



**DEAL JAM**  
**MAGAZINE**

DECEMBER 2023

**DEAL JAM LITERARY MAGAZINE # 1**  
**DECEMBER 2023**

*Front cover by Eriana Ktistakis*  
*“Grow towards the Sun, 2022”*

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*You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated.  
In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can  
know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still  
come out of it*

– Maya Angelou

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Today is the day that I remind you to fail. It's the day I remind you that anything worth doing is worth failing at, and that if you're not failing, you're not casting your aspirations far enough. As writers, our biggest barrier to doing what we love is fear of failure— fear that whatever we put on the page will be mediocre when we're aiming for something profound. So we sit at our laptops and stare at a blank screen and a blinking mouse and our emotions bubble up inside us, and we wait. We wait for inspiration. We wait for perfection. We wait for something that is 'publishable'. And that is the biggest mistake we can make.

As National Novel Writing Month comes to a close and this edition finds itself in the world for the first time, I am reminded of the words of NaNoWriMo's founder, Chris Baty: "the quickest, easiest way to produce something beautiful and lasting is to risk making something horribly crappy." And while it is often difficult to risk putting something 'crappy' on the page, or even to allow that to be an option, it is the only way you'll have a chance at success.

This very first edition of Deal Jam Magazine is nicknamed "The Rejects Edition," because nearly every piece within these pages has been rejected by someone or something: writing workshops, other literary magazines, our own minds. But these are pieces that deserve to be read, and they are pieces you deserve to read. These fourteen pieces of fiction and poetry tell tales of love and loss and life and death and everything in between. They delve into every facet of what it means to be human, and they do it well.

So to anyone reading this, give yourself the gift of imperfection. Give yourself the gift of failure. Take risks. Fail. And fail better. Because you never know what might happen.

Eriana Ktistakis, EIC

December 2023





# FICTION

# HIGH POINT, LOW POINT

by

Lexi Salisbury

In typical fashion, I was running late.

The wind picked up, moving the tree branches above my head and causing a few leaves to cascade to the ground at my feet as I hurried from my car down the path. There is a brief period that we have labeled “Perfect Picnic Weather.” It’s right at the end of summer when fall is hanging in the touch of chill in the air, waiting for the slightest breeze to push it over the precipice and descend upon us. It’s not so hot as to make the potato salad sweat, but not so cold that your fingers are too numb to fold up the blanket when you finish up. The orange and red leaves on the ground told me that my Perfect Picnic Weather was beginning to fade to fall, but I had no time to grieve this inevitable change.

Something lucky about Dad and I is that, no matter what, we always manage to arrive at the same time. I can be fifteen minutes late, and he will show up alongside me as if we’d planned it. However, in an infuriating “I’m the older sister, so *of course* along with my put-together life, big girl job, and mortgage, I’m never late” sort of move, Alice always arrives at twelve o’clock. She was leaning against a nearby tree, texting, just as I’d expected.

I stooped to lay the blanket out on the ground, and Dad suddenly appeared, taking his habitual spot in the top left corner just as I was grabbing my dishes from the tote I’d lugged from the car.

Alice brings sandwiches, napkins, silverware, and fruit. I bring drinks, plates, and a salad of my choosing. This week it happened to be pasta salad. From the turned down corners of Alice's lips, I was guessing she was less than enthused by this choice.

"Do you wanna start this week?" I asked as I passed her a water.

Her cell phone buzzed, momentarily distracting me. She put it on silent and slipped it into her bag.

"Hm...my low point this week was probably finding my first gray hair. And my high point...oh, that's definitely gotta be that I'm pregnant."

The bite of my sandwich I had just taken fell from my gaping mouth to the blanket in between us. We both glanced down at it and then back up at each other which seemed to be the delay my brain needed to start working again because I then immediately tackled her with a bear hug.

Naturally, next came my barrage of questions. "Oh my God, congratulations!! Does Jake know? When did you find out? Have you told Mom? How far along are you? Is pasta salad okay for you to be eating? When should we have the baby shower? Can I host it? Oh my God!"

She laughed, pushing me off of her. I glanced over at Dad to see how he was taking the news that he was about to be a grandpa, but he just simply smiled at us, waiting for me to finish pelting her with questions if I had to guess. I plopped back down in my spot, not so patiently waiting for her answers, practically thrumming with excitement.

"Calm down, you dork. Of course Jake knows! One of the perks of being the husband and father is that he does get to know first," she laughed again. "Obviously, I want you to host the shower, but I think we might be getting a little ahead of ourselves with that one. By my closest estimation, I think I'm seven weeks? I haven't told Mom yet because I didn't even realize

anything was up until I threw up every morning this week, so if everybody could please keep this on the DL for right now, I'd really appreciate it."

Given that Mom and Dad had said maybe six words to each other in the decade since their divorce, it seemed like maybe this last comment was pointed at me.

"I'm going to see her next week anyways, so I'll tell her then," she continued. "If I had to guess, I'd say that pasta salad is okay, but if the baby comes out with a tail, I will blame you. On that note, I hate to bail on you two, but that was Jake texting me, telling me that he managed to find me an appointment for our ultrasound today, so is it okay if I leave a little early?"

I know everyone says that pregnant women glow and that Alice wasn't very far along yet, but she looked so happy in that moment that I can only describe her as the personification of effervescence.

"Of course you can! I'm just so glad we got to see you!"

With some hurried packing of her food, a quick hug for me, and a kiss on the cheek for Dad, she was off, seemingly bouncing her way back to her car.

"And then there were two," I commented around a mouthful of strawberry.

Dad stayed silent still, but his eyes looked alive to me, and I knew that he must be thinking about what his future grandchild would look like.

