

THE CATALYST

CONTEMPORARY LITERARY ARTS MAGAZINE

ISSUE 38 // SPRING 2026



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LETTER^{FROM}THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

It would feel dishonest not to acknowledge the challenges of my final publication of *The Catalyst*, and the overwhelming weight, or self-imposed pressure to make this issue exceptional. I often saw its success or failure as a metric for how good, bad, or mediocre my presence serving as Editor-In-Chief had been. In retrospect, this notion feels twistedly vain in comparison to the contributions of every student, artist, and collaboration: as I have learned—it is the people who define the magazine.

Nonetheless, in these final weeks, I have struggled.

Feeling stuck in a liminal, transitory period is something not only I, but many of us are feeling. Fearful of the future, the “real” world and its contracts and clauses—the only constant for me throughout this quarter was my writer’s block, the belief that I had lost my creative edge. In these moments of uncertainty, I found myself feeling small and childish, wishing and praying, as kids are prone to do.

In these moments I look to my parents as heroes—keepers of knowledge—even though I am now entering 20 something-hood, a part of me will always remain a child searching for shared wisdom. And though my problems have become much larger, and my father has since passed, I often think about the motto attached to his memory, *Success is doing what you love*.

In this respect, I can rest easy as I pass on the torch, my love for *The Catalyst* ineffable, and with Issue 38, the belief that we have done something wonderful. The success of this magazine can be attributed to the creative hands who have partnered and contributed, those who love and embody *The Catalyst*:

To Michelle Zauner, author of *Crying in H Mart*, for bringing a shared space for grief and the inspiration for the *Love, Language* Interlude in this issue. It was a pleasure to meet and collaborate with you, and a special thanks to Sara Kelly from *UCSB Reads* for making this opportunity possible.

To the *Devereux String Quartet*, thank you for bridging music, writing, and art with the project, *Intone*—what a beautiful synergy. And to the writers, artists, designers, the young Shakespeare’s of the world, *“If music be the food of love, play on.”*

And on we play—with this creative collective, spring should remind us that even in the brightest of times, motivation is never guaranteed, but commitment remains—a quiet agreement with oneself: to *The Catalyst*, to art, and to the enduring purpose of instructing, delighting, and surprising.

Rooted in this commitment, I approached our spring aesthetic as an extension of Issue 37, playing on writing and art as a movement that can change the way people think, feel, or understand the world. Taking these principles, we shifted the narrative to focus on embodiment and the environment. How we navigate our natural world: the communities we inhabit, the cultures we share, the emotions we feel.

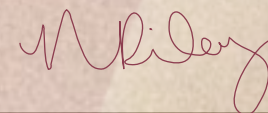
I intended for this issue to feel rich, organic, and authentic, thinking about how we are inspired by materials in our daily life, though initially, this perspective was nothing more than a skewed fantasy, focusing on the truly beautiful and idyllic: fractals, symmetry, and balance. But while sitting in on one of our student peer review groups, a poem about a plastic lawyer led me to formulate an honest version of “environment.”

In a world so filtered and curated, the questions began to surface more urgently: how do we distinguish between natural and artificial? How do consumers exist within nature itself? And what does it mean to inhabit a world we are constantly reshaping?

When you begin this journey through Issue 38, I ask you to think through these unknowns with us: to appreciate our art and writing for their idiosyncrasies, their organic progressions, and their imperfections—but most of all, the way they persist in making us ask questions.

And as you reach the end of these pages, I find myself at an ending of my own—my final words as Editor-In-Chief: migration is a rite of passage, but *The Catalyst* was a home, thank you for bringing me purpose.

Natalie Riley
Editor-In-Chief





DEVEREUX STRING QUARTET

X

CATALYST

ART // DAHLIA LAZICH

THE DEVEREUX QUARTET PRESENTS:

INTONE

I've always been in love with the way music can express emotion, story, and character. I think of music and literature as intertwined in similar ways as literature and visual art. This project is the fruit of our second year of collaborations with *The Catalyst* exploring the connections between the three.

For this year's project, we enlisted the help of our friends to compose and record eight pieces of original music to inspire the editorial staff's written works. The composers who participated have widely varying levels of experience: some with degrees in composition and others having written their first piece of music. I am so impressed with and grateful for their work; the pieces turned out as unique and creative as their composers.

Special thanks are due to Eli, Taylor, and Matt for beautifully recording eight pieces of music in one day, and to Bridget Boland as always for being an exceptional quartet director and spearheading the live performance aspect of the project. And many, many thanks to Natalie, Brian, Shaun, and every member of *The Catalyst* editorial staff for working with us on this in addition to their usual hefty workloads! I like to think that collaboration is our key to a more creative world.

With love,
Ellie Lim
DSQ

Performance videos of all eight pieces are available at devereuxquartet.com, or by following the QR codes on the corresponding pages.

ART // CALISTA DOLLAGA

Sophia Ahmad - “Water”

“Water” is a meditation on water as an ancient, living force, the quiet origin behind all life. Loosely inspired by Celtic folklore and fairy mythology, the piece imagines water as something sentient and mythic: a boundary between worlds, a keeper of memory, and a source of both creation and transformation. Through fluid motion and shifting textures, “Water” reflects the way water shapes landscapes and lives alike, always in motion, always enduring.

p. 22 The Great Egret

Srijani Bhattacharya - “Water is Life”

The writing process for this piece was very introspective for me. When I think of nature, the first thing that comes to mind is water. Water has miraculous properties that allow for life, and whether we are conscious of it or not, we are always surrounded by water. And thus, this piece became a kind of ode to water.

I am a student of North Indian classical music, where different scales (or ragas) have associations with times of day, seasons, and even emotions. One of my favorite ragas of all time is called Raga Malhar. Whenever I hear the sound of rain, my mind immediately goes to this raga. That sound is what also inspired this piece.

The opening is meant to be very simplistic. Each measure always has two half notes, and these are meant to feel like an inhale and an exhale. In the first half of the piece, these half notes continue and are played with one of my favorite melodic components in Raga Malhar. Even as the piece continues to build, the two half notes remain throughout the entirety of the piece.

At the half point of the piece, the cello begins to pluck a melody. I wanted to represent rain drops, and that is why I chose the pizzicato. I also decided that I wanted it to be a conversation between the instruments, rather than a solo for one instrument. Whenever you step outside and it is just beginning to rain, the rain falls unevenly on the ground. I wanted to create that feeling by showing these “raindrops” coming from multiple sources.

p. 60-61 Unsevered

Finn Christensen - “A Voice from the Tapestry”

Upon exploring the thematic visuals for this project, I was deeply reminded of the inseparability of humans from our environment. I began thinking about the permanence of the universe, and our ultimate union with it—no matter how much we attempt to distinguish ourselves, whether through art, philosophy, or the pursuits of life. The tapestry of the earth, and the broader universe containing it, is the namesake of this piece. One day, we will all fade into it.

As a musician, I have somewhat skeptical views on the nature of music. I believe generally that music was created by humans for human enrichment, and is a deeply cultural phenomenon, rather than a natural element of the universe. Still, this does not absolve human beings of being anything but vessels of nature, harnessing natural wonders to make our own art. So in a way, through our own temporary existence, the art and music we make is merely a “Voice from the Tapestry.” It emerges and recedes.

This is represented in the music by one simple theme, with limited variation, that emerges in multiple voices, the tenor, soprano, and alto voices of the cello, violin, and viola respectively. It repeatedly emerges against an ongoing tapestry of sound. It does its best to be lyrical and beautiful, but then goes away, as all things do. I thank the *Devereux Quartet* and *The Catalyst* for the opportunity to write this piece, and I hope you all enjoy and are moved by hearing it.

p. 42-43 Art Imitates Life Imitates Death

Ellie Lim - “To Warm My Shoulders”

“To Warm My Shoulders” is based on a fragment of a poem I wrote several years ago:

“I shift away from the encroaching shade.
Each time, a little more sun
Warms my shoulders.
Tiny infinitudes.”

The piece is built around a simple, bar-long motif, which shifts and evolves as the piece goes on. The slow and continual revolution of the repeating material coupled with the shifting rhythm beneath it is meant to evoke the inevitable movement of shadow and light around you as you sit still on a sunny day.

I wrote the piece using a loop pedal, hence its repetitive nature. A cool trick is, if you accidentally miscalculate how many beats to wait between loops, you end up with a repeating phrase that shifts a beat later each time it repeats...cue a famous Bob Ross quote.

p. 51 My Force of Nature

Ellie Lim - “Rocks!”

“Rocks!” was born first and foremost out of my desire to write a fiddle tune. This past fall, I moved from Goleta to Boulder, Colorado—right at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. Having been born and raised in California, everything in Colorado is a new experience, from the scale of the massive Flatirons in the distance to the types of music that dominate local venues (bluegrass is huge here).

In writing this piece, I tried to capture the setting of the Colorado landscape. The textures in the opening are meant to evoke images sliding into focus: the slow grind of mountains coming into being and the drama of their craggy peaks. As we move through the scene, we encounter a more human voice, perhaps the clamor and bustle of a campground.

Amidst the excitement of new experiences, however, I couldn’t resist ending the piece with something sweeter and more familiar: a lullaby in honor of the rolling hills and sunlit beaches of the state that will always feel like home.

p. 62-63 Stone Vaulted Heaven

Martin Panicacci - “At Shore”

“At Shore” started as a piece for solo cello; the cello part in the quartet, for the most part, was left untouched as I adapted the composition. Given the disjunct way this quartet came together, I feel that the cello part and the upper strings have come to serve distinct sonic purposes. As I had originally written the solo piece, the movements of the ocean informed me. I found it interesting to explore the contrast between its immediate repetitive nature and the ways in which it changes, or enacts change, over longer periods of time (tides, erosion, etc.). With the upper strings, I was able to insert myself into the composition. For me, the beach is an ideal place to sit and ponder; the repetition of the waves, almost meditative, softens me. With the additional parts, I hoped to illustrate the organic ways my thoughts spiral—the diverging, converging, and sometimes unpredictable motions—as I’m lulled by the sea.

p. 109 Edible

Derek Peng - “Caterpillars”

“Caterpillars” represents the lifecycle of a caterpillar, starting from its humble origins as a small worm on a leaf. Despite its humble origins, it continues to eat and grow, maturing into a properly sized insect. However, at its height, it abruptly stops itself and turns itself into a cocoon, a period of transformation and confusion. It is no longer a caterpillar, nor any being of specificity. It is unclear what the fate of the caterpillar will be, if you could even still call it that! Yet, in the face of such conflict and uncertainty, it emerges as a beautiful butterfly, flying out into the world to inspire the other caterpillars.

The theme of this piece was taken from a Vietnamese folk song my mother used to sing to me before bed. By doing so, I hoped to compare the life of a caterpillar to that of a human being, and how our pursuit of happiness in our life can be mirrored to the experience of growth, transformation, and emergence.

p. 72 Fields of White

Lillian Wechelt - “Thanatos”

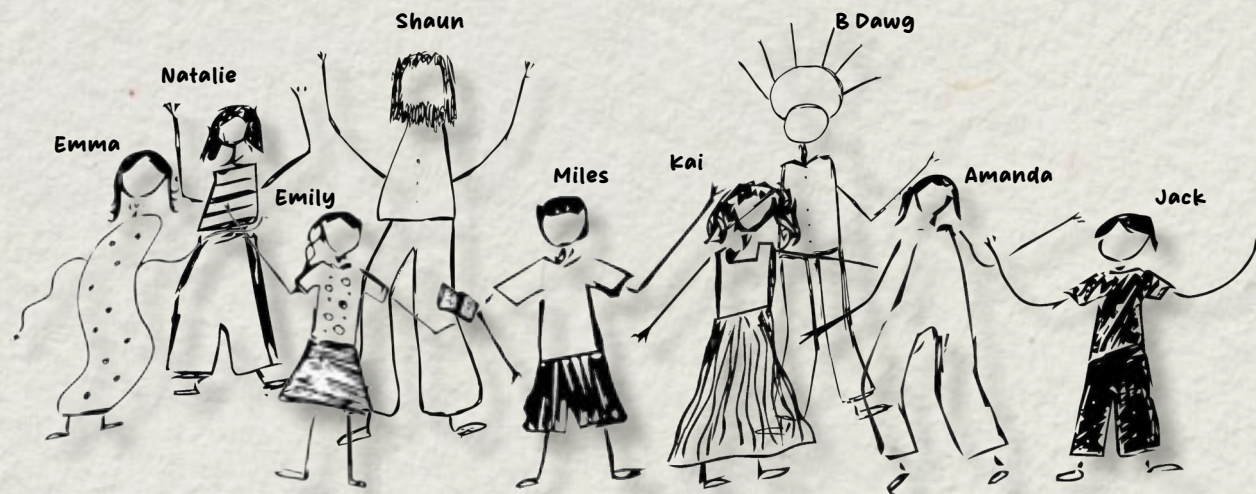
This piece is inspired by the natural parallels between patterns found in nature and those that shape human life. I decided each pitch by using the first seven numbers of the Fibonacci sequence, a mathematical phenomenon that appears repeatedly everywhere. Each number determines the intervalllic distance, in semitones, between successive pitches. For example, the opening pitches, C and C#, are separated by one semitone, reflecting the first number in the sequence. The sequence occurs throughout the entire piece, either in the melody or the supporting lines. Because the Fibonacci sequence often appears as a spiral, I created a sense of circular motion in the pizzicato section. The repeating gestures have a continuous, swirling feeling. Writing for string quartet allows me to experiment with various textures while maintaining a smooth, blended sound. This makes it an ideal ensemble for turning these natural, interrelated patterns into music.

