THE CATALYST

CONTEMPORARY LITERARY ARTS MAGAZINE



ISSUE 36 // FALL 2025

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COVER ART // SERENITY ORBE
ART // GUS FOLKERS

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In the fall quarter of my freshman year here at UCSB, I took a Religious Studies class. One day, I sat next to a girl named Natalie, who was also an English major. I didn't know it then, but she was to become one of my closest friends, and the person I have been lucky enough to share many titles with, being Literature Editors together last year, and co-Editors-in-Chief this quarter.

I traveled to Berlin with Natalie for a journalism trip this past summer and got to explore a new city, while also indulging in rich friendship. On our trip, we took a film photo at "the Innovations Museum" of colorful stacked plastic chairs called "Monobloc chairs," in hopes we would use it for *The Catalyst.* The photo became our catalyst. These chairs are banned from public spaces in Basel, Switzerland, because they disrupt the historic nature of the city, but I've never known a house party, barbeque, wedding, or place-of-employment-breakroom without them.

How strange, but how mundane? I began to wonder what else was surreal about everyday life. In Issue 36, we want to get up close and personal with real life, and the strange things that we don't regard as strange because they are so normal. We wanted this magazine to feel like flipping through a home or fashion magazine to which our readers can actually connect. The creative writing and art within these pages celebrate what makes normal life so exceptional, even at its most strange.

To *The Catalyst*—Brian, Shaun, Natalie, and all of the Editors I've had the pleasure of working with the past two years with the magazine, it's been the sweetest time. I am so lucky.

Claire Trask
Editors-in-Chief

In our time in Berlin, Claire and I discussed the Fall Quarter issue with no expectations or pressure for success or failure, but rather guided by the pure excitement of being able to collaborate on one last project. In our first meeting with the new Editorial Team, we introduced "Surreal Editorial," an aesthetic unfamiliar to many, though the charm of "meaning," is that it doesn't always have to make sense in the moment, rather, it's a discovery of what it can become.

When we first began this quarter, I was unsure of this aesthetic and if it could be executed correctly. I understood editorial to be staged and performative perfection; so how could the students and team pull this off? Throughout the quarter I have learned that it means much more than this. Editorial, a derivative of edit, to me is synonymous with change. To be able to change and adapt in an ever-changing world. Within these past 10 weeks, this aesthetic has matured beyond just an idea, into a way of living.

Living in America, daily life has morphed into a bizarre, and oftentimes surreal reality. But finding moments of the mundane is necessary to live in a more grounded present. Within these pages, the writing and artwork embody the creative journey, acknowledging the presence of each person who invested their time in making this magazine.

Most importantly, I must acknowledge Claire Trask, my co-Editor-in-Chief. Throughout this process, throughout the many vacillating emotions, Claire has been my wishbone. In moments of anxiety or doubt, she has been by my side with morale, encouragement, and support. In these moments of uncertainty, she became my right-hand woman, whom I could always count on without hesitation. And for that, I am deeply grateful to have worked with you, and to be your friend.

We will miss you Claire.

Natalie Riley
Editors-in-Chief

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*CONTENT WARNING: Please be advised that some of the material in the magazine may be disturbing or traumatizing to some readers. The magazine contains language and addresses themes that may not be suitable for young readers. We would like to provide our readers of the UCSB community with additional resources:
Campus Advisory Resources and Education (CARE): 805.893.4613
Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS): 805.893.4411

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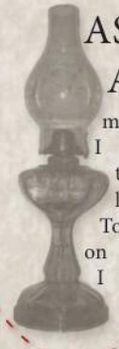
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ART // NATALIE RILEY



BY KATRINA DRURY

Nuclear Family



AS A CHILD KNELT IN A CEDAR-CHEST APSE,

made small before figures in stained glass,
I directed my fingers in drawing
the world, while eyes at keyhole height
learnt it slowly through the gaps.
Too young to glean truth from far-off frames,
on living room mantels, in mythic names,
I worshipped icons while purblind
beneath the brightest kerosene.

The hand that holds the brush hovers still,
wondering what portrait to paint of it all
from the toy gun and the real one,
the inlaid horse-hilt fighting knife,
marbles, thimbles, a lone shoelace,
a hundred unused greeting cards
packed like dirt around the trinitite,
as if purchased platitudes might put to bed

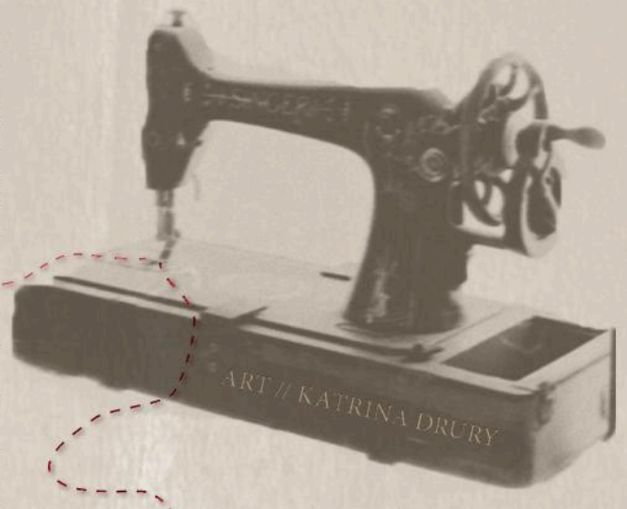
THE MONSTER OF MERE ATOMS AWOKEN BY MEN.

Someone must have believed in God—
if only during holidays—because somewhere
we inherited the urge to say grace,
but the last name writ in the family Bible
is from 1928. If any entity once lived
in clasped hands around the American table,
it has surely long since died, obliterated
by the worst of humankind,
made kindling to an unforgiving fire.

Does anything linger in the
uprooted aspen potted in our yard?
What is left to stitch back to life
when all of the moths have gone
and died? How precious the

PAPER-WINGED SCAPEGOAT

must seem, for putting holes
in history and pulling hands out clean,
when God demands to know why
nothing flickers in the pilot light vigil
on the old gas stove, left burning,
before, to heat a near-empty home.



Either temptation or obligation
will render us as the impressionist does,
fudging out the flaws in strokes over-light,
imitating the simplicity and goodness
of a child's estimation, of a line-art led life.
Details are lost in the folds of a triptych,
dust is collected, paint thins away,
till I'll wonder if turpentine runs in our veins—
an inevitable pollution, the bleeding
of things inhuman, the far reaches
of pollen shaken off the petals
of a flower forged for war.

As a woman enclosed in the white-picket altar,
I know you like history knows

HUMAN APPARITIONS EMBLAZONED ON CONCRETE,

like glass within glass,
a little, yellowed, radiation globe
of frozen sand grains instead of snow.
The relic is shaken from its chest of stillness,
I wake atrophied fingers from their long rest,
and rise to eye level with what waits above me—
only to find that light had been paid
as a portion of our penance,
taking with it answers to the great mysteries,
and faces long awaited loom less familiar
without the battery-powered glow of naivety.

"Go fuck yourself, you idiot!"
Reads the billboard, hovering above the plains
"Your words are all paper thin, and you can only sing in staccato
Trying to make meaning out of language is like attempting to build the Taj Mahal out of Play-Doh"

So I went home and wrote a poem that contained only silence
And it won every award all around the world
And the government spent a billion dollars to airdrop papers with my name on it above the Middle East
But...no one there could read it

All they did was scream at the sky
And they all marched home singing *Na-na-na-na* to fill the hole in the chest where words are supposed to go



But to me, it just sounded like a murmur, birds laughing in trees
So I returned to my business, living like an animal trying to bite its tail
Hunting for instrumental rock records and waiting for the silence at the end

Because speaking is just a way to communicate
And I have no one to talk to
And words are just noise wearing fancy clothes anyway
So I'm dedicating poems to the empty space in bags of chips
And the oxygen in a corpse's lungs
As it floats atop a flood
And the space between each guitar string

And I only listen to gibberish and gobbledygook
Sung by people across oceans and decades
Who sing like angels and drink like demons

Because written on the walls of this nuclear bunker are the words "god is a question mark"
So I've devoted my life to confusion

ART // CLAIRE TRASK AND EMILY O'BRIEN

OBSCURE AND CYNICAL DYSFUNCTION

BY MILENA SEYMOUR



ART/EMILY O'BRIEN

It used to take only one bad night for you to learn how to whip yourself into shape. Now, suddenly, you're gambling away your time like it lives in abundance under a brown leather jacket that smells faintly of spilt cinnamon whiskey and the occasional cheap cigarette. Maybe your surroundings introduced the wobbly excuse of relativity you throw back into the mirror. *At least I don't do molly like the friend I left back in high school.* But saying it out loud feels like humiliation—ritualistic and reeking of the same bitterness that leaves you shivering in the dead of those nights when you no longer remember the answer, yet you are stone-cold sober.

Sometimes it creeps into the eight hours you spend with your coworkers the first time you are all off the clock and in the same room. Maybe it's under the lid of the candles you only burn at Christmastime. Or it's in the quiet heartache of lying awake next to the girl who only remembers she loves you when she's asleep. You only grasp it for a moment before it turns away from you, silently, ignoring your outstretched hands. It flickers away into a golden mist that smells faintly of some sort of cologne or perfume—though you'll be perpetually indecisive over which one it is.

Between the soft bars of John Coltrane's work, you forget the last time you were not waiting for something unnamed—which is curious, because we all know you never seem to forget anything. Memory is a weapon that only finds its target between your untamed eyebrows, where your mother once put *bindis* before you rejected the feeling of empty air underneath your *chaniya* and selected something more *maradana* when November rolled around.

In the time it takes you to determine whether you are kind or just self-sacrificial, the cat will go hungry. Alex Supertramp was found with seeds and mold in his system and you will do everything to ensure nothing in the fridge is expired without first checking the pears on the countertop.

Next time, leave the stove on and the door unlocked, why don't you?▲

AND YET, IN OXIDATION

BY QIRUI HE

How much is receding from you, and how much is rushing back—
Frenzied feet, riots of dust, city's clamor, TNT.
Unceasing mourning, untiring hope and expectation
bodies and faces recklessly spent,
running out irresponsibly, now weary, asleep
trembling like tipped stamens, like eyelashes.

The once-loved slowly peel off, layer after layer
Skin, exfoliated, gone in the wind—irretrievable
Old apartments charred, flames burning bright,
fireworks cascading, crowds fleeing,
among them countless faces scattering,
blurred.

The black hole behind you still breathes its chill,
rolling inward. The words reach you from an ancient time
that never was, spoken at the dead of night.
Cool water, living water, crawls over your feet
and past—
disquieting, repulsive, yet familiar,
it terrifies, it intoxicates, it makes you ashamed.
Tears or laughter, water or fire.

At last, you see this interval, infinitely stretched wide,
and the unspoken peril contained within.
Past and future, captured by either, would be dangerous.
Acceleration maddens, fangs bared.
They come to You.
Unstoppable—it cannot be stopped,
it must not be stopped, because falling
is equally dangerous.
Worlds spinning.

They are oxidizing, endlessly oxidizing—
sulfur dioxide, sulfur trioxide, sulfur oxide
rusting, corroding, flaring, sedimentating
death's layered progression,
and its slow accumulation.
A mayfly between the stones.

What is dying is not yet dead.
What is coming has not yet come.

ART // EMMA CHASTAIN



Perfumed Ouroboros

by Kai Singh

The smell of death from between your legs,
A stain on an innocent reputation,
And far more innocent furniture.
Internal violence of a body inverted,
Is that what it means to be a woman?

Taken apart,
Torn together,
Fundamental evil resides in your stomach.
Is that what it means to be a woman?

Life in shadow,
But a sun as a vessel for your sound.
A smoky haze that covers phantom limbs.
Is that what it means to be a woman?

Keen awareness,
Even keener stupidity,
A corpse flower blooms within you.
Is that what it means to be a woman?

Born a sin, genesis,
Genes of a sis.
A burden from a bloodline
That doesn't bleed for you.
Is that what it means to be a woman?

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A mannequin with no choice,
No mouth, no voice.
Mouthing Sojourner's Truth to ears
That listen but don't hear.
Is that what it means to be a woman?

No matter the earth;
Barren farmland
Or a field made fertile by corpses—
Man plunders,
Sucks dry,
a b u s e s .
Is that what it means to be a woman?

Or must a woman
Carve into themselves,
And feel the sinews snap under
Their owned artificial hair?

Must I taste my own stomach bile
To know I am alive?
To know that I persist,
Beyond the hobble of an old man.

If I can tell myself,
Without your help,
That I am allowed to be,
Will I then be a woman?

S



I HEARD HER VOICE IN A ROBIN'S WARBLE

BY SHAUN NOWICKI

ART // EMILY O'BRIEN

Along the deep river, coffee-colored, pitched-round with salamanders
we walked. We took to the edge of the embankment, not wanting
to shred her flip-flops, dampen my sneakers, or coat our sandsprayed legs
in foetid grime and frog eggs. Besides, there's all the old signs
against swimming—an old chemical legacy of coke, soot, acid, bacteria
together in vitriolic flourishing (my father got sick, once, swallowing creek water).
Our steps are soft, measured, unsure of the weight the land will take.
On tiptoes, she laughs, thinking of pandas tumbling downhill in their enclosures
(some video she saw, likes to see, returning to her feed), and zookeepers wrangling their
fuzzy bulk. She's shown them to me before—their exact shape hazy.
I wonder how they hold them—if those enclosures have steep sides, or deep concrete trenches
ringing the outside to prevent the beast from leaping into hard-won liberty.
Maybe it's iron bars, or thick glass a child could press their face against, an offering
of sufficient solace against escape. There's transparency in freedom, freedom in transparency—
in her words we are like the bears, about to tumble over mud and root, down into the muddy
depths. Swimming is its own kind of perilous freedom, I remind (the world has many
kinds of freedom, both large and small.) The river's flow is a kind of freedom.