A few minutes passed in silence as we picked at the last of our meal. The tree Alice had been leaning on swayed in the increasing wind, and the sun hid its face behind a bank of clouds. I watched as an elderly couple sank gratefully onto a bench several yards from us. Someone was burning something somewhere, and the smell of smoke gave me a sudden craving for s'mores. Though the day was undoubtedly still good, Alice infuses every interaction with such energy that I always feel her absence a little stronger than most.

“High point,” I began as if the conversation had never trailed off, “was when I got the promotion at work. I’m officially the head of the History Department at Riverside High School.”

I kept my eyes averted, focusing on packing up the food. I wasn’t sure how he’d take this news. I’d hoped he’d be proud, but I didn’t want him to think I did it just because he once had. I was already coming up with arguments in my head, that I’m my own person and just because he imparted the love of his subject to me doesn’t mean that I’m more of a follower than a leader, but, in the end, I realized how silly I was being.

“Low point, of course, is always you, Dad,” I said, using the headstone to hoist myself to my feet.

My fingers felt a little stiff with cold as I folded up the blanket, and I knew, as I grabbed the picture of him I bring to prop up while we eat, that the weather had decidedly turned to fall, and I would need to let go.

## HOUSEKEEPING

*by*

Eriana Ktistakis

You can learn a lot about someone from the life they leave behind. From all the parts and pieces they don't take with them as they rush out the front door to some imagined haven or inevitable defeat. The things they don't deem worthy enough to hastily shove into a crumpled old duffel bag, and everything they falsely assume to be replaceable. You see a snapshot of them in this moment— the moment they *have* to leave— in all of its panic or heartbreak or anger, because there is never any other way.

I stand in the entranceway of an old colonial home, a heavy weight sitting on my shoulders. Confronted with the smell of old cigar smoke and a citrusy musk, I breathe in this moment, in all of its finality, in all its freedom. Cold light pours in through the cracks of half-shuttered windows, falling on wooden floorboards in thin, angled strips. Every room opens itself up to me from here— the living room to my left, the kitchen to the right, and the stairs straight ahead. They beckon me into these spaces. They beg me to leave my mark.

I love it when there's no rush. When I get to see everything left behind— everything that will eventually crumble and die and be forgotten about. Everything that will be built over and replaced. I can't always control that, of course— Normally the job needs to be quick and all you can remember is a small safe left half open, a passport lost in hurry, or cold metal casings scattered about. But today I have all the time in the world. So here I am, grabbing poorly hidden

keys from underneath prickly welcome mats or from inside fake rocks or behind a potted plant. Heavy doors shut behind me, one after the other, and I go exploring.

I wander through these open spaces, into the living room where untuned piano keys resound under my twiddling fingers and a faded doll with red hair lays strewn out on the rug with her hands at 11 and 3. And then towards the bookcase, watching as dark, polished shoes pass in front of a plastic princess mirror leaned up against the charcoal couch, each step calculated and curious. Dozens of books sit on shelves between slender ceramic vases and miniature animal figurines, an amalgamation of years and passions and cozy childhood memories. Novels read so many times that the spines crack and the pages yellow, and others that just exist, pristine and untouched and unreal— a mask put up for the outside world. I run my fingers along titles and authors-- Jane Austen's *Emma*, Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*. Love. Loss. Starting over.

I move into the kitchen next, each heavy step a near-perfect prediction of silence or creaks. Diffused light and deep shadows envelop every part of the room— the wet mug sitting upside down on a paper towel next to the sink, the crumbs from a PB&J collecting mold on a monkey-shaped plate on the table. My footsteps patter through this space where alphabet magnets lose their stick on a metal fridge and the leftovers of a microwave meal from the night before sit tossed on top of an overflowing trash can. I trace the to-do list on the fridge with my free hand, the rounded letters slanted sharply to the left, the inventory dated months ago. All these tasks left undone, countless moments snuffed out of existence before they even had a chance to breathe. Each one pulls at something different inside of me— every part that doesn't want to remember and each one that does, all fighting for a place at the forefront of my mind. But I can't let them in. I swipe my hand against the cold metal, sending plastic letters and crayon

portraits crashing to the ground, recoiling as they fall into a puddle that splashes back up at the hem of my dark coveralls. This isn't like me. I have a job to do. So I take a breath, and I move on.

I like finding the person under the mask, tearing it all away until you get to what's raw underneath. The seven bottles of prescription pills in the medicine cabinet of a crumbling farmhouse or the dishes that pile high in abandoned log cabins. The awkward second rug or floor lamp hiding dark stains on shag carpets and the dress that still wears its tags, saved for an occasion that will never come. The diaries, the photo albums, even the blades taped under tables—it doesn't matter how many times you've seen it. It doesn't even matter that it's a job—a simple exchange of money and service. When you do it like this, it always feels new. A fresh life that has opened itself up in all of its glory and pain and defeat, knowing that what happens next is entirely up to me. There's no feeling quite like it.

Past the long kitchen and up the stairs, I let my fingers graze every whitewashed beam of the wooden banister, even the one snapped in half and never fixed. I take in the way the splinters prick my skin, the knowledge that this task will never have to be completed. And then into a quaint bathroom at the top of the landing, opening a window that overlooks the backyard. It's an overgrown blur of brittle, beige grass interrupted only by a rusting swing set and a lonely seesaw whose blue and red paint chip with every storm and gust of wind. I've never worked at a house with a playground before. I glance over a damp toothbrush to prescriptions long expired and the strange, gold-framed image of a man whose hollow eyes hold a deep and broken mourning. It's an expression that grabs hold of me, then forces me to look away, sitting in the lingering fear that he looked away, too. I turn towards the shower tiles instead, white and gleaming, freshly wet with a familiar, dark smell.