Collaborating with the *Devereux String Quartet* has been extremely meaningful. It enables me to develop ideas with my peers in real-time. This process of trying new things and discussing them not only shapes my music but also pushes me to explore beyond comfortable methods, using new sounds, techniques, and ways of creating music collectively.

p. 54 Chondrichthyes Regis

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ART // NATALIE RILEY & MILES TRACHTENBERG



ART

16 Love Language
Akela Craig (she/her)

18 Fission
Amelia Lagna (she/her)

20 Matcha Stain
Natalie Riley (she/her)

22 The Middling Egret
Ryan Downing
(he/they)

23 Bleeding Flowers
Dia Kai Singh (they/she)

24 Sunbaked Shoreline
Aliana Hermann-
Campana (she/they)

26 The Importance of a
Best Friend
Ashley Reckers
(she/her)

28 Flying Colors
Lily Avery (she/her)

30 Superstition in
Summer Air
Ari Semsarha (she/her)

32 Forest Animal
Tori Pearson (she/her)
& Jaesa Verdaguer
(she/her)

34 My Friend, Bridget
Emma Chastain
(she/her)

36 Mr. & Mrs.
Casamigos
Natalie Riley (she/her)

38 Trash Bubble
Rio Blackshaw-McKee
(he/they)

39 Refuse
Rowan Riggs (it/its)

40 Atrium
Jack Buschow (any/all)

42 Garden Where the
Grass Grows
Anna Ngo (she/her)

43 EAT YO
FLOWERS!
Emily and Co.

44 The Pesky Adonises
Taylor Alice (she/her) &
Amanda Rossiter
(she/her)

48 Two Lips
Katrina Drury (she/her)

49 Feijoa Blossom
Brian Donnelly (he/him)

50 Famous Legs
Emma and Co.

51 Computer City
Emily O'Brien (she/her)

52 Caught in a Net
Natalie Gray (she/her)



ART

- 54 Blue World
Jack Buschow (any/all) &
Piper Flaherty (she/her)
- 55 Crimson Spire
Miles Trachtenberg (he/him)
- 56 Walking Home
Noelani Henson (she/her)
- 58 A Cool Staircase
Miles Trachtenberg (he/him)
- 60 THIS IS FOLSOM LAKE
Emily O'Brien (she/her)
- 62 The Web of Creation
Dahlia Lazich (she/her)
- 63 Layers of Becoming
Lily Avery (she/her) & Sarah Baldwin
(she/her)
- 64 Outlook
Taylor Alice (she/her)
- 66 Ink Sails
Miles Trachtenberg (he/him)
- 67 Bird-To-G
Emma Chastain (she/her)

- 68 En Face
Sophie Jetzer Gagneux (she/her)
- 69 Catepillar Drive
Emma Chastain (she/her)
- 70 Deeply Rooted
Rowan Riggs (it/its)
- 71 The Scream
Sarah Baldwin (she/her)
- 72 Guggenheim Staircase
Miles Trachtenberg (he/him)
- 73 Walter Mitty
Liam Baker (he/him)
- 74 Warhol in Vegas
Roisin Casey (she/her)
- 75 Fuck it, We Bald
Gus Folkers (he/him)
- 77 Pheetotype
Miles & Co.
- 78 Fix your Heart
Natalie Riley (she/her)

- 79 *Mexico*
Natalie Riley (she/her)
- 80 Autobahn
Natalie Riley (she/her)
- 81 Bright Sky
Thomas Iannacone (he/him)
- 82 Always Shotgun
Emily O'Brien (she/her)
- 83 Stone Wash
Harim Choe (he/him)
- 85 Unseasonal
Miles Trachtenberg (he/him)
- 86 There is no Eye in Ocean
Yogita Sharma (she/her) &
Dia Kai Singh (they/she)
- 88 Ophi and I
Yogita Sharma (she/her)
- 90 The Color Violet
Sehej Pawar (he/him)
- 92 Found Alaska
Sean P. McQuill (he/him)
& Mia Hirsch (she/her)

- 93 Hundred Teeth
Ryan Downing (he/they)
- 94 Teef!
Calista Dollaga (she/her)
- 97 Arirang
Kaci An (she/her) & Natalie Riley
(she/her)
- 98 From my Butt
Christian Solorio (he/him)
- 100 Polonius
Olivia Bievenue (she/they)
- 102 Miles Debut
Miles & Co.
- 103 Alphabet Soup
Charlotte Davis (she/her)
- 105 Dinner of Champions
Nicole Aguirre (she/her)
- 106 The Eyes Around Us
Sean P. McQuill (he/him)
- 109 Red Light Poultry
Amanda Rossiter (she/her)
- 110 Not IG
Ashley Carranza (she/her)

CREATIVE PROSE

20 The Proper Technique
Jade Corona (she/her)

23 On the Topic of Roots:
Natalie Riley (she/her)

26 A Personal Essay in the Defense
of Sand
Emily O'Brien (she/her)

30 Tonight, Los Angeles:
Tomorrow, Beirut
Ophelia Hamze (she/her)

32 Mythical
Tori Pearson (she/her)

44 When I Became a Man
Ripley Baker (he/him)

51 My Force of Nature
Emily O'Brien (she/her)

52 Convenience
Natalie Gray (she/her)

55 Fire Horse
Jada Bailey (she/her)

64 Un-Wall Me
Kalvin M. Madsen (he/him)

70 Faith Blooming
Rio Blackshaw-McKee (he/they)

71 Hear Me Out
Sarah Baldwin (she/her)

80 Young Father Blue
Thomas Iannacone (he/him)

82 The Vinyl Under Your Feet
Keylaan Edwards (she/her)

84 A Tree of Beers
Miles Trachtenberg (he/him)

94 Forgive Me Dentist, For I Have
Sinned!
Calista Dollaga (she/her)

104 Smile Please
Nicole Aguirre (she/her)

106 The Evil Eye
Sean P. McQuill (he/him)

110 Easy
Iraa Guleria (she/her)

POETRY

18 Fission
Amelia Lagna (she/her)

22 The Great Egret,
Natalie Riley (she/her)

24 Moral Hygiene and
Gunpowder Showers
Dia Kai Singh (they/she)

28 Hello! My Name Is: _ _ _
Momo Ouk (she/her)

34 Twin Fish
Emma Chastain (she/her)

38 Heap
Rowan Riggs (it/its)

40 Pedro Biscay
Matteo Shahar (he/him)

42 Art Imitates Life Imitates
Death
Dia Kai Singh (they/she)

48 Mother, I Might Be
Katrina Drury (she/her)

50 High Ground
Lily Avery (she/her)

54 Chondrichthyes Regis
Jack Buschow (any/all)

56 Walking Home
Claire Trask (she/her)

58 Death Takes My Holiday
Emma Bogna (she/her)

60 Unsevered
Amanda Rossiter (she/her)

62 Stone Vaulted Heaven
Shaun Nowicki (they/he)

66 The Adriatic
Finn Buggy (he/him)

67 Flock Tones, 2
alice f. z. (she/her)

68 En Face
Sophie Jetzer Gagneux
(she/her)

69 Monarch Butterfly
Joshua Minjarez (he/him)

72 Fields of White
Miles Trachtenberg (he/him)

73 Please, Pick Up the Phone
Liam Baker (he/him)

74 Harry Reid
Roisin Casey (she/her)

75 Slide Tackle
Gus Folkers (he/him)

76 Runing Towards Sunlight
Taylor Alice (she/her)

78 Blue Rose
Roy Cohen (he/him)

79. Surface Tension
Brooke Feyder (she/her)

83 God's Children
Paul Way-Henthorne (he/him)

86 My Shoes Have Souls
Stella Mullin (she/her)

88 a work in progress
Yogita Sharma (she/her)

90 Yes Mom, I'm Going Out
With My Friends
Sehej Pawar (he/him)

92 Learn to Run (on
Abandoning America)
Henry Patrick Coburn
(he/him)

93 She's Entropy
Jack Buschow (any/all)

97 Zone of J
Kaci An (she/her)

98 Elephant Shit
Christian Solorio (he/him)

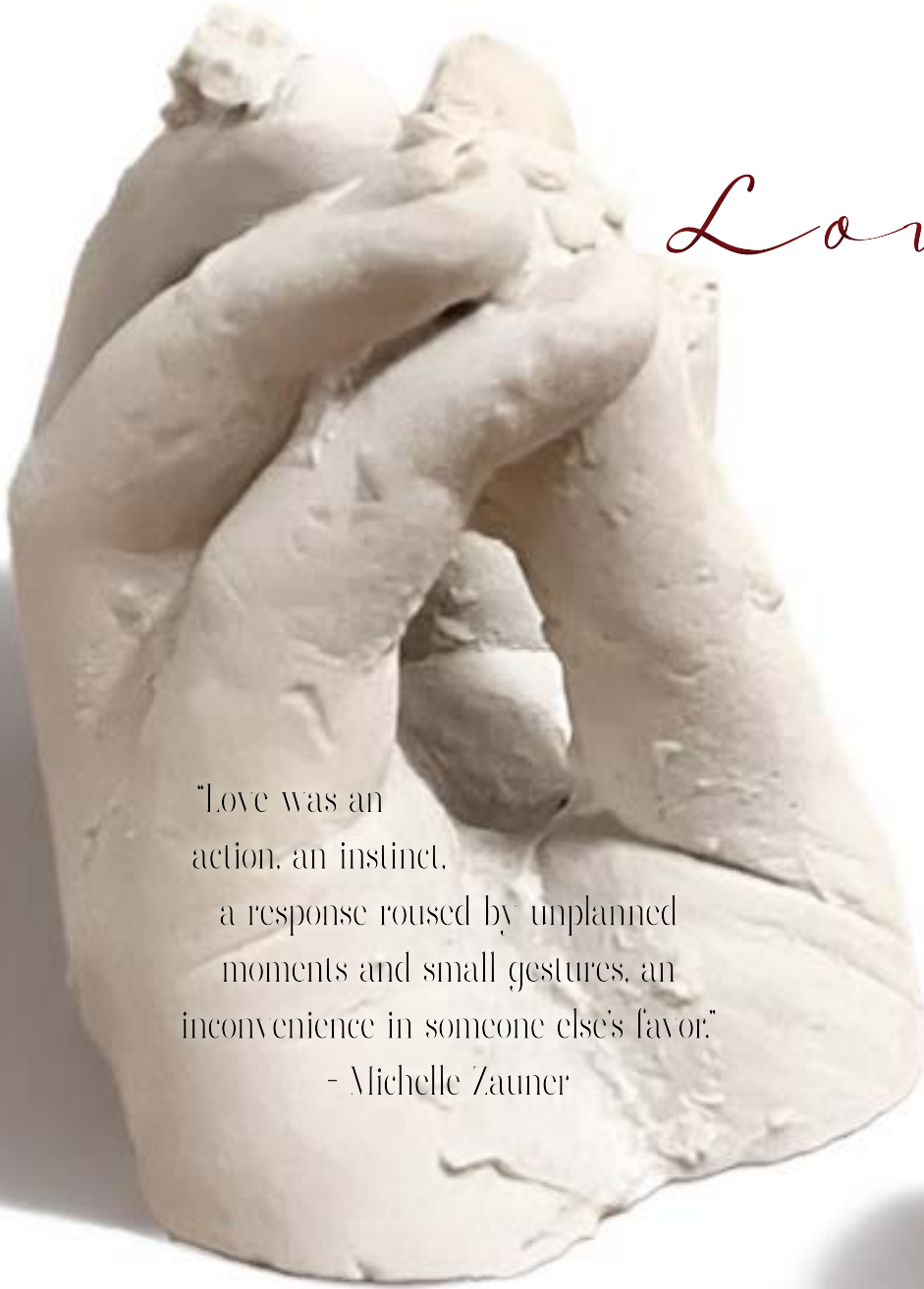
100 Lived In
Allison Upton (she/her)

102 Clear Blurs
Jeovany Tzilin-Gomez (he/him)

103 Language Speaks to Feeling
Charlotte Davis (she/her)

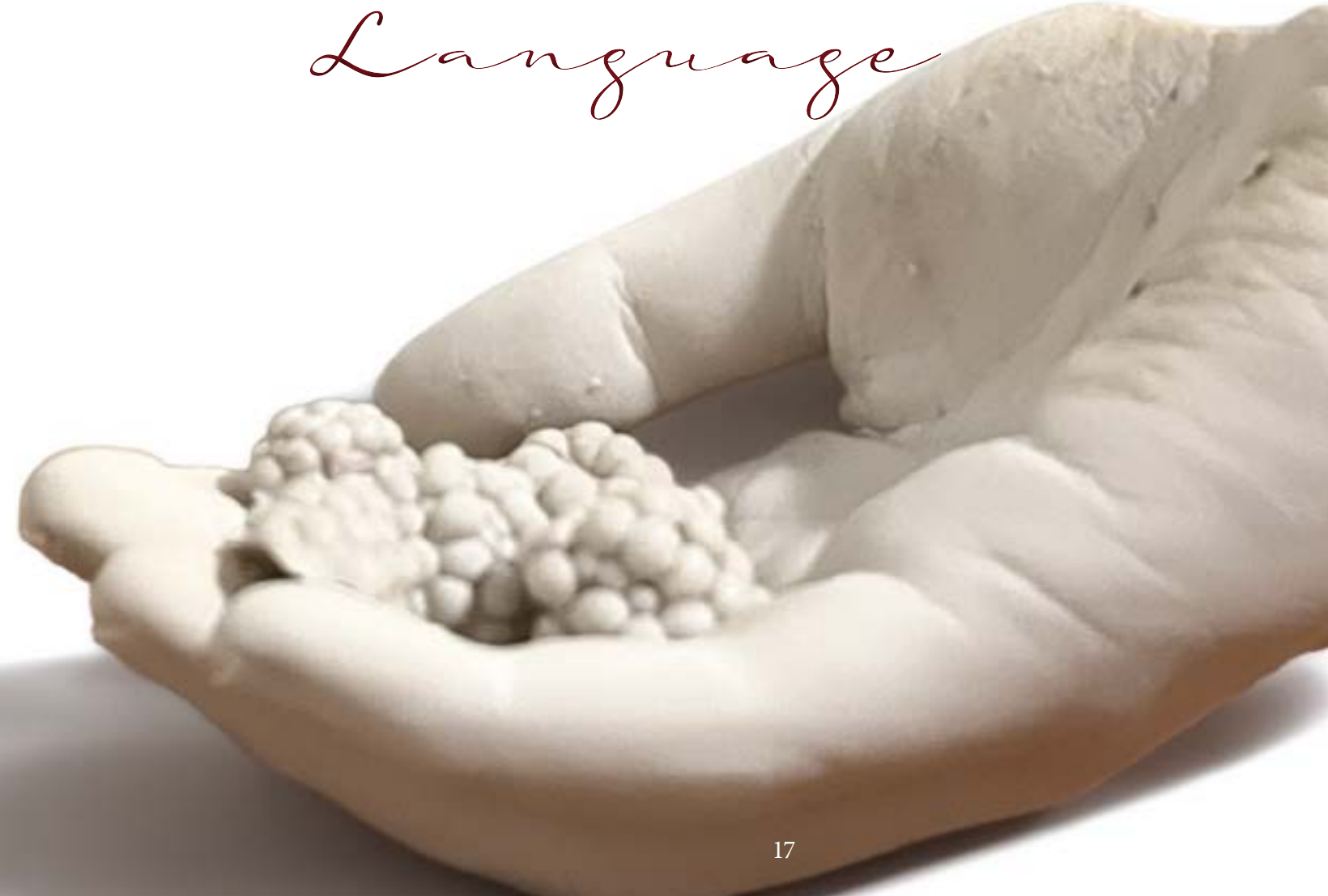
109 Edible
Emma Chastain (she/her)

*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

A clay sculpture of a hand holding a heart. The hand is formed from a single piece of clay, with fingers curled around a heart shape. The heart is also made of clay and has a small, dark, circular mark in the center. The entire sculpture is made of light-colored clay and has a rough, textured surface.

Love,

Language

A clay sculpture of a hand holding a cluster of grapes. The hand is formed from a single piece of clay, with fingers curled around a cluster of small, round grapes. The grapes are also made of clay and have a textured surface. The entire sculpture is made of light-colored clay and has a rough, textured surface.

"Love was an
action, an instinct,
a response roused by unplanned
moments and small gestures, an
inconvenience in someone else's favor."
- Michelle Zauner

Writing after Michelle Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*

FISSION

BY AMELIA LAGNA

YOUR BIRTH WAS THE FIRST TIME YOU LEFT

Your birth was the first time you left.
Creator, destroyer, we pretend she is not one god.
Every mother is a killer, every daughter is too.
Her body cocked and you, gentle bullet, flew.

My grandmother, spore of a mushroom cloud,
took her first breath in smoke.
The men told us the atom could never be split—
What did they know of divide?

I asked what it was like once,
girlhood and war.
My mother translated between us
And answered plain:
There were no sweets.

Finally pregnant, my grandmother
held her only child like water in her hands,
and brought my vessel into the world gasping,
and wailing her first word, more.

More was across the Atlantic,
double deep-fried,
billowing over subway grates.
More had light eyes, a tall nose,
rolled his r's.

So, on the same day as my grandmother,
66 years later,
I, too, was born,
shrieking, incoherent,
brandishing a name she could not pronounce.

They carried me home in steady arms
And on the window there landed a paper
crane
Which promised all my wishes would come
true.

Indeed I was a good American, a perfect
stranger.
I grew up with cavities, selfies, 808 drums,
boredom.

My mother, only God I have known,
Beheld a creature she could no longer
translate,
and for the first time, there was no room for
more.

Why she never taught us Japanese
I couldn't understand.
I took classes as a teenager to compensate—
I can admit now it never stuck.
But I remember the first kanji we learned,
the teacher at the board,
And my eager pen to blank paper;
She dictated,

This is mother: 母.
Two figures in a room,
reaching,
and the final stroke—
One slash between them.

