

germinate

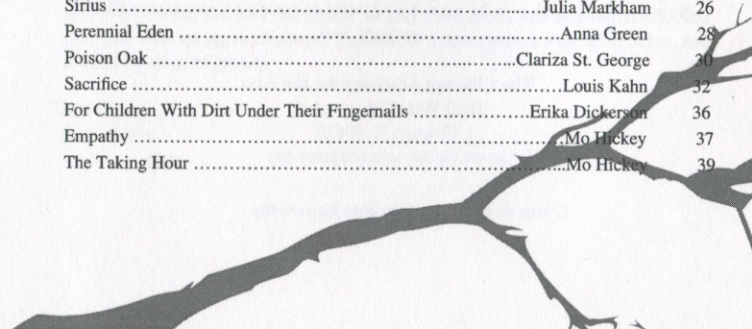
Vol. 4



Germinate

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Peter

Louis Kahn

The Great, and wide old barber of Russia,
Holds scissors in one tremendous hand,
Sits in his chair reading the paper.
As you walk in he swivels dramatically
And drops to his feet.
“Welcome, sit down,” he says.
Tiny bells quiver as the door
Closes softly behind you.
He grabs hold of your shoulders
And eases you down into your chair.
“What would you like my friend?
A trim for that curly beard that clings?
It must be such a burden for you.
I suggest a goatee, or perhaps
You want it all shaved off?”
He squeezes your collarbone.

The white paper ring snaps on.
The bib corners tie tight and fast,
Pinched by stocky fingers.
He strops the razor.
It goes up and down on the leather
Like the extension of a tiny machine.
He spreads the lather
One hand engulfs your chin.
With careful strokes
He carves smoothness out
And lets hair fall limp into your lap.

“People have forgotten
The power of being close
Of knowing your enemies eyes
Of strangling them yourself.
I was a great man.
I shaped the world to my liking
Using whatever I could find.
Whether clay or bone it made no difference,
All you need is strong hands.”

The Lord God Bird (Excerpt)

Julia Markham

My best friend Jackson and I are both in love with the same boy, Maurice. He's in the eighth grade, two years older than us, and he's built like a man-- at least that's what everybody says. I don't really know what that means, but I guess they're talking about his big shoulders and broad chest and big square head. He looks like he could work at the mine with all the other men in town even though he's only fourteen. I pointed him out to Daddy one parents' night at school, and Daddy said that it was true. He would hire Maurice to haul coal, because he looked like he'd be able to do the job. Jackson said that Maurice should never work

at the mine, he should be discovered and be on the covers of romance novels, like the ones his mom keeps around their house. The only thing in that house there's more of than romance novels are liquor bottles.

Jackson's mom is a former beauty queen, but once she got pregnant she had to drop out of all the competitions. I guess she wishes she was a pageant girl again, because she still bleaches her hair and keeps all her old gowns in the closet. The story is that she was at a contest in Los Angeles when she was seventeen, and she met a rich Italian businessman. He was so taken with her he brought her up to his

hotel room and ordered in room service even though she only got fifth place. The result of that night was Jackson. He doesn't look much like his mom, he's got curly dark hair and tan skin and she's got such light skin and blue eyes, so I guess he takes after the businessman. Jackson says that someday his rich dad will come around and take him back to Italy, and they'll live in a villa and he'll eat spaghetti every day. But everyone knows, even him, that that won't happen. We know around town that his father sends them money every month, and that's as far as that father-son relationship will ever go. His mom uses half to buy food and stuff, but the other half she gives to Jackson for clothes because I don't think she knows

how else to make him happy. Once he was eleven, the year his mom was never able to take him out on account of being drunk all the time, he started taking the train to Nashville to get clothes by himself, and he'd come back with some of the nicest stuff I'd ever seen. Jeans that fit, boots, t-shirts with band names, stories about the boys he saw there, how they were cute but none of them were like Maurice.

We were lying in my backyard, something we did a lot all through middle school, and it was pretty late at night. Daddy was inside watching the television, and he hadn't noticed us going out. Jackson came around a lot those days. Anyway, it was late, and he was lying on his back

and I was on my side, facing him.

“Do you think I’d ever have a chance with Maurice?” he asked, looking up at the sky. The factories from the next town over were belching smoke into the air, and we couldn’t see any stars. He glanced over at me and touched my arm. “Lorraine?”

I had been spacing out, and I looked up at him. He had the longest eyelashes out of anyone I’d ever met. He looked out at me from under those eyelashes and I looked at him and said “I think so.” Even though we both knew that he would never, ever have a chance with Maurice, even though he would ever have the guts to try and put it out there anyway.

He wrinkled his nose at me.

“I hope you two end up together. Because that would be right.” He turned onto his back again, and I moved closer to him. I smiled. I was twelve, and my best friend thought it was right for me to be with a boy built like a man. I held his hand, and we didn’t talk for a while more. I fell asleep, and when I woke up he was gone and I was soaking wet. I had slept through a rainstorm.

The Blue Jay's Metal String Song

Matthew McKeon

And removing my fingers off the keys
At the point of all ten digits,
Where the imprints of identity swirl
Into a center circle and flow back
Out again, is where they are located.

Endings of nerves died years ago,
There is no wound of entry or exit
But metal tokens of lyrical notes are
Under the cover of thick clear nails:
A treble clef for each.