And then onto the bedroom. A breathing contradiction, a fight for dominance that will soon end, as all things eventually must. The left side of the bed is an entanglement of cotton sheets and cream blankets, and a pair of dark socks peeking out from under them. And then there's the right side, made up tightly, the pillows in order, the night stand devoid of all signs of life but a retainer case and a metal lamp. Half the closet sits covered in crumpled jeans and wrinkled shirts, the other half neatly folded and colour coded. Photos in silver frames stare up at me from a dark chest of drawers— a smiling woman with curly, blonde hair, her kind, squinted eyes decorated by lines that trace down to her cheeks; a man with a long buzz cut and a dark mole hidden under large glasses, his thin lips almost smiling; a sweet, rosy-cheeked little girl in a sunflower shirt and pigtails, beaming up at the person behind the camera. Beaming up at me.

It's around this time when that weight really starts to lift off of me— when I separate myself from my heavy shadow and leave these rooms behind. Another quick glance at the bathroom whose tiles are slick and shining, a peek at clothes newly darkened and stained. And a single sorrowful hesitation at a room with a closed door, sparkly crooked letters in green and yellow spelling out LILY. A room I leave shut. A space I don't need to tarnish with my presence. A room that can keep its memories as they were.

Back down the stairs, the creaky main floor no longer smells of cologne and cigars but of something heavier, more familiar and intoxicating. Pouring one last gaze into the heart of the piano, at all its strings and hammers and tuning pins, I feel even lighter still. And through the kitchen one last time, past the alphabet soup on the floor and the stick-figure family holding hands in a puddle, until the sloshing at my side fades into nothingness.

I open the front door once more, the fresh air hitting me like a bright, frosty wave. I stand in the doorway, in this swirling and invigorating mix of scents and feelings, in this glorious

moment between action and inaction, between past and purification. And with one more deep breath, pulling in every part of this home's soon-to-be forgotten life deep into my lungs, I flip open the small metal lid in my hand, feel the flint wheel turn under my thumb, and toss the lighter into the house.

I watch as the trail of gasoline ignites from a single spark, as the house erupts into flames that leap and dance as they grow through the kitchen and slither up the dark banister, into every hobby that was abandoned and every memory that will be buried. Eating away at blackening pages of novels and crumb-filled couch cushions, lighting the doll's yarn hair on fire like miniature wicks, and climbing up the piano's legs to burst from its core in an expression so violent and liberating I thought each string might snap and fly. I watch as the fire consumes the kitchen and slides the last magnets down the fridge, pulling them into this beautiful, growing inferno— as stick figures perish and glasses shatter and plates melt and everything joins this sea of flames. Stairs darken and crumble, animal figurines relaxing into puddles as the pink plastic around the princess mirror drips and shifts and contorts. It twists until I can see my face in it, my thin lips and the flickering red gleam in the reflection of my glasses, the dark mark under my hollow eyes.

I move back and stand at a distance now, taking in every part of this great symphony, each pillowing plume as it bursts out of splintering windows and through the pitched roof, bleeding into the sky and painting it shades of red and orange and black. I watch as the past and everything in it is erased, and me, the conductor of it all. Each mesmerizing sway and crackle and blaze were my creation and a reflection of the dozens of houses that came before. Each person I freed from their past and each home I cleansed from its memories.

I breathe in the sweet scent of burning wood and bathe in the hot glow of this crisp, cold evening, watching with a racing heart until the sound of sirens approaches and flashing red lights peek through dark, patchy trees. Until men in thick, tan suits and dark helmets pour out of trucks and douse my work. But they won't change anything. It's been too long. There is nothing left to preserve, nothing to build from or lean on. Everything worth remembering has been reduced to ashes. And now, just like all those that came before, I can be set free.

## THE WITCH'S SPIRAL

*By*

Anna W

You will begin with a circle as you always have, draw it around you in a wide ring. Speak the words towards each cardinal direction as you call upon them, begin in the East and end in the North. Facing the North, you shall begin your incantation. Your words will flow, and your movements will not hesitate. They are carved into your being, like prayers etched in stone. You will begin with a circle, as it always begins.

You will place yourself in the center of your circle and take your rosemary to the southern flame and cleanse your space. You will waft the smoke about the space, the scent of the rosemary burning will send a wave of ease splashing over you. You shall call upon the fifth element drawing the five points into your palm. You will feel the hairs on your arms rise and the room will grow colder with each passing hour. You will feel the smoke hanging in the air, growing unbeknownst to the ever-present smell of burning rosemary, you always do.

You will feel each step, each word, each movement, the way you have since your first incantation. Since that mystical day, fruitful with candlelight and ink blotched hands. You will speak the words laced with honeyed charms or rusted nails and alchemical curses. You will hold yourself high, speaking to the spirit within the very air from which you draw breath, and call into existence a manipulation, a manifestation, a migration of the energy thriving within you. The

pattern repeats with only a difference of intentions, herbs, stones, and words, but the pattern continues.

With each spell a stone is laid, and they circle round and round. A spell done well is a well laid stone. You will lay each stone till a tower is established, a tower with no windows or doors, tall and guarded. You will build the tower into the sky, till the clouds become your binding tar, gluing the stones to the sky. The tower will stand as your guard and you will live in its shadow shrouding you in solace, in solitude, in sanctity. A tower reaching into the night sky stands alone, a song of sorcery plays for the stars. You will sing for the stars, lay stones for them to land on, and their glow will refract on the tower walls. You will continue the pattern, you will lay the stones, or else risk the stonework crumbling. You will not set foot on grass and dirt again; not when the stars need your song. You will lay the stones and circle them high.

