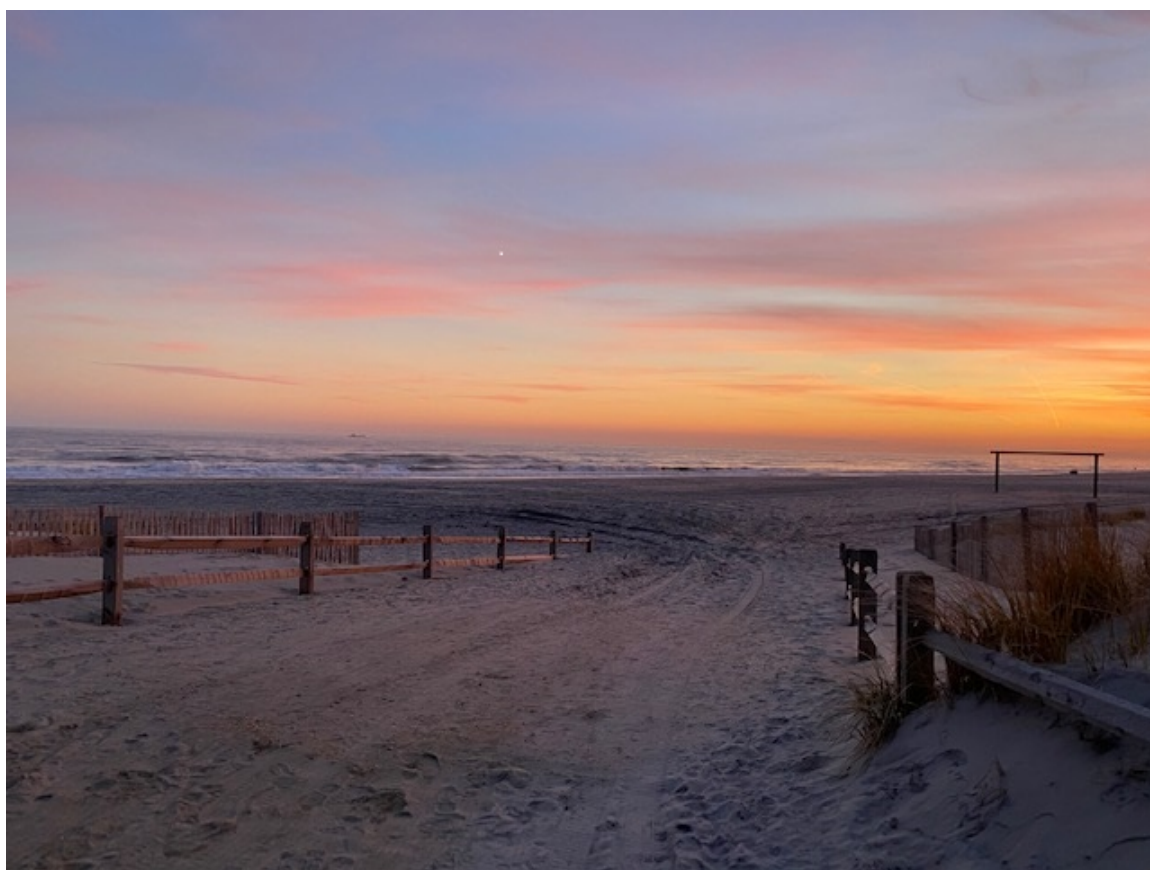
When she expressed how disappointed she was after I chose to eat two eggs, my heart sank to my stomach and so many built up emotions came forward. I felt shame and guilt for even eating a single bite of my breakfast. That was the first time I threw up my meal on purpose. I stuck my fingers down my throat and puked and cried in my grandmother's toilet.

After that visit, I decided to not let Mom's or anyone's comments affect me any longer. I tried dieting again but it did not work. Food consumed every thought I had. I was constantly checking my weight again, becoming obsessed with the scale and counting calories. I would break down crying every night, exhausted from my own thoughts and anxiety over food. I was tired of restricting myself and then binging later on. I was exhausted from the diet culture and done with feeling guilty for listening to my body's wants and needs.

So, I reached out for help. I started working with a dietitian who specializes in eating disorder recovery, intuitive eating, weight loss and finding a healthy relationship with food. That's how I learned that I have BED. I started going to therapy regularly to unpack my childhood trauma with weight loss and gain more self-confidence.

