

Gracelyn Mitchell

Age: 17, Grade: 12

Home School, Wetumpka, AL

Educator: Shunta McCants

Category: Poetry

Bloodthirsty

Blood-orange, mid-October sun bathes your yard in glowing slivers,
Your slender fingers clench and crunch patches of dried, yellow grass
Like the skeletons
in the cemetery zero-point-five miles from your house
We lay together, spines pressed
 to earth,
 Like sheets of your family's linen, hanging on the clothesline,
 you more so than I.
Your skin sallow, your eyes gibbouses,
Your body engulfed in amber.
Your sable hair has grown in spiderwebs since March,
 much like your house has grown several-hundred-more cobwebs.
Midsommer has dealt you no good deeds, has offered you no favors,
You are collateral damage in its abrasiveness.
When you turn over to whisper in my ear, your voice
 is macabre and haunty, like the echoes
of ghosts.
Your mouth is two red brushstrokes on porcelain,
Your bloodstained lips leave streaks on my own.
I tear through spiderwebs with my fingers, entranced.
Our bones rest, intertwined in fleeting peeks of apricity granted by the swaying tree canopy,
 The pomegranate tree your mother planted
 on your grandmother's grave,
the fruit low-hanging like glass-blown ornaments,
low-hanging like your mother's womb during her sixth pregnancy,
 the third unplanned, the second after she swore it was her last,
 the pregnancy you spent months lamenting to me about,
 the unborn child you groaned over
 like the baseboards in your home
Cigarette Ash wedges, collects, crunches
between linoleum tiles
Cigarettes like the ones you smoked on the playground at night
in ninth grade and made me pinky swear to never tell a soul,
Ash like the ash of the bonfire in May you begged me to never
take you home from, the one you attended as more than just a skeleton.
My palms clasp your shoulders, cup your collaborne
Amidst the broken glass scattered through your yard,
 as diamond as the tears that dampen your pillow each night,
My hands have the power to erect ghosts,
To transport you to a time when sunsets were not finite.
As our bodies entangle and interlock, I render every lion
They have settled into your ribcage untamed and ravenous.
We twist knives into each other's hearts,

Throbbing like warm, swelling citrus.
Perhaps there will come a summer when you do not induce
The preemptive mourning or forethought of
Your death,
Or, perhaps, we can return to October
With a single touch
Should we ever grow bloodthirsty.

Gracelyn Mitchell

Age: 17, Grade: 12

Home School, Wetumpka, AL

Educator: Shunta McCants

Category: Poetry

Noémvrios

**“Blackbird singing in the dead of night,
Take these broken wings and learn to fly.”**

-*Blackbird* by the Beatles (1968) resonates.

Cyan skies stretch over umber earth,
dotted with ochre fallen leaves
and dips into sepia via sunset
in the evening.
Glass cups full of amber tea
thud and slosh on our burnt sienna coffee table,
and this is one of those memories my mind recalls
and extracts wisdom from.
November 2018 felt like a record scratch,
a dip, a groove, a valley between hills
I am still trying to surmount.
I remember the cold breezes and swaying, skeletal trees,
the wind that tangled my hair beyond repair
and rustled the pages of my notebook in
the same way that I remember cop cars casually parking
in my driveway.
That was the day I realized my mother’s age,
how her skin is paper holding back protruding, blue veins.
I discovered that she cries; the tears just hide in the shadows,
the dark crevices under her eyes.
But this was the month I realized resonating factors of my life:
The living room is a temple, a place of condemnation,
especially to family members
The bathroom is a place of requiem and grief
My bedroom is a place of insomnia, perhaps a rectory,
a place of abstaining
I learn to make grilled cheese sandwiches continually
no matter how appalling they become, as the splintering of my heart
overshadows my hunger, like Jesus on the cliff.
Maybe this is fasting.
I am Hera watching Greece burn,
I am a maelstrom, a monument, a harbinger.
My uncle is a sex offender.
I am a combination of Medusa and Athena,
equal parts victim and protector, but never
disregarding my title of goddess.
My cousin is the Poseidon who inspired my
petrifying gaze and serpentine tendrils.
Most of my family consists of Nephilim

I have witnessed and initiated the Deluge.
I sink and sing in sorrow on the creaking, hardwood floors,
mourning secretly, but my feet portray otherwise.
I dance as I stir the pot and realize that the streams of rising steam
resemble dancing Greek statues,
and I want to kiss each sliver of vapor with a press of my lips
as I sway my hips to the melancholy worship.
I learned that ancient Greeks believed that an unburied corpse
was an offense to the gods,
therefore, I am an offense to the gods; I feel as though I am
a dead woman walking.
November 2018 taught me that it deserved a strong name.
That's why I call it Noémvrios.
It feels resilient, in the same way it sounds like
a whisper, stretching forward, and at the same time,
it feels like the title of a memoir.
Noémvrios taught me that persistence is mandatory
and best acquired in the silence of night,
when we are all puny blackbirds with bones rattling in fragile bodies,
trying to sing.

Gracelyn Mitchell

Age: 17, Grade: 12

Home School, Wetumpka, AL

Educator: Shunta McCants

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Memoir: An Index of Life

I.

Title: *Fahrenheit 451*

Author: Ray Bradbury

Loaned: May 2015

Returned: September 2015

Patches of dried, yellow grass crunch under the soles of my flip-flops as I thunder down the lawn, a cardboard box bouncing in my arms. My neck and ponytail are slick with sweat. The nosepiece of my glasses slides down my nose as it beads with sweat. The sun blazes down on my suburban neighborhood, glinting on the hood of the U-Haul parked in our driveway.

We were moving for the first time in seven years. From the outskirts of a metropolitan city to the abode-filled fringe of a rural small town.

Truthfully, I had no clue why my parents chose to relocate there. Twelve-year-old me might have been too young and gleeful to fully comprehend the situation, but I still saw no reason for us to move to such a desolate, uneventful city.

Regardless, we were moving closer to my cousins; that made my preteen self exponentially-elated. Besides, my parents were insistent that it would be an adventure. Just like those stories I was always scribbling in notebooks and those novels I read obsessively.

I slid the worn cardboard box across the riveted metal floor of the truck and turned around, gazing at the perfect brick house with the yellow-painted realtors' sign pitched in the front yard. My oldest cousin pushed a small, green cart across the neatly-trimmed lawn, churning blades sprinkling pesticides across the yard, sweat seeping through the back of his shirt. My younger cousin (one year my senior), Ann, helped carry boxes out of the house with the rest of my bustling relatives.

I smiled dryly, proud of the adventure I was about to embark on.

How naive and blinded I was....

