

# PENGUIN REVIEW

stories, pictures, and poems

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Dear Readers,

As co-editor of *Penguin Review* for the past three years, I have had the pleasure of bringing you what I believe to be the very best that Youngstown State University's undergraduate writers and artists have to offer. This issue is no different. We received many entries in fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and art. The staff and my co-editor, Jordan McNeil, have tediously put together an issue that is the culmination of many talented undergraduates' work.

I am very thankful to you the readers, my staff who I will never be able to stop praising, my excellent co-editor Jordan McNeil, the greatest advisor ever Dr. Tiffany Anderson, Youngstown State University's English Department, The Jambar, Rookery Radio, and any person that has helped *Penguin Review* flourish.

Now, for the sappy truth that Jordan told me to make quick: This issue of *Penguin Review* is the final issue of my tenure as co-editor. I will never forget any of my experiences as a co-editor. Among my favorite are the late nights spent in the office with the staff and co-editor Rebecca Brown for the 50th anniversary issue, our inside jokes, the selection of staffs, and, of course, *Penguin Review* bake sales — the best damn bake sales on campus. After three years, I am sad to let go of my position, but I am very excited about what the future of *Penguin Review* has in store for this university. I know that the *Penguin Review* will continue to offer nothing but the best for you. The staff and future editors are fantastic and will continue to further the progress of the magazine.

Thank you for your constant support,

Tom Pugh  
Co-Editor, *Penguin Review*

Dear Readers,

Wow. It's hard to believe that you are actually holding the 2015 issue of *Penguin Review* in your hands right now. A lot of hard work, blood, sweat, and tears went into the making of this. It's amazing to me how many great writers and artists we have here on Youngstown State University's campus — and these are just the ones *Penguin Review* is able to share in this one issue.

I want to thank the staff for their hard work and determination to help make this magazine the best it can be. I also want to thank them for accepting me into the group as I seemingly came out of nowhere to fill Rebecca Brown's co-editor position — I never once felt as though I was intruding. Thanks to our great advisor Dr. Anderson and my co-editor Tom Pugh for all their help as I felt like I was fumbling around getting used to my new position. They both are wonderful. I also need to thank Rebecca for her assistance and for answering my incessant questions about everything. And I believe a shoutout to my mom is necessary as she helped us solve a problem before it became a crisis — thanks, Mom!

Although I've only been on the staff for a short time, I'm proud to say I was part of *Penguin Review*. I hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as I enjoyed putting it together.

Thank you,

Jordan McNeil  
Co-Editor, *Penguin Review*

Lana

It's a sultry buzz.  
You sit on the floor in the corner  
(legs crossed)  
and smile to yourself as the alcohol  
lazily feathers through your veins.

The music is thick like syrup  
slowly swirling over your skin.  
The dark pull of the baritone arrests your heart —  
now it beats only under the rhythm's command.

You don't want to live anymore.  
This feeling is too seducing  
(too right).

You would drop every responsibility,  
every constraint  
(happily)  
if the alternative was to dwell inside  
the bass line.

Nighthawks

Troubles are laid on  
cherrywood countertops while  
secrets are concealed by  
steel gray hats and steelier glances.  
Porcelain skin and black coffee  
keep men awake long after  
the darkness has devoured  
all sensible civilians.

Nighthawks know a place where  
it's never too early for a drag  
across the town,  
lit by a crescent moon and  
flickering fluorescence.  
Their jackets are stained, reeking  
with the stench of graveyard shifts  
that have rotted their souls.

He minds his business,  
she minds her manners,  
everyone minds their language,  
as to not fracture the fragile glass  
of an aquarium of misfits.

## The Barista

I fell in love with a barista today.

She was new, and giggled nervously at regular customers she hadn't become familiar with yet. Her makeup was perfect and matched the mauve of her uniform polo, but her hair — in a tight ponytail — chose function over fashion, and appeared frizzy from the unpredictable summer weather.

I'd come to do work — I was so far behind on my projects, personal and professional alike — but instead of focusing on what mattered later I could not pull myself out of the now. Watching her tentatively use the espresso machine, too short to see inside her milk pitcher as she steamed its contents, jogging back and forth behind the counter looking for misplaced tools, swelling with pride every time she ground coffee beans, one of the few machines she'd used enough to grow familiar with it. The bob of her ponytail, the faint shaking of her hands, the tension in her thighs when presented with a problem she couldn't immediately solve. She kept her hand on her hip, a comforting gesture for her no doubt. I would have preferred that hand to be mine.

Sky Sailing played softly in my one functioning earbud. Something about the acoustics and the lullaby-like quality of the singer's voice only amplified my trance. My imagination took the hand of this unsuspecting girl and ran wild and free. We were no longer inside the café, but on its roof. The night sky seemed dull against the cherry of my lit cigarette, and her glasses were nowhere to be found. She rested her head on my shoulder, my arm around her, falling asleep under the weight of her body. We danced around a bonfire in a field and she wore my belt around her head. I undid that damn ponytail of hers, and she ran her perfectly manicured fingers through my hair while I explored her body.

We spooned in a hotel bed, she in only my t-shirt. It swallowed up her small body, giving me an excuse to go find it again.

Her smile. That uncertain but eager smile trapped me like a whirlpool. I could do nothing but let myself be swept up in her tide. I let myself drown in her, surrendering my body and soul to the might of her ocean.

“Can I get you anything else, hon?”

I looked up from the blank Word document I'd opened forty minutes ago. My bottom lip throbbed from biting it. I felt dizzy staring at her. She

offered me that uncertain smile, anticipating some kind of response.

A night with you. A field and a bonfire. A cigarette and a cushiony hotel bed. A life raft. I'm drowning in you.

I smiled. “I'm good, thanks.”

You smiled back, warm and genuine, and I felt the tide roll away with your fading footsteps.

