The Central Review is a literary arts journal publishing prose, poetry, and visual art by Central Michigan University undergraduate students. It is edited and produced during the fall and spring semesters under the auspices of the Student Media Department.

All submissions are considered in our student writing contest. Upon each publication, exemplary works are awarded top honors within the categories of prose, poetry and visual art.

Poetry Winner: Ren Crudele for “The Day Before Spring Break”
Prose Winner: Emily Bober for “God and Bob Dylan”
Visual Art Winner: Brendan Bowers for “Bot is Hot”

The Central Review editing staff make all final decisions.

Send all correspondence to:
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Send submissions to cmucentralreview@gmail.com for the 2020 Spring Edition
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Dear Readers,

This semester, I’ve been playing with the idea of liminal spaces, or limbo. For those who haven’t had Barco or Berk, a liminal space is one of transition or change. A place that is neither where you have been or where you are going. I couldn’t pay for a better sentiment to sum up the “adolescent” experience. (Even though, I technically did. . .) This time in our lives is such an amazing, mysterious, confusing, and overall scary place to be in. Not yet ready to put away childhood (no one will ever take away my cartoons!) but also not yet prepared for adulthood (taxes are definitely more frightening than Freddy Kruger). So, how does one cope when you are thrown into limbo and also expected to get a degree? I’m thinking this theme might have answered that question.

Grey Areas. What started as a way for Central Review to save a little by skimping on expensive colors turned into what I realized should probably be the catchphrase for our collective generations. Millennial, Gen X, Y, Z, LMNOP and what have you; we are the first generation to grow in this particular social, political, and moral grey area.

In this semester’s submissions, my wonderful team and I encountered some beautiful pieces that highlight all of the different shades of grey. There are some charcoal creations that may grab your heart strings a bit, but there are also some pewter pieces that will make you sigh with relief.

As always, we could not have done this without the help and support of the entire staff at CM Life and all of the amazing poets, writers, and artists who trusted us with their work. We hope that this magazine makes living in the grey just a little more comfortable.

Sincerely,

Ivory Fields

Editor-in-Chief
**MEET THE STAFF**

**Ivory Fields**  
Editor-in-Chief  
Ivory is a senior that’ll be graduating in May 2020 with a degree in English concentrating on Creative Writing. When she’s not helping run Central Review, you can find her in class, working on one of her eternally incomplete novels, or desperately trying to teach her dog to roll over.

**Madison Topolinski**  
Editor  
Madison is a first-year student majoring in Integrative Public Relations with a minor in ASL. Along with being one of the editors for the Central Review, Madison runs the Instagram and Facebook pages. She is also in Thylikos, a household at St. Mary’s. Madison loves writing, reading poetry and, most importantly, tea.

**Kelly Kisell**  
Editor  
As well as being an editor, Kelly is one of the social media team members! She is also an English major with a concentration in Creative Writing. She’ll be graduating this upcoming May, then will be continuing on for one more year here at CMU to finish her masters program.

**Caroline Carpenter**  
Editor  
Her name is Caroline and she is a senior. She loves BROCK-HAMPTON, naps, and her dog Bosco. She’s very excited to be a part of the editing team!
Who is DeJah Love? Well, for starters, she's a junior studying English, Literature, Languages, and Writing with a concentration in Creative Writing. She loves to write romance novels mixed with a bit of something... else. She has four dogs named Kash, Money, Dolla and Lola. One day, Dejah hopes to publish a novel of her own and help others get published as well.

Doesn’t Exist.

Jaclyn Prout
Editor

Jaclyn is a fifth-year student majoring in English Literature, Language, and Writing. She also has a minor in Accounting, certificates in Creative Writing and East Asian Studies, and is studying Japanese! When not working, sleeping, studying, eating, or listening to music, she does a lot of writing and loves reading Science Fiction novels. Jaclyn hopes to work as an editor, and maybe even publish a novel of her own one day!

Ayanna Wyatt
Graphic Designer

Ayanna is a fourth-year student majoring in Graphic Design. In or outside of the classroom, Ayanna is always experimenting with different creative mediums. Some of her favorite hobbies include traveling, exercising, cheerleading, and reading. Her daily motivation is to question herself,

“What are you doing today to become a creative director?”
Who are we?

We’re tidal pools and 24-hour laundromats
and super stores and staircases in the trees
and vernal ponds in deserts and petrified wood temples
and crumbling church basements and the neon of the warehouse
district
and
and
and
all which was ever transitory.

We write on caffeine binges
with diminishing returns
treading gently to not wake
circadian normalists and creatures alike.

Royally, we
make declarations on the Empress of the new age
flit as flies about the corpse of the old guard, spout
reactionary rhetoric to incense the incendiary, as
free radicals are charged with no valence
to hold them justifiably.
All of this a muffled scream for the construction of worlds we have only ever dreamed, which could make this all more tolerable if only they were not masked in the haze of illusion, marred by the terrors of sleep paralysis, monopolized in the fears of small men before us.

The empire scours on, fumbling blindly for what identity there is to a generation.

Nos profectum. We are change.

Shane Guenin once saw a maple leaf fall out of an oak tree and has been writing poetry to cope ever since. A biologist by trade, Shane is a fan of awkwardly large waterbirds, and is slowly working through every red wine sold at Aldi. Shane has yet to publish a poem that doesn’t mention plants, but sticking to your roots can sometimes be the best option.
You look at me
As if I could make it stop.
I cannot.

Some days are better than others.
Some days, you smile when you look at me.
You place the most radiant colors around your eyes.
I love those days.

Other days, I wish I had not seen at all.
You avoid me entirely, your thoughts drowning in denial.
I still see the shades that you did not apply.
You’ve grown to hate the color purple.

Some days, music fills the room -
The kind of music that steals your breath.
You make the ground shake underneath your feet,
And you laugh.

Other days, it is pure silence.
You place yourself in front of me, eyes swollen,
Finding it hard to swallow your own breath.
Neither of us laugh on these days.

Sometimes, we have very bad days,
The panicked frenzy of a faulty alarm or misplaced key.
But the worst days?
The days that he accompanies us.

You never ask my permission,
Sometimes he doesn’t even ask for yours.
I see it all anyways,
That is my curse.
Some days, he is very kind.  
He is sweet and he brings flowers destined to wilt.  
He speaks your name as if it could rupture in his mouth.  
He scares me on these days.

Other days, his words are hard to comprehend.  
He is louder than usual and he stands over you,  
Your skin begging for freedom underneath his grip.  
He is no longer worried about whether or not you break.  
He terrifies me on these days.

Eventually, we are always alone again.  
You stare at me, and I stare back at you.  
You ask me questions I could not possibly answer.  
You know that I can only sit in silence as you watch me,  
Right?