For three months, my feet padded down concrete floors and cracked painted tile. I transitioned from couches to pallettes made from cotton blankets on the coarse carpet. I watched flies become entangled in screen doors. I stayed in what I can only describe as a tyrannical lost castle positioned in front of a marshy, thick forest spilling over a dented chain link fence and disguised as a mustard-yellow, ranch-style, three-bedroom house. My aunt and uncle, the rancorous ruler's, home. They offered to squeeze an additional four people into their home while we transitioned to our new house. Their generosity was graciously-perceived, but every action during that extensive summer only proved their dictatorship.

They seemed to criticize every cell in my body with sugar-coated criticism. My spontaneous personality, the way I loved to dance and play. My hair. My clothes. My crooked teeth. The way I loved to spend most of my time scratching ideas into notebooks that they assured me I "would never use". The way I seemed to be assimilated with the idea that I could *be something*.

We finally left the despotic household in August with no grievances, but my aunt and uncle's silver-tongued grasp did not end with the summer. When they joined us for dinner on the weekends in our new home, they would spit smooth, fascistic lies at the kitchen table. With her deception, my aunt landed me in a coverschool founded within a run-down church. She twisted social strings once invisible to me, ensuring her daughter involuntarily competed against me. She left me with depleted social interaction and had the audacity to ask me every time I chose to stay home on Wednesday nights if I had depression. If I was suicidal. I was twelve. Yes.

Stifling mint chocolate-scented vapor rolls through the car in moist, white clouds. The sickeningly-sweet smell grasps my face like a cool, feathery claw, clenching over my nasal cavity. I gag silently. My throat constricts and my lungs plead for air. The plea reaches my lips as I crane my neck to it's tallest potential. "Please, Uncle Ben, can you roll down the window?"

My uncle glances at me in the mirror, his almost-translucent-blond, widow-peaked hair coming into view. He glares at me as another moist cloud blooms from his lips. "I am an adult. You, as a child, don't dictate my decisions." The smell of stark peppermint blossoms through the encased air. He sucks on his E-cig with the black-market, flavored cartridge shining like amber. Wise words for the dragon who does not have to endure his smoke.

I came to understand that this town was an inferno with a cause. My aunt and uncle's house expanded into a vindictive kingdom. If I was not careful, I would burn and be stripped of everything I was—reduced to nothing but cinders.

II.

Title: *The King in Yellow*

Author: Robert W. Chambers

Loaned: October 29, 2016

Returned: November 2016

The Repairer of Reputations

A year later, my life hadn't improved. My aunt managed to convince my mom to transfer me to three different schools on three separate occasions, each established in orthodox churches.

I couldn't plant my roots anywhere. I didn't have time to adjust to anything or *anyone*. I felt like I was fracturing from within.

I developed my first nervous habits. I fidgeted. I was debilitatingly paranoid about everything—death, failure, success, life. I believed everyone hated me. I would over-analyze every move I made. There were some times that I slumped against my bedroom wall, heart racing, unable to breathe, and I had no idea if this was normal or if I was some sort of freak or how to get help or if I should get help. Was I crazy?

My aunt took this ammunition and painted me as an ignorant girl who wasn't capable of doing anything right. Apparently, I was erratic and stupid.

I wanted to tell her she was completely wrong. But she compartmentalized me in an inescapable box.

The forbidden play

It was the day before Halloween.

Construction paper pumpkins lined the paneled hallway like haphazard notes on sheet music. The smell of warm caramel apples wavered through the painted tile kitchen. My costume was stuffed inside my duffle bag, ready for co-op the next morning, where we would be allowed to dress up.

My parents asked my aunt and uncle if they'd be willing to watch us while they went on a date, and of course, they obliged. They would let us spend the night, then take us to co-op in the morning, and later that night, we'd meet with our parents to go trick-or-treating.

I wish I remembered how many candy apples Ann and I ate and if the glossy, liquified sugar stuck relentlessly to my molars. How many ghost stories we told in the glow of the crackling fire pit with the marshy forest behind us, or how many melted marshmallows stuck to the roofs of our mouths. How many miniature ghosts we made out of crêpe paper and fishing wire, or which movie we watched while tearing through bags of candy. I wish I could say when exactly I showered and changed into my tie-dye shirt and polka-dot pajama pants.

But I can never recall all of these things with absolute clarity. They all dissipated from my mind like running ink as lilac-colored walls were painted dark by midnight.

I laid on the hard floor between layers of bristly cotton blankets, my sister sleeping diagonal from me. I tossed and turned, which meant I was fully awake when the door opened with a *creak* that sent a chill down my spine. I opened one eye, becoming as frigid as a statue, feigning sleep.

In the doorway, I could see a pair of glasses glinting in the dim streaks of light emitting from the bathroom down the hall and the silhouette of Ann's brother. For a few seconds, he stared into Ann's room and partially opened and closed the door like he was methodically testing the rusting hinges.

He strode into the room, his heavy footsteps muffled by socks and carpet. Then...silence. A minute passed. He cautiously crept onto the layers of coarse blankets. He crouched down. I quickly shut my eyes. After a few seconds of nerve-wracking silence, I peeked—opening one, trembling eye. In the soft moonlight shining through Ann's sheer, sequin-studded curtains, I could see him leaning over my body like a perplexed scientist...elbows resting on his

knees, flannel jacket flowing like a labcoat, pushing his thin glasses up his nose. I was a specimen. Then the touching began. The poking, the prodding, the squeezing. His fingers danced on and grasped at my skin. I wanted to scream, I wanted to run, punch, kick, bite—let it be known that I was *not* an experiment. But I froze...like a preservative in a petri dish. I was paralyzed.

Eventually, I worked up the strength to flinch. He backed away, scared, and hid behind the door. As I got up, tears rolling down my cheeks, I watched him through the crack between the door and the doorframe as he cowered to his room. I walked to the bathroom. As I marched down the hallway, I caught a glimpse of him peeking through his slightly-open bedroom door. *Scream* I told myself. But I didn't.

I swallowed and splashed water on my face. I let the water drip down my neck and mingle with my tears as I slowly walked back down the hallway, the paper pumpkins fluttering like ghosts. I caught another glimpse of Ann's brother, face eclipsed by his bedroom door. As I drifted into Ann's room, I could hear it slowly creak back open. I yanked my phone off the charger trailing from Ann's dresser and collapsed on the now-strewn-and-twisted blankets. When my eyes adjusted to the blinding white light, I was able to see a set of segmented numbers wavering on the screen—12:45 AM. My thumb trembled on the corner of the screen. For several seconds, I thought about swiping up and calling my dad. Calling my dad? Why? What would he do? I was scared of what he would do. Would he even believe me if I told him what was happening? What if my aunt and uncle asked why I called my parents? I heard rusted hinges groan behind me. My breath caught. I quickly powered my phone off and laid my head on the pillow, my heart pounding in my chest. I closed my eyes, panting heavily. *Maybe it's over.*

Then, before any rational human being would be able to fall asleep, Ann's brother crept back into the room and crouched beside my petrified form. I closed my eyes tightly as his sixteen-year-old fingers slid past every layer and thirteen-year-old boundary.

