

The background features a complex, low-poly geometric landscape. It consists of various angular shapes in shades of blue and tan, creating a sense of depth and movement. The shapes are layered, with some appearing to be in the foreground and others receding into the background. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by the orange background and the tan and blue tones of the geometric forms.

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Echo

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Text set in Georgia

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Echo

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About Echo

A heart echo test, or an echocardiograph, is a painless test that examines the structure and function of the heart, according to the National Institution of Health. This test may involve the injection of saline or a specific dye into the patient's vein to showcase the heart.

We chose the name Echo because we expect the work we publish to come from the heart. In our monthly issues, we want to publish the greatest creative nonfiction that we can find.

We accept creative nonfiction submissions year round, and we would love to read your work!



Miasmata

Jonathan Burgess

(mɪˈæzmətə) *n., pl.* 1. a poisonous atmosphere formerly thought to rise from swamps and putrid matter and cause disease. 2. any noxious atmosphere or influence

My partner drove the ambulance while I jotted notes about the last call of the day, an elderly woman who'd accidentally pressed her medical alert button, which had put us on the highway at the edge of the city and half an hour over our scheduled shift. I smelled my partner's wintergreen Double-Mint gum as she whispered a pop song to herself. I knew the tune but couldn't remember the words.

"I know dispatch sees us, and we passed Medic 2 heading to another call, which means Medic 1 is probably out on one too," my partner said, finished with the song.

"I hope they don't ding us," she said.

The radio hummed out an alert.

Medic 16, Medic 16, Main.

My partner patted the steering wheel and I sagged into my seat, dropping my hands onto the keyboard in defeat. We exchanged glances, and her eyes were hidden behind dark sunglasses, but I saw the muscles in her neck and around her mouth grow taut.

"Damn, Leslie. We almost made it," I said.

She picked up the radio handset.

"Main, this is Medic 16, go ahead," she said.

Medic 16, are you 10-8?

She hesitated.

"10-4, we're 10-8," she said into the handset and released the button. "It's Margie. She knows it's me. She knows my voice."

I'm sorry, Medic 16, you're the only one close to this one.

"10-4, we'll take it. It's fine," Leslie said into the handset.

The dispatcher read off the call. A local woman hadn't heard from her ailing uncle in a few days and decided to check on him. She called 911 after she discovered him dead in his trailer, all the power and water out of service. The coroner was already on-scene and estimated the man had been dead for four or five days.

"Well, thank goodness it's Friday!" Leslie said with a smirk.

I laughed and took out my phone to tell Kelly I would be late. She was due in a couple of months and already hated staying up too late. She worried about me.

We pulled into a dirt driveway in front of a single-wide trailer a few feet from a two-lane highway. It looked to be built in the 70s or 80s like a place my mother and I lived in when I was a kid. It was a yellowed white with brown trim around the top, a hitch and bay window protruding from the front, and an air conditioning unit jutting from one of the windows, cardboard and duct tape all around it.

Leslie radioed to dispatch that we were on-scene as I hopped out and withdrew a fresh pair of purple nitrile gloves from my cargo pocket. I smelled sage and a faint hit of cat piss. As we passed two police cars -- one uniformed, one unmarked -- I noticed a young blonde woman held by an older man with a handlebar mustache sitting on the front porch. The man watched us, but the woman just stared at the sun-bleached, splintered planks of the porch. Her eyes were red and puffy, and she held a small wad of tissue in one hand.

"Evening. EMS," Leslie said as we walked up the steps.

“Y’all can go on in,” the man said in a hoarse, hushed drawl. “They’re already in there with him.”

We walked through the unlocked door, Leslie first, and we both had to duck under the chain connecting the door to the frame. The stench was immediate and overwhelming, hot trash mingled with feces and urine, rotted flesh like a bloated dead animal on hot asphalt on the side of the interstate. I closed the door behind me so the two outside wouldn’t smell it again. I tried the light switch, but nothing happened. A grey-striped cat scurried across the floor from behind a dusty recliner covered in patches and blotched for the open back door beyond the galley kitchen. Magazines, wrinkled newspaper, torn clothing, hats, cups, empty cans covered the shoe mold and reached about a foot up the wood panel walls on all sides. The furniture was dusty and dark, and there was only one clear narrow walkway.

From a dark, narrow hallway at the back of the trailer, two men stepped into the light coming from the open back door. One wore a button up tucked into tan tactical pants and held a camera. The other was a uniformed sheriff’s deputy, who held a white handkerchief to his mouth and nose. We met them in the kitchen and exchanged solemn greetings.

Pill bottles of varying shapes and sizes littered the Formica countertop, some tipped over, their contents spilled out, white oblong tablets and multi-colored gel capsules, some small and round with alphanumeric markings. Pharmacy bags were strewn about, the receipts still stapled to the outside flap. Dirty pots, pans, bowls, plates, and cups overflowed from the sink, and flies darted from grimy mug to crusted dish rag, unsettled as we were, always moving and buzzing between stench of quiet. The buzzing and meowing and breathing colluded with the stench of rotten human flesh and overpowered me as water built on the rims of my eyelids, but I couldn’t be the one to crack, the Marine, the combat veteran. I tried to look casual, averted my gaze to the open door.