But do you know  
The very worst part of it all?  
You look at me  
As if I could make it stop

I cannot.

Brooke is a second-year student from the Lansing area and is double majoring in English and Psychology, hoping to minor in Substance Abuse Education. She will be graduating in 2021 and hopes to continue within the world of creativity.
Brendan Bowers is an aspiring artist from Michigan pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. His concentration is in studio art with a focus on painting and sculpture; though, his work is constantly expanding and pushing boundaries. His work is inspired by dystopian depictions of society and the natural world. Outside of art, Brendan is an avid hiker and outdoorsman. After obtaining his degree, he hopes to pursue an MFA and continue growing as an artist.
peculiar white hard parts pinky flesh stitched together

and creator thought of us

of lips and tongues

of last tuesday night when

your lips under your nose on your face met mine–

creator said, "yes, mouths are a good idea."

Emily Bober is striving poet with some radical ambitions to publish a book or twelve somewhere down the line. After reading a Billy Collins poem in her high school literature class she knew she had to be a writer thanks Billy. She finds greatest influence from the natural world and the simple joys and tragedies that surround her as well as inspiration from her fellow poets. Currently residing in good old Michigan, she finds herself devouring poetry and constantly growing as a writer. She writes mostly poems but is known to dabble in prose from time to time. An avid plant enthusiast and lover of all things blueberry Emily is hoping to attend an MFA program in the future. She feels that one of the greatest triumphs in life is sharing art with others.
I raised the knocker on the wooden door, but held it in place for a few moments, not releasing it to signify my arrival to the family. I stared at it, a magnificently crafted piece of art in comparison to anything I had ever owned. It appeared as if it was gold, and even though it most likely wasn’t, a small part of me wanted it to be. If it were, it would be the most money I’d held in my entire life. A part of me wanted to savor it.

A part of me also didn’t want to alert the Banes that I was here. I could simply forget the whole thing, walk away, forget any of this had ever come about. I could run away from our little town, never to return. If I took this job, I’d essentially have to do that anyway. At least this way, I could save a part of my soul while doing it.

I pondered it for what felt like a lifetime before I relented, placing the knocker onto the door hard enough to create a loud, echoing sound throughout the house. If I ran, the Banes would sick everyone they could on me, hunting me until they were able to capture and execute me for my abandonment of our agreement. Or, perhaps worse, find someone else to take on this absurd task. My soul could handle a little bread and banishment. I wasn’t so sure it could handle another person taking my place.

I heard a shuffling noise from inside, and soon I was greeted by a small boy, one with mousy brown hair, wide eyes, and a sniffle. Getting down onto a knee, I greeted the child. “Hello, my boy,” I stated, forcing a smile onto my lips. “Are your parents home?”

“Coming,” shouted a woman’s voice. A rush of footstep noises led to the entrance of a young woman, one with her hair hidden in a bonnet and her body covered in a black drew, one I could tell must have cost the woman more than I had seen in my life. “Shoo, Llywelyn, shoo. It’s past your bedtime and the adults must speak.” She turned to me as I stood up and she gave me a forced smile. She looked me up and down, her eyes seeming to ask why on God's green Earth should she let me into her home. “And you, pray tell, are…”

“A friend of yours sent for me, good ma’am,” I replied huskily, attempting to show the proper courtesy to such a woman with as genuine an attempt at a bow as I could muster. “I am here to help you cope with your tragic loss.”

She looked upon me, eyes somewhat confused at first, then suspicious. “You appear too young to be a proper priest...”
A boulder formed in the pit of my stomach. This was the part I dreaded the most; putting a name to my profession. “No, ma’am, I’m not a priest. Nor am I here from the graveyard. I am...I’m the apprentice sin eater.”

Madame Bane’s green eyes widened in shock and horror for a moment, as if I had told her I was Satan himself, before she blinked and shook her head. “My apologies,” she stated, “I’m not used to...your kind coming here.”

***

My mother died birthing me, and I had been six when my father died. One night, I went to sleep and the next morning I awoke to find him dead. That was the day I learned about sin eaters.

I ran to the neighbor as quickly as I could to understand what to do. He was a tall, skinny man, I remember, a frail man, more bone than skin, with thinning hair. I used to think he would break into a thousand shards at the slightest touch. “My father, my father,” I cried to him, “he’s dead!” When he heard that, I expected him to point to our church, but instead he pointed in the opposite direction, to a forest.

“On the edge of the forest,” he said, “lies the hut of the sin eater, Alban. Meet him and tell him what happened, then give him these,” he handed me a dry slice of bread, a pinch of salt, and a half shilling. With that, he left me alone, leaving me nothing but some material goods and directions to my future.

After running with as much youthful adrenaline I could muster, I eventually found his small hut and knocked as fast as I could, crying and begging as loudly as my lungs could manage. “Sir, please,” I bemoaned, “my father’s dead. I have food and I’ll pay for whatever you can do to help me.”

Alban sighed, taking the money from my hands. “Lead the way, child.” His voice was surprisingly calm and wistful for a man who towered over me like a giant. I nodded and turned, wandering slowly in front of him as I showed him to my house. As he enters, he takes note of our small home, the windows letting the bright lights of the outside world seep in. “Have you covered
the windows and mirrors in black cloth?” Alban asked me. I shook my head no, not understanding why he would ask. “Go,” he told me, “and do so. It’s customary to do so in a house with the dead.”

I began to look around my small home for any sort of black cloth to use. After searching and realizing my father didn’t have any, I decided to grab his blanket instead. As I returned to Alban, I saw before me a sight that changed me forever.

He was standing before my father’s body with the salt on my father’s breast, holding the piece of bread I had given him over it. As he did, he said a prayer to himself, one I had never heard before; “I give easement and rest now to thee, dear man. Come not down the lanes or in our meadows. And for thy peace, I pawn my own soul. Amen.”

I stared in awe of the man as he stated these words before he placed the bread into his mouth and chewed, sighing heavily as he did so. He turned to me, calmly.

“What is your name, child?”

“Bran,” I told him, gulping back tears.

He nodded, then rubbed his grey beard with a boney hand. “Hmm. You’re young, but you could still be used in the workhouses…” He said it ominously, and I shuddered at the thought. “Or perhaps..I can take you in.” He raised an eyebrow and walked up to me, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Bran, I could use an apprentice. Someone to carry on my legacy. Would you accept the position?”

It was a question I didn’t expect. But, where else could I turn? I raised my head, wiped off my face on my sleeve, and nodded. Alban took my hand, leading me out of my home and into my new life.