By morning, numbness transcended through my body. Every muscle was like lead. I glanced at myself in the mirror, and in my eyes, I could see the same shadows that painted the walls last night.

I slipped my crumpled Halloween costume on. At the same time, while I still couldn't fully comprehend what happened, I knew I wanted to rip my skin off.

The Yellow Sign

We went to the wealthiest, most suburban neighborhood that night. The kind that stretches fake, cotton spiderwebs through the neatly-trimmed bushes. The kind that pitches inflatable skeletons right next to their campaign signs.

We went on several hayrides. We filled several plastic jack-o-lantern buckets to the brim. I felt hollow the entire time. At one point, I glanced over at Ann's brother. In the reflection of the sunset, his glasses gleamed blood-red.

For months, I took hot, steaming showers, subconsciously hoping it would burn every phantom remain of that night off my skin. I forcefully shoved every memory of what Ann's brother did into a mental cage in my mind. I began to convince myself that it either never happened or it was all a dream.

Yellow

Years later, I learned in a novel I was reading that there is a book called *The King in Yellow*, in which there exists an eponymous forbidden play. In the book, the play is not allowed to be performed as it drives the audience to madness and relentless despair.

Perhaps October 29th, 2016 was my "forbidden play".

It should have never been performed....

III.

Title: *To Kill A Mockingbird*

Author: Harper Lee

Loaned: December 29th, 2016

Returned: January 2017

Months later, in December, my cousins and I went to visit our nearly-ninety-year-old great aunt in Orlando for a Christmas reunion. She was a woman who lived by herself in a sun-bleached house in the Villages that smelt like sand and sunshine and eucalyptus.

Per usual, we kids were sentenced to the sunroom, ceiling fans with blades of plastic resembling palm leaves whirring above us. I sat across from my many-times-removed, barely-remembered cousin. She attended a fine arts high school in the state as a writing student, and among other things, we related over our newly-found and mutual love for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As we spoke, I recalled a few months prior, while I was still reading Harper Lee's novel—I informed my dad when he complained mockingbirds were flocking the pear tree in our backyard that killing a

mockingbird was a sin. He replied, "You cannot make up sins." But to my knowledge, the mockingbird in the story is an allusion to innocence. It is a sin to kill innocence. My mockingbird was killed in October. The sinner has not repented, and he is sitting right beside me.

IV. Title: *The Scarlet Letter*

Author: Nathaniel Hawthorne

Date Loaned: June 15th, 2019

Return Date: August 2019

It took me three years to relinquish the truth about what happened that Devil's Night. I'm not sure how I built up the nerve, or how I broke the mental cage holding back the tidal wave of memories in my mind. Maybe it was because months prior, we learned that our family was convoluted in deceit— Uncle Ben was not the man he claimed to be (instead he was an unconvicted sex offender)—effectively isolating us from my aunt and uncle's rule and giving me the freedom I so desperately needed. Regardless, I told my mom. As we rumbled down a narrow country road, the words came spilling from my mouth in a surging cascade.

She stared in disbelief, her eyes brimming with tears, then pulled into a gas station. As we rubbed our eyes with scratching brown paper napkins from the glovebox, she embraced me, tears rolling down her cheeks, and apologized—for bringing me to this despicable city. She called it "the worst mistake of her life".

Telling my aunt what her son did was like standing in front of an unpersuadable jury already settled on a death penalty. She stormed out of our house as soon as her son's name left my mouth paired with the words "sexually assaulted me".

As expected, the news detonated over the family. I was the liar, making up stories for my benefit. I was the one "destroying the family". My grandfather, notoriously-unreligious, called to tell my mother that I was "possessed" by a demon. He offered to come "pray over" me. She refused.

Suddenly, the girl they used to have Thanksgiving dinner with was deserving of death threats and barrages of phone calls.

I didn't try to hide the truth. I was done hiding. With no chance of conviction or a confession, speaking my truth was the only justice I had. I had no reason for shame. I did nothing to deserve my circumstances.

Still, when the story eventually seeped into our small community, it was impossible to ignore the searing stares as I walked downtown, or the sneers I received from mothers with sons at church.

I was branded.

I entered my junior year at a public high school in August.

I took AP Language. One of the first books I read was *The Scarlet Letter*. In it, I noticed something extraordinary. Hester was publicly reviled, undeservedly—pushed to immense sorrow and shame. In the beginning, she saw the embroidered letter on her chest as something to be despised. Later, she grew to regard it as a symbol of adversity. In the end, she was a survivor. When I was finished reading, I was left to wonder...if I would ever reach such levels of atonement.

Eventually, towards the end of my junior year, my parents and I decided to renounce the rural city and leave, agreeing that it was caustic. When we made the decision, I recalled something else from Hawthorne's novel: In Boston, there are two establishments that the people build before any others, despite their optimism for the thriving city—a prison and a cemetery. This town seemed to exhibit the same disguised-pessimism as Boston in the 1600s.

Notably, while Hester is being decried in the square, she notices a rose bush climbing up the prison door. The narrator tells the reader that this is a symbol of "Nature's kindness to the condemned". To this day, I am waiting for my roses.

V.

Title: *The Great Gatsby*

Author: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Loaned: January 2020

Returned: March 2020

In the months preceding my confession, I began reflecting on life. I started thinking about, *fearing*, death again. I plunged into all of its depths, its inner crevices—twisting, tearing apart, and analyzing the world like a half-solved rubix cube: an almost-completed puzzle, still looming overhead, consuming every thought.

In my last month of AP Language, I began to mentally compare myself to Gatsby.

He died, surrounded by proof of his success, his greatest dream left unfulfilled, killed by evidence that his life was not entirely gilded—in a place of peace.

This can be used to summarize the hurricane of my life—success in writing, the unfulfillment, the not-entirely-gilded life.

I think—at least, I'd *like* to think—I am similar to Gatsby in life. I am restless. I refuse to be compartmentalized. I will fight to achieve what I long for.

And I cannot die in complete peace—I can't even *exist* in peace— until I have proven my resilience until I'm recognized as a force to be reckoned with.