In the sweltering summer dusk, I saw from my position in the kitchen and grass and weeds grown up like trees in a far-off jungle, invading the tilted, dry rotted deck. The weeds were eye level, and heat shimmer rose above them, the smell of sage and dogwood somehow abetting the odor of decay. Another cat darted from the living room, through the open door, and disappeared into the thick, green brush.

“Okay,” Leslie said as she backed away, “that’s it, y’all. I need to step out here and... I need to go put my big girl panties on for a minute and come back.”

She stepped one black boot onto the deck with a slight stomp-and-shake to test it and eased over the threshold as she withdrew a bottle of peppermint oil from her pocket to dab around her nose.

I looked around the kitchen at the rotten food caked onto the stove’s plastic backsplash, the pot of half-eaten cheese grits still on a burner, the flies, the buzzing.

“Wow,” I said, quiet and low. “What was wrong with this guy? Who was supposed to take care of him? I don’t understand how it could get like this.”

That was a lie. I had heard and seen this before -- a grandfather with maggots in his wounds and sepsis from an infection, a great aunt with dementia and an infection from a roach inside her -- but it seemed like the normal thing to say. People let themselves and the people they love go, let them wander into a sleepwalk through life waiting to die.

I watched the coroner fumble and pretend to adjust the large lense on the DSLR camera hanging from his neck. The sheriff’s deputy just shook his head and looked at me wide-eyed over his handkerchief as beads of sweat slithered down his pale forehead.

“Y’all bring that big ole industrial sheet y’all use to move bariatric patients?” the coroner asked. I could hear him trying to hold his breath as he spoke, tense bursts of hushed syllables.

I nodded to answer his question but squinted at a freezer bag with rotten potatoes writhing with maggots. The sheriff’s deputy nudged it with a metal pen.

“It’s in the truck,” I said and glanced down at the sweaty T forming on my blue uniform button-up. “Where’s the body?”

The coroner paused and waved for me to follow him down the dark hallway. We passed a dark

room, and I couldn't make out anything but shapes, the dim square of a narrow window covered by a blackout curtain. I was glad the body wasn't in there. In a childish flash of imagination, I envisioned a reptilian arm reaching from the shadows to pull me in, a horned demon ready to chew me up and swallow me whole, or an undead corpse-turned-zombie eager to gnaw through my skull to my brains, not the sluggish kind but the frenzied fast kind.

The sound of our boots was heavy and deep on the poorly-lain linoleum, a sticky peeling sound as we shuffled around a mound of laundry in the tight corridor. The door at the end of the hallways was ajar, and the coroner pushed it open as he walked through. The smell was amplified, and no matter how I turned my face or how firmly I pressed my undershirt against my nose, I could not escape it. I released my shirt collar before the deputy or coroner noticed and tried to maintain a veneer of nonchalant interest.

As the coroner moved aside, I saw the corpse, a mound of rotten bones and bloated flesh, black and purple with ashe-grey spots and streaks, spread out on a cheap rug, naked at the end of a trail of feces and vomit, which led to the open toilet a couple paces away. I couldn't tell whether he was morbidly obese or simply swollen from decomposition and the elements, the humidity and lack of air conditioning. His face resembled a massive bruised and rotten grapefruit kicked in and sunken. I could only see one of his eyes, which bulged in a black and reddish-purple mass. The other had retreated into the black façade, swallowed up by the abyss of decay.

"I reckon he's been down about five days, give or take," the coroner said in three-or-four-word spurts. "I'll have to double check, of course, but I don't think there's been any power to the place in a couple of weeks, just running water. He had a lot of comorbidities, had a lot of trouble getting around."

The body had no clothing on or around it besides the wadded, dirty laundry stuffed in various places around the bedroom, but I noticed a Foley catheter secured to his leg by a dingy white elastic strap with the bag resting on his splotchy, edematous foot.

I tried to piece it together.

The man had congestive heart failure and dysrhythmias, based on the medications I saw in the kitchen, and he had most likely -- as many do just before death -- felt the need to relieve his bowels. The diarrhea, obvious from the brown and black spray, also appeared to have blood clots in it, indicative of a lower gastrointestinal bleed, but I couldn't be sure because of how long it had been there. The blood loss combined with the bowel movement, a sudden loss of volume in the body, likely triggered a vagal response, cardiac arrest.

But I wasn't there to diagnose.

I only had to move a massie, decomposing corpse to a body bag to a stretcher to a morgue so I could was the death off me and make the trek south to Atlanta.

"I'll get the sheet and the body bag," Leslie said from the doorway.

Once we had the stretcher in place by the front porch and the body bag and drag sheet by the corpse, the deputy and I knelt down to roll the body onto its side for the coroner and Leslie to slide the drag sheet under it with the body bag on top. We exchanged reticent glances and stretched our hands out on the naked mass. My fingers sank down to the first knuckle into rotten flesh as soft, putrid flatulence escaped the corpse and announced the roll onto its side. The move revealed mounds of pasty black diarrhea smeared across the floor and the man's backside. The coroner reached for a nearby towel and placed it on top of the mound before shifting the drag sheet and body bag over it. With as much respect as could be rendered in such conditions, the deputy and I eased the corpse onto the bag, and the four of us tucked and pushed and folded until it fit. We changed our gloves and dragged the body in great heaves to the door, down the hallway, and across the living room. The coroner stepped outside to usher away the family members waiting on the porch. He returned, and we heaved once more for the doorway, but the body was too wide. Panting, breathless, swearing, we looked at each other one by one as if polling the group by telepathy for alternative ideas on how to fit this round peg through the square hole.