You will spin the threads of the universe until a tapestry of your intention is crafted and perfected. You will wear them like patches, collecting and carrying, you will hang your tapestries on the high walls until each stone is covered in splashing colors and charms. The tower walls are high enough to hang a thousand tapestries, to store every herb and spice, to display your precious stones and charms. But the tower walls are built with words and intentions, how long will they hold? How long will you hold?

When the emerald vase falls to the floorboards of its own accord you will pay no heed for it; the spirits are rambunctious again. You will simply clean up the ceramic shards and sprinkle powdered cinnamon near the shelf. When your southern flame will not light, you will coax it with sweet words and hold its neighbor close to its wick till the stubborn thing will grow warm with a creeping flame. When you begin to trip over your words, your hands beginning to shake,

you will stare. You will inhale a trembling breath and focus your attention to steadying your hands. You will feel the habitual need to continue your incantation, but your words have failed. The words will replay in your mind, the way they should have gone, the way you should have spoken them, had you not spilled them across the floor. Your eyes will not have left your shaking hands, you will stare until the tension snaps like a cord.

You may throw the words to the wind, simply playing out the pattern till the process is complete. You may sink into the floorboards, marking the borders of your circle around you. Noting how the shield you have raised becomes a cage of your own dear creation, locking in your mistaken words scattered about you. You may walk from the stage, leaving your broken song hanging in the air. The scene left to play out by the volition of the five elements. Or you may try again to pick up the broken words and stitch them back together, you may try to coax them back till the weight of them turns molten and you can try to shape them like a glass figurine. You may try many things, but the pattern will be broken, the tapestries will begin to unravel, the tower will fall stone by stone.

When the stonework has crumbled, and you are left standing on the solid ground once again, you must begin with a circle. You will sort through the stones and see which ones can be used again, the ones that will be better used for garden walls, and the ones that will be ground back down into sand and pebbles. You will lay new stones, bigger stones that will bear more weight. You will lay the new stones in a circle, that is how it always begins.

The thought might cross your mind to add a door this time, it might be useful to collect water from the river nearby or stock up on fresh herbs occasionally. You will look at the stone walls now at your shins and think it might be nice to have a few windows for the plants. When

the walls are twice your height, you will think of how tiring it is to continue to lay the stones so high, especially when the stones are heavier than last time, you will think of other ways to use the stones, you will think of the garden walls with the old stones, perhaps a firepit for the summer solstice. You will start a garden of herbs and edible flowers. You will think of many uses for the stones, laying them from your doorway to the garden as stepping stones, you may paint them with sigils and runes, and the occasional flower.

When paw marks appear in the garden you will leave out a water dish. When a blue feather is left at the lowest window you will keep your eyes out for whiskers or shed claws. And when a tabby cat is found outside the catmint bush in your garden you will be pleasantly surprised. You will talk to the tabby as if the creature understands every word, you will sing songs and not be offended when the tabby seems to wince at your high notes. You will continue laying stones, but the tower walls will not surpass the trees this time. You will look into getting a roof, and a large window for stargazing.

You will continue your incantation, but the tower walls will remain a little lower. You will continue drawing circles and the rosemary smoke will escape through the windows. You will spend more time with your tapestries, finding joy in the weaving, still hanging them from the walls, but you will leave space for other things. Things will change, you will continue the incantation, but you will change the pattern, you will adapt.

## LIKE CHICKEN

*by*

Jade Josie

Wet steam rolled over Colton's face as he lifted the curved lid from the pot, the familiar scent of flour and eggs flooding his senses. He recalled the night before, his face slick with sweat, Angie writhing beneath him.

I gotta call her. After dinner, after dinner. After whatever's about to happen.

"Laid off." Acidic laughter bubbled from his father's chest. "Right. They probably just realized how goddamn worthless you are. They lied, just like they did to me! Worthless or stupid, really, which one are you?" His father rasped against his back, making the hairs on Colton's neck stand at attention.

"I don't know, Dad." Colton responded as he let out a slow breath he had been strangling.

Through squinted eyes and a curled lip, "You know what your problem is, Colt? You are just like your mother..." Shit, here it is. Mm...yes, uh huh, Dad. Just go to bed. Doesn't he ever get tired of his own voice? The drone of his father's lecture faded in the background, now just as bothersome as the low buzz of the refrigerator. Colton placed a chicken breast in the hot center of the pan. Tiny comets of oil soared across the edge of the pan just to fall flat on the stovetop.

"...lazy."

At least I'll have some free time now, she said something about stars, maybe we can go somewhere where we can actually see some. Still can't believe it. Must not be that big of a fuck-up if I can get her.



*Snap, snap.*

Colton's shoulders jolted in surprise; a splash of hot oil had jumped from the pan to bite the back of Colton's hand from the sudden movement.

*Snap, snap.*

The sound of fingers snapping in his ear. Colton shook off his fog and focused on his father's face.

"Hey, retard! Are you even listening?" His father slapped him on the back of the head. He then took another swig from a glass bottle with the label half picked off.

Colton turned around with his shoulders raised. "Yes! Whatever, I'm listening. I'm trying to make dinner here." Not like you'd know anything about cooking. Dickhead. Jesus, go pass out on the couch already.

Colton turned back around to avoid the usual look of disdain printed on his father's face. He flipped the chicken breast over with a pair of tongs, satisfied with the browned flesh. His father's voice grew cruel as the excited sizzle of oil grew louder.

"...waste of space!"

Colton tossed the white dishrag from his shoulder onto the counter. Beside it, a glow from the screen of his phone, a message from Angie.