Gracelyn Mitchell

Age: 17, Grade: 12

Home School, Wetumpka, AL

Educator: Shunta McCants

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Chasing Constellations

I stood in the wet grass, scrunching my toes in and out, letting the cool dew drops fall on my bare feet. My thin, white sundress and my thin, almost-white hair fluttering around me in the wind.

I stood firmly, watching the glow of what felt like trillions of fireflies fade in and out. Each time the one I had my gaze set on flickered out, I would close my eyes and inhale deeply, breathing in the scent of summer air and what I can still only describe as “magic”. The cool air on my sticky, sweaty skin felt good. My stomach still churned with nausea from seconds ago when my cousin and her best friend twirled me around on the “swing” made from a single branch and piece of rope tied to a tree in their backyard...over, and over, and over. But I still giggled past the dizziness every time.

I smiled and laughed to myself. My heart fluttered and my veins surged with what I look back on as “child euphoria”.

My cousin, with long, steaming brown hair, ran up beside me followed by her friend. Still giggling, she grasped my shoulders and pointed to the sky. “You see that, Grace? That’s the pegasus constellation.” She pointed to an outline of stars that unmistakably made up the image of a chubby pegasus with a bridle and saddle and very two-dimensional wings. It wasn’t one of those constellations that you had to squint at, or one that you had to imagine most of the image yourself for. It was clear and wonderous (as wondrous as a constellation of a chubby pegasus can be for a six-year-old girl).

Her friend followed our gaze, then declared that the sky was divided into three kingdoms and that we were the princesses. The constellations were our armies, and we were at war with each other.

The next minute, we were skipping across the yard, squealing, and grasping at star formations thousands of miles away that were charted by the likes of Galileo, Ptolemy, and Lacaille hundreds of years ago.

“I’ve got the one that looks like a lightning bolt!” My cousin’s friend called, jumping up and reaching for the constellation *Cassiopeia*. She landed back on the ground, and of course, her hand was empty. But in our little, embryonic brains, it was understood that we could all see what she saw in the network of stars. In our eyes, she was now holding a crackling, electrifying, zapping weapon of mass destruction in her hand like Zeus at the top of Olympus.

“I call the one that looks like a snake!” My cousin shouted, racing to the constellation *Lynx*.

“I’ve got the one that looks like a ninja!” Her friend called back, swiping at the constellation *Taurus* and pulling it down to the Earth. The constellation-now-ninja did a roundhouse kick in front of us, then punched the air.

“Oh yeah?” My cousin teased, “Well, I have the one that looks like a wolf.” *Ursa Major*, or *the Great Bear*.

“I have the bra-KEY-O-SOAR-us!” *Ursa Minor*, or *the Little Bear*.

“I have the one that looks like a knife!” *Camelopardalis*, or *the Giraffe*.

“The one that looks like a stickman is in my army!” *Perseus*.

“I have the other one that looks like a lightning bolt!” *Lacerta*.

We grabbed about a dozen more constellations each, assembling them into our militaries before I declared mightily through my snaggle-toothed smile and with my high-pitched voice, “I have the pegasus!”

We took our positions on opposite sides of the yard, grinning at one another as the light of a dozen constellations showered over us and the light of a thousand stars shined above us. I was mounted on my chubby steed, reins in hand, his unrealistic wings flapping impatiently. My cousin had the astral snake draped around her shoulders and neck while a stellate wolf growled at her side.

My cousin’s friend smirked, raising the crackling lightning bolt of *Cassiopeia* over her head and striking the ground in front of her feet.

We ran towards each other, all of our celestial soldiers colliding. My cousin and her friend’s “lightning bolts” clashed together, and soon, they were fencing, electric light dancing across their faces.

The backyard became a magical battlefield. The ninja (Taurus) launched himself at the wolf (Ursa Major), and now the wolf was growling and swiping his claws at his face. Somehow, the knife (Camelopardalis) had been plunged into the stickman (Perseus)'s chest. The snake (Lynx) had wrapped itself around the brachiosaurus' (Ursa Minor) neck. The brachiosaurus thrashed around blindly, knocking the lightning bolt out of my cousin's hand and flattening it with a *hiss* in the process.

I watched the scene unfurl for a minute, then Pegasus snorted. I stroked his mane, which was filled with glittering and searingly-bright stars. Then I clicked his reins, and we were off. We were soaring. The cold night air turned into a rush around me. I tilted my head back and laughed blithely as we circled around the battlefield/backyard. Pegasus' mighty, two-dimensional wings flapped powerfully. I looked down and watched as Orion (who had turned into a samurai warrior) unsheathed his sword and thrust into the heart of *Pavo*, or *the peacock constellation* (who had turned into a twenty-foot-tall duck).

Pegasus swooped to the left. Andromeda, who had turned into a massive dragon was also on our side, flapped above us, showering the crowds of constellations with her bright, fiery breath.

Pegasus and I landed softly on the grass. Andromeda (once goddess of dreams, now fire-breathing dragon)'s breath had vanquished most of the stelliform forces. In the center of the yard, my cousin and her friend had resorted to using sticks as swords. As soon as they saw me still mounted on Pegasus with dragon Andromeda circling above us, they dropped their trivial weapons and started running. They acted like they were scared, and they let out soprano squeals, but I could still hear them laughing with each step. I snapped Pegasus' starry reigns. He whined, raising himself up on his hind legs, then galloped after them.

The girls both released a scream that dissolved into more giggles as they dodged behind a broken swing set. I laughed and pulled on Pegasus' reigns, drawing him to a halt. I jumped off his back, my feet landing in the wet grass once again. I prowled closer to the swing set, which was lopsided and had six cheap, plastic swings of varying sizes, three of which were broken despite my cousin's friend's dad promising to fix them countless times. I could hear the girls snickering as I drew closer. As soon as I grasped one of the swings that was hanging by only one chain in my chubby, little hand and shook it in their faces, they screamed and bolted away, their screams becoming more and more like laughs the further they ran. And off we went...

We chased each other around, the porch light casting dull, yellow light across the lawn. We slipped on the slick grass more than once, transforming our knees into blotched blue and purple galaxies. We snapped twigs off of nearby trees as we went, bending them into swords and crowns with reckless abandon. We were valorous royalty, fencing each other, stabbing each other's chest with trimmings from the laurel bush. Leaves and white flowers broke off our crowns and fluttered in the wind. Pieces of wet grass were snatched out of the ground as we ran, sticking to the soles of our bare feet. Mosquitos, moths, and fireflies hummed around us, gathering around to witness the epic battle. We regarded them as fairies.

The TV inside the house blared through the screen door, but we were oblivious to the rest of the world. The adults chatted in the kitchen, dishes clinking, but the pine trees in the yard swayed, casting long shadows that pulled us back into our fantasy. The beer bottles under the shed were monsters with gleaming eyes and claws threatening to bite our toes; we still didn't leave any part of the yard unexplored. Like true kings.