At last, the deputy stepped over the bag, stumbling as he went, to join the coroner. He nodded for me to lift my corner as he lifted his, turning the body halfway on its side, and the whole bulging mess passed through with a squeak from the aluminum door frame.

“Well, now we just have to get him down the steps to that stretcher,” the deputy said as he wiped sweat from his face with a soaked forearm.

Leslie and I stared at him and glanced at each other.

“Oh, is that all?” Leslie said. The four of us laughed but not so loud the family would hear.

After a few splinters and tumbles, we got the corpse onto the stretcher at the foot of the porch steps, into the ambulance, and headed to the hospital. The morgue attendant and Leslie unloaded the body while I finished the paperwork.

“Oh, that was a big one, wasn’t it?” the attendant said once the move was complete.

We cruised back to the station without much chit chat, and I got in my car, took a deep breath of the crisp linen air freshener, and made a break for my house.

That night, Kelly fell fast asleep. Beside me, she breathed a steady cadence of calm, her side rising and falling and rising again. I stared into the dark and listened to the traffic and sirens outside. I considered the masses of people still milling about like ants on a hill, scurrying around in a rat race to nowhere. I thought about Leslie tucking her two boys in for bedtime. I closed my eyes and gazed into the blackened one-eyed gape of a mottled, bloody dead man. I opened my eyes again to the darkness and sighed. I couldn’t see anything in the room, but I knew it was there. My mind traced a rancid carcass sprawled across the rug beside the bed. I pressed my eyelids tight together again and embraced the fetid dead. People were finally thinking about him.

Sunday Afternoon Jazz

Laurie-Lynn McGlynn

Tink-tah, tink-tink, tah-tink
Tink-tah, tink-tink, tah-tink

That
is the sound
from the old
pian-o

Dim
is the light
inside
the café.

Warm
is the wood
b'neath
my pale hands

Slow
are their mouths
as I watch
them move

A ghost
I'm invisible
It's stolid
bliss

I welcome
namelessness
A pious
cant

Aids
indulgence
sans bane
impediment

To heed
the sound
of the old
pian-o

The Trapper Hat

Laurie-Lynn McGlynn

Prologue:

*So, somber, this face of white opal, with forehead pressed against the cold glass.
Eyes as dark and watchful as the edge of the wood, stare across the snow-covered field waiting for a
sign of luminosity just below the surface.*

Act I:

Winter means breakfast and that small space near the snow-covered mailbox. The back door opens to a swirl of icy flakes, suspended within a brine of morning light. The trapper hat sits on a worn hook by the door, waiting for its next adventure. The soft, black leather is molded into place, ready for dress rehearsal.

A distinct trace of bacon and warmed maple syrup is soon sucked up by the dry, crisp air. A mitted knuckle attempts to relieve the instant freeze of the tiny hair inside my nostrils. The beat of each crunchy step seems to keep time with Vivaldi's lighthearted flute dancing in my head.

Snowflakes continue to fall, and the blue-grey sky is in agreement. This is satisfactory. A spot just below the knoll. I fall into position, and the snow is compressed under my wooly weight. Here I remain for hours, looking out to this winter vastness. Patterns of white and ochre dot the landscape. Some frozen, some wet pockets from a recent thaw. The sun is nowhere to be found today. It is like a Sunday afternoon, all still with only the sound of February blowing across the field. But alas, this space is much more than a mere vista. It is my stage and here I will conjure up the best tales of pilgrim strife, babes lost in the wild woods of the North, families fighting famine, all the time hearing wolves howl to the dance of the flute. I shut my eyes.

Act II:

The silence is intoxicating as the sound of each falling snowflake can be heard landing on the trapper hat. I ignore the winds as they pick up tempo and blow surface snow across my face, taking a little bit of breath away each time. Here I sit and relive tragedies and comedies of old. I sing songs to an absent audience and wait for the endless umber brush to return the haunting echo. But the cold, wet corduroy wakens the realization of posterior numbness which is too strong to ignore. That and the urge to 'wee' eventually win out and I begin the long and arduous journey back to the "homestead". Once I arrive, I quickly heed the reminder to stomp snow off my boots. But as I kick until bits of wood flake off the steps I am rudely awakened by the *beep-beep-beep-beep* of a nearby truck in reverse and the sound of slushy puddles. I sigh and return the trapper hat to its well-worn hook, and as I close the door, I feel fortunate that the traffic was not too loud today.

The Minch of Yore

Laurie-Lynn McGlynn

Upon this old map I spot a town
of long ago, and barren now
t'was tucked along the Northern Minch
the dwelling place of fabled men.

Near Summer Isles the town did sit
atop a steep and craggy cliff
So sweet a moss did nature intend
grew where tender soles did tread

Whirling flags of blue and white
lined moored vessels that sparkled bright
The narrow lanes and cobbled roads
when kissed with sunlight, shone of gold.