I remember an old friend of hers, with a voice like vinegar and cherries, and the first time she
saw the waterway. It was August and we were looking to escape the sweating walls
of our apartments, I remember her looking out across Lake Erie and asking
"Where are the waves?" Seagulls cracked their crow across the rocky beachhead.
Windswept, she saw the little swells and her face was dissatisfied, sour. She spoke the language
of the ocean—the language of her home. "Shouldn't we be able to swim if those are the waves?"
These were her water's words for danger—her feet uncut by hidden zebra mussels and
skin untouched by the itch of unknown concoctions boiling and driving in depths.
I know these words, born forth in hot algal blooms. I had never seen the ocean,
her ocean, nor could I speak its many words for danger.
Now, on silentstill banks, I scarcely know the words for river, for danger, outside of memory.
Somewhere further, birdsong. No, she calls me. It's getting dark. We should get back.

ROAD TRIP

BY SANAM ESLAMI

ART // JONATHAN GELFORD AND NATALIE RILEY



I've packed a bag, locked up my flat,
The open road is where it's at.

The tank is full, my shoes are loose,
The wind laughs like an old caboose.

The glass is rolled down in each door,
My glove compartment, a snack drawer.

My maps are burned, my phone is fried,
A stranger stops me, thumbs a ride.

We motor for uncharted miles,
Exchanging stories, swapping smiles.

The skies are blue, the clouds drift slow,
Just where I'm headed, I don't know.

Past sunlite diners dipped in dust,
A thousand road signs cracked with rust.

Up purple mountain majesties,
Bonfires catch a summer's breeze.

Through canyons cloaked in cactuses,
Soft tunes—a songbird practices.

As winds wave warm in pinstripe pastures,
My heart's a melting mess of raptures.

For all my cares have fled and gone,
My only thought: *keep rolling on.*

The sweet hum of the road does declare:
Why hurry to end up nowhere?

So when someday I chance to pass
A speckled meadow tall with grass,

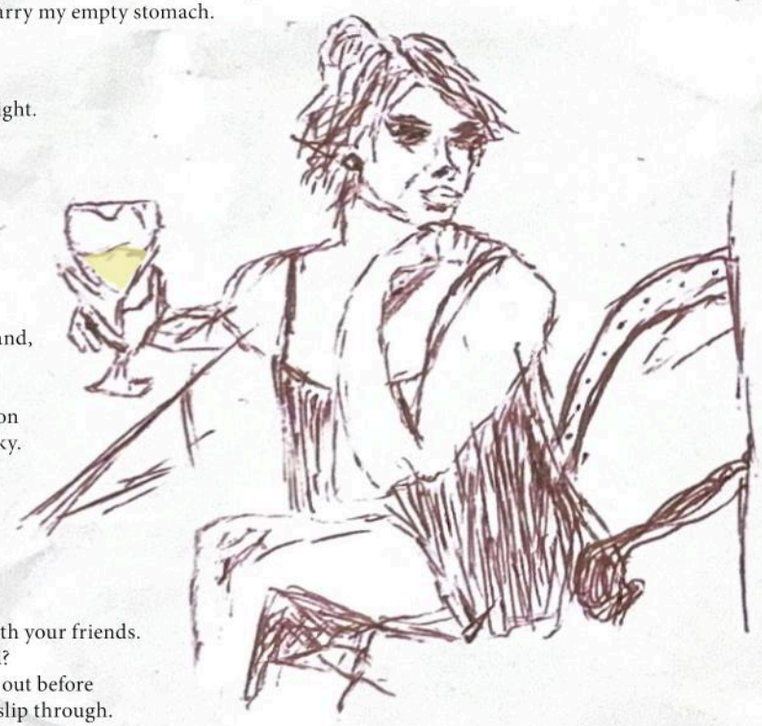
I'll toss the key out to my flat,
I think I'll stay just where I'm at.

Talk Tonight

By Liam Baker

I stumble through rain,
Lightning stretches through violent skies.
Am I on your mind?
My murky mind weighs enough to
Carry my empty stomach.

I eat fried eggs, and
Wonder what you'll eat tonight.
Am I on your mind?
I dip toast into the yolk,
Imagine you next to me.

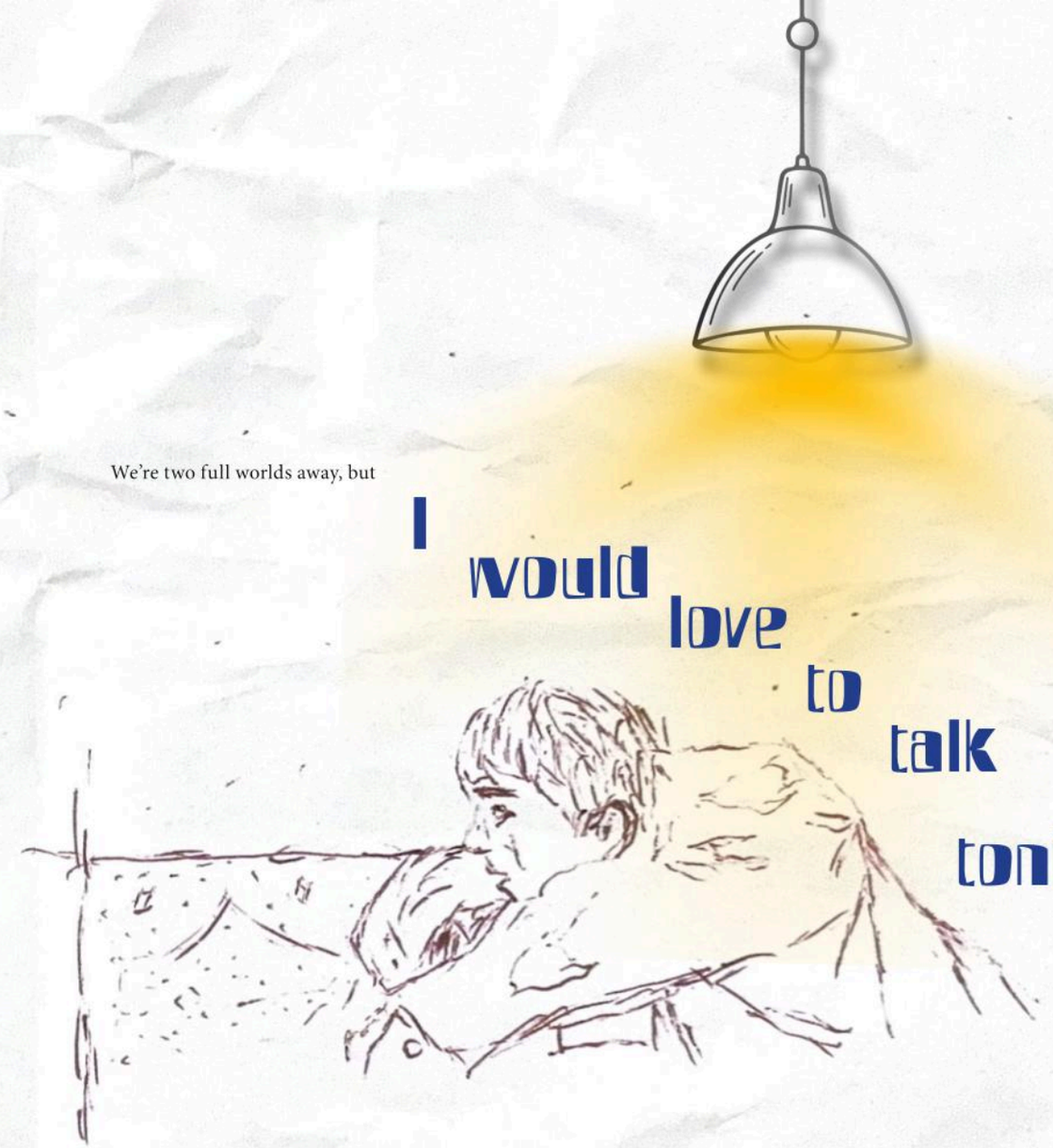


You waltz through bright sand,
Shining even brighter still.
Are you on my mind?
A blushing sun weaves cotton
Candy clouds across your sky.

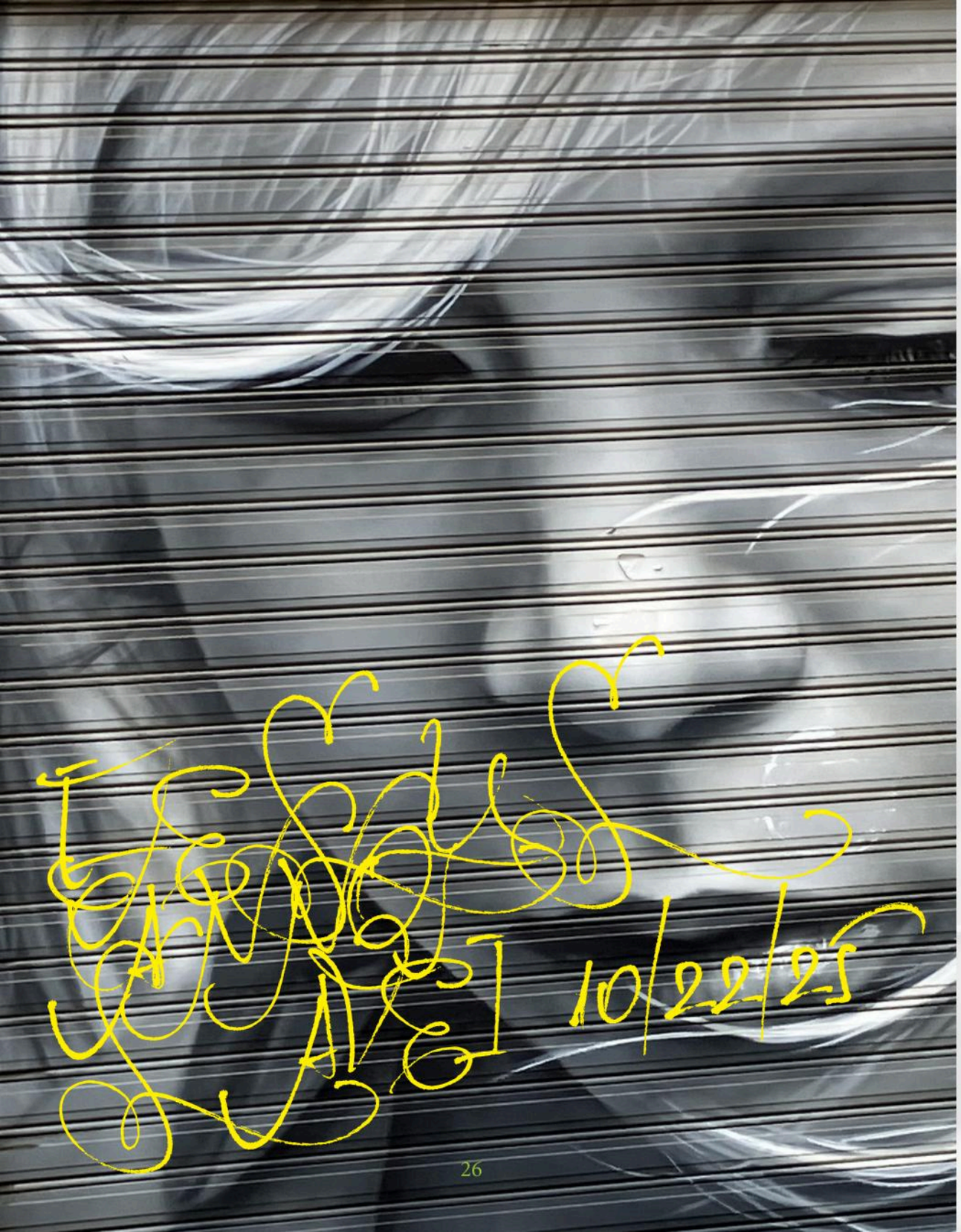
You sip Sauvignon,
Watch *Bee Movie* with your friends.
Are you on my mind?
You brush your hair out before
Bed, feel my fingers slip through.

We're two full worlds away, but

I would love to talk tonight.



ART // LIAM BAKER



[JESUS CANNOT SAVE] 10/22/25

By Natalie Riley

[redacted] Thoughts. [redacted] Simon and Garfunkel. [redacted] America.
[redacted] …Jesus cannot save us now when I am looking at America.
[redacted]

Inglorious. [redacted] Saran wrapped. [redacted] Parasitic. [redacted] Where we live for the dime, worship emails, and preach crypto. [redacted] When the nine to five gnaw trenches into your average Joe, economic silos are a game of who knows how to talk in hundreds or millions.

[redacted] Whispers,

"Jackson, Grant, Franklin, can you hear me now?"

[redacted] What good are morals if tithing serves penance for corruption? [redacted] It's just another sad story on the television. [redacted] And so the doctors prescribe Lexapro; [redacted]

Green. [redacted] Sewage. [redacted] Reek. We devour and engorge. [redacted] Toothpicks scrape the crud off our moral conscience [redacted]

...Why so chipper when our children dance to the thumping of hungry bellies? [redacted]

I am looking for America. Bent with hands clasped, pressed against forehead [redacted]

What is the difference between praying hands and hands of frustration?

