

MMMM!
RADICAL **PROGRESS**
YOU'LL ❤️ IT

2022-2023

THE RC REVIEW



HOT

HUSTLER

MAGIC



What a
Trip

Editors' Note

Thank you for picking up *Hot Hustler Magic*, the 2023 edition of *The RC Review*!

The RC is a weird, funky, and wonderful place. Even having moved off-campus, so far away that the weekly journey to East Quad feels like a trek, coming back feels like coming home. Hearing “Heart and Soul” on the piano, it feels like nothing has changed since our freshman year, even though it feels like the chasm between now and four years ago couldn’t be wider. We’ve experienced both the fantastical and the unfathomable. But through it all, the RC — and with it, *The RC Review* — has retained its quirky spirit. Or, as we wizards might say, its magic.

It’s a pleasure and an honor to be trusted with the beautiful art and writing of our contributors, and with the time and energy of our readers. Thanks to all of you, there is so much charm and whimsy between these pages, bound together with glue. You are what makes *The RC Review* so magical.

Much love,

Emilia Ferrante
Editor-in-Chief

Chelsea Padilla
Managing Editor



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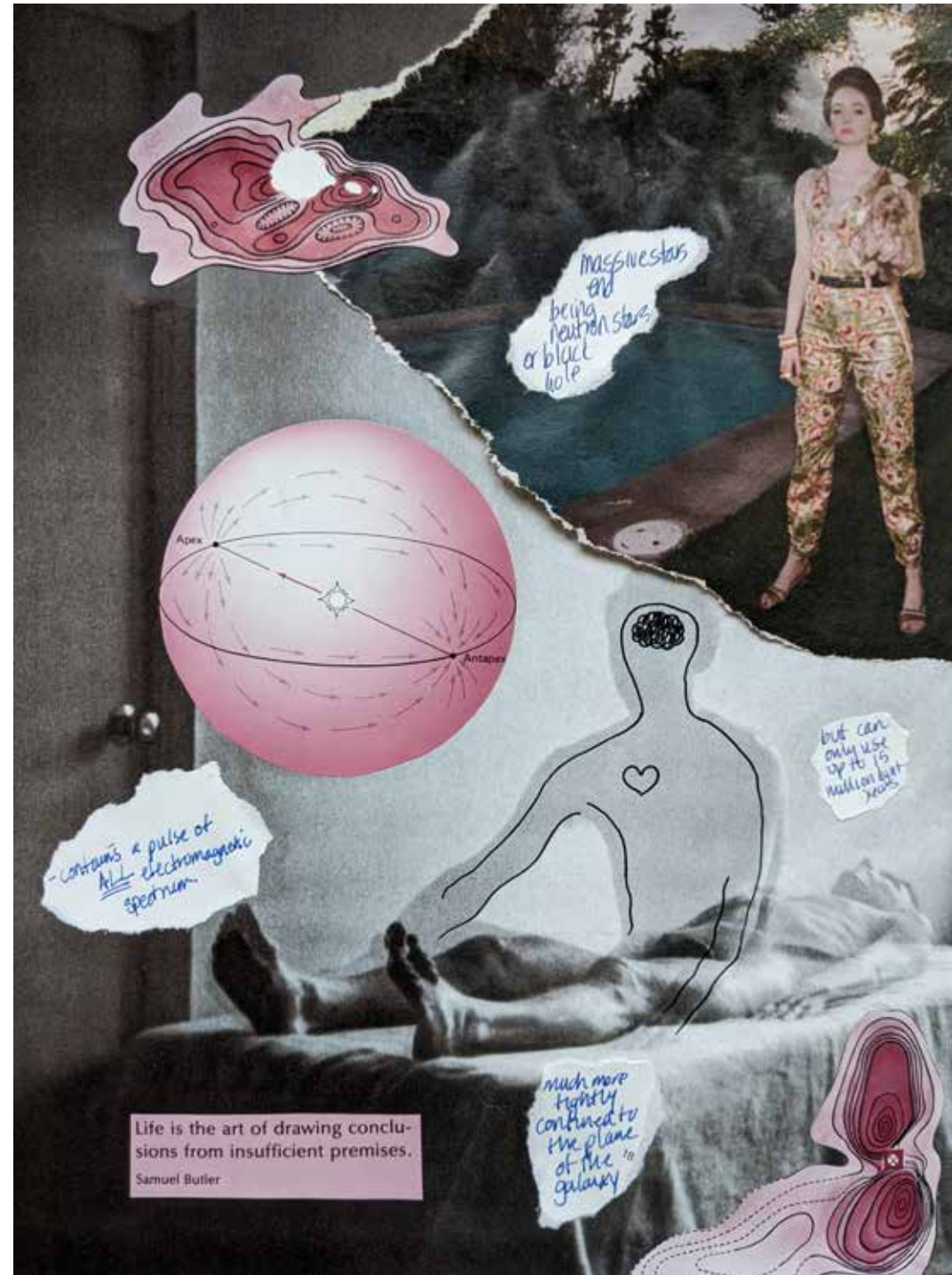
January

Ani Seigel

If I close my eyes, I can clearly see you
sleeping soundly to my right;
the planes of your back dappled in sunlight,
your breath sweet and soft
[like a goose feather
carelessly plucked from a down pillow
and ran across the back of my hand],
the freckles on your cheekbones
whispering promises of your blue eyes
and the day yet to come.
I think that in a past life,
you must have been a mountain stream
or a snow-dusted fir,
for surely,
what else could look so perfect
in the cold and clear light
of a winter's morning?

*much more tightly confined to
the plane of the galaxy* >

Ani Seigel



If You Care Enough to Find the Time

Anika Puttaiah

I enjoy waking up to a misty morning. One which dries up as the day stills, only to drench the ground with a torrent in the evening. The picture frame in my room is slightly crooked. The white paper mache pattern within it, the shortened crosses and intersecting lines, alike to a quilted blanket. It taunts me to fix it, to straighten it, to allow it to align with the rest of the paper mache-filled frames alongside it. But I let it go because it's not very important, and I don't have time to fix it. It's just like an itch, one that I refuse to scratch because on my other arm, there's a gaping wound.

The door to my childhood home had a glass oval at its center. When someone was approaching the door, it was easy to tell, but the glass was frosted enough that the person inside, behind the door, would be a blur. Opening the door you could always smell the spices that filled up the home, hear the sound of the stove exhaust and the deep hum which came from the bass of my dad's voice which reverberated across the home. He always came home at around 6 PM, and somehow I felt whether he was inside before I touched the door handle. There was always a slight tingle when I would walk up the stairs from the door, an inkling about whether it would be a calm night or a painful one. The prediction could yield a nice dinner, delicious food and the family sitting in front of the TV watching some movie. Polite comments about the food, the movie, and how school was that day. Or night could be desperate instead; screaming, yelling, throwing things, since resolving things calmly was never an option. *He drinks too much, we don't have money, bad father, bad husband. She doesn't care about me. The kids aren't on my side, I hate everyone at work, my brother's always pressing me to borrow money.* They always wanted me to pick a side, as though one of them was completely in the right.

My dad would make promises about his drinking. My mom would force him, by grabbing his hand, and putting it over my head so he would promise on my life. She would only believe it was real if he did it on me. Maybe in a way, he passed because he knew he could never fulfill that promise.

At some point that repeated prediction became another itch in my brain. An itch that I let go, for the sake of everything else that's important, for a disregard of my feelings, ignoring them to make life easier. No one was allowed to know about my family, about my home life, so there was no point in making a big deal out of it. It would only make things worse.

The itch of unpredictability turned to a dull throb. A dull throb that would roll across my skin every time I walked up the stairs, an acceptance of the unpredictability and of finding predictability and routine in that instability. I didn't let my brain think about it, really. There was no time, and I'm too caught up in getting my homework the next day, making sure my mom was feeling okay and that the house was intact, held up by thin threads. No time to react and process. The next day is coming.

I often think of time as rigid. How to make every minute efficient. Produce the maximum yield. Time for anything I deem unnecessary is removed. This began when I was a child, and slowly evolved. I found taking care of myself to be generally unnecessary. I really believed I could function without sleeping, without eating, without expressing emotion. In a way, I could. But it would always catch up to me dramatically. Suddenly, I would find myself passing out in school, wondering how I ended up on the floor of my calculus class during passing time. It's comfortable on the carpeted floor, forced to rest by my body. Forced to slow down and face my incessant fear. A fear that the world would rush ahead of me. I'd look in the mirror and suddenly the phases of my life would rush past me, faster than I could ever go, leaving me behind and taking a hollow shell of a future with it.

In the mirror, I could see myself dancing. My mom was there too and I could see her in the mirror. Her image flowed parallel to my reflection. Every interval of my hands moving was perceptible, their image moving frame by frame before they arrived at another spot. I was trying to remember how it was possible that I ended up where I was, where I existed, and how I was made that way. I couldn't remember and the room kept moving and I kept dancing. I couldn't stop dancing and as I danced I was in another stage of my life over and over again. I was wearing a black dress, long and frivolous, but suddenly I was much younger. Perhaps that is how I felt as a child. Always wearing pretty

dresses and a bubbly smile yet still mourning. Perhaps that's how I felt at my dad's funeral, a 16-year-old little kid playing pretend in a dress too grown for her. As the phases of my life rushed past me, I felt like I had to run to catch up. To chase after a future because, if I didn't, I would never be happy, never find conclusion in my passions, and become someone I would despise. Someone who contributed nothing to the world.

Running feels good for the first ten seconds and then hurts. I have tried many forms of exercise, yet I still think running hurts the most. Everything is a little blurry. The shadow of the night illuminated by flickering lamps, footsteps pounding on pavement, each footfall weighing more than the last. The pain in my lungs; the strain in my calves. I have to keep running otherwise I'll fall apart. One thing after another collapses into each other. My mother's disappointed tone lingers in the echoes of my ears. She encourages me to run, yet wonders why I always do. Isn't it obvious?

The vermilion color of the trees fades into a blur.

Snow appears, frosting the ground, soaking into the branches of trees.

Then just cold, a long stretch of cold that shakes my bones and holds me captive.

Grey can be a comforting color,
familiar.

Painful, but it wraps around me.

Suffocating,
but I breathe.

How do I breathe so well when I'm suffocated?

A calm ache,
a dull throb taps at my skin,

when the morning dew turns into rain and I am washed down the drain. The world is spinning and I'm getting far too dizzy to stand still. Water in my lungs. No more air. I'm collapsing to the ground, falling apart. I understand why I have to fall. I can't degrade myself. I know my time has come. The time to piece myself back together again. This cycle is endless, I am consumed entirely by my goals, my identity, so much so that I let go of everything else that matters to me. Things I feel guilty for spending time on, regardless of their value.

I found that I was wrong in a lot of ways to believe I couldn't do it all. I can spend time eating. I can make time to spend with my friends and family. To call my mother at least once a week. Time will appear if I care enough to find it. While I was so busy running ahead, I forgot that. I forgot that it's all a construct. There is not a limited quantity. It is something to control. To bend and stretch at will.

Tick-tock:

the clock never actually ticking,
just another noise folded into my ears.

One that isn't real.

Only the rain is real.

Droplets rush onto my skin. I can feel it. The liquid is between my fingertips, falling onto my hair, blushing the highest points of my cheeks. It falls into my eyes when I look up. It's all blurry, but the rain falls and seeps into my eyes, rinses my brain into my veins, and coats my whole body. It washes away all the grime and aches. It pours out of a hole in my skin before that water travels to a seed in the ground. It travels through the soil, between the earthworms and ants, and helps the seed grow. The rain always comes, but maybe it's better to drizzle than to pour so heavily.



< *No Smoking Please*

Siyuan He

butterfly pins

Leonor Brockey

butterfly pins
pierce her fragile
stained glass
their thin pricked holes
hallways of light
in carefully painted lace

the carcass
is pried open
in windless flight
with frozen life
a delicate death
preserved

I found a Blue Whale in a puddle in Seattle,

there wasn't much swimming room
–but it was all he had. Like a
beetle in sap,
flower in fire,
butterfly in space,
goldfish in the dead sea,
my Blue Whale: an oxymoron.

Grace Meinke

Crowding the city streets,
nothing there to eat,
friends all past the beach,
begging someone
to find him more water.

Look At That!

Siyuan He >



Turning 18

Mori Rothhorn

I sit down at a coffee table across from myself
My date smiles at me
I can tell how long she spent doing her makeup
Yet her lashes still lift at the corners
Winking at me

I ask her how she is
Today is the day after all
She says she's ok
"Just a little tired"
Of life? I ask
Not quite. I just got here after all

I still don't know why my nose clogs up when it's cold outside
Or why my hands still long for hers
And why the circles around my eyes seem deeper
But only on Thursdays
Why time seems slower in his arms
But the minutes escape when I turn my head the other way

And on really romantic evenings of self
I go salsa dancing with my confusion

I stop to look at her as she gets up to leave
So put together
Her life so scripted
She fixes her hair anxiously in the mirror
Twirling the front two pieces
A habit only we notice
Before bidding me goodbye

Until next year.

Untitled >
Henry Baratz





Baroness Carrie Reichardt's *Pig Head Bra*

Them Piggies

Kylie Cohen

Momma wears them piggies for their woman-like faces;
they got these scared, poison-berry eyes, one ear always unfurled,
and this soft, tender look, like the velvet petals
of some goddamn daisy. They're too soft,
because someone will always feel like they can rip them up
with a hungry, fork-like stare.

Like how Momma's swollen breasts fall
when she lays on her back, them piggies
look away from each other as if
they were embarrassed of their place
on Momma's chest.

That sense of shame has fried Momma too,
so she stitched smiles on them piggies
as if they were her very own daughters.
She had to do the cutting,
gutting, skinning, tanning, dehairing, deboning,
and sewing all by herself. She did all that
while her fingers were bound in tight silver rings.

Momma kissed them piggies on their spring flower heads
before the farmer tore them open with his fork.
Momma knows she's not a piggy,
but her full-moon belly won't stop the farmer
from trying to buy her like a sow
to breed with the next year, and the next year, and the next.

Lepidoptera Blues

Emilia Ferrante

At first, nobody noticed.
It's not often you saw one, anyway.
Speckle black,
orange yellow,
iridescent blue.
These aren't colors we see anymore.
Against grey
 and concrete
 and blacktop
 and smogged-up skies
 and benches never made to be sat on,
they were a rare sight.

They were swallowed by the grey
slowly then all at once
quietly gone before
any noticing happened.

But —

I saw one once.
Maybe one of the last ones
 ever
though I didn't know it at the time.
It sat next to me —
 (I'm not sure "sat" is the word,
 but we were both on the bench,
 waiting for the bus to come
 or the flower bud to open)
— It sat next to me
so lightly, spindly twig legs barely brushing,
still flying and floating
with feet on the ground and i wanted,

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i wanted to be

light
 like that

i wanted to make the concrete beautiful
i wanted to be any color
 other than grey
i didn't want to match the sky, the bench the bus

Don't match the smoke
don't match the street
don't match the cigarette butt
mashed under feet

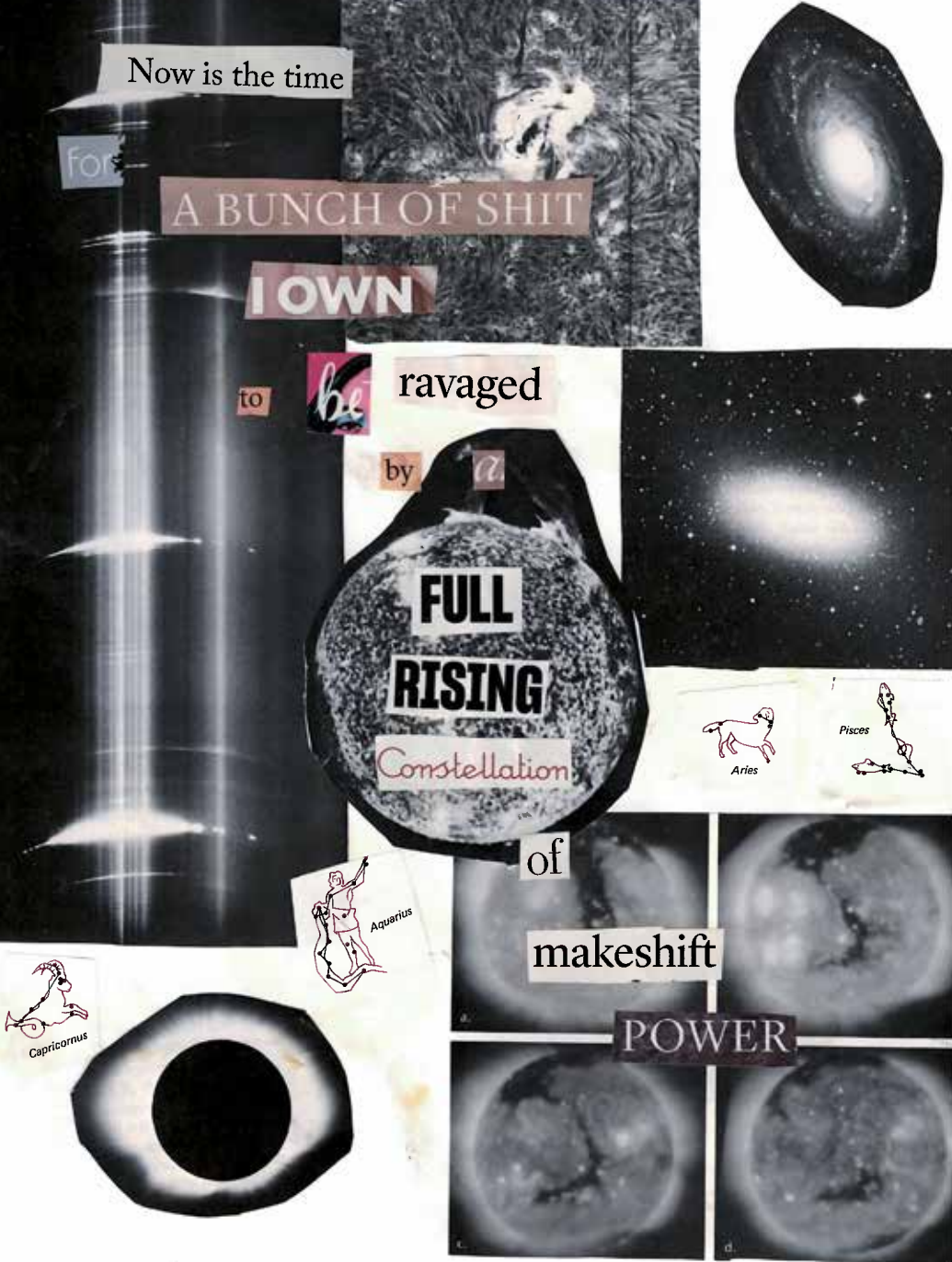
The bus roared into the stop.
It creaked to a halt.
Grey poured out of it, it sank to the ground
like an old man in supplication.
The grey sighed out of it, tired,
 fucking exhausted,
then dispersed quietly
into the surrounding other-grey.

That was my bus —
 get on it
(can't stare marvel want)
 no time —

I didn't remember to look back
until the bus was pulling away,
rejoining the mass.

The bench,
of course,

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Now Is The Time

Emilia Ferrante

now
empty —
of color, life,
butterflies.

Morpheus

SJ Shin

An immortal spirit flies through our dreams.
A winged messenger of the night, an ear for
the divine, the mortals—seraphim. In his
rest, he lays among poppies dear; opioids
shape our fears and fantasies molded from
the works of the Oneiroi. But he is not the
lord of phantasms
nor nightmares; rather, of gods and heroes. I
wonder, does he swim? Does he float through
Forgetfulness and Oblivion, and
does he speak to Nyx the way we pray to
the night sky? Does he see the falling sand
in his hourglass of time, like we do? And I
wonder, does he get lonely too?

Hell's Kitchen

Marissa DeLeon

I keep trying to find you in dreams, but it's nightmares all the way
down, darling

I woke up this morning from a nightmare where I was being stabbed
All my guts are spilled out onto the floor, and you've devoured them all

All of them except for
This rotting heart of mine, decaying in my chest like a forgotten piece
of fruit But

maybe it is sitting there fermenting, still there for you to get drunk on
somehow I

know there isn't anyone there to love me, but would it kill you to
pretend?

Just store this spoiling organ in your freezer
You don't even have to look at it or acknowledge that it's there

Hide it like you would a dead body

Or better yet,
Just finish me off

Eat all of me alive in the marketplace until there's nothing left, and I no
longer have to feel

I'd choke down a pomegranate to stay in hell with you
Return the favor, will you?

Apples
Abigail Schreck



The Secrets of an Orange

SJ Shin

There was once an orange that appeared on a child's windowsill. Unexpected and foreign, they could smell the reek of its scent in the room. Their mother—and her mother, and her mother—claimed an allergy to the orange and all its cousins. They had never seen one in the flesh before then, and that day they saw the way sunlight filled the pores of its skin and felt their own arm prickle in shivers.

The child had immediately thrown it out, for fear of a reaction and a sudden rising shame that their mother would find it in their room. But the next day, like magic, it reappeared. And the day after that, and the day after that. It continued to haunt them for weeks, and no matter how far they threw it away—the garbage outside, the neighbor's trash, and once, out of the window from frustration—it returned, at the exact same sunspot of the sill.

Its scent continued to diffuse about the room in those weeks, finding a home on their clothes, their bed, their skin. It was a dance, almost, of citrus notes that demanded attention, and a stubborn abhorrence that challenged it. But the child danced along, and it began to feel natural. The way it filled their space, the way it stung their eyes if they got too close, became a new comfort. It transformed itself into a secret they hid from family.