Hah, guess she can't stay away. Well, look at me, I'm a catch. Cleaning, cooking, fuck, I do it all, Angie can wife me up for all I care.

A shove to his shoulder and Colton caught himself on the counter. His father was an arm's length away, pointing a fat finger in his face.

"I'm trying my best!" His glossy eyes shuddered as he spoke. "You wanna be a loser, Colt?" Wide, wild eyes poured into each other, waiting for someone to give.

Left unattended, the oil ate at the edges of the chicken, leaving blackened flesh along the way. It spat, and spat, but was ignored. Colton threw both his hands against his father's chest to push him back.

“Man, get away from me! You're drunk, you old bastard.” Colton spat at his father over his shoulder, his lip curled at what he's become. Goddammit, he made me burn the chicken. It was like he could already taste the burnt chips of chicken crunching against his teeth, he grimaced. I guess I could split it, cut all the black off. Back turned to his father, he plated the chicken, letting his disappointment sink in.

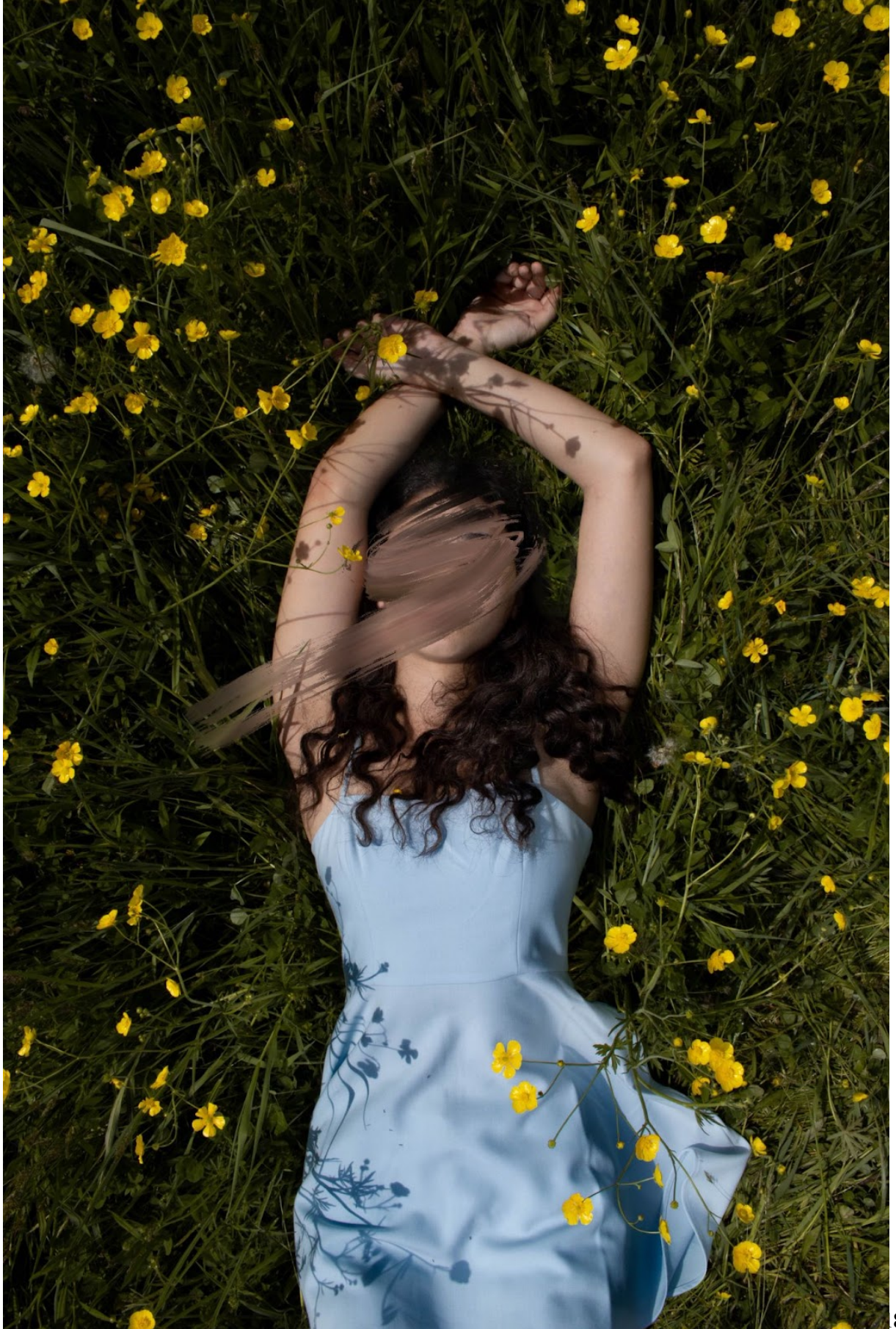
His father grabbed him by the back of the neck and hissed, “You don't talk to me like that!” Thumb-sized purple bruises were already forming on the sides of his neck, reminding Colton of his childhood.

“Get off me!” Colton turned and yelled. He slapped his hand away, and so father and son wrestled against one another.

His father withdrew and charged at his son with violence written in his glassy eyes. A tangled pair of flesh, a clatter, a splash...

boiling oil ate away at more clean flesh.

The smell, like chicken.



# POETRY

IT'S SUNDAY AND I'M LISTENING TO MY JONI CD

*By*

Milla Troyer-Reed

If I were to crash my car  
blood would cover the cash  
in my small breast pocket.

It was full!

The moon.

My pocket.

And yellow.

Not yellow

like daffodils

or salted butter.

Yellow like the solitary

streetlamps that hangover

highways in ohio at 1 a.m.

to make you feel sorry that

there's syrup on your jeans.