I am looking for America. [redacted] High-class, clean-faced pinup dolls plastered on editorial campaigns. [redacted] Yes perfection, conniving—calculated, but at least it is something to believe in. I am looking backward America. [redacted]

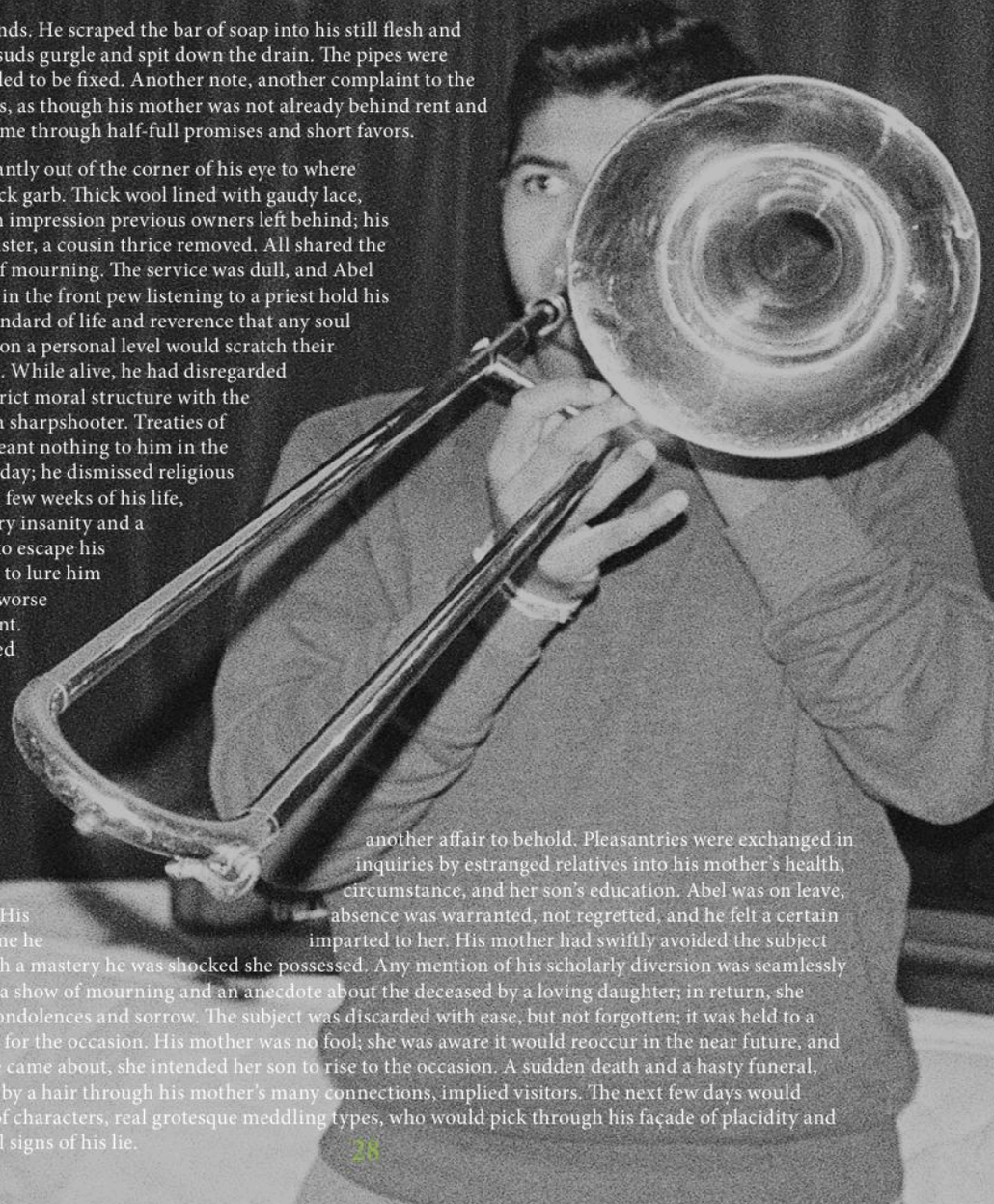
I am looking to childhood America. To the kid whose parents don't speak American. [redacted] Tiny. [redacted] Sweaty. [redacted] Palms. [redacted] Ripped from weathered hands. [redacted] Cheers to childhood. [redacted] Frozen. [redacted] Lost. [redacted] Time. [redacted]

So toss me a cigarette, America. This feels bizarre, America. In my all-American Ford, America. All gas no breaks, Jesus take the wheel.

No one is safe in America.

THE PRACTICED FEW

By Sophia Benito



Abel washed his hands. He scraped the bar of soap into his still flesh and watched the dusky suds gurgle and spit down the drain. The pipes were old and always needed to be fixed. Another note, another complaint to the man down the stairs, as though his mother was not already behind rent and biding ill-favored time through half-full promises and short favors.

The boy looked vacantly out of the corner of his eye to where she stood in her black garb. Thick wool lined with gaudy lace, an inheritance of an impression previous owners left behind; his grandmother, her sister, a cousin thrice removed. All shared the coat and occasion of mourning. The service was dull, and Abel sat with his mother in the front pew listening to a priest hold his grandfather to a standard of life and reverence that any soul who knew the man on a personal level would scratch their skull in puzzlement. While alive, he had disregarded any religious and strict moral structure with the control and aim of a sharpshooter. Treaties of higher order had meant nothing to him in the scheme of the everyday; he dismissed religious doctrine. In the last few weeks of his life, he feigned temporary insanity and a variety of illnesses to escape his daughter's attempts to lure him to what he deemed worse than any punishment. So, Abel had endured the discordant mutterings of his relatives and words in dedication to a false gentleman.

The reception was another affair to behold. Pleasantries were exchanged in faux compassion—inquiries by estranged relatives into his mother's health, sanity, complexion, circumstance, and her son's education. Abel was on leave, not yet withdrawn. His absence was warranted, not regretted, and he felt a certain pleasure in the shame he imparted to her. His mother had swiftly avoided the subject of his schooling with a mastery he was shocked she possessed. Any mention of his scholarly diversion was seamlessly redirected through a show of mourning and an anecdote about the deceased by a loving daughter; in return, she received heartfelt condolences and sorrow. The subject was discarded with ease, but not forgotten; it was held to a reasonable distance for the occasion. His mother was no fool; she was aware it would reoccur in the near future, and thus, when the time came about, she intended her son to rise to the occasion. A sudden death and a hasty funeral, scrounged together by a hair through his mother's many connections, implied visitors. The next few days would summon a variety of characters, real grotesque meddling types, who would pick through his façade of placidity and immediately find all signs of his lie.

Deception is effortless for the practiced few. Abel was far from rank sufficient to entice more than a raised brow. For the better part of the morning, he shied away from conversation and wished for the stillness of rolling emerald hills and the solitude he was offered in the country, luxuries he was without in the cityscape of Andersonville. Since his return to his mother's home, she had resumed the authority she claimed over him from the womb. His years-long absence meant little to the control she sought over him. The incident was further justification that she could not trust him in either mind or conduct. Abel's sudden return after months of unanswered letters and phone calls had left her reeling. She had nearly flown across the country and marched to his room herself. How could a son treat his mother with such disdain and indifference?

No word for a millennium, too long a time for any mother, thank you, and the weight of the horrifying knowledge he had picked up and left with no concern for societal discourse or her state of mind. It was too egregious to be true and taken with seriousness, so by sleight of hand, she had crafted a respectable reasoning for his studious abandonment.

And so there she stood, hanging her handbag on the hook by the kitchen door and standing expectantly with the authority only a parent who wields ineffable power over their child can hold.

"You'll write to the admissions office and request reinstatement. I'll post it tomorrow," she said definitively. There was no room left for question. "It's a shame you let the incident affect your judgment and nerves. That it made you—"

"Made me what?" Abel turned from the window and greeted his mother with the same stifling air she had shown him all day, "Sick? Erratic?"

"Temporarily indisposed." Her voice was clipped. "I understand that your generation is particularly susceptible to the pressures—"

"Please don't."

"I'm offering you a solution. These things happen, and they can easily be sorted." Without waiting for his answer, she turned to the kitchen desk and, opening a bursting drawer, procured a sheaf of papers. She riffled through them for a half second before holding out a half-written letter in neat script.

"I see you've already written it." He stared at the offering, making no movement to accept it. Resolutely, his mother sighed and placed it on the counter next to where he stood.

"I've drafted it. You'll copy it in your own hand, of course, and add a few lines about how your extended leave has made you of a more sound judgement."

Abel picked up the draft and read it slowly.

"Mrs. —'s cousin is on the board, you know." She continued and moved to his side with practiced efficacy, waiting for his reply in consensus, "One letter explaining the cause of your leaving, and it will be fixed. You should be able to return by next week, I'm sure."

He set the letter down. "And you've thought of everything."

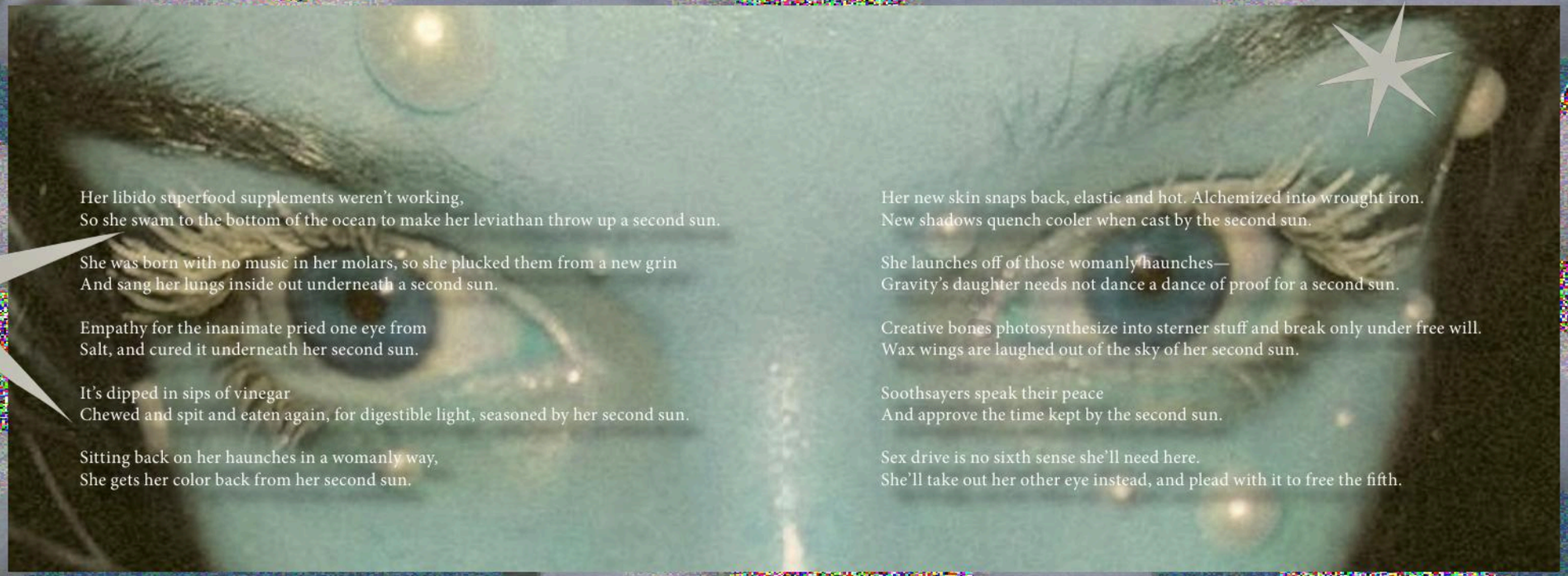
"I had to." A sharpness entered her voice. "Do you think I enjoy this? All the questions I've received about your whereabouts, your activities, and dalliances. The lengths I've had to go to for you, to save some semblance of our reputation. I've had to direct it all to your grandfather's health, which I'm sure you don't care about in the slightest."

"You have no right—"

"We do what we must, and you will copy this letter as I've told you." She paused. "That's final." Then she swiftly left the room, the door clicking shut behind her, silence overtaking the space she had left behind.

He chose to write a letter of his own, addressed to his mother. With pen strokes made by the sleight of a steady hand, he wrote with deft skill and a creeping sense of relief. He wrote of the son and father she'd written into fiction. The years he spent as a child holding his breath as she scrutinized the inner workings of his life. Abel kept it brief, but the truth was there in his scrawl on the page. When he signed his name, his hand didn't shake. He exited the apartment door with no plan in mind except a vow to return only as a box of dust. ▲

Second Sun



Her libido superfood supplements weren't working,
So she swam to the bottom of the ocean to make her leviathan throw up a second sun.

She was born with no music in her molars, so she plucked them from a new grin
And sang her lungs inside out underneath a second sun.

Empathy for the inanimate pried one eye from
Salt, and cured it underneath her second sun.

It's dipped in sips of vinegar
Chewed and spit and eaten again, for digestible light, seasoned by her second sun.

Sitting back on her haunches in a womanly way,
She gets her color back from her second sun.

Her new skin snaps back, elastic and hot. Alchemized into wrought iron.
New shadows quench cooler when cast by the second sun.

She launches off of those womanly haunches—
Gravity's daughter needs not dance a dance of proof for a second sun.

Creative bones photosynthesize into sterner stuff and break only under free will.
Wax wings are laughed out of the sky of her second sun.

Soothsayers speak their peace
And approve the time kept by the second sun.

Sex drive is no sixth sense she'll need here.
She'll take out her other eye instead, and plead with it to free the fifth.

ART // EMMA CHASTAIN

By Emma Chastain

THE LINES OF KILIMANJARO

BY DAVID MCGRATH

A Circular Tab
Present of the Magic Man,
Pop it, crush it, cut,
Make a line, forget time,
Heavenly Chemical Snow.
Another night high
Kept live by magic lines
Living Powder Sky's
Waking sleep, forgetting time,
Victim of Heavenly crime,
Running out of time
Powdered pills fill gaps inside
Loss of self, tears dry
Emotions die, I cannot cry
Holding Dear To
Prescription Lines.

ART // SEBASTÍAN MUNIZ-MASSA

THE BEAST

BY NOELANI HENSON

He rode into town at the sound of the horn. The mist moved with him as though he commanded the breath of the earth itself. Long dead Redcoats marched at his side, their lanterns flickering like captive stars. Children and adults alike have been waiting in feverous anticipation for The Beast's arrival—we laugh and cheer and scream with an excitement that's been brewing all year. A coat of polka-dotted polyester, damp with the perspiration of his caretakers and the afternoon rain, clings loosely to his fiberglass skeleton. Exposing his wire sinew and plastic veins, he struts through the square knowing he is our pride and joy. Our carnival messiah. We watch in awe.