Thin Wallpaper

When I punched the hole  
in the wall  
the swarm of bees was  
released.

That clicking noise we heard for  
a few days

steady, consistent

and the bathroom wallpaper  
thinning until seven-year-old me  
curled  
a small  
fist  
and set free  
the nest.

Nowadays,  
I try to poke my head  
around corners  
and slowly open doors.

Locker #257

Every day  
she puts something different in my locker

Sometimes it's a love poem  
or candy or cologne  
which I take

Sometimes it's just her notebooks  
or her purse  
which I leave

I've found cookies, magazines,  
pens and leaves

A computer mouse, feathers,  
ice packs, and toothpaste

Barbeque sauce, stamps,  
ticket stubs, and a raincoat

Cups full of nickels and pennies,  
a cheap watch, and a golf club

A pair of roller skates, a vase,  
several posters, and a dog leash

I want to know who she is  
if she really loves me  
and how she chooses what to leave

But mostly I just want to know  
how the hell she got my combination

## Flora and Fauna in West Germany

I planted a tree in 1988.

I suppose it's more proper to say I planted an acorn with aspirations to be a tree. I had found it on the seat of my lawn chair, brought by some capricious squirrel or a wayward wind.

I was living in the south of Germany — the year before the wall fell — at the time, not far from Heidelberg if you know it.

It was a pleasant enough summer day, and I had never planted a tree before. I asked the nearest neighbor for one of those small gardening shovels. They didn't have one; they suggested a cup instead. I don't think they much liked my presence.

I softened a patch of dirt, lush with grass in the summer months and earthworms after a morning's rain, with an iron fire poker I found in the closet. Then I dug away with the cup. The soil on top was flaky and rough and the soil below soft and a deep brown ebbing on black.

I was little more than an intrepid interloper in forestry, but still, I dropped the acorn in, perfect in shape, a healthy, vibrant brown — hazel. It wasn't dried out — I knew that much at least.

I was willfully ignorant about the germination schedule of acorns, so I checked most days after I covered the acorn in soil to see if the leaves had broken through. I missed my friend; I would eagerly await his return.

Myopic as the young man I was, I became disheartened when the winter came. It was a bad winter; the neighbors lost their child to a flu. I brought over a loaf of bread I made myself, and they hurried me away. They would have left me with the bread if I had not reminded them. I can't blame them. They left a few weeks later. Someone set fire to the paper I had delivered to my door a few days before I saw them drive away.

I trekked out into my yard on a day the snow was up above my boots. I shoveled the snow aside, with thin wool mittens that soaked through quickly with melt water, on what I was sure to be my acorn's patch. There was reed thin, brown grass underneath, staring up at me pitifully. Nothing was alive there. My acorn had died. What could I have expected though? Something else I suppose.

I forgot about the acorn in the very beginning of spring — the time when warmth brushed its red dew lips against your ear, making promises.

The crab apples that my trees produced, with or without my say, grew in abundance that spring. The birds and rodents ate well. I stepped on pits and nibbled remains throughout the spring and summer.

I watered the patch for the first time, early in the spring. I had a spot of another man's blood on my thumb. There was a peaceful protest — showing solidarity with East Germany — in the streets of the small shopping district down the road; I had to walk through it to meet an interviewee for tea. I don't know what happened — some words, a fight, and a knife I think.

I ripped part of my shirt to make a tourniquet and improvised bandage, and I wrapped it around his arm. The attacker stood in the corner twiddling his thumbs, holding back tears while two older men with stern eyes held both his arms at his side. The local doctor was nearby; he came quickly and relieved me. It, the blood stain, was in between the ridges of the knuckle; I couldn't get it all off even with the hose that was tucked under my deck.

I sprayed some water, pressing my thumb against the mouth of the trickling hose, over the patch of dirt where grass had found new life — no sign of the leaves of my acorn though.

I didn't see it until the early summer, when I almost left for the first time. It was small, hidden by grass, but it was a stem with a single leaf sprouting out. The leaf looked slightly deformed, like a cell in the midst of reproduction, but it was a verdant and blanketed in those thick veins that sprang from the stem. It lived, my tree.

I watched over that leaf, as stalwart as any sentry. I brought back books from the library a few miles down the road. It was really more of a house with this middle aged woman — she always smelled of the little biscuits you found covered in chocolate glaze at the corner store — who let you borrow her books. She told me a bit about botany. I don't think she knew much though, she suggested I pour a bit of beer on it.

The books were old, but I don't think our knowledge of growing acorns has changed too much in 100 years. I still was not too good at reading German, so I may have been misguided either way. I tried to give it the right amount of water, and I tried to clear it some room in the soil, pulling any weeds. It worked I suppose, and it grew into a healthy young sapling. The sapling grew up and out, growing to 6 cm before autumn came.

I feared the cold would kill it outright, but I never had the chance to find out. I was watching Reagan speak on the TV I had just installed — for too much — in the twilight of fall when I heard some mewing.

I shuffled to the window, the morning leaving me groggy, with blankets draped around my shoulder. There was a small, deep red fox right before the window, a scarlet streak on the otherwise white patch under its eyes, peering at me. I waved at it, dully aware of how rare a sight the beast was for a city boy. It groused, a shrill cry, before running off into the brush that lined my yard's boundary. I hoped it didn't run into the neighbor's new cat; I didn't want to see either dead.

It took me until later that day to go see my fledgling tree.

It was torn from the ground; claw marks encircled the frayed patch of dirt. It was a grim scene — somehow grimmer than the knife wound I had seen. The plant was left in shreds, claws raking the paper thin membrane of the leaves. The stem was split in twine, with teeth marks on it; it was all wet with saliva.

I had set out to kill the fox that day. I picked up the shovel in my small shed that was really more a glorified box, and I prowled the garden and the brush and the crab apple trees looking for my victim — a life for a life.