Cottages decked with thistle and thatch
Crofts with stone and peat neatly stacked
Lads out fishing, wee boys with no cares
Sprigs of heather in long, flaxen hair

Washing to hang, hens to be fed
A baker's dozen cools on the ledge
Shop doors hold, as bells start to ring
Hasten the tasks that the day would now bring

When came twilight and deed were all done
the young and the old would gather as one
Some sang and some drank, some read and some spun
but all would take heed when the tellin' begun

The mythical *Kelpie* the lonely *Loch Ness*
The *Dunters*, the *Redcaps* the *Shellycoat* dread
All these were worthy of goose-bumpy skin
but no tale competes with the *Blue Men of Minch*

They live in the sea where the water's most wild
They're friend and they're foe, they'll trick, and they'll lie
They'll lead you to safety, they'll drown you at sea
It mostly depends on their mood you see

The fishermen know when it's wise to stay home
and when the Blue Men are sleeping below
For then it is calm and time to set sail
but when they awake, they're badly behaved

There is one other they will not abide
It is the stranger who brings ill tide
The one who will pillage, the villain or thief
and means only harm to those that it seeks

This is what happened to men from abroad
whose intent was to injure, to spoil was their cause
“Thieves” said the Blue Men, “they come ‘ere at night
We must take up arms, put a stop to their blight”

When all the village was fast asleep
the boorish brutes would deftly creep
upon the pebbled beach, they’d haul
and drag their boats without a sound.

Then up the cliff each one did climb
like mountain goats, all in a line
Then once the top they all had reached
they stretched their backs and had a swig

Across their bearded face they’d smirk
at thoughts of robbin’ all the clerks
And in the morn, they’d open shop
to find it empty of all its stock

“But not this night,” says the Blue Men
“we’ll take no prisoners, we’ll fight to the end”
The town’s folk were wary of what was in store
for quiet, the Blue Men were n’er before

With doors and shutters locked up tight
the town clock tolled the bells for midnight
When candle wax was all but burnt
and baby’s breath could now’t be heard

That is when the thieves returned
to take what little was left the purge
But on the beach, they met their fate
As the Blue Men of Minch rhymed away

The villains smacked of fear and froze
as the Blue Men of Minch approached their foe
“Rhyme me a story” one Blue Man sneered
“Just one rhyme per man is all we need hear”

Now, ruthless brigands they may’ve been
but bards and rhymesters? N’er heard such a thing!
So, what of these villains did happen you think?
Met their demise, with the Blue Men of Minch.

'tis only a fable" you say my friend
I beg that you shall think again
For if you should venture far outwith
Beware the *Blue Men of the Minch*

Seeping Presents

Hannah Turlish

Yesterday I woke up, disoriented, in a Holiday Inn queen-sized bed, with Cora next to me and swathed in both of our shares of the covers; this morning, my eyes open with a similar confusion, but with a very different welcome. The angled attic roof above me, painted a muted blue, is glowing from the soft light that comes in through the windows. The vastness of the space comes into view as I nudge my head right and left. My new room. *Our* room. I pick up my head slightly, and see Kim's motionless form on the other side. She is noiseless. Some audible breathing, at the very least, would be a relief. I have been known to snore, and I'd feel better if I weren't the only one that has the potential to ruin a night's sleep in a shared room.

I put my head back down on the pillow and stare at the ceiling, taking note of two tiny nicks in the blue paint and smiling hello at my David Bowie poster, which I have transferred from Maine with the care of an ardent fan and lovingly thumbtacked above my new bed. New bed, new room, new house, new family. This is where I live now.

Still groggy and shocked by what I have done, I go down the stairs and into the kitchen to find out what there is for breakfast. It is early, seven o'clock on a Saturday, and I was hoping I could be alone to poke around at my leisure; but here is Mrs. Wetzel, greeting me with a cheerful enthusiasm.

"Good morning! I hope you slept well. How about some breakfast? We've got eggs, and toast, and english muffins. There's bacon too, tho' we usually just have that on Sundays. Do you drink coffee? And there's o.j., of course, and apple juice."

I smile meekly, saying nothing, and she takes my elbow and leads me across the kitchen, to the pantry over the far wall.

"And here's the cereal," she says.

There are more boxes of cereal in this pantry than I have ever seen in one place outside of a supermarket. All I can eat at home are Cheerios and Mom's homemade granola (really, though, the Cheerios are my only option. The granola grosses me out because of the way Mom drinks the leftover milk when she's finished with the cereal itself. The sea of oat-inflected milk, vaguely grey from the granola's leaching, makes me want to gag whenever I sit across from Mom as she picked up her cereal bowl and slurps). No added sugar, no colors allowed other than brown and tan. But here, breakfast can obviously come in any color I want. Fruit Loops, Lucky Charms, Apple Jacks, Frosted Mini Wheats, Cap'n Crunch, Frosted Flakes, Cocoa Pebbles, and the one with the commercial in which the ghost rises out of a bowl of light blue puffs -- Booberry something. There are also a few bran-filled brown ones that, I will soon discover, Kim chooses when she's feeling bloated and the adults always have when they aren't eating scrambled egg whites and grapefruit. The boxes are lined up one after the other on the third and fourth shelves of the pantry, a stragging array that, as I find when I start to idly pick them up in wadner, has led to three or four boxes that have barely a serving's worth inside.