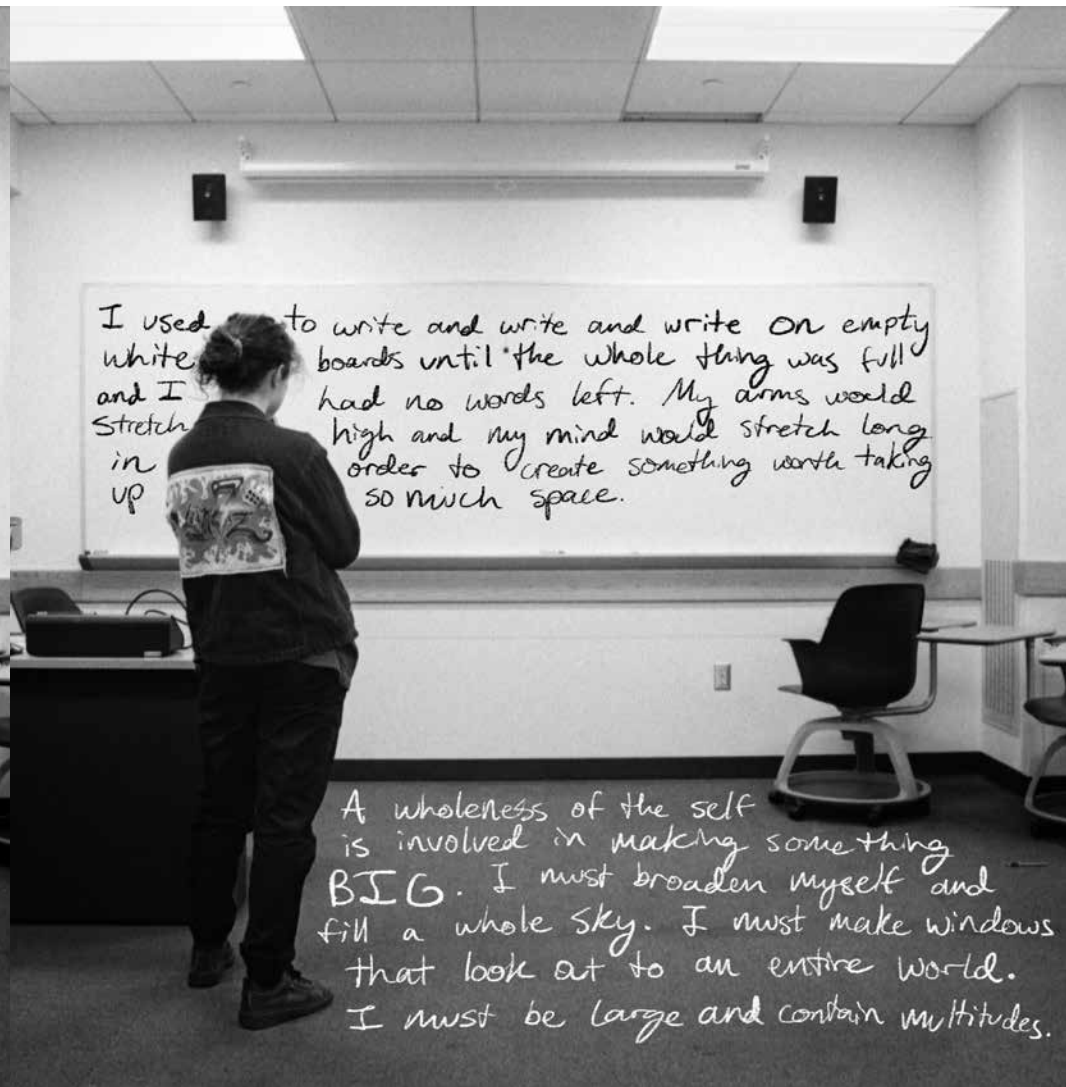
They found themselves whispering secrets to it once the sun would set. They'd sit, knees up to their chest, next to it, moonlight streaming in and blanketing them in a silent intimacy. They told it things they had never, and would never—thought they'd never—tell anyone. And the orange stayed quiet throughout, assuring them with the same fragrance they once hated. They found it beautiful, then.

One night, doors locked, lights off, the child peeled its skin. Felt its surprisingly smooth exterior, and textured pilling whites. They grazed

the thin film that protected its pulp, and finally—after months of trepidation—bit in. And the juices that burst in their mouth surprised the child so much, they had to take a step back. Their eyes shut tightly from its acidity, seeing the same stars from the sky in their own room. It was dizzying, but became a new addiction. Again and again, they pulled apart its carpels and tasted it. They were gentle, nervous, exhilarated.

They repeated the same ritual every night. Despite consuming its fruit, they'd leave the skin on the same spot, and as the sun rose, it rebirthed itself and tasted sweeter every time. It began to leave a stain on the child's skin, and an eternal smell on their fingers. At a certain point, they couldn't hide it. They would attempt to obscure it, with pockets, gloves, soap, but it made its mark and they were an extension of its existence.

Their skin's pores opened, suddenly textured, warm in color. They glowed in the sun, soaking in the light, energy bright. The child smiled so wide, it blended into their skin. They sang, music flowing out in loud symphonies that had to be listened to. Arms wrapped around themselves, they hummed music unknown, self-soothing, self-loving, cocooned in their own assurance. They stayed awake all night, serenading the moon until the sun rose, and they became whole.



Something BIG

Laine Kibler

Rolling Sevens

Laine Kibler

this is what it feels like:

you handed me the die and told me to roll a Seven. so i rolled, and it was a 6. i tried again and it was a 6. i tried again and it was a 6. what do i do now? i asked, and you looked at me. you looked at me with a blank stare because isn't it obvious? you told me to roll a Seven. so i rolled the die and it was a 5. i feel you holding yourself from tutting in disapproval. i roll again and it's a 6. i roll again and it's a 5. i roll again and it's a 4. it's getting worse, i tell you, and you tell me to roll a Seven. i roll the die and it's a 2. i roll again and it's a 1. it's hopeless, i say to you, i can't roll a Seven. you tell me to roll again and it's a 6. i roll again and it's a 6. roll a Seven it's a 6. roll a Seven it's a 2. roll a Seven roll it roll a Seven roll. you take the die you hand it to me roll a Seven. roll a Seven. i roll a 6. i roll a 6. i roll a 3 i roll 2 i roll and i roll. i roll 1. why do i roll and roll because it's not a Seven it won't be a Seven you said to roll a Seven i can't roll Sevens. i can't roll Sevens. you said roll you say again roll do it again roll it again roll a Seven roll. it's a dead die. it's a dead die it doesn't like Sevens. i can replace the die i ask and you say no because i have to roll a Seven. it's hard to do anything else until you roll a Seven. it's hard to do anything until you roll. it's hard to do anything. it's hard. i don't roll a Seven. you said roll a Seven. you said roll and the die is dead i don't roll Sevens. i roll 1 through 6 again and again and you hand me the die and i can't even look at it. i only know i can't roll the Seven when i hear you tell me to roll it again.



Untitled

Adaeze Uzoije

House Ghosts

Emilia Ferrante

This is my house before it was my house. It is a site of cumulative memory, where each day has pressed itself onto the last like so many flowers between journal pages. Each day thickens the book that makes the house my own. But the house itself has not stayed constant as each individual memory would crystallize it. This is my house before it became too small, before our growing and multiplying bodies squeezed out of its frame and burst into something bigger. Before eight months of mattresses in the basement and men overhead, systematically taking the house apart and putting it back together. The screened porch, the old bathroom in the back, they feel remote to me, untouchable and unknowable outside of photos and ghosts in the foundation. Their pressed-flower memories have all but crumbled in my hands, so delicate I can't reach back and touch one without it falling apart in the oils of my fingers built up over twenty-one years. They stay tucked away, just beneath the family room and the new bathroom, lending their bones to a structure they will never know. They are buried under the expansive sand sieve of time. They were not as important as kitchen and dining room, as green laminate floors and sunny wood cabinets, as fiestaware and long table and happy birthdays and spilled cereal milk. Those parts get to stay, aided by their ceaseless physical presence, falling over themselves day after day until they are no longer sticky putty but hardened cement in my mind.

I lie on green floors and I am every age I have ever been at once, time and space colliding until the house cradles me in its beams and blown-in insulation. It holds me, it is passive, it is full of love because I have loved it, not because it was built that way. It holds me because that is what it has always done, as I grew and scratched the walls and sang in the shower and cried in its belly, cried for sleep and for heartbreak and for all the things in between. It pulls me up through papery time-petals and shows me my room before it wasn't my room, before the builders picked it up and moved it sideways and built a different room in its place.



The floor is dark and weathered hardwood, warm from slanted sunlight through windows. Shadows on the floor change at the whim of the oak tree outside, branches so close they sometimes gently tap on the window. The braided pastel rug, less faded, more vibrant. The toy chest, not dusty, not relegated to the basement, not used for storage but opened every day. The lavender and yellow quilt, lost to me now, though it must lie somewhere in the murky memory boxes in the basement.

The house has memories of me, too, and I wonder if they pile on top of each other until you have to strain to pull one out of the bottom. Or do you hold them all, all at once, tracing every step over steps that came before, adding them to a sum total of a heavy thrum, your heart beating with my footsteps? Do my many daily ghosts walk around when I am not there? Do you watch us collide, sometimes, age three and age eleven, age fourteen and age seven, age seventeen and age nine, dancing around each other like dandelion seeds in a lazy breeze? Did I ever walk the same path twice, fifteen and four, seamlessly blending into one for a brief moment before pulling apart, unaware of repetition? Do I fill the room with myself even in my absence? Or are you reminded each time I walk through the door?

< *Untitled*
Sarah Bayne

sweet
blown glass
supple and cloudy
freezing over by morning
how far could it land
inches down the
beach
cool
early
exhausted
future on canvas
forged in ovens and pots
comfortable in size
and too fast
to see
sun
spots
a warm drink
a savior, nothing new
save it, the invisible thing
that shifts and turns
and tears apart in
moments
alas
none
could stand
the righteous thing
a hand reaching above
from ragged ground
and thawing
rivers

(Ruby Howard)

Corona Unseen

Karein Goertz

This poem is dedicated to a friend's mother who died in isolation during the early months of the pandemic. Writing the poem was an attempt to find beauty and transcendence in a time when these were hard to come by.



Pandemic
of a virus unseen
with a name
deceptively beautiful
corona-

which used to mean
concentric circles of light

around a luminous body
like the sun's outermost atmosphere
or the halo of a moon.

But what is used to anymore
when we can no longer
take leave of our dead as before
and reaching out to a friend
requires the weighing of risk?

This pandemic
with its own vocabulary
of social distancing
and quarantine
superspreaders
and flattening the curve

its culture war
and political gambling:
public health or economy
science or faith
common good or me

where workers
considered essential
are sent to the frontlines
while others shelter in place.

During all of this
I walk.

My feet touch the ground
and even if I don't know
how all of this ends
I know that
just another step
takes me from now

to next.

And in the woods
I see
dew along a jagged leaf
like sparkling diamonds
capturing the light
that cuts through the canopy of trees
while a startled squirrel lies flat
watching warily
when I enter upon this vernal scene
and the birds
go hush.

As I write
the vapor off these miniature suns
has long lifted
hovering momentarily
a corona
glowing white.

Only when the sun is blocked
its radiant crown appears
leaving me to ponder
what this eclipse
reveals.

Untitled

Sara Stewarz

Lesson in Futility

Grace Meinke

It is said:

*[the heart cannot feel
what the eyes cannot see!]*
so I closed up both of mine.

But:

the hunting is real
[even if you should plea!]
& the beasts all come to dine.

So:

I stayed for a meal,
[simply failing to flee!]
consumed, of course, by design,
& there I was:
still trapped in the creel
only the difference for me?
I was bait, *[heart-lost & blind!]*



Erase

Laine Kibler

this is what it feels like:

you asked me to look at our list of names and Erase them all. so i picked up the Eraser and i looked at them. and i looked at them. i looked harder. they aren't going anywhere, i said, and you said to Erase them. but isn't that ink? i asked, and you looked at me. you looked at me and you pointed at the Eraser and demanded i Erase them. so i rubbed it over the first letter R. it didn't go anywhere. Erase it you said and i did but i didn't because there's a big black R on the paper and it's not going anywhere. Erase the letter, you say and i Erase it harder and i try the other letters but the name stays. you aren't Erasing it, you say and i clutch the Eraser instead of throwing it and it rubs over the names, another one and another one, this one starts with L and this one starts with D and this one starts with J but they don't move and the ink is dry it doesn't smudge. you're such a bad Eraser you say and i cry saying i know. you sigh and hand me white-out. i can't use white-out i say it will still be there underneath and that's not Erasing. well you must Erase somehow mustn't you, you say to me, why's it always my fault, my tools, i am giving you all the right things you just can't do it now can you, and the tears make the paper damp as my hand hovers over the letters, wet paint threatening to spill. it's not Erasing its covering you said Erase how can i Erase this is censorship this is hiding you said Erase you said Erase you said Erase i can't undo it they're written in ink the ink smudges i'm crying and you look at me and say Erase.

Hard Edges, Soft Skin

Olivia Thompson

*“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 with her boyfriend Nick of over a year. 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 as she 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 in 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 through 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.



The pitter-patter of the rain on her window makes her look up from her homework. Her dorm room desk is small and cramped, and the chair is highly uncomfortable. Freshman year of college is hard, practically impossible at this point, but she pushes forward. She can't see why she should anymore, other than it's what she's supposed to do with her life.

It makes her think about her mother; the way her mother would brush her hair before bed and tell her that there was something better out there for her.

She swallows before forcing herself to look back at the paper she is typing on her computer. It feels so minuscule and stupid in the grand scheme of her life. Everything does—even living itself.

But, when she pictures her mother's face it makes her want to keep typing. Because this is what her mother wanted for her. A good life. A good job. A good family. Something she never had. Something she might never have, actually.

She considers giving her mom a call, to see if the number she has is still connected after so long.

When she picks up her iPhone, her fingers tremble. She can't bring herself to dial the number. Can't bring herself to face the woman who she left behind. Can't bring herself to face the woman she finally decided wasn't worth saving anymore.



She steps into her home with a thud from her Doc Martens around 4:30 in the morning. She quickly kicks them off next to the pair of Vans sitting beside the entrance of the door. Their shared apartment is small and reeks of *safe*. There are books scattered around on their various shelves and tables. Clean coffee mugs sitting on the counter from when he had done the dishes. Throw blankets and pillows tossed haphazardly on their couch and chairs.

She takes a deep breath as she steps into their bedroom. Nick sits up quickly.

"You made it back," he breathes out.

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



Fracture

Abigail Schreck

He laughs, but it sounds forced. “Yeah, I bet. Glad you’re home.”

She changes out of her jeans and tank top into her PJs. She feels Nick’s eyes boring into her skin as he watches her carefully. He has to notice. He has to notice the bruises on her neck that weren’t there before. But, if he does, he doesn’t say anything.

With calculated strokes, she brushes her hair. There are knots and tangles at every corner, but she just continues to yank the brush through her hair.

“I’m tired,” she says as she sets the 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 lies her head on her flat pillow. “You should know,” she laughs softly, “we’ve been together for, like, 6 months now.”

“Sorry.” He turns on his side and puts his arm over her waist. “Didn’t realize I had to learn your whole schedule,” he jokes.

“Don’t apologize,” she says dismissively. “Goodnight. I love you.”

He is quick to repeat the words back to her.

She closes her eyes and tries to dream of a world where maybe this wouldn’t be her normal, even though it has been since sophomore year and now she is graduating in a month.



“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. It's decent outside. Chilly, but not freezing.

"I think so. I mean, it's literally your 19th birthday. What's a birthday without getting drunk, right?"

She snorts at Amanda's comment. "You're a raging alcoholic. Can't go one night without getting drunk?"

"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 are really so cute, honestly. Y'all are, like, goals or whatever." She laughs, but it feels forced. "Yeah." She hesitates for a moment. "I like to think we are."

↓

"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?" She isn't sure what possessed her to ask.

"Today?" he repeats, just to be sure he heard her right. They've been together for over a year at this point.

"Yeah," she says. She plays with her hair, twisting it between her fingers. She knows she should be studying with graduation just around the corner, but she's tired of the usual rhythm of everything.

"Alright."

They pack up their things and head out to 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 over-priced restaurants. The elderly sitting on the benches and taking everything in like it could be their last time.

They are hand in hand, Nick's being bigger than hers. Her heart should flutter. She should feel the butterflies everyone talks about. She should've felt them the first time they kissed, too. But, she still feels overwhelmingly empty. Nothing matters. Not when love is a myth fools use to make themselves feel better. She doesn't know why she keeps trying to convince herself otherwise.

"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. Of course he remembered, they've been together for a long time. Nonetheless, it's a thoughtful gesture. "Yes."

↓

Ever since moving to a big city, she has had to get used to public transportation. It sucks, really. It's not fun having to run on another person's schedule, but she supposes it could be worse. The fact that it's her first year here doesn't help, either, though.

She is sitting on the crowded bus, and someone gives up their seat for her because of her broken arm. She barely remembers how she did it, and frankly, she doesn't really care all that much. It's just a reminder that even she is capable of being hurt still.

The bus stops at her stop and she weaves through the throng of people to get off. She steps off the bus and an elderly woman is standing by the

corner in nothing but a simple t-shirt and ragged pants. Her shoes are dirty and have holes in the toes.

She licks her lips as she looks at the homeless woman. She has ten bucks in her wallet which she was going to use to buy something for lunch. But, maybe the woman in front of her needs it more. It's the middle of fucking winter now, the second semester having just started in their big city.

Hesitantly, she walks over to the old woman. She has gray hair and squints as she walks over.

"Here," she says and holds out the ten-dollar bill.

The woman looks at her and snatches it from her. She doesn't even say as much as thank you.

She walks away toward her destination. She realizes easily why she felt drawn to the woman. She wipes away the tear that rolls down her cheek.



"Here's to 19, bitch!" Amanda screams as she raises her red solo cup in the air.

She laughs like anything is funny and follows suit. She feels so drunk it's almost bad, but she ignores it and downs the rest of her drink like she has for the past year and a half.

Amanda grins and pulls her close. They dance and dance. The night escapes them. And, when it's over, she winds up in the place she shouldn't be yet again. She wants to hate herself for it. Yet she doesn't. It's all she can understand.



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 woven 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 stumbles home, she can't help but think of Nick. Of knowing he's at home waiting on her like he always is. He has to know and she knows he has to know, but neither of them says a thing about it. Maybe because they each have their own issues they're trying to deal with and the comfort of the other is more important than the fact that she has been cheating on him since the start.

Her heart starts to feel warm inside when she thinks about him. She hates it, so she stops it. She goes back to staring at the pebbles on the ground as she heads home. Because her need to fill this void is much bigger than anything else she could ever possibly feel—if she could feel at all.



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 twenty.

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 lies 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.

I Turned 21 Last Night

Neil Peterson

David and I went out to buy a conversation.
It was 14.99 and the guy didn't even card me.
We went to the park near my house to smoke it in the dark.
He lit it with matches from his glove box,
while I opened the ginger ale.
It was a big, fat conversation,
one of the long ones you see hanging out of your
Uncle's mouth at a wedding.
We breathed in smoke and blew out words like
"Father" and "whiskey" and "respect."
We took turns taking long pulls too,
holding it in while the other queued up a song,
letting the story we had trapped inside
our cheeks build up before letting it out
with a long, heavy sigh.

Ginger pairs well with smoke and tears.

When our words lay as ashes at our feet,
and the cold of the concrete we sat on
had seeped past our jackets,
there was enough conversation left to blow out a goodbye,
burning hot enough to warm the walk home.

2016, Sedalia

Sarah Bayne

Southern solar system
Moonpie and moonshine in hand
Dark nut of Jupiter 'tween teeth
Light weight of fragile paper glasses with plum purple tint
Shooting across a face not quite covered

The party is already drunk
Singing for the anniversary of love birds migrated back from Taiwan
Mates finally ready to nest in the land Great Aunt Bernice has been
saving all these winters

"Dear fledglings,
I am worried you have fallen out of formation for too long.
Come home to the call of cattle in the night and the roar of the
truckers skating down the valley.
Come home to your mama's china and that old treehouse your daddy
built for you back when
wood was cheap. You have been traveling in the cloak of all that city for
too many frosts. Come
home so that the moon and stars can see you. Come home and be
naked again."

We are drunk and bare
Waiting to be tricked like the Red-bellied Woodpeckers
Into thinking day is night

We are naked in the walnut orchard
Ready to be eclipsed

Thrift Store Jesus Painting

Kylie Cohen

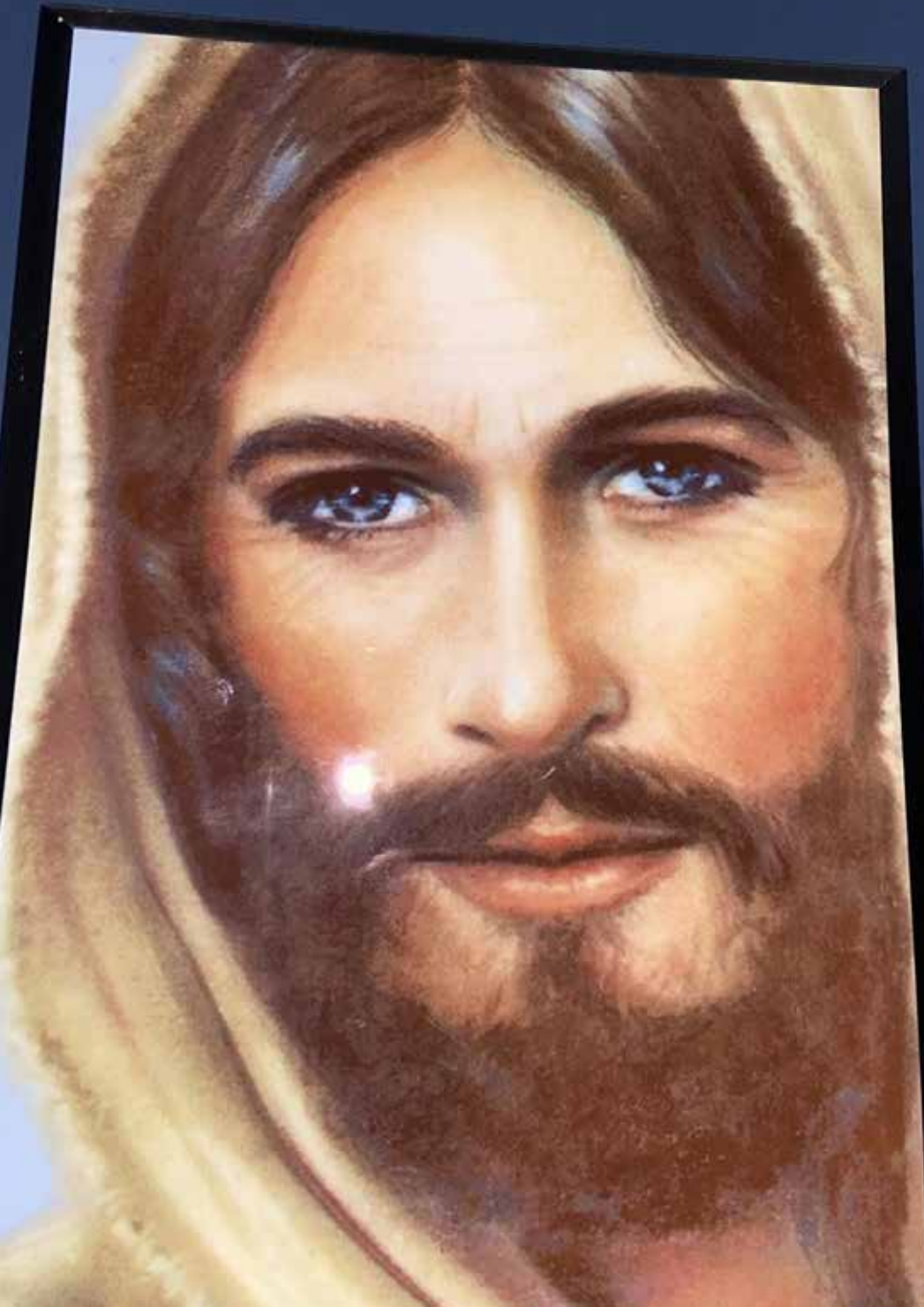
What have we done to you?
Your white skin hangs on my wall
Like a porcelain mask,
And with your wreath of glossy brown hair
Adorning those deep blue eyes;
Jesus, you look like Jared Leto.