Madame Bane seemed polite enough, I suppose, but her face portrayed how deeply uncomfortable she was. I was a peasant, a pariah, a sin eater, and she was a good, clean, rich Christian woman. I stepped past her scowl as I studied the room, making sure all the windows and mirrors were covered in black as Alban instructed. My eyes wandered, I eventually spotted him; the master of the house, Mr. Bane. A tall, stern looking man with a well-kept, long beard. He stood before a body, one far smaller than his own. It appeared to be a child, a young boy, no older than five years. He looked innocent, pure, untouched by the ravages of the world. His death must have been sudden, unexpected, as most of my clients deaths are. I feel a great weight lift off my shoulder. Perhaps his sins won’t damn me after all.

“Sin eater,” Mr. Bane spat. I jolted myself upright. This isn’t a time for letting my mind wander. I had a job to do.

Madame Bane seemed polite enough, I suppose, but her face portrayed how deeply uncomfortable she was. I was a peasant, a pariah, a sin eater, and she was a good, clean, rich Christian woman. I stepped past her scowl as I studied the room, making sure all the windows and mirrors were covered in black as Alban instructed. My eyes wandered, I eventually spotted him; the master of the house, Mr. Bane. A tall, stern looking man with a well-kept, long beard. He stood before a body, one far smaller than his own. It appeared to be a child, a young boy, no older than five years. He looked innocent, pure, untouched by the ravages of the world. His death must have been sudden, unexpected, as most of my clients deaths are. I feel a great weight lift off my shoulder. Perhaps his sins won’t damn me after all.

“Sin eater,” Mr. Bane spat. I jolted myself upright. This isn’t a time for letting my mind wander. I had a job to do.
woman who’d died in childbirth. He was sitting on an old rickety chair, an empty flask in his hands. He’d used his earnings to buy himself more ale and seemed rather talkative because of this. Glancing up at me and sighing, he wiped away spit a woman had launched at his eye on our way back to our home.

“You’ll be an outcast, a monster. Hell, some might even see you as a Bran. We are the most necessary, most evil thing imaginable to these people; their saviors.”

I continued making our soup for the night, stirring the pot as I turned to him quizzically. “Then…” I sighed and turned back to the pot. “I’m sorry. Forget it.” Years had passed since my father’s death, and in that time, I had followed Alban as he devoured the sins of the deceased. The prayer I once gawked at could be recited dryly by memory. I had seen almost every aspect of the practice a few dozen times over, and yet I had never been allowed to perform a sin eating myself. And I had seen and heard similar rants from him.

“Hm?” Alban asked. “Were you saying something, Bran?”

I sighed. I suppose this was as good a time as any to finally ask the question I’d longed for him to answer all this time. “Why do you do this? Why does anybody? You go out into an ungrateful town, damn yourself with their cheap bread for the meagerest of coins, and all for them to despise our existence?” I was more riled up than I had realized, and I wasn’t slowing down now. “Why? Are we too ignorant for anything else? Are we simply XQDEOHWR ≦QGDQ\WKLQ\HOVHWRGRZLWKRXUOLYHV"$UHZVLPSO\QRQ believers?” I threw the ladle down onto the ground harshly. “Why? Our home is tinier than my childhood room and our food is the epitome of garbage. We have nothing and want for everything? Why? Why would ANYBODY take up this life?” I turned to him, a look of puzzled anger in my eyes.

Alban had remained serene and calm throughout. I saw him nodding, his unkempt beard moved up and down. “I understand, Bran.” He placed down my question I’d longed for him to answer all this time. “Why do you do this? Why does anybody? You go out into an ungrateful town, damn yourself with their cheap bread for the meagerest of coins, and all for them to despise our existence?” I was more riled up than I had realized, and I wasn’t slowing down now. “Why? Are we too ignorant for anything else? Are we simply XQDEOHWR ≦QGDQ\WKLQ\HOVHWRGRZLWKRXUOLYHV"$UHZVLPSO\QRQ believers?” I threw the ladle down onto the ground harshly. “Why? Our home is tinier than my childhood room and our food is the epitome of garbage. We have nothing and want for everything? Why? Why would ANYBODY take up this life?” I turned to him, a look of puzzled anger in my eyes.

Alban had remained serene and calm throughout. I saw him nodding, his unkempt beard moved up and down. “I understand, Bran.” He placed down myself that question every day when I was starting as a sin eater. Perhaps some do this for the easy meal, not even being a true Christian. Perhaps some do it because it’s their only way to survive.” He got up and casually picked up the dropped ladle before scooping it into the pot and sipping some of it thoughtfully. “But me? I do it because it is the noblest of professions.”

He turned to me and handed me the ladle. “We are men who save the very souls of the damned. Knowing the risks, knowing their hatred, knowing their fear, knowing our souls are on the line, we still save the very people who hate us the most. We are seen as more evil the more we devour, yet I view it we take. For we save those who cannot be saved, even by the priests and
bishops, at least not without risking their own livelihood.” He looked up at the ceiling. “I’d like to think there’s a special place in Heaven for men like us. Perhaps, even, dare I say, the left hand of the father? After all, wasn’t Jesus himself a savior of men’s souls?”

I stared at him in disbelief. I’d never thought of it in that way before. Maybe, he had a point.

***

“I hope you’re ready,” Mr. Bane said. His shoulders were held high, his face stern, and his voice gruff. Yet, it also sounded uncomfortable and the look in his blue eyes told me that he has no desire to draw this out. I’d expected this. I’d seen the way others treated Alban enough to know how people felt about us, but a part of me kept repeating what Alban had told me. “Wasn’t Jesus a savior of men’s souls?”

I walked toward the body. I noticed next to the body a cup filled with what appeared to be a wine, perhaps not a particularly fine variant, but it would do. I spotted the child from earlier, Llywelyn, peeking through a bedroom door, as if he was about to witness a ritual of great importance, a private event for the eyes of adults only. I gave a sly smile in his direction, and his eyes widened before he shut the door quietly.

I turned to the corpse again and held out a hand for the two items I needed most; salt and bread. Mr. Bane handed me the salt first, which I placed onto the child’s breast. Grabbing the bread tenderly, I placed that over the salt. I began to mutter the prayer of a sin eater;

“I give easement and rest now to thee, dear man. Come not down the lanes or in our meadows. And for thy peace, I pawn my own soul. Amen.”

From there, I raised the now sin-covered bread to my lips and bite, tearing it apart with my teeth before swallowing the child’s misdeeds and evils. I then placed the rest into my mouth and swallowed, finishing the damnation of my soul.

The family handed me a half-shilling and a flask of ale. “Thank you, kind sir.” They attempt to sound sincere, but I know they simply desire me out of their home. I granted them their desire and left solemnly. But not before spotting Llywelyn peaking out at me again in wonder.

I took the flask and sipped it tenderly. This was my first gulp as a practicing sin eater. My soul should’ve felt tainted, heavy, yet, a part of me felt lighter. Like first seeing the sun after living in a dark cave. The boy’s soul was saved because I took it upon myself to take his sins. I felt almost as if I had finally done something with my life. Something good.