When I looked down  
at my hands  
they were red.

I didn't even have to wait  
for the night to fall—  
my hands were already red!

## APOCALYPSE LITE

*By*

Devin Reeves

all these tiny graveyards in dying towns  
places where the steel mill closed down

crosses and teddy bears on the roadside  
places where someone you don't know died

show me yours, and I'll show you mine.

make yours a stretch of highway that isn't haunted  
by something or another, and  
I'll make mine the living wall I built  
from the stretch of skin over my own two hands.

**EWE & ME**

AFTER MAG GABBERT

*by*

Jade Josie

Because I've wandered from any man that doesn't watch me close enough—I'm always the one that got away.

Because the Lord is my shepherd, but I haven't heard from him in a while; & I don't think I really want to.

Because I'd rather bleed than think things through.

Because I'm so small strangers look right over my head, ramming on above me like I'm not there.

Because my face flushes every time a joke doesn't land, & I have to think about it for weeks.

Because my mother hated my thick wooly hair until it started to wave.

Because I rind the skin from my lips & use my blood like chapstick.



Because my dad's nickname for me is "dum-dum."

Because I always thought punching tags in my ears would make me look older.

Because church pews remind me of bus seats. We bleat hymns as one big bus heading to beastly hell, where they keep all the other animals.

Because with the number of bruises blotting my body, people joke that someone's hitting me, but really, my tissue just tears so easy.

Because I only learned to whistle by sucking in wind, following a bird's song (following still).

Because if I had a dollar for every time I've had fleas, I would have two dollars, & it's weird that it happened twice, but maybe my blood is just too hard to pass up.

Because in between what is & what could be, I sit pasty white with tangled legs, stuck in the fence.

Because in my revelation, worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power & wisdom & might.

Because I need to bathe in the slaughter, but I'm scared of what comes after.

## OSCAR BAIT

*By*

Devin Reeves

*Int. NIGHT – A close up shot. The entire world is blood and brick and gouged open fists.*

I am not so much breaking the fourth wall as  
shredding my fingers against it.

*When we pan away, we see*

Me. I'm there, and I'm turning to the camera with a wink.  
I am reminding you, always, that this is still a love story.

*Our protagonist, a thin and desperate girl, 20s, still somehow tragically beautiful.*

You've noticed, now, how much weight I've lost for this role.  
I've lost weight for every successive role I've ever played.  
I'm waiting for the day I'm cast as nothing and no one.  
It's an excellent role; it's a biopic.

*She lifts a ruined hand*

I'm hoping, here, that the critics will understand the conviction I have for the part.  
Full method. No body doubles. My real hand is really shredded.  
The real nails really ripped away, really revealing all that ugliness beneath.

In a film, there can only be real blood and fake tears.

The trick is to convince everyone watching that it's the other way around.

*And feels her own face in the darkness.*

And you're still watching, aren't you?

You're still convinced?

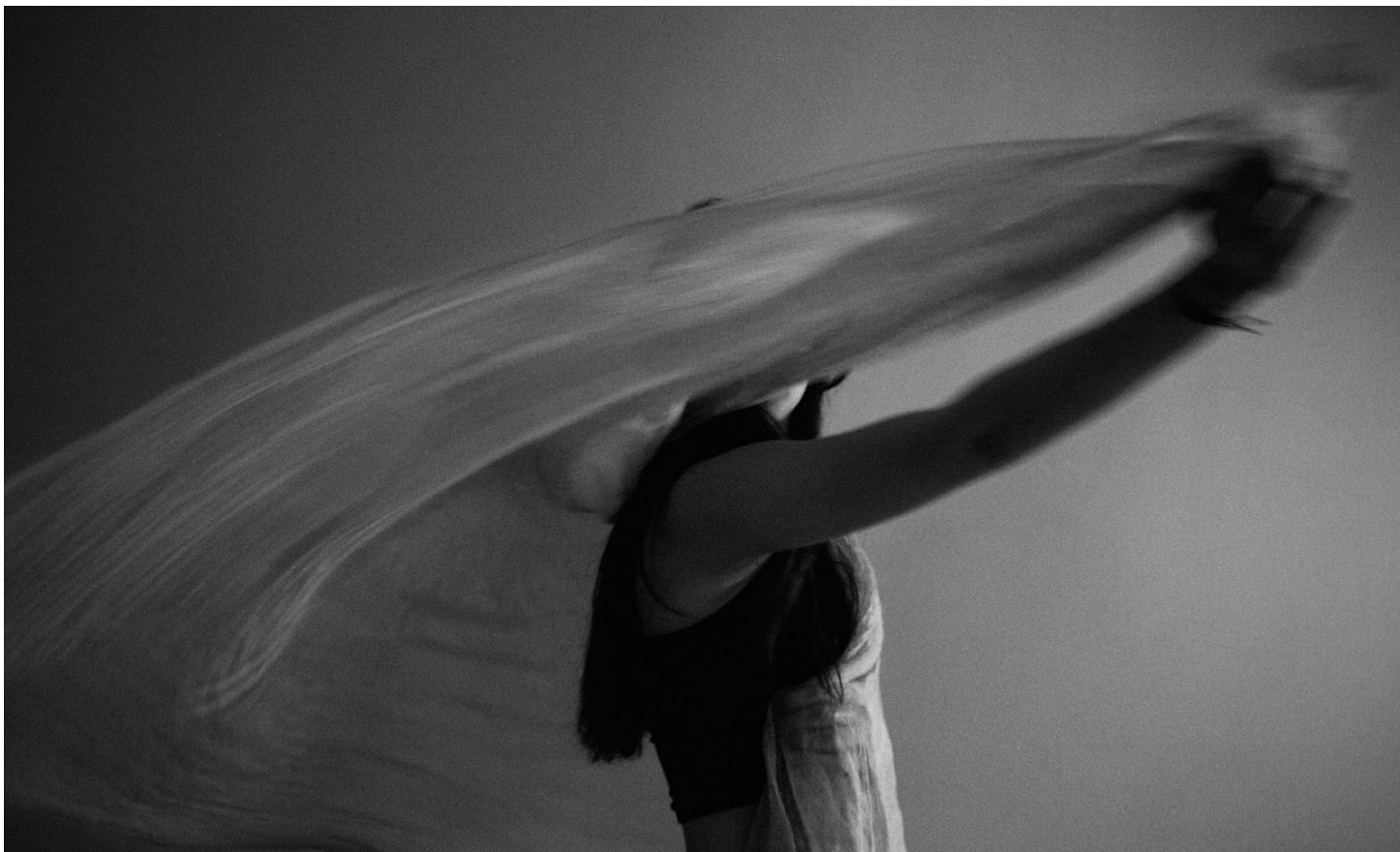
If you're bored, we can jump to the part when—