With the help of my new dietitian, I am learning skills to help cope with my eating disorder and gain a healthy relationship with food. There are no more restrictions. I have created boundaries with the people in my life in order to heal from this past trauma. I do not speak about dieting or my weight with my family anymore. If Mom tries bringing up the subject, I change the topic or simply say "we will not be discussing this" and walk away.

Right now, I am not focusing on losing weight. I am not on a diet. I am just eating what my body wants. I am more confident than ever and I love every single ounce of me. In a year, I was able to change my relationship with food and exercise. I eat what my body wants and for the first time, I enjoy moving my body. Going to the gym now is no longer a place to dread, it's a place for me to move and love my body and myself. After taking a gym class or lifting weights, I am so happy and satisfied with life. I move my body not to lose weight, just because it's fun! Yes, I have gained weight but, I am the happiest I have ever been. I now listen to my body and no one else.



“Longport” | Nikki Palladino

In Loving Memory of

Nikki Palladino

Some months ago, a dead tree collapsed in their front yard during a storm. Before it fell, the neighbors heard the steady sound of summer rain hitting the pavement. After it fell, they heard the anxious chirps of native birds hinting at this shallow ending. It was mysterious how the pine had stood tall and majestic for a century, but in an instant, laid bare all its secrets. Like how it expected the living things in the neighborhood to go on without her, even though she had always been their protector.

She knew parts of her had rotted. It was obvious to onlookers. But she was regal still. Planted when Woodrow Wilson was president and the state still funded conservation. She belonged to this park, and these people. She played hide-and-go-seek with the children, and although stoic, she would let them embrace her trunk, stand on her roots. When the storm hit, she leveled with Him, with God, before her reassignment.

“What if they try to catch me?”

“Why would they do that? You’re so much bigger than them.”

“A grandmother senses these things.”

“Rest assured that is not your ending.”

“Surely it would scare them to hear me snap and for them to see me give way though. They think I’m invincible – that nothing can break me.”

“But we know you’re unbreakable and that this is only a change to your form.”

“What if they don’t sense me after this – after they can’t see me anymore?”

“We’ll make sure they see this, see your loving intervention.”

A girl with a distinct accent called out from a room in their one-story home, which has a view of the front yard. “Where is everybody?”

“We’re in here.”

“Who is we?”

“The four of us.”

“Is that all of us?”

“Why?”

“Didn’t you hear that noise?”

“What was that? We didn’t want to come near the window because we heard lightening.”

“The pine tree just fell.”

With that, the family heard the sliding door to the porch close. Then a few moments later, the girl with the distinct accent called out again from the kitchen. “It missed the house by inches.” The mood in the room shifted from sleepy to shaken.

From outside the window, the pine tree watched the family. But one was missing - her son, the owner of the house. He was on the porch, gripping a glass of Merlot and chain smoking. She saw him staring at a spot in the yard where she used to stand and embrace all of them. The memory was interrupted by a neighbor, who passing by, remarked as he eyed the damage, “How the hell did that pine tree miss your house?” The pine tree’s son, a strong, stoic guy, remarked without hesitation, “My kids’ Nonni (grandparent) must have redirected it.”

The Not Wives

Giana Longo

That wasn't his wife with him. In fact, she didn't even look like his wife. That happened sometimes. The Not Wives resembled the wives in ways that made you understand how they came to be the Not Wives in the first place. But this woman didn't look anything like the woman he was married to.

His wife was a slender, thin actually, in an "I'll have the grilled salmon hold the potato's and make sure there's no oil" kind of way. She was that kind of woman. This woman was not. She was curvy, voluminous, clearly showing no shame in ordering a rare steak covered in a natural demi-glaze, with a side of grilled asparagus and potatoes, while also indulging in more than one glass of wine.

I wondered if it was because she was a Not Wife; if it was due to the fact that she had not endured long years with this man. Years that were hard and demanding where he made her feel inadequate in such a way that she needed to find control in her life and did so at the expense of her pleasure in favor of her appearance – to seem to be enough. I wondered if this woman had been the wife if she too would have been reduced to a boiled vegetable and bland fish type of diet; if she too would have succumbed to the demands of wifehood to be enough for her husband but still coming up short. Short enough for him to have found himself a Not Wife who did not need to worry about such things. I wondered if his wife had remained as she was prior if he still would have sought a Not Wife. Something told me he would have.