I thought of Alban and his words, what he had taught me about sin eating. Thinking of Llywelyn, I wondered if watching me with his brother was as intense and fascinating to him as it was to me when I was a child. I wondered what would happen if, one day, I was to eat the sins of his parents. This child more than likely had extended family to live with, but
what if he didn’t? What if this boy needed a guardian, a mentor? Would he want to become a sin eater? Would I receive my own apprentice one day? As I wandered through the quiet, dark town, I slowly entered the foliage of the dense forest, but not before looking back. I knew they hated me. I knew they despised me. I was a sinner. And yet, a smile crossed my lips as I downed the last of my ale and flipped the coin into the air.

I am sin eater and one day, I shall sit at the left-hand of my Father.
you used to take her for walks
in Gallup Park

she loved the swings
& you loved to watch her

little blonde curls
peonies from the garden in her bike basket

I wonder if you knew back then

how the feeling of your calloused hands
would burrow into her eleven-year-old brain

how in the safety of blanket forts & flashlights
she would warn her sister about being alone with you

how her parents would scold her for telling lies
about family friends

or how her daughter
forty years later

will celebrate the worms
that lick your flowerless grave
A house that’s just a little bit too clean
Beds that are always made
Several empty bottles of beer and wine
Walls that appear to trap anyone who comes near

A mother sitting upright, wide awake at 4 in the morning
An anxious dog who paces in the kitchen all night
A weary father, who feels older than he should,
and just wants to rest
Several phones always nearby, just in case

The youngest upstairs, hiding in her room,
  unable to understand
The eldest moved away,
  focusing her thoughts on anything else
Empty pill bottles strewn around the house,
  like christmas lights
Air so thick breathing almost becomes impossible

The middle child gone,
  maybe in jail, or the hospital, or perfectly fine
Kisses the needles left, seen visibly on her arms
Something eating away at her mind and her soul
Empty promises of a better future,
  swirl in circles with the heroin
  in her black and blue veins.
BOTTLED
by Sage Tischer

If you put a corkscrew down my throat
and twisted away
discover
a waterfall of suppressed upset

the more that went down
the more that’d come up
I’d finally be able to tell you how I feel

If my larynx was drenched in liquor
My tongue in tequila
If my vocal cords were laced with vodka
My words could drip from their place
At the tip of my tongue

Liquidate the mental block
I’ll bottle it up again tomorrow
A MURDER OF INNOCENCE
by Meghan Dyer

girls with brown pigtails
and cotton dresses with buttons
down the front
and boys with overalls
and ratty, white t-shirts
underneath
in fields with golden stalks
reaching for the
blue, blue sky.

little girls and little boys
always laying,
playing, splaying,
trembling hands
stretching out.
all the while they
are smudging freckles
like the mud spots on
cotton dresses with [un]buttons
down the front
and ratty, white t-shirts
[trampled] underneath.
and those golden stalks
shuddering,
like old barn shutters
on a windy day.

and the murder
in the cornfields,
all swathed in black,
circles and circles and circles,
waiting for the final kill.

Meghan is a fourth-year student who is currently studying English and History for a BS in Secondary Education and she will be completing her student teaching net semester yay Outside of class she orks as a consultant in the Writing Center as a content developer for the Support and as the head coach of Mount Pleasant’s color guard program Her hobbies include buying far too many fssow lexmrk Fipkmer e iw jvsq MLST and being the best gerbil mom
The Day Before Spring Break
by Ren Creudele

But it wasn’t a school shooting…
Sure there were guns and people died, but,
one of them were students so it’s fine.

Shaken awake by a semi-familiar face,
there’s an active shooter
Parkland just happened, was there another one sooner?
Confusion and disbelief, hot tears sprint
down my cheeks, salt leaks into my mouth.
On the phone with my mom, there’s two people dead?!
Screaming, friends’ faces wet when they find that
I’m okay. I’m alive.
Overslept in a lover’s bed
Where were you?
I was confused and I didn’t even know why.
A dresser in front of the door, all our blinds closed,
news channels splashing across the TV, helicopter vision
of our campus. Starving, no food,
but can’t leave the room.

Calm down, it wasn’t a school shooting.
It was a controlled incident.
Don’t play the victim card, you
were fine, why were you scared?
It wasn’t a school shooting…

Ren is a full-time student activist
and creator who prides herself on
making life an adventure in and
of itself. Ren loves Supernatural,
music festivals supporting local
businesses and laughing. You can
always find her in a small coffee
shop editing vlogs or crowd surfing
to her favorite band, All Time Low.
You stand there, separate but one.
When I see you, when I think about you,
I am consumed with different shades of red.

You reach your hand out to me
Pulling back when I reach too.
Your emotions are like the distance between us.

As you travel farther and farther away,
the shades of red I feel change;
the shade becomes deeper with anger
but lighter with the anticipation of love.

You’re supposed to be here.
I long for the touch of your uniform against my skin
as I hug you, welcoming you home.
I wish I could see you,
but it’s as if you’re never coming home.

Your name appears on my phone’s screen,
and my mind screams for the solitude I find in you,
I fight the urge to reply,
fights which are always lost.
I answer you.

The red notification ignites
The good memories like a bad drug.
My brain is practically screaming at my heart
“No, you can’t respond.”

I answer you.

It is almost as if the color red is tainted with the smell of your cologne.

All the shades of red suddenly wash over me,
the color of love and lust
but also anger and hurt.
a building pressure
to crumple my head like a soda can submerged.
pain with deep roots, growing
intertwining with red veins,
pupils burning in the light, a cavernous hole.
a scorched open wound, vulnerable.
mind’s temple, both under siege,
and relentless pitchforks spark with fire,
hurled with such force they stick upright in flesh,
searing all organic matter away.
my hands are sewn with thread
to pull fingers up to eyes in a dangerous game. palms
compress
the sides of my head
aiming to pop it open, if only releasing
Athena could end it. digits scratch eyes,
and dig in, pulling down skin, scraping away
at orbits, and only minimal relief gained
until a snagged nail pries the mushy ball
to rip out veins and roots, dripping from
a clenched fist.
I walked back to our place, a fire beneath my feet and a pack of Marlboro Menthol cigarettes in my pocket. She told me her mom found out that she was gay her junior year of high school and I don’t remember how this happened. After arguing with her mom on the matter, she decided to drive to a local elementary school park for the night and smoke a single cigarette. In the night, she perched on the peeling swings that left the smell of rust in your hands after swaying for too long. She ended up unintentionally falling asleep in the back of her car, her mind clouded by the shitty smoke and gut punch of strict Catholic mothers. I found this all to be quite the new age tragedy, and charming.