ART // AMELIA LAGNA

The Proper Technique

By Jade Corona

Outside Senso-ji, red lanterns hang overhead, glowing even in the daylight. Crowds move in every direction; they come from every place. The smell of burning sandalwood drifts outwards; the air feels magnetic.

Stalls are lined along the walkway; most of the vendors sell souvenirs and streetfoods. She enters a small but ornate tea shop; she purchases matcha inside a sealed paper bag. She cannot read the ingredients written in Japanese. The owner of the shop has a knowing smile as they hand back the receipt. This makes her uneasy, though she cannot say why. She walks away from the temple past the Ichiago Daifuku stand, where perfectly curated strawberries sit atop pillowy mochi, all under shiny plastic.

She walks carefully, taking in her surroundings; the noise slowly begins to fade. A pine tree catches her eye, the glossy green needles are sharp between her fingers. Their scent is earthy. Everything growing near was planted with intention, always maintained, manicured.

At her apartment, she sifts the powder twice, measuring the water with precision. She whisks it until a few bubbles form on the surface. After watching several tutorials, all she can see are her mistakes, mocking her from the jade green chawan.

Humiliated, she begins the process again. At first, it is still proper technique, gentle circles, wrist loose, as if she is painting the surface of the ceramic in swift strokes. She aims for perfection and consistency.

The movement suddenly quickens.

The bamboo whisk taps the ceramic edge. Clack.
Her knuckles white.

The green sludge splatters.
She only tightens her grip.
Her wrist begins to ache.

Left to right, left to right. Aggressive motions of “M” from the instructions she read.

The matcha foam is patchy, uneven.

She leans closer to see her reflection.
Green and menacing, watching from the other side, taunting her.

She starts again, faster this time.

The bowl clatters against the counter.
Clack. Clack. Clack.

A frantic rhythm. The ache climbs up her wrist, and shakes.

Her breaths become shallow,
Inhale.Exhale.Inhale.Exhale.

Yet, she continues to feverishly whisk.

Stopping would be admitting failure, admitting that it will never be perfect.

And then, like a bullet.
The realization hits right to her core.
There will be no finished latte; the moment will not cease.
Only repetition, the same motion continuing.

An endless loop.

The worst part is not that she can't stop.
It is that nothing inside her wants to.▲

The Great Egret,



White plume stripped bare—

It is a winding journey when the days are longer, years shorter,
And though you can't add days to your life, you can add life to your days:

What a privilege it is to fly.

Flocking through the silver hours of morning,
And through earth's hum, the singing of cicadas beat to Spring's bloom,
The horizon calling to the winds of East—softly she answers:

Change is coming.

And as the Egret perches, long and lithe, feathers composed,
The valley stiffens, listening to her ruffled breath—moss-filled lungs sifting the surface.
And through the wayward marshes, her tall arms billowing in
harmony:

There is nothing left for you.

White plume stripped bare—The Great
Egret croons:

Who will I become?



ART // RYAN DOWNING

By Natalie Riley

As sweat builds at the base of my bra, I survey the bones of my 10x10 room, the Santa Barbara heat beginning to bite. Summer has come unexpectedly early and the house built in the 70s begins to swell. The wooden doors jammed and floorboards cracked, a home I must transport four-years into cardboard boxes.

Reaching for the packing tape at the corner of my desk, I glance at the plant I purchased at the start of college. Striated and proud, a taut little thing; I dragged my mom to a nursery explaining that I needed to ground myself. Four years in the making: tender care, summers of plant-sitters, and winters of re-potting, I stare at its green foliage. What once was two petals, a humble arrangement of six, some bitten and mishapen, some waxed and sturdy—once insignificant, now a breathing life I whisper to,

"What a strong plant you are."

Its roots coiling deep, simplicity standing like bedrock beneath the world. Small and silent, I study its composition, its every fiber. From growth and regeneration, dried leaflets make way to new bulbs, tiny veins running east to west...I stop myself. Surveying my empty room, a fractal of absence, each corner echoing the last, my focus returns once more to the plant. I begin to question the permanence of roots. Pillars of becoming, I have never given them much thought. But perhaps roots are more fundamental than people think, like dirt-packed hollows, or fisted hands racking at something ancient.

How God told Adam, *"from dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return."* Perhaps roots are organic, perhaps they are biology itself: inheritance, birth rights and declarations, like I belong to you, and you to I, though the operative word belonging—maybe roots are ancestral—something I was never taught to read.

And on the topic of roots, what do they mean? What do they matter when it's a place you can't remember: can't touch, feel, or smell? When it is a place you've only read about—small, unimportant, invisible on most maps—what rights can one claim from a province in central China, an amalgamation of tongue-tied words and inflections. A language learned, a language lost.

In every sense of the word, uprooting is something unbidden, unthinking, yet mourned—like worn tissue cut raw. Clinging to the stories of who you were as a child though they don't begin at birth. A cascade of identity, disrupted and confused, then a sudden ache catching fire in what could have been, traditions never practiced—I am a recursive omission. Echoes of a child who cried for home, reaching out, grasping for familiarity on the streets of Asia—a woman characteristically similar—black hair, folded eyes, and a flat nose...

On the topic of roots—ripped-up-roots are guttural. Ripped-up-roots: the word *adopted* sealed above your head and a \$30,000 government bond attached to your name. Ripped-up-roots are abandonment, like a punch to the stomach, or like the last kid to be picked at recess. It feels like the stares at carpool when both your parents are white, or the fear when roll call comes around—

Fear that en-jambled between America and America is a Chinese face.▲

On the Topic of Roots:

ART // DIA KAI SINGH

MORAL HYGIENE AND GUNPOWDER SHOWERS

BY DIA KAI SINGH

I.
Sometimes, you have to be disgusting to feel clean.
Like throwing up after throwing back sixteen shots on your sixteenth birthday
to make sure you don't wake up hungover,
Or eviscerating your bowels after a nauseatingly heavy meal of steamed chicken and broccoli.

But how do you purge after binging philosophical Twinkies?
There are no fingers long enough to shove down your throat and reach your soul.
Goodness knows the bile burns like bible-wrapped joints.

Mama, do you think I will be reincarnated as a cockroach
Because I prayed to the porcelain gods more often than I prayed at temple?

II.
Sometimes, you have to be disgusting to feel pristine.
Like waking up covered in someone else's spit, and a stranger in your clothes;
wearing your matted hair and your sweat-soaked skin.
Ready, unready, unready, and then ready again.

Am I molding because I've been out of the freezer for too long?
The ground beef bought on clearance has been four days in the fridge—
Maybe soon I'll feel like cooking it.

Father, have your salt tears become indistinguishable from the sea mineral spray,
The ocean wave nightmares you've passed down to me?

III.
Sometimes, you have to be clean to feel disgusting.
Like sinking your lotioned hands into dirty dishwater,
scrub-scrub-scrubbing away burnt-egg deposits on stainless steel,
Or being covered in sticky dust after you finally sweep the halls of your grief-brick cave.

Can you mourn a part of yourself that hasn't (yet) died?
I won't have to be sober if I am never not drunk,
But the liquor is getting harder to stomach.

Mama, did you know that when you were pregnant with me, You were also pregnant
with your grandchildren; Ambition and Regret?

IV.
Sometimes, you have to feel disgusting to be pure.
Days pass since the shower has seen you naked,
But the water is polyethylene,
so you decide to drop plastic instead of glass; at least the shards are easier to clean.

How many cigarette butts pour out of the rusted piping in a peeling bathroom?
When my friend smokes, she jokes that she'll eat the filters
so she can beat the Pacific in nicotine addiction.

Father, do you see yourself in my reflective pieces,
and shatter them further so you can escape yourself?

V.
You just have to feel to be.
The past is a bullet nestled in the sinews of time,
and surrounding it with stem cells keeps it stable enough
to only throb sometimes.

Am I to limp through life,
With the knowledge that a pistol shot at me in 1951?
The dull ache is almost bearable when I laugh.

Father, does the same lead leech into you,
that seeps into me?

VI.
Mama, is this what you meant when
you talked about growing pains?
That growing up doesn't mean growing out,
but growing around;
adjusting your gait and learning how to walk again?
Mama, if I am able to bite the casings off,
limp towards the artillery,
And swallow the gun,
Will I be more metal than me?
Or is that the sacrifice I have to make,
In order to be?

By Emily O'Brien

A Personal Essay

in the Defense of sand

Everyone is always complaining about how sand gets everywhere—it's the universal caveat to beach enjoyment. I would like to oppose this enmity and present a stirring defense of the sand; of the grains that stick to your fingers like glue, swirling up and down the ocean damp-parts of your body, whispering sinister things about dirt and disease—filthy, filthy, filthy. But, imagine one day that the ocean was cleared of its sand, that an angry man out there—somewhere, someday—determined that the sand was no longer economically efficient and stripped the beaches of it, large empty caverns where the multi-colored grains used to sit.

This hypothetical is not as absurd as you might believe. The United States Government has already claimed ownership of the airspace above us, what's stopping them from moving to the sand between our toes? And even if you don't think it sounds absurd, let's say you're intimately aware of the politics of ownership we talk through, maybe you don't think it's a bad thing. Maybe, you secretly think, it's the same necessary evil as when an Amazon package comes to your house, a mere four hours after you ordered. Ethically dubious, but overall worthwhile. A beach without sand sounds like a California dream come true, the stuff Katy Perry might wail about. You could leave the beach a fantasy. Let's set the scene: clear blue skies. 75 degrees Fahrenheit, UV at peak 9, slim tanned bodies diving between waves—effortlessly cutting through ocean currents. This is the type of grace you dream of at 14 and lanky, 14 with corn off the cob stuck in the wire of your braces, 14 and wanting more. The more: sun-kissed and ocean-warmed and and and beautiful. These beautiful, gleaming bodies arise majestically from the ocean, gliding out as if from a dream. No clunky beach bag clutched between sweaty armpits, no traces of sunscreen smeared on the bridges of noses, and no sand stuck in awkward places. Stripped of memory, stripped of existence.

The sand unfortunately placed in the sweaty caverns of pits and the hairy depths of ass-cheeks is more than an inconvenience, it is the record of that time a wave tumbled through you; when your limbs were scrambled furiously with the pounding ferocity of a force larger than you. And you bore the brunt of that force, praying for salvation, praying to be washed anew: born again, but beautiful. This is a vision foiled by the persistence of sand, its determination to crawl into your gaping holes—the human body has more holes than you might think—and declare itself home. It sticks as persistently as that humiliation from that one time you, eleven years old and arrogant, leaped into the ocean without a care in the world and emerged bottomless. It fuses itself into clumps of hair and makes a mess on shower floors never letting you forget where you've been.

Trouble with grains of sand, they're harder to hold onto than you might think—easy to scoop large sopping wet clumps of it—but much harder to make sense of. Easy to buy one Krispy Kreme donut on Friday to stick in the microwave for fifteen seconds, just like my *Ba Ngoai* would tuck that one glazed donut into her purse, and bring it home after work. She, my *Ong Ngoai*, my mom and my aunt would watch the donut spin for those fifteen seconds in the microwave and split the steaming dough, glaze sliding off its rounded cliffs the way a sandcastle tumbles in on itself when faced with the waves, using two delicate fingers to enjoy the dessert. Easy to buy a donut for myself and eat it, harder to know what it would've been like to drive to Krispy Kreme with her. If she would break too hard at a stop light, prefer to pull into a parking spot nose first or back in, if she would turn the keys out of the ignition or unbuckle her seatbelt first.

If I could have one dream career, it would be to make gods out of people out of sand. I could get a lot done. I would use the tan-brown material to make a five feet tall statue—five feet would be a bit of a stretch but we can all wink and pretend that it was true. I would make a version of her not yet crumpled by chemo, with legs firm enough to stand unflinching on a boat for three days and three nights, no food and no water, sure enough that leaving *Việt Nam* was the only option. This sandcastle would not fold. My version of her would have the delicate swoop of dark hair that rests behind pale ears and caresses clear glasses, not the version of her with a rotating carousel of hats and wigs. A version of her that craved the earthy sweetness of *mì vịt tiềm* and not Carl's Jr. fried zucchini. The wrists would be small, not crafted from memory but made exact to scale from the jade bracelets I can't get to slide over the joint of my thumb. If parts of my sand statue would crumble, as sand is predisposed to do, I would take some of that Carl's Jr. fried zucchini and carve her face back in, placing the greasy mangled vegetables into the divots of her eyes. I would spend hours at that sandfront, letting the water lap at my feet, as I made and remade her. If I try hard enough, I'm bound to get it right. Right?

Back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. Just like the tide of the ocean, just like my dad ran up and down the stairs when I was born. My mom: in the maternity ward. My *Ba Ngoai*: in the cancer ward. Up and down he would travel, rhythmic motions, bringing pictures of me for her to look at.

Memory sticks like sand to damp legs. It crawls into corners of the wooden floor and makes homes out of the creases of bedsheets. A sandless world isn't as perfect as you might think, it's a world in absence, the outline of a sketch too uncertain to be filled in.▲

Hello, my name is Momo!
or Morgan
or Morykuntarith
or Mo for short.
It's always a different name nowadays...

i am ashamed
to be ashamed that i
do not have a name that belongs
in a hall of fame—

a name that induces
a phonetic hesitation,
that triggers
a mild dysphagia
in the mouth of another.

i am embarrassed to say
that any semblance of my name
presents as discomfort:
a foreign body lodged
in the throat,
glottal constriction,
a refusal of passage.

each attempt
a misfire of the tongue.
lingual resistance,
syllables collapsing
under unfamiliar weight unsung.

i watch them perform
oral triage.
truncating, sanitizing,
offering me back something
clinically adjacent
but not quite right.

and yet—

i am not ashamed,
that my name is singular.
thirteen letters. syllables: five.
a full breath capacity
of something unfamiliar.

there is history in me:
etiology rooted in blood,
in migration,
in a lineage that predates
their inability to pronounce me
with love.

but even as i carry pride
like a secondary spine—

why does my body still respond
as if under evaluation?
why does my name feel like
a diagnosis
with no clear baseline—

a condition
of partial translation,
inherited adaptation,
loss disguised as accessibility?

reading my name now,
or however it shall go,
whatever the nurses or teachers
or the wider known world shall hear,
Hello, my name is Momo...
look like hook
or oak like tree—

my father's legacy
softened by my mother's mouth,
but altered:

romanized.

a careful intervention.
a transliteration meant to reduce
linguistic friction,
to make me more legible
to an american tongue.

and still—

even within my own
khmer inheritance,
my name registers as unfamiliar,
as if i am a mistranslation
of myself.

a deviation from origin.
a phonetic compromising composition.

something almost correct,
but not quite
home.

maybe i am ashamed
that i exist
in this in-between—

not fully mispronounced,
not fully remembered.
not convenient
for the anglo-saxon mouth,
not entirely recognized by my own.

ART // LILY AVERY

HELLO!

MY
NAME

IS: ———

By Momo Ouk

Tonight, Los Angeles; Tomorrow, Beirut

As Told By Ophelia Hamze

Way back when in Lebanon, there was an American-born girl asking her mother to give her two braids instead of one. She was hoping that asking for two would mean sitting in her mother's lap just a little while longer, staring out the window at their neighbors' house. In Lebanon, far away from the cities, there are villages nestled into the cedar forests. There, everyone builds their own house, each family decides exactly what brick should go where; and the little girl had noticed that these neighbors had a particular affinity for birds. So it was that their rooftop was purposely built to mimic the branches of a tree, with each stoop stretching up and out, welcoming anything that may come; begging for good luck.

The second braid was almost complete when they heard the damning, territorial "hoo." Her mother's hands froze, surely just as excited to see the owl sitting on the neighbors rooftop as her daughter was. And there indeed it was, perched right above the evil eye that her neighbors had meticulously carved into the stones. A bright blue ward against all the danger in the world. A big orange-eyed owl sat right on their roof. The American girl's smile cut through her face, excited to be meeting a new friend with such a calm voice; but behind her, the second braid had fallen loose, her mother's hand clamped over her mouth as if she was trapping the fear inside herself.