Well. Actually,

*The girl is grinning. We linger long enough to see the blood in her teeth. Finally, she speaks:*

GIRL

I don't want to spoil the ending.





## DO TEENAGE GIRLS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?

*By*

Devin Reeves

Thirteen-year-old Devin living as an imitation jellyfish.

All long and gangly limbs

with all the wrong nerve impulses.

Surfing through middle school

and swimming on the internet.

Sixteen-year-old Devin telling 90s Leo DiCaprio,

*Photoshop me like one of your French girls, baby.*

Turn me all airbrushed and blurry.

Give me magazine straight lines

and bone white teeth.

Nineteen-year-old Devin knowing what her father will say

about her shattered phone screen.

Secretly going to get it replaced,

thinking about the digital ship of Theseus,

and feeling astonished when he doesn't notice.

Twenty-one-year-old Devin forgets sometimes to exist.

The sky surges and crackles whenever she's under it.

At the bar, she meets this asshole older guy.

He says, *You think you're owed the world, little girl?*

*Just cuz you live in it?*

She replies,

*You call this living?*

## LAGUNA BEACH

*By*

Milla Troyer-Reed

At first my shoes were on my feet.  
The geometric pattern of my sole  
  
imprinted in a line.

The park was closed—flooding.  
So we decided to go to the beach  
  
even though it was cloudy. We ate  
the salad you had made for us on  
  
black rocks.

They were covered in moss and  
things alive and probably dead also.

I could tell you cared about my answers  
to your questions and you made sure

I had enough almonds in my bowl.



## SANCTUARY

*by*

Addie White

If the pines were sentinels, their sap sticky ichor,  
then the fireflies would be oil lamps, flickering  
in the windows, to guide us home from war

Soft needle beds would quiet each step as we stumble  
hand in hand through the midnight haze,  
and look for an answer that has eluded us for decades

If each fern, a seraph with ever looking eyes  
were to unfurl, wishing to share their wisdom,  
blanketing the earth as we lean into each other...

Then moss-covered valleys would welcome us with open arms,  
to tend our wounds, to heal our losses,  
knowing what we have done and forgiving us anyway

And if the sun was a pyre, burning the fog away,  
we could finally say we were alive



# IN THE RAIN THAT DRIPS IN SYLLABLES

*by*

Eriana Ktistakis

i want to find myself  
in the rain,  
in the pitter patter  
that scatters  
over tin roofs  
like a baby's first steps

i want to find myself  
in soft summer showers  
that sit in silent drops  
on silken webs and flowers  
and fill the air  
with kaleidoscopes of colour

i want to dance in the rain  
in merciful midnights  
under rows of dotted lights  
that turn the street orange and red and blue.

i want to dance  
until it all blends together,  
until it melts at my touch

i want my clothes  
to cling to my skin  
and my hair to drip  
and my steps to splash in puddles  
that throw beads of water at my knees

i want to find myself  
in the gentle sprinkles  
and torrential downpours,  
to discover every facet of myself  
in the fall

i want to embrace it  
run in it  
scream in it  
drown in it,  
and wonder  
if this is what it means  
to be alive

## **MIRROR**

*By*

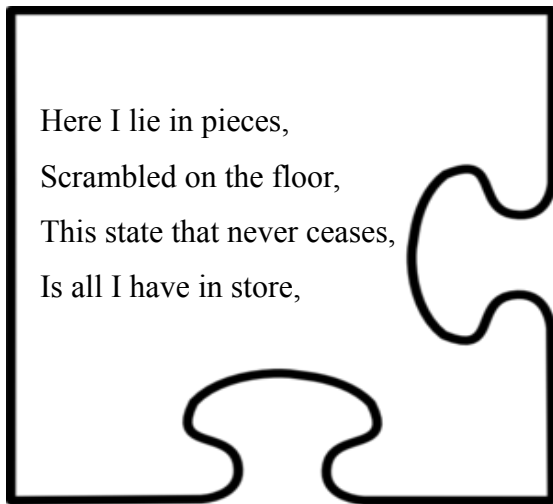
Milla Troyer-Reed

I sat in front of mine the other day  
and took my shirt off because I wanted  
to see myself the way you did.