She was laying on her bed now, a few years later, with the stars around her, fake plastic stars that still transported her somewhere far from the cinder block apartment room we shared. She was wearing running shorts in defiance of December. Her legs were still bronze despite everyone’s tans having long since faded from the summer, radiating a warm vanilla scented heat. After living with her for the duration of the school year, I was well acquainted with her odd nature. I often observed her singing to herself while working, as if to lull the nothingness of forced words on pages of homework assignments into a musical trance. One of her legs was bent over the other, bouncing like the tail of an antagonistic cat, and she occasionally twisted her ankle to create small loops in the air. The hazy lights and the repetitive motion of her leg made me forget my intentions walking into the room.

I stood for a few moments and watched her. She didn’t notice me until I spoke. “Hey,” was all I could muster, and all I had to. She looked up from her laptop screen and met my gaze with a soft smile, melting me.
“Hello.” She accompanied her greeting with a mischievous smile. I could just make out the color of her eyes as they rose above her thick rimmed glasses, emulating the sliver of new day’s rising sun. Her glasses hung on her face until she slowly placed them on top of a mountain of books that acted as a nightstand.

“Uh, I thought we could go for a drive.” I reached into the back of my Levi’s and pulled out the teal box to show her, rather than say wanna go for a smoke like some hard-worked old man. I just liked being with her, and I wanted to share a singular and imprinting moment of rebellion. She raised her eyebrows and nodded, like we were participating in urgent business. She got up from her bed, arising with her mane of golden curly hair and shrugged on some pants and a coat she kept slouched over her bed post.

Soon enough, I was clutching the steering wheel tightly as I focused on finding the park. It had the kind of setting I was going for, not too scary for a brisk December night but dark enough so the orange ends of cigarettes would be the primary source of color in the night. I turned up the only radio station my car would pick up and the sounds of The Cranberries, “Tomorrow,” played in the otherwise quiet car. I could see her in the corner of my eye, mouthing the words of the song and releasing them in a muddled whisper, as blurred as the lights of the buildings around us. She even went so far as to mouth the words in a way that would produce a mediocre Irish accent. I’m sure she knew I looked at her, and I didn’t try to hide anything. When I looked away from her, she reached over, placing her hand at the base of my neck and squeezed delicately. She wanted to remind me that she was still there. We knew one another so we didn’t have to fill up space with exchanged words unless they meant something.

A few weeks back we were sitting on the makeshift couch in our living room, her tearing her split ends into individual golden threads. My mind began to wander and as I felt myself slipping into my thoughts, she pushed a pillow that was on my lap to the edge of the couch. I glanced at her with an inquiring expression, which she ignored and proceeded to lay down on my lap, her forehead and her chin nestled between my things and her arm loosely wrapped around my waist to protect her from falling. An overwhelming heat prickled my body, and I froze. I froze because I didn’t know if she was comfortable and if the sheen of sweat I had acquired while walking back and forth between buildings was bothering her. She was warm and smelled like chamomile and grass and cheap tea packets.
“What are you doing?” I rushed out, still stuck in place despite the heat that had overtaken every muscle in my body.

“Laying down. You smell nice.” She turned her head closer to the front of my stomach and I could feel the tip of her nose brush the fabric of my shirt. I didn’t know whether I should move to give her more space, but she pressed into me further.

“Are you comfortable?”

She made that noise, the one where it’s an exhale of breath before you smile at a stupid question. “Yes.”

“Do you need me to move?”

“No. Just let me sleep.”

So I continued to stay still. Her eyes remained closed and she took deep, cool breaths I could feel tickle the inside of my thighs. Everything began to burn and engulf me into beautiful panic. Maybe to her this was nothing unusual, I didn’t know. After that she started coming into our room only in a towel after she would shower. Her face was always flushed from the water, and she didn’t care to fully dry off and let drops of water fall and cascade from her hair to her toes. I watched this journey of a single drop to the puddle she collected on the floor. Lamplight and the black night outside made the water look like drops of honey on her body. The streaks accentuated the curves of her legs and how muscular and strong they were, yet still long and seemingly unending. I couldn’t help but wonder what her freshly clean skin felt like to touch while it was still steamed.

Returning back to the present, I found the park and pulled into a spot hidden enough from the flowing traffic of the road. She stood in the stillness of night with an illuminating presence. I locked the doors of my car and made my way up to the roof and sat down. For a moment she gazed up at me like I was some alien being that had plopped down on top of a car nearby just to observe a night on earth. I reached out a hand, which she took and slid next to me on top of the world. I realized I didn’t think this through and pulled out the cigarettes from the back of my pocket, dented from my carelessness. Because of the way I had damaged the box she found it safe enough to assume that I didn’t know how to smoke them either. She dragged her hand across my palm and nonchalantly took the box.

“Do you have a lighter?”

“Yeah, I do.” I dug out a chipped blue lighter and handed it to her. She pushed it away. “Light for me.”

Already clammy from the situation, I attempted to spark a flame, and by the second attempt a small orange flicker emerged and lit up the closeness of our faces. My hand moved towards her face; I was overthinking all the possible errors I could have made that would
have sent her golden locks into a mass of fiery embers. She quickly clasped her hand on mine and pulled it to the end of her cigarette, wedged between the dusty rose color of her lips. She leaned back and took a drag, and with a sigh sent a cloud of childhood dreams and ambitions into the lost black ink of the night sky. I took out my own and lit it up and breathed in deeply. Warmth instantly filled my mouth and throat and sent my body into the relaxation of a new sensation.

Whenever my brother and I were sick as little kids, my dad would rub Vick’s VapoRub all over our heads and feet, sending us into the deepest and purest kind of sleep fueled by the warmth of the menthol seeping into our fevered skin. Every part of me felt relaxed and headed toward a deep slumber, in which I would awaken with fresh eyes. I thought of my Dad, who was probably working right now. I felt this same warmth wrapped in his arms. Maybe I was disappointing him, or maybe I was doing the same things he did while he was young and foolish.

A courteous silence fell over the two of us as we comforted ourselves in our poison. The uneasiness and nervousness I had felt leading up to this moment dwindled inside my stomach and grew smaller with every exhale. When she was ready, I knew she would speak to me. In moments like these, I was grateful for my quiet nature and preference to listen.

“Thank you for taking me here. I needed this, and you knew that,” she took the cigarette from her mouth, “didn’t you?”

I faced her defining presence, and she looked at me like she had discovered some sort of trick. Nodding, I turned away once again to avoid deeper thought. I didn’t like the hope I felt at this news, I didn’t like any of the things I felt. I didn’t want to like them. I saw her holding a poem between her thumb and her eye and softly rubbing the paper this morning. She had rubbed the words off until the paper became silky. Something was tormenting her with the lack of fire that was behind her eyes that morning.

