

A black and white photograph of a modern interior corner. A large, bright skylight is visible in the upper right, casting light onto the surrounding surfaces. The architecture features clean lines and a mix of dark and light tones. The text "The Avenue" and "Spring 2020" is overlaid in the bottom right corner.

The Avenue

Spring 2020

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Literary Works from
Saint Joseph's University's
Graduate Writing Program

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The Avenue

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Non-Fiction

Emily Advani

End and Beginning are Dreams

I had a bizarre dream. In the dream, I somehow found my way into an underground chamber, sort of like the one in the movie *Ex Machina*. The movie is about a young programmer who is chosen to go to a remote location and participate in an experiment in which he must interact with the world's first artificial intelligence robot. The chamber was windowless and looked like something between a sterile hospital and a modern condominium. There were people there in my dream like the A.I. bot in *Ex Machina* – seemingly part robot, part human. The robot-humans were conducting experiments on humans.

It was a frightening but fascinating place.

They handed me a baby. The baby girl in the dream looked exactly like my real life little one. And in my dream state, I instantaneously fell wildly in love with the little girl as they placed her in my arms. Even my subconscious mind could conjure up the feeling I had when I became a mother. Even fast asleep, the vessels pumping blood through my heart could recreate the same emotion I experienced almost three years prior when the midwife placed my firstborn on my chest.

The robot-humans gave me a choice: I could stay in their underground world with the baby or I could choose to leave, be

free. I looked at the face of my daughter and without hesitation, chose to stay. We played, we laughed, she held me tightly. In that space between the waking world and the landscape of dreams, my mind had manifested the actual sensation of what it is like to be with my daughter.

A gong rang.

Upon its chime, the little girl in my arms jumped down and walked away from me without looking back. She entered through a doorway into a nursery-like room with all the other babies and toddlers. They were programmed to leave at the sound of the gong. The robot-humans would cycle the children to the next person they were trying to entice to stay.

As I pressed my hand against the clear glass that now separated us, my heart felt like it was being ripped out through my bellybutton. My baby girl was gone. She didn't even look at me from the other side. It's like I had never existed. But to me, she had been my everything.

Now I was trapped. Trapped in a strange, unfamiliar, unsettling world without her. The reason for me to stay was gone. She was gone. My real-world body felt the pain in every inch, heat tingling down into my toes. I thought to myself, "Even if I can never be free, it is better to have gotten the chance to love that little girl and lose her than to have never experienced that type of love." The glimmer of magic I had touched made the extreme sadness in some way worth it.

I woke from the dream with adrenaline warming my veins and my heart trying to piece itself back together. Like I couldn't comprehend it had all been a dream.

This dream came almost one year to the day that I experienced a miscarriage, and just two weeks after I experienced yet another loss. In the midst of still grappling with

my first miscarriage and the journey of trying to conceive, I did receive the inexplicably exciting news that we were expecting. And not just one baby, but two.

Within 10 weeks, that elation turned into devastation when we lost one of the two twins. At 10 weeks, "Baby B" had stopped growing and a heartbeat was no longer audible.

As I write this, my six-month-old daughter wails for me in the bouncy seat next to my chair. I pick her up and stop for a moment to examine each hair, each wrinkle, each curve of her ear, each eyelash. Relishing in all the things that went right, and the few things that went wrong, to bring her here to me.

The quest for motherhood with my second could not have been more different than my first. The unexpected gift that is my oldest daughter has seemed to expand in its blessing—and so has my appreciation for another gift that was longed for, tried for, and wanted so deeply. And I have come to truly understand the idea that it is better to have loved and lost than never loved at all.

Rebecca Lane
Morning Heat

The drinking glass slammed against the wooden shelf and slid backwards like a bowling ball clanging against a perfect line of glass pins. The sound echoed through the narrow hallway and seeped underneath the small crack of space between the bottom of Rebecca's bedroom door and the timber floorboards. Seconds later, the clash of silver cutlery dropped onto a bed of itself and pierced the air, stirring the sleeping bodies behind each of the four bedrooms.

Rebecca's sheets bunched at the end of her queen bed, a product of restless kicking throughout the baking night air. Her doona lay strewn across the floorboards. There were some nights, only ever in the summer, that she would go to bed at night wondering whether her alarm would be her natural body clock or the sweltering rays of sunrise. The beams would blare heat through her window and transform her room into a stifling hot box early in the morning – too early for any kid on school holidays. Sometimes, when her room was sticky like a sauna, she was forced to sleep on the narrow, leather couch in the lounge room.

She reluctantly opened her eyes as the thud of footsteps got louder outside her door. She peered down at her doona, dehydrated on the floor. As the footsteps simmered and moved

down the hall, she realized that she probably should have snuck out and claimed the lounge room as her bedroom for the night.

Rebecca checked the clock on her bedside table. She saw the blurry numbers of 5, 3 and 0 and sighed. She wished that the clanging and thudding were all just a dream. But she could no longer deny the alertness of her mind. The heat had boiled her insides. Beads of sweat dripped in every crevice of her contorted body, making it impossible for her fetal position to lull her back to sleep. Her singlet top was damp. Her pyjama shorts stuck to her thighs. A musk of heated sweat that had stewed throughout the night hung in the air.

She was awake.