A brief interlude on superstition: *the owl as wisdom. The owl as Athena, goddess of strategy, of war. The owl as doom, as fear, as a white-faced prophet. The owl as a looking glass. The owl as a theory, a woman, a creation myth. The owl as metaphysics, a messenger, a sign. The owl as night, leyl, nýchta.*

"Look Mama, an owl!" She says,
but she never gets a response.

Her mother silently finishes the second braid.

ART // ARI SEMSARHA

Right now in the city of Los Angeles, 17 years later, I sit in my bedroom in my family's apartment. No bricks here, no cedars, only a window that faces the pale wall of another apartment building and reminders of monotony, the greatest creation in American history: sameness, the copy-paste tool. No blue-eyed wards here either, and nothing to ward from. Many things have changed since I was that child in Lebanon. My mother has stopped doing my hair, but I haven't stopped wearing the two braids. I have a sister now who I can constantly hear through the thin walls, insistently blasting the same early 2000s emo I did when I was 18. And I've learned a lot about owls. You see, I've become a real *American* girl, science over feelings and all of that. Superstitions from back home blow into me like a bullet underwater.

Last night, there was an owl outside my window, though initially I had confused it for a body falling from the roof; shrieking as if it had seen a ghost. The walls of my room glowed eerily white; suffocated with all the posters of those same 2000s emo bands I had pierced into them 6 years ago. The owl felt closer than it usually is, its "hoo" shaking my bones like a rattlesnake. The sound was so holistic, all encompassing, there was no way to tell where it was coming from at all.

Most nights, the "hoo" is an echo. It comes through with a delay, the way thunder claps for the lightning only after it's burned a hole into the ground. But these "hoo"s sang directly into my ear, not a second too late, like the lightning itself. I all but run to the window, scouring the windowsills and praying I see the familiar brown wings, pale face, and yellow eyes.

I pride myself on being so reasonable, so...*western*. I know that there's no such thing as an evil eye; I know that showering at night isn't going to bring ghosts into my house; I know that an owl is just an owl is just an owl is just an owl. So when I go to my window and find that I can't see this owl anywhere, I can't explain the cold shock that envelops me. I realize two things: firstly, the owl is choking. It's once calming "hoo" coming in as a gurgle of something that should be so natural being wasted on something as mangled as *a prophecy*. Secondly, the owl is directly above me.

A brief callback to superstition: *the most important thing to know about owls is that they are not vultures. They do not eat death. They do not rely on death. Not here at least, not in America.*

Right now, in California, there is a Beiruti girl listening to her mother and sister argue over what time is too late to be listening to Panic! at the Disco, and thinking *It's just an Owl. It's Just an Owl. It's Just An Owl*. But she knows that even the West has its superstitions.

In America, they would tell you to watch for when the vultures come, but where I'm from, when an owl sits on the roof of your house, someone inside is about to die.

Who? Who? Who?▲

MYTHICAL

The cow embodies an investment in wealth: you can't get the milk for free.

A horse represents the trajectory of careers: get bucked off, get back on, steady yourself and ride it out.

The lamb of love possesses purely natural flaws: teeth bite, legs flee, voice screams raw.

Then the monkey is the baby figure, for it will outgrow youth quickly: adolescence turns to abandonment.

And the lion embodies pride, but with its absence comes loss of assurance: the self given up first.

The dragon is the oldest and wisest of them all, knowing when to conserve strength and when to display raw dominance over the realm. The divot of each smooth scale holds as many scars as stories.

A phoenix rises from the ashes, fueled by pure resilience. Natural fire contains embers which persist deep within. Wings of flame a beacon through the skies.

The unicorn radiates supernatural power effortlessly in a glow. Beauty is subconscious, purity the rarest of powers.

Then the jackalope is ground down to the fibers of DNA. A masterful balance of physicality is maintained with frail ferocity and miniscule mightiness.

Faith grips the seams of them all together. Without devotion to a belief in what can never be proven, the aura of magic fades into oblivion. Admired with wonder in passing, yet jaded with doubt into obscurity.▲

BY TORI PEARSON

Twin Fish

By Emma Chastain

My mother's god
sold her skinny for sunday.
He gave her beautiful blue-blind eyes,
to freeze out the faithless
finding the sum of
tax breaks and free school lunches
in the verses and books.

What's worse is
crooks took her promiscuous
and told her
Look how

Motherhood becomes
a woman scorned.
An unbecoming of personhood
that teaches the workhorse
how to replenish the
Workforce.

But I've come upon a deadhorse
in her hopechest
next to her tambourine and leotard
and hair scarves that
show how alike we are.

In the struggle to find where
Pisces ends and generations change
there's popped blood vessels
and whores and cinematic
origins for names
we can't read
because the page is stained
by shame

and less than one
day where
wilted candles
are passed down and reused,
my wish, smoking
yours out.

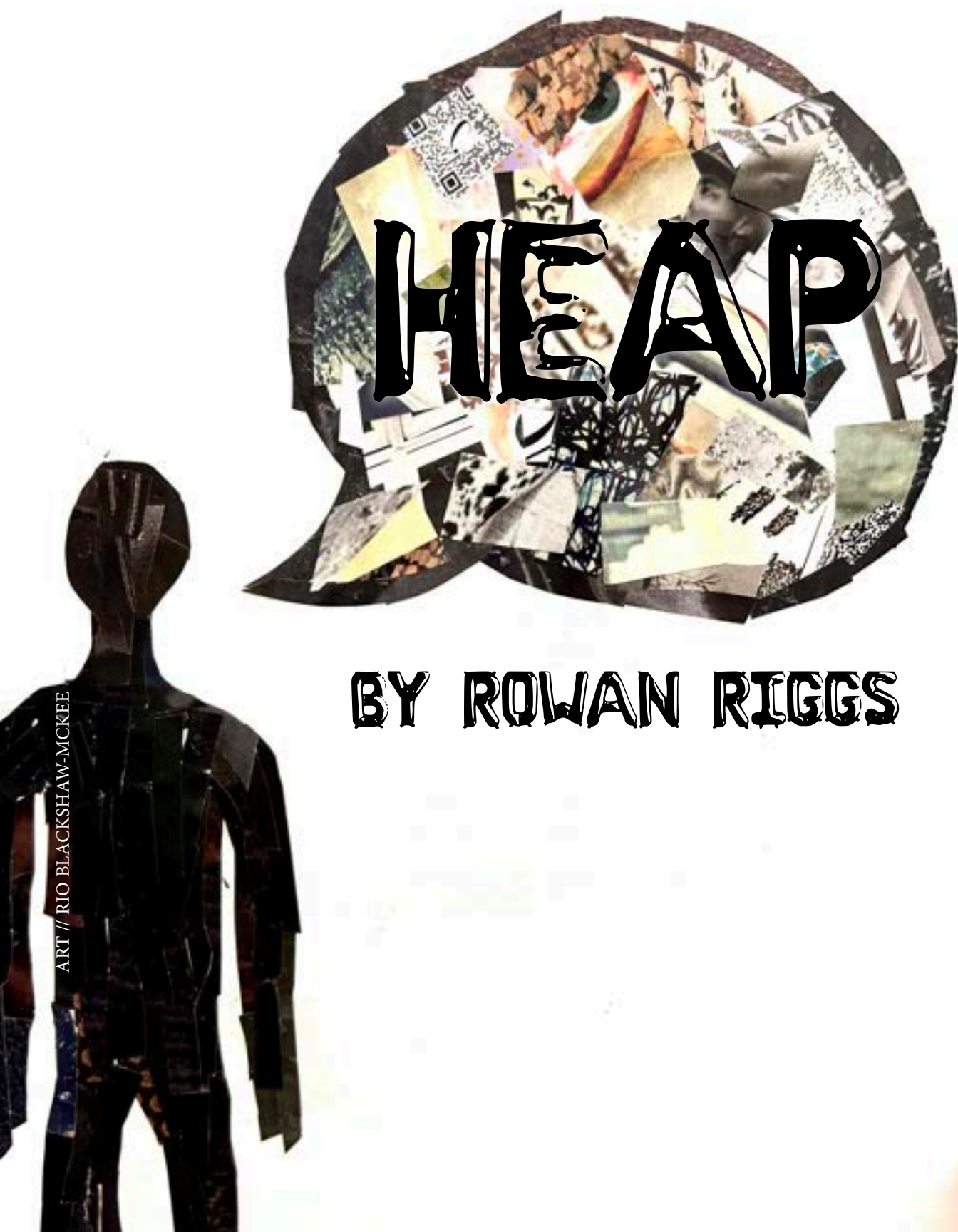
I take
the twin fish
that tattoo your love handle.
I switch
the one that's you
and
the one that's me
so you can't witch me
anymore
or ignore that there's
more

or less

than that day.



"In fact, she was both my first and second words: Umma, then
Mom. I called to her in two languages."
- Michelle Zauner



ART // RIO BLACKSHAW-MCKEE

HEAP

BY ROWAN RIGGS

ART // ROWAN RIGGS

Wine-stained crumpled up red cups,
half-smoked, all smashed cigarettes,
and balled greasy fast food wrappers.
Trash is temporary and your joy
is fleeting, so buy another blind-box toy.
Your shelves are full, but don't you fret,
there's always more room at the dump.

Put every piece in poorly sorted piles
and abandon it all to never touch
again,
yearning for the happiness it once
brought,
now nothing more than a nest
for rats.

Rotten neon sludge
and rainbow oil
dripping into the sea,
set to boil
slipping down for
more room
at the dump.

Garbage stacks that rival
skyscrapers,
our tower of Babel for God to
forsake.
Space is scarce, so send it
skyward or ship out to
foreign acres:
pressure the poorest
people off their
pastures,
or plan the Pacific trash
patch for your tropical
paradise—
but don't stop buying,
we'll do anything
for more room at the
dump.





ART // JACK BUSCHOW

PEDRO BISCAI XAN SHAHAR BY MATTEO

*Pedro Biscay is conducting terror in my bathroom.
Pedro Biscay is formalizing my filth.*

I trace the paths that call to be traced; I revel at the infinitesimal moments of discovery in conversation. This is, of course, to confirm my conversing. I do.
I do converse—I'll let that be first, guessing there's worse.

So, yes: I trace and tread and place my faith in the fjords of Our face. And, inevitably, I ask: "Have you been visited? Visited by a small man—a man about this tall (and here I gesture to them)? A man named Pedro Biscay? Has he visited you? Has he called?"

And as I wait I slice ginger and sing—
and tell silent stories of every patient eyeball interred in each frozen waterfall.

Though, really, I can already know which way the wind blows—blowing from the first (and knowing what's worse). I can already know, already say, because I am visited by P. Biscay.

In my periphery, he's stood by me: 'neath countless highways, beckoned by endless, ravenous halls.
In my infancy, he's played with me: drumming clamshell rhythms under the guise of Rimbaud.
We've gambled up the Gorge and ambled down the Avenue, lugging secret recipes of the great chef: Count Janou.

From the tops of trains Pedro gives lunchtime sermons, jumping and humping and shouting and purring:
"We are all fixed in the matrix of the world! Cast forth, cast forth!
Tumble and hurl!"
(I can't help but sweat and sob and pull at my ears, jeering down at passing ostrich auctioneers).

I trudge and heave like the Night Chimney, and call out: "En garde, Sir Buzzard!, we are unrestrained—the fresh pheasant quiche replete in our veins
& saintly ragged sorrows can no longer borrow;
I leave old decisions in their desert-mountain reunions."

Then—A Great Unravelling!
I lose the mark of the Seven Djinn's for questioning my sins.

and Pedro—well, Pedro leaves, for a little while.
He has gone, clad in argyle, down roads where ideas lie prostrate upon the earth that birthed them.

Then—Tumultuous Latency, Tantalizing Litany come careening for my unfrothed expectancy. They've gotten me sick and gotten me weary.

HMPH, PUFF, GRMF.....

No more Big, I will be Small. No more flouncing and sweat—ensconced now in bees, it's best I sit:

After I trace (for I've traced enough), and after I tread (is there bread enough?), and after I cry (is the sky the stuff?), I begin to smile (because They often do) and know that there is nothing left to know and no one left to bruise.

Spin me a story, stolid and self-affixed!—don't spare no details, girl!, of the ways of Yourworld.

Pedro Biscay, back from track & train, kicks off his boots, and I do the same. Outside, the weather makes clear I have nowhere to go, nowhere for to steer, and somehow, wonderfully, no way to complain.

I pinch and mold Ears out of red clay and prop them up to listen.

ART IMITATES LIFE LIFE IMITATES DEATH



ART // EMILY & CO.

History wasn't written by us,
And yet, I feel tears pricking my cheeks,
—Like deepening nails—when I view it pass
me by.

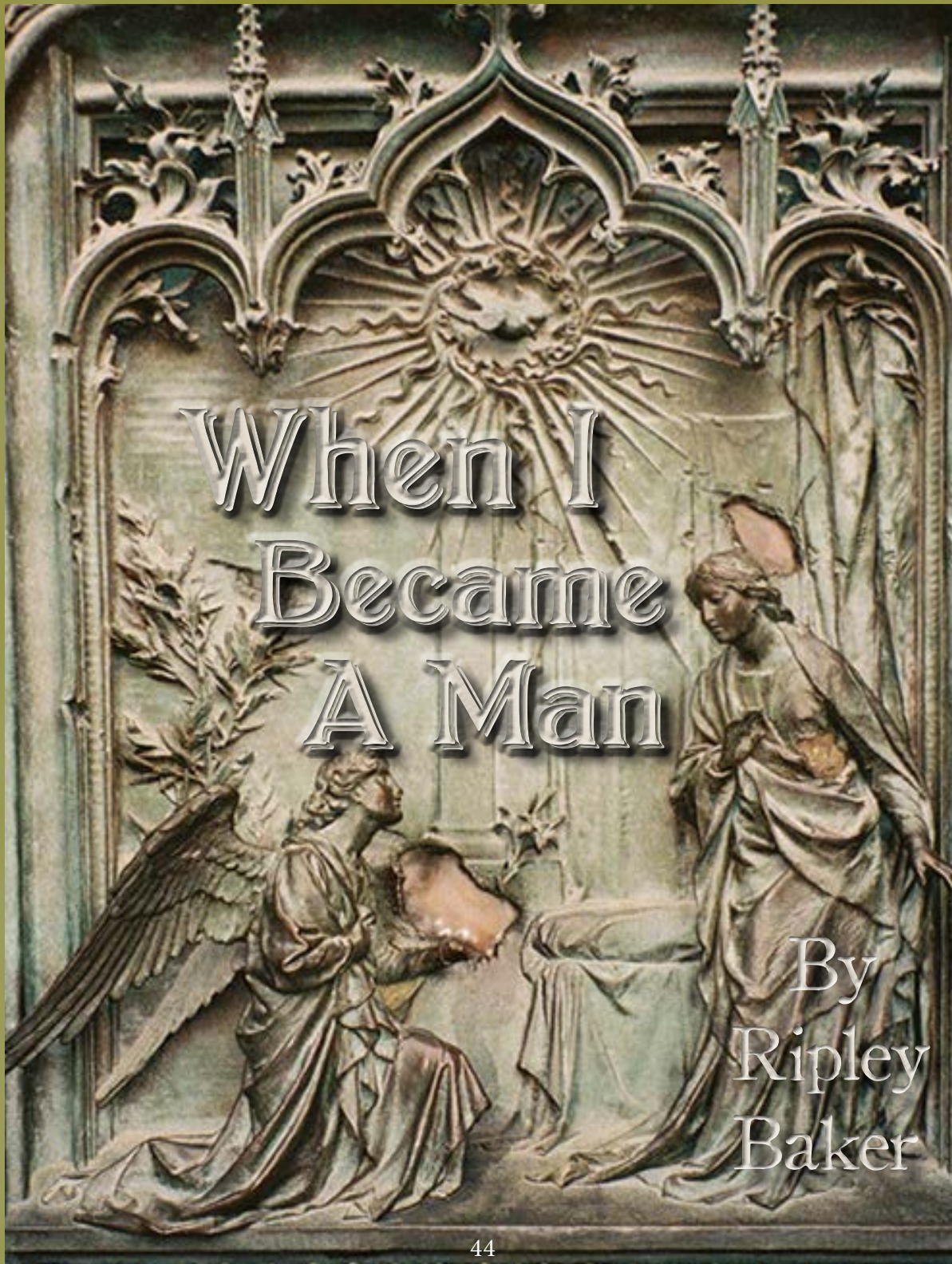
I listen to the reincarnated sounds of
centuries past,
And I wonder if the creator knew
what would
become of their legacy.
Will I be remembered?
Will my words look as foreign and
shapely to others?