She let smoke linger out of her mouth this time like sensual dragon’s breath.

“I just thought it would be nice to get away for a little while myself.” Me, trying to pin my devotion towards her as devotion towards myself. This didn’t work, as she laughed and shook her head. My cigarette was already getting too small for safety, so I grabbed another from the box and took this time looking away from her to collect myself. She slid across the metal of the roof and
pressed her shoulder against mine. The way she curved her spine made me think she was about to rest her head on my shoulder, and I turned towards her instead, slight annoyance crossing her face. She scrunched the tip of her nose and flicked the butt of her cigarette into the parking lot.

A sudden panic filled my lungs that I had made a mistake, moved too fast and seemed too confident in my gesture. I regretted this; I regretted this moment of destruction.

“Don’t worry, this is nice, and we’re friends, aren’t we?” I didn’t like the word but that’s where we were. I nodded.

“This is the shit that friends do, I guess.” I didn’t bother hiding some disappointment and enveloped my lungs with carcinogens and the burn of rejection. Perhaps my hope was more apparent than I thought it was and I had let the idea of this moment leading to something seep through puffs of smoke. She took the time to crush it with these few words. But at the same time, what was I expecting, to repair a heart that wasn’t even really broken? She was the one that broke hearts, and it was instead the blanket of guilt she felt that sent her into a depressed state.

And just like that, I fell into myself. I fell into the feeling of being too stupid to pursue some unreal love that I had brewed in my mind. This was just a moment, and I had seen what I had wanted, rather than what was actually there. My gaze fixated on the ground below me, a black void calling me to fall into it and go to sleep.

“What’s on your mind?” She jerked her head toward my ear. I wanted to cringe and move away.

“Nothing, I’m just thinking.” My face tightened and I looked away from her piercing gaze. She didn’t bother to believe this. She softly blew the smoke across my cheek and leaned in to whisper in my ear, the warmth of the cloud caressing the inside of my hair.

“Everything,” she began, bending her neck so the opening of her lips lined up with the opening of my ear, “only goes so far before it’s gone.” She exhaled completely and into the blue of the night; it vanished. If I had even dared to move my hand to touch hers, to turn my face and breach the distance of smoke between us, I could have breathed her in. I stayed where I was. For once I could not read her, if the same thoughts were crossing her mind as they were crossing mine, that they may have just casually walked in between our heads. She stayed there too for a few seconds longer before pulling back only to put us face to face with the width of a penny between us. I heard myself break.
"You know," I began. I didn’t make the gap any larger. A foreign feeling of bravery came over me. "You can’t keep doing this to people. I don’t want to be a part of it." Her eyes sparkled at my anger, and the hot broth in my stomach turned into excitement. Her grin taunted and fueled me. "You’re taunting me, aren’t you? And you let me fall for it. You’re messing with me." I made the assumption that I was even interesting enough to taunt. She somehow made the already small distance between us even smaller. My heart beat at the walls of my chest, a physiological warning siren.

"Do something," she said, a harshness and hastiness in her voice I hadn’t heard before. Do something! But I could just focus on the length of her eyelashes, the pulsating heat of her breath, and the way I felt too close in an empty parking lot above the rest of the world around us. I wanted to push her away from me and I wanted to press my lips on to hers and make her feel the sharp edges of my teeth. I wanted her to feel as tortured and stupid as I did.

"Do something." She pressed on, and how at this moment we continued to move closer I can’t explain. She was wearing something peppermint on her mouth and I wanted to taste it. I wanted to give her the satisfaction in her cat and mouse game. Everything burned: my eyes, my mouth, my chest, and I wanted it to stop. The slightest vibration of my body could have sent our spirits into a thousand sparks and above the stars.

And I chose to extinguish the fire.

I grabbed her shoulders and pushed her away. Shock came over her face, and mine, mirroring one another. This space made me realize how badly I needed air, and I gasped for a few moments. She was suffocating every sense of me and became lethal. I had allowed myself to drink too much of her. I hoped that my face could speak enough to apologize to her. Her eyes glossed over. My gaze overcame her and even the slightest touch would have sent tears rolling down her face. I like to think it was the smoke that got to her eyes but once again doubt my hope. I went to speak; I wasn’t sure what to say. She must have noticed the barrier between my thoughts and my mouth, and broke, smiling sadly. Maybe me not acting saved something but prevented something else. I wasn’t sure, but she seemed sad.

"We should go," a shakiness overcoming her voice. She was so bold, so confident and so sure, and in that moment, she collapsed into someone else. At once we ripped each other a part down the side of the car and she turned away from me, breaking the palpable tension in the air.

On the drive back she didn’t sing along to any songs, and I didn’t expect her to. She turned and looked out the window and
wrote a word I have long forgotten, but maybe it was important. As we walked across the parking lot, she disappeared before me. I took the time to look at the sky which was now drowning the stars in dark clouds.

Before falling asleep that night I rolled over to look at her from my bed across the room. The light that was able to creep through the curtains illuminated her state. She was content in the crumpled mess of her blankets and dared to smile at me in her slumber. Dew crept under her lashes. Everything in me wanted to close the space between us.

And with the same matched strength, I willed myself not to.
Oh, happy are the days to be out and about basking in the sun, unafraid of what life has in store.

These days are few and far between.

The bed is warm and inviting, protection from the horrors of the world. Why go out, when the cave offers safety, Sanity?

But is it sanity, to stay in a recluse, and not accomplish anything? To be stuck in a fortress of solitude, crying out for someone to rescue you,

but no one can hear your cry, until it is spoken aloud and that is the hardest part of all; words often unable to describe the hurricane in your mind.

Somehow, someone does hear the wails: the one dearest to your heart. But no matter, the tornado won’t stop its cycle of destruction, cat and mouse, capture and release

The only hope that remains is the love and understanding of those around you, to see the storm for what it is and accept you.

But love can only keep the storm at bay a while forever a problem. Life continues its endless spiral as hope fades and grows.
“The only thing worse than a boy who hates you: a boy that loves you” – Markus Zusak, 7K H % R R N 7K L H I

Dark grey clouds rolled in from the East,
Blanketing the sky in total darkness
And hiding the full moon away
From the eyes looking up towards it.

The eyes connect to a lanky body,
One that belongs to a man short of 21 years,
Who stands at the end of a wooden pier,
Barefoot and collecting splinters in his sole.

A single drop of rain dives from the cloud,
Landing on the boy’s black and blue nose
Before it rolls down his hollowed cheek,
Mixing with the dried blood that is still there.

The rest of the raindrops follow their brothers lead,
Clinging to his white shirt that is ripped at the right sleeve.
The shirt attaches to the pale, freckled chest,
Encasing the boy in a warm, wet hug.