I never found the fox. I went back inside, my eyes a bit watery.

In 1989 I planted no acorns.

In 1990 I saw a fox, and I chased it off my lawn. In the spring I planted two acorns.

In 1991 I planted 18 acorns.

In 1993 I decided to stay in that town. I planted more seeds — not all acorns.

In 1995 they built a supermarket; I met a woman there.

In 2000 I had six small oak trees.

### New Message From: Facebook

Facebook texts me at 11:13 every day.  
*You're probably her 11:11 wish* Ben says  
 but I doubt it. I never text her back  
 and I never call and I never log on.  
*You can change those settings* Ben says  
 but for some reason I don't want to.

Some days I don't get out of bed  
 until she texts me. *Hi Facebook*  
 I want to say. *Are you sad too?*  
*I'm sad too.* If I text her back she won't be sad  
 but I'll still be sad and I don't want to be sad  
 or I don't want to be sad alone.

I like waking up and seeing that Facebook texted me.

Facebook shared a Google Drive folder with me  
 full of poems that no one else had read.  
 Every one said *I'm sorry I'm sorry*

I'm sorry too, Facebook.  
 I'm sorry too.

(untitled)

why am I bothered  
we'd never met  
I never knew your name

but you had a father  
and a mother  
maybe siblings, or a dog

you took the bus to school  
or maybe walked  
you probably had friends

friends who cared about you  
friends that wondered  
how they got so lucky

I wonder where you lived  
and was it far  
or were you my neighbor

I wonder what you did  
on the weekends  
did you go out? or sleep?

what did you do for fun  
writing? drawing?  
or maybe you liked sports?

did you like to take walks  
to clear your mind  
and feel warmed by the sun

did your favorite music  
move you to tears

or make you dance like mad

had you kissed in the rain  
or was the rain  
just bad weather to you

had you even known love  
or was love just  
a thing in fairy tales

did someone hold you close  
and kiss your nose  
and tell you it's okay

or did you just feel fear  
like the whole world  
was closing in on you

but what I wonder most  
if we'd been friends  
would you still be here now?

## [Sketches of Youngstown]

## I

Olivia was sandwiched between four others. The two eldest, Leo and Lo, strove to consume as many illegal substances as possible, as early in life as they could. The younger ones, Kat and Richie, bickered with an unshakable affection that only twins could exude. All of the children, the fruit of the womb and hope of a generation, were undeniably lazy at their core. Their creators, Harold and Wendy, had been unhappily married for over twenty-five years, a bloated fact offered to the occasional visitor along with a glass of water and fruit. This dissatisfaction seeped into the walls of the historic home lining 5th Avenue.

The home itself was a character, rightfully so. Built seventy years prior, the edifice was adorned with all of the Grecian pomp of originality. Despite its strut, it was in fast decay. Its occupants had learned to shut their eyes to the leaking ceilings and creaky stairs. When problems were addressed, it was in a seemingly ingenious fashion. For example, Wendy derived great satisfaction from painting over the mold in the children's bathroom with primer.

"Oh, it's the easiest and smartest thing to do. All of the mold will die immediately."

Over the years, the white linoleum kitchen tiles had transformed to a yellow hue due to the perpetually dirty footsteps of children. The shutters' paint was shedding in sickly green flakes. And the once beautiful backyard was now an unmanageable brat, with weeds usurping space at every front.

It was a pariah. It was home.

## II

Shrevi moved to the United States to receive his degree in Mechanical Engineering from Youngstown State University. Each day, his mother would sigh and report to her husband the number of days since she had seen her little boy last. On his birthday, the count was two-hundred and twenty-nine. He lived in a one-person apartment. During the first three days in the US, he did not hear the sound of his own voice. On the fourth, in the shower, he hoarsely sang his mother's lullaby. On the fifth, he met the others — the majority from Saudi Arabia.

Still one short man, in his forties, was from India.

Shrevi's niece was born on his second day of midterms. He was studying for Statics and Fluids. The latter interested him more.

To avoid loneliness, he played chess with Abdullah. Shrevi was very good at chess. The mathematical certainty of it made him smile.

"Stop that. It makes me nervous." Abdullah would say.

Still smiling, *It's very simple: the bishop must die, for the health of the king.* Chess valued sacrifice. *A pawn is just a pawn.*

## III

Martha was to fly back to Seattle in five days.

"Mom is convinced she has lymphoma cancer," Mary said. "You know how she's been complaining about exhaustion for weeks now? The blood work from Dr. Qi came in the mail yesterday. It's all out of sync."

"Jesus."

"Yeah. She needs to make an appointment with a blood doctor — a hematologist — that's what they're called. Except you know how mom is. I'll have to remind her twenty times to schedule. It's just driving me crazy, hearing her worry all of the time. I tell her — mom either you have cancer and you have it, or you don't. Worry won't help."

Martha stared at her chai tea latte.

"Mary, you can't just tell someone not to worry. Mom might have cancer and she's freaking out. She wants someone else to freak out with her."

The downtown coffee shop hummed with the flow of people entering and exiting.

"It's funny because you're right, but it doesn't make a difference. You see, you escaped. Moved away from it all and don't have to deal. Mom tells me *every* problem — financially, or about dad, or about her health, or Peter not being able to find a job, or his childish drinking habits. Every problem our family has, she vents to me, because she has no one else."

Martha blew on her drink to cool it. She did not know how to reply.

The tone-deaf barista was singing a tune to his co-worker. She giggled. A salt and pepper haired couple sat in the corner reading comic books. Two young men were playing chess. A family entered: husband, wife, and four shrieking children. "Hush now", said the dad. A tray of double chocolate chip cookies left the oven. "Oh, alright then." The man pulled out his black faux-leather wallet and paid for four.