I stare vacantly at the boxes and try to choose one while simultaneously thinking of something to say to Mrs. Wetzel. I wonder what to make of the cereal variety difference between my two homes. Images of the forlorn sugarless Cheerios box sitting in our cupboard and of Mom slurping her granola milk unobserved flash through my mind and my eyes immediately well up with tears. Mrs. Wetzel notices, of course, and there is an awkward moment before I snuffle and wipe my face with the back of my hand.

"Cereal is great, thanks," I say, smiling through my shame, and I work on keeping the crying snot from bubbling out of my nose.

It gets easier after that, of course. Everything always does.

It doesn't take long for Kim and Marty to see the advantages of having me here. Within two weeks it is clear that that the possibilities of a three-teenager bloc against Pete abound.

“Pete thinks he is *such* the chef,” Kim says to me one day as we stretched out on our respective beds after dinner, doing our homework. “But he *should* be the one to do the cooking. Mom’s job is so much harder than his, whatever he does at the chemistry lab, staring at beakers all day long. Mom’s always joking about how she can’t cook, but she used to. She did, before.”

Kim must mean before Pete, back when her and Marty’s father was still alive. I feel a shiver of sisterly closeness but don’t know what else to do other than wait for her to continue.

“Pete wants Mom to think that he’s indispensable,” Kim says with a little hiss, finishing the conversation with a burrowing of her head into her Trig book. Smiling slightly, I look at the glow of her blond hair in the light of her reading lamp and feel officially accepted into the room.

Pete *can* cook, though. Almost all of his dishes are really good, and there’s always a lot of everything, which is great for me, always ravenous after these astonishing workouts that I am, somehow, surviving. All is fine as long as there isn’t any sauerkraut involved. But that is, sadly, a “vegetable” that Pete just loves, even if it’s the generic Acme brand that is 39 cents for a can. I can’t even get a mouthful of it down without wanting to gag on the limp, stringy, aggressively vinegared cabbage. Sauerkraut pushes me over to Marty and Kim’s side.

So do every night’s first post-dinner minutes. The three of us sit in wait in an ear out for Pete’s belches. He always burps in the same way. The diaphragm and throat work in the traditional manner -- with a remarkably loud rumbling and rush of gas -- but then he releases it with a long “*pffffttt*,” sort of like a bike tire that’s losing its air. Every time he burps we exchange glances and smirks of solidarity. I use these moments to feel accepted. Kim and Marty, I suspect, use the silly-sounding belches as proof that their dead father was the superior man.

After dinner one night in late September -- grilled chicken and mashed potatoes, eaten outside on the deck, impossible at this time of year in Maine -- the three of us are in a fit of giggles over a particularly resonant Pete burp as we do the clean up chores, tasks done according to the refrigerator-posted chart that we made up soon after I got here. Kim sweeps the kitchen floor with spastic and rather ineffective swirls of the broom, chortling all the while, as Marty tries to dry the dishes I’ve just washed without dropping them. All of our motor controls were lost after Marty’s impressively accurate rendition of Pete’s gas release. Caught up in the merriment, Kim asks Marty, slyly,

“Hey look here, little brother, was that you, were you the one who left me a” -- she pauses, dramatically -- “a *seeping present* this morning?”

Seeping present?

Marty has totally lost control at this point. He grabs the counter to support his crumbling body, and the plastic -- thankfully -- drinking glass in his hand falls to the floor with a *conk* and bounces and rolls toward the spiral staircase down to the rec room.

“No way, man!” he yells, with fake indignation. “Not me. Was it... a *big seeper*?”

“Quite big,” says Kim, looking at me, getting ready to let me in on the gag, to tell me what a seeping present is, although I’m starting to have a theory or two. Marty’s first question was about its size. And look at how he is about to lose consciousness from all of his laughing. Marty is 13. This must have something to do with the bathroom.

“It had been there for quite a long time,” Kim continues. “It was starting to get that furry look to it. You were up early, Mart. Are you *sure* you are not the giver of the seeping present?”

“It wasn’t me!” Marty yelps, convincingly, but he seems to want to simultaneously deny responsibility and take the credit. He looks at me, right in the eye, the first time he’s done so, I think. “It was her!” he says, with glee, pointing. “It was her! SHE left the...*seeping*...present!” He is dancing around the kitchen, around Kim and her broom, twirling here and there with the dish towel brandished overhead.

The three of us are now rendered helpless by fits of laughter. By the time Kim is finally able to catch her breath and tell me that *seeping present* was an expression she and Marty had picked up from a *Saturday Night Live* skit, defined as a piece of poop that didn’t quite make it down the toilet flush cycle, I -- me, the one who is always the last to figure things like this out, the naïve one, the

doesn't-watch-TV one, the always-swimming-and-doesn't-know-how-to-have-fun one -- already understand. And when Mrs. Wetzel and Pete get up from their deck chairs and come to the screen window to look in on the three of us rolling in laughter, Marty snapping the dishtowel at me and Kim in equal doses, I had already felt the shift. I am included. The Seeping Present will endure as the running joke for the year, and, while I certainly don't know this now, I will continue to use the term for the rest of my life. All I know now is that this is a big moment. We are all smiling and laughing and behaving like a family. I am not the lonely girl out, I am not tearing up, I am not forlorn and guilty for leaving home. I like this.

