

The Blue Route

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Succumb: To Submit to Falling

Lindsay Brader

After Linh Dinh's "The Most Beautiful Word"

I think succumb is the most beautiful word in the English language.
The sounds fall subtly from the tip of your careful tongue—
suck, come. The brusque b kept silent.

She was weaving through the boughs of her willow when the branches betrayed her.
“Caught” may be the ugliest. Don’t say, “The branches caught her shirt.” Caught sounds
like a coughed up word, it shapes your mouth like a tomb as choking does. Say, “The
branches snagged her shifting shape.” Say, “The twigs snapped around her like closing
jaws.” The leaves are hanging splinters with the will of water in their veins. Come down
he said from below. Jump he told her. She did and she sank through the evening air like a
thrown stone with her arms raised, feet hoping to touch first. The willow claimed her
shirt. The ground welcomed the rest.

Paint

Gabrielle Castro

He doesn't want to go, but she does, and he doesn't want to anger her. He asks why she wants to go if she can't even participate and immediately knows he shouldn't have asked. She glares at him and says, "If you had an eight-month-old baby in your belly and spent all day playing Solitaire and inhaling Pine Sol while cleaning the house, you'd want to get out and socialize, too." He's seen her squirm for the past month, itching to go into the office and feel powerful again, wielding her title—"Senior Vice President of Marketing"—like it was a sword able to cut everything that attempted to stand in its path. Relinquishing her title to maternity leave—even if only temporarily—had been the loss of her sword. He sighs and grabs her coat and says nothing, knowing that this late in the pregnancy he really should be more careful to keep his wife happy because her hormones and the weight of the baby straining her spine are making her crazy, and he can't blame her—the baby looks heavy.

The vineyard is filled with people not of his normal crowd. She's in her natural habitat, smiling at one person and shaking hands with another, introducing herself and chatting up the people that she knows will eventually introduce her to her main target: a man named Andrew Heathrow, the executive of the firm that wanted to buy her company. The purple dress she has chosen for the evening is smart; she glows in the environment, even with the eight-month bump attached to her middle. He straightens his own spine in reflex, amazed that she can stand so straight. He feels lonely and shy as she drags him from group to group, beaming charismatically and re-introducing him to the president of Windham-Ground and the external HR rep of Mary Grant and the CEO of Java International and his wife (a kindergarten teacher, a status of which he is aware but knows she doesn't like to mention in this crowd). It's too much social interaction for him and his saving grace is the wine. He sips one glass after swirling it with a flourish and, pretending it's such a glorious wine (he doesn't know the difference between a nineteen-forty-seven Cabernet Sauvignon and a 2011 two-buck-Chuck anyway), asks for a glass and gulps it down when no one is looking his way. With this he's blending in very well to the wall with his white shirt and pale skin, just another stroke of paint—he would be given away only by the dark pupils and the telltale freckles (and the purple tie he's worn to make his wife happy). He does this three or four times more, until he can feel the wine mixing with his blood and flushing in his cheeks. It loosens him up; soon he finds his way back over toward the kindergarten teacher and exercises his own charisma.

She's similar to him; he knows this. They are the only two people in the room who don't hold a title that would mean anything to anyone but them, nothing like an operations manager or a chief officer or an executive director. It isolates them. She speaks to no one, he speaks to no one; they shake hands and smile politely when introduced and nod in all the appropriate places. They've met before briefly, at one of the other parties, but neither of them like talking too much. Perhaps they can speak to each other: the two

wordless, powerless creatures in the room, chameleons sinking into the colors around them.

“So you’re a kindergarten teacher,” he says, and he feels strangely comfortable with the words. He hadn’t thought he would feel as comfortable as he does. He leans against the bar; it’s made of wood and coated in blue and red splattered paint. It was the paint that always let him let things out, a way of describing things without words. He could splash a bit of green here, a touch of white there, and suddenly the world made sense, ringing clearly with colors mixing in splatters across a canvas. He had actually sold his last painting, and though he could hardly bear to hand over the canvas he eventually did so, though he was sure he lost much of his own blood in the process. The red and blue paint on the image were his vitality, arteries carrying the red through, weaving through the ventricles and atriums of lines rushing across the canvas. He’d held onto it, but the painting had been wrenched from his hands, the unsatisfying feel of the fabric of worn paper replacing it—as if the money could equal the emotional devastation he had undergone to create the piece in the first place. The fiscal exchange is traumatizing, turning vitality into object. Canvases like that hang in places like this where blue and red are commodities that can be splattered on a bar and have wine splashed on top of them, then wiped off it, as if there were nothing to it, just a paper towel that probably cost a couple of bronze coins.