Laborer. Retiree. Grandmother. Veteran. Student. Taxpayer.

One of the chess players eyed one of the sisters. He wanted to ask for her number; but they were discussing something intently. *She is beautiful.*

Martha sipped her drink. It burnt her tongue.

#### IV

The sky was drippy that day, as Rachel walked to the Boys and Girls Club after school. She looked at the patchy grass, half-dead from a brutal winter. It had been trying to thrive and so it, at least, was grateful for the drippy sky. She was not.

Rachel had been six years old when she first went to the Club. She found out that it was not a dance party, like the club her older sister would go to on the weekends. It was uppercase Club. The kids danced at the Club, but mostly all of the boys would hog *Just Dance 3* and Rachel would sulk in the corner. No one knew how much she loved to sway her body back and forth, moving her hands to and fro. And Rachel did, but only when the house was empty. Still, she wished the boys weren't such hogs. Usually she would watch the TV and imagine herself dancing. She would neatly bounce to the beat in her head, and always win, in her head.

Once the boys would finish their round of dancing, a group of girls would fill in their place.

The Club was a place kids went to after school. Rachel heard them say it was to "keep 'em off the streets." She didn't know why they said that. The kids who would want to be "on the streets" were, and the kids who didn't, weren't. Anyway, once the older ones reached a certain age, they would stop coming.

It seemed to Rachel that she would never leave. Sometimes she imagined herself, fifty years old, still in a corner, dancing in her head. Maybe they would put an apron on her and make her serve the food like the other grown-up ladies. She wouldn't mind the food bit, but *I'll sure be annoyed if they never ask me to dance.*

#### V

A man, early thirties, stepped outside with his four-year-old son. The storm had begun thirty minutes ago. The father wore a wife-beater and was sprinkled over with tattoos, hieroglyphics he no longer understood.

He jumped into a huge puddle, waiting for his son to mimic his behavior. "C'mon buddy, just jump on in. It won't hurt ya." It took the man four jumps of his own to trigger his son.

The neighborhood girl who lived across the streets watched the pair from her pink filing cabinet of a room. Her eyes intermittently cheered on the water droplets racing across her window. She enjoyed focusing on the watery sprint, and then on the man and his child. The blur of one image with the crispness of the other. To focus on both was impossible.

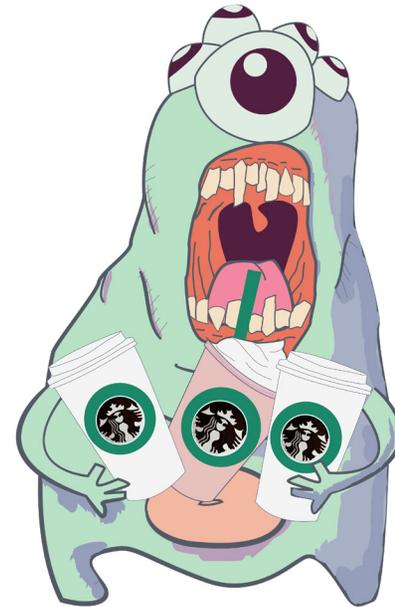
The Storm

a sun once shined within my heart  
illuminating me  
but now I'm stranded in the dark  
the light is gone, you see  
what once was beautiful inside  
has turned to dank and grey  
a chilly night does now reside  
where once was light of day  
the heavy clouds came rolling in  
and winds began to blow  
harsh rain washed out where smiles had been  
and fear began to grow  
depression fell like hail stones  
and beat down all it saw  
the pebbles chilled me to my bones  
and rubbed my spirit raw  
white lightning flashed across my sight

black thunder rumbled low  
leaving behind dark flecks of fright  
where happiness should go  
the storm washed out what once was good  
and left behind debris  
of fear and sadness where once stood  
the happiness in me



Storm



My Inner Monster



Untitled



Untitled



Library Leftovers



run from nowhere #2

Dyeing

Long, straight, brown  
Ordinary hair.  
She's plain, quiet, shy  
She needs a change.  
Alone in a room  
With a bottle of burgundy dye  
Snip! Snick!  
Layers caress her head now  
Changed.  
Not good enough.  
Snip! Snick!  
A pixie cap of nighttime hair remains.  
Her emotions a calmly raging sea inside.  
Loss of hair, loss of love.

Hair grows back, she feels restless.  
A brighter, happier color this time;  
Snip! Snick!  
A cinderblock weight is lifted.  
Color washes out  
Undecorated, pure brown is back.  
Simple, Sweet  
She doesn't need to change.

erin says you don't love me anymore

*scene: you are a sad song repeating; traipsing across synapses; snow is falling, drifting, piling; you should be gone.*

beth: i can't think any new thoughts. it's just the same words over and over: stay, stay, stay.

max: two years. we were a silent movie. everything was teal blue. i could always see your eyes when i closed mine.

beth: you wanted to be the freckle on my ankle and i wanted to be the scar on your chest. the way you looked away sounded like love.

max: i could be a two story house on lincoln ave. i could be a picket fence. i could be a dog and three kids and pta meetings and everything you never wanted and everything you never saw in me.

beth: i see chicago in my sleep. i see city lights. i cry in the dark. i never loved your mother. you will always taste like chalk. i will always want you.

max: i can never say need. i can never say you. i don't believe in good bye.

beth: i don't believe in anything else.

November Love

She blew into town like  
a November breeze,  
draped in an aura as warm  
as a cherished memory.

Her hair, a muted amber,  
mingling amongst the  
few leaves refusing to fall  
as we all fell for her.

She sat alone in the corner,  
her humble hands hidden by  
the cuffs of her sleeves,  
leaving lipstick-stained  
coffee cups as calling cards.