As we parried across the yard, the only thing I was vaguely aware of was our celestial armies fading. Andromeda let out a mighty roar and flew back into the heavens. Perseus and Pavo both lay on the ground, fading and dwindling into trails of stars that lead back up to the sky. Orion faded right before attacking Taurus with his sword. Lynx, who was still strangling Ursa Minor, disappeared from the dinosaur's neck. The brachiosaurus had a few moments of peace before disappearing with the other constellations. Out of my peripheral, I could still see Pegasus. He was fading, but he still stood at the other end of the yard, flapping his wings and watching us intently like he wanted to see how the battle ended.

Finally, in one valiant move, I managed to back my cousin and her friend towards the tree with the "swing". They tripped over the tree root, and I stood over them, pointing my laurel bush twig at them, wearing Band-Aids as armor. One on each elbow acting as coulers, one on each knee acting as poleyns, one right above my eyebrow acting as a sallet, and a dozen more wrapped around my fingers acting as a gauntlet.

Right as I was about to strike the final blow, my aunt called out through the screen door, "KIDS! DINNER!" We laughed as we ran to the metal picnic table underneath the carport and feasted on hotdogs, and chips, and coleslaw. We raised our plastic cups and toasted to our victories, blue Kool-aid made with a \$1.00 pack of flavored powder acting as our wine. As I brought my red Solo cup to my lips, I glanced at the yard. In the glow of the porch light, I could see Pegasus standing there, his wings spread wide. He stared at me with his glowing teal eyes for a moment, then bowed his head before fading away.

It's been several years now since the night we chased the constellations. The nausea from spinning on the "swing" disappeared from my stomach. The taste of Kool-aid left my lips, and the feeling of magic-filled air left my skin. Deep, rattling tremors of grief would come to separate my cousin and I. Something catastrophic would happen,

creating a void between us. And yet, I choose to believe that there are thousands of constellations knitting the distance between us, shrinking the expansive darkness.

A part of me wants to believe that we never stopped running that night. A part of that night transcended into my being today. When I was younger, I chased brilliant, burning lights that were millions of lightyears away. They were impossible to reach, but I dared to throw my hands out and chase them. If nothing else, I hope to continue doing that — reaching out to the heavens, to the near-impossible, and believing I can touch them; believing I cannot only touch, but *grab* them: the light in the darkness.

Until I grab that light, I will tie Orion's belt around my waist, I will unshackle Andromeda and release her from the sky. I will continue to believe that thousands of constellations create an empyrean bond linking every person on Earth, and I will continue to believe that there is always light in the all-embracing darkness and that it is *not* beyond our reach.

Perhaps the constellations will look down from the heavens and remember me, and perhaps they will assemble and fight in my honor once again.

Gracelyn Mitchell

Age: 17, Grade: 12

Home School, Wetumpka, AL

Educator: Shunta McCants

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Purgatory, Ascension, and Blood

//

ladybugs

my cousin and I—eight and eleven—trample the newly/neatly trimmed lawn of my parents' expansive backyard, over floral weeds and flowers we've assigned whimsical names to with total disregard for botany. We race past the fence which divides my yard from the wooded dirt trail behind my home, which we are sure is populated with Heffalumps, who run and charge and leave giant impressions in the ground (the dry crater a few miles away, we insist, was formed by a particularly large one, despite my dad's attempts to inform us that it was the result of a lake that dried up years ago in a drought). We run in figure-eights around the two dead trees at the edge of the yard, which we believe have the capability to produce waterfalls of pixie dust (after watching *Tinkerbell*). We search the crevices of the castle my father erected for us when we were six and nine—the one all of the adults affectionately refer to as a *clubhouse*.

With a plastic hairbow container “borrowed” from my former-cosmetologist mother in hand, we begin hunting ladybugs. Except, we weren't really *hunting* them. *Rehabilitation* is what we called it. We would rescue the “injured” and “sick” spotted beetles, the ones “clearly in need of help”, and release them within a week. We promised. We filled the hairbow container with blades of grass, leaves, acorns, twigs, rocks. We collected dozens of ladybugs. We swore all of them had an ailment or defect. We let the smells of onion grass and foul-smelling ladybug secretion reek through our upstairs playroom in the name of humanitarian service.

The ladybugs suffocate and die of starvation days later. We scatter carcasses in the garden like red-and-black seeds. This is routine. Despite the results, we continue to believe that every time we capture a ladybug, we are doing them a great and noble service.

While we recall this memory fondly with laughter, I am well aware that we were not nurturing forces as we intended to be; we were murderers.

We returned the hairbow container to my mom. It still smells of grass and ladybugs' blood.

//

birds

my cousin and I did not just kill once. Our first experience with mortality came one cold, October morning when we found two birds splayed across the floor of our clubhouse— panting, barely-alive. A gnarled nest full of baby-blue eggs rested on a high shelf mounted to the wall. We screamed for our parents.

My grandfather cradled the birds in his palms, their wings draping over his fingers as they took too-shallow breaths. We kids, keenly aware of the birds' responsibility to their eggs and the possibility of survival insinuated by their weak gasps, begged our grandfather and parents to “help them live”. The adults, however, reached a general consensus that the birds were as good as dead.

My grandfather walks towards the gate to dig shallow graves for the birds in the wooded dirt trail behind our yard. We ask what happens to the eggs. We are told honestly. We cry.

We were told to lock the clubhouse door each night before coming inside for dinner. This is what ultimately caused the birds' starvation and suffocation. We feel guilty.

//

popsicles

sitting on the concrete steps of the staircase adjoining two tenants at my cousin's two-story, brick apartment building nestled in the middle of a humid-and-wooded nowhere, we suck pungent fruit juices out of icicles wrapped in plastic. Occasionally, the other's teeth crunch through the slender crushed ice with a *snap*. Our laughter fills the June afternoon like bubbles. The asphalt parking lot, filled with sun-bleached Ford Tempos and Couriers, wavers with

heat. The smell of linen fills the air, and we can hear the muffled rumbling of washing machines resonating from the apartments' laundromat. Pieces of chalk lay sweltering in the sun over hopscotch squares and outlines of our friends and random neighbors.

Grape juice from our popsicles paints veins down our arms, and we still laugh—bits of ice flying from our mouths and melting instantly in small puddles against heated concrete, our tongues stained maroon. Our tanktops, shorts, and flip-flops all smell of grass and heat accumulated from the monkey bars in the courtyard of the apartments, the ones we are told to leave after two kids no older than us pull cigarettes from their pockets and begin filling the summer air with gray snowflakes.

