

Writer to Writer

A journal by writers, for writers



Fall 2023

Issue 09

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Letter from the Editor

Dear reader,

Welcome to the eight edition of *Writer to Writer*, a literary journal written *by* writers, *for* writers, in collaboration with the Sweetland Center for Writing. Through this organization, we aim to foster interdisciplinary creativity across a variety of modes, mediums and genres.

This semester, under new leadership, *Writer to Writer* expanded our mission to focus on the growth of our membership, by holding a series of creative writing workshops. Through these weekly workshops, our members were able to hone both their creative writing and editorial skillsets.

In the latter half of the semester, our mission shifted to publication production. Our editorial staff met weekly to share ideas, review submissions, and work together to compose the latest edition of our literary journal.

Within this issue, you will find pieces that all touch upon common themes of culture and life

, particularly with the beginning and end of life. From existential poetry to romantic partners having fallen apart, we hope that you see yourself in this wonderful microcosm of writing, and that you enjoy the stories our writers have chosen to share.

As always, our journal strives to celebrate multimodality in writing as well as the individual writing process for different writers with our “Spotlight Interviews.” You can find snippets of these interviews with featured writers in the publication itself, and you can hear them in full by scanning the supplemental QR code to listen on our website.

Lastly, this journal would not be possible without the generous support of the Sweetland Center for Writing, especially from our wonderful faculty advisor Dr. Shelley Manis.

Her thoughtful guidance and enthusiasm have been absolutely essential in producing our journal and continuing our growth as a young publication. To Shelley, the Sweetland Center for Writing, the contributing writers, and to you, reader, we are so grateful. Thank you for all your support.

Sincerely,

Madi Altman & Krystal Koski
Co-Editors-in-Chief
Writer to Writer

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Julie Zhou

KIDS

Strange, foreign creatures

Filled with disease and nonsense,

But also of innocence and joy

As absorbent as a sponge to the world around them

But I can't allow them to absorb

The poison that spews from my mouth

Or let them be brittle

From a lack of everything

For I am a creature of starvation

Barely able to feed myself

THE SILENCE OF LONELINESS

I'm all alone

Not a word breaks the silence

I sit by myself

My thoughts are the only thing I can hear

Not a word breaks the silence

Outside, I'm sure the world is alive with noise

Alas, my thoughts are the only thing I can hear

So I sit alone and dwell on everything

Outside, I'm sure the world is alive with noise

I can see the chirping birds, but not a single sound reaches my ear

I only sit alone and dwell on everything

Everything is contained inside of me

I sometimes imagine noises, but in reality not a single sound reaches my ear

I'm in a bubble no one can pop

Everything is contained inside of me

I wonder what would happen if I could break free

I'm in a bubble no one can pop

Solitude pulls at my every end

I wonder what would happen if I could break free

But I will never know, the eternal silence prohibits me

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I'm in a bubble no one can pop
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I wonder what would happen if I could break free
But I will never know, the eternal silence prohibits me

Solitude pulls at my every end
I can see what happens around me
But I will never understand, the eternal silence prohibits me
It seems I am the only one left without a friend

I can see what happens around me
People laugh at others' jokes, everyone's lives intertwine
It seems I am the only one left without a friend
My life is a single strand, undisturbed by everyone else

Everyone's lives intertwine
Noise crowds their space
I remain undisturbed by everyone else
While the silence devours me

LADY OF THE SEA

Looking above at the aquatics,
swimming with no clue that they are
trapped in a man-made ocean,
made me yearn to become a fish.
The beauty of constantly moving,
wiggling their bodies to stay afloat,
is a simplicity I need in life.
However,
the longer I imagined being submersed in
the beautiful blue,
the heavier my chest felt.
I was no longer a fish with fins keeping me up,
but a woman who cannot swim.
The light blue turned dark and cold
as my panic peaked.
I cannot swim,
I cannot tread water.
The burdens of my life weighed heavy,
sinking me to the bottom
like a forgotten shipwreck.
As wonderful as life would be
as an aquatic animal whose only job
is to survive,
I need to remain on land
to maintain my job of survival.

I LOVE TOO MUCH

"The piano drips its little notes, like rain dreaming itself whole."

—Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

my default setting is love, i love thoughts drowned by
symphonies,
people-watching in indie cafes,
and smelling like smoke from last night's
campfire.

(i love french music, rubato,
chopin, and steinways.)

maybe it's because i've been missing
so much.

"missing" has so many meanings that i'm
lost in the lexicon,
unsure which parts of me
are which kinds of missing.

i think maybe i might be missing,

longing, lost, absent, untraced
and i have love with
nowhere to go,
overflowing my chest and gut
every time i breathe, diaphragm
fully constricted by the suffocating weight of all my
loving.

i love things and people i know i shouldn't,
things and people i know i can't have.

i'm fragile now;
music breaks me so easily,
a violinist's delicate fingertips able to strangle my own beating
heart with a simple
melody.

i can't imagine how many other things
must now possess the power to break me.

my default setting is still love
even in this pressure machine.

so tell me,
how do i sever these
hazardous wires, before i trip and set off the
alarms? before i see the one who rewired
me, who tampered with each of my colorful buttons,
who showed me settings i didn't know
existed within me, settings

that shouldn't have existed
for someone who didn't ever
love enough.

but i love
too much.

after all, i'm still calling boys after museum trips,
dreaming of those who hurt me, and
crying in hill auditorium.
when will i learn to give love
that's deserved,

that's welcomed,
that's returned.

when will i stop loving so much?