Oh, how he wished to have a different hug.
One where arms with a full tattoo sleeve
Wrap around you and land on your back
And lift you as your legs give a little kick.
But this current hug is wrong,
Wrong like the brother who texted him slurs.
Wrong like the father who left bruises and cuts.
Wrong like the mother who packed his suitcase for him,
For how wrong it was to love a man with a dragon tattoo.

But it wasn’t wrong to carefully put on a mask,
One where his smile caused crinkles around his eyes
And he would throw his head backwards
to emphasize how “funny” he found his classmates jokes to be.

All the wrongs led to the wooden pier
At the far-right end of the dimly lit beach,
Where the tides rise in height every passing minute
And slam the pier in time with the thunder in the distance.

The boy breathes in deeply,
Ignoring how his heart beats at his colored rib cage
And walks over the tattered ledge,
Thinking how wrong it was he never learned to swim.
MILES OF SKY
by Sage Fischer

I think he said he likes the sky.
I wonder what that means
Aiming for an escape you know you can’t get
Or is it the idea
Of finding value
in the darkness.

A darkened soul
Finding refuge
In a smearing of nothingness
And perhaps a scattered light.

A world of voids
On the outside instead of in.

I think he said he likes the sky,
It was something about space.
I wonder what that means

But when it gets dark
His face lights up

He can find the little lights in a big darkness
To him, they were enough
I think I need that

The sky hasn’t looked the same since

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SAGE IS AN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION MAJOR WHO ENJOYS READING AND SPENDING TIME WITH HER CAT. IN A PERFECT WORLD, HER FUTURE COULD INCLUDE TEACHING A KINDERGARTEN CLASS AND WRITING A POETRY BOOK ON THE SIDE. THIS IS HER SECOND TIME BEING PUBLISHED IN THE CENTRAL REVIEW.
Madison Alexander is a sophomore double majoring in Photojournalism and Women and Gender Studies with a certificate in Creative Writing. She enjoys finding joy in the little things, like house plants and spending time with loved ones. Her favorite ways to pass the time include reading, taking photos, and writing poetry or creative fiction. She has a cat named Penelope that she often calls "pretty girl." This is her first time submitting to Central Review and is very thankful for the opportunity.

THE REMAINS OF THEN
by Madison Alexander
Lucent moonlight filters through my window, peers through lace curtains, spills onto scuffed floors and alights on my skin like a bumblebee pausing in flight.

In apogee, our brief dalliance can only end in the petulant, poignant, burning of our eclectic melancholy as fleeting as the first bloom of glossy tulips in spring.

Moonlight waltzes languidly across my bed sheets, beckoning me across the floor to the window where my eyes are greeted by the moon’s dim radiance, rising over the shingled rooftop of my neighbor’s house.

She beckons me closer, inviting me to dance. I acquiesce, arabesque, and turn. Pausing in the center of my room, I look out the window, and smile.

I wish to petrify this moment, preserve the fragile beams of light as a mother wishes to keep her children small. The moon and I might continue our affair, but my alarm will come to life soon, blaring a premade ring that will shock the sleep from my system.

I walk, limbs heavy, back across the floor, eyes lingering on the moon as she rises higher. We cannot continue our midnight revels. We are only bumblebees, never ceasing to pause in our errant flight.
INSECT’S LIFE
by Grace Long
CAR CAB
CHRYSANTHEMUMS

by Shane Guenin

in faraway places no more exotic than mustard fields and fen marshes of Michigan,
we shout what we know to be real,
hoping only
to hear our words returned.

we revel.
raucously, as residuals
of some forgotten resonance
on a retrograde radio -

we were an anthropomorphist analogy,
revising our own renaissance, or
at least conferring
on how we are
different than before.

are we simple as chemical switchboards?
are we lab rats, the milky way a maze?

the buzzing bulb fades the stars
and so goes out; the air is smoked
you wipe the glass and
condensation pools over Mars.

we wait on what might move the world,
we hope our drunken notes might
one day be the spark.

we want to be heroes.
more than that
we want to have been.

Shane Guenin once saw a maple leaf fall out of an oak tree and has been writing poetry to cope ever since. A biologist by trade, Shane is also an advocate for voter efficacy in Generation Z, a fan of awkwardly large waterbirds, and is slowly working through every red wine sold at Aldi. Shane has yet to publish a poem that doesn’t mention plants but sticking to your roots can sometimes be the best option.
Shane Guenin once saw a maple leaf fall out of an oak tree and has been writing poetry to cope ever since. A biologist by trade, Shane is also an advocate for voter efficacy in Generation Z, a fan of awkwardly large water birds, and is slowly working through every red wine sold at Aldi. Shane has yet to publish a poem that doesn't mention plants, but sticking to your roots can sometimes be the best option.
There are very few things I think one needs to know about me. But amongst them is my undeniably pessimistic outlook on life in the Midwest, my complete obsession with YooHoo: Chocolate Drink, and the fact that my name, Zett, came from nowhere. I’ve never been keen on staying in the Midwest, which is why I didn’t. As soon as I got into a school in Maine, I moved there. And after I graduated, I got a job in Montana, and so I moved there.

I once had a conversation with a lady that was staying at the local rotating homeless shelter while I volunteered late at night. We talked over a game of Liverpool Rummy and yellow lemonade. She told me I needed a character check, that I was far too negative for a girl of my freedom. She told me about being trapped, about having a husband beat you and kids that need you and no way to escape it all. She told me that psych wards and halfway houses do not make good homes. She told me that I had no right to hate the Midwest, but I still do.

Maine is a place unlike the Midwest, which is probably why I love it. Cape Cod houses painted white and weird pastels line the coast, fishing boats with chipped exteriors and muddy footprints set lobster traps in the bay. The air is always chilled there and the smells of day-dead fish waft far into the shore. I never had to pretend there; I didn’t question my existence. I was content. But content could only get me so far. It was like God was whispering in my ear, “expect more.” That’s why when I saw an ad for a hardware store clerk in Montana, I applied. Montana had to have more than Maine. It certainly had more than Michigan.

I grew up in a family that had standards I could never meet. My sisters never want to leave Michigan. They say that there’s too many memories. Their memories have replaced mine, making me feel minute and dispensable. They remember friends and blonde ringlets and recess. I remember walking to school in my teal Sketchers tennis shoes and faded overalls with a hole in the left knee. I remember my long, brown hair. I remember the wind. Where my sisters keep their memories buried in their yards in Michigan, I keep mine in my shirt pocket.

Walt Whitman once wrote, “missing me one place search another.” I loved Walt Whitman because he’s honest most of the time. I left my mom a note telling her to read “Song of Myself.” Maybe then she’d find me. I like
the randomness and change my mother despised. It takes a lot for me to be content. I’m content in Montana, on this road. This road that has a church on the left-hand-side and a McDonald’s on the right. The Church of God—as if there could only be one, it’s His church. God’s church. I think they should rename the church.