The metal shaft wraps around fingers
Welded permanently in four places on
Every one; the rings of time and bondage.

The metal rises just below eyesight
Where four blue birds hold the end of
The line, tightly woven over their
Wings where each divide of the metal

Forms its own knot. A constant connection
Between master and serf, spaces between steel
Mimic balloon, ribbon, and traces of smoke
Made from air planes, the sound barrier ,
Going to places far away.

It is then when all is formed that,
The birds have taken grip of me. When they
Are ready to sing,
The grand piano appears in its metallic
Black glory and broken porcelain doll
Keys. They move upon my touch of the key
lowering and raising, pressing
To produce the high chime of their voices.

Marilyn Poses Over an Air Vent

Mo Hickey

The elastic on the back of her dress stretches low
to reveal a constellation of freckles
across her shoulder blades.

A former prisoner of brown hair
and baby fat, she is motionless,
her spike heels wedged inside
the tiny metal squares.

The corners of her lips are glued up
to show a jackal smile,
her teeth grinding together
to guard the keys she swallowed
to keep them out.

Air fills the lonely space around her legs
and she presses her hands to her thighs
to hide every kind of desire.
Above her head, a movie theater marquee
rearranges its letters to spell her name.

Her hair lifts with the sudden rush of cool air—
it tickles her ears, brushes against her cheek,
and settles quietly into place.

Behind her a storefront window watches,
the lights dimming and the room inside darkening
to get a better look.

Better Off

Florence Helbing

The emergency waiting room was mayhem. His family sat huddled in a corner, a bastion of silence grasping hospital coffee cups, absorbing the women's sobs, the children's moans, people doubled over cradling their wounds. Adrián sat down next to Esperanza, who was tucked wide-eyed into Sergio's arm, coffee at her lips. She greeted him quietly. His uncles balanced their coffees on their knees, gripped the top with the tips of their fingers to steady it, or wrapped one hand around it on the armrest. They didn't drink it, and stared ahead, backs straight. It made him uneasy that their tough-guy frowns had been replaced

with something else. It was less identifiable, and couldn't have meant anything good. He pressed himself farther back into his seat.

"Have you seen her yet?" he said through his dry mouth, pushing apart the silent curtain that had separated them from the rest of the waiting room. A chorus of murmurs answered him. Eduardo cleared his throat and shook his head. He got up to throw out his coffee.

"It's only been an hour and a half. They're taking care of her right now, that's what they said. And they'd come out and let us know when... when she was okay." Esperanza gulped down some coffee.

All that kept Adrián from tapping his feet on the floor, running his hands through his

hair, drumming his fingers, going out for a smoke, were his uncles still and silent, hard shoulders pressed against his aunts' soft trembling arms, leather hands twined. They sat like rocks, or impassable mountains, imposing in their competition. He kept his hands clasped in his lap and tried his hardest not to move at all. He wondered again if anyone had called León yet, but was determined not to ask.

When finally they were allowed to visit his mother, his nervous energy spilled out as he jumped from his seat. In a shuffle, they came to her room. She was wasted and waxy in the bed. He greeted her tentatively, one in a flood, and sat down in a misshapen orange chair near the wall. Soon, his uncles turned on the

television and watched a baseball game in silence. Alternately, Adrián's eyes slid from the game on TV, the faraway treble sound of fun at the ball park, the grim soprano whispers that hung around his mother's bed in a cloud.

He got the call at his three-flat, around 8:00. Heart failure. Lo siento.

He lit a cigarette, turned on the TV. Every part of his body had rooted itself to the lumpy couch, pressed into the back cushion as if it would tether itself there. He was left with practicalities—what kind of coffin would they bury her in? What about the clothes? How much money could he afford to spend on a funeral?

Where would the dinner be held? There was family to call. Even if they couldn't make it, they had to be notified.

He leaned back and looked at the TV with half-closed eyes. Esperanza had told him, “¿Por qué no le llamas a León? We're calling everybody else over here. We're calling people down in México, Adrián. Anyway, I think he should hear it from you.” As much as he didn't want to call León, he didn't argue with her. Now he got up off the couch, padded barefoot to the kitchen, took out his cell phone. As he leaned back against the wall by the window, he dialed the number.

The ringing stretched on for years. It made Adrián's skin itch harder, stiffened his shoulders

and drove his nails deeper into his palm. He gritted his teeth. Someone finally picked up.

“Hello?”

“León?” Adrián ventured, with a nervous bite to his lip. He tapped the ash off the cigarette into an ashtray on the plastic counter. The voice was deeper than he remembered. Maybe the number had changed. He stared hard at the countertop and counted each little brown and black fleck in the plastic.

“Adrián?” The voice said.

“Why are you calling me?” Suddenly he had assurance that all of his resentment was directed down the right phone line. He paused, tucked into a small corner of his unfriendly gray kitchen, staring at the cheap counter, up at the plywood cabinets. The

night had seeped in and curled up in every part of the room. The laugh track on TV in the living room was a distant backdrop. “I got something I needa tell you.” León asked him what. “It’s important, huh?”