WILLIAM

I still remember his smile,
And the quick cast of charm when he bared his teeth.
The fisherman's line flew in my direction
Its hook catching my breath
Brief asphyxia
An uncontrollable egress
Exhalation without the balance of inspiration
A body robbed of air

Truth be told, I let it slip.
Beguiled I stood,
Mesmerized by those beaming white rays of light against
his beautiful, Black skin

Enamored, Enchanted, Enraptured
I was

My feet sunk into the sand and my heart stood before me
while muddied waves lapped behind
The wind played with my braids
Urging me to go to him
Pushing me that way
His way
I shouldn't have listened
A fish pulled from her home

With breath partially returned, I listened to the insistence of the wind
and went to him.

We planted two chairs on the sandy bank of our enclave,
Sinking into them as the sun sunk behind the trees,
Coloring the sky with the last of its hues
Signaling that the cicada should ready its tymbal and begin the day's
sonata
My ears heard no sound apart from the melodies that flowed
from his mouth

Enamored, Enchanted, Entraptured
I listened

Words and prosody blended together
in wonderful harmony
I prayed that his words would never cease
That the moment would never end
That we'd stay there on that lake
With its muddied water
And musical cicadas
Together

God's will obviously didn't include that.
I wish I knew that that'd be the last time we meet.
The last time I'd ever hear his voice.

At last we stood,
His hand found mine
As did his lips
A rhapsody welled up within me, like blood from an inward wound,
and gushed out
A profession of love rolled out of my mouth and slipped into his
He swallowed it whole
Nourishing the ego but malnourishment to the sender
My words were never returned

Instead, when we finally untangled, that sweet voice said:
"I don't want to hurt you, but I'm not ready for a relationship"
Little did I know, the "with you" was silent

Sadness is hard to shed
Especially when you learn that the object of your first love's affection is
your best friend
And not you
How does one deal?
How does one cope?
How does one grasp with the illogical nature of love, and its persistence
despite a past of hurt?
Reason and love often form no bond.

William broke my heart,
Yet it still yearns for him so.

HARD EDGES, SOFT SKIN

"Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.
Yo la quise, y a veces ella también me quiso."

Pablo Neruda

She isn't supposed to be here. In fact, she was supposed to be home twenty minutes ago. This doesn't stop her though.

The man sitting in front of her smiles. She doesn't even remember his name. Yet, she just smiles at him too and slips her jacket off.

The smell of cheap vodka disperses through the room as she opens the bottle and pours it into the shot glasses. She doesn't bother with the semantics of making sure they're both filled evenly.

She sets the bottle down before picking up the glasses. She hands one to the man she doesn't know.

He grins.

They clink cups before throwing back the alcohol. It burns in the usual way, but it goes down easily.

The two of them make eye contact. And, for a moment they just stare at each other. She swears she can feel his heart beating so hard it might fall right out of his chest.

She clears her throat. "Another?"

The man only nods.

And, so the night goes on.

It is at 4 am when she finally wakes up next to the stranger. Her head hurts, but she just shakes it off with a shrug and pulls on her clothes.

The man is sleeping peacefully. In the dim light coming from his open window, she sees that he is indeed handsome. She doesn't bother to leave a note.

+

She watches carefully as her dad slaps her mom right across the face. The noise rings through the open living room. She swallows.

This is how it's supposed to be.

+

She watches carefully as her first boyfriend kisses another girl. The image pierces her skull. She cries.

This is how it's supposed to be.

+

She watches carefully as the man she isn't supposed to be with breathes in his sleep. The up and down of his chest makes her heart ache. She sighs.

This is how it's supposed to be.

+

She is finally stepping into her home. Their shared apartment is small and it reeks of safe. There are books scattered around their various

shelves and tables. Coffee mugs sitting clean on the counter from when he had done the dishes. Throw blankets and pillows tossed haphazardly on their couch and chairs.

She swallows hard as she steps into their bedroom.

Nick sits up quickly.

"You made it back," he breathes out, relief seeping through his skin.

She nods, "Yeah, Sorry. Girl's night got a little crazy."

He forces out a laugh, "Yeah, I bet. Glad you're home."

She changes out of her jeans and tank top into her pjs. He watches her carefully. Carefully enough that he has to notice the bruises on her neck that weren't there before. He doesn't say anything.

He watches as she brushes out the knots and tangles in her hair. The brush is yanked through her hair with calculated strokes.

"I'm tired," she says as she sets her brush down on their dresser.

"What time do you have class tomorrow?" He pulls back the comforter for her.

"Not until noon." She climbs into the bed and lays her head on her flat pillow. "You should know," she laughs, "we've been together for like 6 months now."

"Yeah." He turns on his side and puts his arm over her waist, "Sorry."

"Don't apologize," she says, "Goodnight, I love you."

+

"Are you coming out tonight?" her friend Amanda asks her, not bothering to look up from her phone.

"Should I?" She stares up at the ceiling of Amanda's apartment from her place on the floor.

"I think so. I mean, what's a Friday night without getting drunk, right?"

She snorts at Amanda's comment. "You're a raging alcoholic."

"Says the one addicted to crystal meth."

"That was one time," she defends. "What time are we pregaming?"