He floats through his movements and we all blissfully ignore the tangle of legs and limbs that kick and squirm between his hollow ribs. We like the illusion. He pauses. His mane lashes gently in the salty breeze, each strand of paracord and cast aside sailors' line, a tell-tale testing the wind for omens. Then he smiled, that terrible, perfect grin: his equine lips pulled back as if stapled into place, taut in eternal defiance, a set of shiny clay teeth gleaming against the gray sky. An explosion of crimson flame erupts from his gaping jaws—he is the leader in the annual crusade.

The time has come. The band plays, filling the air with brass prophecy, drums rolling like distant thunder.

He turns. His fluorescent hooves point towards the sea. The father of his maker blesses him with words swallowed by the wind, and we all wish him luck on his journey. Driven by an anonymous kinetic energy he lopes onward. Trailed by his henchmen just as they came, THE BEAST is ready to test his fate at the Dead Man's Drop. ▲

ART // NOELANI HENSON

WHAT YOU KNOW (WITH NOTES)

ART // CLAIRE TRASK

When Aimee was in college she liked to steal something from every party she went to. It didn't matter what—a potted plant, a bar of soap, an empty picture frame. She kept them in a large box in the back of her closet, where they mostly remained, save for once every few months when she'd take them out just to see if she could remember where each one came from. Years later, when a second-rate therapist asked her why she did this, Aimee would say, "There are billions of people in this world, and I'll never really know any of them, and none of them will ever really know me. At all those parties I went to, I was just another face in the crowd. Another girl to fuck and forget. But some morning after, someone probably woke up and thought, "I wonder what happened to that candle, (or fridge magnet, or shot glass) that I really liked? And they would never know, so they would wonder about it forever. And that would be proof I was there. That would be proof I lived."

Aimee was a girl of average height and average build. She had brown hair that curled at the ends when it was wet, but it was usually flat. Her nose was not dainty nor large, just simple and straight. Her lips were not thin but they weren't big either. Her teeth could've been perfect, but they were just one shade off white and had a chip in the upper left incisor. Some people might've said she was pretty. Some might not. Aimee's appearance was forgettable in every aspect except for her eyes—they were very pale blue, the color of ice and emptiness.

(EYES LIKE THAT COULD MAKE SOMEONE FEEL COLD LONG AFTER THEY FORGOT THE REST ABOUT A GIRL WITH BROWN HAIR AND CHIPPED TEETH THAT THEY ONCE KNEW.)

Aimee stares Liam in the face, her head cocked slightly to the side. His hair is greasy and one of the buttons from his shirt has popped off. She wants to figure him out, but people are something she has never been good at.

"Aimee," Liam repeats, licking his lips as he says it, "which do you feel when you look at me?" Aimee watches his slick pink tongue glide over the cracks on his lips and has a sudden urge to hand him the chapstick in her left jean pocket. Desire, she decides, is what Liam is feeling at this moment.

(AIMEE DOES NOT FEEL DESIRE. SHE FEELS NOTHING.)

Aimee was born blue, at least according to her mother.

(THIS IS NOT A METAPHOR FOR SADNESS, IT IS SIMPLY A FACT.)

"You had the cord wrapped around your neck," her mother had explained a while back, "and for what seemed like the longest time, you wouldn't move, couldn't breathe. It was terrifying. And I've had this nightmare ever since then, you know. I see you—not you as a baby, I mean you as you are now—and I see you leave this world exactly the way you came into it."

(BLUE IS NOT A METAPHOR FOR SADNESS, BUT MAYBE IT SHOULD BE.)

Liam drags his pointer finger in lines and loops down Aimee's back, drawing pictures that she doesn't bother to comprehend. She's not sure why she's in his bed once again. It is not the first time and it won't be the last either.

"I can't figure you out," Liam remarks. His finger runs in circles around her vertebrae, one by one.

"I can't tell what it is you want."

"Maybe that's because I don't want anything at all." Aimee responds.

"Everyone wants something." Liam's finger pauses halfway down her spine.

Aimee stands up, retrieves her shirt from the floor, and leaves. She does not look back at Liam, but before she walks out the door, she picks up the small ceramic elephant that's been sitting on his dresser and slips it in her pocket.

Imagine what would happen to an earth without spiders, where the insects became so plentiful that they poured from the trees and coated the ground. Or maybe, think of what would happen if gravity ceased to exist, but only for a few seconds. What if the sun was green and the grass was yellow, and the moon glowed all on its own? What if Alexandria's library hadn't burned down? What if pharmaceuticals had never been invented, and the whole world died of heartbreak without any baby aspirin to cure it?

Not that Aimee would know the answer to any of these questions.

(SHE HAD NEVER FELT HEARTBREAK BEFORE.)

Aimee thought about her mother's nightmare often. She knew it was dark and gruesome, so it was not a thought that she enjoyed—she hated it. More than she hated the thought itself, though, she hated the fact that she secretly found it beautiful.

"Why do you think it is," the therapist asks, "that you find proof of your existence in the absence of something else?"

"I don't know," Aimee says. "Isn't that for me to wonder, and you to tell me?"

"No one knows you better than yourself. I'm just here to help you come to terms with what you already know."

"I don't think I know myself any more than I know anyone else." Aimee replies.

(THAT IS TO SAY, NOT AT ALL.) ▲

BY LAUREN LUDWICK

THINGS YOU LEARN WHILE WALKING WITH YOUR EYES CLOSED

BY ROISIN CASEY

ART \ EMILY O'BRIEN

Fabrizio always stood like he was holding a cigarette, the phantom smoke curling around his head like an imaginary helm on the head of a disgruntled lord. The lines in his face carved deep and smelled of stale tobacco, his hands deft and unforgiving. He spoke with a Tuscan dialect, his language as unforgiving as his hands, no room in his wry humor for mistakes. Luca stood unapproachable, his smile deceptively wide, teeth long and crooked as he sang along to the songs on the laptop. He would ask me if I knew this Italian song or that Italian singer, and I would usually lie and say no just to see him smile that lopsided grin of his. By the end I felt less like an employee and more like their patchwork child. I could never tell when Luca was serious in his reprimands. Sometimes, he or Anna would approach us with some task or misstep that needed righting under the guise of a friendly quip, his long, long smile widening as his displeasure grew.

I remember the dust in the floor mats of his car as he drove me and Nagore up the side of the vineyards and fields to the house, my hand out the window feeling the air as it grew solid in the quick-moving heat. The dust was all-encompassing. My feet, growing darker as the summer ripened, collected residue which never seemed to want to lift.

In the last few weeks when I felt my rope begin to fray, I would walk along the avenues of the olive yards surrounding the grounds. The air would seem to thicken around me, the drone of crickets rising and falling like a tuning radio in the solitary curl of breeze that made its rounds through the sweet-smelling branches. During one of my last walks, I discovered where the squat cathedral of trees opened into a vast expanse of valley, dead yellow grass making the foliage seem purple. I loved when the sky would turn gray, at night when the air was so still you could cut it with a pocketknife and the lighting forked huge rifts through the monstrous clouds, huge silent tendrils of platinum tearing apart the sky.

One weekend they pruned the groves. It smelled fresh and earthy, almost tart, not what you'd expect an olive branch to smell like when cut. The smell sticks, so distinctive and refreshing, grounding. The aroma of fallen leaves wafted through the camp all night. I learned that they make the leaves into an Amaro, which, when poured, is a light, thick green and tastes like how the night smelled.

I only rode a horse once, late in the evening of the fourth week, the pony stumbling beneath me on its final circuit of the day. I hadn't touched a horse since I was twelve, when I begged my mom for boots and the week at horseback riding camp felt like a visitation from a preteen god. The late July grass was so long it brushed my knees, stretching leisurely over the expanse of slope. Time seemed suspended there, in the gold, a solitary keep on the opposite hill, gilded in the late evening. I loved that place. The kid in the kitchen would make me a crêpe every time I visited, and make friends with the new campers each week. Lucky, one of the horse wranglers, was my favorite. He rode behind me, twitching his reins with the expertise of someone whose horse is less of a separate being and more an extension of themselves, quietly echoing my hums and laughing to himself. He felt like a friend, an ally unspoken. As my horse picked its way through the plains, dust catching the light and the sweet smell of late summer earth on the early evening breeze, I came to understand this was a fleeting experience, a pocket of life I wouldn't be revisiting. When Katie volunteered to go that Thursday, I realized I'd been right.

The slightly trashy sheen of the Wednesday outings became comforting by the third week, once we'd figured out the timing and knew the lady behind the desk at the waterpark. It always felt like a blessing that the weather was nice, like a wink or a pat on the back from someone way up there, but it didn't feel the same once Max left and I couldn't watch the fields go past over his dozing head. I only got a coffee at the bar in the square twice, the first week and the last. It felt right, like a sacred ceremony I'd completed. The streets of Orbetello taste of pistachio ice cream and Hawaiian Tropic. I don't think there was a single week where I wasn't late to the bus. One night somewhere in the middle, Yasmine and I slept curled like sisters in the twisted white sheets of the art room listening to the creak of the cheap metal foldout frame. Legs and arms intertwined, heads sharing a pillow, matching cotton pajamas—her hair in one braid, mine in two—sweating in the dry July.

THE BOYS IN THE TERRAZZO WOULD CALL ME *CAPA*. MY LITTLE LEGION OF STOWAWAYS, MY BATTALION OF HOOLIGANS. HOW I MISS THOSE FILTHY ROMANS. ▲

The Maraschino Cherry at the Bottom of my Teacup

BY
Emma Bogna

Winter rustles a windchime and I once again see
in front of me the hill I will take.

Today I washed my hands, and
remembered the scratch of the earthy
paper towel pressed against my face in
Relief. It tasted salty because I asked it to be so.

I remember steeling myself
to reach out and grab the cold metal hand,
to walk away knowing I could not walk away
again. I dried my hands. I remember lying to
his face: "I'll see you at Thanksgiving." He hated
liars, I remember that, too.

By December, they sold everything.
The house, the car, the chess set from London,
His cashmere, his cane, his tube of toothpaste,
patiently half e m p t y
on the counter.

Love is soft, warm,
the moss on
the roof of the dollhouse
my grandmother built me
when I was three.
If I could, I'd
shrink
down
once more and sit on the bench
She placed just outside
my three story home,
admiring my minor life.
In my house,
we drink Shirley Temples with every meal
and I laugh so hard that
cherry juice comes out of my nose.
I have pink walls and thirteen dogs
and they wear pink ribbon around their necks
and drink Shirley Temples with me.

Their noses are soft, warm,
sniffing under the door jamb,
curious about dinner.
Max asks when the bell will ring,
I beg for it to toll.
We are all happy.

I didn't notice I was small then,
because my gods would sit
in tiaras and feather boas
at my two inch kitchen table,
pinkies raised, sipping tea, asking
me about the new doll my parents brought
home from Saint Agnes.

Today, my grandfather's dog tags hang next to
my old terrier's collar
above the mantle.
They hug on breezy days when my mom leaves
the back door open.
They sound like teacups clinking.
They sound like a girl laughing.
They remind me I am small,
and all my gods are in the ground.

Beneath my feet,
the grass is soft on the hill,
the top of which I cannot see,
always half
way
up,
always half
way
e m p t y.
A tube of toothpaste on a bathroom sink.

ART // NATALIE RILEY

TRAFFIC REPORT

BY CLAIRE TRASK



ART // NOELANI HENSON

Every time I drive home from my grandparents' house, I stop by Pea Soup Andersen's. My shirt is usually stuck to my back with sweat like plastic shrink wrap, or tightly bound wrapping paper. I like Pea Soup Andersen's because it feels like Christmas when I walk past the pastries and ornaments to the dark bathroom. It appears when most needed. The southbound 101 gets particularly long in Buellton, and one time someone told me that pea soup was full of fiber, and many other necessary-for-life nutrients, like sometimes-bacon, or if you could feel a warm hug on the inside of your stomach.

I know why the cars get backed up. It's a fiber thing. You get too much or you get too little and the result is always the same. For optimal fiber intake, I suggest apples or pears. Dense liquids are never a bad idea if pea soup is readily available in your area. I am partial to oatmeal with chia seeds on top. I also think kisses from loved ones should release some tension, a good night's sleep on a nice cushy pillow. No one gets enough sleep these days.

They say veggies are a good source of fiber, too. My preferred way of ensuring I get plenty of greens is to lie with my nose flat in the dirt, and chew on grass until my tongue hurts from the prickly side. If I lie long enough, freckles pop out on my neck, and doctors usually want to hang out with me more. No one minds the dirt in your teeth if it means you're regular.

The traffic is punishing when your destination peeks at you from behind black clouds, like how June means summer but it actually means darkness. Charcoal smoke pours out of exhausts and the exhaustion keeps everyone clawing for something to wake them up, or the promise of movement as soon as they wake up from behind the wheel. And if you don't go right when your feet hit the floor, something might be wrong.

Steinbeck said some people are born monsters, but I think more people are born constipated. That's why people drive slower on the freeway when there is something to look at besides the road ahead. They all hope it's a shit show and that pastries and ornaments and a dark bathroom will appear. ▲

HIGHWAY POPPIES

BY STELLA MULLIN

ART // JACK BUSCHOW AND STELLA MULLIN

There was a poppy growing on the freeway.
The other cars went around it,
And I stopped, that was my day.

The wind sways the flowers nearby,
And the poppy upright, near where cars sit.
There was a poppy growing on the freeway.

I saw a poppy, didn't I, on Sunday?
Under all the smog drip,
And I stopped, that was my day.