History wasn't
written by you, or I,
But I see it repeated
in our breathless dances,
our hushed conversations,
our intimate decisions.

I take my skin and I make a monument;
a monolith of the past everlasting.
I look at love and I see it
in the works of those who
cannot understand my existence
as anything other than
divine or demonic.

I am the history I too cannot
understand, but maybe I can
resurrect it with graveyard dirt
and my tree-root blood.

By
Dia Kai Singh



When I was ten years old, I stood before the congregation of our small-town church. I wore a cheap dress with a flower print on it. I was glad the dress was ugly—it would have been unbearable for anyone to notice or comment on it. I took the microphone, drew a deep breath, and gave a perfect recitation of First Corinthians, Chapter Thirteen.

The chapter about love.

The pastor's wife presented me with a prize: a beautiful, gold-plated crucifix. When I got home, I laid it reverently in my dresser drawer, next to my white cotton socks. I never wore it.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

I was raised in a family of strong, pragmatic women. I will be thankful for this until the day I die. The habits and idiosyncrasies of my mother and my four sisters shape all my earliest memories, the contours of my sense of self. And so, I do not exaggerate when I say my childhood was almost entirely defined in and by the language of women.

It was my mother who taught us, early and well, how to work hard, to stretch a dollar, to clean a bathroom or care for a skinned knee, to ride a bike and drive a car. How to hold out a helping hand, and to take one when offered, and needed. At no point did it occur to us that our moral education was anything other than common sense—it simply wouldn't have occurred to any of us NOT to take care of one another, to protect and help one another if we could. We loved one another. It was a cornerstone of our identity.

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

But I have always had a strange relationship with womanhood.

You see, my mother raised five daughters. But only four of them turned out to be girls.

If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

It is a strange thing, to be a boy raised as a girl. A boy whose whole life is defined by the strong women surrounding him and yet to know, even in childhood, he isn't one of them—even if his body looks the same. If my mother and my sisters, such strong and important parts of my life, were content with the fact of being female, then why couldn't I be too? How ashamed, how confused they would be, if they knew what I was.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Having had the misfortune of being raised Evangelical, I had no idea that people like me could even exist. Not really. "Wicked lifestyles" adults declared with pursed lips and disapproving faces, at the faintest whisper of queerness. Evil. Demon. Rejecting God's plan.

Somehow, deep down, I knew they were talking about me—even though they never did.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

How very evil I must be, I thought, to wish for a boyhood that God had clearly not intended. How ugly, how ungrateful, how wicked. I had no words, then, to describe myself—I could not be a demon, since I hadn't yet been condemned to Hell. But I needed words.

So I settled on one from the Book of Revelation: the unnatural beast, made of fragmented parts of those that were once whole. That which ought not to be, a creature that God will smite in the end times:

(CHIMERA)

I decided I was being tested, tempted like Jesus in the desert, and must bend and break my will toward begging His forgiveness, seeking His redemption. My sisters would sometimes make fun of my piety, my obsession, and they were right—with my perfect grades, my haughty recitation of scripture, my loud disdain for makeup, lip gloss, jewelry, I was the poster child for being a perfect little Christian girl. “She’s going places,” adults would confidently say. And I would smile, and not correct them. They thought one of those places was heaven. I knew better.

I don’t blame my sisters for being exasperated at such performances—but such performances were never inspired by the reasons they thought. I never thought I was better than them. No; somewhere between the small hours of the dawn, and sickness in the pit of my stomach, I knew—despite all my labors—that I would never be better. That I was so, so much worse.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

Part of the current, prevailing moral panic around trans childrens’ non/existence centers on whether we were somehow pressured into it, inappropriately socialized into a delusion. I am living proof this is not so. There were few, hardly any male role models in my life, and none from my family. I never knew my grandfathers, nor their sons. My father was around for awhile, I suppose, but not really present. I would have liked to look up to him; but even then, I saw little worth emulating. I have no brothers.

For now we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

This is not a story about failure. I did not fail at being a woman. This is a story about a boy whose church taught him a violent and ugly lesson about love, about its conditionality and its absence, when he was far too young to understand himself as anything but a monster. This is a story about a boy who tried very hard to be a girl, because he was taught that God could only ever love her, no matter how much or how sincerely the boy prayed. No matter who he tried to be, what he was was an abomination in God’s eye.

But those patronizing, pious adults never knew how much blood they’d drawn. I never let them see. I learned early, and well, how to hide.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish things behind me.

But there was something else those patronizing, pious adults never understood. Another, older lesson I’d learned a long time ago, about love, about its unconditionality, its presence, when I was far too young to even read words on a page or understand concepts like wicked or evil.

I was raised in a family of strong, pragmatic women. We loved one another. It was a cornerstone of our identity. And this was a foundation laid far deeper than the hateful prison walls the world had convinced me to erect around myself.

For now we see but a poor reflection, as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.



ART // TAYLOR ALICE & AMANDA ROSSITER

It took me years to remember, to accept that self I knew as a child. It took many more for me to take steps toward enacting it. But I was suffocating behind those prison walls; and, even if they crushed me when they fell, I could no longer live within their embrace. I have rarely been so afraid as when I came out to my mother and sisters—if God couldn’t love me, how could they?

But those strong, pragmatic women, whose habits and idiosyncrasies had shaped my earliest memories and the contours of my sense of self, loved me still. They embraced their long-unknown brother, their prodigal son. I do not exaggerate when I say my childhood—my boyhood—was almost entirely defined in and by the language of women.

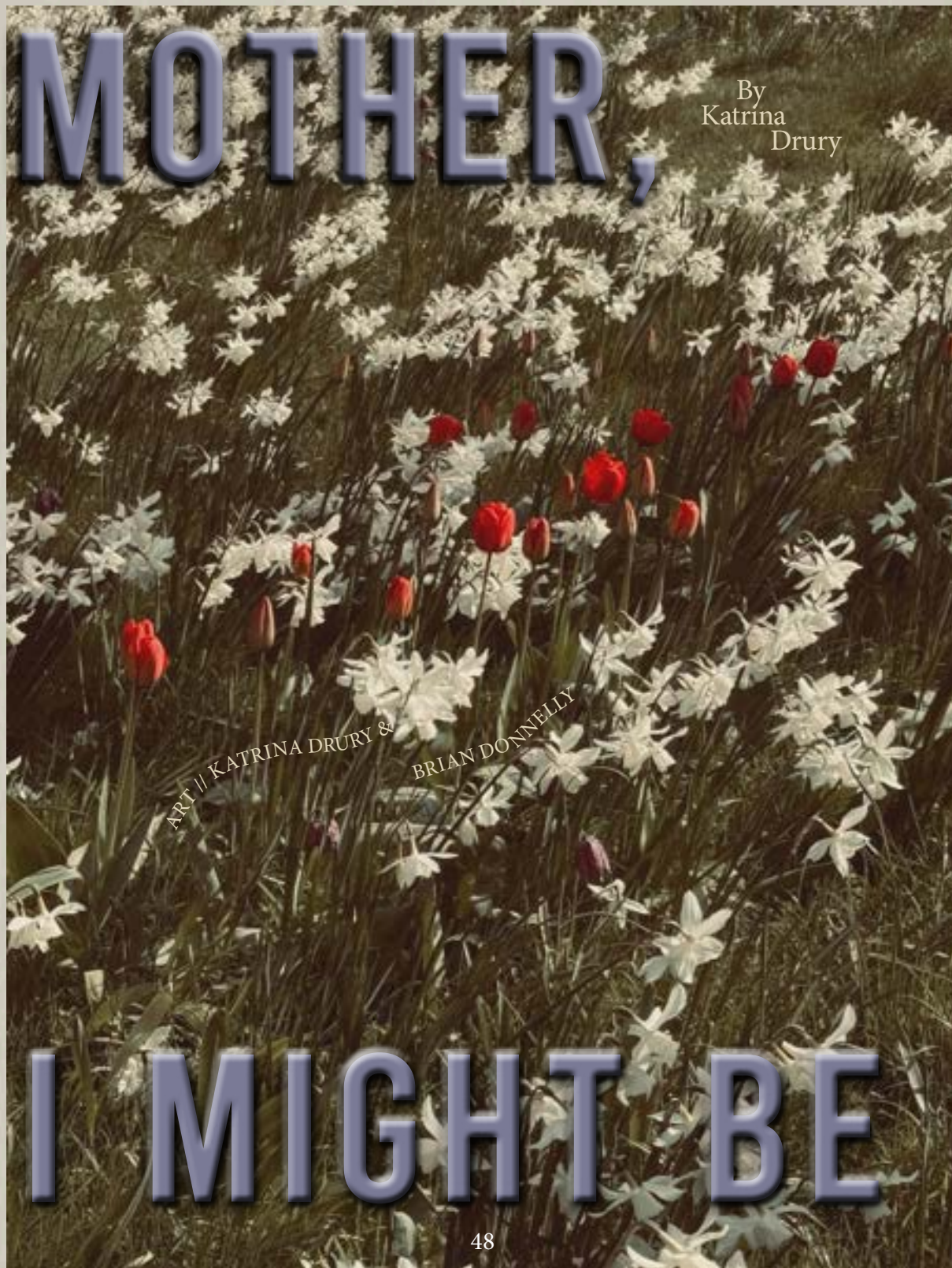
*And now these three
remain:
faith, hope and love.
But the greatest of
these is love.*

I do not know whether or not God makes mistakes.

I no longer believe in God. But I still believe in the words I spoke, a lifetime ago.

When I remember those words, they don’t belong to Him.

They belong to the women who caught me when I Fell.▲



It was a recipe on wasp-eaten paper—
my grandmother's old-school calligraphy
on a dusty box in the garage—
that did what a mirror never could.
I saw myself di s s o l v i n g
slowly,
held together by the grace of packing tape,
grown and in the garden,
already withered,
yet awaiting
the unfurling
of something still
foetal.

This gash in the field
that every mother taught their daughter
to wash out with cold water, detergent-dried hands,
tracing the same paths from umbilical memory,
divots in the hardwood floors
paced between my bedroom and yours
and back, saying,
My little love, my little love,
the painful plea pressed
burning,
into my psyche,
Don't hurt my child.
to which I thought:
Mother, forgive me,
I might be
already.

Just living leather embossed
by learned hands, scuffed
by carelessness, sun-weathered
and stretching with use,
expanding
to hold the whole of you,
as your love, like blood, seeped forever
into the growing puddle of me.

All I could promise day to day
was one more
rotation
around the
drain
before I let myself slip away,
caught in the warm-water caress,
and the knee jerk promise of *I love you*
said on a single breath, practised,
though we meant it no less.

Digested and in the wasps' nest,
you waded out to meet me
when I couldn't crawl back to you
on land. A rain away
from the wasp-eaten fate,
our words stamped like
bootprints
on hills that were behind us;
telling me
you love me, you're worried,
you just want me to be happy—
till birthed a new day, when:
Mother, I smiled,
Mother, I might be.

HIGH GROUND

trees gently bleed,
bark roughly blinks,
extend your layered limbs,
to my failing feet.
drip your tear to
cleanse me,
don't clean me.

rain, crown my head,
purify my body in the sea,
hear my plea,
to the burning bush that speaks
the lamb that softly bleats.
salvation not in the sky
but on hardened surface.
among each wilted petal,
within each splinter of soil,
packed between my calloused toes
anoint me with your oil.

cleanse my soul,
don't clean my soles.
for they carry the dirt i stomp on,
earth i trod on,
heaven i'm called upon.

BY LILY ANERY

MY FORCE OF NATURE

BY EMILY O'BRIEN

There are things trembling in the grass, the world is waiting with bated breath. It's creation myth removed from its mythos—it's your teeth pulling apart the atom. Nuclear fission, origin story: your mouth.

But this is the end of the story, not the beginning. This is what is told after the fact: in the After—that moment in the future which is defined by the present. Things are made to be rebuilt, tear it down then remake it all the same, just slightly shifted to the left. In the present, there is me. Toes curling into the trembling grass, swaying like a nose before it's broken.

The sun spills out from your teeth the first time we meet, I wondered what it would feel like on my shoulders, I imagine(d) the soft flesh would sing. I'd never stop wanting to find out. The second time we meet, you bend down to grab a ladybug out of the cool blades of grass and press(ed) it behind my ears. The soft beating of its wings beneath the thin of my skull stays with me for a while. I wonder if it made me lucky, makes me lucky like a penny. The third time we meet, there is something flickering in your form, like the long swoop of a reed before its spine bends towards the water. Total immersion: a mirage of the self, fragmented through the water. You took me to the lake the third time that we met. You clutched in your smooth palms a handful of pennies, and we took turns tossing them into the water, exclaiming with delight each time the water rippled outwards—concentric circles futilely reaching horizontally. Mirages are easier to step on that way.

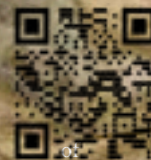
The second time that we met, I ate four almonds—one for each of the gray strands prematurely appearing in your hair—and drank a cup of ginger tea—prepped for digestion. You snatch a ladybug from the ground, wrapping its slender body between your long fingers as it thrashed futilely

against the cage of flesh. When you thrust it upon my ear—always making sure it's our burden, never just yours—I couldn't help laughing as it pushed itself off to freedom; journey: the gap between my ear and scalp, up and outwards, to the great unknown. My lucky girl, creating freedom in the twists and bends of your fingers.

My force of nature, the first time we met, the sun slunk out from your teeth, restless to roam unbound. It filled up the sky and its ferocity settled on my shoulders. In the After: there is you. There you are. Your teeth tumbling out and reborn again as blades of grass and the long greys of your hairs plucked and turned horizontal becoming the heavy clouds that pull water towards the horizon, brimming with the weight of secrets untold.

In the After, there is the warmth of my shoulders, the grass they shudder into.

Mythos of creation, intrinsically known but held apart from origin: forces nature in indefinite collision.▲



ART // EMILY O'BRIEN



You can't really stop it, but once you think about it, you can't stop that either. Sometimes I put it in a box, tucked in the back of my mind. Somewhere littered with trash or treasures, depending on who you ask.

I don't know how many things I open each day, I don't even want to think about how many things we open each day. It has to go somewhere, nothing can be nowhere. It kind of reminds me of the word "sonder," like the overwhelming realization that every person has their own rich life, full of stuff. Everyone has a toaster, a mattress, some of us have cars, and we all have phones. My Sonder-lust makes me sick when I think of all the stuff. Where does it all go?

I've seen the documentaries. I've spiraled and opened tabs and bags and stockpiled receipts in my passenger seat. I also chase those receipts down in parking lots when the wind picks them up, revealing my secret shame. I lurch over my passenger to stop them from flowing out, fistfuls stuffed into coffee cups to do my part. I guess it brings me peace, like I'm doing something good. I want to believe that the dozens of reusable bags in my pantry, overpriced rescued pieces in my closet, and Amazon shopping sparingly will be enough to rid me of personal responsibility.