Amanda hums. "Probably like 9? Are you bringing Nick?"

She shrugs. "Dunno."

"You guys really are so cute, honestly. Y'all are, like, goals or whatever."

She laughs. "Yeah, I like to think we are."

+

She knows she should stop now because if she goes any further she will do something she shouldn't.

"Do you want to stop?" the man asks her. They are in his bedroom. It is a bit messy, but she doesn't mind.

She shakes her head no. He kisses her again.

They kiss and kiss. They spend time together in a way where she can barely tell where her limbs end and his begin.

And, when it is all said and done, she still feels nothing but empty. She stares at the wall next to her as he sleeps. She tries so hard to make her heart ache, to make her chest hurt, to make it something that fucking matters. Nothing works.

She crawls out of his bed slowly. Her clothes are weaved throughout his room. As she jerks on her skinny jeans, the man in bed twists. She stops breathing, praying that he doesn't wake up. Luckily, he doesn't.

She rushes to leave.

As she walks home she can't help but wonder if that is what her first boyfriend felt when he fucked somebody else. Was he pleading to feel something like remorse? Or did he simply feel nothing?

This is her first time. She thought it would be more exciting. It wasn't anything but another fuck on her long list.

Because it doesn't matter. Nothing matters, in fact. Not when love is a myth fools use to make themselves feel better.

+

"Nick," she says. He looks up from his book sitting on the library table.

"Yeah?"

"Do you wanna go on a date or something today?"

"Today?" he repeats, just to be sure he heard her right. They've only

been together for two weeks officially now.

"Yeah."

"Alright."

The two of them end up taking a stroll through the busiest area of their college town. It is nice to see all the students sitting and studying in the coffee shops. The friends eating in the restaurants. The elderly sitting on the benches taking everything in.

They are hand in hand. Her heart should flutter. She should feel the butterflies everyone talks about in her stomach.

"Are you hungry?" Nick asks and she nods.

"I could eat."

"Do you wanna get ramen? I know it's your favorite."

She does smile softly at this, knows she should at least. He remembered.
"Yes."

+

She knows moments like this do not last. Not for her.

But, she would like to maybe cherish it for a second longer than she should. It is wholly innocent. It is the type of moment that beats words and worlds.

"You are so beautiful," Nick murmurs into her skin. They are front to back now, naked, and warm. She lets herself smile at his words.

"I love you so much." He says it quietly like it is a secret—one that he shouldn't be saying but he's hoping that saying it will change everything.

She wants to revel in this feeling—in knowing that she is loved after all. But it doesn't seem real and maybe she doesn't want it to be.

She thinks maybe she should say it back. But, when she twists her neck to see if he's still awake, he is sleeping soundly.

Good, she thinks. It's better this way.

+

She feels it intensely when her father slaps her for the first time in her life at the honest age of seven.

It's supposed to be this way.

+

She feels it intensely as her father is put into the ground, finally gone, at the knowing age of fifteen.

It's supposed to be this way.

+

She feels it intensely while her father continues to haunt her even as she tries so hard to forget him at the tormented age of nineteen.

It's supposed to be this way, right?

+

The snow is freezing cold against her bare skin. It burns almost.

So oxymoronic.

She doesn't want to be here, lying in the snow in nothing but shorts and a tank top, but it is not up to her.

She is only here because she doesn't know what else to do. She hasn't felt this way for a while. Maybe since she was fifteen and her father hurt her for the last time. This...this feels...wrong.

She isn't supposed to feel this way about a person. She isn't supposed to feel this way at all, in fact.

She learned to turn it all off. Emotions, feelings, sentiments. Those aren't real. Not anymore at least.

If she lays here she can remember what it is like to be numb. What it is like to be a person who exists purely for pain. Because her skin is aching and raw, her head is pounding, and her heart feels less likely to self-implode.

She hates feeling alive. She hates remembering she is capable of anything other than a dazed existence. She hates thinking maybe she can love too.

WRITER SPOTLIGHT

Olivia Thompson

In each issue, Writer to Writer selects a few submitting writers to interview, encouraging them to reflect on their piece, writing process, and the medium as a whole. Here, our Co-Editor in Chief Krystal Koski sat down with writer Olivia Thompson to talk about her piece, *Hard Edges, Soft Skin*.

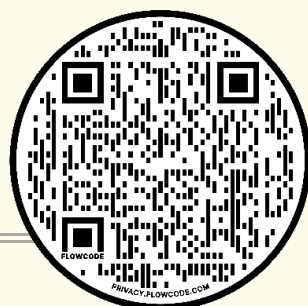
KK: What was the process of writing *Hard Edges, Soft Skin* like?

OT: It's really funny, because, I was writing it the night before I had to turn it in for a class. And I was like, "Oh, my gosh, I still have to print this. I still have to edit it," and so I was just writing and hoping for the best — but at the same time, trying to get this message across. I asked my friend to read over it for me, and she told me how she felt like it was so powerful, and really great. So she was definitely part of the process, because without her, I would have just probably scrapped it and started something new.

KK: Is there any message or takeaway that you hope readers will have when they read this piece?

OT: The main thing I wanted to get across was that she's — Amanda — a very morally gray character. And I think a lot of people are not exactly good or bad; I think a lot of people are morally gray. And I don't think necessarily because she was doing these awful things to Nick that it makes her an awful person. I think there's a lot of nuance to it, especially because you read it and you see a history behind it. So I definitely think there's a lot of nuance to everybody.