“Mamá está muerta.” It made things very final, to say it outside of the walls of his own head. He could hear cars driving past his flat through the open window, and “You call THAT a banana?” from the sitcom in the other room. But for a while he heard nothing on the other end of the phone. The response was anticlimactic.

“What?” León said.

“She’s dead.” He paused, wondering what else there was to say, then, “The funeral’s this Wednesday, you know the

funeral parlor, on 22nd—with the green bricks? I guess we’ll see you there.” He hung up.

On Wednesday, they had what his uncle Julio called “an honorable preparation for Lupe’s life with Dios.” It was well attended, too, which he said was a very good indication that she was going to heaven. “Not that I had ever had any doubt, you know,” he clarified, leaning in towards Adrián. “She was una gran mujer. Mi propia hermanita, Adrián.”

They sat in rows, unprotected from the withering sun. He supposed someone had forgotten in the chaos of preparation that, in August, a canopy would’ve been a good idea. It was a stupid thing to forget. The heat-sick

yellow of the grass and flowers clustered around the coffin had begun to creep over him, too. He sat in the front, arms crossed over his chest, very conscious of the sweat soaked through his wrinkled cotton dress shirt. León sat four chairs down, calm and quiet between Eduardo on one side, Jorge on the other. He’d arrived late the night before. Adrián hadn’t seen him until just that morning. His avoidance was part design and part coincidence, but he felt he had dodged a bullet. Julio leaned in towards Adrián again. “What about your hermano though, eh? We say for months, oh come visit—necesitamos celebrar tu graduación, Leonito! It takes a funeral to bring him back here.” He shook his head, and Adrián couldn’t help

but smile. But Julio continued, voice at its softest yet. “He didn’t get to see her, though. That’s the kind of thing that haunts a man.”

If We All Had Hair like Rapunzel

Erika Dickerson

I've been weaving a ladder
for a little girl whose fingers
will never grasp its purpose.
Whose hungry palms only
caress the impossible

dreams welling in her eyes,
falling from flimsy fairytales,
flowing
like the golden tresses of a girl
in her storybook.

The infinite mane captured her
each time she flipped pages
that pricked her follicles,
condemning the strands she lacked.

And she smeared happily ever afters
across her hair, heavy and lonely,
wishing she knew the feeling
of having braids linger
like memories

of bedtime stories; where royalty
climbed her rigid ringlets
and saved her from the roadways
Mama parted through her
tender wool on school days.

But no matter how many
brushes she broke or how hard
Mama pulled her roots, she still
clung to the idea of being
planted in Rapunzel,

who sung to her from the
corner of a tower confining
beauty to which the little girl
hummed past pages,

allowing envy to tower over
pubescent shoulders too filled
with fallacies to carry the weight
of her own imagination.

She never looked outside her
window to see me interlocking
her wounds from once upon a
times.

But for every year she hums
a borrowed melody, for every week
she wishes for a prince to plant his
seed in her soul, and every second
she yearns for locks that cascade
twenty ells down,

a skein of humanity falls.

I laced my last link of her longing
yesterday. Crowned myself with it,
thinking this is what it would be like,
if we all had hair like Rapunzel.

Histrionics

Louis Kahn

(Somewhere:)

A tragedy moves quickly towards the last act.

Perhaps a fatal ending,

Lives ruined or hope lost.

(Maybe a girl)

Eyes like deep, deep wells,

Water cascades over limestone,

Tears for her forbidden lover,

Memories of shared warmth,

Embraces so deep,

Their love melting,

Flowing hot into one another,

while others plot to divide,

their destinies decided,

still underneath the covers.

(Or, maybe, a tale of masochism)
A lazy ache that thuds
With the beat of the heart,
That moans for the companionship
Of violent sobbing and convulsions.
And when all the characters are gone,
When his heart is ripped and sawed to waste,
Then he breathes freely
The heavy, sour smell of the darkness
At the bottom of a lake.

(The day after they are gone
I will get up and fix myself
eggs and toast with jam
which I will eat while watching T.V.
even though there is nothing on)

First

Florence Helbing

This was the first time I ever saw guts—
slick, toad guts
that spilled from her cracked head to the pebbly concrete.

I had cupped her in my hands,
the inexplicable softness of her pale stomach breathing
against my nervous skin.
Her mottled back rose to my fingertips,
and I caught her eyes, our anxious hearts beating.

I gasped at the leap that finally saved her from my hands,
that delivered her to the sidewalk with a shrill slap.

But I chased her.
I chased her past wilted flowers, yellow grass
and into the shadow of the neighbor-boy's smirk,
sticky fingers glued together in his pockets,
peeling sneakers that crushed her.

This was the first time I ever saw guts—
tangled organs pushing from her belly,
white eggs staring up at me from the cave of her skin,
round bodies carried to my feet.

The ground took her blood away.
Dirt pulled it through concrete cracks
and drank it up.

I'm Hoping

Mo Hickey

Tonight I have my first date with Melanie. I met her at the gas station, which won't make such a great story if we ever get married, but she's cute enough that it doesn't bother me. If I could draw I would paint a picture of my ideal woman, and she would be the mirror image of Melanie. Tonight we're meeting at Las Casas, my favorite Mexican restaurant. I'm hoping I can charm her enough that after drinks, I can take her back to my place and convince her to have sex with me. I'm really hoping she's not vegetarian.