If you were lucky enough,  
you could catch a glimpse  
of her innocent stare and see  
reflections of all the things  
you wished you were, and  
all the things you'll never be.

I could be the first rays of  
spring, warming her ways, and  
she could let me know  
my faults are flawless.

But before I could speak,  
before her scent left the air,  
she disappeared with the  
first fall of snow.

Patricia

She is fading  
just as everything  
begins to grow

Soon there will be flowers  
with soft, fragile petals  
like the pages of her detective novels  
and the smell of light rains and mud  
will replace the stale smell of all  
the cigarettes she smoked during the winter

She's started pulling a ratted quilt  
tighter around her shoulders  
as she stares out into the garden  
because even with the sunshine  
that reflects constantly off  
of her tortoiseshell glasses  
she's always cold

She says she feels like a baby bird  
withered, featherless, and  
unable to leave the nest

When spring ends  
so will she  
and I will wait  
for winter to come again

### from *Journey to the Center of the Book*

My friend and I, we found ourselves walking on the snowy, fragrant pages of a novel — or maybe a novella; we didn't keep track. We agreed to depart from opposite ends of the manuscript and meet in the middle. He, a man of habit with an acute aversion to risk, chose to start from the beginning. Because this particular novel (or novella) had only one beginning and one end, I began my journey from the conclusion. So he began at the beginning to end in the middle, and I began at the ending to end in the middle. And so we both began.

Upon inspection of my starting point, I soon discovered I was hanging precariously from a precipice. I took in my surroundings. A mountainside before me, completely flat. Not really a mountain at all — no deformities or crags, perfectly smooth. I myself was hanging from a — thing — jugged into the cliffside. The end I clasped with my damp hands was thick, almost spherical, and difficult to grip. The other end, stuck securely into the cliff, curved upward and ended in a point. If I didn't know better, I would say it was a comma. Fortunately, I do know better; novels don't end with commas, and neither do novellas for that matter.

Below me was a deep, dark nothingness. Pardon me, for this is a careless assumption. Perhaps there was a somethingness below me, somewhere deep down — maybe discarded words or piles of bodies, those characters who couldn't quite fit into this author's little world. This one too one-dimensional, this one too trivial. Throw them over the edge. Do they ever hit the bottom? Maybe they fall into the spine of the book, seep into the cracks and become one with the glue, supporting the characters deemed worthier than they. Or maybe they fall into some other author's world. At any rate, I would not know, for I could not see far down into the chasm, and at present I had various other, contradictory concerns. Chiefly, I did not want to find out firsthand where the chasm actually led.

Though below me I saw nothing, above me gleamed a bright, unnatural light. It couldn't be sunlight. I could see no sun, and I could see no sky. Just glaring, artificial light. I couldn't speculate as to whether this was part of the world I currently inhabited or if I was simply peering up at the lamp of some nameless reader; it was impossible to tell. Perhaps it portended some glorious revelation just before this egregious cliffhanger. Or, in my case, just

after. As my hands began to slip and I wrapped my mind around the whole predicament, I could not help but feel that my friend was having a much easier time of it. No doubt he began "On a brisk fall morning in a bustling New England farmer's market" or "On the soft shores of the Caribbean." I, on the other hand, was hanging over an abyss, which for all I knew could provide entry to the Hades of the Written Word.

I considered for a moment allowing myself to fall. Although I might end up in the spine, or lost in another book, it was equally as probable that I might loop around and fall headfirst into the Caribbean or the awning of some watermelon stand. All I'd need then is to catch up to my friend. If I sprinted past the exposition, brusquely declined to address all the new characters as they greeted me with "hello" or "hullo" or "salut," I was sure I could reach him. But there was always that chance I might become glue. I held my comma-like object all the tighter.

As I whispered unholy prayers to that ominous light overhead, my escape began molding itself. I swear to you, it happened as I tell it. As I gripped the object tighter and tighter, whispering louder and louder, other strange black objects materialized before me. First appeared one small, dark circle, out of nowhere, suspended above me. It was attached to nothing — not the cliff, nor to me. It simply hovered there. Confused and frightened, I gripped my friendly object all the tighter and whispered all the more vehemently. At first slowly, but then quickening as the seconds passed, more and more of these black dots materialized, one over the other. The eight or nine of them formed a sort of vertical stairway or disjointed ladder up, up, up to the bright light and to the peak of the odd cliff.

"A staircase of ellipses," I said to myself, and laughed at the absurdity of it all.

Instantly, the black circles started to tremble. My saviors were either angry with me or excited, or I'd caused an avalanche. I cut my laughter short — but it was too late. One by one, with a roaring rip, each sphere sprouted a long, vertical shaft. I held on to my comma-thing for dear life as the entire face of the mountain shook. Eyes closed, cheek pressed against the cool black face of my new favorite object, I waited. What god had I angered? What was the title of this novel/novella, again?

When the tremors ceased, I counted to fifteen, then finally ventured to look up. Each sphere now resided under a vertical shaft. Each shaft ended

where the next sphere began. I quickly realized what had transpired: my laughter had taken shape on the page. My bridge of ellipses had formed a bridge of exclamation points! Even better! From a staircase of whimpering doubt to a ladder of laughter. Much better, in my book (and in this one, too).

I now had the means to scale the cliff, if you can call my clumsy ascent “scaling,” and if you can actually scale a cliff without touching it. Hand over hand, I made my way up, especially careful when reaching from the tip of one mark to the bottom sphere of the next. The spheres themselves would occasionally roll in place playfully, and I would lose my grip and fall without warning onto the top of a lower mark. It was a perilous climb, but it was also slow, so I will not bore you with further details of it.