[listen to the full interview on our website](#)



CHANCE AND SHADOW

I feel sweat horizontal
where forehead meets brim.

It
parts my face,
saves my eyes,
and cast shadows
(like aspersions
on it all).

It's protecting
this ol' cowhand
who's days are numbered
like 'eir flock's.

('bad sheepdog,'
sneered the mirror,
'bad dog,'
called my head;
now they're covered
by my pardner
when my eyes cast down in shame.)

I turn my head
looking upwards
'til the sun blinds me again.
I deserve it, bein' truthful,
so the pain ain't stopped me yet.

I feel your damp
Where hand holds mine.

I
Part your hair,
Wipe your tears,
And tightly envelop
(Like shade
over your body).

It's protecting
I'm protecting
My old cowhand
With no days numbered
Like were mine.

('Poor wolhound,'
I said softly,
'poor pup,'
I whispered near
Now I cover
As their partner
All that can to them bring pain.)

They turn their head
Meeting mine,
'til my clouds blind them again.
They deserve love, after all,
So I'll give them all my shade.

THE DIVORCEES

Wait, watch until the sun goes down

Unzip the skin of lies

Hang up your honor

Hang up your name

Unveil the black fireball of venom

Uncovered from the pit of hate

Elude his strikes by summoning the lawyer

Attack with wretched screeches

Shred his credibility

Rip his beating vessel

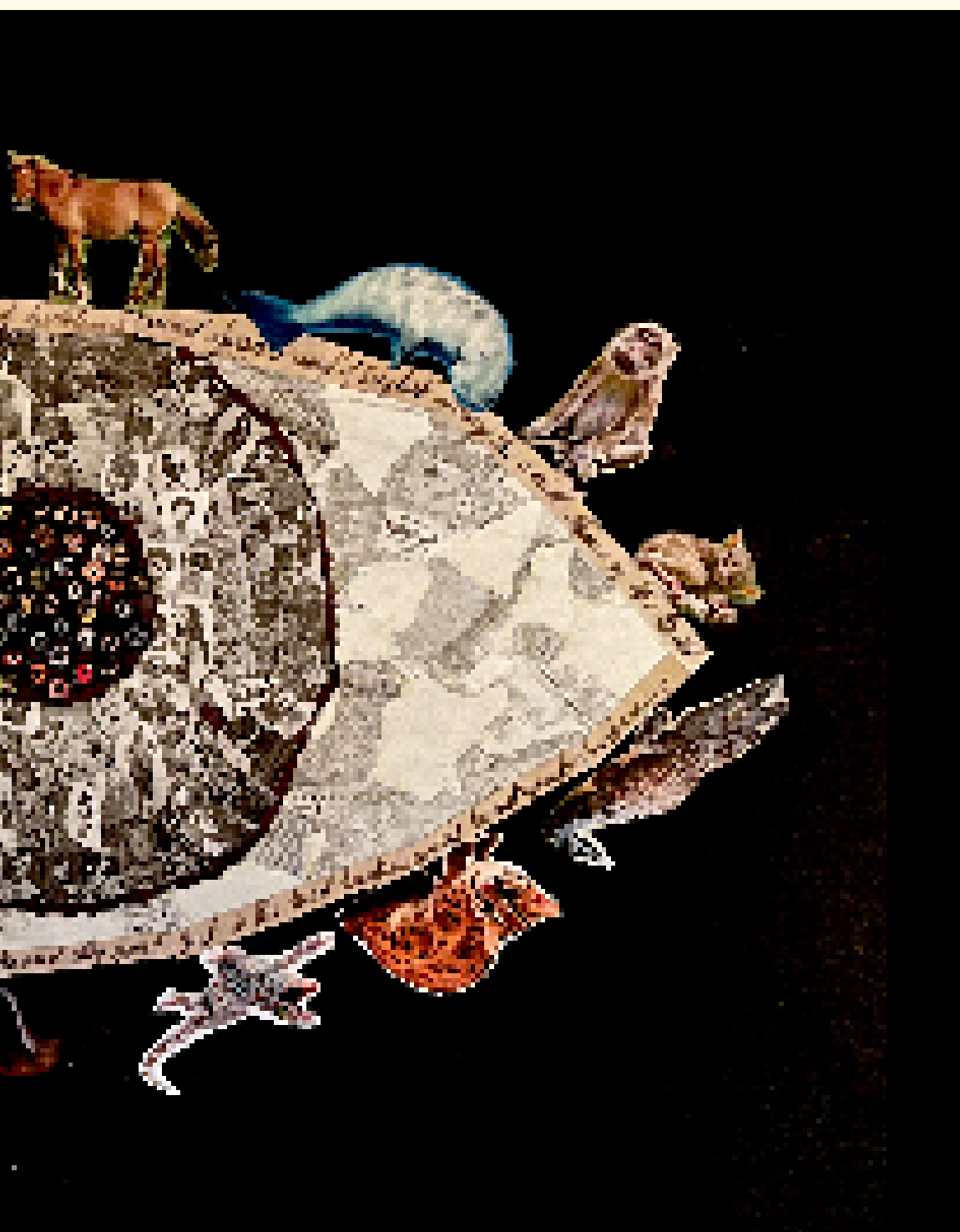
Until you hear his cry

If you finish with a pure heart

And clean hands

You regain your honor and name.