But that was not my job. My job was not to wonder. My job was not to even notice. In fact, my job required that I ignore wondering. All my job entailed was taking orders, refilling glasses of water the moment someone took a sip, and making sure there was never a shortage of wine and bread on the table. It was the job of a servant. I could travel to any time period and my

job would still exist. There had always been and would always be someone with this job. There would be someone to hold the bottle, pour the drinks, run the food, and ultimately notice when someone, some king, was out with his Not Wife instead of the woman he was married to.

In this job, this place of people who clearly lived in a different reality than I did, I could not help but wonder. Did his wife know about this woman? Did she care? Was she really that thin for her husband or did she do anything for herself?

They had children. I knew that too. They had come in with them before and when they did their conversations were much louder and easier for me to hear. Not that I was paying attention to what they were saying, but I was. Walking around the table with a pitcher of water, of course I was. The son was in school to be a lawyer like his father, and the daughter was taking some time off to “discover herself,” a statement at which her mother actually took a sip, a borderline gulp, of wine. I wondered if the kids knew about the Not Wife?

Their father wasn't the only one who did it though. There were others who strutted into the restaurant with someone on their arm other than the person they were married to. Mr. Soahn came on Thursdays with one woman and Friday nights with another. Based on the way he looked at them both, I was sure the Thursday woman was his wife. He looked right through her. Mrs. Dorota came in with a man-child at least once a week, who she may or may not have paid for, while her husband was away on business. Even Mr. Nieto came in with another man on occasion whose hand he held gently; unlike the way he touched his wife. This man, Mr. Patrick, just made it the most obvious with his Not Wife. He did not care who saw. He did not care what they thought. He didn't even seem to care if they would tell. He just came to have dinner and wine and shoot the shit with the chef.

And we let him. I let him. He always requested I serve them and week after week I did nothing to stop the endless adultery I saw every day. Not that there was much I could do, but it still felt wrong to let it continue when I had such vivid images in my head of their lives. I walked around the dining room, roaming with my white button down and crisp black apron, and watched, thinking about the interesting stories behind each of these dinner goers. I didn't want to stop it. I wanted to know more.

Only, I didn't because I was sure if I did, I would be utterly broken by what I heard. I would be devastated to know that the countless people I served everyday were not happy, and that few people were. I didn't want to know that. I couldn't hear it. The truth is better left unspoken.

I walked away from Mr. Patrick's table and his Not Wife. I had gotten myself upset thinking about his thin wife at home with the dogs or wherever she was. I was thinking about how her fish never came out without oil on it. I never even put it in that way. I just wanted her to indulge in something even

if she didn't know. She never complained either, but that might have been for other reasons. I also always gave them the largest slice of cheesecake I could find. Mr. Patrick thought it was because he was special, but really, I wanted that one bite his wife took to be a good one.

I went to refill the pitcher and uncork another bottle of wine. I knew he would ask me for it on my next round back and I didn't feel like having to make an extra trip. It would be a waste. Sure enough, as I circled around to their table, he clapped his hands together and sang praises about how wonderfully I do my job because I brought the bottle of tart Pinot Noir he ordered every trip in. How brilliant I must be to have already known, *although truly how could I not at this point?*

I was his favorite. I knew that. It wasn't just because he requested me, I knew it had a lot to do with the fact that most of the other servers were men. He tipped me well though, usually a little too well, so I didn't have room to say anything other than, "You're welcome, sir." In the low lighting of the dining room, against the dark burgundy carpets and expensive artwork that hung under spotlights, I understood his appeal. The Not Wife could do a lot worse. He was handsome for the fifty-something he was. His hair was salt and peppery, but still more pepper than salt. Despite the hardness of his face, there was something about it that made you want to look at him, meet his eye and have him look at you. Even when sitting, he was tall, adding to his grandeur. Like his wife, he would not let himself go, but something told me that the motivation he had was nothing like that of his wife. He did it for himself, not for others. How lucky he didn't know he was.