The grape stain veins become sticky and transparent. They fade.

June fades. Summers in the apartments vanish. I wish I could recall eating popsicles on the steps with greater clarity.

//

makeshift heaven

a frigid breeze filters through the screen of the open window in our new, ranch-style house. I lean against one of the legs of the dining room chairs, watching cars speed across the road which stretches in front of our home; watching as the four mostly-dead, lightning-stricken oaks sway in the wind; watching my grandfather behind the mesh screen as He becomes assimilated with the image of a higher deity, a Heavenly Father.

A dining room chair he pulled outside creaks as he leans back into it, a Rickenbacker guitar pressed against his stomach. He rests his abrasive fingers on the fretboard, contemplating. He lifts His right hand, raising a tightly-wound roll of paper pinched between His fingers (which seem to form a trident) to his lips. Plumes of silver smoke flower from His lips. Tendrils seep through the screen window, filling the house with the archaic and stark stench of flora, grass, and pine. I choke on the warm fog as though I have ascended to the sultry Mount Olympus.

I watch in confusion and awe as my grandfather lowers the roll of paper and starts stroking the guitar strings with His gnarled fingers, letting random bursts of slurred lyrics escape His cracked lips. He shouts and strums loosely, freely, the clouds He formed still hanging in a halo around Him. He has created a heaven on Earth, one that burns my nostrils.

He stops playing when the clouds fade. He stares out onto the busy road for a while, then extracts a candy cane He took from my parents' Christmas tree from His jacket pocket. He leans his guitar against His slumped chest. With a smoking blunt in His other hand, He twists the candy cane in his mouth for several minutes, sharpening it to a point before sliding it out of His mouth with a wet *pop*. Translucent, red, peppermint dye drips from the corner of His mouth like watered-down blood.

Blood. Like the blood that stemmed from him, the blood he used as shackles to bind us.

he forms more clouds. he is good at creating makeshift heavens.

But he is no god in my eyes.

//

porcelain

I am told my grandmother died in a bathtub before even the slightest notion of my existence was made. When my mother was eight, and her sister was ten, and they were home alone with cassettes of *Moby Dick* and *Anne of Green Gables* that their truck driver father had recorded for them so that he could still read them bedtime stories while he was gone.

She had a pre-existing condition, an ugly and relentless one that caused unexpected seizures: a silent killer. She wasn't found until hours later when my grandfather came home.

I am told the funeral was traumatically depressing. I am told that was the day my grandfather became like an oak tree: calloused and gnarled, emotionless. I am told that Florida became bubbling acid that drenched my grandfather's soul; this is why they moved to Chicago, followed by any other place where he could escape his grief after it began seeping through the cracks of each new home.

I am told, countless times, that my grandmother was a beacon of light in my grandfather's world. My grandfather never says this, but his face turns into an eclipse anytime a relative suggests it. She was a woman that smelt of lemongrass and sunlight; a woman who wore flouncy, floral blouses and could knit and play clarinet and the harp; a woman who pressed flowers into scrapbooks and wrote grocery lists in the margins of her pocket Bible; the definition of benevolence. She had strawberry hair and porcelain skin and cherry lips: she was nature and glass all at once.

She drowned in an olive-green, porcelain bathtub, but her soul is far from engulfed. It has resurfaced. My mother's aunt tells me that I am her sister reincarnated. I am not certain I am.

Grandmother, I am so sorry. Being "the beacon" in this family is a heavy burden to bear. Yes, I have filled such

dark rooms with an abundance of light—but it hurts to burn. I am melting. Grandmother, I am porcelain as well. The fragile glass is growing unbearably hot from hosting this flame. My body has become a kiln. I am incandescent. Fissures are forming within me. I will implode just as you did. I am so sorry. Our family's souls have only dimmed since your heavenly light was extinguished. I am not a good—or even *adequate*—replacement.

I still wonder what it would have been like if you lived...

//

tickets to the stars

my cousins and I are bundled in puffy winter coats, fleece-and-fur-lined hoods pulled over our ears against the harsh North Carolina cold. Our exposed fingers are numb, the tips the color of the mountains, as we grip fluttering, metallic gold tickets.

We board a warm, mahogany-and-crimson train, bound to our mothers' waists.

Sometime within the hour-long train ride, we shed our winter coats, exposing our footie pajamas. We dance around our compartment, giggling and tapping each other back-and-forth on the shoulder repeatedly every second in a very confined game of tag. We hold long, slender tubes filled with layered stripes of flavored sugar in our hands. Rainbows stain our mouths and lips.

We are told we are going to the North Pole. Where we will see the Northern Lights and Santa and we will hear the sound of bells if we believe. And we believe. And we are kids. And we are happy, and this is the essence of who and what we are.

Oh Lord...take me back.

//

german blood

my uncle has german ties. This, he says with pride and conviction. Many times. His father, who is responsible for the rich, inherited blood gifts him several family heirlooms carried from their immigrant ancestors, which fill my aunt and uncle's houses like humble trophies. *Salz* (salt) and *pfeffer* (pepper) shakers; an old spice rack labeled in painted, German calligraphy. I remember one heirloom with intense clarity: a series of delftware plates hanging on a zigzag of brass vines mounted to the kitchen wall. Each plate displays one scene from the process of making a pie, as though an invisible hand is baking the pastry and illustrating each step: a leafy branch drooping with the weight of clusters of glistening berries; a woven basket overflowing with freshly-picked berries; a rolling pin sticking out of a lump of dough powdered with flour; a golden-brown pie with a lattice, dough cover draped over a berry filling still wavering with heat.

My brain stumbles over the placement of the plates. My aunt arranged them "incorrectly". They sit completely out of order on the grapevine wire. For years, I stare at the pieces of china, becoming agitated—even *angered*—by their misplacement. I strain each time I sit at my aunt and uncle's dining room table, willing myself to gain telepathic powers so that I can rearrange the heirlooms to their *correct* order.

Perhaps this is how I invert, analyze, examine my family—it is not right, and I do not have the power to correct it. Sometimes, this frustrates me to the point of tears.

...

my uncle is bipolar. This, my aunt tells me in persuasive whispers. Several times. Each time, I am meant to accept this explanation as some form of apology, an excuse. I always nod when my aunt asks if I can forgive him.

Yes. I forgive him. For calling me an idiot after I drop a bowl of crushed Oreos and spill the tiny, black crumbs all over his kitchen floor (when I was nine). For telling me to "grow the hell up" after I express my desire to become a writer (I was still young enough to believe "Hell" was a "bad word"). For telling me that he would "smack" me after I load the dishwasher, in his words, "incorrectly". For making me stand outside in the cold after I refuse to drink the milk leftover from my cereal.