Outside Las Casas, a mangy dog sits next to a fire hydrant, licking its bony hind leg. When

I walk past it, it looks up at me with accusing goopy eyes. "Shoo," I tell it. "Go home. Get out of here. What do you expect me to do?" The dog stands up shakily and drags its skinny body a couple yards before lying down underneath a tree.

I push the restaurant door open and look around for Melanie. I find her at the bar, underneath sombrero string lights, drinking a margarita. She smiles when she notices me.

"Charlie," is all she says. But she's still smiling.

"Melanie. How are you?" I lean in to kiss her cheek and I grab her hand to help her off the tall stool. "I've been waiting for

our date all week.”

“You know, pretty good. How are you?”

“I’m good,” I say, admiring the way her hair falls over her right eye.

A heavy silence follows, during which I smile uncomfortably.

I say, “Um, yeah, so where do you want to sit? How about that booth by the window?”

“Yeah, that looks nice.” Melanie grabs her purse and leads the way while I concentrate on the sway of her solid hips.

When we sit down at the table, the same heavy silence hangs between us. She rips a paper napkin into pieces and wraps them in another napkin. I drink a Mexican beer that the busboy brought over wordlessly without taking my drink order.

“So, where do you work?” I finally ask Melanie.

“Right now I work at a women’s clothing store. Maybe you’ve heard of it—it’s called Upscale?” I notice for the first time that she’s an uptalker. She ends each statement so that it sounds like a question. At first it seems cute, but after a minute it really starts to bug me. Everything that should sound definite and assertive comes out sounding like she is asking for my approval. If I were that unsure of myself, I wouldn’t talk at all.

I manage to smile and say, “Any hobbies?”

“Just the average,” she says, or rather, asks, looking out the front window. “I like to shop and cook... you know. What about—oh my god!” I follow her gaze

to the street, where a car has just crashed into a lamppost right in front of the restaurant. The whole front of the car is destroyed, the bumper bent in half around the metal pole, the airbag blocking the window so I can’t tell if the driver is hurt or not. The stray dog is still out there, hunched over gloomily so that his bumpy spine sticks up like a mountain range stretching from the back of his neck to his tail. Melanie looks concerned, like she wants to check on the driver, but I don’t have all night. Still, the crushed bumper and glass shards sprouting up from the rubber brim of the windows are all too familiar to me, and I have an urge to run to the totaled car and pull the driver out through the window. She turns back to me, and she

looks into my eyes with such dullness that no matter how hot she is, I know it won’t work out unless I can manage to find some human level we can connect on.

I clear my throat and sit on my hands. I’m hoping she will look at me with warmth and understanding and respond in such a way that I can love her. I don’t want to be disappointed.

“Have you ever been in love?” I ask her.

“I don’t really know,” she smiles. “Love is so complicated, you know?”

“I was in love once. Do you want me to tell you about it?”

“Sure, if you want,” she says, smoothing her hair down.

I start to tell her about my ex girlfriend, Samantha, who died in a car accident. I tell her about

how we ^{were} so in love, and how I was convinced she was the one for me.

I tell her about getting the news and going to the hospital. I remember the way she got me into healthy food. She was a vegan, and she was always handing me sprout and avocado sandwiches. After a while, I found that it was worth dealing with vegetables to see her smile.

I pause and look down at my lap, avoiding Melanie's empathetic face—whether real or fake or maybe somewhere in between. "That night I just stared at the TV, not really seeing anything. Samantha's mom called me crying, telling me how they told her that she was on her way home when she got hit by a pick-up truck going sixty miles an hour down a city street. Even though

she cheated on me and we fought over stupid things like where to eat dinner, she was the only girl I liked enough to be able to look past her faults. She was perfect." As I finish the story, I tentatively look up at Melanie. I'm sweating from the effort it took to dig up this memory, and I want her to say something profound enough to melt it all away. Her brow furrows with concentration. I feel worry growing like a piece of rotten fruit in the pit of my stomach. I'm hoping this is it. She opens her mouth and words tumble out.

"That really sucks." An uncomfortable smile and vast silence accompany her empty words. She has something green between her teeth.

This could only be expected, I think to myself. There is one

perfect person out there for some people but for the rest of us, there is nothing. In time people lose their beauty, and underneath their layers are scabbed and unappealing.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I whisper. It doesn't really matter to her. She smiles dumbly and touches the salted brim of her margarita. She licks her finger. It stirs nothing inside of me.

I head for the front door of the restaurant instead. I don't know if she's watching or not. It doesn't really matter to me. As I walk by the dog I stop and dig into my jacket pocket, taking out the remains of a candy bar I had for lunch. I kneel down and the dog takes it from my hand with his teeth. He is grateful.

Sirius

Julia Markham

Dear Lord, it's hot as hell.
This is your country and our rivers
have run dry like animal bones.

The family dog has been missing for days.
She doesn't respond to our calls and whistles.
We don't expect to get her back,
but we've been catching our tears in a jelly jar
so she won't be thirsty if she ever comes home.
We've dreamt she'll become a shell like the
cockroaches we find under our beds,
and so we pray feverish and desperate.