Framed in black, you're embraced
By an ivory hood so gently
It makes me ache;
Because I've seen you
Destroyed by your own people,
Yet here you are,
White as fake snow, but forever
Gentle in that blessed gaze.

Though my eye is drawn to you,
Yours are painted as a lost ocean;
Where are the flames of fire?
Are they in the rouge
Blushed on your cheeks?

Are they in your lips,
Scarcely painted pink?
Or have we lost you completely?

How much of you, Jesus
Of Nazareth, do we paint today?
If we can alter the face of God's lamb,
Who's been refined in a holy furnace,
Then what have we done to your word?



Growing Pains

Bailey Burke

You got your wisdom teeth out three days before Christmas. It was about as fun as it sounds. You thought everything had healed—things seemed fine in Florida. Though in truth, all you cared about was that your swelling had gone down. You didn't want to look bloated in pictures. You did look a little bloated though.

Anyway, things are handy dandy. You hop on a plane to the other side of the world and start a new life. As one does when they are twenty-something and restlessly disillusioned. On your third day in this foreign land, your mouth starts to hurt. It's been nearly a month since you got your wisdom teeth out. You try to ignore the pain.

This is normal, you tell yourself as you try to fall asleep.

You wake up to redness and swelling. Perhaps a slight fever, too. That's not good, my friend.

You make a few dreaded calls. Your phone doesn't have international coverage, so you pace and stare at the clock as the dental people put you on hold. Every minute counts. Or perhaps more accurately, every minute costs.

You schedule a same-day appointment in the sketchiest part of town. It's fine, you'll be fine. Just think: back in America you would have had to wait longer for an appointment. Isn't healthcare just so efficient over here? You're not convinced yet, but that's ok.

You figure out how to take the bus. You're pretty sure you overpaid by a dollar or two (you haven't figured out the currency here. You probably won't figure out the currency here. It is monopoly money, valuable and valueless at the same time). You take the bus to the sketchiest part of town. You won't learn that it's the sketchiest part of town until the end of your dental appointment, when the dentist offers

to call you a taxi and gives you a very concerned look when you ask for directions to the nearest bus stop.

But first, you find the dentist's office. You have time to kill, so you run some errands. You browse the shops. You buy a pillow. It will be nice to have a pillow for your fourth night here.

You then go to your appointment. You feel a sense of relief as you sit in the ugly green chair. You are an adult. You are solving your problems. The dentist asks you some questions, then asks you to open wide. You wince. It hurts to open your mouth this wide.

The dentist finds an infection. Congrats, lucky you! You remember what you're allergic to as he prescribes some medications. You thank him. You don't get mugged as you walk to the nearest bus stop.

You Google the nearest pharmacies as you ride the bus. You have to turn on your data roaming to do so. Every minute costs, so you search quickly. Every pharmacy closes by 8 pm here. It is 7 pm. The nearest pharmacy is a mile's walk. You can make it, but you mustn't dilly-dally.

You drop your pillow off (and the other less necessary things you bought) at your accommodation. Then you half run, half walk in the dark to the pharmacy. You are grateful for Google Maps. Though your trust in Google Maps wavered for a few moments as you half ran, half walked to the pharmacy. Google Maps took you through the woods, on an eerily empty (but, admittedly well-lit) path. But it's no matter. You made it to the pharmacy.

You wait ten minutes for them to fill your prescriptions. It feels like 20 minutes. You don't know what to do with yourself. The running part of getting here was not a good idea. Your mouth throbs. And your stomach rumbles. Ah yes, dinner. You need to eat dinner.

It is a good thing you figured out where the grocery store is

yesterday. You have food to make dinner. You think about what you will make as you walk back to your accommodation, medications in tow.

You will get back to your accommodation, make some pasta (it will boil over on the stove that you haven't figured out yet), and you will spend the next five hours unpacking and rearranging your few belongings in your little room. You will spend the next two weeks taking antibiotics, rinsing your mouth out with a solution that dulls your taste, and taking half of the prescribed pain medication.

When the second week is done, you will think everything has healed. This is where things will get murky. You will experience discomfort a week later, startled to find food logged into a hole you didn't know still existed. You will remove the food and breathe a sigh of relief. All is well. Maybe.

You will then get very ill. But not to worry. This illness is unrelated. But, as you get better, your mouth will get worse. Increased discomfort will cause you to again go fishing for food in the crevices. You will have to use your phone flashlight to see. You will also have to pull your cheek out of the way. You will wish you had another hand as you balance the phone flashlight with the cheek pulling and attempt to stick a toothpick where you can just barely see a dot of food. You will get the piece out but feel the need to check again. You will see and remove another piece of food. You will check again. You will pull out what is hopefully the last piece of food from the alarmingly deep hole. The final piece of food will be turning green. This will cause you alarm. You will be afraid to eat after that. You will then question if this move to a new country was such a good idea after all. Though the country isn't the problem, now is it? What you should be questioning is the wisdom teeth removal. But you cannot question that. It is done.

You will then long for home.

Untitled >
Camille Nagy





Into The Woods

Siyuan He

Irradiated Fungi

Clyde Granzeier

Mycelium tendrils working their way through hollowed steel
Usher in the era of abandoned biomes and renewal
Siphon the baleful poisons of the lightless sun
Habitation in the epicenter of annihilation
Recovery is an assurance in your wake
Obsidian rot shall be our protector
Out of all the harm wrought
Mushrooms still remain

Wish

Taylor Burnham

Stained copper touches skin
as desperate fingers release.
Turns and flips all the way down
until consumed by the darkness.
Pool of water underneath,
crashes inside with a silent plop
and left to drown for years:
once a coin, now a dream.

Weed that blossoms—
ugly and round—
picked not for its irresistible beauty.
Cold winds brush the surface,
blowing away children from their home.
Once nestled in the pores,
snug right next to their brothers,
sent away and dispersed all over:
a million little wishes.

Deep night sky
painted in iridescent black;
stagnant light dots the canvas.
An insurgent moves whimsically to fade,
destroying the still scene.
Transient rock miles from the surface
drifting to better days,
spreading magic dust along its path:
close your eyes and wait.

Tangible objects
burdened to be much more,
expected to do the impossible.

Yet I put faith in the superstitious;
talent remains accidental,
and blame is placed on the unexplainable.
I fear what I can control,
dear universe:
take the accountability away.

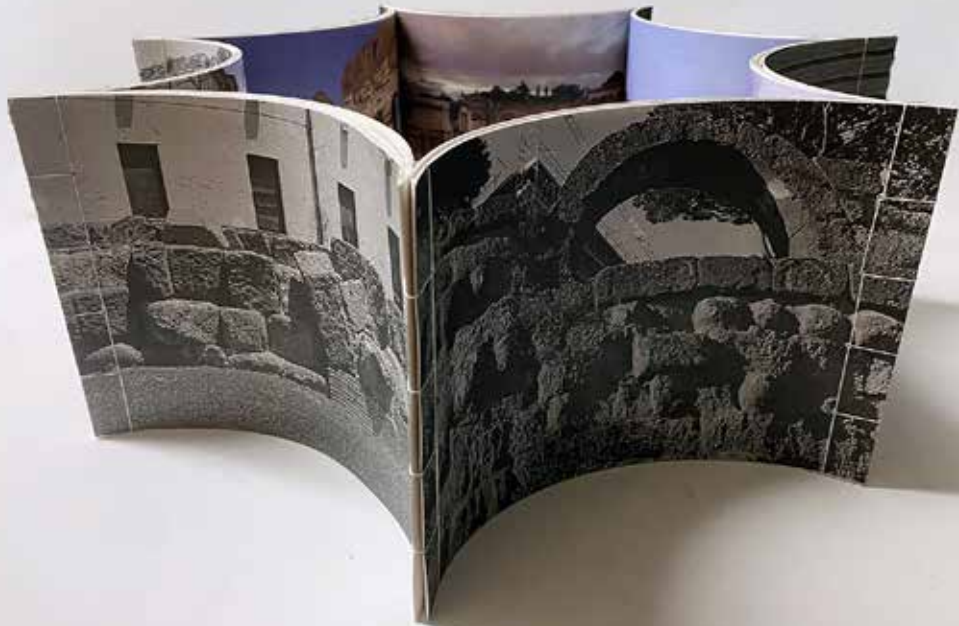
The Drawer

Laine Kibler

this is what it feels like:

you opened the dresser drawer and told me to get Inside. i asked why and you said to get Inside. the drawer was not even the length of my arm how could i possibly fit In, but you said get In. i looked at you and your ever-unwavering blank face and i placed my hands in the open drawer and i tried. i crawled up but the dresser creaked. it is going to break i said and you didn't care you said get Inside. i can't fit you said get Inside get In i have to make myself fit. in order to make myself fit i have to break my bones and fold like a clean pair of pants but can a person break himself like that or can he fold i don't know and you're saying get In. i crack my fingers but that's as much as i can do i manage to sit in the drawer but i'm barely In it's a miracle the whole dresser isn't falling. get In you demand get In get In you must fit get In. i don't fit i don't break my bones i sit like an idiot. i sit. i'm an idiot with my ass in the drawer and the rest poking up and out of it it's useless. you look at me and come closer and i get as small as i can and i'm still taking up more space than i'm supposed to fill so oh well what's a few broken bones, i almost do it i almost break to fit but i look at you instead. it's your fault i want to believe it's your fault for demanding i break these bones but you look at me and it doesn't matter whose fault it is the point is i won't fit i won't get In.

Hills of Rome
Cristina Squatriti



Campus Buildings

Bailey Burke

Mason/Angell/Haven/Tisch Hall: A living, breathing creature with four heads; its hallways and hidden corridors like tentacles. It was not designed by an engineer—rather, it is the collective brainchild of a few forsaken English and History students, who, legend has it, still can be seen wandering in the bowels of this quad-headed beast, like Plato’s cave dwellers who have yet to see the light.

Law Library: The place where 20-year-olds still salty that they haven’t gotten their Hogwarts letters go to study in unnatural silence. I sneezed here once and never went back.

The Ugli: Freshmen go here because they think it’s cool. Don’t let the appearance of the first floor deceive you. The remainder of the building is, in fact, ugly.

Hatcher: The best kept secret on campus; where upperclassmen go because they have a crushing amount of work that actually needs to get done. If you can find your way through the stacks, you’ve earned the right to study here. It says it’s for Graduate students, but rumor has it they wouldn’t be caught dead here.

The Diag: Walk quickly and don’t make eye contact with anyone. Anyone with a flyer in their hands CAN and WILL add you to their email list and never remove you. Either they’re trying to get you to join their obscure club or sell you something. Sometimes both.

MLB: Nothing makes you want to learn a language like lack of sunlight and oxygen.

LSA Building: The basement is always crowded, but this place is IDEAL for studying. If you can get in that is—some of the upper floors require an MCard because sociology students deserve that, I guess.

Kelsey Museum: Worth the trip (though I’ve been here four times for classes...), just ignore the *minor* ethical issues of the acquisition of many of their artifacts.

The Union: If you like tables, don’t go here. There is a lack of tablespace in common areas. Panda Express is underrated though—fight me. Also, my cousin got married here, so this is a very versatile building. There also used to be some sketchy stuff that happened on the seventh floor a couple decades ago, but we won’t get into that...

Weiser Hall: Come here if you want to be confused. Looking to study abroad? The first test you’ll encounter is attempting to find the CGIS office.

Chem Building: If you like getting lost, this is the place for you! Is there a method to the madness? No. False walls, circling hallways, and many, many stairs. It’s as if someone took an old shopping mall and disfigured it. No classes here will bring you joy.

North Quad: The sophomores here think they’re very clever. But evidently not clever enough to find off-campus housing. The key to getting in here is to act like you care about international studies.

West Quad: Why would anyone go here?

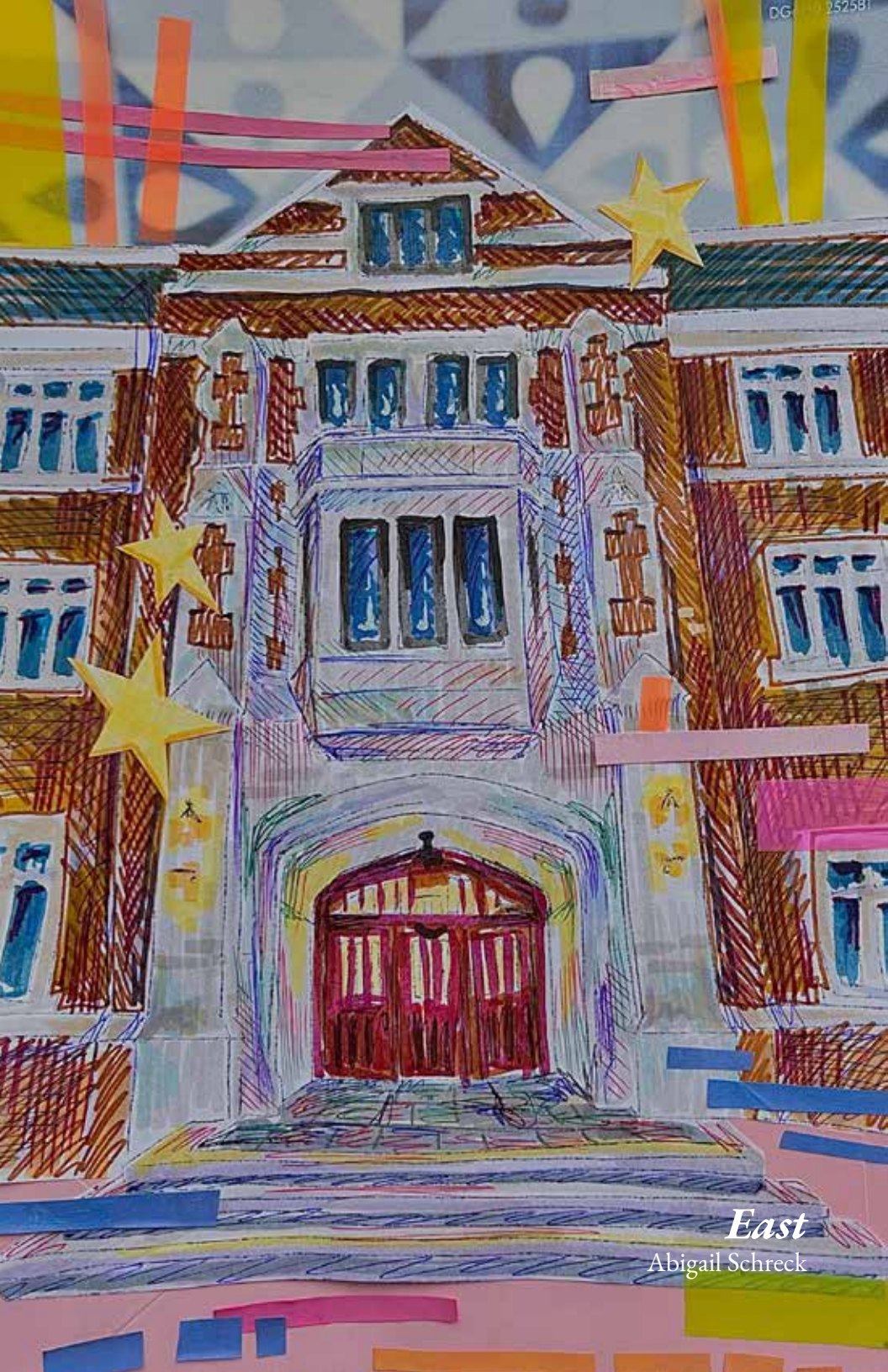
South Quad: Sasha Obama ate here at least once. As did I. Good luck finding a seat.

East Quad: The people here are weird. But, like, in a good way.

MoJo: The cookies are only good because they’re warm. The dorm rooms themselves are far superior to anything you’ll get closer to the Diag. RIP Palmer Field though.

Martha Cook: Are you a feminist who likes archaic rules?

Markley: I feel like I don’t need to say anything here. Its reputation



East
Abigail Schreck

precedes itself. However, if you end up leaving here, you'll at least be close to the hospital in the event that you receive any mold or cockroach-inflicted ailments.

Captain's Log

Marisa DeLeon

There's a leak

There's a leak, and this ship is going down, and I'm tearing out pages from books with broken spines frantically trying to plug the hole, and I want to crawl in the corner and cry, but there's a fucking leak, and this ship is going down

So I grab what I can: letters, lyrics, scripts, anything I can get my hands on, anything I can use to get by, anything I can use to plug this stupid fucking hole

But the pages are getting soggy, and the water keeps coming, and I don't know how much longer I can keep hauling it out

Oh, but if you were here

Oh, if you were here with me below deck, I'd press you against the hole in the hull, and maybe the water would still come in, but at least it would come in slower, and maybe the ship wouldn't sink before we found land

But even if we went down

Even if this godforsaken ship was damned to Davy Jones' locker, we could still kiss as it sank, and who knows, maybe kissing would be just enough for us to breathe

Saturday, on the River Dock

Aviva Satz-Kojis

Lulu can feel Norah looking at her. She forces her eyes down at her book, trying to ignore the stare and instead focus on reading, which is proving to be an impossible task. The letters on the page keep blurring together, making themselves illegible and she's frustrated with herself for letting Norah have so much power over her. Norah stands up from her seat and walks to the classroom trash can, and throws away a small scrap of paper. Her perfume lingers in the air, even after she's settled at her desk. Lulu feels like she might throw up.

"You're not in your usual seat Lulu," Mrs. Cunningham notes.

Lulu says nothing. She merely glances at the empty desk next to Norah and then back to her teacher's face. Her mouth won't cooperate enough to form a response. Her head hurts and her eyes feel hot and itchy. She goes back to pretending to read.

Mercifully, the bell rings and Lulu jumps out of her seat, shoving her book into her backpack and darting out of the classroom. Norah trails behind her, mouth open like she has something to say, but Lulu has left before she gets the chance to do so. The school day is over, and she has successfully avoided talking to Norah for the entirety of it. She can't remember a time when that has happened since they became friends. Since the day they met, they were drawn to each other in a way neither of them had ever felt before. They were fast friends, and have remained impossibly close throughout the years. Now, the space between them feels foreign to Lulu and she doesn't know how to proceed. The sky is a thick gray, and she can feel it in her lungs. She quickly unlocks her car and speeds away before Norah has even left the building.

When she gets home she checks her phone and sees two texts from Norah, reading:

-if you don't want me to go out with him I won't

-i just didn't know that you liked him

She tries hard not to think about the day before when Norah told her that Josh asked her on a date. Tears filled her eyes immediately, which

she attempted to hide but Norah knew. Norah always knows. She quickly got off of Norah's bed and stammered some stupid excuse about having to help her mom with something, and rushed home.

Norah was shocked. She had no idea that Lulu was into Josh at all. Honestly, Lulu never really talked about boys so she figured she didn't have anything to worry about. She tried calling and texting her but she didn't get any response. Lulu's funny like that. Norah wants to face her problems head-on, whereas Lulu tucks them away in a drawer in her mind and refuses to talk about them.

Now, it feels like that drawer is starting to overflow. She sits down at her kitchen table and stares at the texts from Norah. She tries to convince herself that everything's fine and that she's okay. The tears welling in her eyes are threatening to prove otherwise. She puts down her phone and takes a shower, before crawling into her bed and napping restlessly until dinner.

The next day at school Lulu eats lunch in the library. The walls are beige and the fluorescent lights are jarring, but she can't exactly eat in her normal spot, on the grass with Norah, so the library does just fine. Scattered at the tables around her are some of her peers, each of them swiping through their phones in a desperate attempt not to seem as lonely as they feel. A brief look out the second-floor window confirms what she suspected, Norah sitting in the grass staring down at her phone as she eats her lunch. Lulu isn't hungry anymore and she feels sick. As she packs her unfinished food back into her bag, her phone vibrates in her pocket. She can already tell what it is and who it's from and she doesn't want to read it but she pulls out her phone anyway and opens the text.

-things are weird between us, can we talk?

Lulu holds her breath as she types out a response.

-can't, i have a lot of homework

She doesn't and even if she did, it's Friday so she has all weekend to do it, but she really doesn't want to talk to Norah right now.

-ok, do you think we could meet up this weekend?

Lulu wants to say, "No, sorry, it looks like I'm booked for the foreseeable future," but she knows Norah would see right through that, so she responds with:

-yeah maybe

If she's being honest with herself, it's not that she's all that mad at Norah. She's hurt, but more than that, she's embarrassed. Of course Josh asked out Norah. She is beautiful and funny and kind and interesting. She's not surprised he wanted Norah and she's not surprised she said yes, but it hurts so fucking bad. So no, she doesn't want to talk to her and be reminded of all this. But she knows Norah, better than anyone, and knows how persistent she can be. If she wants to talk, they'll talk.