She swung her legs to the side of the bed and stood up. Her white sheets were crinkled, a dark shadow outlined where she had been sleeping. She opened her door and peeked out into the hallway to see where all the noise was coming from. The glass front door and wire screen were both cast open in opposite directions, giving Rebecca a clear view of burnt copper grass in the front garden. She walked outside and stood on the small mound of concrete they called a front porch. Pot plants lined the edges that connected to the brick walls of the house, an attempt to break up the dreariness of the grey entrance. The once vibrant petals now hung their heads with the heaviness of the heat.

Rebecca saw her mother standing barefoot and crazy-haired in the dead grass, both hands grasped the hose as she poured water on the garden.

"What are you doing?" asked Rebecca.

"Watering the plants," her mum mumbled as the beginning of a yawn took over her face. She sidestepped and

hovered the hose over the next plant—only for a few seconds before she moved on again.

“You do know it’s almost six in the morning?” asked Rebecca.

“Yeah,” her mum replied. Her hands gripped tighter to steady the hose and minimize sprayed droplets. “We can only water the garden between six PM and six AM now, or we can get fined.”

“Oh,” replied Rebecca, “Well, did you have to make so much noise in the kitchen? You woke me up.”

Her mum’s icy glare cooled the sweat that dripped down Rebecca’s skin.

“How about you wake up and do this then, huh?” She realized she had lingered too long over one plant with the hose, and quickly shuffled to the next one, precious drops splashing against the brick backdrop.

Rebecca fell silent. She didn’t want to say anything that would actually transfer the morning watering duties to her. Although, the withering plants looked as though they couldn’t handle another day without shade, so the duty might not be on the chore list for much longer. She looked at the house across the street and saw a man wearing nothing but boxer shorts watering his own garden. A woman stood in the garden next to his as she watered a light brown patch on the ground. The whole street was plagued with people as they dragged their yawning bodies out of their houses and shuffled in their gardens, plant to plant, as streams of water immediately soaked through the soil.

“How would anyone know if you did it at like 6:15 in the morning?” asked Rebecca.

“People call the council and dob you in,” replied her mum.

“Really? People would do that?”

“Yep.” Rebecca’s mum shuffled to the last plant in the garden. “Can you get ready to turn the faucet?”

Rebecca stepped down off the porch, the concrete that lined the sick grass was warm from the early sun. “Would you dob someone in?”

“Yep,” her mum said again without hesitation. She walked back towards the front door and hung the hose up. “We’re in a drought. Plus, if I have to get up this early, so should they.”

Ceili Hamill

Three Things You Learn After a Car Accident at Age 16

1. You will remember some details perfectly and others, not at all

Your car accident occurred at 8:27 PM, November 4th, 2014. You were wearing black yoga pants, dance sneakers, and a gray and blue striped sweater that used to be your favorite. The radio was playing. You remember pulling over and stupidly switching it off.

The first responder who herded you to some frat house's front porch had brown hair and wore glasses. You had your first panic attack there, crumpling and putting your head between your knees. Somehow, he got you to dial your parents' home number.

"Hi, your daughter was just in a car accident—no, no she's not hurt, but she's in some emotional distress. Can you come?"

Once your parents arrive, your memories fade. You don't remember going home, what was said, how you got there. You don't remember forgetting to put on pajamas, but you did, because you woke up in the same sweater.

It will sit untouched in your closet for months, until you finally donate it to Goodwill.

2. If you hit a person while going over 30 mph, their shoes will fly off

At least, this was what the police officer told you when you gave your statement.

You sat across from him at a rickety table, staring down at the plaid pattern of your school uniform, pulling your sweater sleeves over your trembling hands. You recounted what happened quietly, letting out loose sobs.

"I was driving home from show choir rehearsal; we were let out earlier than usual...I was passing the college on Main Street and I was driving through a pedestrian crossing and I didn't see this girl and, and—I hit her."

"How fast do you think you were going?" the officer asked gently. You didn't realize then that he wasn't angry with you, so you started at his words. You had only had your license nineteen days, hadn't yet developed the overconfidence of a long-term driver to let yourself speed. If anything, you knew yourself well enough to know that you more often drove under the speed limit.

"26," you whispered. The officer nodded, pausing to write this down.

"That makes sense, as the girl's shoes were still on. Anything over 30 mph, they would've flown off."

You sat at that rickety table for a while, as the officer went to speak with your mother. Years later, she will tell you that the officer cried for you. This man, a burly police officer with over 20 years on the force, looked at her and said, “This was clearly an accident, and probably did more damage to your daughter than anyone else,” and cried for you.

But you didn’t know this then. All you knew then was the weight of your guilt and the surprising physics behind pedestrian-related car accidents.

3. You will become an adroit liar

“Could you pick me up? My brother needs the car tonight.”

“I do drive; I just get nervous on highways.”

“My mom will drop me there; she worries about me driving in the snow.”

“I don’t have a car on campus. Why don’t we just Uber?”

Over the next four years, you became skilled in the art of lying, at hiding what you saw as your biggest inadequacy. Lies rolled from your lips like stones down a hill, and you forced the truth deep inside, where no one could find it. You were still nervous as both a passenger and pedestrian, jumping whenever someone hit the brakes too hard and awaiting karmic retribution in crosswalks. You Googled “PTSD symptoms” and closed the tab when you aligned too closely. You still had nightmares about the girl lying on the sidewalk. You could shut your eyes and remember the moment of impact, the moment your childhood left you.