“I am,” says the kindergarten teacher, and his attention kicks back up, away from the bar and back to the wine glass that had allowed him to initiate his first conversation of the night. She smoothes out her black dress, which he thinks doesn’t look appropriate for a kindergarten teacher.

“We’re in this together, then,” he says, straightening his red tie.

“Oh? What do you do?”

“I’m an artist. A painter.”

“Anything I would’ve seen?”

He shrugs. “I’m not widely known just yet.”

“Ah, okay.”

Her words don’t judge; they simply sit. They find their way across the canvas of silence between them, comfortable, now, as they lean together against the bar and watch the rest of the executives and chiefs and top-level managers do their charismatic dance. He watches his wife, bright smile that he never sees anymore flashing toward a good-looking man with a printed badge on his shiny lapel declaring his name—Andrew Heathrow—that bright smile that had been flashed toward himself in the past, when she’d told him that he was going to be a father, when she’d genuinely glowed and brought him into an embrace that didn’t involve a large ball between them, like it did now. He misses that

smile; he still finds it captivating, and wonders if he could put that on a canvas and never give it up for small, rectangular pieces of paper that would do him no good if it took his purple away.

An October Morning in La Grange, Georgia

by Kenneth W. Hill

With my driftwood stick and a coke
ice-cold from the musky crisper,
I stroll to the patch of gourds
following the ragtag farmhand.

An acre of useless plant,
no profit for the future.

They're the closest kin to pumpkins,
with wart-coated ridges
and a naturally smooth luster.
Fit for menial decoration,
yet unbecoming of pies,
pastries.

Their skin's too tough for knives.
Flesh is all bitter,
when baked, boiled, or stewed
it turns to stringy paste.
Not even cinnamon
can cure it.

Let Stones Sink

Craig Pearson

She was getting off the bus, and, completely by accident, his eyes landed on hers as he walked by. There was the flash of a chance for him to just throw on a smile and keep going, but some impulse, maybe the hesitation of delayed recognition, had caused him to slow down, and they both acknowledged that they were caught.

Neither of them could have drawn a proper pedigree for the friendship—if he'd had to guess, he would have connected them along the line through his best friend's 19th Century British Literature classmate's infamously messy roommate—but it existed tenuously nonetheless, and they were both too polite to avert their eyes from it.

What he saw, then, as they traded glances between each other and the sidewalk, having committed to a common route for the next three blocks, was that she had been crying. Her face was streaked, wet and shiny like a fish. It wasn't red or bloated, nor even unattractive, if he was being honest: there was something rather captivating in the pearly sheen of her skin and the tightness of her lips, which, when they weren't flexing through the yoga motions of her careful conversation, returned to a pinched frown, as if she'd swallowed something sharp and was holding it in her throat because it pained her less lodged there than it might being torn out.

Of course he wouldn't have dared inflict anything like that on her, so he left the hook alone and steered them through safer waters. It seemed they were both taking shelter in the fact that they were only trapped together for a few blocks, and this loosened their spirits a little. He extracted a laugh after misattributing to her the infamous roommate; they were just friends, apparently, not roommates; the roommate belonged to the British Literature girl. They mocked their web of connections, which anyway had fallen quite abruptly out of relevance. Somehow they had stepped beyond it and were moving in a space apart, linked by the glance that had snagged them and the freedom of assured separation. Whatever had wrestled the tears out onto her face felt, to him, impossibly beyond his reach or interest, but she herself had come unexpectedly to the surface, and they skimmed gracefully across five minutes of chat that he knew would dissolve later into the sole impression of her shiny face.

He could have made something of it. She was there for the taking. She wanted to be brought in, he thought later, by which time indeed all he could remember was the way she'd been looking at him. It was probably the look that distracted him, made him glance over whatever sadness she'd pulled herself out of and instead skip words like pebbles on a pond, counting up how far they could get—five, six, seven minutes—before the third block came and, as abruptly and accidentally as they'd first collided, they found themselves walking in opposite directions.