Lulu pushes the feeling of dread to the back of her mind and goes to her afternoon classes and tries her best to seem like she's paying attention. She figures she's pulling it off pretty well, save for her leg which won't stop bouncing, undoubtedly annoying those sitting next to her.

With one class to go until the weekend, Lulu drags her feet into the classroom as she chews on her fingernail, nearly tasting blood. She can hear her pulse in her ears and sits down, wondering if the people next to her can hear it too. She allows herself a quick glance in Norah's direction and immediately regrets it when she sees that the seat next to Norah, where Lulu normally sits, is now occupied by Charlotte. The two seem to be getting along quite well, laughing over something that must be positively hilarious judging by their reactions. In this moment, Lulu realizes that Norah will always be okay. She will always have friends and she will always be pretty and boys will always like her. If she's having problems with her best friend, she will simply find a new one. Things will always work out for Norah, but Lulu can't say the same for herself. This realization overwhelms her, so much so that she rushes to the bathroom, convinced that she's going to throw up. She doesn't, but she spends the rest of class there, only returning to the classroom once the bell rings and class has been dismissed. Mrs. Cunningham studies her knowingly as she puts on her backpack, asking, "Everything alright?"

Lulu heads out the door with her eyes cast downward and nearly whispers, "Have a good weekend."

It's Saturday afternoon and Lulu is lying face down in her bed. She hasn't moved in a while and is beginning to wonder that if she stayed still long enough she would eventually melt into her mattress. It

sounds appealing. She's been playing the same Mitski album on repeat and it's making her feel worse in a miserably satisfying way. When she hears Mitski sing, "All I need darling is a life in your shape / I picture it soft and I ache," she decides she can't take it anymore and reaches for her phone to change the song when she sees the three texts she's missed. Of course, they're from Norah.

-hey!

-do you wanna go to the dock today?

-i miss you and i wanna talk :(

Lulu takes a deep breath and knows she can't put this off any longer. She chews on her nail as she types her response.

-yeah, i can be there in half an hour

She lays back on her bed and stares up at the ceiling before sighing and getting ready to leave. It was the same nearly every weekend when the weather was warm. Lulu and Norah would meet at the river dock, plant themselves down and talk. It didn't matter what they talked about but it always felt so good to just be together. After a while, Norah would get restless and abruptly strip down to her swimsuit and jump into the river. She'd swim around a bit, splashing and giggling, and trying her best to cajole Lulu into joining her. She would always resist, claiming she didn't want to get her hair wet, or that the water was too cold, or whatever excuse she could come up with. Really, she much preferred to stay on the dock, with the sun on her back and her heart seizing in her chest as she watches her best friend. In these moments Lulu is always surprised by how beautiful Norah is. She loves the way her hair floats gently in the water and how the sun glints off her soft stomach when she floats on her back. It makes her want to cry. When she starts feeling like this, she figures it's safer to stay on the dock instead of joining her in the water. Eventually, Norah gets tired, climbs out, and dries herself off. By this time Lulu has gotten a hold of her erratic heart and they continue talking. Once the sun starts to set they hug goodbye and part ways. Lulu starts her car, turns her music up a little too loud so she doesn't have to listen to her thoughts, and drives home.

Now, Lulu sits on the edge of the dock and dangles her feet, watching them disturb the calm water. The sky is an overwhelming blue. Norah is late. Lulu is not surprised but still finds herself a little

irritated, annoyed that after all these years Norah still hasn't found a way to be punctual. Lulu can feel the sun hitting her bare shoulders and can already predict the sunburn she'll be left with instead of the tan she always unrealistically hopes for. Norah, who is already beautifully tan, never has to worry about sunscreen or getting a sunburn. Lulu tries not to think about the freckles that form on Norah's cheeks and nose and shoulders after a few hours in the sun. She tries really hard not to think about how badly she wants to trace them with her fingertips. She fails.

Alongside Lulu on the dock are various groups of people, enjoying the warm weather and the cool river. The straps of her bikini are digging into her shoulders, pinching her skin. She watches the people around her, seeing a group of boys drinking beer and shouting obnoxiously, a few girls shrieking and laughing, and a couple who are kissing a little too passionately to be in public. She can't help but stare at them, at the guy's hand pressing hard into the soft flesh of the girl's thigh and her slender fingers tangled in his hair. Lulu looks away, feeling rude for intruding on their private moment, even though they're in public. Her eyes settle on Norah as she approaches, wearing her swimsuit and sunglasses atop her head. She looks effortlessly beautiful and Lulu resents her for it. Norah offers her a gentle smile, which Lulu attempts to reciprocate, wrangling her mouth into something that resembles ease and friendliness. Norah sits down slowly next to her. After a long pause, Norah whispers, "Hey."

Lulu blinks, unwilling to raise her eyes to meet Norah's. "Hi," she responds. Norah slips her shoes off and dips her feet into the water, swishing them around just like Lulu. Lulu's eyes are fixed on the woven string bracelet tied around her right ankle, a twin to the one tied around Norah's ankle. Both are frayed and dingy after the two summers it's been since they tied them on, but they both refuse to take them off. Norah turns her head, observing the others around them. Her eyes land on the group of boys chugging beers and being rowdy. Lulu looks up at Norah's face and then back out towards the water, wondering what Norah is thinking. Once again, she can feel Norah looking at her. Sometimes it feels like she has a sixth sense when it comes to Norah. With reluctance, she raises her eyes to meet Norah's, who's looking at her the same way she always has, with understanding.

"You know I love you right?"

Lulu swallows and says, "Yeah, I know." She does know, but she also knows that Norah doesn't love her the way she loves Norah.

"And I'll always love you, no matter what happens. I mean it."

Lulu nods. She knows Norah means it.

"I love you too. A lot," Lulu adds. She feels hot all over.

Neither of them speaks and Lulu's words hang in the air.

Suddenly Norah says, "You know what?"

Lulu stares at her, waiting anxiously for her to finish.

"I could really go for a beer right now," she says with a lighthearted smile. Lulu laughs and says, "Yeah, me too", and returns the smile.

They both laugh. The tension seems to slip away a bit, leaving them both room to breathe. Norah stands, stretches her arms towards the sky, and jumps into the river. She extends a hand up to Lulu.

"C'mon, it feels good."

Lulu holds her gaze for a moment and then complies. She sinks herself slowly into the cool water. Norah was right, it does feel good. She takes a deep breath and submerges her head and Lulu follows suit. The water smooths out her curls, sticking them to her forehead and the back of her neck, but she feels refreshed. When she returns to the surface, Norah is looking at her. Lulu looks back, seeing her long dark hair and eyes. It's like looking in a mirror. Or really, like looking at your reflection in the water, almost the same, but not quite. Lulu smiles and splashes her, causing Norah to scream and splash her back. They continue like that for a while, exchanging only a few words and giggles, but happy to be together. Eventually, they get tired and climb back onto the dock, drying off and sitting side by side staring out at the water. The whole right side of Lulu's body buzzes from her proximity to Norah. She takes a deep breath and allows herself to feel the tingle of her skin. Norah rests her head on her shoulder. Lulu hates how good her hair smells.

"I don't like Josh," Lulu croaks out.

Norah sighs gently, "I know. You like someone else don't you?"

Lulu squeezes her eyes shut and barely whispers, "Yeah."

Norah gently slips her hand into Lulu's and says, "It's okay."

Lulu nods and lets out a shaky breath.

Norah lets go of Lulu's hand and stands. "It's getting chilly, why don't we head back to my house? We can watch a movie, anything you want," she offers with an easy smile. Lulu stands as well and looks into Norah's eyes. They regard each other for a meaningful moment before Lulu says, "Okay let's go."

Checking Out

Neil Peterson

I saw Jackie last week
 while I was back home.
Yeah, he cut off all his hair,
 looks just like his dad used to.
He was wearing khakis too, and a button-up.
 Couldn't even see his underwear – had a belt on.
He's working at the furniture store,
 yeah.
All the piercings were out,
 but I could still see the holes in his ears.
I probably wouldn't have noticed
 the flames around his collarbone if
 I hadn't known to look.
Yes, I'm sure it was
 the same Jackie, dumbass.
I don't know, man,
 he seemed happy to me.

We got drinks together after his shift,
 yeah, at Barnacle's.
He picked me up in the Cadillac, too,
 made a joke about how
 he doesn't need to steal
 the keys anymore.

It took a bit for him to put all the piercings back in.

He let me crash at his place,
 I swear, man, it was like
 walking into a time machine.
All our posters were still up.
 My old drum set in the corner,
 and your bass on the wall.
He played the solo from
 Through the Fire and the Flames
 before passing out beside me.
Muttering something about
 coming down to see you.

You know what he said,
 the next morning, before I left,
 while I watched him transform back into Mr. Dennedy?
 'You haven't changed a bit.'

The Poet Prays to Her Vanille Extreme Perfume

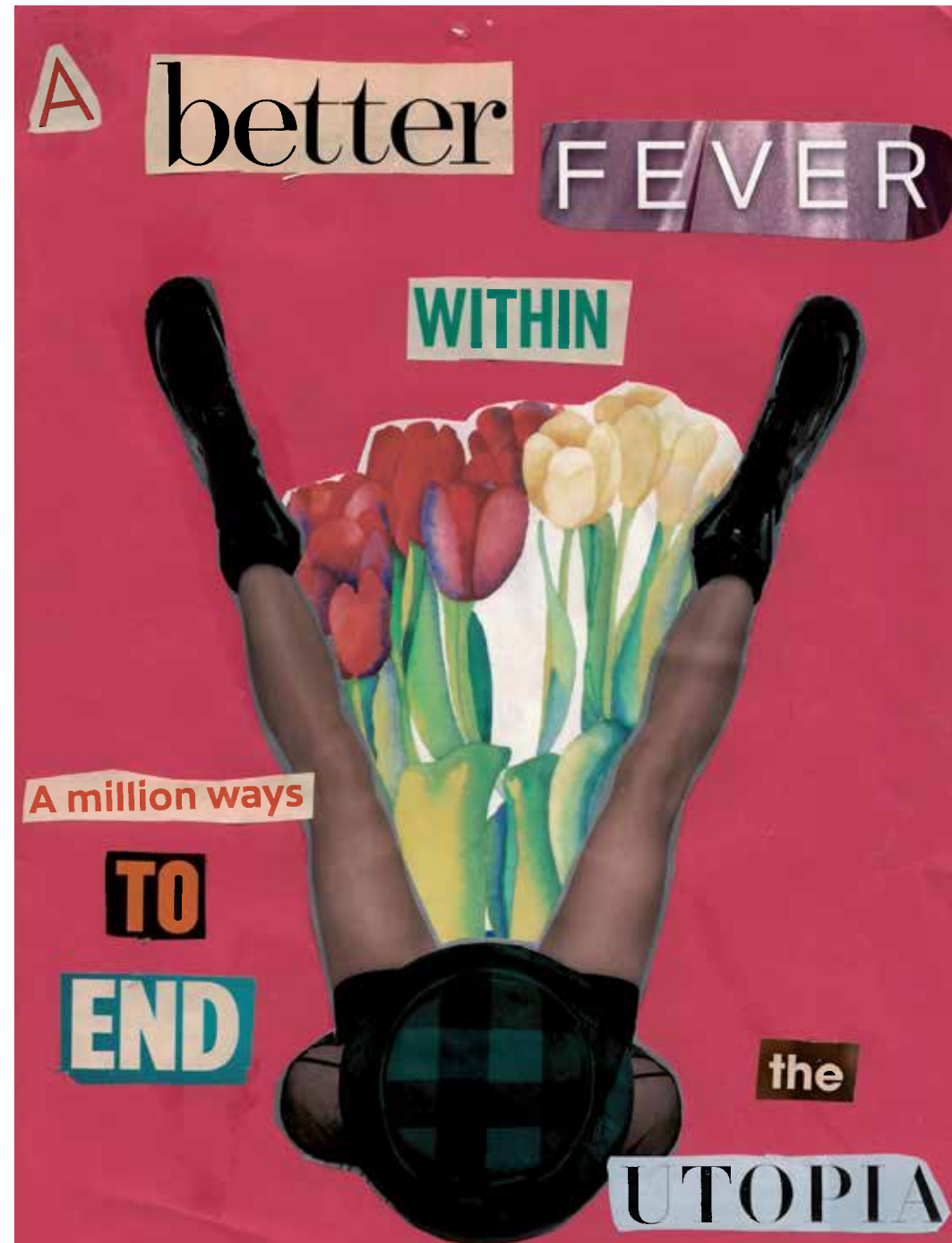
Kylie Cohen

Imported God from France, tonight make me
the frisky, short-skirted predator who reeks
of wedding cake and candied sex. I want
to wrap my lips around your tit and suckle
vanilla chemicals to make me sweet
on the inside. Have them taste my poison;
I want those dogs who bury bones under
my skirt to gasp for breath with flaming tongues
and stinging eyes. When I go out at night,
be the Fentanyl that I am laced with
because hungry little fucks are waiting
to sink their teeth into my virgin flesh.
Discard being dolled up for midnight men;
I want to be nightshade consumed because
all girls will die like flowers anyways;
although velvet petals will wilt away,
forever our sweetness lingers in bloom
from our corpse of curves and wombs. Tainted
Heaven in a bottle, I love the way
you make the starving world drool for me,
and while I hold my last breath,
you will triumph over the taste of blood because
although I am a fragile girl of glass,
through you I am a warrior always prepared
to die—adorned in my liquid sugar armor.
Before I leave tonight, let me put on
a show for you; swinging my hips naked,
unshaved, afraid to die; I dance for you
in sacrificial worship because
I want suicide to kiss homicide with tongue.
I will avenge my innocence, Vanille Extreme.

*A Better
Fever
Within* >

Emilia Ferrante

So I ask you to remember me when your
fragrance dances across a summer breeze.



euphony

Ruby Howard

red and purple woven close
she stitched the sky like lace
serene
and painted the robin's egg
by mild hands
she sowed the worms
and twisted the trees
toward sun
trumpets wail
cries and swinging hips
sounding waves knocking shores
choruses of dissonance
flower and abscise
and euphony is born from chaos
let it wash over you
soak you to the bone
dripping in noise
and luminous in the dark deep blue
that cradles our mother
and births our children

Untitled

Sarah Bayne



What She Saw

Sarah Bellovich

She hiked far out into the arroyo that morning, the bends of the canyon walls pulling her further towards nowhere. She walked in the presence of primordial pinyons and tar-black bones, deep in stone, who noticed not of her passing. Once on a hike, her grandmother told her that pinyons can live to be over 600 years old. Somehow, she felt she had already read it in their gnarled branches that churned out from the sucked-dry earth.

The breeze began turning out a smell the girl had never known before. It was sick and sweet but spoiled, and she followed it despite the way she felt it froth in her stomach. It became thicker and thicker until she had to pull her shirt over her nose as the next twist of the canyon gave way to the source. Flies swarmed the desert ground; a tree was black with their waiting bodies bound by the instinct to lay eggs in the dead flesh. Through the writhing blanket of maggots and flies, the girl beheld the shrunken body of a mountain lion. Its eyes were still open and maw wide, a frozen gaze full of wild shock and surprise.

The girl had only seen the massive paw prints of a mountain lion before. She had imagined the claws gouging the clay from its bed with each powerful stride, and muscles rippling beneath a golden pelt. Every time she saw the prints, she felt a wonder accompanied by a deep fear of one day meeting that yellow-eyed gaze. Yet, there was the reassurance that in that terror she would also meet this myth of beauty.

This was worse. Its power, like rotting flesh, was stolen by the maggots, its eyes begging for the desert to strip its bones quickly, and moisture was collecting in the air around the carcass. She stood staring back at the lion in that microcosm of death, and a heavy emptiness proceeded to burrow into her limbs.

For the next few weeks, she carried that hollowness inside her. She carried that stare, the glint of teeth, and that gray, sunken body. She spoke of it to no one, and with every day of running through alfalfa, wrestling with her brother after dinner, and shrieking with pleasure as thunder rumbled through her chest, it began to fade from her young

body. But she never hiked out into the canyon alone.

* * *

“Come here Lilah,” her mother whispered, holding out a hand behind her body to encourage her daughter forward. The girl felt the hollowness creeping on her again, and she dreaded its clammy fingers. She reached for her mother’s hand and dragged herself forward, clamping her lids shut. But once they were closed, those stunned eyes glared back at her through a squirming black mass. She breathed shakily, her body trembling, but she couldn’t open them, dwelling in horror but trapped by fear.

“It’s ok. You can look,” her mother coaxed, running a hand through her hair. She felt so little... so scared that she would never forget the stare of that creature, so she opened her eyes. She looked. Her grandmother appeared to be sound asleep, placed carefully in the polished box. Her soft fragile hands rested over her heart, and her lips and cheeks were still tinted with rose. She smelled of herself—of dry sage and misty mornings. Her eyes were closed.

In the following weeks, she would hike back into the canyon feeling strength in her body. She would think of the lion, she would think of her grandmother, and she would think of the pinyons. She read in them now the wisdom of knowing. Of looking, seeing, and remembering. Maybe she was not meant to see that lion; maybe she should have told another soul. But she knew the pinyons were weaving it into their branches beside her, and they’d still grow for 600 years.

new year's eve

Sawyer Santella

darling, you make me want to fall
to my knees and scream,
and it's funny because you don't even know
what you do to me;
you sit there and smile, and when i tell you
you're the prettiest person in the world,
you giggle and thank me because you don't know that what i really
meant was —
“you are the only one i've ever met who makes the light of my heart
burn brighter than the sun, brighter than the lights at the zoo
in december, when everyone is shivering
and their fingers burn from the cold, but i've
never felt more warmth. i would be perfectly content
watching you sleep for the rest of my life,
for nothing makes me happier
than seeing the peacefulness on your face and the slight smile curl to
your lips
when you feel me pull you close.” and when you wake
you roll on top of me and you look down at my tired eyes
in that way that you do,
and suddenly i've never felt more awake. and when you press your soft,
warm lips
against my neck, you feel my breath hitch and you want more, and so
do i, and
when i glance at the clock, i smile
because time has never stopped for me like this before.
i look into your eyes, feeling safety and comfort within them,
glance down your body, still feeling your touch on my skin,
though we're inches apart now,
and i tell you you're the prettiest person in the world
because i have so many thoughts filling my head,
one was bound to slip out eventually.

and then you giggle and say thank you, and i want to
fall to my knees and scream
because you don't know what you do to me.

Strings and Stars

Clyde Granzeier

Cold chords of metal pressed deep in skin
Pain to subside to song and callouses
White plastic beak perched on the
Steel branches jutting out from the top
Run my hands and pick along
Woven alloys to make waves
I can see the dust dance around me
In my comfy little room of dusk
Lost within an ever-stretching moment
But I'd rather share this with someone
Leave for the cold again and again
Let it merge with my spine with every strum
It helps remind me I am still myself
Maybe no one will see me tonight
But the darker the ground, the brighter the sky
And in that vastness above I see an audience
Illuminating markings on the celestial sphere
Staring patiently from their silent space
Maybe one day I'll join them up there
And send the waves of my strings
Down to the world below

Frostbitten

Taylor Burnham

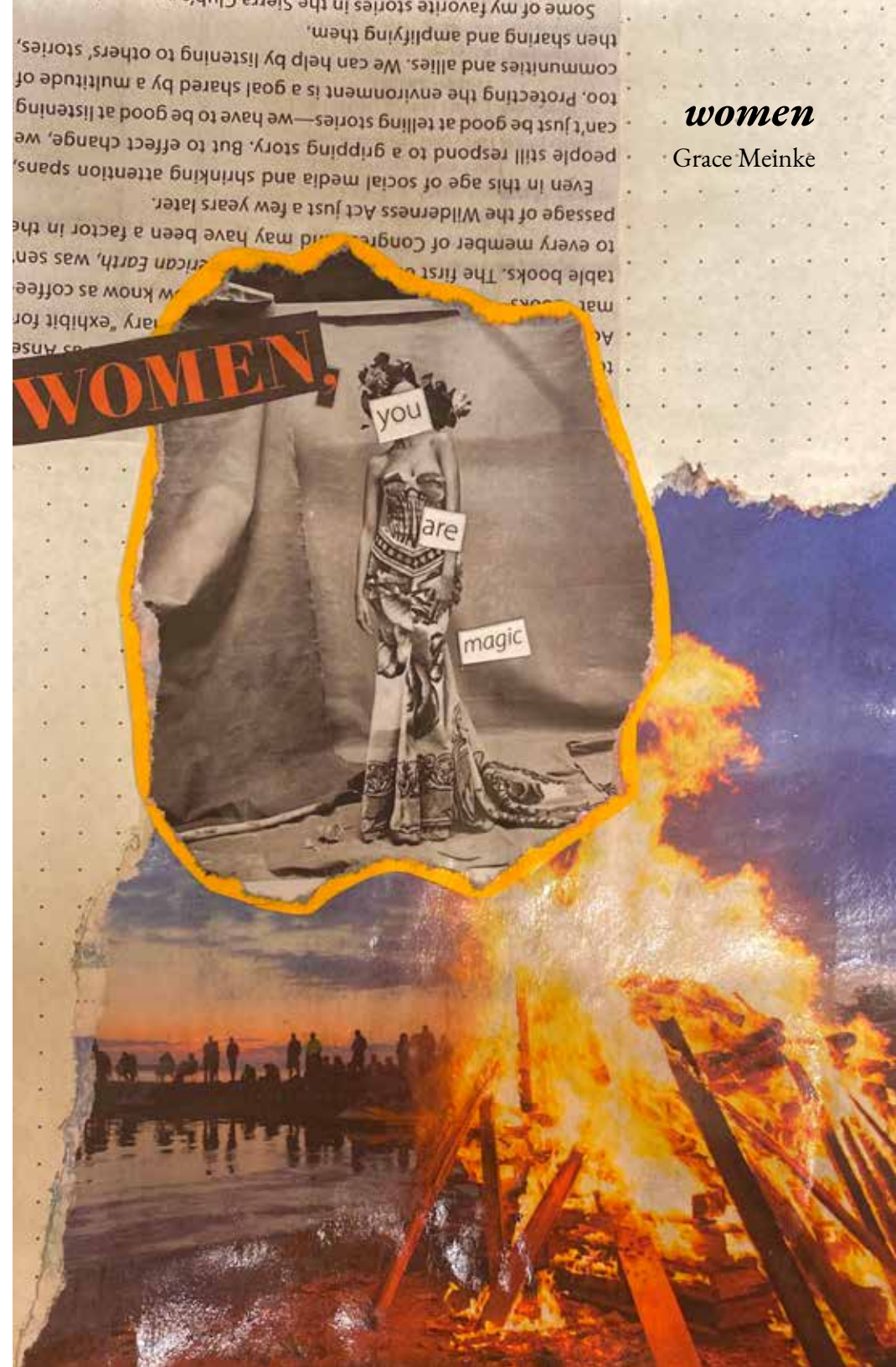
My hands shake as the wind nestles its way through the crevices of my coat. Numbness settles into my fingers; I wiggle them in hopes of sending blood their way. Snowflakes land on my face, patterning my skin in mosaics of sparkling ice. A fatal chill consumes my body. I am frozen, the cold slowly paralyzing my organs and coloring me blue with each vaporized breath.