Didn't I see that flower yesterday?
Growing in concrete, no soil, unfit.
There was a poppy growing on the freeway.

A singular golden poppy.

IF IT'S ILLEGAL TO PICK A CALIFORNIA POPPY
WHY CAN CARS DRIVE OVER ONE?

The poppy is still standing,
I stopped, and I saw it today.



ALL BITE, NO BARK.

BY EMILY O'BRIEN

YOU'RE ALL BITE AND NO BARK

I LAUGH OUT AS WE TUMBLE DOWN THE STREETS, YOUR CLUNKY SHOES CATCHING ON THE CRACKS OF THE SIDEWALK AND GOOSEBUMPS ERUPTING OFF MY ARMS AND SHOOTING INTO THE NIGHT SKY.

You mean I'm all bark and no bite, you say back, accustomed to the way my tongue trips and twists over itself.

Except, no, I think I mean it. I'm good at barking, not so good at biting. Something about the reality of that terrifies me. So I look for the biters, the things that tear and rip.

I am all bark in the carefully curated straightened posture of my spine, my declarative, *well I would never stand for that.* When in reality, I'll stand for anything, and fall for everything. A house of cards perpetually reaching, fluttering towards the ground. I am all bark in the quiet moments of two in the morning when my friend is throwing up and throwing up and I am sitting there: ass against cement floor, phone dead, staring as the cars on the hollowed streets flash by us. I sit there, head throbbing to the sound of retching, thinking about how I'm the person lying in wait. Flash through all ages where kids are drinking and undrinking and I am there on the periphery, ringed fingers tracing the edges of cups that I won't drink and pretending I am brave enough to be reckless. But really, I'm just there to grab the bucket and hold your hair back.

Sometimes I'm scared lack of use will rot my teeth straight through. I worry the crooked one that sits perpendicular to my bottom front teeth will pop right out. I worry I'll hold its thin body in my hand, a survivor of multiple cavities, and think about all the times I should've bitten straight through. Sometimes I worry about the fact that all my biting teeth are stolen from my biters and what happens when I need to grow my own.

GOOD TEETH SING LIKE DYLAN THOMAS' "DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT."

GENTLE BECOMES SYNONYMOUS WITH MEEK, BECOMES SYNONYMOUS WITH IMPRESSIONABLE, BECOMES TRANSPARENT.

Un-gentleness, as it were, is my best friend reaching into my eight-year-old mouth with the confidence only an eight-year-old could have, and ripping tooth from bone. In the spaces where tooth had been freed from marrow, blood poured from its absence to my bowl of phở. The tooth was stubborn in its departure, and so I sat there, bleeding and compliant.

Unafraid, she twisted and she tugged until she held its bloodied alabaster body in her hand. And there in my mouth was a brand new hole. I left the tooth under my pillow for the Tooth Fairy who gave me a dollar coin and when that new tooth came in, it had the fearless bite of the girl who pulled it out. You are all bite and no bark because you are brave and you have survived enough to bite through the core. I love you infinitely for that.

Not all of my teeth are biting teeth. Some are rounded on their corners, a consequence of the girl who wrote me a letter when she missed me, who writes about the way I dress in her essays, and the way I cook my vegetables in her poetry. Her teeth are gentle in a way that shows how she's stopped biting through the things that hurt. She has survived enough to be cautious in the ways that matter, in the ways that are recklessly compassionate.

I'm pushing out my crooked teeth and biting through you. I exclaim, tripping on the same crack.

You know I'm lying and tuck a lighter in my pocket for later. ▲

ART // AVERY KIGHTLINGER AND EMILY O'BRIEN

GAMBLING CHIPS

BY AMANDA ROSSITER

I took a photograph in my mind's eye,
I could not help but wonder if you saw.
Those tokens they gave us that first night,
the ones we got because
they got my drink
wrong,
I keep mine in a box
beneath my bed.
It's filled with things
like keychains, cards,
and notes.
Which sounds
dull,
but I'll have
them
til I'm dead,
because
that night I knew
a door
had
closed.
My new life, filled with
intimate comfort
starkly different from the
days before you.
And there were times I
thought we might
fall short,
but we built a base,
weathered the
typhoon.
Tonight, I saw the
token in your car.
A story started in our
little hometown bar.

ART // AMANDA ROSSITER

THIS ISN'T HOW IT HAPPENS

By Jack Buschow

I asked politely to stop dreaming, please. I put rocks under my pillow, switching them out at intervals to see which ones might make it stop. They didn't prevent my sleeping—in a new fairytale called The Prince and the Stone, he doesn't feel it.

I dreamt of a precipice and a cliff dive, unequipped and thrown to the sea.

I dreamt of white serpents backwards breaching murky green water against a gray slate shore.

The books on my shelves were filled with a strange man's annotations and the little pressed bodies of insects.

I dreamt an axe brought off my head from behind in my childhood driveway. I bled milk out of the unfinished wound.

I dreamt my father poisoned himself in front of me on his red leather sofa in the living room.

The ghost of a lady on fire haunted the top of my stairwell and pulled a veil down over my pleading face.

I dreamt of alligators on the highway and eels in my swimming pool and scuttling creatures ripping out my womb.

I dreamt of a whalebone coffee table and discovered the matching spine upon the shore of Waking.

In the kitchen, I was pierced by the four of swords. Blood barely pinks a finger rippled by life underwater.

On the path, I saw a frog broken by St. Catherine's bicycle wheel, and failed to spare it the suffering.

I went to beautiful places I didn't belong.

During hours 17 through 22 of glowing purple flights over the Pacific, I wondered just how many fathoms it might take to see change.

With each arrow chipping bone I counted my martyrdoms. In the baroque and bloodied velvet tones of occult surgery theatres, I saw myself dismantled and cauterized.

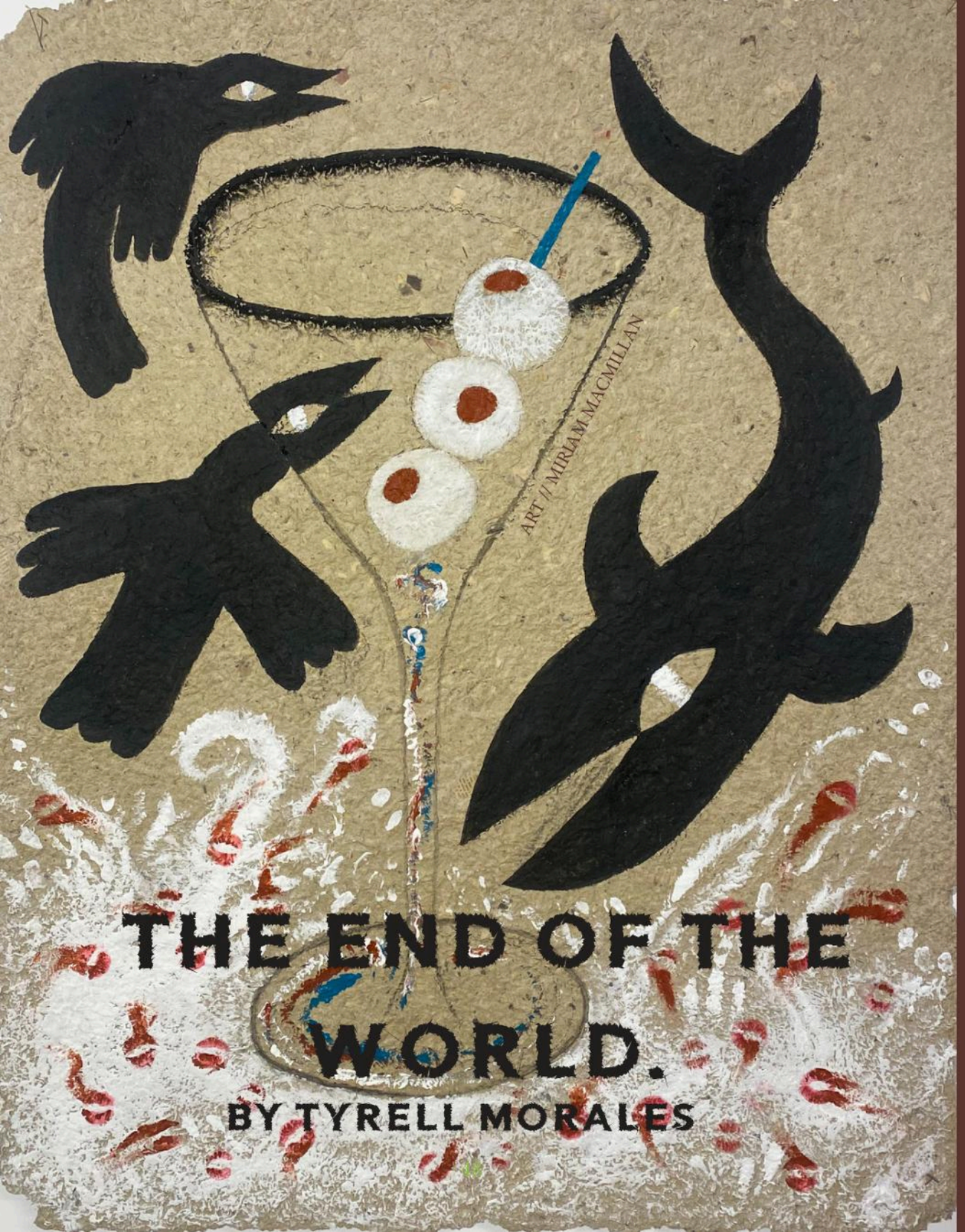
My serenity's saferoom took the form of an old eldritch waterpark: defunct, tunneling and brominated.

I taught myself the words for 'submechanophobia' and 'phallic symbol' and 'sleep paralysis.'

If peace were possible, it would look like two clean quartz discs obscuring my second sight.



ART // CLAIRE TRASK



THE END OF THE WORLD.

BY TYRELL MORALES

through obsidian window panes,
the amber-tinged oak-furnished cafe
suffers a slow and sweet dull ache
as the turntable
sighs with a warped 60's slow jam
that solemnly meets
the silence between tired eyes.

outside dangles the faded
jacaranda, petals
grayscale under the eyeing moon—
that shallow
meniscus of glittering silver
sewn into the night
in a shy, stemless wine glass,

the vibrant open sign
hangs by the front door
in a luminescent, neon violet
beside it, a poster
promising better times—
but from the outside reads as plain,
dry Letraset.

the heater rumbles
just enough to keep
their fragile fingertips
from freezing over,
knowing they are the last of their kind:
the artists with neural, tender minds.

but is careful to not warm too much:
mindful of the drooping English ivy
on the wall, roots tucked
into thin glass vials
with curious leaves afraid to brown.

a sincere score of
cautious conversation burns dimly,
a voice reminiscing about
how there once was an Illinois,
a glistening seascape, and warmth
that you didn't have to pay
for with the pain of
having known it at all.

but the empty evening bus has made its
final rounds, and only tattered
newspapers wearing
yesterday's headlines
line the metro platform,
while the day hosts a sickly Sun,
and the night a scattered bunch of
sickle-cell stars.

those artisans, lamenting
the death of still life.
a choked gaze in return for
heavy heartfelt remarks,
inkless pens between
cornflower bruised knuckles
from having written it all:
The Story of the World, which began:
"Once blushed the crimson
spot rockrose, a deep, deep red."

the gaslamp flickers, and for a moment
it is dark, the black sky torn apart
with great scars of ripping cirrus.
I cannot help but look away, knowing the
fleeting memory of such pigments
will one day become proof of life.

but the needle stays pressed into
the Motown tune, as I am watching
The End of the World:
a beautiful bough, an ephemeral bouquet
the earnest vows, bound for decay
all heres and nows, weathered and frayed,
and now, without any further delay—
as the actress bows at the end of the play
and turns her back to the edge of the stage
if living is losing, then I cannot say
that I have not lived,
when you are away.



BORN AND RAISED

BY TYRELL MORALES

it was in the short decades, in which
the night sky shone the brightest
that I was the most terrified of the dark—
the river beneath it.

doubly folded over by the
aches of memory,
tending to a half-broken arm
in a dark bathroom stall.
no use in a wild heart
if you refuse to use it.
underneath the blinding darkness
consuming street signs with
quaint names.

cobweb clutter on a rusted chain,
handlebars, defunct brakes.
streetlights that seem so crushing now
refuse to dim in image,
they spear through my
being, a total eclipse.

I have been given new flesh
as quiet compensation, crowned the
prom king of unfolded laundry
and missed calls.

indebted to a murky waterfront,
reflecting worldly fears
off of two sets of naive eyes. stumbling over
unsure words and an iceplant cavalcade.

falling flat on my freckled back;
insects buried in backyard stumps, crooked concrete
floods the pedestrian path.

I used to think that one day,
the crosswalks would let me barrel
into the street, signal just for me.

that sore wrists were no longer,
red hands would go unseen.
instead, inaction— paralyzed
on a cement island, cars shaking
directionless metal signs

as they pass,
I stare past,
looking to the curb
that corners the sidewalks
of my past.
I fear I am something;
just something, and that
you are someone.
or everything.

I feel for a bruise wrapped
around my neck,
the one you didn't warn me
you would leave.
I feel about my body just to
find a wreck;
perhaps I am searching for
something to grieve.
I feel for the scars,
raised on my legs,
raised when you didn't
warn me you would leave.

how suffocating.
how rich—
the late air of early blood.

ART // MADELINE MILLER



EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY FROM THAT ONE CHAIR: YOU KNOW WHICH ONE I'M TALKING ABOUT!

By Charisma Gomez

I am in your yard, you can stand on me,
Bring me out for a party, lie me under a tree.

Be careful of the wobble, or you'll hit the floor,
My footing is tricky, one tilt, your back will be sore.

I am never cleaned, yet always there,
Kept in the family, for when you need a spare.