If he'd been wearing a tie, he would have straightened it and knit the corner of his mouth in that private smile that follows a successful bout of conversation—but as it was, he clutched instead at a last glimpse of her over his shoulder.

She'd slid back into her depths, he thought to himself, and it struck him that he'd never know what that meant, where she'd come from and had now returned to. He could ask, of course, when he saw her again, which was often enough, and would probably be more often now after this, maybe even often enough for them to be called friends, but he was too polite to want to dredge up bitter memories, and she would be too polite to burden him with them. Better to let stones sink, he decided.

Years later, when they were married, he recalled this slippery moment completely by accident. But she was pregnant now, and he was afraid that if he pulled on the line of this old thought, something buried deep inside her would snag and tear.

So he left it, and when his teenage daughter asked him why he and her mother were divorcing after all this time, he couldn't tell her what he suspected, that this was what had started it, that this was what had made him feel like they were drifting apart, and he was helpless to reach out and pull them back together.

Searching for Halves

Kasey Phifer

Digging in the garden, I find
an earthworm I have cut in half
by mistake, writhing
like two tails with no head.

I am sure it will live, they will live,
mother and child or brother and brother,
stretching out new with sunlight
in rings around the middles.
When I was six, we crouched
in the driveway and you showed me
with a butter knife that this is how
it is done. This is how one can make
two, how a family like ours could grow
and grow into four without passion
and touch, how they never did the
secret thing, rolling, hot and tangled
in the dark of the soil.

Kneeling in the garden, I watch
as they stop moving. I have kept
the secret. I drop the weapon
and proceed with fingers only.

Chronic

Sara Taylor

You don't consider the possibility of surprises when you walk into the doctor's office, not when middle age, white hair, and erectile dysfunction seem as likely as rogue asteroids or the zombie apocalypse that your brother won't shut up about. The doctor will make faces around his dentures while he fills out your paperwork, poke places that you'd rather have left alone – which means all of you, you're ticklish – then tell you to eat less delivery pizza or take more iron supplements, and that's it until next year. Until he opens your file again, and says something like, “Your bloodwork shows an abnormality, I'd like to run it again just to be sure.” Or he tells you straight up, something's squicky.

Suddenly he's talking too fast for you to understand as he scribbles on the prescription pad. “Let's start with thirties, one every morning. If you don't feel any change after a month, we'll run the bloodwork again, and consider adding a second dose in the afternoon.” You walk out of the office with the grey slip of paper in your hand, and suddenly the questions come.

Your mother asks if it's cancer, but even though your hair is falling out, has been falling out in handfuls, you realize, for years now, it isn't cancer. Suddenly things start to make sense. The days your neck felt too weak to hold your head up, the nights you couldn't think of closing your eyes, how your weight suddenly ballooned when you were thirteen even though you weren't eating any differently, the constant headaches and the conversations that had slipped past like rivers in flood without you being able to grasp them. Suddenly, the little grey slip becomes like your personal ticket to freedom: it will fix everything that's ever been wrong with you.

At the pharmacy, you stand in line between men and women so old you can't tell which are which. They pick up bags stuffed with little orange vials; they remind you of the grab bags that you got at the end of neighborhood birthday parties when you were a kid, and you wonder how many afternoons you'll spend here while the flat-chested pharmacist counts the little tan pills into your vial. It bothers you, a bit, the fact that you have joined the ranks of the pill-poppers. But it's only until the doctor gets you straightened out. Doctors cure people.

As the vial slowly empties you begin to feel more alive. This is shocking, because you didn't know that you felt bad in the first place. Even your mother says that you're less of an utter pain in the ass now that you've got some energy, and she wishes that she'd sent you for a full physical before. You wonder what would have happened if someone had caught it sooner. Fewer detentions, because you wouldn't have fallen asleep in class so often. Better grades in math, because you would have been able to pay attention. More friends, even, because suddenly you talk to people and you actually understand what they mean, rather than feeling like you're listening to Chinese radio through bad static.