Our boots crunch into fresh layers of snow and leave imprints of our existence. As we admire houses decorated with colorful lights and snowman inflatables, the midnight sky permeates with white dust. You mention the cold, but I focus on you: the scarlet in your cheeks as the windchill swipes across your face, the delicate collection of powder settling on brown curls. Your dimples warm the space around us as you laugh about our chattering teeth.

You reach for my hand, dethawing and returning feeling to my body. I could break if these flurries transition into a blizzard, but I will stand here forever.

women

Grace Meinke



Grow Back

John Hetzler

We buy the fireworks at Walmart. Or, at least, we try to. Little Mercury pulls into the parking lot, straddling two lanes because we can, because who will care at 9 PM on a holiday when the lot is never more than half full? Anyway, it's not like the car is very big, unlike the Rams and the F-150s that squat on the cracked pavement of the lot, bulging out of their parking spaces. We pile out of the car, leaving the little compact in its own little spaces separate from the SUVs and the pickups.

Mercury is tiny, squat, and aging. The paint is scraped and, in places, completely overtaken by rust, but it must've once been a very pleasant turquoise. She's (we're all very sure that the car is a she, not an it, or even a he or they or xe, though we couldn't quite say why) named after a band, not the car brand. It's just a happy accident they lined up. It's a tight fit, all five of us, three across the seat in back, where one of the seatbelts doesn't work. We have, actually, put one more person in the back seat, with them lying more or less on top of or across the laps of everyone else, and it was fun for a while before it became very, very uncomfortable. So it's just the five of us, as it is every night.

Walmart is a bust. We spend half an hour combing the shelves, sidetracked a few times by the clothing section and the toy aisle. There has to be some herding involved so that we can actually find what we're looking for instead of wandering the DVD section forever, and it leaves me feeling like one of the tired parents at the store, yelling at their kids to stop looking at the damn Legos and get to the checkout line. Because it's July 4th, right as the first fireworks are starting to go off outside, there's almost no one in the store, so we steal a cart and use it to glide down the detergent aisle, swerving at the last minute to avoid a head-on collision with the shelves of canned cat food. The side of the cart clips the shelf, and we are gleefully terrified for a moment that the whole thing will be knocked over, taking out the aisles behind it like dominos. But nothing except for a can of cat food falls, which we replace, sheepishly.

(We keep riding the cart until we get to the car, steering skillfully at a breakneck ten miles an hour to avoid the potholes in the parking lot.)

We don't actually leave until someone works up the courage to talk to one of the staff and we're informed that, no, they don't sell fireworks at Walmart, only sparkler sticks and those crappy mini things that pop when you throw them on the ground and that look like mini Hershey's Kisses. But we're looking for bright peonies and chrysanthemums, big firecracker combustions of light and flame, dramatic and loud, not these tiny little things. So at 9:30, we leave, defeated.

Back inside Mercury, there's an argument about who thought it was a good idea to check Walmart, and who enabled it, and where (and if) we're going to find fireworks now. Google Maps comes out. All the fireworks stores in Grand Forks are closed, so we have to decide whether it's worth it to go another half hour down I-29 towards Fargo to Gunpowder Fireworks or if it's better to just drive around a while, find a drive-through somewhere, and then give up and go home. Everyone's arguing, and we're complaining about how no one can find any fucking fast food anywhere in the entirety of North Dakota with all the places closed down after Covid, and it feels like the night might be a bust and we'll all go home hating each other, and then the Song comes on.

Suddenly, everyone starts singing. The arguments end and we all laugh at the abruptness of it. One minute we're pretending to hate each other, the next everything else is forgotten and we are hooked on the Song. Practically screaming it, really.

The Song is on this CD the school Shithead made (every school has one—that kid who sits in the back of every class and makes creepy comments about women or religious minorities. You know the guy. The one who probably has a Joker movie poster hanging in his room.) It was a Christmas gift to Mercury's driver, and since I don't think they own any other CDs, it's stayed in the car's player since late December. We treated it as something funny, at first, and I think that he would have appreciated it in a shitty sort of way, us making fun of something that wasn't meant to be taken lightly. It's strangely good, all things considered—a wonderfully eclectic blend of obscure Elton songs, the

greatest Band hits, pulsing electric music, and novelty barbershop tunes. It's become our soundtrack on these late-night drives, the one good thing the Shithead has ever done.

Mercury pulls out of the parking lot. We take off on I-29 towards the Gunpowder Fireworks store, watching the tidy condos and bright gas stations of Grand Forks give way to the endless fields of North Dakota. It's a straightaway—no turns as far as the eye can see, so we can look off down the highway for miles. Almost no cars, either. Everyone else has taken to their fields and backyards, and as the driver guns it we watch the fireworks go up. I look out, forehead resting against the window, jostled in tune to the beat of the Song, and see the bright starbursts blossom above the fields. Bright red casting the green lines of potato plants in sharp relief.

Elton John comes on next (the CD must be on shuffle because normally he comes after The Band's "The Weight" and just before The Song) and we belt along as he sings, tongue in cheek, about suicide. "Hey, I think we just missed the exit," says the navigator in the shotgun seat, not seeming particularly concerned about it.

"Shit, we definitely did."

"I'm gonna kill myself." (This from the driver's seat.)

"Not allowed," comes the chorus from the backseat.

We'll take the next exit, peel out into the exit ramp, and wonder as Little Mercury shakes through the turn if this is the time the poor thing finally gives out on us. It'll pull through, as it will continue to do until one of the tires goes flat the next month and it gets replaced by a Jeep we name Animal. But this time it'll make it through the turn, even with the dashboard rattling like gunfire and the seats rocketing back and forth with every pothole we hit. We'll get our fireworks at Gunpowder, getting in right before it closes and picking up a box of roman candles from the old man at the counter. We'll drive around town a few minutes before lighting them off in the school parking lot, and we'll all clamber on top of the car to watch them ride tails of fire into the night sky.

For now, we skate across the asphalt. We drive beside great golden plains swathed in shadow and illuminated in brief flashes of blue and white, flying past the billboards advertising insurance and various different fertilizer brands, past the sleeping combine harvesters,

past the road signs that advertise directions to the towns further south of us, to Cummings ("Cummings, you guys!" someone laughs—someone always laughs when we pass that sign, every time) and Fargo and I-94. In less than two months, Mercury will give out, and a short while later we'll all take off down that highway, in our own cars this time, to school in Bismarck or Cali or Massachusetts, with plans to meet up together that we'll never keep. Years later, some of us will move away while the rest of us stay, trapped in Limbo. But for the moment we are cocooned together in our little box, watching the fireworks.

thoughts from an ikea bedside lamp

Emilia Ferrante

you unsleeping sleeper you tosser and turner you childish snorer you up-all-nighter *you need to change your sheets* you bad-dreamer you mouth-breather in sickness you screen-scroller you ceiling-starer *you need to plug in your phone* you tired tired girl you late-riser you morning struggler you nightmare-haver *you should shower after you go out before you go to bed* you sweaty dozer you talker in your sleep you sheet-tangler you tv-watcher you coffee-drinker *you wake up in the middle of the night talking to yourself* you moon-gazer you cricket-listener you rooftop rain lover you attic bedroom gremlin *you should wake up earlier and do more with your day* you on-and-off tea-drinker *you are often sick* you silly little girl

Right to Life of [Michigan]'s Policy [State]ment on [Rape] and Incest

Emilia Ferrante

*A blackout poem using Right to Life of Michigan's policy statements
found on their website*

[the result of
a woman is
crisis]
society to forget about
[rape
justice] allows
[In the case of
the crime
help]
[the mother is
mother and
[it is rare that
the intent is
both
child] many times
to save
the mother]
It is absolutely indisputable
that this
denies
humanity .

Right to Life of Michigan's Policy Statement on Rape and Incest

the answer

becomes

the woman

alone.
alleviate the
pretend that
the
has been done,
assault and abortion often
protect
by concealing the
situation
in danger,
treat
me a s
the child
kill the
U.S. Supreme Court
the womb
can be deliberately
destroyed for any reason



Triggers

Elena Mills

Don't Bake My First Time Into a Quick 'N' Easy Cherry Pie

Kylie Cohen

Don't try to bake my first time into a Quick 'N' Easy Cherry Pie, because my raw, doughy folds have cooled between your legs into a stale, shameful lump. You didn't even give me the luxury of cutting
slits into my top layer; no baby, you've got your own special tricks because you're experienced, because you thought you knew how to bake a pie with your ten-minute guaranteed recipe. Until you tested the tenderness of those deeper cherry layers with your middle and index fingers, until your nails were scraping my glass plate clean, until you made me go all Gordon Ramsay on your ass, and that made you get real quiet. Baby got hurt by his Quick 'N' Easy Cherry Pie. Baby was slapping her ass with a limp wrist, baby was slipping around her like she was misbegotten. Baby had to give up and beat his meat. Baby, once your craw is full of my raw dough, why don't you just fall asleep. That's right, dream about quiet girls and one-timers and the crumbs of me you'll keep on your lips. Feed your friends, but don't forget to tell them your ten-minute guaranteed recipe only works if your cherry filling is traditionally sweet, not bitter or alive, because those ones will tell you how to touch them. Don't you think that Quick 'N' Easy Cherry Pies

should come
with a warning label,
should come
with diagrams and gloves and a strong cigarette for after?
Because for some reason, baby, you just couldn't get it.

little lion, little petal, little still inside us all

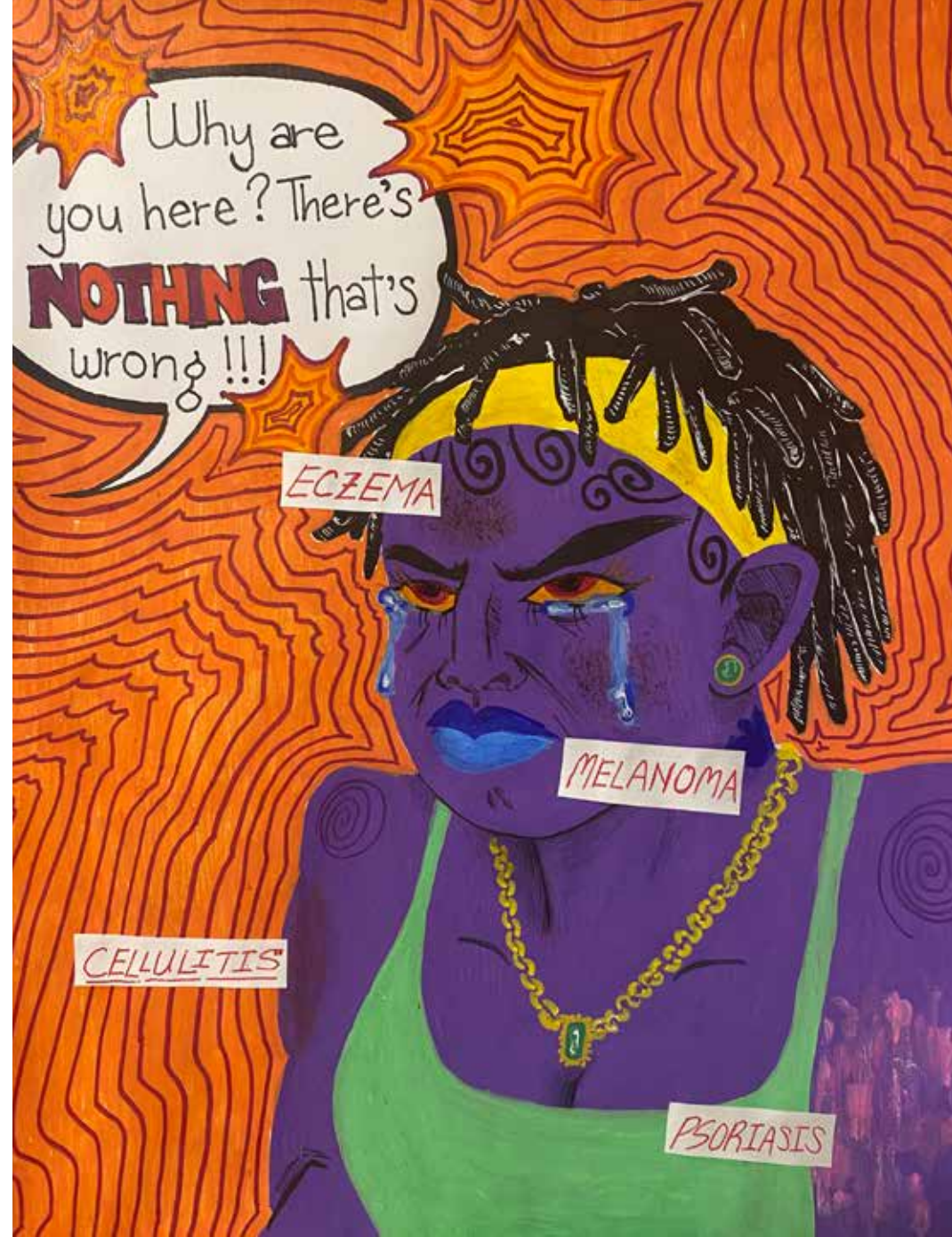
Macie Richardson

old maid playing cards displayed across the coffee table,
pulp-ridden orange juice staining white cotton.

in the dimly lit living room, too many pulled shades
to count, here i am:
skin and blood and river veins.
i am full of flowers
and color
and jesus—
all these spill out of me
when i scrape my knees
on the unforgiving sidewalk.

i swish the saltwater,
(cold so it stings)
through the holes in my mouth and spit
(cold so it reminds me
of the five senses, my five fingers, the first five times
i knew i was never going home).

i write it down, list
of independence day defiances
arranged inside my notebook.



Untitled

Adaeze Uzoiye

1. my mama and your mama
talking on the phone,
telling us to be home by the time
the lightning bugs come out of the trees.

2. playground monkey bars and coloring crayons
on the swing set, roy g biv
and not knowing why yet,
“i’m sorry i got sick again on the way to school.”

3. take-home chapter books on my empty trundle bed,
i can turn off my own night light lamp.

4. report-card-take-home day, ice cream sundae,
three more quarters in the tip jar. i can do this
all day. i can do this my whole life.

5. torn-out shreds of shag carpet strewn
across my bedroom floor. salt-stained nightgowns
wet with the stuff of my unanswered prayers.

i can see the sky from my window, i can tell
how big it is from here. i know
how still my breathing is while the whole world
exhales and tips itself over. i know why—reason
no. 1—nothing here matters. i know how to see
myself in nothing, clicking through the viewmaster
to watch the pictures change.

one day,
one day at a time,
and my whole life to go;
the slow unraveling of time.

in the dimly lit hospital room, too many reasons
to name, here i am:
skin and blood and river veins.

i am full of flowers
and color
and jesus—
all these spilt out of me
when i scraped my knees
on the unforgiving sidewalk.



Cat's Eye

Elena Mills

Balete Tree

Chelsea Padilla

Reyna's mother enforces three rules for moving day:

1. Stock the cooler for the car.
2. Make sure to check each corner of every closet.
3. Be gentle with the plants.

The rules are usually written neatly across a lined sticky note, pasted onto the refrigerator door the morning of the big day. This time, the sticky note is neon pink.

Reyna barely glances at it when she walks into their empty kitchen. At this point, she already knows what the moving rules are. Even Gabe probably knows them by now, and Gabe is the most forgetful person she knows.

Instead, Reyna reaches into the cupboard for the last bagel in the house. She slices it in two with a plastic knife before spreading a thin layer of strawberry jam over both halves. Untoasted, unfortunately. The toaster has already been packed away into some cardboard box labeled KITCHEN, likely sitting in the truck parked outside alongside her boxes of books and her brother's video game consoles. The chairs are gone, too – Reyna has to stand in front of the counter, shifting her feet as she eats her stupid, untoasted bagel.

She turns on her phone. 7:04 am. There's no way Sophia or any of her other friends are up. Not that there's much to say to them, anyway, other than goodbye again, because goodbyes had already been exchanged yesterday.

But even still. She wishes someone had been up to say goodbye again, because at least she wouldn't have to stand in silence, staring blankly as the dim morning light filters in through the window, pooling over vacant white counters and ceramic tile, scrubbed clean of any signs that their house had been lived in in the first place.

She's already eaten half of her bagel when her mother emerges from the basement, a box of red begonia plants in her hands. Her thick, dark hair is tied back, pulled away from her oval-shaped face, revealing her widow's peak. She sets the box down on the floor gingerly –

evidence of rule #3 – then squeezes Reyna's shoulder and presses a kiss onto the top of her head.

“You ready, *achi*?”

Reyna manages a shrug. Even though this isn't the first time they've done this, it hasn't gotten easier. She doesn't think she'll ever be ready to move, ever.

“My bags are ready,” she decides to say.

“Good.” Her mother nods, lifting the box back into her arms. She steps around Reyna, careful not to jostle the begonias on her way to the garage. “Where's Gabe? Still sleeping?”

Reyna shrugs again, even though she knows the answer to her mother's question – her brother is definitely dead asleep, which Reyna really doesn't understand since she had spent most of her last night in the house awake, staring at her bedroom walls and soaking up all her memories of Illinois like a desperate sponge. Gabe has always slept so soundly, even on the eve of their moving days, as if they didn't really bother him.

Reyna takes another bite of her bagel and despises how awfully dry and unwarm it is. “I think so.”

Her mother stops at the door and sighs. “Can you wake him up? The truck should be ready soon. I'm just loading the plants into the car.”

For a moment, Reyna doesn't answer because every single ounce of her would rather snap. Instead, she stares down at the last bite of her bagel and ignores how it's untoasted. Ignores how they are moving again. Ignores how she has to move to a new school again.

The silence stretches out, uncomfortably long. But when she glances back up, her mother's expression seems a little concerned and deflated, and then Reyna almost feels bad. Almost.

Reyna shovels the rest of her bagel into her mouth. A few crumbs spill onto the floor, and she doesn't bother cleaning them up. She wants to leave them, she thinks. As a reminder that she had lived there.

“Sure, Mom,” she says, and leaves.

The fields move by in a blur. Reyna watches out the car window as the broken corn stalks peeking through the snow blend

together into rows of dull yellow blotches along the side of the road.

The drive from Illinois to their new place in Florida is about sixteen hours. It's a brutal drive, especially because their car is filled with plants. Reyna's mother has carefully tucked her palms and ferns and orchids into the trunk of their Toyota, leaves poking over the car seats – even over the front passenger seat where Reyna is sitting. A couple of fronds from a particularly large fern brush against her shoulder whenever her mother steps on the brake a little too hard. She would rather be anywhere else.

“You guys are going to love it,” her mother tells her, but she sounds a little too enthusiastic, like she's a TV salesman trying too hard to sell some gimmicky product. “It's really, really nice. Warmer than anywhere we've lived so far.”

Reyna hums in response and keeps her gaze glued past the window. Her mother had said something like this last time, too. Something about Illinois and golden rolling fields.

From the backseat, the faint clashing sounds of the game on Gabe's phone go silent. “That's nice, Mom,” he says.

Reyna narrows her eyes at her younger brother in the rearview mirror. He's already looking back at her with one dark eyebrow raised. He'd probably expected this.

She shakes her head. *Please don't indulge her*, she begs, silently. But Gabe just shrugs.

“It is really nice,” Reyna's mother agrees. “Plus, the ocean isn't far, either. It would be easy to visit for a quick impromptu beach day. Wouldn't that be nice?”

“Really nice, Mom,” says Gabe. Reyna shoots another glare at him in the mirror.

“And the botanical gardens,” Reyna's mother continues. “They really are beautiful. You both should spend some time there, even when I'm not working.”

Reyna lets out a sigh, turning her gaze back to the window. Rows of dead, snow-covered corn plants still follow them along the highway. A few hours from now, all of that would be gone.

“You say that about most botanical gardens,” Gabe points out.

“This one's different. Really different. It's massive – and the climate allows for so much more than the ones in Illinois.” Reyna's

mother taps her fingers on the steering wheel like she can't keep her hands still, and suddenly, Reyna's interested. Her mother only does that when she talks about anything related to botany – her voice takes on a hushed, dream-like quality. Despite everything, Reyna has always admired her mother's passion for her work. She hopes that she'll be able to find something that she loves to surround herself with that much, one day. Storytelling, maybe. She's always felt as if all her memories of the places her family has lived in are just collecting dust in her brain. It would be nice to write them down somewhere, or turn them into something new.

“They have this really exciting tree,” her mother says. “A banyan tree. Back home, they call it a balete tree. They have these thick, winding trunks. Massive things. They're strangler figs, technically, because they have these roots that grow over the trunk of another tree. It kind of suffocates it, in the end, but it leaves this incredible hollow core inside.”

Reyna pulls her head away from the window. “Sounds like some type of fantasy monster.”

Her mother glances at her and smiles. “You know, a lot of people back home in the Philippines believed that balete trees house spirits and ghosts. That's the superstition, at least. I used to love climbing those trees. I even thought I'd seen a spirit, once. But really, I'm pretty sure it was just a bird. Sometimes they like to live in the hollows. It's fascinating.” She laughs, but for a split second, the look on her face turns wistful. “Your *lola* used to tell me to be extra respectful around balete trees. She hated that I would climb them because she didn't want me to upset the spirits.”

