

FIVE FRESH STORIES
FOR YOUR WEEK

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HOWLER daily

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scene(s) from a chain restaurant in papillion, nebraska

zach benak



On a Wednesday night in July of 2014, I washed my hands after a final sweep of the concession stand, patting them dry on my cargo shorts. I clocked out at 8:30 on the dot and walked out the front entrance, listening to the lifeguards hose down the bathhouses as I twirled my car key lanyard around my fingers. Once I reached my 2001 Ford Taurus, I ignited the squeaky engine and rolled down the windows, letting out the stiff, hot air that'd accumulated through my nine-hour shift. I texted my mom a reminder that I'd be home late and drove through Halleck Park, speeding by the baseball fields to catch a breeze. I turned north on 84th Street, whipping through downtown and past the light pole banners that read *One of America's Best Places to Live!*

When I reached my destination, slivers of sun were still lingering over Tara Hills

Golf Course. I walked in and looked around the restaurant, seeing where my friends had been seated for the night. I slinked into the booth, letting its cool touch kiss my back through my canary yellow work t-shirt, basking in the air conditioning while I waited for a Mountain Dew. I looked toward the bar to see if I recognized the current karaoke performer, then scoped out the rest of the venue, searching for co-workers who had the same plans as me, or friends who came with a different group, or acquaintances from the area Catholic schools that I should say hello to later in the evening. The front entrance slowly crowded with people who'd come too late to secure a table. The environment smelled like fried food and sounded like an off-key Maroon 5 performance. I was officially in my element, talking shit with friends and topping off a long day in the sun with a greasy meal, seated at the center of Papillion's social hub.

This Wednesday night in July of 2014 was not specific, not dissimilar to a Wednesday night in

June of the summer before, or August of the summer after. Details from this night are interchangeable, as this was a regimen as typical as a morning commute. I don't remember which friends were in my booth. (It was probably Sam, Megan, and Libby, or could have been Ambi and Alaina.) I ate some combination of queso blanco, boneless chicken wings, mozzarella sticks, or cheeseburger sliders. (The wonton tacos were phased out of my rotation because they tasted like nail polish on one occasion.) The karaoke DJ was either the one who liked me or the one who didn't. (One praised my performance of "Just a Friend" by Biz Markie; the other said I ruined "Africa" by Toto forever.)

Many factors informed this practice: the novelty of karaoke initially attracted us; the proximity to home made it easy; and the half-priced appetizers kept us coming back. We ate with the world's fastest metabolisms and least-refined palates. Week after week, we watched an older

man in a cowboy hat belt Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York," cheered on by his much-younger girlfriend sitting at the bar. The perennially pregnant server never charged us for soft drinks, and we'd tip the bill in return, still spending no more than \$14 from our summer job paychecks.

We observed but didn't address the politics that can only play out when dozens of teenagers in a small town are crammed into one restaurant. Existing cliques would publicly crumble, a preview of drama to come when we went back to school in the fall.

Classmates we hadn't seen all summer showed up startlingly thin, sipping Diet Pepsi and making us quietly wonder what was going on. We'd actively avoid rivals and exes and friends-turned-foes seated two tables over. I'd balance my feelings when openly flirting with the girl I'd pined after my entire junior year, while secretly hoping the hot male lifeguard I worked with would show up and notice me, catching adrenaline as I negotiated who I

was in public with what I longed for in private.

When the karaoke DJ packed up around 11pm, and wait staff started doling out tickets with promises of "no rush," and conversations got deeper as the restaurant got emptier, an air of melancholy quietly permeated, though I'm not sure everyone felt it. Maybe it was just me, unable to live in the moment, already looking ahead to the next Wednesday in July, which would soon become August, which would bring summer to a close, which would constrain Wednesday nights with homework and college applications and practices and rehearsals, and things would change, something I struggled with then but excel at now, far away from my hometown, away from the people and social dynamics that shaped me.

Kicked out of the restaurant after midnight, we finished our conversations and shared final burning desires in the parking lot. I drove across 84th Street, past the

high school and into my neighborhood, replaying moments from the night or second-guessing something I shouldn't have said. I got home and found my dad asleep in the recliner and my mom in bed upstairs, a distance I didn't think much of at the time. I threw my work shirt in the laundry hamper and retrieved a fresh one from my dresser to lay out for the next day.

The caffeine from the soda had no effect as I stuck my phone on the charger and laid my head on the pillow, completing a routine that I look back on and think maybe every young person needs a ritual as simple and certain, and innocent as this one.

- Zach Benak lives in Ravenswood, Chicago. His nonfiction appears in *GASHER*, *Thirteen Bridges Literary Review*, *45th Parallel*, and *Sweeter Voices Still: An LGBTQ Anthology from Middle America* (Belt Publishing 2021).

howl

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no reason to get up but get up

yvonne morris

I've been reading the pretty, suicidal poets—
hallowed and hollowed, richly bred for pain—
Anne and Sylvia shared a New York taxi in the rain,
discussed therapy and where they'd left their latest lipstick stains.

On a Sunday in January, I can't leave the gas running freely
in the kitchen, I've only got cats as hungry as fleas—
in the garage, four wheels await escape from a dusty TV.

You see, I'm in awe of those women whose fine hands loaded
their pockets with stones, who staggered in the sun,
whose blue veins were exposed
because I'm only green willow, vine and shoot—alive.

No taste in my mouth compares to the sweetness of berries.
My heart doesn't break with a thought, an awareness,
as fatal as some fairytales would end.

I'll pick up some ice cream instead.
So I struggle into my jacket and out the door,
choosing to leave regrets—like the bed—unmade,
slipping by the black dog that drags its chain.

"No Reason to Get Up but Get Up" was published previously in Mother Was a Sweater Girl (The Heartland Review Press, 2016) and The Lake (Sept. 2019)

- Yvonne Morris's poetry and fiction have been published in a variety of journals and zines. Her current chapbook is *Busy Being Eve* (Bass Clef Books, 2022).

you can
continue on
even if I'm
not around
ryo kajitani

- RYO Kajitani (REI Mizuno) is a queer artist/ art model based in Tokyo. She is known for her eerie and solemn art style.

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french impressionists

matthew ellis

I long to wrap myself in the canvases of the French impressionists
Let Sisley and Monet hold me as I weep

I'll plunge into the Loing or the Seine itself,
into ultramarine and cobalt blue
I'll wade into the waters of Giverny,
lie amongst the water lilies
madder red and cadmium yellow against emerald, violet waters

I'll hide in Eragny with Pissarro
in the blossoms of orchards,
white to peach,
blending into the viridian 'round poplar trees sparkling with autumn hues

- Matthew Ellis (he/him) spends his time teaching yoga and following creative pursuits in music and writing.

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and outreach organization, making space for
human connection through STORYTELLING.



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