AVA TACKBURY

THE ART OF AGING

I curl my toes around the soft, cool dirt that hugs the trees. I let it fill the cracks of my skin and naively believe that somehow this dirt unites me with the natural world. I watch the trees sway above me — their branches are mildly barren since the air has begun its annual crisp, causing the leaves to melt away. A few of them litter the ground next to me.

I am alone out here, just me and the trees. I hear a chickadee in the distance — I wonder what I would be like if I were a bird. Would I still be me, just trapped in a birds body? I think so. It's not as fun to imagine myself as a bird without theory of mind. My feet are too chilly to continue this charade, so I slip my shoes back on and take a seat on the rock littering our "secret garden." It's not so secret, my mom just likes the book. Maybe someday I'll read it.

Upon my rock, I pick up blades of grass and examine them one by one. I can hear the echoes of my classmates playing, laughing carelessly as they chase each other around the playground. I am not there; I am alone. I prefer it that way — nobody quite understands the joy of getting dirt underneath your fingernails.

At school, I sit on the blue carpet that's been there for 20 years singing "Jesus loves me." Apparently, the bible tells me this. I make a note to ask my mom for proof of this when I get home. I don't buy it. Why is it that everyone just accepts what is told to them? How am I supposed to believe the "bible" if I don't know who wrote it?

One of these days I'll be the smartest woman alive. I will know as much as I can, I am motivated by understanding and am eagerly anticipating adulthood. The bore of childhood is that nobody cares what I have to

say. One of these days I will know so much that they'll have to listen to me.

I'm gripping the brown speckled carpet for dear life. My bones ache from sadness; I carry it with me all day. It's heavy like lead. I sleep for four hours every night and they're the most blissful hours of my existence. Emptiness. Blackness. Not a single thought can seep through my thick skull that rests underneath the paper-thin skin. I never dream. Each day I put one foot in front of the other – my only goal is to make it to the end of the path.

I am a pseudo-vampire. When I leave in the morning it is dark; I stay within the concrete confines of my school long after the sun sets. There is something soothing about concrete walls and classrooms without windows – I am alone in the space and so I can exist without a second thought. I do not tiptoe around when I fill up my water bottle. Instead, I type mercilessly on my laptop and my fingers do not cease until every last assignment is turned in. What else is there to live for?

Everything is unrelenting. Every day gets harder and my problems become more insurmountable. It's doubtful that I'll make it out alive. Nobody knows – nobody's listening. If I make it out alive (an outcome I struggle to see as the most likely), I want a life where things are manageable. I'm sick of my head falling beneath the waves while I'm swimming as hard as I can. Sometimes I manage to drag myself to a shoreline, but when I stand to try to catch my breath I am entirely alone.

One of these days, if I make it, someone will love me. Someone will hold me and tell me everything is okay because we will get through it together. My island's population will double and we'll build a secret garden as our oasis. I have something to give and one of these days I'll find someone

who's willing to take it.

I am a tower of weak bones, but I am still standing. I walk from obligation to obligation and my knees crack when I move. I feel nothing and I once knew everything, but now I am aimlessly wandering towards the path to adulthood. I thought I arrived over a decade ago, but any and all knowledge I had is irrelevant.

I am exhausted when I sleep eight hours a night. It's the same routine every day. I miss the monotony of childhood; I am most myself when I am sitting in the dirt alone. There isn't much time to do that, though.

I watch people engage with the world from the sidelines. I don't have the time to partake, and if I did, I'd be too exhausted to engage. I'm young enough where I could be careless, but I am too burdened by tasks to frolick about and enjoy my youth. I missed my opportunity to be young even though I am still naive twenty-something.

How you live your days is how you live your life, they say. My days bleed into each other; my life is becoming part of the cog in the machine. I take care of myself, of my bills, of my life, by all metrics I am thriving. Then why do I feel as if my life is all for nothing?

One of these days I'll figure all this out. I will emerge victorious; I will be successful. I will have worked myself to the bone until I finally have something substantial to prove it. Somehow, I will pull myself to shore and our shared garden will be blossoming with life. I will be able to stand with my toes in the dirt and go about each day with a goal of getting dirt under my fingernails. One of these days I will rediscover my childhood self; I will remember what it's like to feel things uninhibited.

One of these days it will all make sense. Maybe.

IS MORRIS HOME?

"Morris? Is Morris home?"

"Not yet grandma," I whispered and held her hand tightly. Tracing her blue-veined hands, I remembered how alien like I thought these to be as a child, and how scared of them I was. But now, well into her 80s, they were evidence of age and time. Nothing alien about that.

We sat in her corner. A coffee-colored couch that needed to be thrown out had been the designated area for eating, sleeping, talking, and re-watching *The Wizard of Oz* for years. With it came an antique side table with a lamp only illuminating the cup and straw beneath it, and a multi-colored, glass mosaic, filtering the setting sun through the window.

"Sandra!" My father exclaimed. He greets her as if they haven't seen each other in years. A greeting filled with his contagious smile and his never-relenting energy that fills each room he enters. My grandmother was his elementary school teacher. Imagine that? Your mother as your teacher both in school and at home. But their relationship was strong. On the surface, the over the top yet hilarious personality of my father bothered my grandmother, but I could see clearly that she adored it and knew where he inherited it from.