## LOOKING FOR A PUZZLE-SOLVER

*by*

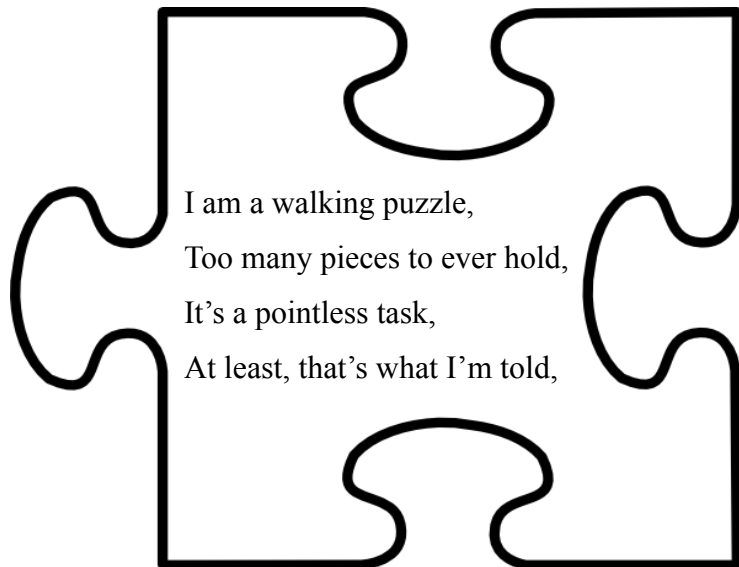
Anna W



Here I lie in pieces,  
Scrambled on the floor,  
This state that never ceases,  
Is all I have in store,

Don't try to put me back together,  
It's a pointless task,  
I'll simply crumble again,  
So this is all I ask,

You can build the border,  
And sort what's left of me,  
Count all of their edges,  
And you'll begin to see,

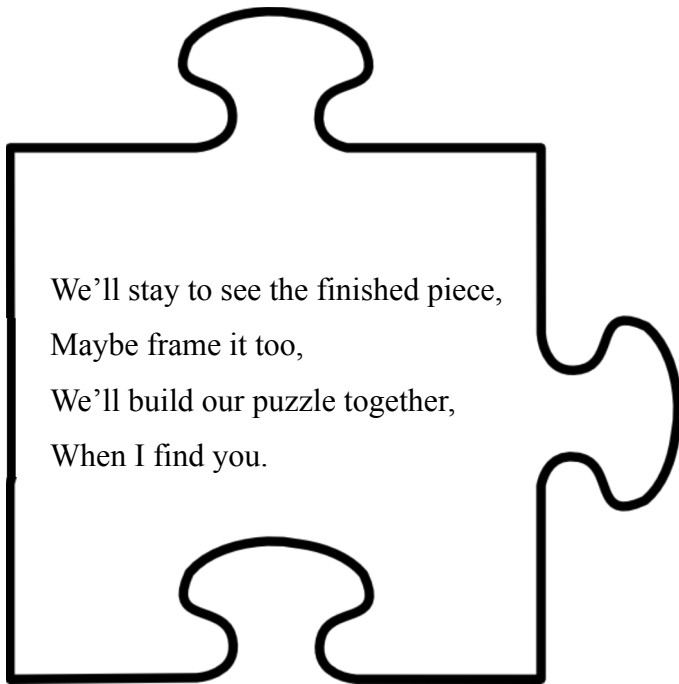


I am a walking puzzle,  
Too many pieces to ever hold,  
It's a pointless task,  
At least, that's what I'm told,

You may try as you will,  
And try as you might,  
All my many pieces,  
May not be worth your fight,

You can build the border,  
Maybe place a few more,  
I'll understand if you go,  
I'll walk you to the door,

But my search will continue,  
There's a puzzler in my sight,  
Who doesn't mind my pieces,  
Who will fit just right,



I'll find myself a solver,  
With a puzzle of their own,  
We'll start to build the borders,  
We'll start to lay the stone,





## CONTRIBUTORS

**Jade Josie** is studying English and Spanish at Ohio State University with an expected graduation of spring 2024. She is a student editor for OSU's *Translingual: The Journal of International Voices*. Jade has a short story published in the online journal *Coffin Bell*. She is more of a novelist but finds horror or extremely tense short stories to be irresistibly fun. When Jade isn't reading or writing, she's with her friends, gaming, or binging YouTube.

**Eriana Ktistakis** grew up in Athens, Greece. She is currently obtaining her BA in English Creative Writing at The Ohio State University, where she serves as a reader for *The Journal*. Her work is forthcoming in *Rising Action Review*.

**Devin Reeves** (she/her) is a product of every horror movie she's ever seen and every bad pun she's ever heard, all piled into a trenchcoat and masquerading as a writer. In her free time, she enjoys the type of music that makes Spotify recommend you its "sad girl starter pack" playlist, re-reading the entirety of the works of Neil Gaiman, and finding the beauty and gore behind everyday living. A recent graduate of The Ohio State University, her work has previously been published in *Short Vine Literary Journal*.

**Lexi Salsbury** (she/her) is a fourth-year English and Psychology major at The Ohio State University. Her love of reading and writing comes from having two English teachers for parents and a slight addiction to murder mystery novels. For now, she writes short stories with the hopes of someday producing something longer.

**Milla Troyer-Reed** (she/her) is a poet and student of the world around her. She is a fourth-year English major with a creative writing minor at The Ohio State University and works as a remote intern for Featherproof Books in Chicago. She enjoys listening to albums beginning to end, taking photos of stemless flowers on the street, and walking everywhere within a 35-minute radius. Her work is forthcoming in *The Afterpast Review*.

**Anna W** is a creative writer who specializes in poetry and short stories, usually focusing on prose and bittersweet endings. She is also a writing tutor on campus at OSU and a second-year English major.

**Addie White** is a recent graduate from Ohio State, where she majored in environmental policy with a minor in creative writing. This love for the outdoors inspires much of her writing, which often leans into nature, and sometimes something spookier. She enjoys writing poetry, short stories, and maybe one day something longer.

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