It's all so damn convenient though, or so we think. Convenient like the CVS or Walgreens you stumble upon just when you need it. Convenience stores: filled with things priced just enough to make you question what you deem a necessity. This is the way we live though and the way I was raised. Paper place settings at dinnertime when life and its downfalls become too much. A disposable table cloth splayed out at every family party to easily gather the mess, confetti still lingering in the corners of the kitchen long after. Obligatory happy meal toys that never stood the test of time anywhere past lunch. Scraping sticky price tags off the deals from discount stores I couldn't afford to miss out on. These are life's little comforts to get us through the day. Sometimes I pay a little more in hopes they'll be long lasting and other times I pay for convenience, goddamn that receipt is long.▲

THANK YOU FOR
YOUR LOYALTY!





CHONDRICHTHYES

REGIS

BY JACK BUSCHOW

I am a staircase and—
I am the knight of the castle.
The king of the drowned castle.
The castle where they named me

after a god.
And I pace the halls: steps on currents and pressures
You'd imagine the clicking of boots, my sharkskin soles
on the filmy tiles.
They say the rays were princes once.
(But they spare no legend for me.)
Imagine my lights-out manuscript,
Lovely scrollwork, on the warning signs.

So I “dance”
With the bits of light falling past the
remnant windows,
Windows too small to leave through.
Watch dust motes on the old
armoire.
They're plankton, really—
And most of the time
I'm lying to you.
I'm the storybook revenant
And I loop
And I pace
And I cycle
And the water flushes
through my centennial gills

We ate our Titanic ballroom
guests.
The water went first
and the benthic got the rest.
In the whale hall there's nothing
to guard anymore—
I wasn't on patrol
Until I started looking for you.

I ought to be hungry but destruction
suits me fine.
Your body or mine.
I watch you leave out the well and the
window.
The drapes flutter when your current passes by.

Looping coordinates, F7 F6.
Some cartographer decided we were never to meet in earnest.
I'm mapped in red on the dive chart you keep snug in your pocket.
You're unhappy to see me.

It's not to say I miss you but I notice when you're gone.
Sometimes I feel your eyes on me,
And want to stop to meet you.
But we both know that sharks never stop moving.

ART // JACK BUSCHOW & PIPER FLAHERTY

FIRE HORSE

BY JADA BAILEY

I awaken drenched in sweat with a restless vitality that has overtaken my mind and
my legs, both of which never cease to be at the ready.

It happens every day, and I try my best to cement myself where I lie—where I
stand—with graceful patience. How that vitality stirs within the muscles in
my legs, it is, indeed, quite disquieted.

My thoughts break free from their reins to run for miles and
miles, traversing through obstacles, both imagined and not, in mere
milliseconds; there is no placating this overriding sense of urgency
that governs me.

2026: the year of the horse, and yet, I feel as though every year
since the dawn of my existence has been represented by the horse.

Although, this horse is aflame and resembles some mythical,
larger than life rendition whenever I stumble into a mirror amid a
raging backdrop of flickering reds, oranges, and yellows.

I think it's because I stared into the fire for so long it beckoned
me to gallop through it, and so I did.

AND LIVED.

I became one with the flames, relishing the familiar whirl that is
my impulsivity. It's what brought me here, running and running
forevermore.

It terrifies my mother and puzzles my father, but they don't get it.
They're perfectly content with their bridles. Their masters sit proudly
perched atop their backs, steering them wherever they please with brute
and unrelenting force.

But this restless impulsivity that resides within me is exactly what
has continued to breathe warm life into me.

The bell of regret seldom tolls for me back at “home,” even when
I've flown too close to the sun and right into a less-than-favorable
outcome.

Even when I find I've been singed by the flames, I often lick my
wounds only to repeat the dance again, because I know what awaits
me at the end of this winding road of a journey.

Everything.

Well, maybe nothing.

Or something.

Perhaps living. Choosing. Breathing.

What I know for certain is that this freedom will
always be mine.▲

ART // MILES TRACHTENBERG

I picked a clover on my way today.
It had three leaves and brought me
No such luck,
I just needed to have it in my hand.
The wind howled like Old Ladies in Church,
Sporadically and with conviction.
I wondered if church could explain where wind
Goes, where wind Ends.
I twisted my clover's stem between my index and thumb,
It twirled and caught air.
I followed it as God's whispers carried it down

Quiet streets.

Once in a while, I'd be joined by a neighbor,
They'd tell me about their ailments and successes,
Their wives, husbands, children, and all of the
Important people I'd never meet.
They didn't know they had joined me on a quest,
Just that we were going the same direction and
"You might find this interesting."
We all followed the clover as it jumped
Over houses, I leaped above fences.
One neighbor might be bringing another neighbor dinner,
So then I'd get some dinner too.
I never went hungry in all my days of walking.

WALKING HOME

ART // NOELANI HENSON

Eventually the wind got tired and stopped.
It was cold outside, no wind-ruffled-hair pushed me,
We were far past it now.
Where the clover had brought me, I had never been before.
There was a single chair in front of an oak tree,
I had been walking for so long, I figured
I might as well sit.
In front of the chair was a mirror, propped up
By the tree trunk. I didn't know how it got there,
Maybe it had been curious,

And followed the wind too.

I saw myself, wind-beaten,
Miles-deep trenches carved into my face.
Through every one of the traveled trenches,
My face got older and wiser alongside
Faces of found friends
I had known better than my own,
With wives and husbands and children
With names like Frank or Pauline or Marcia.
They didn't know they had walked me here.

BY CLAIRE TRASK

The clover stitched itself to the dirt,
Laying obediently between the toes
Of my worn walking shoes.
It was greener than it had ever been,
Brighter than the first glimpse of sun
After dark grays,
As if to say:

"We've walked a lot of people home."

Death Takes My Holiday

BY EMMA
BOGNA

58

As I left my hotel room this morning,
I felt that familiar sensation of forgetting
 something
I could not find what I was looking for
behind the headboard in the fridge under the coffee table

Could it have been my toothpaste but no the
bathroom sink was bare

I could not find what I was looking for

In my search, I heard from within the shower a low quiet
wailing and when I slid the door open
I saw myself but smaller paler shinier Frail
 and shriveled and covered in wet,
the pitiful thing lay shaking like a dog on her deathbed

It must have emerged from me last night when my mom
called from home,
so far away from it as I was,
must have cut out through my back then stitched my
spine up cold and bumpy
My grief left a stain in the shower,

I imagine it will be hard to get out, like that pesky
little splotch of mold in the corner of the ceiling
 that just does not want to leave
 or maybe cannot leave.

I tried to pick up the sickly thing, but as I reached
 out to it,

 I reached right through it
My hands shook so quickly they passed right
 through her

I found what I was looking for but I could not
 carry it.

I sat with it a while longer and listened to it cry,
wondered when again I would have to say with
 finality

 another goodbye on a cell phone,
not even a landline to tether me to home,
so far away from it as I would be,
and continue life as if life continued
I could not abandon it there

 but I could not miss my flight,
 so I left

that thing, that part of myself on a cold
shower floor face down in Chicago
I regret that she thinks I left her with
 indifference,
as if I had a choice.

At the airport I realized I forgot my
shampoo. I guess I forgot to look up.

ART // MILES TRACHTENBERG

59

Unsevered

Through the night there was one wish held in the light of the lantern,
I could feel it in the rusted air full of salt.
Hoping our fate was not destined to be hollow,
we waded into the sea and submit to its current.
With nothing but our fingers thread
and above our heads a singing wren.

Have you ever considered the lineage of a wren?
Delicate and wrapped in the glass of a lantern,
each new face a trend that was carefully thread.
Up north, they are sprinkled in the sky like salt.
One after another they follow the wind current—
floating on the air (only made possible by their bones hollow).

But you tell me that my words are hollow
and in the sky there is not a resilient wren;
but a raven, waiting for our blood to cease its current.
And you say that it is dim, the lantern.
But as the waves continue to lap at our chins, I taste salt
and I kick and scream and grasp at your shirt, tearing its thread.

Pulling and ripping until together nothing is thread.
My shrieks chasing animals into a tree hollow,
as my lungs fill with water and salt.
All the animals gone except for the lonely wren.
Is it my blinking or is it the flickering of the lantern?
My timeline warped so everything past is current.

And everything future is current.
I wonder if there is anything to which I am truly thread.
I want, for you, my words to be the light in the lantern,
I want, for other, my words to seem hollow
I want to soar through the sky, small and unnoticed like the wren.
I want to be divorced from attitudes and personalities akin to salt.

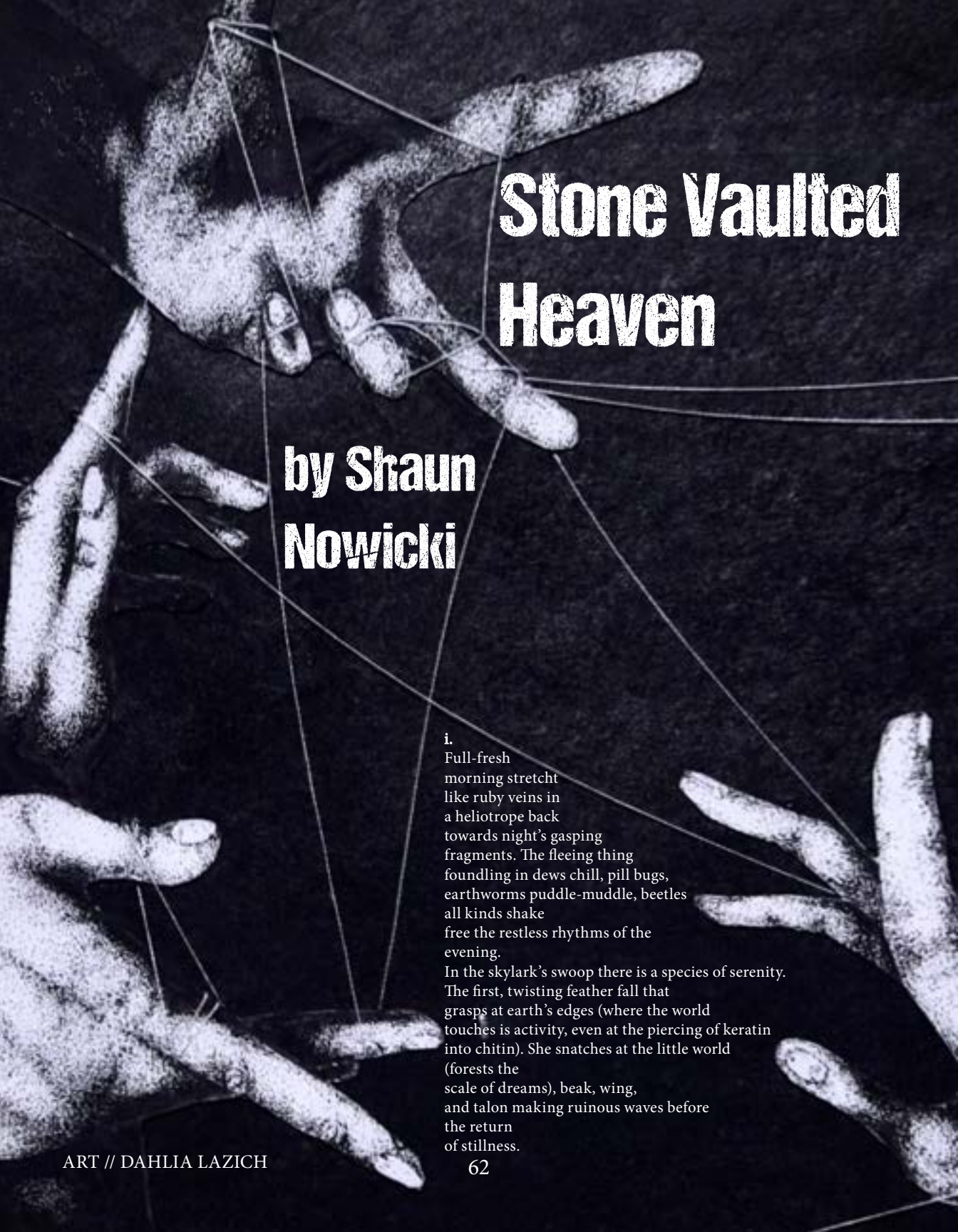
I want to eat the food you make that accidentally has too much salt.
I want to be stuck with you our own current.
I want to feel as admired as the wren.
I want, between the two of us, there to be an unseverable thread.
I want to come to you and be held by you when my insides feel hollow.
I want to look to you when I am lost, I want you to be my lantern.

And so my wish was thread, encased in a metal frame of a lantern
completely hollow besides the bulb that shows us that the crunching beneath our feet is not just salt.
But the bones of the wren being buried within.

And I thank her for sending me through this current.



by Amanda Rossiter



Stone Vaulted Heaven

by Shaun
Nowicki

i.
Full-fresh
morning stretch
like ruby veins in
a heliotrope back
towards night's gasping
fragments. The fleeing thing
foundling in dew's chill, pill bugs,
earthworms puddle-muddle, beetles
all kinds shake
free the restless rhythms of the
evening.
In the skylark's swoop there is a species of serenity.
The first, twisting feather fall that
grasps at earth's edges (where the world
touches is activity, even at the piercing of keratin
into chitin). She snatches at the little world
(forests the
scale of dreams), beak, wing,
and talon making ruinous waves before
the return
of stillness.

ii.
Quartz-cloud with a sparkle
like gypsum, one can hear
the creak of the earth if you
attune yourself through touch
(all sense is touch, after all,
the world strikes your tympanum,
tastebuds, light lifts your
eyes—all world is glory, glory).
Two young men find their footing
in loose dirt—the goatherd's path,
steep and stiff up the old crag.
Do you think it'll rain—we'll
feel it first, then the first
takes out a single, ponderous globe
red-orange in the hand and he feels it,
tests its weight. Heavy as the dawn
and flush with nature's secret—sweetness.
Arms outstretched to his fellow
he offers this sustenance and they
split it piece and segment, each
to each and on the rock ledges
rest their bulk in repose—
Eyes outward, they see the expanse
and activity of the world below
(every day new-sung, what life!)
and observe all that is made beat
in harmony. Roadways wind as a spider's web
or veins pocked by cells flowing far
away carrying, carrying. Cities
square, rectilinear, right—give way
to the heave and sprawl of suburbia,
crystals newgrown with unpatterned
regularity and burst forth bud-like,
all latticechaos and peoplepatterned
Their edges soften, waves in ebb that give
way to the fish's scales and the
tendrils of kelp and the rot of ages—
all of these are their own edges, bleeding
into the next. In our guts lies civilization,
the pith of a mandarin is its own
web—the bitter before the bite.
All this is in them then—



The two men
who sit and stare, bound in mutual stillness,
listening to the silence that is there
for those who have learned to hear.

iii.
Nature knows no coincidence
but speaks forward mutual purpose
in difference. The moonglow a syzygy
for the eyeshine of nocturnal
creatures, each with its own way of
lighting the darkling world. We
find the secret ways in the
dark—some through dreams
that float across coal-black heaven
and find a home in flecks of
carbonate stardust. Some in the creep of the earth—
pawpads gentle on the soft talc of forest,
dirt, dust, all in threnody.
What song is in this? The breeze rustling the tall grass—

It goes against professional protocol to discuss my therapy clients, yet I find myself compelled to document a recent experience, perhaps as much for my own clarity as anything else.

The client in question, I'll refer to her as Dr. Orion, holds a research position at Maxim Animal Studies, a facility on the outskirts of town. Her work centers on feline behavior, domestic cats in particular. She is usually quite reserved, invariably arriving in either crisp business attire or medical scrubs, typically coming straight from her laboratory.