My father set the grocery bags on the dining table. Bags filled with bagels and lox, white fish and cream cheese, rugelach, and pastries, and some gefilte fish for good measure. We always came here for the holidays, permitting if my grandmother was mobile. The addition of her oxygen machine slowly limited our options.

I gazed up at my grandmother, Sandra. Or Sandy. Her hair is a dirty blonde with her roots slowly turning white. When I was younger, I never knew whose hair I had inherited. None of my immediate family had curls. But I eventually saw the wedding photo of my grandparents. She had two small, brown curls on the top of her forehead while my grandfather was almost balding. The high school sweethearts went on to stay together through graduation, the war, a professional baseball career, five sons, and the many births of their grandchildren. I knew I had always longed for a relationship like that. Their dependency, their love, their need for each other's safety and well-being. I remember flipping through photo albums and seeing their travels and adventures around the world. But my grandfather rarely looked at the camera while my grandmother smiled big and wide in her khaki shorts, white tennis shoes, and her pastel-colored windbreaker. It was curious.

I looked down at her hands again, those pale white hands with turquoise veins bulging through. I always held her hand. As much as I could.

"I got my nails painted today, Grandma." I said while wiggling my fingers in front of her face.

"Oh, how beautiful." She responded as I saw the wrinkles on her face lift and morph into her classic smile. She chuckled slightly, as if this small piece of news I had delivered was a highlight of her day. Her chuckle was soft but familiar. She chuckled with an elegance you could only have acquired in the golden age. An age of big bands and swing dancing. An age where you could see Frank Sinatra live before sitting down to watch a film. An age of missing the young men who were drafted. An age where your best bet was changing your last name to something less...Jewish. An age where sowing a dress for your wife was looked down upon but you did it anyway because you picked up the trade in the war.

But it was clear, time had passed. I only knew my grandparents in the present. My grandfather's wisecracking jokes, their unplanned visits to our house with a quart of ice cream tucked under one arm, my grandmother's classic, rich, chocolate cake, meeting at the Italian restaurant down the road after my dance recitals, and the never-ending stories heard around the table during Rosh Hashanah and Passover.

I can remember hearing my grandfather's thick Bronx accent, teasing my siblings and I with his riddles. "What color was George Washington's white horse?" I giggled at the question, always wanting to hear it again during every visit and reacting as if I was hearing it for the first time.

But as time passes, age is its testament.

I glanced over to my grandmother again.

"Look grandma!" I exclaimed. She gently took my hands and said, "Oh how beautiful, when were they done?"

"Today." The feeling had become regular. The repetition had become a staple of our conversations but that was oddly the only way to move forward. My chest tightened as I was reminded of how this was how it had to be. My grandmother was not any less than she was before. She just needed to be reminded of certain things.

"Why don't you tell grandma what you did today?" My father said as he motioned me to continue.

"But I already did." I replied. His face became relaxed, and he slowly nodded, "it's okay."

SPOTLIGHT

“Edward Jameson”

In each issue, Writer to Writer selects a few submitting writers to interview, encouraging them to reflect on their piece, writing process, and the medium as a whole. Here, our Co-Editor in Chief Madi Altman sat down with the author of Edward Jameson, who wished to remain anonymous.

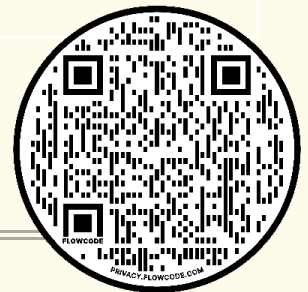
MA: What first inspired you to write Edward Jameson?

A: I was inspired by the experiences of several friends and their families. Joining the military as a way to pay for school was very common where I grew up, however, it was common primarily among low and middle income kids. The wealthier kids in my area rarely took this path, because they didn't have to worry about money for school. It's a very honorable choice to enter the military and serve the nation, but it always bothered me that the military took advantage of people's financial situation to influence this choice.

MA: What was the process of writing this piece like? How was the first draft different from the final draft?

A: This piece was really just a shower thought — quite literally, I thought of it in the shower. I had the idea, sat down for about an hour, and just wrote what was in my head. I did a few minor edits to the language so that it would flow better, but this was really the first and final draft.

[listen to the full interview on our website!](#)



A JOURNEY OF HELLISH PROPORTIONS

The merciless pecking of crows causes a stir. The man rubs his eyes, pushing away the tired. In front of him is a poster centered on the wall. An acid trip of rainbows and free love flows through it. As he locks eyes with it, the vibrant waves begin to undulate. Each color gracefully sways up and down across the laminated paper. Soon, though, it picks up pace. The rainbow dips and dives along a powerful rhythm. Hypnotized, the man sits, mouth agape. It moves faster and faster still until it practically breaks through the paper. A screeching caw erupts, causing him to break his gaze. "Where the hell am I?" Unfortunately for this man, he is no longer in Kansas. He's in hell. His phrasing is quite intuitive, I must say.

The man's eyes darted from one spot to the next. His feet are planted solidly on a shagged yellow carpet. There is an unsettling griminess to it, perhaps because of the woolen texture or the array of blotchy stains embedded in the material. Peering out the window to his right, he finds thousands of crows. The man's legs weaken as he observes their eyes, bleeding crimson-red. Some cling to the window, hacking away at the integrity of the glass. Oddly, there appears to be only a single window to match a tight interior. The man gets up and crosses the room in three steps. He grazes the dingy metal walls with a hand. Hesitantly, he reaches for the door adjacent to the poster.