Outside it keeps on getting hotter.
Our swimming pools have evaporated
and the Mississippi River is a glass of water.
If the dog doesn't come back soon she'll die.
Pigeons will eat at her:
desert buzzards to dead lions.
And then we find her,

stretched across steaming blacktop,
ribs out and curving like a cathedral toward heaven.
She burned us up when she left the atmosphere,
melted frozen Alaska and turned us over to the sun.
She's cold now, we're certain,
she's not coming back.

We bury the dog near where we found her,
the grave is shallow; the dust blows up in our faces.
In our mouths it turns to mud
and in our eyes it turns to tears.
We finish but the sun is still overhead and bright,
so we go back to our houses where our prayers
shine cold and coat the ground with a welcoming frost.

Perennial Eden

Anna Green

I'm finished with annual lies
I want to become more religiously active
Not the type of fake promises people tell year round,
No, I mean the serious kind.

I'll grow my own garden.
Throw in apple seeds, pumpkin seeds
And anything that tastes good in pie.
After sowing and sprinkling water over the soil, I'll wait.
I'll just kill the time
Writing down all the things I've seen and done so far.

And after they germinate, the animals come looking for food.
Birds build nests in the trees higher up than I'll ever be.
And the raccoons come with grumbling little stomachs
Happy to steal something other than garbage.

With all the animals living here in the trees and bushes,
There's no need for an ark.
I'll eat my ripe fruit and trickle juice all over me,
Then laugh when the animals try to lick it off.

The next day I'll turn over the soil with my hoe
In new rows of tiny holes I'll drop the plants,
Repeating this over and over takes time.
Maybe I can tell what I did,
But I'll let the trees do the talking for themselves.

Poison Oak

Clariza Saint George

My skin crawls as I kiss a decaying oak.
Her once supple skin tastes like playground woodchips
before puberty hit. She lays strewn across the forest floor,
forgotten.

When she fell no one yelled “timber,”
so her life began to flee before her open eyes.
Her full limbs that once embraced me
lay cracked at her sockets.

Brittle leaves that once expelled the vibrant color of age
now lay in a tangle resembling roadside carnage.
I kissed her burrow thinking I could give her life,
but she was past the point of resuscitation.

She needs a spell to break the binds of old age.
I stumble backwards onto a heap of crisp leaves
after my pursed lips met her cold wrinkled bark.
I sit beside her and try to comfort her dead spirit.

Her lifeless body beckons me with hopes of rebirth,
as a maggot escapes through one of her flesh wounds.
I can only look upon her decomposing trunk
and see how awful it must be.

Sacrifice

Loius Kahn

George put wax in his hair. He had bought it especially for this occasion. It was very strange for him and probably useless, he thought, because his style certainly wasn't the thing that his date liked about him. He was optimistic about the whole thing, chipper even. He knew it could end badly, but was there anything really terrible that could happen? He fully expected second, third, even fourth dates, but he wouldn't jinx it by being too optimistic.

They had met on the internet, with simple social networking no less. It was odd how perfectly it all came together. George had just recently arrived at the

Myspace phenomena, a friend had to set him up. For a while he spent quite a lot of time doing the personal things: filling in all the little information boxes on his account with unnecessary detail, choosing the perfect candid photos. Later he made a point of "friending" not only his friends but all his co-workers and acquaintances, however distant, and eventually finding new friends on popular fan sites. One group was dedicated to vintage arcade games, and since he had a Nintendo and an Atari he decided to sign up. There he found people who seemed to share his personal interests and whom he could talk about the technical aspects of

them with. Motorcycles, basketball, ethnic cuisine (George was a regular connoisseur and occasional cooker of curried dishes). One day he started up a conversation with a woman who had recently joined his bike group and was from the same small town in which he currently lived. Her name was Miranda and they talked long and ardently about different basketball teams and even a little about the current happenings of the Arkansas congressional race. She was a graphic artist and her Myspace photos were real knockouts. She was a cute brunette with a tiny curvy mouth and green glowing eyes. Her nose was slender and turned slightly up at the end, her glasses were endearingly lopsided, somehow adding to her

perfection. She didn't have any pictures with her shirt off but you could tell that her stomach was flat, and her legs were quite obviously beautiful even to the point where they seemed like two slender molded glass imitations. The only downside to this, of course, was that she probably spent a lot of time on her appearance, which usually entails at least a little vanity, and a little higher maintenance.

They walked into the restaurant waiting room and George started up a conversation, perhaps a bit too quickly, by picking up a discarded Times newspaper, leafing through it awkwardly, and finding the Arts section and then the horoscopes.

"Have you heard, this stuff is

a month off?"

"What does that mean?" said Miranda.

"Well, you know, the people think someone born past May 21 is a Gemini, but they may be a Taurus. I don't know the exact details actually... I heard it somewhere, I'm pretty sure its either a month ahead or a month behind. I just say ahead cause usually when I look at the horoscopes I always think 'Y'know, I sound like more of a Capricorn.' I'm a Sagittarius though, in real life."

There was a pause and she giggled, and then he giggled too, thinking he may have said something funny because he often said things that people laughed at even though he didn't know why. "The stars are confusing, I guess.

People always seem to get them wrong."