Suddenly, you're angry that no one ever bothered to find out that something was wrong, that you've gone through life up to this point with "fatass brain-dead screwup" written across your forehead in the invisible ink that all teachers, parents, and cool kids can read. You gather your high school transcripts to put in your college applications – the college applications that prompted the blood work and the doctor's visit – and are angry that the grades aren't higher, that you couldn't pull yourself through one more AP course because your brain felt like it was melting out your ears all through high school.

Back with the doctor the next month you tell him how much better you feel, but some things haven't changed. As you describe your stomachaches, your difficulty sleeping, your fogginess, he pulls out a different prescription pad and orders more bloodwork. It isn't one thing, now, with one pill to fix it, but many things going wrong together. Suddenly you realize that those tan pills will be with you for the rest of your life, that you aren't going to be getting better like you used to get better from a cold or the flue. This is just how your body is now.

They stick you four times before they find a vein sturdy enough to draw six vials of blood from, test your saliva and your urine, check your stomach for inflammation. Your mother doesn't care now that it isn't cancer, she's worried anyway. When all the tests come back she goes with you to the appointment, watches with you as he writes out more grey prescription slips, and explains when and in what order to take the pills, and why you won't be drinking coffee ever again. Everything will be all right, he says. You will live a normal life; you just have to be careful. She asks him lots of questions, about what you should eat and whether you should drink and if this means you'll never have kids, but you just stare out the window.

Your mother tells you to see a therapist when you get to school, to talk it over. She's a thin, bony lady with masses of curly hair and a New England voice, that says "mhhh" constantly as you talk. Lots of people are on supportive medicine, she tells you. You should be thankful that you can get it, and that the side effects aren't pronounced. You can't explain, don't know how to explain. At first you were just relieved to feel better. Now you hate everything: your body, the blood tests, the orange vials with their piles of smooth pills. The fact that you're not even twenty and you know what it's like to spend hours in the local CVS wondering if you're insurance will cover it all.

The new pills make you feel fizzy. Hyper. These are flat and white, and you halve them with a tissue blade, and swallow a half four times a day because that's cheaper than buying smaller dosage pills. They're to replace a dead gland somewhere in your abdominal cavity, which once synthesized one of the cocktail of hormones your body won't run without. At first you tend to forget to take them all, usually the afternoon dose, but after a few weeks you begin to look forward to it, the initial buzz after it hit, the sudden energy. They wear off after a few hours, just before the next dose, and you hate that period of waiting, the hyperconsciousness of the clock hands edging you towards your next pill. You don't know why you ever hated them.

In April they recall your tan pills. The drug company changed the filler material without sufficient tests, and people have gone into anaphylactic shock from taking them. You drive to every drug store in town, but your bottle is still empty. When you get back you close yourself in your closet, sit on the floor, and rock. You don't know how you'll get through school. You don't know how you'll get through life. You don't even know if you'll be able to get out of bed in the morning, now that you're no longer used to pushing your way through molasses in order to do something as simple as brush your teeth.

You read forums. You read articles. You run out of pills, and try to live without them. On the first day you fall asleep every few hours, but it isn't so bad, since you still have the white pills. Now that they're the only things that keep you going, you look forward to them more than ever. Then you fall asleep while driving. Just for a moment, but it's still too long. The doctor writes you a prescription to have capsules formulated specially, at four times the cost. They don't work as well, but you're happy to have anything at all.

When they begin stocking your pills again, you go back to the doctor. He writes you a prescription for them, but he isn't happy with your bloodwork. Something else has died, or is about to die. Your soft, necessary bits appear to be mutinying on you. He wants to decrease your dose, take away one of those half-pills that you so much look forward to. You consider this, and tell him that you will try it and see if you can still get your work done without it.

You really mean to try, but finals week is coming. People you know take adderal, and speed, and cocaine, but those are too expensive and you really don't know what the hell they'll do to you if you add them on top of everything else you're swallowing. Instead, you stop halving your pills, taking a whole four times a day, then add a fifth since you're not sleeping at night anyway and it's technically an extension of the day. And something beautiful happens.