"Hello there!" I wished to greet him kindly, as I have learned mysterious figures tend to incite screams.

The man blankly stares as if he sees right through me. I wave with an intense smile, hoping to kickstart the conversation.

His eyes begin to dart this way and that, taking in my image. My cloak is lush velvet, embroidered with dark brown striations, concentric circles, and charcoal black designs. Although my lavish attire

is sure to impress, the look of horror the man dons suggests he finds my face distasteful. A viciously pale, slender face, sunken cheeks, and bony hands are not among my most treasured features. Or is it my eyes? No matter.

Slowly, my smile drops, and I exhale, "Okay, let's get started. You're probably wondering who I am, what this place is, how you got here, yadda yadda yadda. Nod if you understand?"

Maintaining his blank expression, he bobs his head.

"Well, the good news is we're going to get you where you need to go. The bad news is you're in hell."

Finally, the man's statue-like face thaws, "I'm what?" He places his hands on his head, combing his fingers through his hair. "Oh God, oh God, I need to wake up. Just wake up. What's going on? Oh God."

"Take a breather pal. You aren't waking up from this one. Hey, whoa, what are you doing?"

The man paces frantically out of the driver's area and into the other room. His chest rises and falls, matching the speed of his feet across the shag carpet. "This doesn't make sense. Why can't I wake up? I'm not dead. This doesn't feel like a dream. Tell me I'm dreaming. Tell me I'm dreaming!"

I drift into the room. The man stops dead in his tracks, his face sweaty and white as a sheet.

"What? Oh. The levitation. I always forget with you newbies. Never mind that. We have work to do!" I plaster a beaming smile which, to my frustration, does nothing to quell his panic. "Look, buddy, you need to sit down and I'll explain."

The man exhales deeply and finds a seat on the bed.

"To start, welcome to hell. My name is Dante and I'll be your travel guide. I help mortals like you get where you need to go. Along the way, you'll regain your memory of how you passed, what you did to get here, we'll do some reflection, share some heartfelt moments, you'll learn a thing or two, and then I'll drop you off at your designated area.

Questions so far?"

The man clears his throat before starting, "Why are we in a trailer van from the seventies?"

"Ah, good question! Lucifer had a particular dislike for the seventies, too much freedom I think. Anything else on your mind before we get going?"

The man's head turns as a distinct thud strikes the window. "What are those things? Ravens?"

"What are you, stupid? They're crows. Ravens work in the prophecy department."

I glide past the man and wave my hand, compelling the door open. The flock that had gathered disperses, apart from one. Its beak holds a small scroll closed with a wax seal. Opening my hands, the crow hops near and drops the message. Unfurling the scroll, it reads:

It is my regret to inform you that there has been an error in the lifespan department. You, Dante, are to escort Amato to the veil following the completion of the three-step program, effective immediately.

Insincerely,

Lucifer

Returning to the van, I find the man sitting there, squirming in his seat. "I just received news that you are not meant to be here just yet. I am to escort you to the veil, which will return you to your life."

"Really?!" The man jumps up, a smile of relief across his face.

"I wouldn't celebrate just yet. You must journey with me through the three steps in order to regain your life."

"Like they do at NA meetings but with three steps instead of twelve?"

"You'll see soon enough. Now, we must begin the journey." I motion for him to open the trailer van door.

"Woah." An immense blood-red sun looms overhead, its pres-

This fearsome ball of light sends shadows to the barren ground and fills the air with a red tint. The sky shares this color, making it appear like a river of red, flowing effortlessly along the curves of the wind. Below this imposing atmosphere is a pale barren land with jagged rocks protruding from the surface. Red fog prevents the eyes from reaching far into the distance.

"Extraordinary, right? Can't beat the bloody sun," I say, placing my hands on my hips with a sigh. "Come, we must make haste. The first step awaits."

Despite the absence of vegetation and dominating sun, the atmosphere lacks temperature. Without a drop of sweat, the two traverse miles of rocky plains. Besides the crows, not a single marker of life or otherwise greets them.

"We haven't seen anything for ages," the man whines, "When will we be there? Or is this some trick and we'll continue for eternity."

"Don't concern yourself with the thought. We are almost there."

"How on Earth could you know that?"

"Look there," I say, pointing in the distance.

A patch of trees materializes. At the sight of the brush, he hops up and down.

"Once again, your celebrations are premature."

The man stops hopping, sobers his expression, and we press on. Reaching the trees, darkness creeps up on us as if cloaking the eyes themselves. The man follows behind, clearly puzzled and unsettled. Vines grow in size, the trees expand, and the darkness becomes impenetrable as they near the center. Soon, I vanish with a twist of my cloak.

"Hey! Where'd you go?" the man calls out, yanking his head side to side.

A faint voice cries out. The man quickly stumbles toward the sound.

"Mum! What's the matter? What happened? Mum! Wake up!" It's high-pitched, the voice of a distressed child.

An older man asks, "What's all this? My God! What did you do, Mary!?" Amato, give me what you're holding! My God, my God, why?" The child's footsteps dash across the hardwood. The older man's moaning and stifled sobs grow quieter. The man opens his eyes, which he neglected to realize were closed, to the sight of the barren landscape and me, still smiling brightly.