I can even forgive him for telling me outright that I would "fail miserably" in life and for watching (a bit too closely) as my cousin, my sister, and I play *Just Dance* on the Xbox, the same Xbox we begged him to move into the living room so that we would have more space to dance. We were met with instant refusal. We are unable to understand why until years later.

I can even forgive him for giving me a small wash rag that offered little coverage and fit tightly across my prepubescent body after I yelled through the apartment, post-shower, that there were no towels under the sink. I am also able to forgive him for smirking from the kitchen as I scurried through the hallway in the revealing rag, into the safety of the guest bedroom.

My aunt looks at me, her eyes pleading, "He's bipolar, sweetie. Can you forgive him?"

...

my first clear suicidal thought happened just a few months before I turned thirteen. After my uncle accused me of

“being dramatic” while I was in the midst of having a panic attack in his car (a panic attack which he triggered). He yelled at me for the remainder of the ride to church. As soon as we came to a stop in the gravel parking lot, I leaped out of the car and tore through the dank sanctuary, immediately locking myself in one of the stalls when I reached the restroom. I cried, knees to chest, leaning against the wall for several minutes until my shallow breathing became even again. I choke on remnant sobs, lifting my head slowly. Then, with tears dripping down my neck, a thought slips into my mind like a sliver of silk or a haunty whisper: *you can end all the pain if you want...*

Just a few months short of thirteen.

...

it isn't until after turning fifteen that I learn not to accept the “he’s bipolar” excuse from my aunt. I steel myself against persuasion after learning that my uncle groped a minor. I refuse to give anything but renouncement to this phrase after watching my aunt force her daughter, Ann, to talk with her “father” after Ann made it clear she disowned him. He is not her father; he is not my uncle.

I have bipolar friends. None of them are pedophiles; they are bipolar, and bipolar alone.

“Your uncle did something *really* terrible that he regrets. He was probably having a manic episode. Can you forgive him?”

I do not respond. I glare in disdain. My silence is deafening. It sends a tremor through the years spent suffering my uncle’s torment and renders them to ruins and dust. It makes the very thought of my uncle crumble to dust.

He initiated Armageddon. This is Judgement Day; I am judge, jury, executioner.

//

prayers

my cousin, Ann, and I rattle the midnight darkness with our muffled giggles. Impulsively, we grabbed a handful of markers from my desk drawer, and now we are writing random phrases and words and doodling absurd drawings on the vertical, wooden beams that support the top mattress of my bunk bed. Softly-glowing stars shine on the popcorn ceiling above us, and our souls only intertwine more with each laugh, as though we are sharing the same reservoir of happiness, clinging to kinship.

Not many people know this, but I used to pray that I would never die. That I would live as infinitely as the God who supposedly watched over me. As though God would select me—or *anyone*, for that matter—to live indefinitely in this very definite world where mortality sustains legacy and purpose and value in genuine experiences. This prayer usually encompasses my family—my mom, my dad, my sister, my dog, Ann. I never embraced anyone else in this prayer. I never offered immortality, granted by this grace that only I was aware of, to anyone except those I subconsciously decided were worthy of my plea to the Lord.

This prayer was typically inspired by paranoia and superstition. When a kid at school pointed a finger gun at me, I imagined a real, loaded pistol and lifted my head to the sky, praying my prayer of immortality over myself and my family, as though even just seeing a gun’s *likeness* would increase my chances of being shot in the future.

Perhaps I feared that my family would be exposed to the dangers of this world, and that the results would be fatal and irreversible. Perhaps my solution was to pray them unconquerable and immortal.

Lying on my back, scribbling nonsensical future memories and gazing at artificial stars with Ann, the night suddenly feels virtuous. We fall back laughing, our arms draping over each other. Our beaded friendship bracelets become interlinked rosaries with our names curving across our wrists, spelled boldly letter-by-letter across individual beads.

Hallelujah. *Hail Mary.*

May we live forever in indifference of the darkness.

//

Anastasis (Ανάστασις)

I have seen an infinite number of stained glass windows because I have been in an infinite number of churches. And when I see those depicting the Resurrection, I have to wonder—did the blood in the tomb dissipate upon Christ’s ascension?

And if I achieve righteous adversity—will the blood nailing me to my cross vanish upon *my* ascension, granting *me* hallowing relief?

Gracelyn Mitchell

Age: 17, Grade: 12

Home School, Wetumpka, AL

Educator: Shunta McCants

Category: Poetry

A Series of Random Odes, Dedications, and Laments

Castor and Pollux

//

For an infinite year, what the heavens creed, what the heavens intended—what the heavens prophesied and created inseparable, separated. I watch in horror as—after the betrayal of earthly blood, after my once-exalted soul is damned—my aunt grabs Ann, my *Castor*'s, wrist, tearing our interlaced fingers apart, unknowingly ripping the cosmos themselves. The universe quakes, unhinged with anger.

//

Castor and *Pollux*'s gravitational fields yearn for the other's presence, grasping at each other's existence. Their souls are depleted in single-story, city-limits homes, but their divine, sacred bond is nevertheless relentless. This archived unity festers in its newfound shackles. The heavens are willing to crack open, descend, conduct *The Rapture* in order to restore this *brotherly* (sisterly) relation, a god-forged kinship, one that could dominate the world in its light and vengeance.

//

Pollux (I) watch(es) as *Castor* (Ann) dyes their hair from a distance, an exotic metamorphosis undertaken that *Pollux* can have no part in, only witness from afar via photos swallowed by camera flash, taken in the reflection of murky mirrors. Green, yellow, blue, pink explosions, adding to the sheer brightness *Castor* radiates. *Castor* misses *Pollux*'s seventeenth birthday involuntarily, keenly aware that life is fragile and finite, and mortality is dwindling. *Castor* and *Pollux* ache, and they swallow this grief the same way someone would swallow searing stardust...with great pain.

//

Pollux and *Castor* streak across an asphalt parking lot one ominously-overcast day in June after what feels like an eternity of division, tears streaming from their eyes like pure droplets of heavenly emulsion deteriorating the ground beneath their feet as they fall to the earth. When they clash, their souls find each other and knit together again, their blinding light re-bound. As they embrace, every cosmos in existence erupts, transforming the galaxy into an open oblivion that the gods' ecstatic tears begin to fall through, splashing the earth that *Pollux* and *Castor* grace.

Gemini. After all this time, at last.

In Dedication to King Midas

I met this boy by coincidence, or perhaps by fate—hopefully, fate—with flecks of gold shining like sparse beacons in the depths of his dark-hazel eyes, like earth and melted bronze melding together. His skin is gilded, as it would be from my perspective regardless of external influence. However, this luster is imposed, meticulously polished to give a superficial shroud of perfection—Golden Boy. Everything he touches is rendered perfect; every word, practiced, perfect. Not of his own will.