I've held up your *abuela* when her knees grew weaker,
Your baby cousin too, whose sleep gets deeper and deeper.

I am nameless, but always there,
The one within reach when you yell, "We need a chair!"

I've seen every birthday, I've held them with care,
Bring out a new chair, they won't compare.

You don't know where I come from, yet I'm still trusted,
Until you play musical chairs, and find out that I'm busted!

ART // CHARISMA GOMEZ

The Halfpipe Flower BLOSSOMS

A place built for the after hours, afterall, it is ours.

Betwixt the sounds of rusty bike chains and the ambient whispers of the man upstairs, Sweet Jane closes her front door, breathing in the lingering fug of life's afternoon. The sounds of the bell tower begin to fade as the paralyzing aroma of pungent tar expands and contorts in her glass lungs. Reaching into her studded leather satchel, she discovers the remnants of the night before, embarking into a new night henceforth. She peels open her bag of treats, its sugary coating grinding down the back of her throat and cracking like sand. With the time bomb of euphoria set, she throws on her baby-blue dress and fabric crown and laces up her bright red Chuck Taylors. Confidently puffing her chest, she looks into the mirror and revels in her ideal: the less Midwest Princess, and then waits. She waits for the tidal waves of tranquility, where the Sun meets the Earth and everything becomes so much more translucent; much more feasible, much more real.

The lagoon has met the Sun, and the lights of Isla Vista begin to flicker on. Alternating chords of varying genres spew from all sides, beckoning in an uneasy harmony. Broken glass scatters itself along the cracked pavement like serrated knives, allowing the remnants of some cheap booze to fertilize the weeds. Flimsy flyers of events long gone litter the streets, advertising to ants and sewer cats as they slowly fade away in the green torrents of sewage gone by. Sweet Jane walks along the uneven sidewalks, kicking a brown and green compostable paper cup along the way. The mystic mist of marijuana musk follows her silently through the night, fluttering and flourishing the foul haze with a fleeting layer of soft nostalgia. Memory manifests through the fog, and Jane reflects herself in the iris of every other girl on these streets; like fleeting phantoms of the ideal night, flickering into reality through the shallow glow of the silver streetlight.

By Ryan Downing

Drifting, Sweet Jane finds herself at a random gathering on the streets of Isla Vista. It's "Pint Night," and everyone is cheerily enjoying their Wednesday night concert session. The crowd creeps into the street like the roots of trees to pavement; perpetually on the verge of breaking containment, yet never fully reaching the point of absolute obstruction. Their brew just simmers along the brim of their glasses, its foam occasionally curling over the edge to rest itself in the crevices between the thumb and index. Jane's attention, however, finds her eavesdropping on a conversation with others who have gathered here. One, a mirror image of Jesus Christ, talking to her with the grace and elegance of the enigmatic Jesus. Unsure if this is actually Jesus or not, she decides it safer not to take chances, lest she be wrong about his holy identity. Jesus is drinking some ripe-looking liquor, the kind of liquor that makes condensation look appetizing. The other slyly exclaims himself to be a patron of the humanitarian arts, casually referencing obscure literary works as if they're common knowledge. His name slips through the surrounding drunken hissing. Instead, she names the man Karl Marx; his beard does look very Marx-like, after all. Regurgitating the fruits of academia, the words begin to drool out of their mouths, pooling into a verbose greyish-green puddle, slipping into the half-clogged drain systems below.

Do you know why they call it I.V.?

Jesus says, mumbling over his words.

Because once that needle enters you, it's in your blood for life.

Jesus and Marx never see eye to eye, but under the fuzzy red starlight, the line in the sand dissipates with the rolling tide. Too drunk to care, Marx and Jesus solemnly grasp each other's hands, exchanging fleeting kisses as they clash under the ebb and flow of the Milky Way. The blend of music and alcohol mixes with the sand and the sea, as everyone leaves their worries behind, letting the poison and half-lucid smiles numb the pain.

Sweet Jane grows hazy, and in the mists of her mind she wanders alone once again, leaving Jesus and Marx to the world behind. Time begins to flicker like fire, instances of stained reality born in its smoke. She continues to meander down the concrete river, following the boats and buses down a path only accessible to them. Layers upon layers of shoddily printed flyers decorate the walls, staples lingering in the wood, concreting the residual parchment to an eternity of insignificance. Dancing across the concrete sea, Jane finds herself in an expansive field with a singular tree, the bog looming nearby. The pungent fog illuminates the red eyes of heaven, malevolently beaming down at her from beyond the haze. Initially, she thinks it to be divine retribution for leaving Jesus to his drink. Despite this, Jane focuses on the villainous gaze above, realizing the eyes to be nothing but the red illuminating lights of the same old bell tower.

Sweet Jane blinks again, and she finds herself at her last stop of the night. A sign reads "East Depression," which she thinks is due to the congregation of sad drunken folk who spill their blood into the sand each night. She does this too, but just as everyone else, there is no knife. Under the haze of the moon's airglow, Jane allows the sand to consume her, occasionally bumping ways with the resident sand flea. The moon's gravity pulls her down further into the sand, melting her into the glass-covered beaches of Isla Vista. She feels as though her entire body is being tingled by the sand and sky, each and every gust of wind driving the substrate further and further into her skin. In slight of this minor abrasion, Sweet Jane smiles. Lying down to close her eyes, she feels the blood and body of every single person who has come to this beach before her, as they all melt themselves down into the sand-spit of the Pacific. She feels everything; the alcohol in the water, the tar on the beach, the tears of an innocent soul slain by the spectacles of society. She takes this all, feels the world revolving with her, mixes everything into a nice little cocktail, and throws it back like a Pink Whitney shooter. Buried by the champagne supernova, the landslide completely swallows her existence, melding her entire self with the blood, glass, and tar. Comfortably suffocating in sand, Sweet Jane smiles forever, knowing that the tide will roll back again, and the sun will rise behind the bell tower once more. ▲

ART // RYAN DOWNING

FORMLESS-INGRESSION

BY SEBASTIÁN MUNIZ-MASSA

I've lost mine, so I seek the shine in your eyes.
Can't seem to find my sacred gleam, so I need
the reflection in yours. That subtle light
you've tucked away. Hollow souls need harmless lies,
and you my love, have left me craving more.
More of what you say I am,
your words define my form.
With every breath, I've learned to be through
the living mirror before. I began by echoing
her existence, making sense of self, so she'd
whisper recognition. My mother gave me the
shine in my eyes, but I went and dismissed
it. Drifting further into ominous isolation,
I survive, not in grief, but wielding a
weary penchant for life. Sinking into
ambiguity, I still search for the lost
shine in my eyes. I've spent my days
gliding the blade beyond the nape
of thoughtless creatures, or so
they seem, wondering why some
get to wait, while others will be
set free. Does my solipsism
grant me, judge, of their
perfect imperfections? Not
once in their short lives
did I think they might
have a subtle shine in
their eyes. And so I
cut them out, not
thinking twice,
with my swift
knife, leaving
them to drain
and bleed.
They found life in company,
yet lost their lives to innocent greed.
What does that make of me?
What does that say of you?
Is every interaction
yet another selfish deed?
Will I be your companion,
or will I be your feed?
When it is all for one,
and one minute before the next,
we crave presence for what presence is,
an oasis for the unaddressed.
I spin in a world devoid of context,
cycling through speculative perceptions,
my mind will never rest
until I find
the shine in your eyes,
so I can find myself again
before I am buried beneath clay mounds
made of my words and my shells,
semblances of that self left underground.
Unearthed until now
when I see the shine in your eyes.
I've found rest in your reassurance
before my demise.
I jest in my cold occurrence, and
realize
I've found the heavenly
communion of the formless
while searching for the shine in
your eyes.



The Normandy boys learned that day that Hell was neither hot nor cold. Their skin did not prick with rigor mortis chill nor bead with summer sweat. Wind did not tousle their hair. No sun cast their shadows. They lined up by the thousands—flagless, nameless—waiting, ignoring their bullet wounds and smithereened limbs, trying to pretend they didn't want to be there.

The Devil watched them from His perch. This was no spectacle. Over and over again, they fought and killed, over and over again cried for their mothers, and over and over again met only Him. He had seen this before. Seen sons not yet fathers line up before Him, thinking they were better than those who had graced His path before. Thinking they deserved honor. Thinking they were special.

In days, though, the Normandy Day population dent would smoothen. The numbers would be only numbers.
The Normandy boys did not matter.

They shuffled forth, heads bowed, eyes blank. They took with them shells of themselves, leaving behind them everything else: a marchtrail of gundust, guts, and memories.

One son steered his attention toward the Devil. Rare for battlesons, their heads most often bent in shame of war. The Devil was used to being scrutinized with Christian doubt or feared with sinful knowing. This son did neither. He squinted like he didn't quite believe what he saw and wanted more. Elder folk often gave Him that look. So did wide-eyed, toddling children. But never boys of this age, stubbled, schooled, unwrinkled. The Devil rarely looked at lives anymore—it got old, knowing—but the boy's curiosity caught onto Him. What must it be like to still want to know? Perhaps it was worth His time. The Devil focused, channeling His once-mortality, and saw.

The mother lingered longest. The boy had been home a short while, but the army suit and cap beckoned his return.

"I'll be fine, Ma," he told her, pretending to believe it. "Medics never get any action." He'd never been a medic, not really. It had been a temporary assignment. He was qualified for it. They needed him in the ranks more, though, and his mother's heart was poor enough.

It had been easy to lie. She wished him safety and the best, then stayed until his train was no more than a smudge against the distant hills. Her boy waved all the while, convincing himself the silver streaks across his face were from the wind.

In the train car, he did not look at the faces around him. He never did. It was easier to see shrapnelled eyes and bullet-holed cheeks when he didn't know what the faces should have looked like. The train, his new metal mother, rocked him to sleep.

He dreamed of the Devil. It was not a perfect likeness. Nothing ever was, but it was clear it was supposed to be Him.

The Devil would cackle, filling this false Hell with sound absent in His real home. He would condemn the boy for lying to his mother, for dying too young, for killing.
The boy would not argue.

He woke and found himself alone. The others had left, or maybe they had never been there at all.

The boy cried. He cried for his mother and his future, his little brothers and little unborn daughters.

He cried for the places he would never visit, books he would never read, holidays he would never celebrate.
He cried for the rain on pavement that June withheld from him, the smell of fresh-baked cookies,
cat fur on clothing.

The boy cried for the Devil.

He never made it to Normandy. They found him at the bottom of a dry ravine, the rail bridge stretching overhead. They said he'd lived through the inital fall but could not move. He died later, on the day of the battle.

The Devil met the son's eyes. He knew the boy belonged here, perhaps more than the other battlesons. The boy's mother would think that false, blame the Devil as they all did, and He would acquiesce. Acceptance of blame was easier than trying to get them to believe only they had control.

There was a certain safety that came with death. There was no crying, no pain, no feeling. Some may call it quiet, but to say "quiet" would say there had ever been sound. To say "empty" would say it had ever been full.

The Devil would cradle the battlesons as their mothers did. They would all pretend it wasn't better. Or maybe that it was. That it was anything at all.

The son turned away from the Devil as though he knew He saw him. As though they were colorfully conscious, not gray imprints of life. The son's curiosity had dissolved.
He cared no longer about the Devil. He had something more important to think about:
death.

Which was nothing. ▲



Solstice

By Amelia Lagna

ART // EMMA CHASTAIN

Like so many summers before it, we're in Southern Italy visiting my paternal grandfather. We are here to splash around, get fat, speak English, ignore. This one is different though; my grandfather is too old now to rent the beach house—let alone descend the marble staircase to greet us—and this is the first one without Zia Lucetta, my dad's only aunt, and the last of my grandfather's eight siblings to die. Now he is really alone, and our hopes of another careless summer evaporate under a cruel Salento sky.

We stay in his cramped apartment, five cots in a room, one for each member of my family. The lighting is fluorescent and unforgiving, and the AC leaves one room frigid and the rest sweltering. We dip back and forth between them like Roman bathers. Every wall is covered in ghosts, slanted and —undusted, hungry and still; I shiver through another hallway of bug-eyed boys I'm told were my father, and demure women I'm told were my grandmother. Someone tells stories about them in a language I do not understand.

During the peak hours of heat, by some logic I cannot comprehend, we go outside. My grandfather, frail and still in his underwear, waves goodbye from the top of the stairs. My adult siblings and I cram into the back of a rental car and punch seat belts into each other's sweaty, bikini'd butts and squawk at our dad to turn the temperature down and the radio up.

At the beach we wait for him to rent us an umbrella and beds in his native tongue, while we eat rustici and Nutella cornetti that dribble down our chests, and wash it down with lemon sodas, sticky and so sweet. We are too old for this.

My father is already in the water with the rest, but he returns and makes it clear that my dryness is unacceptable. He asks what I'm doing if not swimming, but little does he know I am watching him.

WE ARE TOO OLD FOR THIS.

He closes his eyes more often and has more spots on his face and more rolls on his stomach than I remember. I think of his father too, who talks slower, hangs his head, and spends the day in bed all the time now, leaving the apartment just once a week to graze the frozen engraved faces of the dead—a Sunday errand that stretches longer each summer. I cannot help but think that one day my dad will be the same and I will be the child raising my voice to his failing ears, begging him: *exercise, listen to the doctor, rage against the dying of the light.* I know that this is my fate as well, that my body will break down every day until it is broken completely, against the futile behest of some helpless offspring.

My body buzzes. The sun pulls my skin out in every direction. I ache for a stranger. I remember that this is the coldest summer of the rest of my life; and so I dive into the Mediterranean. ▲



Blue Gratitude

By Jeovany Tzilin-Gomez

You gain floral power, you are looking clean.
Every hour, you collect the pollen to become the queen.
You are gaining the bread, but what about the cheese?
You need the extreme heat when you use the city's keys.