By the time October rolls around it's getting pretty clear that Marty and I get on really well. I have always wanted a brother of some sort, and while I used to fantasize about a Harrison Ford-hand-some and devotedly protective older one, one that all the girls at school would jealously hate me for having, I am finding that a younger one is a rather good time too. Marty might be 13, but he's several inches taller than I am, and stronger. But I keep getting stronger and stronger with all of my training, and so when our growing level of comfort and affection for each other reaches the point where wrestling contests in the upstairs hallway are appropriate, we are actually, to his mild dismay, quite evenly matched.

On a rainy early November Sunday afternoon, Marty and I fritter away the day by concocting creative and often disgusting snack foods. Saltine crackers with apple slices and grape jelly are delicious, but Triscuits with chopped sardines and the same grape jelly are decidedly not.

Pausing in disgust after the sardine/jelly experiment, Marty takes an egg from the refrigerator, puts it in the microwave, and sets the cooking time for 10 minutes.

"How long do you think it'll take for it to explode?" he says, grinning.

We make bets, his 3:17 and mine 4:02. We give each other a nod and he hits the start button. With each passing second, the egg still intact but looking rather agitated as it quivers against the heat, we giggle with excitement and anticipation. My stomach tightens with an intensity that, if I were to stop and acknowledge that it's coming from watching an egg in a microwave, would shame me with its immaturity. When the egg does shatter, so suddenly and violently that we both instantly forget to look at the timer to determine who's the bet's winner, we rear back with glee and then barely mind cleaning up the haphazardly cooked but mostly liquid white and yolk from the oven's walls.

"Have you ever heard about the old lady who wanted to dry her cat off after it came in from the rain?" I say, wiping a chunk of yolk off of the microwave ceiling with a paper towel, thinking, morbidly, of Teeta as I told the punchline. "She stuck Fluffy into her microwave and did what we just did to the egg."

"Gross," says Marty. He pauses dramatically. "Meeeowwwrrrrggh...pppshhh!" He uses his hands to simulate an explosion for added effect.

Could this really be a true story? Who cares? We laugh together, bonded in our horror that it just might be.

I know that Kim, if she were to see this scene playing out, would then be a total bitch to me for several days. "Now Marty likes you more than he likes me," she had said last week, after seeing us locked in a particularly noisy stalemate of a wrestling match. "And I'm *his sister*."

But I wrestle, eat Triscuits with sardines and grape jelly, and time eggs in the microwave. I also nod understandingly when Kim complains about Pete ruining her mom's life and I am desperate to tell her about my fierce crush on Will Newbold, the most beautiful boy in school. I can't help it if doing all of these things feels natural. I don't want to be the wedge between siblings, but I don't know what else to do.

I keep cleaning up the eggs as the rain continues to fall.

When the first trimester ends, and the athletic winter season officially begins, Kim decides to join the swim team.

I know, of course, that there are people like this. We -- those of us who devote our lives to this

sport, who don't even think about Germantown Academic Swimming as anything other than a way to become nationally, internationally, olympically and famously ranked -- called them the Varsity Swimmers.

We use "Varsity" as an insult.

So now Kim has "signed up" for swimming. Now what?

When I see her in a bathing suit for the first time, the softness of her body surprises me. I see her naked all the time at home in our room, of course -- we are long past any stranger-induced modesty -- but here on the pool deck, in a black lycra suit that can't do a thing with her breasts, I can barely look at her. Our bodies look as if they belong to different species. Shoulberg might be telling me every day to lose weight, but at least I don't have curves that a bathing suit can't handle or arms that don't have any curve to them at all. I am almost ashamed of her, embarrassed for her, as we walk around on the deck that we really actually do own, we who have put in the hundreds of hours here before it ever occurred to the Varsities that swimming might be a fun thing to do or a good way to get toned for lacrosse season.

"Oh *great*, it's that time of year again," Kathy Hettche had hissed in the locker room when Shannon Petrilli walked in. "The more there are of them, the less lane space there is for us. And it's not as if we have any to spare."

As much as I try to reject everything that comes out of Kathy's mouth -- by now, I absolutely officially hate her -- I have to admit that she is right. The deck is stuffed with new people, confused people (*scared* people, if I were to take a moment to think about it with opposite sympathies), soft and uncertain people who will take Lanes 5 and 6 and leave the rest of us with one third less space, with seven or eight in a lane. Even with the way Shoulberg configures the lanes to maximize space -- "opposite ends," as he calls it, with half starting in the shallow end, half in the deep, racing toward each other and creating a circuit that chases itself with a ferocity that will, mysteriously, not frighten the Varsities quite enough to quit -- we will be crammed in.

Our resentment comes with the little knowledge that some of them have whispered things about us in the hallways, or at the very least have thought of us as weird and antisocial. Now they need us to be nice to them, and they are in our way.