The world crystallizes. Time suddenly has no meaning. Food and rest don't really matter. The work is infinitely easy, and when it's done people find you compellingly interesting to talk to. You begin to do those things that you thought you'd never have time for again: drawing, photography, maybe a little poetry when you're feeling especially bohemian. The colors flow and gel, and you've never felt so alive. Your friends ask you if it's Ritalin or Acid or both. It's not like that. This is something your body needs. This is good for you. This is how you're supposed to feel.

When you go back to the doctor you're euphoric and shamefaced all at once. He scowls at your bloodwork, beetles his brow at you, and you know that he knows that you haven't cut back. You begin to promise that you will try again, then suddenly confess: you don't want to live the way you used to. You don't want to deal with the leadenness, the exhaustion, the constant draw of sleep. You don't want to be alive unless you're going to truly feel alive.

He begins to scribble in his prescription pad. Another one of your soft bits is dead, and so he has to prescribe you something to provide the service that it will no longer be

performing. Your intestines are damaged and no longer absorbing the nutrients that they should; your body can't handle what you want to put it through, not yet. You need to be more circumspect. Your body is your home and the only home you get. He wants you to take it easy for a while.

You try. You really try. You take naps in the afternoons and give up the foods that are making Swiss cheese of your gut and even quit drinking on the weekends, but when you go back to half pills the world loses its color. Instead of merely waiting that final half hour before the next dose you find yourself staring at walls and playing with scraps of paper, sometimes long past the time that you should have taken the next pill. There are chunks of time in which you cannot remember what was said, what you did, and it's like being drunk without any of the good feelings.

Then one day you shake yourself awake and realize that you've been sitting on the bottom step in your mother's house, staring through the window in the front door at the one leaf on the tree across the street, for the entire day. In seven hours you have not moved a muscle; you're surprised that you remembered to breathe. You drag yourself upstairs to your dresser, put a pill down and pick up your tissue blade so you can halve it and put one part away for later. You stare at it for a moment, round and flat and perfectly smooth, with a groove down the middle where you usually put the blade. You like the feel of the blade passing through the little disk, the tiny "crunch" it makes as it splits cleanly in two. Then you put down the blade, pick up the pill, and go back downstairs.

You swallow it whole while sitting on the bottom step, looking at that leaf that has so entranced you for most of the day, and wait. Slowly, color bleeds back into everything you see. A fizzing energy rises in your chest, and for the first time in weeks you want to run, to move, to do something.

Drought

Melanie Willingham

I know why coyotes sing at night.
It isn't at the moon but the little dipper,
a begging song for water.

The docks around the lake are on dry land.
The water smells of rot, and the fish
stranded in the mud sizzle in the heat,
too hot to gasp for breath.

Farmers' lakes are bloody
with the blooms of cyanobacteria,
signs some local Baptists say, of God's anger.
Their cows are skeletal, and break
their ankles in the deep gashes
of the jig-sawed dust.

Even tap water holds
the grimy taste of dirt,
and leaves us all still thirsty.

Contributors

Lindsay Brader is a senior Creative Writing major at Western Washington University. After graduation, she plans to see the world and write it all down.

Gabrielle Castro is a fifth-year Choreography and English double-major at UC Irvine. She specializes in jazz dance and is a freelance songwriter and graphic designer. Gabrielle is originally from Fresno, California, and she likes old books and pizza.

Kenneth W. Hill is from the small, charming town of White Pine, Tennessee. He loves good friends, fried food, and nature walks. All of these loves tend to keep him fairly broke. His nonfiction piece, “Recollections on Stupidity”, was recently published in *Novelletum*.

Craig Pearson is an undergraduate at Michigan State University majoring in Biochemistry, English, and Neuroscience. He plans to attend graduate school and embark on a career in medical research. Pearson’s short fiction has been published in local and national journals including *Open Palm Print*, *The Red Cedar Review* and *The Offbeat* at Michigan State, *Analecta* at University of Texas Austin, and *Mosaic* at University of California Riverside.

Kasey Erin Phifer is a junior in English and Sociology at Eastern University. Her poetry has been published in *Written River* and her university’s literary magazine, *Inklings*.

Sara Taylor is a student of English at Randolph College. She ritualistically squelches her disappointment in being born a girl with homemade mead and gratuitously graphic short fiction.

Melanie Willingham is an undergraduate at Stephen F Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. She’s getting her Bachelors in Creative Writing.