Googly eyes don't desensitize the lack of humor.
That's why there's beef between boomers and zoomers.
I look around the extravagant city to find a tuba player
That plays minor scales, he wants to be greater

I hear typewriters tattletale your inconvenience
And they like to hype me for my grand experience.
I'm the goat that climbs mountains, I do less explaining.
Learn that the cause of ticking clocks is complaining.

I learned that dolphins are playful by nature
Even if they sound childish, they grow to be players
Because the loan sharks ain't letting you live.
So, let me be a dolphin because I have a lot to give.

This is the bull that I ride on to keep myself sane.
I see more than superstars with rabid airplanes.
I steadily escape the maze, don't give a damn about the stakes.
If the steak ain't well done, move on. Journeys aren't replaced.

Than the hopeless who were lost in showbiz.
Typical suits corrupt the roots of hard work ethic.
Excuse me, the goose is laying golden eggs!
You gophers go for my wealth, go on and beg.

I try to loosen up my nerves to learn about the swerves
That men do to get phone numbers of good looking girls.
Banana peels are everywhere, I don't want any more scars.
Too much of my heart is broken by the masculine march.

Woo! I can't break my own fern emeralds because
My friends have polished them many times; memorable.
Gratitude leads you to a positive attitude.
But you get to it by escaping the blues.

ART // ALIANA HERMANN-CAMPANA

Now The Battle's Fought and Lost

By Miles Roorda

ART // STELLA MULLIN

I stare at the text on the listing
and sigh.
Snap a picture.
Attach a file.
Hit post.
I doubt anyone is going to want it.
I know,
for one,
I don't.

It's no more than an eyesore.
Propped up
against the wall
in the garage. Collecting naught but dust.

Once it held so much promise,
once it yearned to be carried
in the streets, raised up amongst the crowd,
forced into the foundations of tyranny
to hoist them up like bales of hay.

We had no clue how great would be the cost,
But now the battle is fought and lost.

And now
it's just an eyesore. Propped up
in the garage,
collecting dust while its targets,
are seated up in marble palaces,
collecting our tribute.

The dead of winter in DC,
tyranny creeping in
like frost.

Now that the battle is fought
and lost,

I stare at the text on the listing
and sigh.

We are clinging to a spinning pole.

Drink in your fist,
phone in your mouth—my mouth is empty,
agape like a fish.

Tongue dragging across the floor
out of my control, snaking along the lines
of a script I've read before.

Someone picks it up and tugs—then shoves it in his hole.

Like so many lemmings,
a well-rehearsed routine;
he's following me.

Eventually, kick him off gently,
(might as well be stepping off The Stage)
time to stop spinning.

Find you on the floor:
drink gone from your fist, phone long lost—
contents of your stomach too.

No, lemmings isn't quite right.
We are ants in a Death Spiral:
spinning in circles,
trailing the stench of the sweats and spirits and smokes and strobes.

Drag you past a drag queen
stalking across The Stage,
concluding her routine.

Press some ones into the free
hand of the security guard
pushing your wheelchair.

This might be our best performance of gender yet.

ART // ALIANA HERMANN-CAMPANA

1:00AM DEATH SPIRAL

BY ALIANA HERMANN-CAMPANA

Channel 919

By Rio Blackshaw-McKee

For me, America's forgotten tragedy dwells within a house that always reeked of cigarettes. It was an old mill house, almost haunted; window panes became violent in the wind and dust had gathered in the divots of the paint-chipped walls. Smoke seeped into the fabric of the carpet and furniture and wafted through the vents in the old, boxy, television that endlessly ran outdated programs. I would rest my wiry body on the beams of the doorway and watch; a woman stabbed to death forty-seven times with a ballpoint pen; a talk show arguing why you should be able to purchase a gun without a valid ID; a gory horror film. I would never be able to watch things like this at home.

Cubie, a soothing woman with hair as white as marble, would sit on her trademark chair that was caked with soot and imprinted with the shape of her back. She handed me candy that tasted like it came from a time when houses were still lit with oil lamps while she called me *sugar* and softly rubbed the dark hair on my head. She withered along with her white, plastic throne, which to my knowledge, outlasted her by a long, long time.

Dalton was a brutish, peculiar country boy who would shoot airsoft pellets at his cousins when he was bored. Sometimes he would take me upstairs to his room, which smelled half of must and half of warm, fragrant cedar. I would sift through his collection of rusty knives and various items he had unearthed in the woods while he played *Call of Duty*. He was always, and I mean always, snacking on a bag of Combos Pizza flavored crackers. Dalton was—albeit a bit mean—an important influence in my life. He would yell at his mom and cause trouble, but he would always bring freshly dried venison to my mom with a wide grin and outstretched arms. My childhood had a lot of contradictions like that. I liked Dalton, he taught me a lot of important lessons like how to jump off a rope swing and how to properly open a switchblade. But, he probably shouldn't have let a seven year old hold a real, loaded gun.

Like any impoverished country home, the overgrown grass in the backyard was surrounded by old tractors and wheels that had lost their vehicles who knows when. Blue, with his good ol' beer and his beloved Lowe's hat, would soliloquize about why his wife Jeanette shouldn't smoke weed and should deal with her problems like a true, god-loving patriot, while I picked mulberries from the roof of his disintegrating shed.

Jeanette, of course, always fired back.

"Well how about you get yer' butt off that damn chair and teach your son some manners instead of complainin' 'bout the one thing I got left," she would rifle out. Sometimes she yelled right at Blue and other times she had clearly given up, simply muttering it to herself.

We all lived in a tiny town called Bynum. Bynum was an old mill town that had lost its soul nearly a century before, when the Industrial Revolution stopped and the consequences of destruction set in. What was left was either remnants or seedlings. New people would move in, renovate, and eventually decide they were sick of it. But for Blue and Jeanette, it was simply the place they were put, and they were just fine with that I suppose.

My mother told me once that she considered not letting me inside that house and only letting me wander the yard surrounding it. She told me she had mixed feelings about letting her child be exposed to heavy smoke, guns, and a reality that was so shockingly different from what I knew. But ultimately she never actually made that decision, she said that she realized what I would be losing if I wasn't exposed to the Wrenns: understanding and perspective.

The contrast to my life was palpable, and I was too young to have the depth to be anything but confused. In time though, I began to understand. People like Blue and Jeanette have been wheeled in and spat out of the wringer. They are those who, despite their hardships, maintained the Southern sweetness that capitalism tried so desperately to extinguish. At that house, which was ruled by entropy and longing, I learned of the forgotten American tragedy. To America, pride means power; to the Wrenns, pride meant humanity. ▲

ART // EMILY O'BRIEN

THE MARKS I CARRY

By Leila Franco



ART // LEILA FRANCO

Steel,

Painted black and painted over again.

Sprayed teal and sprayed red,

I still see your rust.

Your color changes,

Or your place in the yard,

Moving from corner to corner

Or even standing apart.

Covered with a wet towel,

Burning in the sun,

Your grated seat marks my legs,

Your top rail indents my back.

I carry these marks with me,

A reminder of **you.**

And if I had to choose a place to rest,

I would choose **your steel.**

Not for comfort, but for memory.

THE RETROGRADE

BY PIPER FLAHERTY

ART // EMILY O'BRIEN

One a mother.
One a daughter.
Both infants together.

Then the embryo detached.
Floating magnets, repelling away.
A symptom of the teenage bomb.

Doors slammed,
Tears shed,
Voices echoed.

I hold out my hand.
We meet again, in the middle.
Through the very aging balm that divided us.

My sun bleached hair darkened, hers greyed.
With it our detachment withered,
A deprived lily, finally receiving water.

A waterfall of clarity emerges.
Reflecting our likeness, cutting our differences with a blade.
We see each other.

First I saw it in her nose and her heart-shaped palm.
Then her crows feet, and when she did a braid.
I'm turning into my mom.

Now I see it in her need for control, once a qualm.
I realize she was unpaid.
For in all her chaos, she is my calm.

Her voice has become my very own psalm.
I am her very own retrograde.
I am turning into my mom.

One a daughter, no longer afraid.
One a mother, no longer betrayed.
I'm turning into my mom.
For in all her chaos, she is my calm.



Bittersweet

by Jade Corona

ART // ALIANA HERMANN-CAMPANA

Beauty is pain, they say.
Chin up, shoulders back, brace yourself.
Perfect, complicit dolls.

Beauty is currency.
Sugar-sweet, ripe for the picking,
Consumable goods to be devoured.

They pull the corset strings tighter,
Until we can no longer breathe.
Ribs crushed under soft satin.

The alluring silhouette digs and bites into flesh,
A comfort, a reassurance of
Desire.

Every breath excruciating, sharp,
Shallow, controlled, quiet.
Pain becomes familiar.

Wait. A curtain falls,
A seam unravels; we dance,
Unlaced, unbound, unburdened.

We see our bodies bare,
Scars, no longer hidden,
Unashamed, admired.

And for now, that will be enough.

ART // MILES TRACHTENBERG

Two Factories

By Paul Way-Henthorne

Water lily melon, anoxic, cool decay.
Pleasant, foul, I wander into dawn and see a face.
Sky-pink contours catch the concrete; ocean smokestack heat,
Sea and cinder mix their palette;
Salt-stained walls of Crete.
Opaque cloud, she wanders
Through the artificial light,
Not far away, but by the sea, ghost lilac lost in white.
Soon she will flutter, far from sea, a daydream's finite flight.
From ocean foam, away, the floral wisp
Will flee the night. To warp her light,
A withered hand creeps, almost
Within reach to try and crack
Her comely face,
Not God's own factory.

Still peace may come,
Imperfect splendor, flight may not
Need be.
Smokewashed steel and skylit blush;
A blurred trajectory,
May mix with ocean wind to weave a
Fractured seagreen wreath,
To make a medley sweet and acrid;
Let us rasp and breathe.

Keeps on rising; dawn come rise,
Until her face is free.
Keep on rising; dawn—night violet's pale periphery.

Ashen pools of ink beyond the soapy, washen sea,
Concrete towers, rising up, go join her pink-blue dream.
But don't dream far, don't fade away; anoxic, melon breeze,
Don't go away, but fall asleep, between two factories.

The Crow's Lament

by Miles Trachtenberg

In the pastel washes of dawn,
three figures, garbed in loose pajamas and looser hoodies,
emerge from a rickety wooden door,
a brittle draft welcoming their wandering nature.

Palms sway with an air of forgetfulness
as soft forms of clouds drift in silence,
masking, and then revealing, a half moon,
wrapped in a silver band of thyme—

Casting shadows upon a chain of Stygian crows,
crying out in woeful strings:

A cacophony of calls, creaks and screeches,
the air ringing with their impromptu melodies,
discordantly scratching against one another
in waves of shivering reverberations.

One by one, the song falters into listless rhythm
and dissolves into concentric circles of the crow's lament.
Perched upon street wires, the crows besiege the wanderers'
quiet steps with their spectral gaze—

The inescapable totality of the world bearing down upon them.

ART // MILES TRACHTENBERG

Amorist at Best

By Kira Logan

The night is inexhaustible and
I write you letters I will never send.
Take it on the chin; let me be your microcosm.

You wish to be well read, I wish to be understood—we let it part with the sea.

In the morning, I will forget.

Rug burns on my knees
I would slouch towards Bethlehem indefinitely
Placating ancient pantheons; let my mortality unravel in the name of our love.

What do you call my soul when it is not tourist season?

I will forget in the morning.

I float home and it bears me down
Saying my pleases and thank yous.
I learn to take it; I think of him and understand he does not think of me.

You say I have to go, I say I know—we sip a cocktail of the mundane and the celestial, pretending it's not bitter.

In the morning, I will forget.

I am the residue of divinity on your countertop,
Jealous of the shirt you left here because it still has a piece of you on it.
I needed a God the way some kids need a nightlight; even my prayers are rotting.

Do you have to ring me out and leave me to hang dry?

I will forget in the morning.

Deconstruct my spine and demystify the integrity of my soul.
I latch onto anything that will hold, even if it drags me over asphalt.
How can I translate you; not in memory but in belief?

You liked me better when I was a concept,
I liked you better when you were nice—we started putting socks on centipedes.

I can pick up your dry cleaning.
I can pick up your angry words when you smash them to the floor.
Ratify me in your livelihood; let me hold your permanence between my palms as I cup you
Like a handful of holy water.

It is morning: you forgot.

ART // STELLA MULLIN

THE GOLD ROOM

BY GUS FOLKERS

You are in a room.
It is lit orange by a chandelier in the middle, hanging over a glass table with wooden hooves as legs.
The walls are a dark brown oak with panel molding and gold detailing.
You imagine growing with the trees, in the sun, feeling its glowing blanket reward you.
You look outside and see the moon just coming up.
Its crescent glow illustrates just the edges of the landscape outside.
From the room, all you can see is the dark shapes of unknown trees,
Jagged rocks, glints of wet grass reaching for the sky.

You shiver at the unfamiliarity of the dark shapes, you compare them to the smooth edges of the room, the slick texture of polished oak, the warm velvet of the carpet under your feet.
You turn around.
There is a gray granite stone next to the glass table in the middle of the room.
That was easy, you think.

You knock on its rough texture, and it hinges open with a tectonic weight, revealing a room similar to the one you are in now. It is warm and airtight, you are surrounded by walls of engraved dark wood, and cornices sit along the upper edge where the walls meet the ceiling. A gold trim hides all of the otherwise dark details of the room, reflecting the orange light from that same chandelier hanging over the glass table.

The window is gone.
As is the door.
You sit in the stone examining your comfort.
You cannot see it but you know you are inside it.
You lie on the red couch.
Time passes and paintings are absorbed into the pale wall.

Sometimes they fall.
There is a dead body on the dining table in the stone.

An old man.
You panic.
You can smell its rotting teeth.
You are in a chair.
It faces the red couch.
It is a La-Z-Boy.
It is warm and airtight in the stone.
Never too warm.
You can smell its rotting teeth.
You never left the room.
It was cold outside.