She revealed a story she had kept to herself, even as it unfolded over several weeks of our sessions. It began when Maxim, known for their innovative experiments, entrusted her with a peculiar device to try out in the privacy of her home. The device's purpose was both groundbreaking and fantastical, it was designed to give a voice to the thoughts of her Siamese cat, Lyra. This device, a marvel of modern technology, was equipped with a network of non-invasive neural sensors. These sensors were delicately designed to detect and interpret the intentions and desires of Lyra without any physical intrusion. The technology was sophisticated, translating the cat's cognitive patterns into comprehensible speech.

At first, the idea seemed far-fetched, like something out of a science fiction novel. However, to her astonishment, the device worked exactly as intended. Orion strapped the device to Lyra and powered it on. She said that for the first hours, there were only a few grumbled moans and groans. At one point, she stood staring at Lyra, who was looking up to her wide-eyed and focused.

Suddenly, from the device came words: "Un-wall me." The voice, Lyra's voice, carried no panic, only quiet determination. Orion said her stomach dropped. The voice was so clear—so confident. But what troubled her most of all was she felt unsure if she should respond. So she just stared at the cat, trying to control her breathing.

We discussed the possibility that the voice was merely an AI-generated interpretation of neural activity. The cat couldn't know English, or any human language for that matter. It might recognize its name, a word for food, and perhaps a bit more, but certainly not enough to speak through a machine.

Despite my attempts at reassurance, Dr. Orion remained deeply disturbed by her experience. The calm, composed scientist I have known for years was lost in a torrent of emotions. She mentioned that following that first instance, Lyra had started speaking more often, expressing her thoughts about everything from the temperature of her food to her preference for the living room couch over her cat bed. The voice was eerily human, and the cat's thoughts were often complex, displaying a level of consciousness that Orion had never expected.

One night, as Orion lay in bed, she told me she heard Lyra's voice from the living room. She said, "The ground is dry. I want the damp-dark. The green-breathing outside." It was a simple statement, yet it filled Orion with an indescribable sense of dread. She had taken Lyra in as a kitten, protected her from the dangers of the outside world, and yet, she was now confronted with the possibility that Lyra longed for a life beyond the confines of their home.

UN-WALL

ART // TAYLOR ALICE

She was so moved by the statement that it was the first time she spoke back, telling Lyra, "It is dangerous, you don't understand. You couldn't possibly understand. The danger is from every direction. Hawks, coyotes, cars. That is an alien world to you!" This, at least, is the version of the speech she gave to me. She said the cat did not respond. It just shuddered and looked away. But Orion pursued. She recalled, in a tone of shame, telling her cat, "You're a killer too, you know? If I let you out there, you would go on a rampage. Those poor lizards and birds would not expect an alien predator like you."

Over the next few weeks, Orion grappled with the implications of her communication with Lyra. It started to affect her both at work and at home. The more she heard from Lyra, the more uncomfortable she felt. She began to question her decision to confine Lyra within the four walls of her apartment. The guilt started to creep in, followed by sleepless nights and a gnawing unease.

As her therapist, I attempted to provide Orion with the support she needed. We discussed the ethical issues, explored the concept of informed consent in this context, and grappled with the moral implications of what she had unearthed. I realized that Orion was trapped in a paradox. On one hand, she loved Lyra and wanted to give her the best life possible. On the other, she was haunted by the ethical dilemma of keeping a conscious, sentient being as a form of emotional servitude. The device had forced Orion to confront the disturbing reality of her relationship with Lyra, turning their tranquil domestic life into a source of constant turmoil.

As Orion's dread persisted, she spent weeks wrestling with her guilt. The device had revealed a side of Lyra that she was not prepared to see or comprehend. I helped her navigate this emotional maze, but the answers seemed elusive, hidden behind the veil of morality and ethics.

Ultimately, Orion couldn't bear it anymore. She unstrapped the device from Lyra's collar with trembling fingers, setting it on her highest bookshelf where it gathered dust. The apartment filled once more with ordinary feline sounds. The chirps at birds through windows, the demanding yowls at dinnertime. Yet whenever Lyra fixed those blue eyes on her, Orion found herself wondering what judgments, what desires, what alien poetry might be forming behind that unblinking gaze. Some nights she'd wake suddenly, certain she'd heard that voice again, only to find Lyra curled at her feet, silent as the moon.

Orion found herself standing in the gardening section of the home improvement store on a Tuesday night, running her fingers over trays of wheatgrass and catnip. She lugged home three bags of organic soil and spent hours arranging a miniature landscape in the corner by the living room window. When Lyra's paws first sank into the soft dirt, the cat froze, then lowered her belly to the earth and inhaled deeply. Later, she unlatched the balcony door, something she'd always forbidden, and held her breath as Lyra pressed her nose to the three-inch gap, tail swishing at the rush of night air.

Orion caught herself pausing before saying "my cat" during a lab meeting. The words had stuck in her throat. That night, she moved Lyra's food bowl from its corner on the floor to the small table where she ate her own dinner. When Lyra jumped up and settled beside her plate, Orion didn't shoo her away but instead nodded slightly, as if to an equal sharing her table. Their eyes met across the steam rising from Orion's soup, and she found herself waiting, just for a moment, to see if Lyra would speak first.▲

ME

BY KALVIN M. MADSEN

T

h

e

The wind follows my eyes
and glides over waves upturned
vie for a view of the sunburnt sand
and plates of olives
seasoned by the salt they have sprung

Words rest on the rims
of thin glasses
Some gone by gales,
others tinted red
as the beach bends and the sea stretches

Expressions speak softly,
slowly slicing through hot air
Light like a professors voice,
understood as the child understands
the cat showing its belly to the sun

Hands move idly
Peeling peaches, playing parts
tapping tunes, swirling stems
They lie on lace and linen,
late for their afternoon nap

Voices hush,
watch the water
White pearls linger on each break
Lead us to the horizon, the setting sun
still high above our heads.



ART // MILES TRACHTENBERG

Adriatic

by Finn Buggy

FLOCK TONES, 2

In careful gondola buoyance, I am weathered. A burst appendix
lost in words and fireworks. Mascara streaks in the sky.
I have two things on my mind: iron and age. My body
will need more metal as I grow older. I dream
of Isaiah's ascent as my bloodsugar lowers. Each heartbeat
a prophecy: live, live, live. A Roman Candle in my hand,
I am five in Dad's Jeep again. The boys are harnessing
the parking lot in frames of flame, and I sit holding
the Noah's Ark from the doldrummed basement,
where a cracked plastic box of Power Rangers
action figures congeals into a plastic crate
stacked onto a stationary red Radio
Flyer who
has run out of dreams.

ART // EMMA CHASTAIN



I fidget with the Ark
and its door until a
Matchbox Corvette
falls out.
What kind of animal am I?
I think as I hunt for
the glance of the rearview mirror. The
sparks run
across the Jeep's hood, like an enchanting to bring
the car to life. Now, three kinds of needles make
me feel alive. Thomas says to me that on the day you
ate what is dead, you made it into something
living. There's iron in my gummies and there's steel
in the sky. Anemic amorality crushes me into
flint for the fire to come. But fire works
in the chambers of the heart to douse
our would-be accusers in a flood of the good.

BY
ALICE
F. Z.

En Face

By Sophie Jetzer Gagneux

Looking at it, you, speckled splattered and steeped in sunlight dancing across your shoulders landing on the bridge of your nose. Freckles of the sublime spattered silently soaking your skin. Tired, old, you bear the weight of the girl in denim, leaning back into the arms that have given so much, already. Creaking and groaning you hold her them everyone for years the history. The last unicorn, ochre dusted regal in your aloneness. Medallioned medaled “Do Not Sit or Climb on this Tree” last of your kind, one of. So of course you are sat on climbed on pulled on romped around gossiped under, the shelter.

I imagine your branches as a quivering Atlassian lattice, muscles sore tired sinewy and shuddering with breath. Clutching to native land with ancient fingers one foot in the grave, in the after. From all over locals and kooks alike we drop our boards and jungle gym across your living room with childish glee. Young yes adults only some, the couch cushions are ruffled and we do not care if the floorboards break because this would be such a great picture for Instagram make sure you get the sunset because it is aesthetic and the surfboards too and the bikes capture Isla Vista so that bitch from highschool thinks and your cousin too show them yes you will show them how much you are enjoying yourself here in this tiny town with too many liquor stores and not enough earth to hold those that first called it home.

But you are still
there, still holding firm, even as bits

and pieces of you are cracked off and lost to
the tide, or carried far from your bed and landing. Somewhere.

I am here, breathing your breath and listening to your quiet murmurs, wind-aided. I sit across, watching your rustling shifting discomfort as yet another weight nestles himself against your chest, curling up with you to watch the sun go down and ignoring your veteran's pins clearly begging to be left alone. Settling in to the new burden, creaking and groaning you hold him them everyone for years the history.

Colonized by kids in Birkenstocks, pushed to the very limits of where you might exist as the wind and rain devour your foundation. The drunk ZBT boys do not help, stumbling through and swallowing all, your land is taken.

In search of a new garden, you escape the solidity of your mother's, new soil awaits. The cosmos, glittering with man's incomprehensibles and a billion smiling winking stars.▲

I am here

Worm, cocoon, butterfly
Criminal, alien, immigrant

Tending the soil
Farm, fold, farm, fold, farm, fold
Back folds like a worm's toil
¿I steal your jobs?
¿Do you want to pluck maíz?
¿Do you want to import
aguacate?

¿Slither through the borderlands
while being aimed at by predatory
beaks?
¿Do you want your blood en las uvas?
¿How can I steal your jobs if I'm not
allowed to apply?
¿Do you think about the risk I'm
taking?
I breathe—
and I
become
a criminal

ART // EMMA CHESTAIN

Worm,
cocoon,
butterfly
Criminal,
alien,
immigrant

Wrapping myself under documentation
Missing papers, missing identification
I don't have identity, I'm not a human being
Mi papá y yo fuimos separados por fronteras
Lo quería ver ya que me convirtiera en mariposa
Mi hermana se fue con él y ya no puede regresar
Ella lo miró morir; yo me quedé aquí en su funeral
Extraño a mi país, extraño a mi familia
Me duele mucho no ser mariposa

Worm, cocoon—
Drones don't need papers to fly, ¿why do I?

Worm, cocoon,—
Motherfuckers have been fighting for land
Worm, cocoon,—
Mother Earth belongs to no man
Worm, cocoon,—
Bombs, fucking bombs and borderlands
Moon protects Her from meteorites
but can't protect Her from your hands
Somehow I'm the alien, I'm the criminal

My ancestors and I have given our backs to this land
and you fold Her in half
¿Immigrant, immigrant, fucking immigrant!
¿That slur blows me apart!
¿It keeps my family apart!
¿It rips my wings apart!
When all I want is to be a
Monarch Butterfly.

Monarch
Butterfly

by Joshua
Minjarez

F a i t h B l o o m i n g

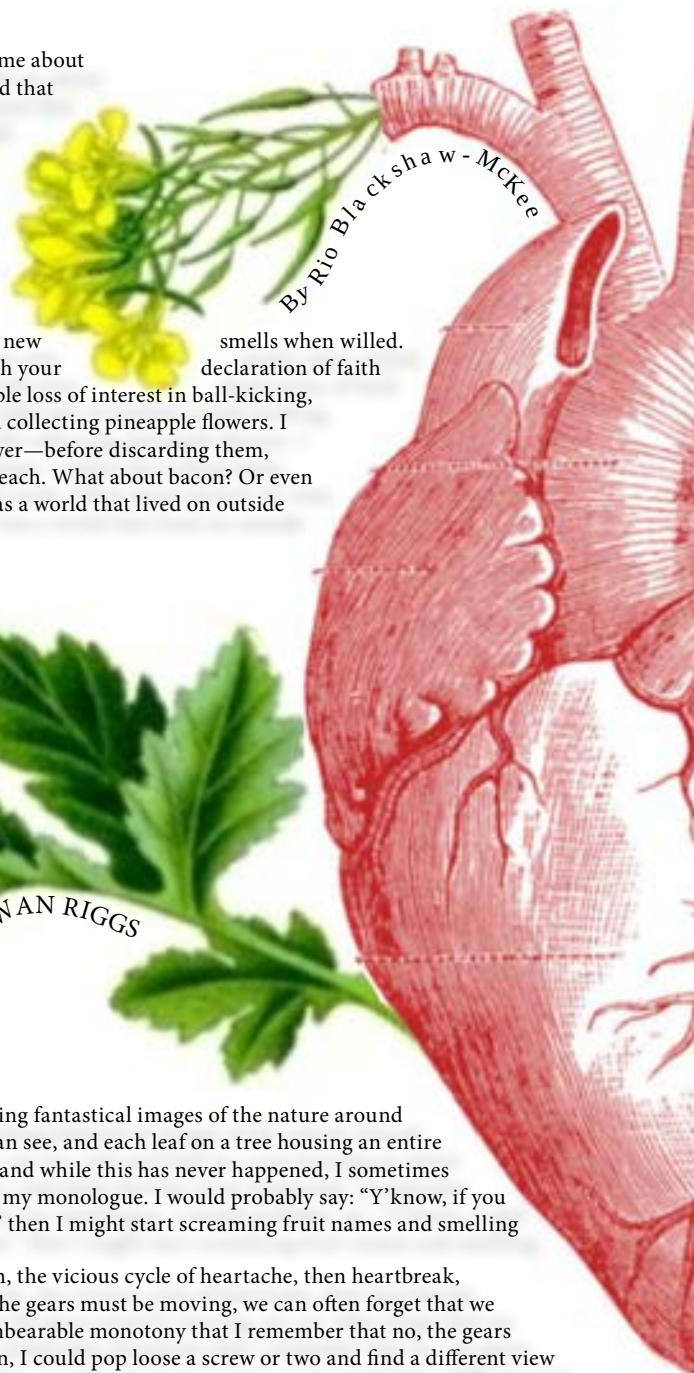
When I was eight, I met a boy at soccer camp who first told me about pineapple flowers. Pineapple flowers are a small, stubby weed that have a little mustard yellow flower in the center. They smell sweet and fragrant, like an ambiguous mix of fruit and perhaps just a touch of honey. He told me: “Whatever smell you think about is what the pineapple flower will smell like! Strawberry! Blueberry! Mango!” He liked to announce his smell of choice before he inhaled, I learned, as if naming the scent was what worked the mysterious pineapple magic.

The pineapple flower did, truly, have the ability to take on new just thinking could muster up some fragrance, but it was with your that the scent really sprung to life. After the gradual, inevitable loss of interest in ball-kicking, I would often find myself wandering the outskirts of the field collecting pineapple flowers. I screeched fruit names maniacally—going from flower to flower—before discarding them, hell-bent on testing just how far these magical scents could reach. What about bacon? Or even chicken pot pie? I often found myself forgetting that there was a world that lived on outside this grassy, fragrant microcosm.

The pineapple flower was my grand introduction to trickery and manipulation, but it was also the vessel that carried my first glimpse at human frailty. How fragile are we that just a simple willing mind can bend and break the physical reality right before our eyes? In these subtle expansions of our world, I found an entirely new way to live. In a world I redefined, green trees became pink, fishes became aliens, and flowers became beings with beating hearts; simply because I willed it so. The physical no longer defined what was real and what was a fabrication, I learned that what comes before the physical, before the reality, is our own minds.

When I walk on trails, I often talk to myself, painting fantastical images of the nature around me; vines reaching higher into the sky than the eye can see, and each leaf on a tree housing an entire village of Irish bards. I’m sure I look a bit ridiculous, and while this has never happened, I sometimes imagine what I would say should a passerby question my monologue. I would probably say: “Y’know, if you yell loud enough, you can make anything come true,” then I might start screaming fruit names and smelling leaves like a madman again.