The years dissolved, and you turned 21, turned the same age that she was then. It was on a Monday, so you celebrated quietly, going out for cocktails with your boyfriend. Not drinking

himself, he drove you home after. You sat in the passenger side, tipsy from too many gin and tonics, not quite happy but not quite sad. And suddenly, there was a flash of a yellow light, he tapped the brakes a little too hard for you, and the first truth you ever said about it left your mouth.

“Ididntmeantoididntmeantoididntmeanto.”

Chris King

Seeing Through the Static

When you get accepted into grad school at your alma mater, Saint Joseph's University, it will be after you quit the writing job you landed right out of college.

You had originally thought you made it big, spending hours a day watching TV, reading about TV, writing about TV until your eyes felt like swollen gums. But then, out of nowhere, your boss says he's going to start paying you one-fourth of your monthly salary while expecting the same amount of work. He shares this information in an email, whose subject line should read, "You're fucked, kid," and the message is littered with typos. If it were an article on the website, it would be your job to correct those typos. Well, at least one-fourth of them.

So, you're unemployed but freelancing, which makes you feel like you're one of those senile old men walking up and down the beach with a metal detector, hoping that, eventually, you'll find gold. One night, when trying to distract yourself from the silence of your email inbox and the money slowly leaking from your bank account, you'll scroll through old college photos of you and your friends sitting at high tops at Landmark, painted with crimson shirts for the Holy War game against Villanova, or jumping toward the ceiling, frozen in mid-air against the

Erasmus quote on the Writing Center wall. You'll say to yourself: "School made me happy."

You apply and are accepted into the Writing Studies program but have to defer because you were never told the deadline for the graduate assistant application. You missed it. By two days. When you finally start grad school a year later, you'll also have to miss the entire second week of classes because Pop didn't open his eyes when Nan tried to wake him; he's now gone from the hospital bed in his own home to a hospital bed in a hospice wing.

When you walk across Saint Joe's campus again, it's as if you're moving through an abandoned childhood home. The shape and structure and even some of the smells are the same, but someone has ripped out the carpet and put down hardwood floor, replaced the pale blue garage doors with maroon ones, and plastered their family photos all over the walls, a collage of faces you don't recognize as you continue to explore this new but familiar place. The memories of talking and laughing and drinking too much Fireball with friends during your undergrad years play in your head like a VHS you've inserted into the VCR too many times. You try to see through the static haze and rediscover the sense of belonging that you haven't enjoyed since that sunny, sticky day in May when they gave you a diploma. You almost feel as if you're trespassing.

You feel that way for a couple of weeks, until you get to know the other grad assistant who works alongside you in the Writing Center. She smiles without showing her teeth and speaks with the softness of pillow talk, and when she laughs, it sounds like a harmonica. Everything about her is new like garage doors and hardwood floor, but you can also picture her photo perfectly fitting into one of your old frames. These

feelings spill out of you like water from a broken Britta during a text conversation in December. She says that she only wants to be friends, and you agree to respect that and try to bury any type of romantic notions, even when her perfume still clings to the Chase Utley jersey you let her borrow for the Phillies game you went to together.

And when she tells you that she has feelings for a different friend of hers, who is also named Chris, it will be December again, as you wait with her for her SEPTA bus on the corner of Cardinal Avenue. And as you wave goodbye to her and walk to the train, your breath hanging like a cloud of smoke in the frigid air, you will tell yourself you're going to write a new piece about grad school. But really, you know it will be about her and how, for a few brief moments, she made you feel like you could see through the static, that you could discover gold underneath the endless sand.

Elyse Hauser
Three Timepieces

In a photo, I notice my new lover is wearing a watch. The watch face is on the inside of his wrist instead of on the outside where it normally goes. It is visible when the palm is facing up, the watch face resting against the delicate veins that run from the arm to the hand.

That photo reminds me of a diner in Seattle, two years ago. The man across from me in this memory also wore his watch on the inside of his wrist, the thick leather strap over the top like a bracelet. I took his hand lightly and pulled it across the table to look closer. It was the first time we had ever done such an intimate touch in public. My hand on his, for a minute.

"Do you always wear your watch like that?"

"Yeah. When I'm doing biology work, it makes it easier to check the time. I can be working with my hands and just glance at it, like this."

"That's funny," I said. "My ex used to wear his like that, too. He did it because his dad was a pilot and wore it that way to check the time without taking his hand off the wheel."

He took his hand from mine. I looked into the distance at nothing in particular, second hands ticking in my head.

Brian Moloney
Lessons

I started working at Thomas Music Center a month after my fourteenth birthday. In some backroom deal I never fully understood, my mother got me the job and then presented it to me as a *fait accompli*. One day, she came home and said, “You’re working at the music center, two afternoons a week, starting next week.”

I already knew the place well—my mother knew the owner, Tom, and I’d taken lessons from him for years. He’d started the little place and had managed to develop the business until it outgrew its first location and amassed several hundred students and about fifteen teachers. Even as a kid, I could see that Tom wasn’t the best businessman, but his customers loved him.

Mom enlisted my grandfather to pick me up after I got off the school bus every Tuesday and Thursday and drive me to work, where I’d do a four-hour shift. In four hours, I usually had about an hour of actual work, so I could sit and do my homework, or try out an expensive instrument under the guise of tuning it. On occasion, I would cover other shifts or work a full Saturday if someone called out. On average, I’d take home fifty bucks a week. As a kid who’d never even gotten an allowance, I felt like a millionaire.