Reyna straightens in her seat a little. Her mother hardly ever talked about their grandmother, not since she'd passed away a few years ago. Reyna remembers the day her mother received the call from her sister. It had been early in the morning, nighttime in the Philippines. Reyna remembers shoveling cereal into her mouth. She remembers how her mother's face had crumpled, how she had nodded in silence, grasping at their kitchen counter. She remembers flying to Cebu for the funeral service a week later. She remembers not knowing how to feel – she and Gabe had only met their grandmother a few times. In all her memories, *lola* had been kind, but practical and firm.

“*Lola* didn’t seem like the superstitious type,” Reyna says, after a moment.

Her mother hums. “Maybe on the surface. She presented her realistic side more than anything, I think. She went through a lot, you know. The time she grew up in was not an easy one. But I think she clung to those superstitions, stories, because at least those things were constant in her life.”

“We should see the balete tree before school starts again,” Reyna says.

“Sure, *achi*.” Her mother looks even more relieved. “Why not? We could go tomorrow.”

Gabe clears his throat. “I thought we were planning on buying our uniforms tomorrow.”

Reyna squints at Gabe in the rearview mirror again. Killjoy. She really didn’t need the reminder that they needed to buy uniforms. New uniforms.

Gabe meets her gaze. “I’m just saying,” he says.

Reyna is getting really, really sick of him.

“You’re always *just saying*,” she says, and she hears an edge to her voice that she can’t control. “Good for you.”

Gabe rolls his eyes. “Well, you’re always just on edge and crazy, so.”

“Hey, come on. We can do both, right?” Their mother is tapping her fingers on the wheel again, nodding, like she’s re-affirming to herself that this will be the solution to whatever confrontation is unfolding between her two children.

Reyna bites at her lip. Gabe stays silent.

Reyna’s mother hums to herself. “Right, then. Uniforms, then balete tree.”

Reyna nods and shifts so that she’s facing the window again. She finds herself tracking the dead cornfields until they disappear.

An hour or two past midnight, they arrive at their new house. The night air is heavy and warm, laced with a steady string of crickets chirping between blades of grass.

She can hear them, even as she makes her way through the house and spreads her sleeping bag across the floor of an unfamiliar bedroom. Her bedroom. She lays on her side and faces the window,

watching the moonlight stream in across the beige carpet. She can’t stop thinking about how loud it is outside. Winter nights had sounded so different in the Midwest –they sounded like nothing, like silence had swallowed the Earth whole.

Just before she finds herself drifting off to sleep, she hears the wood of the hallway floor creaking outside her bedroom door. Even in a new house, her mother’s footsteps sound the same. She hovers in front of the door for a moment. For some reason, Reyna almost finds that she wants her to open the door.

But then she hears her mother walk away, her footsteps retreating to her room at the other end of the hall.

They drive to the uniform store the next day. Reyna carefully avoids Gabe until it’s time to get in the car, and even then, she tries not to look at him.

The uniform store is nestled into a small strip mall. The store itself smells a little dusty and stale, and the walls are lined with bookshelves full of Bibles and copies of the Catechism. Every uniform store Reyna remembers has been like this. Racks of uniforms are scattered throughout the center of the room with different variations of the same collared shirts, stiff khakis, and plaid skirts that she has worn her entire life. Behind the register, an old woman playing solitaire on her phone gently directs them to the uniforms they need, then ushers Reyna into a fitting room.

Once she’s changed, Reyna stares at herself in the mirror. White polo shirt, blue and green plaid skirt. The words *Our Lady of Miracles* are stitched over the left side of her chest in navy letters. Her new school’s chosen colors look odd on her, she thinks. Her old school’s colors had been red and gray.

“Reyna,” her mother calls from outside the fitting room. “How are things fitting? Can we see?”

Reyna starts tucking her shirt into her skirt. “One second!” On the chair in the corner of the room, her phone buzzes. When she picks it up, there’s a text from Sophia: *Missing u a lot already bestie!! ;(*

At that, Reyna feels her eyes begin to water. Her chest feels raw, as if Sophia had reached through the phone and ripped out a piece of her heart with her own hands.

Miss you too, Reyna types back. A lot.

The response is almost immediate. *How are u feeling???? Was the drive ok???*

The drive was long... IDK. This just sucks ass.

I know..... I'm sorry u have to go through this Rey. For real.

Reyna's eyes begin to water again. She tilts her head up towards the ceiling, trying to will her tears away. She really doesn't want to cry in the fitting room of a uniform store, but she *especially* doesn't want to cry in front of Gabe and her mother. Being mad about moving is one thing. Crying about it is another.

Amid her attempts to collect herself, Reyna's phone buzzes again. Another text from Sophia. *Ur not so far from Disney, tho!! Right??*

Reyna stares down at that text on her screen. Lets it sink in. For a split second, she almost feels angry – irrationally angry, as if she hadn't desperately been wishing for Sophia to be awake the day before. She wants to type back, *Who the fuck cares about Disney?*

Instead, Reyna decides to say nothing. She figures she'll reply to it later.

When Reyna leaves the fitting room, her mother is practically standing right outside the doorframe. Her face drops a little when she sees her, and for a brief moment, Reyna thinks that maybe her mother thinks the new uniform looks bad. But then she asks, "Is everything okay?" and Reyna remembers the tears.

She rubs her eyes. "Yeah, no, Mom – everything's fine." The words tumble out a little too quickly. She forces a smile and gestures at her uniform. "Does this look good, though?"

Her mother is silent for a little. Eventually, she nods and reaches out to rub Reyna's shoulder. "It does," she says, her voice quiet. "Your *lola* would be proud of you."

Reyna doesn't know what to say to that, so she just nods and smiles.

Later, when both Gabe and Reyna's uniforms are sitting in plastic bags in the trunk of the car and they're on their way to the botanical gardens, Reyna scrolls through her conversation with Sophia and feels very alone.

At the botanical gardens, Reyna's mother acts like a tour guide. She points out different flowers and trees as they walk through the greenhouses, rambling off facts. Her passion is so noticeable that several tourists visiting the gardens trail behind Reyna and Gabe to listen in, forming a small but distinct crowd. Most of them are older individuals, wearing Ralph Lauren polo shirts and wide-brimmed sun hats – the type of people that Reyna imagines would enjoy a guided walking tour of a botanical garden.

For the most part, Reyna's mother keeps her tour light. But at the balet tree, she stops for a while to go further in-depth. Most of her discussion of the balet tree repeats what she'd said in the car the day before – that the balet tree is a strangler fig, and that the balet tree's roots practically devour its host tree until it suffocates. Reyna allows herself to hang near the back of the group to zone out from her mother's voice for a little. Instead, she stares up at the balet tree and its towering branches and roots, wrapped together like unmoving snakes, outstretched, covering the sun with long, glossy green leaves.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" a voice whispers.

Reyna startles. To her right, a girl about her age – no older than sixteen, she assumes – is grinning at her. She has thick dark hair and an oval-shaped face, and she wears a flowing white sundress. Reyna assumes she's one of the tourists who had been following them throughout the gardens.

"It is," Reyna agrees. She glances up again. The tree's canopy casts shadows across the floor of the gardens – hazy, dark lines that look like cracks in the earth. "Almost scary, but in a good way."

The girl nods, still smiling. At the front of the group, Reyna's mother is talking about how the balet tree can be classified as an epiphyte – a plant that grows on another plant.

"Your mother really knows a lot about plants," the girl says. There is a familiar lilt to her voice, reminiscent of the accent Reyna hears when her mother and Gabe have video calls with their cousins living in the Philippines.

"Yeah, she's a botanist. She's very good at her job." The girl nods. "Hard-working woman. Very good. You know she feels bad about all of this, right?"

Reyna blinks. “What?”

“She feels bad about all of this.” The girl gestures at the space around them. “The moving and everything. You know. She knows you hate it, but she understands. She moved across the ocean all those years ago, remember? Before you were born?”

Reyna opens her mouth, closes it. Opens it again. “Sorry, what?”

The girl continues as if Reyna hadn’t said anything at all. “I had to move, too, a long time ago,” the girl says. “We used to live in the province, you see. Upcountry. But we had to move into the city because that’s where the money was. I hated the change – I despised it. All three of us have that in common, I think. You, your mother, and me.”

The girl pats Reyna’s cheek lightly. Her hand feels cold against her skin, like the way it feels when a cloud passes over the sun. “Change is in our blood, unfortunately. It’s the way our world is.”

Reyna narrows her eyes, studying the girl’s features. Her gaze catches on her widow’s peak, and Reyna considers how familiar it is.

“Who are you?” Reyna asks.

The girl takes a step back. “Oh, come on now. You know who I am.” She reaches out, patting the top of Reyna’s head. “Come visit again. Maybe I can share some stories with you, next time.”

Before Reyna can say anything else, something tugs on her sleeve. When she turns, Gabe is standing next to her. He looks a little sheepish, like part of him is a little hesitant to be around her.

“*Achi*, the group’s moving.” He looks at her face and frowns. “Were you just talking to someone?”

Reyna looks over her shoulder. The girl in the white dress is gone.

“Uh.” Reyna hesitates. “I don’t know.”

“Okay,” Gabe says, still frowning. “I swear I saw someone.”

As the two of them leave the area, Reyna looks over her shoulder one more time. At the base of the balette tree, a girl in a white dress sits and waves.



Cyanotype

Abigail Goodman

spilled groceries

Macie Richardson

you carry a brown paper bag,
the ones that you always request
because you feel guilty
about damaging the environment.
in reality, you are helping no one
(because i always get plastic),
but the smirk this choice allows you to give
to the cashier as you check out
fulfills you regardless.

you walk down the rainy and dirty street,
the same one you rear-ended that red toyota on
in 2019. i was in the car with you when he got out
of the driver's side to yell at you,
(just like i did the second the bumpers made contact)
something about teenagers
and how they always have their heads stuffed so far
up their own asses, they can't think anymore.
you cried so hard he apologized,
said he would shoulder the damage costs,
and left without another word. then you told me
you faked the whole thing.

your car is parked in front of the first baptist church,
which you used to go to with your uncle as a little kid.
he would bribe you with lollipops for every sermon you sat through
and all the old ladies would gush over your freckle-filled face.
i still remember the time you brought me along one sunday,
slouching in the pew in that tight cotton dress you liked so much
(i wore it so i could complain about it later)
while you glared at the pastor, who was giving his piece
about the evils of same-sex marriage. i never knew how hard

you were listening. and how you'd hate me for it forever.

somewhere on your walk, the bottom of the brown paper bag
gives way. you do not notice this. you keep walking.

i watch your groceries spill out onto the sidewalk:
there's a lime, two avocados, and a new cheese grater.
an electric toothbrush and a prescription for fluoxetine.
there's the soymilk you buy because you always said
you were lactose intolerant, yet you never told your doctor
(i was always convinced you were faking it).
and the shampoo you bought cracks open
and pours onto the ground, the same shampoo
that some people use for their dogs and their horses,
the one that you use because your mother used it
when you were a kid and you want to feel small again.
do you feel small again?

you must have bagged these so haphazardly
at the self-checkout. i wonder: was there someone you were avoiding?
was the line behind you too long and making you nervous?
or was the little care and attention required
to separate your goods too difficult for you to muster?

this is so intimate.

i watch your groceries spill out onto the sidewalk
and suddenly i am kissing you on the mouth again,
my arms wrapped around your middle and my hands
clawing at the skin of your back,
reaching for anything to tie you to me
as you undid every stitch i could sew.

i watch your groceries spill out onto the sidewalk
while you stride on without noticing,
despite the clattering sound they made as they fell,
the cacophonous rip of the overtired paper bag.

Invertebrate Musings

Emilia Ferrante

I want to talk about abyssal gigantism:
the way animals in the deep sea take up more space,
make themselves larger.

It's right there in the name:
abyssal, meaning of the abyss,
gigantism, meaning preternaturally large.

You probably know about the giant squid –
I did too. But what I didn't know was that
the giant squid is just one of many enormous sea creatures.
There's the giant oarfish, the seven-arm octopus,
and, to my vocabularic chagrin and amusement, the colossal squid.

Like most things having to do with the deep sea,
no one actually knows for sure why these invertebrates get so big:
maybe lower temperature, maybe the need to get food that is scarce,
maybe fewer predators, maybe more dissolved oxygen.

You or I could read the requisite papers,
talk to the marine biologists who are experts in the field.
We could do this together, even.

But at the end of it all, the answer would be that
there are huge creatures that live further down in the ocean
than you or I or those experts can or will ever go and so
we know nothing. I know that thought
terrifies you in equal measure as it thrills you,
because I get the same shiver all over
when I look at pictures of the Japanese spider crab.
An irrational fear equal to an irrational excitement,
like being stranded in space or falling out of love.

6.24.2022

Ani Seigel

they tried
to divide
my body
like some
sort of
citrus / they
thought i
was sweet
but i
am bitter
and i
bite back

< ***Our Rivers Lead to Oceans***

Ruby Howard



The Serpent's Bougainvillea

Leonor Brockey

Once upon a time, there was a kingdom that surrounded a great, towering bougainvillea tree. The tree had grown in this land since the days of ancestors' ancestors, since before there were wise kings and vain princes living in the large castle that stood at her feet. She held in her branches and flowering blossoms an immeasurable beauty, collected in centuries of life.

Within the twisting branches and vines, those which drew the bougainvillea's ever-straining path towards the sun, there hid an ancient and powerful serpent. With its pink head and deep, verdant scales, the serpent camouflaged itself in her breadth. It was old as the tree's earliest sapling and her guardian, a protector of her delicate beauty and precious life cycle.

In the dark months, as cold crept towards the tree's ancient trunk, the serpent swam through her leaves and drank her blossoms' colors. Each year, it slowly stole their bright beauty until they were frail and lifeless, falling to the ground to shatter among lost branches, crumpled leaves, and stones. Deep in the soil, the blossom carcasses fed the great tree, climbing her scattered roots and returning to her heart. Such was winter.

Then, in spring, the blossoms came again, yet the serpent held its appetite, waiting hungrily through the summer. It watched the beautiful flowers grow in color and size, dripping in a watercolor flurry that covered the skeletal wooden arms of the bougainvillea. It was not yet time to feast.

In daylight, the serpent slithered through the mouth-watering petals, up and down the tree's mighty core to ensure her colors were undisturbed. At night, however, it wrapped about her arms tightly and slept beneath her blanket of leaves.

One summer day, a prince grew envious of the tree's beauty. "This will be my kingdom one day!" he swore, "I must have one of those precious blossoms!"

The king warned his son that this was a foolish task, one that

had been forbidden since the days of his ancestors' ancestors. For seven nights, the king begged him to reconsider. He knew that the serpent would be angered by the boy's vanity and greed, but on the eighth night, admitted defeat: the prince would not be swayed.

On the ninth night, the prince crept towards the great bougainvillea, determined to steal one of her flowers. In his mind, he reveled in images of beauty filling the castle on his accord, and of how he would be rewarded for this feat. The prince saw the serpent laying among the leaves and chose a branch far from it, touching the limb to secure himself. The serpent felt the movement and awoke suddenly, slithering towards the prince in fury. It spoke to the boy with passion, "Do not dare steal to gain her beauty for you will lose far more!" The prince laughed at the threat and with little regard, he snatched a plump pink blossom.

The prince's glee was short-lived. He looked down at his hands and found that the once-beautiful blossom had rotted as soon as it left the branch. Disgusted, the boy dropped the flower and noticed that his hands had changed. Where the bougainvillea's precious blossom had once lain, his skin was pale and numb, with marks from the serpent's bite. The prince felt death in his palms and looked back at the serpent in fear. "You were warned," it said, slithering away.

As days passed, the prince's coloring started to fade. Paleness spread from his hands through his body, and he began to feel weak. Doctors from throughout the kingdom were summoned but to no avail. The prince was dying. At his son's deathbed, the king grieved with solemn acceptance. He knew why the life force in front of him was draining and cursed his son's foolishness.

When darkness and cold came yet again, all that remained was colorless dust in the shape of a boy. A soft wind blew it through the cracks in the castle's stone walls to rest among lost branches, crumpled leaves, and stones. Deep in the soil, the prince's carcass fed the great tree, climbing her scattered roots and returning to her heart. Such was winter.

Ouroboros Mirror

SJ Shin

I've seen you before, this I'm certain.
So familiar, in serrated words on your tongue,
I swear I've tasted your poison,
slick with the blood that rushes through your veins.

So familiar, the serrated words of your tongue.
You've plagiarized the works of traumas before,
sick and bloody, rushing to my veins,
to strip me to my core.

You plagiarize your trauma, projecting
onto me, like a screen in a room that drones.
You're stripped, to your core,
left with only digitized pixels that don't quite match.

A screen in a room, two-dimensional, flat—
surreal, dizzying in ways I can't describe,
I can only stare at digitized pixels that don't quite form
a full picture of your past.

But suddenly it's so surreal and I feel dizzy,
because you dance with me and move in tandem,
and then I see it all, the picture of your past,
a flicker that mirrors mine, a pantomime of my own.

We dance in jest and move in tandem,
circling around, chasing our tails,
and we consume ourselves, a pantomime of our
own, and we forget who we are on our own.

We circle around the ends of our tails,
Licking the poison of our past,

a mirror of each other, treacherous, insidious. And I swear, I've seen
you before, somewhere, inside of me.

I Discovered Immortality 30 Years Ago

Neil Peterson

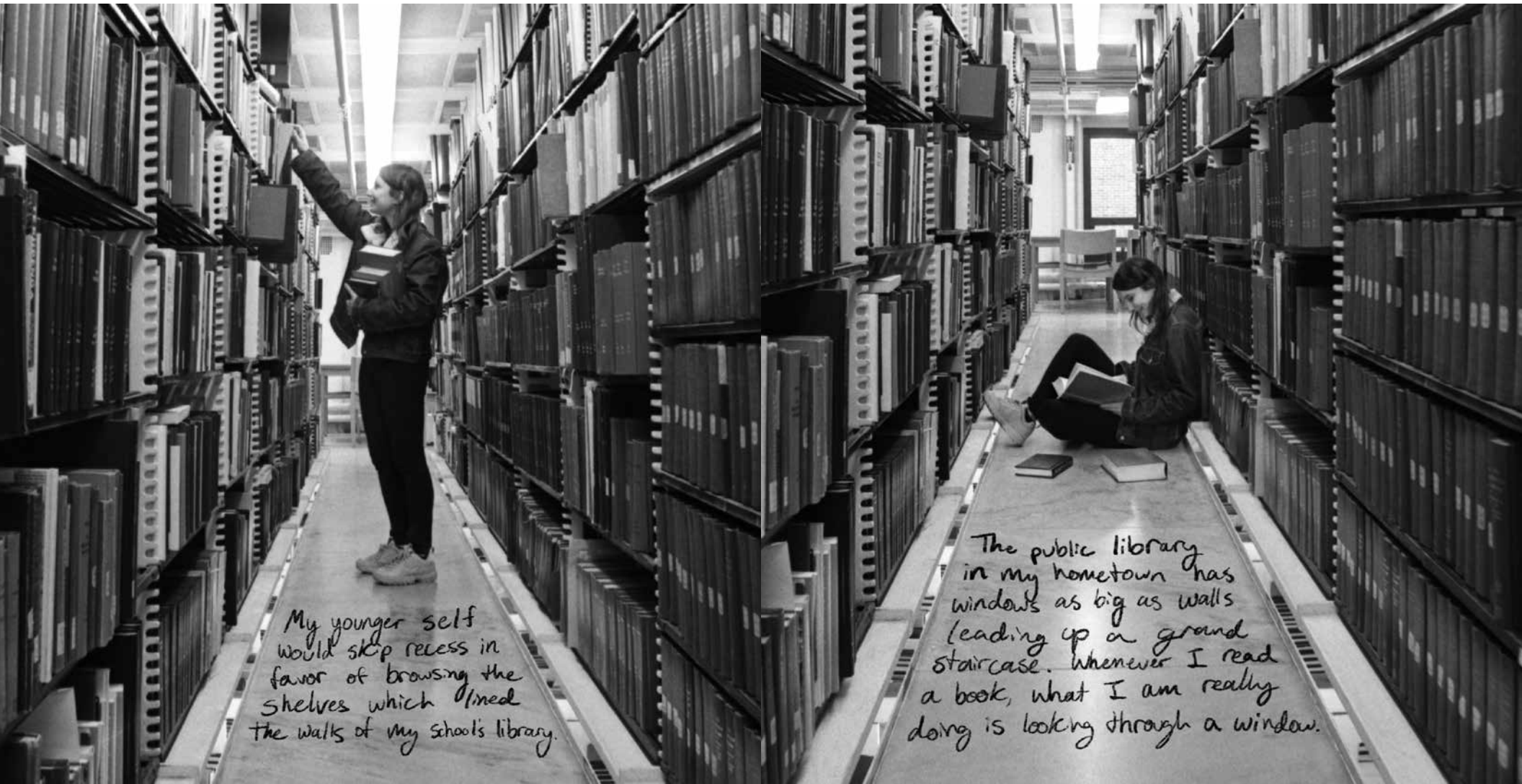
All my friends have gray hair now.
They laugh and joke about aching joints or
how difficult it is
to keep track of their glasses
and how many new prescriptions they've gone through
in the last decade. They talk about new pains.

They apologize when they see me
fidgeting, looking around the room,
waiting for them
to talk about something I can understand.
But soon they're laughing again, about how
they need to go to bed so early these days.

I ask if they want to run down to the riverside,
dip our toes into the water and jump off the cliffsides.
They say no and start to leave;
they need to wake up
early for work or tuck the kids into bed
or finish dinner
or try to complete their degree.
I'm alone by the end of it all.

We'll have similar conversations at each of our parents' funerals. And
then each others' funerals.
Until I run out of friends and family to bury.

I ran down to the riverside and held my head under for as long as I
could.
I never came up again.



My younger self
would skip recess in
favor of browsing the
shelves which lined
the walls of my school's library.

The public library
in my hometown has
windows as big as walls
leading up a grand
staircase. Whenever I read
a book, what I am really
doing is looking through a window.