The maitre'd brought them to their seats and looked quite amused with them, it was an unlikely couple. George was not terribly attractive (though not ugly) and perhaps a little overweight. Miranda was dressed flawlessly with designer accoutrements, the maitre'd could name them all. She was beautiful too, he thought he would've fallen for her completely if he were into that sort of thing. While they were sitting there Miranda seemed a bit distant to George. He asked if she wanted something to drink and she said yes. He called the waiter over gently and asked him if they could have some waters. George began to explain why he had

chosen this restaurant. He said the seafood here was great and that if she liked fish she should try the red snapper. The water came. Miranda politely thanked the server and started sipping her water, all the while smirking and staring right at George

George immediately began to feel funny. He wasn't sure whether she was coming on to him or trying to make him feel uncomfortable, although why she would want to he could not know.

For Children with Life under Their Fingernails

Erika Dickerson

Innocent fingers wander curiously,
gullible impressions pressed against soil,
unaware of how experience coils
wily underneath fingernails to sleep.
Watching as they sift through themselves, we fear
the children will never be pure again;
welcome sin into the present, smearing
earth against their bodies before the end.

One mother cradles her child, and whimpers.
Another scolds her own, dusts what she thinks
is the last of mistakes from his palms, pink,
and sorry. My daughter, eyes still tender
and unknowing, scrapes earth into nail beds,
spreads dirt across lifelines for the dead.

Empathy

Mo Hickey

It's good if you can accept your life.
It was made just for you, however poorly planned,
back when the idea of you was still a nervous smile
on the face of your mother at the altar.
There were firm handshakes for the groom,
there were weepy embraces for the bride,
your mother clutching her sister, so happy.
No one knew when you would show up.

A reception stretched to a honeymoon,
then to a barely furnished home.
There were sticky linoleum floors and
a little TV stood on wobbly legs.

Can you imagine your parents making love
on a bed in a home they had made,
their love unmottled still by the ends
they had to somehow make meet.
Maybe they held each other all night,
awkwardly at first, still uncertain

of how to fit themselves together.
Maybe it would improve with time.
Maybe they watched the sun rise,
all of the future poured out onto the horizon,
suspended for one moment.

The Taking Hour

Mo Hickey

I start having stomach problems after Ethan and I celebrate our anniversary. We've been dating for four years now. It starts as this terrible gnawing feeling, like the worst hunger. I try eating to satisfy the pain, but it always comes back even worse than before. I think it might be cramps so I wait, but my period doesn't come. After two weeks I go to the doctor. While I shiver on the cold metal examination table, my goose bumps prickling under the paper gown and the hairs on my arms standing straight up, he asks me an endless series of questions about my diet and family history. He tells the nurse to do x-rays and a full body scan. The doctor

is middle-aged and he doesn't look me in the eyes until I come back for my follow-up appointment the next week.

I change into the familiar paper dress and wait on the table. When he finally comes in, holding the plastic clipboard with my charts, he smiles at me. "Dana, right?" he says, closing the door behind him.

"That's right," I say.

"Okay, then. I have your test results right here." He sits down in a wheeled chair next to me.

"*Taenia solium*," he says, letting it roll casually off of his tongue.

"What? What is that?"

"It's a common species of

tapeworm. You probably got it from eating infected or undercooked pork. We caught it pretty early, so it's relatively small and hasn't done too much damage to your body. You're probably pretty hungry though, right?" He laughs and waits for me to join him but I stare at him, in shock. "Okay. Well I'll prescribe some medicine for you right away, and you should come back every week for the next month so we can be sure we got rid of him."

I stare at him blankly, my mouth still open. "But...but I'm a vegetarian. I have been for years."

The doctor shows no sign of surprise. He uncaps his pen with his teeth and sticks the cap on the top end of the pen as he calmly writes something down on my

chart. "A vegetarian, hmm? Well, that's a wonder. A real wonder. You probably ate something that was prepared by some cook who touched infected pork and didn't wash his hands. It happens all the time, to people all over the place. It really does. It may turn your stomach but it's completely natural."

He scribbles something on a prescription pad and tears off the sheet and hands it to me. I close my mouth and take the sheet from him. "Go buy this medicine and take it twice a day for the next month. Come back in a week and we'll run some more tests," he says, getting up from his chair. "In the meantime, eat when you're hungry. Don't deprive your body—you've got to eat for two right now."

When I get home, Ethan is cooking spaghetti. "Hey there, he says, as I come in the door. He's standing in front of the stove, stirring a pot of tomato sauce. I walk up behind him and wrap my arms around his waist.

"Hey, that smells good," I say, kissing his neck. I notice he's wearing the wool sweater I got him for Christmas. It's thick and blue and almost looks homemade. He said it reminds him of the sweaters his mother used to knit for him when he was little.

"What did the doctor say?" he asks, not turning around.

"You'll never guess. I still can't believe it."

"What?" he says, concentrating on the sauce.

"I have a tapeworm. One

that comes from eating pork." I remove my arms from his waist and hoist myself up to sit on the counter.

"What?" He finally turns around, wooden spoon still in his hand.

"How? When?"

"I have no idea." I take the spoon from his hand and taste the sauce. "Needs more basil."

"What? I don't understand," he says, as shocked as I was.

"He said I probably got it from a restaurant. The chef probably cooked some infected pork for someone else and then touched my food without washing his hands. Something like that."

"Wow," he says, shaking his head in disbelief. "That's...that's crazy. Well, what are we going to

do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, do you have to take medicine? I mean, this is a big deal. I can't believe you're not upset. I mean, there's something living inside you, feeding off of you." He stares at me.