The top of the final mark was just a few feet beneath the peak of the cliff, so I reached up and pulled myself to safety as effortlessly as my meager *biceps brachii* would allow. The light up here was blinding, so I just kneeled there, squinting and blinking until my eyes could adjust. I heard quite a bustle around me. Lots of voices, both male and female, squeezed from vocal chords of various ages. Some faint music was underlying the white noise of the crowd. Now, at this point, I had no idea what this story was even about. For all I knew, it was set on a lost isle and I could be surrounded by savages who were discussing whether to impale me now or cook me first and impale me later. Or maybe these were shape-shifting carnies I was dealing with, or PETA protestors. Either way, regaining my sight could prove terrifying. After a few particularly effective blinks, I finally saw the page I was up against.

It was a shopping mall. I was inside a brightly lit shopping mall, kneeling in front of a bookstore as shoppers casually walked in both directions around me. I cautiously rose to my feet and took note of the characters. Kids were pulling their mothers’ arms to get them to move faster. A group of teenage guys walked by philosophizing about the peanut butter-to-jelly ratio of the perfect PB&J. On a nearby bench, two ladies were eagerly flipping through a stack of books newly purchased from the bookstore. I didn’t waste too much time observing these minor characters, though. I could tell none of them were of much importance due to a strange, yet perfectly logical trait they all shared: they were flat. Literally. Though they

moved like people and talked like people, they looked a lot like cardboard cutouts. It was surreal, to say the least — especially seeing the paper women flip through pages only slightly flimsier than themselves. Equally as bizarre, those who passed me fell right over the cliff without a sound, then quickly re-materialized and walked back the opposite way. What this odd, flat race of humans lacked in foresight, they apparently made up for in their ability to defy traditional laws of reality.

Also noteworthy is that the entire mall — the floor, the shops, even the benches and other fixtures — was on a steep decline. As far as I could see in front of me, everything went downhill. *Falling action*, I realized. Well, technically, it was the story’s rising action, and I was just walking the wrong way. It would be an uphill stroll for my dear friend, after all. At least this was comforting.

My sight restored and my balance (mostly) passable, I started making my way carefully downhill. Bits and pieces of trivial dialogue floated past as I waded through the crowd of background characters, none of whom seemed to notice me at all. Coffee smells wafted out of a café. The radio played songs in reverse. Several of the shops looked interesting enough to warrant exploration, but after the time I lost hanging from the cliff, I didn’t want to chance leaving my friend waiting. There’s nothing worse than being stuck smack in the middle of a book.

To a muse

this is not the poem;  
the poem is blooming across your face.

this is not the poem;  
it is three months and three years  
and three thousand years  
when I don't see you.

this is not the poem;  
I still wake up and dream us.

this is not the poem;  
I am probably lying.

this is not the poem;  
every time I see you  
I forget everything else.

this is not the poem;  
I never say love.  
I never say you.

this is not the poem.

Numbers

We need mathematics to build the strongest homes, sciences to understand how we breathe and wake up each morning, mechanics in our language to skip words like stones from our tongues to express our most precise thoughts and notions.

Swept in the midst of what's mandated, it's easy to forget to simply unravel the tethers of our fingertips and toes and make ourselves terrifyingly, beautifully vulnerable to what pierces us most cleanly. It's the grotesque, disgusting perfection of everything that can never be done which makes us so human; complacent, bored, angry, and afraid all in our own dysfunctional fashion.

But, if you let it go, recklessly submerged in the atrocity that is human nature, you'll find hearts brimmed with the same kind of enthusiasm, so full they may burst at any moment. It's in your solitary footsteps, your split ends brushing the back of your neck, the fray of your shoelaces. We need more than the numbers of order and structure and time because the heart doesn't function that way.

Regardless of your cynical arguments, our pieces are more than chemicals interacting with each other and the sum of their parts. Therefore, we have no choice but to create — to humanize — the change we want to see in each other.

## Coming Home

Eddie was hunched over in the alleyway outside his apartment, picking up shards of glass and keys from his typewriter. The thick evening air crushed the young man's lungs as he picked up the ink ribbon from his reliable machine. The black strand stuck to his clammy palm and, as he tried to rub the residue off of his fingertips, he heard a shout a few stories up from the next building over.

"Eddie! You alright?"

Eddie stood up and stretched his lower back. A soft snap accompanied his adjustment.

"Yeah, George, I'm fine."

"Writer's block again?" asked George.

Eddie ran his fingers through his short, greasy black hair. He looked up to see a silhouette against a soft orange light escaping an apartment room window.

"Yes sir. But it slipped this time. I promise," said Eddie, smiling.

"Lemme give you a hand with that, huh? Give me a second."

Eddie knelt down and found the "A" key. The once vibrant white symbol was now chipped and barely noticeable. That specific key had gone through quite a bit of usage.

George opened the door from his apartment building. He was a stalky redhead and a people pleaser, often talking long after his company stopped listening. This didn't matter to George though, who fully embraced his status as the crazy middle-aged tenant with perhaps more than just one screw loose.

"That must be one hell of a story you're writing, sailor," he said, picking the typewriter body up from against a trashcan. He handed it over to the owner.

"Ya know, I think she's only got one or two more throws left in her."

Eddie silently examined the machine. There were dents along the cold, grey metal, but it was always more about substance than style for the Navy man.

George pulled out a faded handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his brow.

"This heat, huh Eddie?"

"About a year ago I was out in the Pacific, and I can tell you I don't think there was ever a day as bad as *this*."

"They're saying '47's gonna be even hotter," George grumbled. He put his hands on his hips, asserting his confidence. Eddie turned to his neighbor with skepticism.

"Who's saying that?"

"You know..." he began, saving face. "*They*."

Eddie smiled. He knew he was lucky finding this living arrangement after the war. Any other resident would have complained about his antics several times by now, but George ignored them. It gave him a chance to strike up a conversation.

"Why don't we get out of this heat? I need a drink, and you obviously need to clear your head. You up for Sammy's?"