Shortly after I started working, Tom sold the business to a former student, Paul, who had just graduated from college. A big goofy kid with a Virginia accent, Paul delighted in bad jokes and took good care of his staff. As I got older and proved trustworthy, Paul gave me more hours and let me open the store during the summer. I didn't fully grasp how young Paul was, and how little he knew about running a small business—but I didn't care. We were having too much fun.

Paul ran the music center for about three years. During that time, our enrollment steadily dwindled, putting a strain on finances. I noticed the trouble when my paychecks started bouncing. Several of the long-tenured instructors departed and took dozens of students with them. Paul made a half-hearted attempt to sell the business to the owner of a rival music store two towns over, but the deal fell through when they examined the numbers.

Finally, one of our teachers, Frank, offered to buy the business. Frank had taught there for several years, knew the business and the students, and made some badly needed changes. He put more emphasis on advertising and merchandise—two areas that had always taken a back seat to giving lessons—and brought in several talented teachers. He also changed the name to Rockville Centre Music, to help new customers associate us with their town. Within months, the business showed a profit again.

Through it all, we still had fun. Frank took his business seriously—and nothing else. As long as there were no students in the building, he delighted in potty humor and practical jokes; he usually announced his arrival each day by coming in the back door and burping loudly, and when I was nearly impaled by a falling piece of drop ceiling during a renovation, he laughed like

a lunatic after making sure it hadn't hit me. The new instructors, and even some of the older students and more easy-going parents, joined in on our antics whenever possible.

Reality occasionally pierced the bubble. At its core, my job was customer service, with all the nonsense that entails. I usually had to put out at least one fire a day, usually because someone had double booked a lesson slot. I lost count of how many Karens screamed at me over the years. Once, a good friend's mother chewed me out over the phone, and after recognizing my voice, scolded me for not telling her that she'd yelled at her son's friend.

When it comes to musicians, many of the stereotypes have a basis in truth. I often had to babysit irresponsible teachers, all of them older than me, and chide them for tardiness or having a bad attitude. Those nuisances paled in comparison to the drugs. I had to accept that some instructors were perpetually high, and I hoped that their students remained young and naive enough to just think they were weird. One teacher had a seizure in the middle of a lesson after mixing pot and Vicodin. As I called all her students and told them not to come in, I told them that she'd had an allergic reaction.

She was not fired.

At night, after the streetlights came on, I'd lock the front door and close the window shades, make some final notes on tomorrow's lesson schedule, then shut off the computer and flip the light switches.

One of our piano teachers, Chris, poked his head out of his door.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Let's do this."

I pulled a songbook out from beneath the desk and walked back for my lesson.

Chris and I were the same age. We went to elementary school together, during which he bullied me relentlessly. I'd balked when Frank hired him -- every time he'd walk in, I had a flashback of him repeatedly dunking me in a public pool—but it turned out that some people do grow up. He used to call me names; now he tried to teach me to play Ben Folds songs.

"How much did you practice this week?" he asked as I sat at the piano bench and wiggled my fingers to loosen up.

"Do you really want me to answer?" I responded.

"Slacker. Show me what you got."

Later, my key turned in the front door lock after Chris and I set the alarm and walk out. Our scheduled lesson ended at 9 PM, but we'd stayed until 10:15. We said farewell until tomorrow.

I unlocked my bike and rode away, the hum of amplifiers and clangs of cymbals still ringing in my ears.

It sounded like home.

In recessions, frivolous expenditures like music lessons get cut first. Frank held on for a few years, but one weekend when I visited my parents in New York, I drove over to Rockville Centre Music to say hello, and found only an empty storefront.

Elise Woods
Pre-K Vignettes

Monsters

Mateo has pulled the fire alarm. We go outside to wait for the firetruck. The bright, flashing lights and loud noises from the alarm cause one kid to cry. I calm him down and ask the other children about things that scare them. In spite of the chilly Fall afternoon, this could be a productive conversation. Even if it only lasts two seconds.

“I’m afraid of the dark!” Lilly says, playing with the zipper on her jacket. My solution is to get a nightlight.

“I’m scared that there are monsters under my bed at night,” Cameron admits, staring at me with huge, wide eyes. I tell him to have his parents check under his bed at night before they tuck him in.

We get through the fears of eleven kids before it’s Jackson’s turn. I look at him expectantly.

“I’m afraid of the police!” he admits. Before I can suggest anything, the wailing firetruck whirs in front of the school.

Jingle All the Way

They’ve been practicing for weeks.

I've endured painful, off-key renditions of Jingle Bells more times that I can count. Edward is sensational, though. He has mastered not only the words, but the related actions of ringing a bell and riding in a sleigh. He should be on a talk show displaying his talent.

I imagine him mentioning my name and thanking me when the talk show host asks how he was discovered. Perhaps he'll remember me in his will.

As the curtains are drawn and the Pre-K students begin singing in their red and green sweaters on the day of the show, I look to Edward. Telepathically, I'm telling him that it's "time to shine." Only the message somehow gets lost.

He looks around at the huge crowd of parents, grandparents, and step-grandparents and loses it. The star performer begins sobbing huge, fat, heavy tears on stage. He doesn't sing, much less do the actions. I climb up on the stage to assuage the situation. As his classmates perform their out of sync, but heartwarming performance, Edward latches onto me and gives me a hug.