I laugh. "I don't know, it's not that crazy. Apparently it happens all the time. I just have to take this medicine twice a day and go back to see him every week for a month."

He shakes his head again and stares at the floor. "Wow. I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. Just tell me that dinner's ready. That smells delicious, and me and my tapeworm are starving," I say, smiling.

Ethan is silent. He finally

turns back to the sauce, which is starting to bubble furiously.

"Yeah, it'll be ready in about ten minutes. Go rest on the couch for a while, I'll get everything ready."

"Thanks, pup," I say, jumping off of the counter. "You're the best." Ethan doesn't turn around as I leave the kitchen.

I'm watching television on the couch when Ethan comes in with a tray. On the tray are two plates of spaghetti and buttered bread. The bread is folded over like a sandwich with the butter inside, just the way I like it. I start to sit up and he stops me.

"No, lie down. You need to rest," he says, handing me one of the plates and a fork.

"Oh, thank you. It looks great." I'm touched by this

sudden maternal side of him. Ethan is usually a typical kind of man—not cold exactly, but somewhat reserved and detached. It isn't easy for him to talk about his feelings, and when we do, I have to pry emotion out of him. He can't tell me he loves me unless we're in the dark, with all the lights turned off. I think it's because his family is so distant. His parents weren't very warm when he was little, and they didn't hug him or kiss him or show affection, not even his mother. The way she showed her love was in the sweaters she knitted him, in the careful loops and knots of scratchy wool. But I know he loves me, the same way that he knows his mother loved him.

The next morning, Ethan won't let me get up. When I open my eyes, feeling strangely rested, he is sitting on the edge of the bed, watching me. I smile, and look at the clock. It's nine-thirty. I panic and bolt upright. "Shit, I'm going to be late for work! Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Shh, calm down. I already called the store and told them you were sick. I turned the alarm clock off. I thought you should rest today." He smiles at me, proud of his thoughtfulness. I sit up. My mouth tastes like a sticky wad of cotton. "Ethan, I can't afford to miss work. I know you were trying to help, but I really can't."

His smile fades, crestfallen. "But you're sick. You shouldn't be on your feet all day. You need

to stay in bed.”

“I’m not an invalid, Ethan. The doctor didn’t put me on bed rest. He said I could go to work and do normal activities as long as I feel okay, and I do. So please, let me handle this,” I say. “It’s my body, and I know what it needs.”

He looks down at his feet. A silence hangs between us, heavy and obvious. After a few minutes, he says, “Do you want some Captain Crunch?” It is his apology.

That night, as Ethan sleeps peacefully next to me, I lie in bed, unable to sleep. I move my hands over my bare stomach, imagining that I can feel the tapeworm as he moves inside of me. My fingers dart around my belly-button and then change direction

by the mole near my hipbone, flitting anxiously across my old appendicitis scar. I picture him, tethered in place, feeding constantly, getting bigger and older by the day. He started as a tiny wriggling seed but I can feel him growing every minute.

I take my hands off my stomach and roll over on my side, propping my head up with one hand. I watch Ethan sleep. He lies on his back, one hand sprawled gracefully across his chest, the other by his side, clutching the bed sheets. With my finger I trace my favorite parts of his body, the beautiful areas he hates. The almond hollows around his eyelids, the sunken groove on his nose right below his eyebrows, his shockingly delicate collarbone, almost birdlike in its fragility. He

starts to wake up, his brow furrowing as he mumbles groggily. “Mmm.” He slowly opens his eyes. “Why aren’t you asleep?”

“I couldn’t.”

He rubs his eyes with his fists. “How do you feel?”

“I’m fine. Just a little tired.”

“Then sleep.” He opens his eyes and looks at me. Even when he smiles, his deep blue eyes always seem sad. Sometimes I think he thinks with them—they always seem to be distantly preoccupied with things too painful for his mind to handle.

“I can’t,” I say, reaching over to smooth down his hair.

Smiling, he squirms closer to me. He wraps his arms around me and snuggles in, resting his head near my chest. I start to doze off, soothed by the nearly

feverish warmth of his skin, but I hear him ask, “Can I touch your stomach?”

I open my eyes. “Go ahead.”

He sits up and carefully leans over my stomach, staring at it intently. He cautiously lifts his hand and it hovers over my bellybutton. “It doesn’t look any different on the outside,” he says. “I can’t believe there’s really something growing in there.” He places his hand gently on my stomach. It is the first time he has touched me since I found out. “Can I listen?” he says, looking up at me.

I nod. Bending forward, he puts his ear next to my bellybutton. I run my fingers through his hair. “Wow,” he says. “I can hear it talking.”

“What is it saying?”

"I can't tell...it's very quiet. But it's definitely there." He sits up and looks at me again. "It's so...real." He stares at me for a minute. I reach up and wrap my arms around him, pulling him down next to me. We lie like spoons in a drawer and I close my eyes.

"Dana?"

"Hmm?" I'm starting to fall asleep.

"What's going to happen to us?" he whispers, something catching in his throat.

"What do you mean?"

Ethan pauses for a while, and I start to fall asleep again, so exhausted now that I'm unalarmed at his question.