Again, after pleasant and polite exchanges I excused myself from the table to check on my other patrons. As I rounded the corner, I heard footsteps behind me. They clicked though, like expensive loafers— they did not squeak like the orthopedic sneakers we all wore on our shifts. The air I had been breathing, that had been laced with the tang of marinara sauce and basil, was now penetrated by Polo cologne. It caught in my nose and made me cough.

I heard him say, "Isobell." All I could do was take another breath of the putrid air and turn around smiling.

"Mr. Patrick. Is there something I can get you?"

"Honey listen, I wanted to tell you..." he began. Some diners would chase me down to ask that I surprised someone at the table with desert and a candle for their birthday. However, by the way he was moving closer to me and tilting his head down, I was sure that this was not his request.

"You always wait on us, and I appreciate that," he continued and reached out a hand that I knew concealed a hundred-dollar bill in it.

I put mine up to intercept the transaction, "No really, it's alright. It's my jo—" but he pushed onward forcing the money into my hand without my willingness to take it.

“But, if it were up to me,” he said, “I would lock you away so that you did not see the light of day. I would want you all to myself.” He said it smiling in a way I know he had been told once or twice, probably by women, was charming, but looked more like the threatening grin of the Cheshire cat to me.

He could not be serious. He had a wife, a gorgeous Not Wife sitting at his table, and he had still felt the need to run after me with this declaration. One that sounded more like a threat of kidnapping than a romantic proposal. I remained silent, dumbfounded with my mouth hanging slightly ajar.

I supposed this response was what made him think I was considering it. He took a step closer. I could smell the wealth on him, that arrogance. He reached out and tucked a strand of hair that had fallen from my once chic but now haphazard toasty brown ponytail, behind my ear. He got closer, and that small motion forward triggered my arm motion forward launching a full pitcher’s worth of ice water across the front of him. It splashed up into his eyes, along his hairline that unfairly still existed, and down all the expensive clothes I was sure his wife and Not Wife had bought him.

“You bitch,” he growled, “What the fuck!”

“I am going to have to ask you to leave.”

It took me a moment to realize that Adam, my manager, was speaking to me, not Mr. Patrick, who had moved to the side. The scarlet material of his designer shirt had a large dark wet stain down the front that he had started dabbing at with our cloth napkins. They were just for show though. They didn’t absorb anything.

“What? Me?” There had to be a mistake. He must not have understood what happened.

“Isobell, you assaulted a customer, I can’t keep you. I’m sorry.” He really did look sorry as his eyes darted from me to Mr. Patrick who now had other staff around him, helping him dry off his shirt.

“He assaulted me Adam! You’re gonna fire me for that?”

“I wish there were more I could do.” As sad as he looked, he wouldn’t look me in the eyes. There was something else there too as he looked one more time to Mr. Patrick, whose face was no longer crimson, subsiding to a more mellow flush. Concern.

The Not Wife was there now too. Delicately dabbing at his shirt in what seemed like such an intimate and romantic way. He placed one hand on her back, running a finger along the fabric of her dress that hung tight to her body. She turned briefly in our direction, and the fire in her eyes wanted to incinerate me. Her amber daggers longed to see me gone. I wondered what fabrication he would tell her about what happened. I wondered.

“You can pick up your things on Monday.”

My locker was empty. I never kept much in there to begin with, but there were a few things I needed. When I had gone to say goodbye to all of the cooks, they made me a special meal to take home. I thought about leaving

through the backdoor in the kitchen, but instead I walked through the dining room. I wanted to see it one last time. I could say goodbye to the other servers this way. We had all endured it together. They still would.

I never worked Mondays, so I didn't realize there would already be so many customers this early in the evening. It was only six. As I passed by them, I couldn't help but fall back into my habitual routine of wondering. Was that his mother or his wife? Did she really seem interested, or was she just trying to stay awake?

Then, out of the corner of my eye, in the table by the wall where he always liked to sit, was Mr. Patrick. Dressed in pressed khakis that had a crease down the front, he looked as triumphant as ever. Across from him, a woman, not the one he had been with the other night, and not his wife. Another Not Wife sat across from him, her dark hair falling over her bare shoulders as she threw her head back, laughing flirtatiously at something he had said.

His poor wife. His poor Not Wife.

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