"It's alright," I assure him. "It's just the environment."

Later, I explain to him the concept of stage fright.

Playground

"They look like chocolate chips," she says as she presses the freckles that are scattered along my arms.

Natalia has temporarily left playing ice cream truck to find toppings. She stares at my arms like a dermatologist, determining the best way to remove what needs removing. I tell her that my freckles aren't supposed to be eaten, that they're not

for sale. She shrugs. Then she runs past the winding slide and kids soaring into the air on the swing set.

I watch her search for things to add to her invisible ice cream.

Daria J. Walsh
Driving Vernon

I had been driving with my trainer, Vernon, for two weeks. When you are training to be a truck driver, this particular company, Werner, requires you to do 240 hours with a trainer. It's a good policy, because you have someone with you night and day to show you the ropes and teach you what you need to know on the road—the things they didn't teach you in driving school.

Vernon was a very interesting character.

The minute I got into his truck, I said, "Let's have a little talk." I proceeded to tell him that there would be no fooling around. I didn't mean to be disrespectful, because we had just met, and he hadn't "done" anything. Yet. But I wanted to be clear that I was there to learn and that was it.

He answered me right back in such a way that I was not worried from that minute on. He said, "I am a professional, and I've trained over twenty students—men and women. I take my job seriously and want to keep it."

He said it while looking me right in the eye, and I just had that feeling that I could trust him.

Vernon was a man of few words. But once I got him talking, he told me that his dad had played professional football for the Colts, and that he had been headed toward that path, too, after being accepted at Penn State. He had played about three

football games into the season when he broke his ankle—not on the field, but on a basketball court with some friends. He knew right then that his professional football dream was over.

He went on to earn a Restaurant Management degree at Penn State. He told me that he was responsible for coming up with the idea of the salad bar at Ruby Tuesday. After about 20 years in management in the restaurant industry, however, he felt the need for a change.

He had continued playing football at the semi-pro level. He said after two years as Quarterback for a semi-pro team in Delaware (I didn't catch the name), he actually bought the team, coached it for a few years, then sold it. With the money he made, he bought his truck and became an owner/operator.

Vernon struck me as the kind of man who had a cool head on his shoulders. He was a business man, and a family man as well. His mother lived in Reading, PA, and he and his wife owned a home in Wilmington, DE. But they fell in love with San Diego, CA, somewhere along the line, and bought a house out there as well. So, he was bi-coastal. His wife was a traveling nurse of some kind—perhaps even a doctor. I can't remember exactly what she did, but I know she travelled quite a bit.

I was glad to see that Vernon had a great relationship with his wife.

Vernon kept a low profile. I'll never forget how, about a week into our training, we travelled from Pennsylvania out to Colorado. We were hauling Harleys for Harley Davidson—along with electronics, beer, and clothing—so we had to be extra careful where we parked and locked up. These were all high-value loads.

At one point, I missed a turn off a highway, and tried to turn around in an office park. But the lanes were way too

narrow, and we almost got stuck. Vern just sighed and explained not to do that again. Then he got out and directed me out of there, while I backed that sucker up about as much as half a football field (you try it).

Another time, he told me about how crazy California drivers were. He said that the border guards were pretty strict, and that we would be stopped and maybe even asked for papers. Sure enough, the California troopers checked us out, but I found that anytime they saw it was a woman driving, they let us go pretty quickly. Vernon and I agreed that it was probably because I was white and female. Talk about privilege. He teased me about the difference being a black driver and a white female, and he certainly had some stories to tell.

On one of his trips to Cali, as we called it (there really is a town out there called Cali), the guy he was training got so spooked by the California traffic and speeders, he insisted he couldn't do it and wanted off the truck. Vernon tried to talk him out of it, but the guy insisted. That guy went home.

Once I got to L.A., I understood. There are no words for it except to say—crazy, crazy drivers, darting in and out, cutting off our 18-wheeler like it was a golf cart and could stop on a dime. And the mountains—going up mountains in an 18-wheeler is scary enough—you need to know how to down shift pretty fast when the truck gets below 30 mph. But coming down the mountain, when it's twisting and curving, with 43,000 pounds behind you—well, let's just say I could have used a drink after that night.

One time, coming out of a Saint Louis truck stop and turning left at the light—I gasped as some asshole decided I was going too slow and decided to pass me on the left shoulder. Good thing I was always checking my mirrors—something they

drilled into us from the very first day. Vernon vehemently gave the man the bird as I laid on the horn—that was the only time I saw Vernon get that pissed.

We came out of Fort Worth, Texas, into Oklahoma, in one of the worst thunderstorms I've ever been in. I couldn't see 20 feet in front of me, rain was cascading down in sheets, and it was black as night out. I was sure we would see a twister rising out of the gloom ahead, like a giant devil bent on catching us. Vernon had been in the back bunk, trying to catch some shut-eye, but it was so bad out, he came up front to keep me company. I think I earned some brownie points by getting us safely through that storm.

Later, I asked him if I could have stopped at a rest area, and let that storm go by. Sure, he said. I wouldn't have been expected to drive through that if it wasn't safe. Sigh.

When we finally got back to Pennsylvania, we were headed up through Gettysburg. I called my mom and told her we were almost home, but that I had one or two more loads left. Vern told me that once we dropped our load in Wilkes Barre, PA, they'd probably take me off the truck after about 20-30 more hours of driving.