"Well, what did you think of the first step?"

The man rubs tears from his cheeks, "That was hell."

"I'm glad you think so! Only two more left to go!"

"I'd rather not," the man says weakly.

"I know, but you must. Trust in me."

The two set off again, although this time, the man's bones are heavier, his peppy walk a trudge.

More bare landscape, the occasional snippy crow, and the constant blood-red sun decorate their journey. The miles double, triple, quadruple, for hours and hours we go. The man asks again, "When shall we be there?"

"All will be revealed. Perhaps conversing would make this quest less tiresome?"

"Sure," the man says unenthusiastically.

"I know much about you," I begin, "I know that your mother died by needle, that your father resented you after her passing."

"We don't need to discuss this."

"Oh? Should we discuss how you fled at 18, found a wonderful woman, had a baby girl? Should I mention the pills you stashed in your desk, behind lock and key? What about how discontent you are, how you crave to feel something, anything? Each night, you lay awake, perplexed at how your life is so wonderful, and yet you feel so terrible. There is an itch inside you, to destroy your life, and the lives of those you love. You started heroin just last week."

"Please, no more."

"I think it is in your best interest to hear this."

"Please," the man whispers, falling to his knees.

I turn to look at the man weeping at his feet. "You have passed the second step."

The man's crying ceases, his breath still trembling.

"Come, get up." The man stands before I ask, "Now you know why you're here?"

"I died last week."

"Of an overdose, yes."

In a vain attempt to quell his racing thoughts, the man presses his hands to his head, rubbing aggressively.

"The good news, for you at least, is there was a mistake made. The lifespan department mixed up your fate with that of another. As part of the third step, you are to face your future, your true future."

We came across a gorge. Its width is astronomical, only matched by its height. "Look down," I instruct.

He does so. To his horror, he finds billions of mortals piled atop each other, wailing and squirming. Although there is no water, each body contributes to a wave-like illusion.

"As you may have guessed, these are the souls of the damned. You must jump from the cliff ledge and plummet downward. There, you will find your future."

"There's no way back from that!" The man paces as he did in the trailer van, his chest rising and falling.

"If you wish to return, trust in me."

The man exhales, ringing out his hands. In a whisper, he says, "Okay." He reaches the ledge with three apprehensive steps. The souls of the damned cry out as if calling him closer. With a breath, he falls.

An agonizing impact takes the air from his chest--every bone in his body protests in shooting pain. Thousands of warm bodies brush past him, pleading desperately for salvation or mercy. Quickly, he is overcome by the souls and taken under. The pressure is immense as the bodies compound above him. Soon, the darkness overwhelms him.

Something flutters by. Its wings are intricately designed, with striations and circles of black, tan, and brown against a tan, fluffy body. It drifts along the air, employing the man to follow. He is home, in the main hallway. Family portraits and his daughter's drawings line the walls. The moon is out, and to his comfort, it shines a glistening silver.

The moth enters a crack in his bedroom door. With a creak, the hinges turn, and the man enters. His wife is nowhere to be seen, but on the floor is his daughter, playing with a lighter. The creature began swirling around her head, dipping each time the lighter ignited. It slips her small fingers. The carpet immediately bursts into burning flames. Screams erupt from her mouth as the fire licks up her arms, singeing her skin.

"Decessa?!" His wife rushes in. The fire has spread to the curtains, walls, and shelves. Before she can react, the fire encroaches on her nightgown, and she too cries out. The man watches helplessly, on his knees. His eyes cannot look away from the tragedy he caused. Black smoke lines his insides as the fire overtakes him.

Then there is light. The man wakes to find himself in a dark room illuminated by candle light. Everything, from the walls to the ceiling, is glossy obsidian.

I sit, with a grin, at the head of an expansive dining table. "Well done!"

The man stares with a pained look in his eyes. He doesn't speak but moves toward the table, taking a seat.

"Now, to summon the veil, I must first tell you a story."

"The night was dark, the forest licked with icy dew. Tree roots tangled and interwoven along the ground required a steady foot. An unbearable isolation overcame me. Silence overwhelmed me. Not a living breathing thing approached, neither a deer nor bear, not even a mosquito. It was just me, the crunch of my steps, the shake of my breath. As I trudged deeper into the brambles, I realized that I no longer knew which way was forward. Panic crept up my back, resting there, compressing my chest. Then, to my right, a flutter sounded.

Illuminated by nothing, I saw it clear as day. A moth, with extraordinary patterns dove past. Without another thought, I ran. Each step brought me closer to a warm, rosy, inviting light. Soon, the uneven ground left my mind and I effortlessly traversed the path. The warm light was pulsing now, the moth circling round. As the darkness subsided, I stood face to face with a doorway made of red pane glass. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Without a second thought, I entered, and here I was reborn."

After a pause, I said, "Take this story as you will, but hear this: Let the moth guide you through the darkness. Be there for your daughter, love your wife. Do not cross them, for they are gentle souls. I shall hope never to see you return."

Upon this last word, the center of the table dissolves, revealing a warm, rosy light. The man stands, eyes on mine. He knows. He has learned.

Through the veil, he reaches his wife and daughter, whom he cherishes deeply. My crows watch over him, and my moths guide him to the light of every day.

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