Eddie thumbed through the broken keys in his hand.

"I could go for that."

"That's what I like to hear!" exclaimed George. "And tonight's the night to go. Roy and his band just got back into town. It'd be nice to play catch up."

The mention of Roy's name made Eddie feel as though a fever had come over him.

"You know, George? I should really head back inside and fix this thing. I think tonight's a stay-in night for me."

"Ahhhhh, that's garbage. You're coming with me to Sammy's. I'm buying."

"A free drink isn't gonna fix my typewriter," said Eddie, caressing his damaged property. George patted his forehead with the handkerchief once more, smiling as he wrung the dingy cloth out in the alley.

"No, but after a few, it'll certainly give you some stories to tell! I'll meet you down here in five."

George retreated into the building before Eddie had a chance to back out of the invitation. With a stride of discomfort, he deserted the alleyway as well.

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Sammy's was unusually crowded that night. The club's signature dark oak dance floor was occupied by customers sitting and drinking in an attempt to escape the heat. Their second-hand stools dug into the wood, a

sight that broke Eddie's heart as he entered with George.

George went straight to the bar, but Eddie took a look around the place. He had come here all the time before his deployment, chatting with the other regulars and arguing whether or not it was America's problem that Europe didn't have their act together. Since his return, he had stopped by only twice.

Eddie found his way to the counter and rested his arms on the worn out wood. He could feel his skin stick to the surface as soon as he leaned forward. George was already drinking and talking to a slender old man with the posture of a vulture behind the bar. This was Sammy himself.

"Eddie! Where the hell you been?" Sammy adjusted the glasses that rested on the brim of his crooked nose. "You take a Manhattan, right?"

"With ice, yeah," replied Eddie.

"No ice tonight," the barkeep replied. "But now I got a bucket of lukewarm water in the back if you want it!" Sammy produced a small glass of liquor and handed it to his friend.

"Maybe later!" joked Eddie, smiling as he took his first sip. Any worries he had about going out withered away with each drink. He ordered another. Then another. Even when he knew he should've stopped, George insisted he have another. But Eddie didn't mind. He was sitting with friends once more, sinking back into the life he used to have before the world got the better of him.

But then one sweet note from a beautiful, breathy voice snapped him back to reality.

The band started to play their first song. It was a soft jazz number that caused the audience to collectively turn their heads, their eyes meeting a group dressed in white suits and dresses. The piano was accompanied by the gentle brushing of cymbals. Roy sat behind the drum set and played with a deep passion that could only be equaled to the warmth he expressed for the woman serenading at the front of the stage.

Eddie shifted in his seat.

"I think I'm ready to go, George."

"The hell you are," whispered George, entranced by the performance. "You haven't seen Roy in ages. And anyway, I'd rather be surrounded by *this* sort of heat." He pointed to the stage.

The band played on for what seemed like hours to Eddie, who spent

the duration of their time on stage staring at his empty glass, running his ring finger around the rim. He perked up when the building erupted with applause. The band dispersed when they were finished, but Roy made his way over to the counter.

He walked with as much charisma as when he played. His appearance was neat and clean, his brown hair still tightly combed back. There was barely a trace of sweat on his face.

"George!" The drummer embraced his old friend with a grin. He was stunned when he looked over George's shoulder.

"And...My goodness. Eddie? How long has it been!?"

Roy went in for another hug, but Eddie deflected him. The most he could do was stick out his hand for a shake. The old acquaintance gladly accepted.

"Too long!" interrupted George. He began ranting about the weather, the changes he had made in his apartment, and whatever other uninteresting topics popped into his head. Roy smiled and nodded while Eddie spent his time trying to figure out if the responses were genuine.

There was a gentle tap on his shoulder as he turned for another drink. The sweet scent of vanilla surrounding him was unmistakable. A soft voice spoke.

"I remember you specifically saying you hated this kind of music..."

Eddie pulled his shoulders back and turned in his seat.

"Alice."

Alice stood with elegance. Her jet black hair and deep green eyes were even bolder tonight against her white dress and porcelain skin. Scarlet lipstick had never been worn so well. She didn't deserve to be in a band performing in a place like this; she deserved to be singing with the angels.

"Do you have a minute? It's been a while," she said.

"Two years and four months," Eddie mumbled. He looked at his empty glass once more, then behind the counter, but Sammy was nowhere to be found. His eyes were drawn to the singer once more.

"Just a minute," Alice insisted.

George was still rambling and Roy was still listening. Not in the state of mind to come up with a clever excuse, Eddie stood from the barstool and wiped his brow.

"Just a minute," he asserted.

Alice guided the sailor through the sea of drunken patrons. They searched for an available spot to sit, finally being forced to settle on a crooked table in a dimly lit corner. Eddie pulled a chair out for the woman in white.

“Always the gentleman,” she remarked.

“I haven’t heard that in a while,” said Eddie, sitting down and crossing his arms.

“That doesn’t mean it’s not still true.” She smiled. “What have you been up to?”

“Writing.”

“Oh? What about this time?”

“Just...something. Nothing, really,” he growled.

“Come on, Eddie! What’s wrong in telling me?”

Alice reached out across the table, playfully tapping Eddie’s arm. He looked into her eyes, inviting him to tell his deepest and darkest secrets. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the uneven surface.

“It’s...Well, it’s a story about coming home,” he began. He felt somewhat embarrassed talking about his work. “A soldier returns and tries to readjust to the world. He wants to pick things up where he left them, but things have changed.”

Alice rested her chin on linked fragile fingers.

“Sounds like a memoir.”

Eddie shook his head.

“It’s fiction. I mean, sure things have been hard changing your routine and all, but it’s fiction. I’m just having trouble figuring out how to end it. But I don’t want to bore you with that. How are things with you?”

Alice’s face was radiant with joy.