But, during that day, we got an order to take another load to Ohio. He told me I was a good driver and should consider becoming a trainer myself; they made good pay. Somehow, that praise from Vernon meant the world to me. He wasn't a flashy, loud-spoken guy—he was quiet, sensitive, steady and a warm, comforting presence the whole time I was driving.

I felt safe with Vernon.

A couple hours later, my brother called me. He said that he knew the training wasn't done yet, but that mom needed me if I could manage it. He said she had just received a diagnosis of

breast cancer, triple negative or something (an aggressive kind), and that they wanted to operate very soon.

As soon as I heard this, I told Vernon I had to pull over. We switched seats, and I broke down. I completely lost it. I said I had to get off the truck. Vernon looked really upset—but didn't give me any hassle. He just told me that the training wasn't completed, and that I'd have to work something out with the company before they would let me have my own route.

We got the OK from our Manager, and he dropped me off in Allentown at 1:00 in the morning. As I hugged him good-bye, I tried to tell him what a wonderful experience it had been.

I missed him for a long time after that.

I didn't get back to driving for quite a while.

Poetry

J. Germaine Fountain
Our Story Blacked

Sleep was the sword that kept me in bed,
when I should have been with you
by the sea
instead.

All knowing was lost on the day you left,
our air, our skin, our ocean, our breath.
Push me forward, I want to go back.
Pull me under, our story blacked.

If I could change some things I would,
but most I'd keep
for most was good.

Sonia Vazquez
High on Your Throne
A Poem About my Father

You,
Always had a voice
Barked orders around the house
Loud and finite like a death sentence
As we, your children
Obeyed without resistance.

You,
Silenced our voices
Wrapped your hands around our delicate throats and
Ripped out our ability of expression
You made sure that we knew that words
Always came with consequences.

And no one ever dared to challenge you.
Your rules,
Your decisions,
You wrote it, and it became law,
Branding itself into the delicate parts of our brains.

You had your weapon of choice -
Your knuckles,
A switch,
The leather of your belt,
The end of a broom,
While we showed up to the slaughtering empty-handed.

Do you remember,
The time you called us down to the foyer
Me, Tania and Lilly -
The light from outside streaming in through the window
Like silver speckles.

You were sitting on an armchair,
Belt in hand,
Waiting for us to make our way down to you.

I can't remember what we had done.
Perhaps we had laughed too loudly.
Maybe we were arguing.
Maybe we were rooting too loudly
for the poor fool on *The Price is Right*.
It escapes me now,
But the fire in your eyes had already divulged
That there was no going back.

You growled at us,
Asked us to strip down to our underwear,
And raised the belt to me first,
Because I was the oldest
And I should have known better.

I allowed myself the freedom to cry
A quick yelp to prove that you had hurt me
Because I knew that you would stop -
At the first sight of pain
At the first sight of fear.

Then you called Tania.
Then you called Lilly.

But Lilly,
Stubborn,
Headstrong,
Unyielding,
Like you,
Refused to give into tears.
And this only made you angrier.

So you raised the belt to her.
Once,
Twice,
I lost count.
Tania and I stood immobilized,
Watching her small frame jerk with every one of your blows.

But she resisted.
While Tania and I willed for her to cry.
Prayed, *"Please, God, please don't make Lilly fight this battle."*
But nothing.

Lilly had disappeared and had gone to another place
Transported herself somewhere else

And challenged each of your blows with an angrier,
“That,
Didn't,
Hurt.”

So you unleashed the monster in you
Brought the belt down on her with unyielding fury
Until red welts splintered across her back like nails.

Legs,
Arms.
You shattered her like glass,
Broke her until her tiny spirit caved.

Tania and I watched her crumble like terracotta
Her small, thin frame slumped over on the floor
Hushed, silenced, still too proud to cry.

And we watched as you walked away,
Belt in hand,
Conscious clear.

You,
Always had a voice,
Always had a reason,
Always wielded the power,
To change things,
To make them right,
To be the person I could have held onto,
But that was never in your plans.

Pete Sanchez

Haikus in the time of COVID-19

Meals

Cooking a lot more.
Scrambled eggs are a quick dish;
Omelettes are harder

Hope

What will it look like
When the world begins again?
Fearful, or fearless?

Comfort

Loved ones through a screen,
Now routine conversation.
Some just want a hug.

Scrubs

Rushing into storm,
The frontline men and women;
Worthy of our praise.

Delay Ball

Diamonds are quiet;
Pitchers pack away their arms
Spring has not yet sprung.

Adonis Seldon
Still Here

There have always been rainbows
There have always been rainbows arcing over the earth and
coloring human civilization since Genesis.
And through it all-

They have been tortured and castrated; their dignity and bones
crushed under the regime of a totalitarian Reich.
They have been invisible at times; hidden within the concrete
cracks and crevices of a StoneWall.
They have been stigmatized; for having acquired an immune
deficiency syndrome- but who was really deficient?
They have been cast out like Adam and Eve; not from the
Garden of Eden, but from the place where they worship God.

There have always been rainbows
Tangible, multi-colored rainbows

And through it all-

I am still here.

Chris King
Behind the Fence

Bloodshot eyes, slurring words, Gumby-like limbs.
Another afternoon after school after Connor
Travels behind his backyard fence
And stains the spring sky with smoke.