Kim sees me and smiles, tentatively. Her cap is askew, plopped inexpertly on her head, and her goggles -- I cringe when I see them there -- are dangling around her neck. Her curvy breasts and hips, so effective in attracting guys like her current boyfriend, are gorgeous and mysterious Bud Swope, are all wrong here. I silently curse myself for not trying harder to talk her out of joining the team.

But then I look at her face more closely and see that her round blue eyes are just a little bit frightened. I can also tell that even now -- before practice even starts and she gets to look over from her slashed and simplified Lane 6 workout to see us flying by at speeds that can never be described with words, that can only be seen and *felt* to truly understand -- even now she is impressed. She is beginning to realize why I stay home every Friday and Saturday night, falling asleep in the TV room as I watch *Miami Vice* and *Hunter*. She is starting to see why I need that third helping of mashed potatoes and why I have been known to rub Ben-Gay on my situps-ravaged abdomen before going to bed. Eventually, if she sticks with it and finishes the swim season, she might see enough to understand why I left home and came here, to live with her, to share her room, and to share her family, with all of Pete's belches and Marty's Seeping Presents. Suddenly I am no longer ashamed of Kim. I am impressed that she had the guts to put that body in a suit and stand here in front of Shoulberg. I am happy that she will now at least begin to understand what I have been going through. I look forward to nights when we can talk about the day's workout and she will shake her head in awe as she tries to describe what it's like to watch me swim. And I am pleased that, right now, she is looking at me as a source of encouragement and, well, of love.

To My Baby Nephew

E. C. Kelly

Hey Jacob,

So I know you're probably asleep right now and I bet you're dreaming about molecular structures. Or Pokémon. Or how to steal your little sister's PJ Masks hoodie. You go ahead and keep sleeping; I'll say all this again when you're older.

You were born in the winter, close to Christmas, and your grandparents and I have been fighting. I was really confused about why Mom and Dad wanted me to come home for winter break. When we were together we fought; so it made sense not to be together. I know that sounds confusing, so let me say it this way.

Remember when you were building that blue Lego tower? It was huge and gorgeous and it made me think you'd be a good architect. You didn't have enough blue Legos to finish, so we put a red one on top. And you started to cry, because the red Lego piece didn't match the blue Lego pieces?

Sometimes our family makes me feel like a red Lego piece.

I don't remember how I found out you were born, but I remember your grandma and grandpa picking me up to come see you. I remember walking into the hospital room and there was your mom, exhausted and beaming in her hospital bed; your dad couldn't stop smiling. He picked you up and gave you to your grandma. Then to your grandpa. Then he gave you to me.

You won't remember this, but you were wrinkly and you weighed almost nothing. And while I stood there holding you, some stuff that seemed stuck to me started to get unstuck. I looked at you and the certainty that I would die for you became a blunt fact. I'd never met you before. You couldn't speak. But I knew I would do absolutely anything to keep you safe.

After I said goodbye to you and your parents, I walked to the car with my parents. It was a Wisconsin winter and when you cry in Wisconsin winters the tears freeze to your eyelashes.

Your grandparents dropped me off at my apartment. I sat next to my self-covered boots on the floor, crying.

Jacob, before I met you, I didn't understand why my parents wanted me to come home for Christmas. I didn't understand why being together for Thanksgiving, or Easter, or the Fourth of July was something to fight for. I held you for five minutes. You taught me why.

The Target Boy's Section

Rowan Smith

Don't worry, he whispers

You have a right to be here

Besides, you're too small for the men's section anyway

Linoleum floors and fluorescent lights stretch out endlessly

Funhouse mirrors around every corner

The occasional stray shoe or pair of boxers on the floor, abandoned without their mate

It's twenty minutes to closing, and I still haven't been able to try anything on

Not the sweatpants that I'm afraid will expose the undeniable truth of my hips

Not the jeans that are both too long and too tight

Not the shirts that I know will stretch over my chest, distorting the pattern

A high made into a bad trip

Hey, he says softly, as though I'm an animal that might get spooked by the natural pitch of his voice

The one that rumbles deep in his chest before a single word comes out

What about this one?

He hands me a button down

The kind I always wanted to wear in school pictures

Night sky blue, sprinkled with stars like the flour he always manages to spill on his shirt, even when he wears an apron

My heart flops dully into my rib cage,

Defeated, because it knows I will say no

But too hopeful to give up just yet

Please?

I run my fingers over the material, stiff

So unlike my old clothes

Love, he whispers

As though it is my name

Not the one that pinched like the heels I won't wear anymore

The one we picked off a baby naming website at two am in a Waffle House

Table littered with empty congealed milkshakes after four hours

Four

Hours

Do you know how much somebody has to love you to listen to "100 Gender Neutral Names for Cool Kiddos"?

To take you seriously even when you pick a name sandwiched between Raindrop and Star?

But still he's here in the Target Boy's Section

Arms full of shirts I'm too afraid to try on yet

Why can't I?

Why does my ribcage feel too tight around me?

Why can't I breathe?

Hey, he whispers, the same voice he used on the baby bird that dripped onto our porch

It was so small, naked, nothing to cover the fresh pink skin but a few scraggly feathers

I wonder how it would feel beneath the glare of these lights that are flattering to neither

man nor bird

I wonder who would be more naked

I wonder whicj one of us is going to grow up faster

Whether we will grow up at all

Which one? he asks, one patterned with rosebuds like stars, the other with constellations like a field of wildflowers

The roaring begins in my ears again

A din like the ocean pounding out its anger on the cliffs

My old name meant daughter of the sea

I was nobody's daughter, but at least I know where the rage came from

Baby?