The Library

Laine Kibler

Blue

Sarah Bellovich

When I walk into the mudroom, there is a picture on the wall to the right of my head. It is green and blue, silly, scribbled lines. There is a certain shape reminiscent of a potato, but besides that, nothing else reveals itself through the picture. Your name isn't even on it unless the distorted swirls beneath the "potato" are supposed to be your attempt at letters. People ask me about the picture, and I wait a moment, thinking about all the possible answers I could give. Maybe it's a statement piece—abstract and meaningful. They wouldn't believe that. Maybe I could tell them I drew it. Maybe I could tell them you drew it. I say I don't know. That's what I always say about you. I don't remember. It's been over a decade or two, so they believe me.

But I remember the first memory from my childhood; under the fluttering shadows of the oak, crayons scattered across the Little Tikes picnic table, the blue wax as primary as that artificial bench. You babbled away as haphazardly as that lopsided circle you dragged across the page. I insisted you write your name, but you were being difficult, so I took your hand and directed it across the bottom of your picture in light markings which supported each other in crossing but lacked any meaning.

Yet, that could not have been the first one. I think it must have been running into the backyard with a popsicle clenched in my fists. You were eating dirt off a spoon, taste-testing it in your mouth and dipping the metal back into the sides of the shallow hole you were sitting cross-legged inside of. The residue of dirt looked like Oreo crumbs on your tongue. I told you to stop, and you stuck your tongue out as if to say it was too late. I took the bottom of my light-yellow shirt with sticky hands and wiped it across that rough pink surface.

Unless the first memory is of that moment spent sitting in the living room, the surrounding faces as far from my head as the distance between their years and mine. *Can I hold the baby, can I hold the baby?* I was nestled far back into the red sofa so you could come to rest on my lap. I must have been a baby then too.

No. It was that night—lightning flashes striking shadows of shivering trees on the ceiling. Rain was colliding with the windows like pebbles. I was crying out with desperate tears streaking down my flushed cheeks, clenching the bars of the crib like a cage, shrieking for comfort or for someone to come and just be there with me. It must have been my earliest memory because I was alone. Because you were not there yet.

It's the only one that seems truly real anymore. Because you weren't there. Because sometimes I think maybe I was never an older sister and maybe I was always alone in that room. Because sometimes, when someone tentatively asks if I remember, I find myself trying to unravel memories like they're a jostled bag of string all knotted up. And if I try to untangle them, I just make another knot. It's those scribbles on the page, scrambled up in a blathering shape.

It's stupid, that picture. My parents should take it off the wall. I certainly don't remember you drawing it, even if they do. But when my parents decided to move because there seemed to be too many rooms and stairs in the house for their aging bodies, they asked me if I would take it. I said yes and hung it by the front door of my apartment, above the shoe rack.

Flight

Laine Kibler

this is rare:

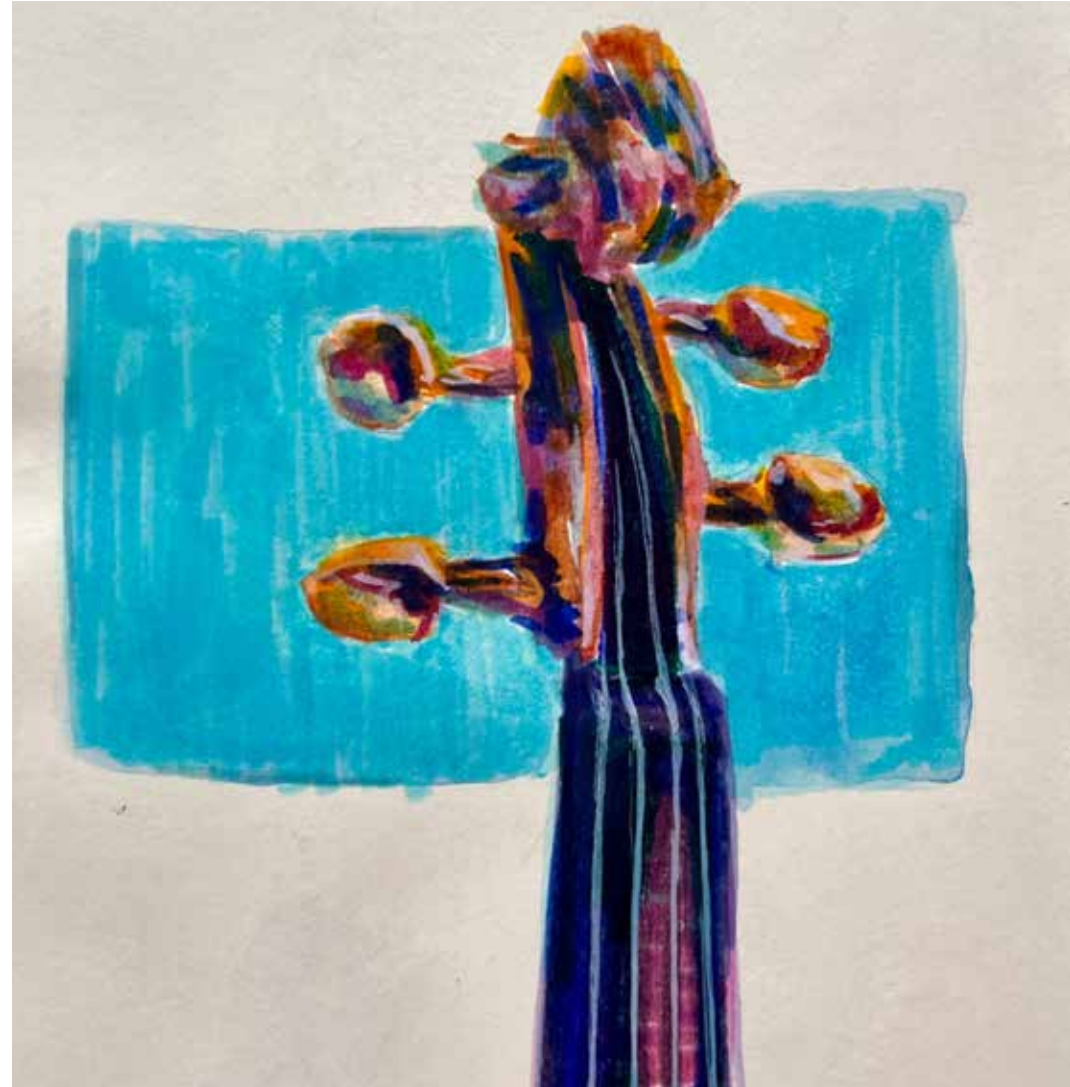
you sat in your power in your throne as you always do when i told you that in the dream i Flew. in what dream? you said and i said last night, the dream when i was fast asleep, you know i don't sleep fast but i Flew. you can't Fly, you said, look at everything i've asked you to do you can't do those you can't Fly. you can't Fly. look at you you roll and you roll and you cover no names and you don't fit. i know i say and maybe that's why i Fly in the dream because i keep rolling and keep names and keep sticking out and up. you don't make any sense you say you're nothing you can't do anything you can't Fly i give you simple things to do you can't do them none of them you can't Fly. no i say in the dream i Flew it's different it's important that it was the dream and you say who cares about dreams they aren't real what matters is what's real and you do nothing. you are nothing. i look at you and i look some more and i smile a little and i say i do something. you're right i'm small so small and i roll and i roll and i don't Fly i dream.

wisteria

SJ Shin

wisteria
wisteria wanders in wonder
whimsical in the wild, well-mannered even in woe
wisteria whispers with sensual intimacy growing
and waning with grace
wisteria whirls in the wind with an intoxicating smell
almost lewd, wholly sensitive
wisteria is wistful, wishful, witty
whistles blissful melodies, woos winters to warmth

wisteria wants, the whole, it all with the will of
crashing waves, and the elegance of flowing water



Pegbox

Abigail Schreck



Untitled

Adaeze Uzoiije

Happy Birthday

Taylor Burnham

I heard the floor creak under his attempt to tiptoe from the kitchen to the bedroom. The sheets rustled as he eased himself under the covers and wrapped his arms around me, the warmth of his body against mine. He tucked a strand of tangled hair behind my ear. I felt his breath as he wished me a happy birthday in a sing-songy voice, kissing me as soon as he saw my lips awaken into a smile. He helped me out of bed and led me to the kitchen; his hand was over my eyes. I could smell vanilla and fresh coffee, and when he uncovered my eyes I was greeted by a giant stack of pancakes sitting on the counter. The fluffy cakes were piled on top of each other, complete with whipped cream dollops centered with a chocolate chip. He had placed a candle in the center, the blue wax dripping down onto the pancakes, and told me to make a morning wish – because I deserved to have more than one wish for the entire day. I blew out the flame with his arms around my waist. I thought about how getting older wouldn't be so terrible:

But that's last year's memory.

This year I wake up to several consecutive buzzes coming from my phone. I instantly grab it off the nightstand and scroll through my notifications, mostly messages from friends and birthday discounts from restaurants and department stores. The first message is from Dani; she texted as soon as the clock hit midnight so she could be the first person to wish me a happy thirtieth. My phone vibrates again. It's the family group chat. My parents had sent their usual wishes, and my brother was confirming the time for lunch that afternoon. I look beside me at the undisturbed sheets and place my hand on the fluffed pillow. I scan over the messages again; his name isn't there.

I turn on my phone's ringer and trudge myself to the kitchen. There's nothing on the counter except a birthday card I received in the mail from a relative I barely know. I open the freezer and grab a box of blueberry waffles, but not the healthy, low-carb kind I eat on a daily

basis. These are Eggo waffles, saved for special occasions. I pop two waffles into the toaster and grab the syrup from the pantry. I run to my phone whenever it makes a noise.

I place the toasted waffles on a plate with a light layer of syrup and eat at the counter. I scroll through my messages again. The latest is from Dani:

you good with being picked up at 7???

I sigh through a mouthful of waffle, trying to ignore the freezer burn taste. My friends insisted on throwing me a party, Dani being the mastermind behind the idea. Apparently she booked a fancy banquet hall complete with miniature sandwich hors d'oeuvres and pretentious artwork, all so we could 'grow into our newfound sense of adulthood.' She claims it's because thirty is a 'milestone' and should 'not be passed over,' but I know it's because she doesn't want me spending tonight alone; a party was just the best cover story. I swallow and reply:

sounds good

She responds almost instantly:

great!!! it'll be fun i promise :) :)

I roll my eyes as I finish my last bite and place the sticky plate in the sink. My phone goes off again. I run to its place, slamming my hip on the kitchen counter's sharp corner. I wince in pain as I read about how I can get a free chicken sandwich with my next order at Chester's Cluck Club. I slam my phone on the counter and rub my face with my hands. I pick it up again to peruse the notifications from my social media accounts – sometimes I don't get those alerts right away. Scrolling in and out of the apps, I take notice of my phone's background. It's a picture of me, him, and Dani from the barbecue my boss hosted last summer. I've been trying to delete the photos, but I told myself that I could keep this one since Dani's in it. Dani and I are wearing pastel sundresses, and he's wearing this ridiculous camouflage cargo short, bucket hat combination. He had said that he put it on as a joke and that he was going to change, but he preferred hearing the sound of my laugh instead. My boss came up to me at the end of the night and asked me to invite him to every future company event. He's

holding my hand in the photo and *god* I miss the feeling of that hand. That hand used to be mine. Last year.

I grab my phone and bring it with me to the bathroom to start getting ready. I place it on the toilet for easy access from the shower. An empty bottle of his shampoo sits on the mildew-stained edge. I wonder if there are still traces of his hair in the drain.

Morning wishes are bullshit.

...

My heart stops when I hear the phone go off, and I feel like dying when I realize it's just my brother texting that he is parked outside my apartment complex. He honks repetitively and starts singing when I make it downstairs; I give him the finger as I slip into the SUV. He makes a joke about how my life is virtually over now. I point out how he's the one who's married with two children, but he insists that *I'm* the one whose young and reckless stage is over.

Music blasts through the car speakers while we talk, and it reminds me of those early mornings years ago when I drove him to school. We would roll all the windows down and take turns controlling the radio. And whenever there was nothing good on our favorite stations, we would have the deepest conversations. He used to tell me all about the cute girl who sat next to him in chemistry class: what she was wearing, where her locker was in relation to his, how her blue eyes thinned when she smiled. Now he tells me how he's planning on moving into a bigger home and trying for another baby with her – hoping for a boy this time. She was supposed to come with us to lunch, but she had to stay home with their sick three-year-old. The way he talks about her hasn't changed; I can still see that same sparkle in his eyes that I first saw when he was in the passenger seat. I gaze at the ring on his finger, and I remember how only three weeks ago I imagined the feeling of a diamond against my skin; I imagined I could plan a future like that.

We are almost at the restaurant when he turns down the music. The glistening in his eyes fades into dust:

“Hey, I never got to say I'm sorry. About Hunter.”

I feel my throat start to burn. It was so much easier when his name was left out of it; I could pretend that I forgot it. I could pretend that I had already seen it pop up on my phone, I just didn't realize. I

swallow hard and assure him I'm alright. He smiles, unconvinced, but turns the music back up. I check all the apps on my phone that could possibly send me a notification for the rest of the car ride. Nothing.

My parents are already sitting in a booth when we arrive. They call us over and attack me with dreaded birthday hugs and kisses. I leave my phone face up on the table. Its ding echoes throughout the entire restaurant, but turning the ringer off feels impossible. I can sense my mom frowning whenever I check my messages. I make sure the waitress brings me something on the tap instead of water.

When the waitress brings out our order, the plates barely fit on the table. The booth is too small for our usual collection of fried appetizers and gluttonous entrees. The four of us weren't crammed in a booth last year; we sat at a spacious circular table with plenty of room for our family's signature birthday selection. And we had Hunter. I can still feel how his hand felt in mine hidden under the table, his thumb rubbing against my palm. He told jokes and discussed basketball brackets with my dad. He patiently listened to my mom ramble about the classes she was taking at the recreation center, and he let her complain about her secretary's infuriating habit of stealing pens off her desk. He taught my brother how to properly make a 'moving worm' with a straw wrapper and a droplet of water so he could show his kids. He offered to babysit for a weekend. He stuffed himself with fried pickles and mozzarella sticks slathered in ranch like he had always belonged to this family. I lose my appetite in the middle of a grease-filled bite and glance at my silent phone. I take a swig of my beer.

My parents are careful not to mention him. They ask about my recent transfer from teaching third grade to fifth grade and remind me to write thank-you notes for any birthday gifts I receive, but I can tell it's difficult for them not to ask about him. The conversation remains centered on my brother's news. When my parents hear about the possibility of getting another grandchild, they inform the entire restaurant about their excitement. I stare at my phone while they share the familiar details of our birth stories, how blessed they felt when they could hold us in their arms. They're sitting close together, their cheeks are practically touching. His arm is around her back, and their fingers are intertwined. My dad compliments my mom on her bravery, and it reminds me of when my brother talks about his wife; he has that same

sparkle in his eye. Part of me is glad my brother came alone.

My parents met freshman year of college. My dad was her resident advisor when she first moved to campus. She noticed how his front tooth was jugged slightly to the side when he smiled, and he noticed the line of freckles outlining the inner curve of her cheek when she pulled her hair behind her ear. One minute she was filing a complaint about her roommate and the next they were secretly kissing in the back stall of the communal bathrooms. They've been married for almost thirty-five years now, but they still act like college kids discovering how it feels to fall in love.

I think about how I had found the person that made everyday feel like the early stages. I can find it again. But then I remember that I'm thirty now, and I can't help but feel I lost my last chance. I order another beer. My phone dings and I snatch it off the table. It's just Dani:

see you soon!!!

what are you wearing tonight???

I go to my text message history with Hunter and refresh the page.

...

I'm wearing the same dress I wore the night I met him. I don't notice until I see the light reflecting off the rows of silver sequins in the mirror. We met the night of Dani's new year's eve party a couple years ago. He was friends with Dani's boyfriend at the time. He had been eyeing me the whole night, but it wasn't until after the clock hit midnight that we spoke. He said I was the reason there wasn't a disco ball at the party – because I already lit up the room. I wanted to slap him; I thought he was teasing me about my dress. When he started frantically apologizing and over-explaining the pick-up line, I noticed how his bottom lip squished under the pressure of his teeth, how he used his index finger to sweep his hair away from his blushed cheeks. I noticed the sparkle in his eyes. It only took one night. And he became mine.

I peel myself away from the mirror and grab the wine bottle sitting on the counter. The cork is still lying next to it from when I popped it open after my brother dropped me off at my apartment. I

pour the remaining traces of liquid into my wine glass and chuck the empty bottle into the trash; the glass shatters.

Every social media app on my phone is open and showing our message history. I filter through them every few minutes and refresh the page, starting with the accounts I know he uses the most. I take a deep gulp of wine and try not to read the inside jokes and terms of endearment from the past. When I finish off the glass, I take the phone with me to the kitchen and continue to scroll while I search for another bottle. I raid the pantry and the fridge, but all I find is an expired spritzer hidden behind a container of something that looks like meat. I leave the finished wine glass on top of the sticky plate in the sink and stumble back to the couch. For once I am thankful for my low tolerance.

I slouch against the cushions and continue my scrolling routine. I feel the couch beneath me, and suddenly it's not just furniture. It's the place where we sat after the new year's eve party. We both concluded that parties suck, and I asked him to come back to my place. We sipped wine and stayed up talking until the sun crept through the blinds. I never laughed as much as I did that night. He asked about my family and my job, and he listened to my stories like he wanted to memorize every word. It's the place where he first held my hand and released the butterflies from out of their cage. Our fingers lined up and fit into place, like we had united the two lost halves of the perfect whole. But this is also the place where he sat me down just three weeks ago and told me that he wanted to talk. He took my hands, and part of me believed that his next move would be to get down on one knee. But his eyes looked different. He said he felt confused and unhappy. He thought that taking some time apart was a good idea. He twisted his desire to leave into a fabricated mutual decision so that we felt confused and unhappy, we thought that taking some time apart was a good idea. He packed up his things and went to stay with his sister. It only took one night. And he was gone.

I wrap myself in a blanket and lie down on the couch, curling myself into a ball. I continue to refresh the pages pulled up on my phone. I try to convince myself that it will make a difference, but I can't lie to myself anymore.

I hate him.

I hate him for leaving me behind.

I hate him for separating our hands.

I hate him for losing the sparkle in his eyes.

I hate him for being able to forget everything within just three weeks.

I hate him for taking away my last chance.

But if he would just...

My phone goes off. It's a few minutes past seven:

i'm here :):)

let's go birthday girl!!!

I throw my phone to the other end of the couch and press my face against the back cushion. I wipe my eyes with the blanket, staining it with splotches of black and peach. My blubbering drowns out the phone's sounds.

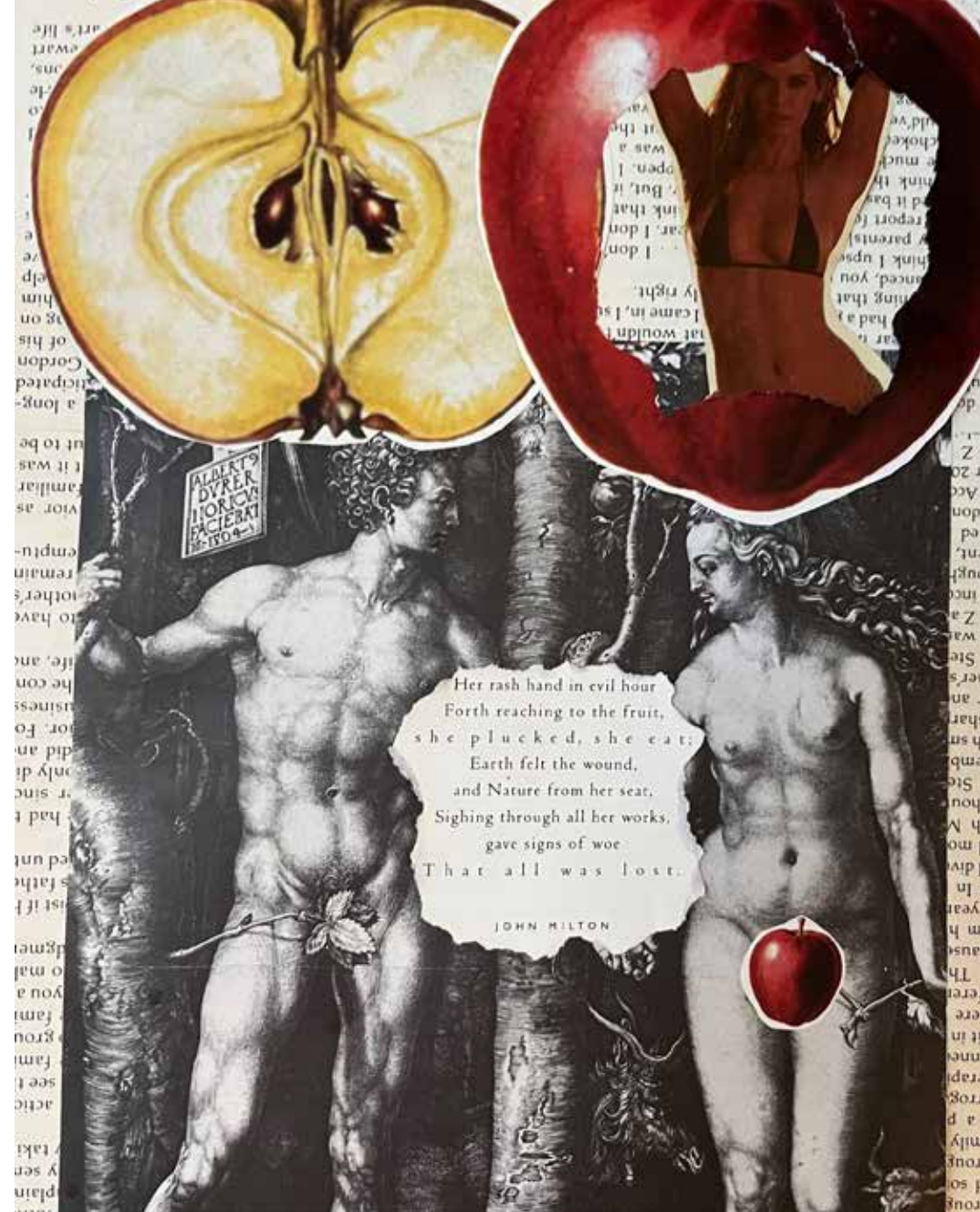
I hear the front door open. Dani comes running to me on the couch. I'm grateful I gave her that spare key. She takes my phone away and cuddles next to me on the couch. I think about all my friends at the banquet hall, dressed up in elegant outfits and sipping champagne next to a concrete lion. I think about how Dani put time into throwing me this incredible party, and I'm here covering my couch with bodily fluids. But then it reminds me of how I spent my entire birthday last year in this apartment. Hunter and I stayed in our pajamas all day, cheating at board games and debating movie plot holes. We talked about a future that is no longer mine. There was no party. And it was the best birthday I ever had. Dani cradles my head and lets me cry in her arms.