I try to convince him otherwise
But my words are like blanks in a gun.
There's no actual threat of change;
The entire conversation is pure performance.

Just like our weeknight routine of
Slouching down in Connor's squeaky desk chairs.
My eyes assaulted by fractions, decimals, and exponents.
Connor's eyes slowly shutting like an old garage door.

"How's the homework coming?"
The voice of Connor's mom slinks in from behind the office
door.
"It's going really well, Mrs. Cercone!" I lie,
As Connor starts to snore and I scribble down unsure answers
to equations.

Julia Snyder
Summer Vacation

I.

Beat the pavement
one foot in un-tied chucks
crossing grey city blocks
One at a time

There's a collective
behind the church
Neighborhood kids
split into armies

Yellowed streetlights
become the enemy
casting shadows
100 yards out

You hopped the fence
a born seeker
pretending not to see
my shadow next to yours

With the grace of a
given lead
I slip through bushes
seeking refuge

It's warm out
and the game has just started
or has just continued
blending one summer into the next

II.

Blueberries warm in sunshine
and melt into saltine crackers
as the most delicious jam
if you can be patient enough

Girl Scouts spend
so much energy
cooking things
with no energy

The sunshine
doesn't add sweetness
to the jam or the girls
but the sound of a troop
of overheated 10-year olds
munching through cracker sleeves
is sweeter than any store-bought confection

III.

Automatic garage doors make
so much noise
in the middle of the night
so we turned the latches ourselves
and prayed to any listening god
not to wake a soul

You actually pushed the truck
down the block
one hand on the steering wheel

Sneaking out
on bikes
was so much easier
But the lights of a distant Wawa
were beckoning
and you can't take a bike down Route One

We didn't go far
but coasting back into the open garage
with the lights off
and windows open
to discover we hadn't (yet) been
discovered
was a triumphant homecoming
worthy of an odyssey

IV.

You hate rowing
so I sit backwards
pulling you across the lake

The water blinds you
in your bug-eyed sunglasses
while the smooth ripples
dazzle me into green-grey serenity

Would you tell your parents
if I just jumped over the side?

The algae turns muddy brown up close
through the sunny haze
and my fingers only stay visible
even to me
for a little while

I flop not so gracefully
back over the side
where you bemoan wet feet
from my splashing

So I sit forward
and pull us back to dry land

Krisann Janowitz
Disintegration

No one but monsters
could think of such severe
punishments for fixing a broken
ankle, I would have gladly fixed
myself.

If only human bodies could
heal Wolverine style, broken bones
hermetically sealed by the power of
positive thinking; leaving no need to
sling out money to urgent care, the
podiatrist, and the surgeon.

Released
into the world of billing, skateboarding
accidents soon become deeply rooted
regrets, chest-tightening pressure on
bank accounts with glass ceilings.

The
contents begin to boil and payments are

slowly made, but the pace is not quick
enough and the kettle's whistle blows;
but I can't take it off the stove, so it
continues to hiss — a reminder that
my best is just not good
enough.

The pot boils over and threats of
collection flood in, becoming too much
for my fragile mind to comprehend and
I retreat to the crowded countries of
anxiety & depression.

Fiction

Josh Dale
Maintenance Call

My cat won't stop clawing at the access panel for the bathroom. The paint is peeling and the wood is notched from his efforts.

"No, Sprinkles, don't do that," I say, picking him up. He is a tabby with dark grey fur, except for a spot on his back that was bleached white, almost like a smile. His crestfallen meows are anything but cheerful as we go to the couch.

"Who's a good boy?" I continue. He stares at me, irises huge, and nips at my nose. "Okay, that's enough," I groan, outstretching my arms to let him leap onto the couch. His irises are still globes, eliminating the sky blue they normally show, but at least he is calm. I leave him to inspect the panel.

"Shit, this is getting worse. Maybe I can just go to Home Depot and get another piece of wood or something," I say aloud. I look back, and he is still staring at my position, crouching and ready to pounce. I put my shoes on and get halfway out the door before I remember.

"Shit, I should probably measure it first."

* *

I return a half-hour later with a 2x2 foot panel of plywood that was conveniently painted white already. Sprinkles

darts to me, rubs his body all over my legs, purring loudly. He makes a couple passes to the hallway and I shush him.

"C'mon, buddy, let's get you some food...and so I can replace this damn panel in peace."

In the kitchen, I crack open a can of flaked tuna in gravy and set it by his water. He doesn't protest, just gets right to it. I exhale and go to work. Turns out, the panel is fairly jammed in place. I use a flathead screwdriver to pry enough out to grab it. A plume of dust blows out, infiltrating my nostrils.

"Ew, that's gross," I say before coughing.

There is an odd draft that I fell so I yank the rest off. I gasp at the reverse side of the panel. It is covered in black mold.

"What the fuck. I'm going to have to call maintenance now and—"

The pipes are dripping wet. The hatchway is deeper too, which seems strange. I reach my hand down a few inches and the warmth blows up to meet it.

"Ok, there's something going on down there."

Sprinkle's head comes near my knee, hissing into the abyss. "No, back," I command, twice, but he doesn't listen. He slides through my grasp on his rear leg and bounds down.

"Sprinkles!" I yell. I don't hear any sign of a hard landing.