“Great! Everything has been simply wonderful. The band has been playing more and more often, so who knows what will happen there. And Roy? He’s been a sweetheart.”

“I’d heard about you and Roy,” said Eddie, closing his posture once more. “Actually, I heard you started sending him letters about a month after you stopped replying to mine.”

A silence came over the table. Alice glanced down at the floor, but Eddie’s stare was unbreakable.

“So why did you stop writing, Alice? I wrote to you every week. At

first I thought one might’ve gotten lost in the mail, or another got sent to the wrong person, but you just...stopped.”

Alice couldn’t look at him.

“Alice?”

She took a deep breath and pushed the hair out of her face.

“I realize now that I probably handled the situation the wrong way,” she muttered.

“Situation? What situation?” asked Eddie.

“Your letters, Eddie. Something changed in your letters.”

Eddie’s stomach sank. He had no clue what she was talking about.

Alice placed her hand on her chest and continued.

“You started off as this sweet man, but eventually I started getting letters with rather depressing details. Your tone had changed. Your sense of humor? Gone. You were talking about things I couldn’t relate to. Honestly, Eddie? I was afraid. So I stopped writing.”

“You don’t do that, Alice,” whispered Eddie.

“I didn’t know what to do! I found myself looking for advice. Roy and I go way back, so I wrote to him hoping he could help. Then things started to pick up from there like they sometimes do, you know?”

The sailor folded his calloused hands. He squeezed with all his might, hoping to take the pain inside away.

“Men like me, out in the ocean with no idea if they’ll ever come home? We need something to look forward to, even if it’s only a dream on a piece of paper.”

“Eddie, I —”

“S’time to go, sailor.”

George had shuffled his way across the room, interrupting Alice with a bellow followed by the strong stench of liquor. Eddie stood up to help his friend keep his balance.

“That Roy’s one helluva guy,” said George, slapping Eddie on the back. “I could barely get a word in!”

Alice waited for the two to turn around and say goodbye. She watched Eddie wave to Sammy and shake a few hands on his way out, but when he left the bar, he never looked back.

He couldn’t look back.

— — —

The two men entered the dark of the alley. George could barely keep his eyes open as he bobbed back and forth to the apartment's screen door. He struggled to turn the handle.

"D'ya haff a good time?" he slurred.

Eddie nudged George to the side and opened the door for him.

"I guess so."

"Good. You needed to get out of the building." George stumbled over the threshold. "Tell me in the murr-ning if your type-wridder still works, alright?"

"Will do, George. Thanks."

Eddie heard the screen door slam as he marched to his own apartment. A roll of thunder rumbled in the distance.

He walked into his room and went straight for his desk, strolling past the peeling wallpaper and the disorder of his residence. The desk was a small table he had owned for years and always positioned next to a view of the outside world. His typewriter laid on top, the same mangled mass of metal he left hours before. Eddie rolled a fresh piece of paper into the machine.

His eyes were then drawn to the broken window just beyond the desk. A warm breeze entered the apartment, followed by another crack of thunder. The curtains fluttered and exposed the jagged glass still stuck to the windowpane.

His stare followed the edge of the glass until he reached the knifelike tip. He saw the distorted reflection of a man who had the last thread holding him together torn out in front of him, with no one to stop its unraveling.

As the calming patter of a long-needed rain reached the alley, Eddie realized he knew exactly how to end his story.

## Lessons

Above all those rocks and hard places exists an endless stream. Where people float, just underneath the surface and observe light through waterlogged sunbeams, which reflect and shine even the dulllest shades of dirt.

Every tree trunk is a marker of firsts, and there is a whole forest that is hung just beyond our fingertips. It is being preserved until the day comes when its beauty can truly become all that it was always meant to be.

Inside every sun dried leaf lies a pamphlet that proclaims the greatness of this day. Its warmth is outlined in every vivid color, including lacking-in-luster grey; because sometimes the sky just couldn't contend with bending light against those who made their own.

Often, like most great events, it is not known or drawn to a timeline when this day will come. It simply exists because there is hope that it must. People gravitate towards extremes, and I can recall nothing greater to believe in than who you and we grew up to be.

You will never be accusatory.

You were a blessing in the building of I.

a poem for after you realize you are hollow

i am falling asleep in the back  
of class and jamie's voice is  
echoing across my synapses  
*chris is moving back home*  
she says as i am lighting  
what is suppose to be the last  
cigarette and i am supposed  
to feel sorry now.

we were supposed to be the ones that made it  
but we are all dropping out and  
moving home and i am listening  
to a song we used to sing when  
we were young and we thought  
we were only going up.

and we don't meet up in basements  
so much anymore like we did when  
we were seventeen and everything  
made sense.

i don't remember what success  
is supposed to feel like anymore  
other than *thank god they got to her*.

we don't say *thank god she didn't*  
*kill herself* because we aren't sure yet  
if we're supposed to feel better about  
ourselves one day or not.

i knew who i was most of all when  
i slept most nights on your bedroom floor.  
hands tangled up together,  
breathing pure, life purposeful.

we were bright. we were clear.  
now chris is moving back home but  
i didn't hear it from him and i'm afraid  
when i see him he will be hollow too.

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Penguin Review accepts submissions from YSU undergraduates September 1st through December 7th. Submissions should be emailed to [penguinreview@gmail.com](mailto:penguinreview@gmail.com) along with a cover letter stating your name, a short biography, email, home address, phone number, and the genre in which you are submitting. Please also include the genre you are submitting in the subject line of the email and do not include any contact information actually in the submission file.

We accept up to 1,500 words of fiction, non-fiction, or of a screenplay; or three pages of poetry. We also accept up to three art submissions. Art submissions should be sent in at 300 ppi, as a pdf or jpeg file type, and in separately named files.

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## **Notes**

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