And so here is this year's memory:

I can hear the floor creak under Dani's feet as she runs from the bathroom to the couch. The blanket rustles as she places a small waste paper basket on the floor next to me and helps me sip some water. She brushes a crusted strand of hair off my stained face. I can feel the warmth of her fingers as she wipes away the tears that drip down my cheek, lightly shushing the sound of my sobs. She wants me to eat. She

helps me off the couch and leads me to the kitchen. I place a pan from the cupboard on the stovetop while she grabs the pancake mix from the pantry. She measures out the required amounts of dry mix and water. I mix them together and butter the pan. She scoops the mix onto the pan, flipping each cake until they're golden brown. I stack them on top of each other in a tall pile. I surround the top circle with a row of whipped cream. I place a chocolate chip in the center of each dollop. I find an old candle in my junk drawer and put it in the center of the stack. I light it with a match and let the wax drip for a minute. I blow out the flame while Dani rubs her hand on my back.

I make an evening wish; it doesn't come true.



Untitled

Aviva Satz-Kojis

是,这个小
与国家昌
发人们情
生“驱散



golden

hour 大的影响

却儿就会进一步侵

那解宜一刻奇

绝的舞台上。首先,

春晚广告收入 2002

春晚超过 6.5 亿元

”,但据了解也有 7

“春节联欢晚会节目”

标价为 5201 万元;

更高达 11099 万元。

全筹备,与春晚的公

广告的行为则进一

步> 李康美 王

“以前,广告里插播

广告不仅直白大胆,

并且有他亲口说出

宣传,特意将原计划

二字其用意不言而

竟带着价格不菲的

搜狗产品的宣传到

性的做法不仅深深

。 (end)

2月8日。

月18日。



The Complete View of the Sky From a Bedroom Desk

Clyde Granzeier

Pygmy elephant flapping its ears to the covered sun
Ferris wheel that smells like vanilla melting in root beer
Azure-cradled totem to commemorate home
Wooden swirling sunny basket of stressless cloth people
Shining black shrine of fortune, death, ice cream, and elephants
Many-leafed plant wrapping around wooden right angles
Miniature Appalachian stake to drive away the vampires
Smiling floral skull getting a tan and growing spiked emerald hair
Wax former record-breaker of a Chicago school field trip
Soft sundered symmetrical scraps of paper to make a mountain

Cool breath of a breeze creeping through the rarely-opened windows
Relaxed air of an early summer approaching evening
Windswept woodlands of chlorophyll-filled swaying greetings
Occasional sound of rolling wheels, rustling leaves, and chirping
Slowly traversing worlds of white water crossing the sky
Wanting to fall upwards into them forever

< *Untitled*
Camille Nagy

Skinned Rabbit

Kylie Cohen

Last Sunday, I went to church because I was hungry
for some salvation, but I ended up begging
God for more of you; I was as naked
as a skinned rabbit
because in my prayers your hands were on me, blue veins
against soft pink skin, with my fine fur and large ears stripped

from my body; in my prayers I was your edible delicacy stripped
blissfully to the bone; oh, you were so, so hungry
for me, so hungry you wanted to suck my veins
empty, so hungry that you couldn't stop begging
for one more bite of your rabbit,
your girl, your darling, your body who's naked

at church wondering if God hates her for being naked
all the time. God, it's not being naked if I've been stripped,
no, it's not being naked, because I'm looking for my stolen skin. I'm a
rabbit
hunched over with my eyes half closed because I'm sick. I'm not
hungry,
God, I was never hungry, but I am weak enough to start begging
you for a little more meat on my bones, a little more blood in my veins,

a few more tempted "I love yous" before I open my veins
to gush and drain my naked
body one last time of every bruised kiss, every foul, begging
breath, every groping fist that has led me to be stripped
easily of my skin. I don't make the hungry
hunt, because I'm loved harder and faster as easy prey, as a rabbit

who quivers quietly on the plate, as a rabbit
with a tight body and warm veins

full of life. I can grit my teeth into a hungry
smile if I need to and get naked
if that leer shows up in their eyes, and soon enough I'm lovingly
stripped
down again—as a rabbit who prays hard every time that I'm not
pregnant after begging

for more, more, and more; God, I'll bet you're tired of my begging
of this game of wolf and rabbit,
of my praying for peace and virginity and closure, but when you've
been stripped
of your skin by dry kisses and sharp teeth, when your veins
have been torn out by calloused fingers, and when your naked
body is how you are loved, you'll understand why I live to feed the
hungry.

Small Defiances

Oscar Nollette-Patulski

The house I grew up in is located across the street from an elementary school, whose playground abuts a modest hill that slopes up to the next street over. My parents used this as a selling point for me and my brother when we moved there, saying it would be just like our old New York City apartment with the park a short walk away. On the night in late June when we arrived at our new neighborhood, the clipped grass lawns were prickly from drought, a critical barrier to a five-year-old's enjoyment and acceptance of this new play space, and therefore the state of Michigan as a whole.

However, after the cicadas hummed their final note, the chevrons of geese flew south, the grass was covered in layers of leaves, winter came, and snow fell. The sharp newness of our lawn and park across the street was cushioned with the possibilities that come with a blank slate of powder. With a gift from our retired neighbors, the full potential of the elevation change across the street could be realized: my brother and I could sled.

The collection of plastic carriages we inherited from our neighbors was one of remarkable variety. The rugged orange one with side handles was ideal to impersonate a penguin's slide, and the black one resembling an oversized takeout dish was named *Torpedo*, demonstrating its ability to quickly move you down the hill in a simple straight line. The two blue saucers were preferred for those seeking a dizzying orbit to the bottom, but our most prized possession was the *Polyboggan*. A hybrid name for its modernist purple plastic and its resemblance to the traditional toboggan, the vehicle boasted four one-foot by one-foot squares molded into its elevated base. These four squares implied the existence of four adventurous sledders, and our neighbors were called into action from a few streets away. When we were younger, our father would take up the rear, and some combination of my brother, our neighbors, and I would fill in the remaining seats. The combined weight was enough to propel us down the longest slope of the park, the slight uphill to the sidewalk, and if we

had a good run, spill out into the bottom of our suburban road.

Over the years, our parents faded into the background and our sledding runs became more independent, but the goal of our winter excursions was still to surpass the bounds of the hill, to foray into the streetscape where no kid had slid before.

On Monday, after a quick snack break at home, I leave a few minutes later than planned. I jump down the porch steps instead of stepping. At the next intersection, I decide to cut a diagonal across the asphalt rather than crossing the sides one by one. Still, I rotate my wrist only to see I've not made up much time and am behind schedule. I repeat the jaywalking strategy at the following turn, and once again at Huron Street: I ignore the pedestrian crosswalk two hundred feet to my left in favor of my own haphazard alternative. My head is of a prairie dog when I quickly look back and forth, and my presence as a rodent continues as I cross the four lanes of traffic, my feet moving and backpack bobbing with urgency. I step up to the curb, therefore successfully completing this vehicular obstacle course. I know that if I speed walk the rest of the way and carefully dart between traffic at the next road crossings, I can make it to my class on time, where my presence as a human will be re-confirmed.

My English class is located three stories above ground and features large rectangular windows that form most of the left wall. In the class, we discuss novels and their authors, and we try to figure out what their words mean and analyze their intentions. This can be quite interesting, but my favorite part of the class is looking outside at the trees swaying; watching the branches rock the snow off of their twigs. On the first day of class, I chose a seat directly next to the windowsill, so that whenever a slide deck threatened to glaze my eyes over, I could stare out into the maze of intersecting forms, the limbs dissecting outdoor space into soothing shapes of thought.

Whenever a squirrel climbs high enough to exist in my line of sight, I fantasize about a *Freaky Friday* scenario with the animal acquaintance. The squirrel would take my spot in the chair and analyze the role of the setting in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, and the only thing I would need to worry about would be how many acorns I desired to

eat. I would give the squirrel my work uniform so they could clock into my next shift, and my only task for the night would be finding the best tree that would sway me to sleep before the next morning. I find great pleasure in this thought even if it will never happen.

At four o'clock, I find myself in the university's student union, descending into the basement, navigating a webpage on my phone to clock into my job. I take my time placing my backpack and jacket into my locker and putting on my work shirt over the rest of my clothes. I arrive late. The first time this happened, I apologized to my supervisor, Lori, and she said, "Don't worry about it." Now, I no longer worry and consistently show up about ten minutes after my shift begins.

I see Lori. We say hi to each other and show surface-level interest in our respective weekends. We talk about the "big snowstorm" that will arrive in our city in a few days. She bemoans the potential wrench in her commute, and I automatically agree on the outside. On the inside, I make a note to text friends about potential sledding outings. Lori leaves a few minutes later, leaving me and Cooper, the other student manager, in charge.

Cooper tells me what there is to do. I spend the next hour gathering various computer-related items, scanning them, and putting them in boxes and on shelves so a delivery person can take them away. When I am done with that, I pretend to answer people's email requests on the computer, but I am actually doing homework for my English class.

When the thought hits me, I pull the cash registers from the front of the store two hours before I'm supposed to and count them. Cooper says, "You're counting the registers already?" and I reply with, "There is nothing else to do." There are other things to do, like dusting the computer screens and helping out customers, but this one advances my agenda of closing the store for the night as soon as possible. I balance the credit card machines and then sit around pretending to exude managerial authority while everyone else does nothing as well.

We play this game for a while until my coworker Ciara asks me if she can "take a fifteen." As far as I know, "fifteens" are not a part of the Tech Shop break policy, but I say, "Okay, have fun!" I have no idea where she goes or if she will actually be gone for only "fifteen."

The next time I see her, she is eating chicken tenders. She puts this food on a table in the employee area of the store because we are not allowed to have food next to the computers we are supposed to know things about. Last week, Ciara was sipping on an Oreo shake next to the smartwatches. Instead of telling her where the shake was supposed to go, I asked her what was in it and where she got it, and then said, "That looks so good!" I tell myself that at my next shift, on Wednesday, I will become a little bit more like Ciara, and take a fifteen.

After this interruption, we wait around a little longer until a few minutes before 8:00. We then lock the doors and reset the card machines, and by the time we leave the store it is only a minute after closing. The early departure I desired has been achieved.

I often text my friends Nicole and Lailah when snow falls. They are the most reliable takers of my offers to sled, doing so two out of two times. We used stolen sheets of cardboard from the dining hall storage room the first time and upgraded to actual sleds the following winter. On Tuesday, Lailah texts first upon hearing about the snow. I reply a few hours later. The group chat stays quiet, the other parts of our lives pulling us back to higher priorities. By Wednesday morning, the urgency of the Winter Storm Warning compels a choice. I try to decide if it is worth sledding alone.

When I visited my parent's house for a few weeks during the December holidays, I decided it was always worth it. They get more snow where they live due to the lake effect weather pattern, and I needed to make up for lost time spent at my college residence, the grassy desert of Ann Arbor.

This is how I ended up at the base of the hill across the street at seven in the morning on a Monday after Christmas. We were preparing to leave by car for a day trip up north, but while the rest of my family was getting ready, I grabbed my new favorite sled and hustled to the park. I received this green sled from my parents at Christmas a year prior, and it is now my vehicle of choice for long, snowy inclines. I place it at the top of the hill, the surrounding twilight made brighter by the snow's reflection, and kneel on the dish-like object. My gloves dig into the snow to push me down the hill, and my smiling mouth shifts the other parts of my face into an image of contentment.

The speed of my run is likely no more than a modest jog, and the hill is only about ten feet tall. Most of the thrill is in the lines the sled's plastic shape impresses in the snow, the evidence of a voyage through uncharted space. It affirms the narcissistic part of myself that wants to be an individual, and when I look back up the hill, I see a tangible path, an act that only I thought to create.

Going sledding at odd hours like the early morning is essential for my long-term practice of the sport. A few days prior, in the late afternoon, I was inspired to slide down the hill by the warm glow of the sky and the desire to overcome lethargy. I set out across the street, the diagonal route from my driveway to the park practiced enough times to consider it my own. While walking to the base of the incline, I saw that children, with their watchful parents, were occupying the prime part of the hill. Had I been with my neighbors, we could have slid right in. We would have been older than our grade-school counterparts, but the courage and numbers would have aided us in our quest for a mild thrill. Instead, believing my orange jacket invoked the cautionary tale of a traffic cone, I stayed in a less controversial, sub-par portion of the hill so as to not offend or provide material for maternal gossip; the weight of other's hypothetical judgment being too burdensome. After five runs down the hill, I decided I no longer wanted to sled and walked home.

On Wednesday, I again find myself in the student union at four o'clock. I arrive late, Lori is already gone, but most of the others from the Monday crew are here today. I am a little on edge because I will be forcing myself to take a "fifteen," and I am not sure how it will go. I conduct these forcings somewhat regularly, in a non-evidence-based effort to make me a better person. In this case, I am hoping that directly copying the actions of someone else will make me more independent.

I wait to do this until after my co-worker Matt leaves because he has worked here years longer than me, and if I tell him my plan, he will likely see right through it. Until then, I do the same tasks as I did on Monday. They make me feel mildly useful. Matt's shift ends at six, and at six-thirty, I tell Cooper I am taking a "fifteen." He says "Okay, have fun!" and suddenly I am released to do whatever I want.

I bring a book with me, and scout the chairs in the study lounge on the floor above. An empty rocking chair near the window

implies the existence of a relaxed person, and I decide that person to be me. I sit down, begin reading, and allow my form to sway forward and backward like the tree branches outside. I feel this is the human equivalent of being a squirrel in a tree, my body succumbing to the perpetuity of the rocking chair.

These moments are interrupted by the realization that I am still clocked in, and still at work; I rotate my wrist to catch a glimpse of the time. I badly want to stay here, in my chair, swaying to the freedom of small defiances, with Ciara's shadow giving quiet applause. My watch and the thought of a timekeeping Cooper, however, move me back down the stairs and into the workplace I belong to for the next ninety minutes. I could easily take more time for myself, as nothing of relative importance is happening in the Tech Shop anyways. It is the fear of being thought of as lesser due to my diversion that haunts me, and I would hate to be recognized as someone who does not care.

At close, even with my unauthorized break, we lock the doors and leave the Tech Shop at 8:01.

On my walk home Wednesday night, I follow my regular path and ponder the possibility of a nighttime sled. I will need to eat dinner and watch a recorded lecture, but after completing those obligations, I will designate the night as mine.

There is not much opportunity to jaywalk on the route back to my neighborhood, but I make up time where I can, ignoring flashing red hands meant to grab my attention. I encounter Huron Street, the asphalt moat that separates houses like mine from Downtown. The four lanes of traffic are relatively busy tonight, and instead of outright dismissing pedestrian signals I will wait until the cars I am rebelling against have the red light. I will take control of the few-second gap between this occurrence and my signal to walk and render it mine.

Huron has the red. I step out onto the road and move over four crosswalk stripes before hearing the honking horn and the screeching brakes from a Cadillac SUV. It is swerving between lanes, barreling towards me from the left. I run back to my side of the street in shock as the car speeds away.

I pause, and then laugh haphazardly as if the front tires have just told me a funny joke. I restart my crossing, humbled by the higher

power of the automobile, and walk with uncharacteristic care the rest of the way home.

I eat dinner and watch my recorded lecture. With the fate of the group sled still unanswered, I decide to go solo in the Arboretum to take advantage of the fresh snowfall. I know there will be moments when I feel out of place, but I try to overthink these ahead of time so they won't feel as awkward in the moment. Ideally, this forcing will help me be more confident as a social being, and steer me away from the regret of a missed opportunity.

I wear winter boots and my orange jacket but forgo the youthful tradition of puffy snow pants in an attempt to blend in with society. I grab my favorite green sled by the side handle and walk down Catherine Street, partially sledding down the incline to the next intersection. I am a fool from afar, kneeling on plastic atop snow atop a walkway, but upon reaching the bottom, I feel satisfied in creating a deviant way to use a sidewalk; I am taking advantage of all my night's affordances. I continue walking.

I arrive at the Arboretum. I walk past people alone or in groups, and we occasionally make awkward eye contact, before their pupils look down to my side to observe the sled. This is the part I like because I feel like I could be a piece in a lively social puzzle. I mentally push propaganda toward them, hoping they pick up on the hypothetical scenario I am acting in: My friends are already at the hill, but I was running late. Even with homework, I just couldn't miss a chance to sled with fresh snow like this, there's really nothing like it! The hills are so peaceful and quiet at night. When I get there, I will have the time of my life! Sledding is so fun, especially with friends. It's not just for kids, you should try it sometime!

The pretend people I am meeting evaporate once I reach the hill. A group of real college students, all strangers to me, are having the time of their lives. They show what could easily have been part of my night, but what isn't. They are just dark silhouettes against the snow and stars, and because of this anonymity, I give myself permission to portray them as the antagonists in my sledding narrative.

I always make myself sled at least five runs, to make sure my desire to stop is not just the nerves of being watched. I do this to lessen the effect of other people on my actions, at least in theory. I reason: the

antagonists are occupying the hill I want, but if I sled five times on this other slope, perhaps they will be gone by the time I am done. I will get the hill to myself, and I will carve new paths through the trees, foraying where no one has slid before.

Run One: I kneel on my plastic, green carriage and hold the ropes in my gloves. My horse is named Gravity, and we giddy-up down the hill, steering past a fence post. Unfortunately, we then tumble over an obscured divot and spin out into the white, where the two hills meet in a bowl. The antagonists are at the top of their hill, having an inaudible conversation. They look so small from far away, and I tell myself that I can use that hill too. They will be frightened by my lack of fear, and Run Two will be the slide of my dreams. I climb up my hill and make the turn up the path to the top of theirs.

Run Two: the antagonists look much bigger up close. I turn around and go back to my part of the slope out of fear that they'll recognize my lack of confidence in social rebellion. I think: it will be a little while before they leave because of their numbers; they don't have agency like I do. Half of them don't even want to be there, anyways.

As I push off towards the bottom, I tug the ropes strategically to steer away from the fence post, away from the divot, and navigate through the opening of trees. I am now in the woods, controlling the sled over curves and jumps to where the path spits out in an open field. After I get out, it's a five-minute walk upstairs to the top, so I have time to plan my next move. In between cold breaths, I decide that Run Three will be shorter and end at the intersection of the two hills, so I can climb up to the ridge next to the antagonists, without having to cross their path. This will prevent me from unpredictable, humbling interactions, ones that are too great to be overcome by a forcing. This will give me the sledding experience I desire.

Run Three: I sled into the bowl as normal, but must turn myself away from other people that have slid into the same area. More of the antagonists come down the hill. The close encounter involves a weird type of ignoring, and we pretend the other party is not there even though we both know it to be the opposite. I think about my intentions to climb and my goals of conquering this summit of self-doubt. It is a long way up, and their stares make the wind blow harder.

I think again. I will come back with Nicole and Lailah, over the

weekend. We will bring sleds, we will brave the lights of day. The social puzzle I pretend to be a part of will be real. Our numbers will give us the courage to trespass next to the antagonists. We will deviously slip through their ranks, social signals that prevent us from sharing the space rendered inconsequential. The sleds we bring will imply the existence of sledders, and we will decide those sledders to be us. We will allow our forms to sway forward and backward with the turns of the sled, like the tree branches around us. Our legs will succumb to the perpetuity of climbing up after sliding down. There is only one choice once we get to the top, and I will sled however many times we want.

I decide this is a sufficient enough rendering of my future experience to resolve the urge to conquer the antagonists' hill, and that Run Four will be my last of the night. But because of this, I feel that I've failed myself and that I've let others get the better of me. This sense of defeat necessitates a greater thrill, a greater proof of thrill.

Run Four: I place my stomach and chest upon the inside of the sled, and decide that my final time down the hill will be made more magnificent by going head first. I lean around the fence post, steer away from the divot, and slide down the path through the woods. My eyes are forced open as I hold on to Gravity, my breathing is shaky from the rough ground passing below me, and maybe it's this personal earthquake that shakes my future plans into a state of irresolution. Why couldn't I walk up the hill? The woods end and the moon illuminates the wide field. Why can't I bring myself to do what I want? I reach the bottom of the slope and my sled plows through the deep snow to a stop. I should have just waited for friends. My hands push into the white to bring myself up. How much of an individual do I need to be? I begin to mold the past forty minutes into a misleadingly positive story that I will tell my housemates if they ask where I was.

Run Five: is an impromptu sled down a small mound in the Arboretum on my walk home. It is the most satisfying of the night.

On Thursday, no plans for sledding are advanced in the group text, but we decide to go see a concert at a local music venue the following week. I look forward to this. On Friday, I find myself rotating my head more than normal while crossing streets—paranoid prairie dog—and the red hand of the pedestrian signal looks intimidating up

close. I still jaywalk, but with small hesitations.

On Saturday night, I walk home with my friend Mark. We are coming from a football watch party at a mutual friend's apartment, and we make conversation until we turn our separate ways. Among the pleasantries, he asks what my plans are for tomorrow while I watch his feet step on the sidewalk. I don't have much homework to complete, so I state simply: "Whatever I want."

Mark looks up and laughs genuinely, as if I have just told him a funny joke. He then says little, falling silent, and I am given space to choose a different answer.

Michigan Blizzard

Clyde Granzeier

You

Becalm the chants of broken night
With your dance in the cold winds
Envelop the cold earth and dead leaves
With your all-encompassing pale embrace
Turn the blaring lights of street lamps
Into paths of unwavering candles
Let these empty streets and roads
Be filled with your rising fog
Cover my half-closed eyes
In refracted light and frozen water
Out of this lonely walk tonight
Make a home for me

I've missed you so much

Winter in Michigan >
Siyuan He



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