So, I panic. I jolt downstairs to the neighbor below me and bang on their door. No answer. I ring their doorbell. Nothing. I go for the handle and it jiggles loose, nearly falling out of the door. The same warm air comes out. My arm creaks it further open, and I catch the stench of something dead, rotting.

I step inside and my shoe smushes into what looks like the carpet, but upon looking closer, it's all moldy moss. What looks like a couch and TV are wrapped in the greenish fuzz. Even the blinds look like sod is growing on them.

I pull my shirt over my face, yelling for my cat in a muffled tone. My shoes slog around to the kitchen, where the sink is lined with white mushrooms. The ceiling fan is somehow still spinning, slinging spores everywhere.

“Fuck, where is Sprinkles,” I mumble.

My clothes and skin are getting wet from the humidity. I step into the hallway and check the bathroom. There is a network of tree roots festering beneath the door. The door is unlocked but is blocked from the inside. I push it open after a few budes, and the cracking of twigs rings out.

I yelp as my fingers find the light switch. My tan shirt is turning green from moss growing on it. My skin is red and itchy. I scratch at my arms and see a hole in the ceiling. Possibly where Sprinkles jumped down from. The toilet seat is down but it’s overgrown with an orange veiny substance.

That’s not even the strangest thing in the room.

Inside the tub is a human-looking thing. It’s sitting straight up, wrapped in greenery that droops down like hair. I can’t see anything underneath it, just a coagulated organic mass. The branches that I snapped are attached to what looks like arms resting on the edges, but really look like logs with various stems and fungi all over them.

“What the hell is this—Sprinkles where are you!” I yell.

The mass starts creaking and I get out of there. I scurry to the bedroom, each step taking more and more effort. I hear a mewing and there is Sprinkles, sitting on the only item in the room. Some maroon-colored bed that is overgrown with bright pink flowers. He tries to come to me, but his back legs are stuck to thin brown roots.

“Hold on, let me help you,” I say, kneeling.

I fall to my knees and sink deep into the plush. The flowers touch my arm and start to latch. It feels like pins and needles digging into my skin and I yawn. Sprinkles, too, makes a low groan and puts his head down. I feel a crawling sensation all over my back, chest, even underneath my jeans. I hear that familiar creaking sound and turn my head. The creature in the bathtub is there, standing nearly as tall as the frame. A thick plume of yellow spores emits from it and covers the room.

I lose all control of my body and slump into the bed. I feel for Sprinkles, mumbling to run away but his fur does not feel like fur, but coarse and inanimate. He doesn't make a sound.

I feel a pressure in my head and my breathing slows. The moldy smell now resembles lilacs and lavender. The moss on my arms, a blanket of dew. The flowers on the bed, a plush pillow to sleep on.

Angela Prendergast
Rx # 89436103

July 12th, 2016

B*ecause Zoloft leaves the body so quickly, stopping it too abruptly can cause discontinuation syndrome to develop. Among the symptoms that may be experienced are nausea,*

Nausea

I'm drowning in three feet of water

I'm 5'10

I think I forgot how to stand

tremor, dizziness, muscle pains, weakness, insomnia, and anxiety.

—Colleen

July 13th, 2016

Avoid drinking alcohol while taking Zoloft (sertraline tablets). Talk with your doctor before you use other drugs that slow your actions.

Yesterday, I went to a house party and got drunk

I enjoyed a nice cocktail of Smirnoff and Zoloft.

Oh my!

How dare I!

For a second I felt *good*.

I followed this beautiful boy – crystal eyes. He resembled
barbed wire, taunting my comfort zone.

*This medicine may raise the chance of a broken bone. Talk with
the doctor.*

He played with me and made me feel alive again. I swear
I could hear my heartbeat for the first time in two years.
—Colleen

July 14th, 2016

*In some cases, Zoloft may trigger or exacerbate psychiatric
symptoms.*

As the sun begins to rise, it creeps in my room,
illuminating the messy pile of clothes in my closet.

I cringe at the sight... reaching for the string to pull the
blinds shut.

Darkness returns. Much better.

I hate staring at that
cluttered mess

*Call your doctor if you experience any new or worsening
psychiatric symptoms such as panic attacks...*

I must clean the closet.

Most of the clothes
outgrew me anyway.

—Colleen

PSYCHIATRIC OUTPATIENT CLINIC

666 Main Street

Doylestown, PA 18914

Complete Evaluation: Psychiatrist

Date of Exam: 07/16/2016

Time of Exam: 5:22:37 PM

Patient Name: Hayes, Colleen

Patient Number: 1000010659748

Current Symptoms: She reports that acne has cleared since stopping use of ZOLOFT.

Ms. Hayes reports that her mind often wanders from subject to subject quickly. She reports "Crying Spells" or episodes.

Feelings of sadness have been reported. Reports of difficulty sleeping.

Suicidality: She denies suicidal ideas or intentions. Denial is convincing. Denial is certain.

Severity/ Complexity: Based on her response to questions, severity is estimated to be moderate.

Ms. Hayes has symptoms of anxiety. Anxiety symptoms have been present for months, especially after stopping ZOLOFT, especially with the start of the new school year.

Anxiety symptoms are occurring daily. She reports occurrences of difficulty concentrating. Nausea is described.

Difficulty sleeping is occurring.

Some previous signs, but no recent signs of discontinuation syndrome.

She describes an exaggerated startle response.

Ms. Hayes is enduring a normal withdraw period categorized by fleeting emotions and fragmented thoughts.