I first read Walt Whitman after Foley gave me his copy of Leaves of Grass. I remember when I met Foley—I was a sophomore in high school and he would have been a senior if he wasn’t homeschooled. I met him in the parchment store I love in Grand Rapids. I was buying paper to write a cynical letter to my history teacher about why he was in fact very wrong about Native Americans, and Foley was buying paper to write down his poetry.

His ponytail-hair and purple pants intrigued me. We’ve been friends since. Foley says that I should be in poetry—that I’m far too peculiar to simply exist in an earthly realm.

“You must be art!” he’d tell me, smiling his crooked smile.

I spent days after I received the gift reading Leaves of Grass, over and over again, dog-earring my favorite pieces. “Starting from Paumanok” made me realize I could be art, just like Foley had said. It also made me realize I loved him. Not in an I-want-to-kiss-your-face way, but instead I just wanted to be in his poetry. I wanted him to write about me.

I’ve been driving for a few hours now. It’s hot in Montana, and dry. I don’t think I’ve seen a place more beautiful than Montana. It feels like I’m driving in slow-motion, like the mountains passing beside me are pausing to say hello. My old green Jeep drives bumpily on these roads, and my passenger window is stuck open. In the car, I smell dirt, like earth and wet grass. It hasn’t been washed since May. Somewhere in the back, a hornet is buzzing—trapped in the stale heat of a sealed window frame.

As dusk settles in, it becomes obvious that the wind has missed me. It’s known for visiting its lovers, but tonight it chose me—and a violent waltz to sway with my long, tangled mess of hair. I can barely see the tangerine sun hanging in the sky, dipping behind the rocks and walls ahead of me, but I prefer the navy of night. I glance in my rearview mirror, into nothingness. I meet my own solemn stare—patterns of freckles asking the night sky to match its stars to my paint-by-number face. I stare for a while longer than I should, realizing that I’m blander than I thought. I’m as average as a person can get. I can feel the knots in my stomach asking me to eat. I had a large black coffee for dinner.

As I drive, I think of J. Alfred Prufrock and the time fleeting. I think of lost love—of finding God. Montana is where time stands still. Where Michelangelo can judge at last—his David and Pietà are stone symbols of a powerful God. Looking around I see Michelangelo’s beginnings surrounding me in granite walls and mountain passes. The lyrics on the radio fade to static and the voices disappear; I do not think that they will sing to me anymore.
This road makes me realize how little I am. I see God everywhere I turn. His huge presence in this land and my own tiny self, just a visitor—a small number—in years of handiwork and art. I’ve lived in this place for three months now, just a summer job. I wonder if after living here I’ll be able to see God in buildings and corn. I don’t think I will.

I pass a lady looking for a ride—she is old, skinny, and dirty. For a second I see my mom in her. My mother, a worn-out raggedy woman who rid herself of any hope. She spent my entire childhood pretending to be okay. She’d have me steal Valium from Mr. Baker’s medicine cabinet on Thursdays when I babysat. When they caught me, I’d lie and say the dog ate them. They’d pump the dog’s stomach, and my mom would tell me, “You weren’t careful enough.” I want to stop and help the lady, I really do, but my mom wasn’t a person who could be helped.

One September, my mom was wearing blue jeans and a yellow t-shirt. She said to me, “Zett, do yourself a favor and eat more—you’re too skinny. And here’s black eyeliner,” she said, “you need that too.”

“You could use a doctor,” I said back sharply. I watched her lift her cigarette to her lips and inhaled deeply. She did it three more times.

“Well, you could use an attitude adjustment. I’m doing just fine.”

“Yeah, just fine.”

“Here sweetie, take the eyeliner and five dollars. Go get yourself a Slurpee or something. You still like those?” she asked, taking another deep, smoky breath and handed me the bill. That was the last conversation we had. When I got back from 7-11, she was dead, four small Valium in her hand.

My sisters lived with my dad, and their pretty mom—a mom with blonde hair and shiny new breasts to match. My mom didn’t look like her. My mom needed me. I search everywhere I go for a reason she lost herself. I hope that maybe in the rocks or rivers I’ll find a memory I’ve forgotten—a time when my mom was shiny and not so broken. I haven’t found one yet. I fear that I will never find it, that my mom had always been broken and died being broken. I stopped trying to fix her brokenness a long time ago.

Sometimes I wish Foley could see these mountains, he’d love them. He wrote me letters all summer long. And I wrote him back. I lost my favorite one. He wrote to me about falling in the river and it made me laugh and I left it in a coffee shop in Cut Bank. Maybe someone else will read it and it will make them laugh too. I close my eyes and picture his crooked smile, and I can feel the Jeep pull to the left. I sit for a moment—the unknown and God directing where I go. I’m okay with it.

A gust of longing wind kisses my cheek, blowing the Bob Dylan poster I snagged for 50 cents up against my rear window. Bob was young in that snapshot and black and white. He was standing tall and sturdy and prepared to share his voice with the quiet souls of Montana.

Bob is the most famous person that’s ever been in this car, I think.
He keeps staring at me as I drive down this road, his greyscale body trapping the hornet. It’s my 21st birthday today, so I whisper a little tune of “Happy Birthday” to myself. I remember Alan telling me that it’s illegal to sing it out loud because it’s copyrighted. The buzz of the hornet seems to go along with the annoying tune of my song. Bob smiles and sings with me. Soon the radio static matches my pitch and our whole car is a symphony of “Happy Birthday,” with Bob’s deep voice and the hornet’s buzz and my off-key hum and the radio static.

What a beautiful song to sleep to. I hear my mother’s off-tune voice singing to me on my eighth birthday. I see her scrawny face and bulging eyes. I remember unwrapping a wood-handled mirror, into which I’d stare, wondering where my face had gone. I remember the cheesy potatoes and saying grace before the meal. I remember my scratchy sheets I was wrapped in that night. I feel the edge of the road on my bald tires. I feel my eyes drift away. I see it—God in the faces of the sculptures. God in the stars. God in my heavy insides. I feel nothing, and then everything at once.

I’m almost back now—back to Tim Horton’s on every corner and rows of corn and venison being a staple food. I don’t like venison. Sometimes I still hear my mother’s voice reading me a bedtime story. The stories usually ended with tears or screaming. God’s eyes in Ursa Minor tell me to expect more than I was ever given. After all, Foley’s a person who craves change in the way I do. I think about Foley, about his letter I lost. I think about having to tell him, and I feel bad—maybe I won’t have to. God and Bob Dylan tell me to keep my eyes on the road until everything becomes the same. And so I do.