"Nothing," he whispers.
"Nothing."

My stomach pain wakes me up in the middle of the night, at three-thirty the next morning. Ethan is sleeping peacefully next to me, a slight smile making his baby face look even more angelic. I can't ignore the pain so I climb quietly out of bed and walk to the kitchen. I get the Greek food that is leftover from dinner out of the refrigerator and try everything—the flaky spanakopita, the creamy tzatziki sauce, the cold pita bread. I stand in the open refrigerator door and eat it all in the dark and quiet kitchen, in the flood of the only light. After that I feel better, but wide awake. I walk to the sliding glass door that opens out onto our balcony and go outside.

I lean over the railing and crane my neck to look up at the

rows of balconies jutting out from the apartments above ours. It is warm for April, and the air is damp and fertile. It's that time of night that my grandmother used to call "the taking hour", the hour between four and five in the morning, the theoretical moment when everyone that will sleep is sleeping.

"The night owls have just gone to bed and the early birds are about to get up," she had told me. "Lonely spirits are the only ones around, and they fly around from house to house, hovering over each one. You see, they're missing a part of themselves, and they can't rest until they find it. So they go from house to house looking for it, and if they find it in yours they'll take it from you, while you're still asleep, and in

your dreams you'll find it missing. It might be a person or a feeling or a possession, but either way you'll dream about it and you'll find it missing."

I look across the empty street to the row of brick houses to see if I can catch a glimpse of a lonely spirit, but there is nothing, only dark windows. "They move very fast," my grandmother had said, "so there's no use in staying awake to catch one. And anyway if you catch a lonely spirit, you're only lonelier yourself. Then you become one of them, and you have to hunt around at night, mourning for the part of you that is lost."

The medicine the doctor prescribes makes me queasy and tired. One day, while I'm cook-

ing breakfast, I have to run to the bathroom to throw up. Afterwards I fall asleep on the couch for a long time. I wake up to the sound of the front door opening. Ethan is just getting home from work.

“Hey,” I say. “How was your day?”

He throws his coat down on the chair and kicks off his shoes. “It was fine.”

I wait for him to say more but he doesn’t. “Is that it? Tell me, what’s going on with you? What’s the new office gossip? Is anyone having sex in the supply closet? Any missing money, or a mysterious lack of three-hole punchers?”

He doesn’t laugh, or even look at me. “I don’t know, I’m just under a lot of pressure to get

this huge file in to my boss by Monday. I don’t know if I can handle it.”

“I’m sorry, baby. Come here,” I say, reaching towards him from the couch.

He walks over slowly, like a kid about to be scolded. I hug him and pull him down to me, but he abruptly pulls away and stands back up. “I have to make dinner,” he says, turning to leave.

“I have to ask you a big favor,” I say, giving up on affection. “Can you go down to the drugstore and pick up the refill for my prescription? I’m completely out, and I’m supposed to take it tonight. I’d go myself but I’ve been throwing up a lot today and I’m afraid I’ll vomit if I walk that much. But I’ll start dinner for you. How does tofu stir-fry

sound?”

Ethan closes his eyes and runs his fingers violently through his hair. “I really don’t want to go out again. The train took forever and all I want to do is lie down.”

“But...I need to take my medicine. And soon.” His coldness bewilders me. It seems to change him and he starts to look different to me, more imposing, more like the man than the wounded hart. His eyes are sharp and acidic. He sighs deeply and swivels away from me. “I don’t know. I just can’t take this, I can’t take it.” He walks quickly into the bedroom and slams the door behind him.

I cry on the couch for a while, my face pressed against a pillow his mother gave him for his nineteenth birthday. She quilted

it herself, from pieces of her old blouses and his sister’s discarded baby blankets. My eye is near a section with a picture of a baby sparrow on a branch, and the bird is surely drenched, ruffling his feathers to shake my tears off his wings.

I hear a door open and Ethan walks over to where I lie on the couch. He kneels on the floor next to me and looks into my eyes. “I can’t do this,” he whispers, bowing his head forward and letting it rest on the couch. “I can’t take this anymore.”

I put my hands on my stomach and watch him. He raises his head and looks at me again, with those wet sad eyes. He motions with his hand towards the apartment window. “Just look at how fucked up the world is. It’s all

becoming real to me now.” He stares at me. “Do you understand what I mean?”

I nod. His hand trails gently over my neck. “And us...we...” Something catches in his throat. “Everything...everything has changed.”

That night, I dream that he is taken from me. He lets it happen, leaving without a fight. While I sleep, he packs a backpack of his things. He stops by my bed and watches me sleep. He cries a little, very quietly, and runs his hand across my stomach. “I’m sorry,” he says to my sleeping self. I know how hard it was for him.

After he leaves, I dream that one hundred white moths fly in unison through the open window. The fluttering curtains

release the smell of damp wings and the syrupy perfume of the cherry blossoms that grow on the trees outside our bedroom window. The moths land all over my body—settling gently on my chest, my wrists, my hipbones. They look up at me, their paper-thin wings trembling, and they all have deep blue eyes that remind me of wells. I start to cry and the moths cry with me, the wells of their eyes silently overflowing. Their tears pool in my stomach and between my breasts. I close my eyes and the moths move up and down with my chest—that rise and fall, the filling up and letting go.