ART // NATALIE RILEY

MERMERS

BY KRIS HAVLUCIYAN

As a cat I was born with nine lives. Typically, that means I get to be adventurous and explore the world I inhabit. I might catch small critters, meet other cats, and make a name for myself while living my lives to the full. However, that was not the case for me from the day I was adopted. A family of four took me in: a mother and father with their two boys. Just a wee orange kitten, but they were happy to have me. They named me Merlo, or if you really loved me, Mermers.

Each day of domestic bliss I would play, cuddle, eat, and sleep. A sweet cycle from which I never wanted to be removed. I had an older sister named Cleo. A white and grey cat who was far more reclusive; she was very possessive of the father in the family. Cleo showed me the wonders of sleeping under the master bed, peak comfort, quiet, dark. A dog came and went. A good boy who was replaced by two crazy huskies. They tried to nip and shove me as if I were a toy for them to play with. I retreated to my hideout under the bed when they grew too big for me to handle.

The two human boys were my favorite. They would let me snuggle on their beds while they played their games. On occasion they might scratch my chin and pet me—but only during game intermissions. The older boy brought a girl home to meet me when I was around eleven, after many of my lives had been lived. She may have been allergic, but she loved me just as much as the boys; sniffling and sneezing while she cuddled me as though I were her own precious cat. They all loved me. I was at home, at peace. Time passed.

My nine lives were calm.

At one point I began to grow weak. I couldn't close my eyes properly, and when I did they would stick together. I grew weaker, and the vet's medications no longer worked for me. I knew my time was up. I had used all my nine lives; but I was so grateful for each and every one of them. I had spent most of my time with the older son, who loved me best. He had claimed me as his; his Mermers, and the girl he had brought home all those years ago still fretted over me. She would call and see me over his phone, and he would send her photos. Sadly she was unable to visit me one last time.

I did not think my nine lives would go by so fast. To my humans, it was twenty years. Twenty years of being loved and cared for by the kindest family a cat could ask for.

Thank you.

With love, Mermers. ▲



ART// KRIS HAVLUCIYAN

KEATING'S LESSON

Oh Captain My Captain, what were you lacking?
Here, on the eve of sweet sixteen, you know.

Caused by your family's knowledge of what you lacked,
And the freedom of lacking evening plans.
Plans that formed from this lack of knowledge would form you.
Title cards and opening cinematics segue into narrative:
Adolescent educated men alienated from human desire
Idealized by their parents, educated on their passions,
No ending could ever haunt you more.

Medicine, law, business, and engineering are noble and necessary for life
Yet poetry, beauty, romance, and love are why we stay alive.

Carpe Diem, seize the day, tattooed into beliefs.
A modern cliche with a timeless moral.
Puck's monologue by Neil, tragic perfection.
Todd's class poetic breakthrough, utterly awestruck.
A kaleidoscope of life's expectations being subverted in two hours.
In comes your budding passion while the credits roll, a
Newfound life dream of writing, what they could never say.

ART // GUS FOLKERS

BY TORI PEARSON

WHITE SAGE

By Nicole De Beauchamp

Did you forget
When we would burn white sage
And pretend the smoke was spirits?
You breathed them in
And took their memories
And I watched you,
I miss the gap in your teeth
And the way you spoke.
When did you lose the glitter on your clothes
And the tinsel in your braids?
I still find glimmering specks
Between the floorboards
And under my nails.
I don't see you—
Unless I burn herbs
And pray on your diary,
Light candles
And let the wax sting my skin.

We used to dream of riding out West
In your father's jalopy.
Our hair static, our eyes wild
Past the noles
And the sacred Mississippi,
But we did what we could.
We found long sticks
And treaded through the thickets.
We stacked stones and caught fireflies in our palms.
Some nomads:
Eager to follow the diaspora of holy barbarians.

You sang with the hyenas
And I cried with the owls.
I studied you
As you walked ahead of me
And as you slept
Your jumbled word jazz,
A holy hymn.
You had thin wrists and a hard jaw,
I was rather humble—
A baby face and a big nose.
We both had pale legs,
They bruised easy.

But you ruined it—
You went mad one day
Behind the rusted barn,
And you smothered the calf.
A few more moments and it would have run
Amniotic fluid
Still coating the youngin's rough hair.
She wanted to run
You can understand that
Now the dream's over,
Are you happy?
Her eyes were scared
And yours were bloodshot.
You caught the redeye
And I went home—
I never left again.

Are you older now?
Or did you go to Venus?
Are you still morbid,
Collecting dead moths and eating roadkill?
How many ants did you step on today?
Pray to the snail whose shell you plundered.
Now spread your fingers farther,
They were once webbed.
Do you remember
You could breathe with the ocean back then?

ART // NOELANI HENSON

ART // STELLA MULLIN

Family Massacre

By sarah Baldwin

Every year,
Each November,
We come together to feast,
We join together in massacre.

Potatoes mashed to a pulp,
Turkey fisted with soggy bread,
Later we stuff these in our faces,
But first express gratitude for the bird being pre-dead.

We may not have killed the bird,
But mutilate it with herbs and butter,
Massaged between its skin and muscle,
Slowly roasted then carved on a silver platter.

Dark meat or light meat,
Thigh or breast,
This bit is too bloody,
But we'll eat the rest.

Once the turkey is picked apart,
Ravaged by civil vultures,
We begin to pick at each other,
It's our nature, it's in our culture.

Fueled by apple cider,
Doctored up with whiskey,
We throw jabs at each other,
Even Grandma gets bitchy.

The election,
The last bread roll,
An 18-year-old's new tattoo.

Microaggressions,
The liberal agenda,
Running out of booze.

We pick and we pick,
Till the bones are clean,
Till manners turn mean,
Till the table is a crime scene.

We give thanks for the food,
We give thanks for family,
It's the spirit of the holiday,
It incites pure insanity.

Today is a day of thanks,
It's in the name,
Today is a bloodbath,
Let's watch the game.

The Gift that Bought Itself

By Makana Carbonel-Mangus

Hollow reeds bending in any direction the crowd blows,
come to Hawaii—be something you've never seen but always known. People and bones share similar tones, akin in death,
we'll all sound local when the accents gone.
Prayer sounds like product in motion,
a cure through the Pacific Ocean, of palms cut in the winds of hegemonic devotion. It's pure emotion,
paradise don't struggle—the rent comes in waves of promotion.
To hell if we know—maybe if the coastline swallows up the ocean.
The hollow reeds hum what you want to hear—in slow motion. So I carried this hymn, forgot its sound,
Grew tall like sugarcane, and got cut back down.
My grandmothers pidgin still hides in my jaw.
When I laugh too hard, it escapes through the teeth of my urban patois.
But bleeding blue is easier when red's been framed as divine repair, white's what we were taught to need, Kamehameha's mistake,
mercy for prayer.
White sails of Union Jacks waving like our creed hollowed bare, None for us but all to share.
I'm the logo and the labor—paradise needs a new heir.
In the places the Spaniards taught the Paniolos,
Filipino hands are transgressed in the soil,
Hawaiian hands dressed with oil,
Portuguese tongues prayed through the boil,
mixing sweat with sweet, brown sugar—a holy broil.
Japanese backs bent neat like pineapple arrows,
Chinese hands never measured by width, but for how narrow.
They found our bones, but were too late for the marrow.

Puerto
Rican hearts learned how
hunger was sealed, I am the harvest of what
they could not yield.
Swap poi for plastic, kalua for spam,
yet the mortgage demands, *I am what I am.*
The palms of their labor sung psalms scratched through smoke, Kalakaua needn't be poked to be seen, nor seen to have spoke.
His vision stitched my bloodline, dividing the land and eachother. policy met pulse, the needle knew my color
Hershey's chocolate blended with melted butter,
mixed but never one another.
If I pass for something else, will my people still suffer?
A gift, they call me, *Makana,* but whose to give?
A nation annexed so another could live.
Do tariffs and taxation mean more when modernity is at ease? My body is a ledger, my home a lease,
each breath a border, each prayer a piece
Dreams are drowning brighter than a brown man's plight.
Drink stout, get gout or get out.
We measure heritage in decimals and grief, like culture on clearance, belief by lease.
Hawaiian land can't make a home or house.
Fifty percent on your phone,
Twenty percent on your blouse,
Thirty percent on the dream of being allowed.

One-hundred percent on an account,
Of being too scared to talk and too strong to leave and get out.
But if shame is to blame when my back turns against the profane,
I'll leave my people behind and be a color no one can name.

And I still hear Hawai'i like she's on the other line telling me,
"You left too early to call it mine." I tell her,
" I never left, I only moved between tides."

She laughs,
"You sound like the tourists do when they cry."

ART // AVERY KIGHTLINGER

LEAKING OUT

BY BROOKE FEYDER

My leaking heart wailed out a note or two—
My leaking eyes could hear it from here—
I am shrieking out of view.

There she was looking see-through—
Seeking hands emptied out her pockets—
I cannot get rid of the residue.

My leaking teeth chatted in the queue—
My leaking lungs longed for the quiet—
I am shrieking out of view.

There she was in her blue—
Seeking fingernails dragged at her skin—
I cannot get rid of the residue.

My leaking bones blinded by the untrue—
My leaking veins vanished at sea—
I am shrieking out of view.

There she was leaking out her deja vu—
Seeking feet sinking into melancholy—
I am sinking out of view.
I cannot relinquish the residue.

A Taste of Summer



ART // SOPHIA WU

Welcomed by familiar voices, I am handed a terracotta chalice containing a sticky, sweet surprise enriched with undetectable spices.

Her crown is bedazzled with warm-toned jewels whose taste linger on the lips.

Fruity, flirty, addictive; she has the power to seduce your taste buds.

Created from pure imagination, and a little hope, this dark, rich beauty turns any simple beverage into a candied narcotic.

She is more than just a spicy treat; she is a magnetic force bringing together the abstinent-minded and overconsumers, lovers who still argue about whose turn it is to take out the trash, or children anticipating their parents' gaze when they are creating mischief.

She is delectable, coating your mouth with her sweet venom.
She'll have you floating above the clouds.

And when she's gone, and she'll leave you reminiscing her memory like a past lover who left without a trace. She is simply *La Dulce Vida* personified.

By Paulina Medina

TO THE WORLD WE DREAM ABOUT -&-

By Hayley Wilson

Twist green to iron, roll downhill
at horsepower 1—70—10,000—

Rippling hills and plaited
crops microchip on takeoff—

You stretch fingers to the stars
but can't reach through smog—

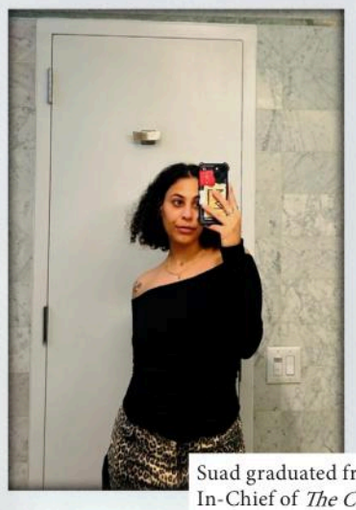
Birds twittle through trees, but
they'll stop if you dance—

Make marks on skin with
what once whittled wood
and clay—

Call steel embraces
support,
carve flowers in chains,
and call them home.

ART // NOELANI HENSON

CAT-ALUM



SUAD ABDOUN

Suad graduated from UCSB in 2023 with a degree in English Literature, and is a former Editor-In-Chief of *The Catalyst*. She currently lives in Los Angeles and works as a Collections Specialist at The Academy's Margaret Herrick Library. Suad thinks libraries and archives are the coolest and a very underappreciated resource. When she is not at work, you can find Suad at the gym, cooking an unnecessarily complicated meal, or attending American Cinematheque screenings at the Egyptian. She will always cherish her time in *The Catalyst* and misses the Catalyte community deeply.

THE GRIEF OF LOSING ONESELF

by Suad Abdoun



ART // NOELAN HENSON & EMILY O'BRIEN



It's 6:23 a.m. in Los Angeles, California, and the sun is rising and I don't know who I am.

All I can think about is morning skinny, and how people tell me I'm pretty, but I don't believe them, so fake it 'till you make it, I guess.

But when does it end?

I'm not her anymore.

The old me, that third-person severed persona of mine.

I can see her so clearly in the landfill of shrapnel where I left her.

I'm not sad that she's gone so much as I am sad that I'm presently…empty. I tore her away from me like a sticky skin, grimy film, guilty pleasure turned hollow sadness.

I'm glad she's gone, but she was something, and now I'm nothing, stuck in a limbo, the subliminal, so sometimes I dig parts of her out of the trash, but they don't fit anymore, and I'm left frustrated, waiting.

I stand in the violent chasm between day and night.

The mirror taunts me, "I'm a blank canvas," it says, watching me peel myself into thin strips, piece by piece.

Maybe some filler under the eyes, some Botox in the forehead, is that a grey hair? What if I was skinnier, prettier, my eyes further apart, my lips perfectly symmetrical? What if I was whiter than that 50%?

Bitch, get the fuck out of LA.

And I run from place to place, desperate to escape my own body, to claw myself out of the bile of a bitter mind.

But when do I stop running?

Because what if I move to another city and I take all of this with me, and it's always me.

I'll be lovable with the perfect face, and the perfect body, and the right clothes, and six figures, and when I never say the wrong thing and suddenly, I'm no longer a real person but my own fantasy so far removed from any humanity.

I despise it all, on days like these where a shitty $7 coffee and a cowboy killer are all that stand between me and the edge of the PCH.

I wonder what it's like to be content, to not hunger for the entire universe. It's 5:02 p.m. in Los Angeles, California, and the sun is setting and I don't know who I am. ▲



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ART // EMILY O'BRIEN

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Have a seat...



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