But he contains a unique, unprecedented, authentic value to me. Under his fingertips, his touch, I become gold. I forget what I once was, and become a version of myself that is precious, that I can cherish. But he has not rendered me pristine or priceless or perfect—with his golden touch, he has transformed me into *kintsugi*, selflessly repairing shattered bits of me with undeniable, valuable, ethereal portions of himself.

And he does not exhale, or think in, gold. His thoughts and breath are in hues. He breathes and speaks *yellow*. Which is as good as gold in our own eloquent, shared language.

And I recognize the gild he wears as inflicted—I can see he defines it as obtruding; I validate the inner corrosion I see while reminding him of the pure, rare, authentic gold at his core—all visible as I gaze into his eyes.

There is one fault—only one reprehensible flaw—to Midas, and that is that his gift of golden embrace has left

priceless, unbreakable, strengthening, molten pieces of himself installed within me. And the permanence of his magical, repairing touch is unmistakable and daunting in his absence...yet, so cherished.

Eulogy for my Great-Aunt's Annual Christmas Parties and Sparkling, Pineapple Punch

The extravagance of the home grows exponentially in the form of lustrous garlands and velvet ribbons and fairy lights. I stare at my reflection in the swirling, gilded liquid, rainbows refracted in the facets of a crystal bowl as I am transported by the grasping, wistful scents of sharp cinnamon and harsh cranberry.

French perfume wavers off aunts and grandmothers in V-neck poinsettia sweaters with creased smiles painted with cracked, red matte lipstick.

We kids sit at a primary-colored, *Little Tikes* picnic table, drinking *Welch's Sparkling Grape Juice* from Solo cups, paper plates piled with whatever-our-mothers-insisted-we-eat-for-the-right-to-open-gifts.

And it isn't until years after we girls pack away our dresses with velvet tops and plaid skirts and our white stockings that we learn the importance of the stories and the weight of the discussions occurring at the adults' table.

Ode to the Octet Rule

The octet rule states that, when observing "main group elements", atoms tend to form compounds in such a way so that both elements have eight electrons in their valence shells, giving them the same electronic configuration as a noble gas—thus, supplying them with what they attract, what is adequate, what they need. Ensuring they are perfectly, ethereally, selfishly balanced in a process of sacrifice and gain

Twelve-and-a-half months post-November 2018, I am sitting in a sleek, plastic chair molded to the curvature of my spine. I am tapping fur-lined boots beaded with frozen raindrops and remnant pieces of jagged frost against sporadically-colored linoleum tile, the cord of golden tinsel wrapped around my sweater stabbing the nape of my neck. I hold a cluster of highlighters in my hand, meticulously turning a peer's essay into a rainbow of neon stripes. A group of girls surrounds me, a swarm of minced laughter and conversation; a kaleidoscope of embroidered reindeer and Christmas trees against red-and-green, knitted sweaters. Strobing Christmas light earrings hang from one girl's earlobes, assaulting my peripheral vision with their bright-red flash. We all stab plastic utensils through bright yellow pieces of cake fused together by too-sugary, synthetic chocolate frosting, except mine

makes my stomach feel more hollow than full. Laughter expands and implodes against the cinderblock walls of the AP English classroom, brightening it, fizzing like champagne—creating a clear juxtaposition between the warm classroom and the warm classroom and the damp, overcast, gray world outside. Still, I find no comfort or joy here. I am unsettled and dissociated. In fact, I refuse to reconcile with or compromise my joylessness. Because every time someone asks me where I am going for the holidays, or what I am doing, or asks who I am visiting—the words 'nothing' and 'no one' squelch and solidify in my throat like a lump of clay. And I am reminded, painfully, that my family is dwindled to a quarter of the size it once was.

:Congregation:

/ \
myself **Anyone that Remains**

It was November once again when I was home alone, in a barely-restored kitchen, homework splayed across a textured, plastic folding table, shifting variables—when the unseen equation of my life became more complex. The sliding glass door adjacent to the living room rattles under the force of an iron ring paired with an iron fist. My heart jolts with the thunderous impact and I run, past the shrouded windows and into the confined bathroom. I call for help. Only after the situation de-escalates do I learn that the anonymous, threatening barrage of a threatening fist came from a police officer, the authorities visiting my home for the third time in less than a year, this time to conduct an investigation into resurfaced images of tanned young ladies with pale lines in revealing, intimate areas. They are underage.

Their bodies have apparently inhabited our home before. A confiscation of our devices clears our names. The person who acquired and consumed these photos was a visitor in our home, someone with connections to us. My body is consumed with rage beyond comprehension as I swallow. I want to say his name—the one I know as the only plausible perpetrator's name—but it burns like acid on my tongue. Before, binding my cousin, my abuser, to this word felt like philosophical contingency—but now, after this revelation,

I realize this title is truthful, and, as such, I have accumulated the confidence to call him by it: *pedophile*.

.. ..
:men in my family : pedophiles:

My neck cranes back as I stare up at the network of tantalizing tree branches. Vultures swirl in juxtaposition overhead and flitting, fleeting sunlight gilds my face like warm, luminous feathers. Tears are suspended in my eyelashes, and I am attempting to will them into unmoving stone. The roughly-hewn bench scrapes my bare legs, complementing the winter-cracked backs of my hands. I clench my fists, brushing my fingers against the raw, bleeding fissures forming in my knuckles. My therapist, a woman carved out of birch wood with hair woven from kite strings tangled in slender branches stares at me, an ancient beacon of nature that knows more about the ways of time and earth than I ever will, stares at

me, then parts her crinkled lips to say, “*You attract what you are ready for*”

I swallow in searing agony, my throat a Bunsen burner in the corroding December wind. I dampen the crescents of shadows under my eyes with brushstrokes of ancient oxidane. “Then how did I attract this *shit*? How do I deserve it?”

My therapist, a lady that could pull the universe into *her* orbit, responds, “Exactly. You attract what you are *ready for*, not necessarily what you *deserve*.”

And in this monumental statement, the definition resonates within me: you do not always attract a

permanent state of peace and satisfaction. Occasionally, you are faced with what you are capable of conquering.

This, this concept, is more encouraging than my original interpretation.

In disposition, I shed my valence shell, conducting a mass exorcism of self, ridding my body of all anxieties and prior connections (all links and chains and bondage)—contributing solely and firstly to myself, *to become something much more electrifying*. Perfectly aligned and balanced with myself.

.. ..
: me : hope:

. .
assimilated.