I point to the constellations, finger trembling, almost accusatory

I know the chest will be too tight and

My chest is too tight

And this room is too bright and

Love, he says again

Pip

Daisy

Tree climber

Midnight adventurer

Worst driver I know

Favorite cover stealer

Our dog's biggest parent

Best friend-

This is not the end

This is only the beginning

Take your time, love.

Take your time.

Stardust Bones

Rowan Smith

In sixth grade, my science teacher was the least inspiring woman I knew
Wore nothing but mustard and beige
Always had runs in her stockings
Ate alone in the breakroom while slipping coupons for Bed, Bath, and Beyond
She was, on the whole, forgettable
Except for on the first day of our astronomy unit
With mini Saturns dangling from her ears,
She stood dramatically
And proclaimed to the class
We are all made of stardust.
In sixth grade, this was terrible in the most ancient sense of the word
As in exciting terror and awe
As in take your breath away
Terrible
She waited all year to say that sentence
The one and only that would make an impression on a room of kids who would rather
be
Anywhere
But here
Leaving class, I bounced on the balls of my feet
Purple sharpied converse squeaking on linoleum on the way home
In the back of a bus that smelled like hot plastic and pencil shavings
I ran my fingers along my spiderweb veins
Wondering what galaxies lingered there
That day, I swore that I would bleed glitter and let it drip down until I found someone
whose insides matched mine
And I grew into something worth loving
The night I met him, I could see the stars etched on his bones from miles away
Myth branding the cortical surface, proclaiming he was Other
Like me
That he kept his best selves hidden away
Like me
That he, too was a mismatched that he never quite seemed to fit
Beneath the blacklights he glowed in a way that didn't belong to this earth
Something borrowed from a place not quite ours
Six seeds of a pomegranate dropped in my palm
Promising to show me his secrets
If I showed him mine
Fingers dipped in stardust, beckoning me
Braiding together his thread and mine until the constellations buried in his marrow and
the galaxies singing through my veins become one universe
Like Gemini
The twins
We are intertwined

I thought then that I had found it
Found the person who would bleed the same as me
Whose insides matched mine
But then he took my hand,
Bone on bone
Leading me to what I believed was home
But he stopped at a glittering black pool of sky
And in a moment I understood
The boy with stars in his bones was my best friend, not the answer to a riddle
My other half was the reflection in the pool
Not the girl I was
But the person I was becoming
I let my wrist hang over the water
Let my veins sing their last
As I realized
The stardust in my veins was too big for this celestial body
The only shape I needed to grow into was my own

Jonathan Burgess lives in upstate South Carolina with his wife, four children, and a Giant Schnauzer named Titus Andronicus. He has an MFA in creative writing from Converse College. He's the managing prose editor for South 85, and his writing has appeared in The Remington Review, Catholic Exchange, O-Dark-Thirty, and Blood & Thunder. His essay "Chai Party" was published in War, Literature, & the Arts and also nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Laurie-Lynn McGlynn was born in Toronto, and currently works and resides in Caledon Ontario. In 2016 she completed a BFA with distinction from the University of Waterloo and has recently returned to Ontario from Halifax, where she was part of the MFA program at NSCAD University. As a writer, McGlynn has written two librettos and is currently working on a third for a spring 2019 project. She co-founded the collaborative art collection called MOTUS. The group consists of her colleague composer, McGlynn's poetry, vocalists, experimental dance and digital media. In addition to MOTUS, and several creative writing projects, McGlynn wrote for Acadia University Newspaper, The Athenaeum, as the Arts & Entertainments editor. She had the honor of interviewing the Tragically Hip during their concern on the university campus. As an arts professional, McGlynn has learned the value of content writing and digital marketing. Both have been a big part of promoting her work and that of her colleagues in group exhibitions. She currently works as a freelance copywriter. As a painter, McGlynn's work is indicative of process-based media which explores the materiality of acrylic painting and its multifunctionality. McGlynn's 3-dimensional paintings create an interesting dichotomy between the historical language of painting and contemporary works of this medium. McGlynn's work has been exhibited in public galleries across Nova Scotia including Anna Leonowens Gallery, Ontario cities such as Stratford, Kitchener, Waterloo, London, Toronto, and in private collections.

Hannah Turlish is the History Department Chair at the Haverford School for Boys in Haverford, PA, and she previously works in New York City for twelve years and in the Boston area for four years. Much of her writing, including the piece in this issue, "Seeping Presents", is about her life as an elite swimmer.

E. C. Kelly has an M.A. in Liberal Arts, which is a fancy way of saying she's studied teaching, acting, and creative writing a lot. What motivates her writing is the queer kid born to an unaccepting family. She wants to reach that kid.

Rowan Smith is a novelist, playwright, and freshman at Bryn Mawr college, where they are double majoring in Creative Writing and English. Their short stories have been published in the US and in the UK, and they review upcoming books for Simon and Schuster, Random House, and Harper Collins. They are currently in the process of getting their first book published. Their first musical is in development.