In between the shifts that you never truly wind down from, the vicious cycle of heartache, then heartbreak, then doing it all over again, and the constant reminder that the gears must be moving, we can often forget that we always have the power to choose. It is in these moments of unbearable monotony that I remember that no, the gears don’t have to be perfect, and that maybe, instead of perfection, I could pop loose a screw or two and find a different view of the familiar. So please, find a weed and will it to make it smell of peaches, climb a tree and imagine each branch as a limb, each trunk as a spine, and perhaps just once a month, sit on your front doorstep and notice how this world, that you think you know, is in fact completely alien and you are but a Martian.▲



W e a r M e

o u t

By Sarah Baldwin

your words are not whispers that tickle they are
screeches that shatter a bellowing onset of auditory
exasperation your intonation pounding against
my drums berating their heads your voice echoing
echoing gargled as if spoken underwater it’s
not conversation but drowning cacophony your
sharpness inducing a deafness that rings from
ear to ear oscillating throughout my skull the
ringingrings on ceaseless sirens filling the gaps
of silence silencing my thoughts controlling my
mind incessant static fuzzy and warm but
abrasive a grating comfort a harsh constant
ill forget when it fades out to white noise
but ill miss the initial depth of your sound
the way its bass resonated in my temples and in
my chest the way it used to beat against me the way
it beat my heart your tongue that i lapped up your
inflection that infected me with harmonies of love
and of language your cry invokes a new sensation
in relation to this situation and it pains me to
hear you speak but its absence is splitting rising
higher to a frequency i can no longer make
out i can no longer make out i can no longer
make out i can no longer make i can no
longer no longer longer▲

ART // SARAH BALDWIN

FIELDS OF WHITE

by Miles Trachtenberg

ART // MILES TRACHTENBERG

Sterile fields of white-tipped stalks
stand against pale boxes of frost,
the warmth of the sun diffused
into an even array of ashen hues,
left to be consumed by the artificiality
of lights sitting upon rafters, removed
from those deft dabs of ink, those
recycled remnants of our consumption,
those elements that come together
to compose the human bodies
that drift silently in undulating herds,
their flowing dance of lines folding
into one another like sheets of fresh linen,
spiraling to create webbed patterns
out of defined roles, their bodies
together, yet separate, their eclectic forms
severed by nebulous magnetic fields,
by the freedom to go wherever they please
so long as they remain within
the harsh right angles of a canvas defined
by sterile fields of white-tipped stalks.



Please, Pick Up the Phone

By Liam Baker

It's 10am in Seoul, and
I need remission for
My absolute sins,
But
No amount of lukewarm water can
Wash away the ink staining my fingers.

Pick up.

I haven't shaved in days, and
I look good with my hair
Tucked behind my ears,

But
I have bruises on my chin, and
I can't stand my two left feet.

Pick up the phone.

I look in the mirror, look away to
Find concrete skies and
Boundless telephone lines,
But

The city is lost, reeling 'roundabout
Behind my tired eyes.

Please, pick up.

I'm blind in my left eye, and
I haven't quite been in
My right mind,
But
You could lick the salt from my teeth,
Bring color back into my cheeks.

Please, pick up the phone.

I never did believe in
Wonderwalls or
Sunday morning calls,
But

For one refrain, I dream your
Ostinato voice, slam my head,
Waiting for that noise.

So please—pick up the phone.



HARRY REID

BY
ROISIN CASEY

You'll touch down early,
10am in Terminal B, the clatter and whirr
audible long before you see
above the spinning LEDs
the naked women promising thousands.

A new hand is dealt to every passenger
as they exit the jet bridge,
stapled to the boarding pass,
electric, rosy tantalize.

The Queen of Diamonds sits heavily at the gate,
straight from the chapel, smudged,
blue plastic cocktail in one manicured hand,
cheap silver band on the other.
Her King of Clubs fumbles with his third
cigarette

click clatter whirr click
Reels turning, paylines sucking more.
Just one more. Please, just one

Searching desperately through neon fruits,
sick panic, patting jeans,
turning out coats for a fix
Give it all to the beautiful girl
in line for the bathroom.

Dazed, tipsy dread drowse,
eyes strained square from the relentless
click clatter whirr click
Frantic, anguished search for the Grail,
the sacred Triple 7.

ART // ROISIN CASEY

SLIDE TACKLE

BY GUS FOLKERS

If I could slide tackle with my head I'd be a hell of a soccer player.

It could be a real asset.
I'd spot a chance, a breakaway by the opponent,
I'd chase and dive and use my neck and spine
As my tongue and teeth scrape dirt from the earth and
Tear melted dog turds from hot turf as I
Make invisible microadjustments,
Little lumps of movement
Toward the ball.

Directed by my brain,
Utter focus takes over—
Untrapped by the latency of the body
I become an instant,
The smallest unit of being,
A frizz on the thread of experience,
Focused on a singular goal,
To stop a ball, and
Minutes become seconds
And seconds become hours,
Everything moves in unison, one concerted effort,
Perfect coordination synthesized into every sect of bone and highway
of muscles and tendons, all forced into one job, to successfully remove the
ball from
the opponent's control,
and that is what happened because there was no other way, and all of that
teamwork
would be celebrated and rejoiced by all of my pores and amoeba
and atoms in the nanoseconds after contact with the ball, all that grand work
paid off.

Clouded by celebration, I would be unsuccessful in identifying and dodging the cleated
foot accelerating towards my head, which is now where the ball was.

I take the brunt of the force into my nose and eye sockets.
The game is prematurely ended due to gruesome injury on the field,
although we still technically win because we were already up 1-0.

If I could slide tackle with my head I'd be a hell of a soccer player.

Too bad I can't.

ART // GUS FOLKERS

SUNLIGHT RUNNING TOWARDS

The morning dew makes its way to my bedroom window.
My mind is like wind.
The air caresses me.
The air that is love.
The air that so fruitfully beautifies the world
And I saw the world.
Before I crossed the ocean
I saw the world
Below your forehead
And above your nose,
Or maybe it was hiding in your teeth
Somewhere under your tongue.

Speak life into the air.
Let the words settle into your mind,
Eyes closed and visions full of color.
Color of sacred knowledge
Only we know.
I can live forever with this vivid image
In this world made for just us two
Save my letters,
Savor the taste before its gone.
You're a subtle tune in my head
In my ear
And I'll keep dancing to it
Step-by-step
Before the sun goes down
And the image goes blank.

BY TAYLOR ALICE

Rosemary and time are bittersweet endeavors
Remembering and forgetting, I've received my
only gift.

I prayed for your eyes
When I reached the garden
I was met with brown and green
You set me on fire, I was a remnant
Of the gold that lies in the flames.

I said to myself, in the secret sanctions of my
mind,
Things I felt could only be true in the darkness of
night
When everyone had gone to sleep, could I begin to
formulate
My hopes and dreams and understanding.

You, too, can read my mind
And feel it too
Like a cool breeze on a warm day
My dreams, my deepest desires
Seen, seamlessly understood.
I know I can bleed
Smiles stem from my tummy
We are all I've ever wanted.

I try to run
But my calf is strained
You are quicker than me, but
I'm the messenger, I'm the power,
I'm the songs I sing that become
yours.

We exist in two places, my
mind and your feet
When we speak—I feel the
sunlight,
It's just right, sweet honey on
my body.

I see you, right through the
window,
The sun wants you to know, I am right
for you.

No routes ever list it.
No drivers discuss it.
But every once in a while,
a rusted old bus
rumbles in sputtering,
its lights dead, but humming,
its doors yawning wide.

It was there,
at that bus stop,
that I first glimpsed:
a blue rose
that didn't exist.
It grew from a crack—
a split in cement,
from broken mirrors
and viscous black blood,
from burning beams
of a black hole sun.

And every once in a while,
I think back to that bus,
go back to that flower.
I like to keep an eye on it—
see if it remembers me.
And every time I stop by,
I'm astonished anew.
I watch the rose,
and it watches me too.

If you stood there you'd know
this inscrutable scene
exists only in passing,
a vague, hazy dream—
a bus stop
that clings
to where reality forgot.
A blue rose in its shadow,
it's hard to believe it.
It remembers all souls
who have waited beneath it.

BLUE ROSE

BY ROY COHEN

A bottomless well
surges,
then swells,
welling out my eyes.
keep the surface tension,
if you dive in my depths
you'll lose your buoyancy,
staying down under with me.

please.
i don't want us both to
drown.

a chronic infestation
settles in my folds.
black mold
fester-meshes in my breath.
a pus-welling wound
oozes pungent odor.
fever-induced dreams
forge untruths
suffocate in my airways.

i 'm a "too much"

look only from afar,
no flash photography,
velvet ropes close me off
from covetous hands.
i may look like a pretty plaything,
but don't pluck at my heartstrings
just for your own delight.
touch me and i'll come apart.

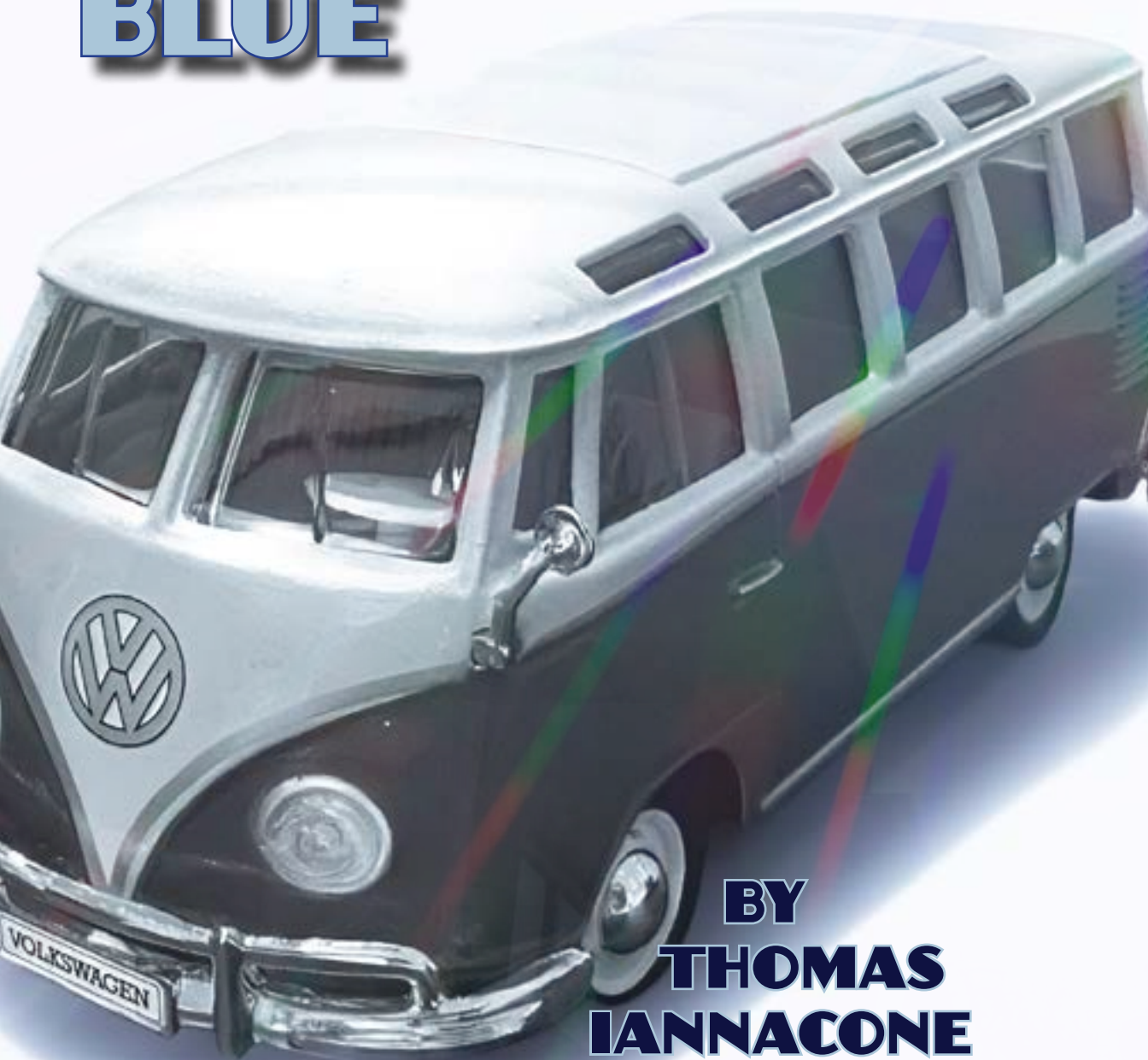
i don't want to get close to you.

once people know you,
that's when they leave you.
your frame as still as ice,
vaporizing as I draw near.
your eyes avert,
avoiding my pull.

Why won't you look at me?
please.
I need you to look at me.

SURFACE TENSION
BY BROKE FEYDER

YOUNG FATHER BLUE



BY
**THOMAS
IANNACONE**

A young father lifts his child out of bed, dressing him in dark jeans (**B**) and a knit brown sweater. Earnest, the young father of one, hadn't seen the color blue in years.

HE WASN'T COLORBLIND.

He could see every other color of the rainbow, appreciate the beauty in the changing of the leaves, a bright Red Delicious, and the passing yellow school bus. But when it came to azure skies, ocean waves, and skinny jeans he had only a vague impression left by faded memories of his youth. Glacier Freeze Gatorade and Blue Raspberry Icee his best hope now at placing a sensation to the word.

"They just taste blue," his kid would say, sitting content in the lackluster description. But to his credit, there Earnest would sit, taking controlled micro-sips of his drink, eyes closed, forehead wrinkled, tapping his tongue to the roof of his mouth trying to link the sweet, syrupy, and altogether unidentifiable flavors to the vast spectrum of color.

EARNEST LABELED EVERYTHING BLUE IN HIS LIFE WITH A CAPITAL LETTER (**B**). HIS CHILD, GUIDE TO THE UNMAPPED AND UNLABELED, MADE SURE TO CALL OUT EVERYTHING THEY MISSED.

Getting in the car (**B**) and driving east now, Earnest and his little boy are journeying to a place uncertain. Earnest didn't know when he started and his kid never asked. A particularly uncurious child, he was a boy of few thoughts and many words. No toil in the mind: a cloud in a box condensing into a deluge of words but only a fine mist of meaning. His monologues a perpetual background hum of word salad which gave the sense he never knew what he was going to say until well after he had already said it.

Even still, he delivered with such confidence it almost made you believe him. He'll be very successful when he grows up.

Together they drove, east and upward. The child, talking uninterrupted as they passed first grocery stores, schools, and restaurants; then gas stations, diners, and rest stops; and finally rolling mountains, reservoirs, and open road. The low hum of the car and the kid's everlasting soliloquy phasing in and out of Earnest's consciousness the whole way down. Each dip and rise in the road accompanied by his kid flying up out of his seat, and every turn, sending him dramatically left into the center console or slamming right into the car door.

Descending now over the far side of the mountains into the valley there is rich soil and green fields far as the eye could see. Cornstalks whizz by at dizzying speeds and cows line the road, infusing the air with a profoundly earthy scent. The child tries counting the cows but can never quite get past 12 before losing count and starting all over again.

A few miles pass, Earnest and his son pull aside, at last arriving at the chosen destination. A roadside attraction. The world's largest peacock statue, standing 30ft tall, a reflecting tower of blue and green multicolor. A hundred dancing eyes fanning wide and the neon body shimmer.

"Dad, what are we doing here—" the kid says, unimpressed by the dazzling display.

"I don't know just...I really thought this would've done it" says Earnest.

After a pause he continues, "It's beautiful I just...well, I really thought I would see the blue this time. That there'd be some reward for the struggle. For my patient, stubborn waiting. For wanting it bad enough. More than just a green bird," he says, nearly moved to tears, "Tell me what you see..."

"It's a big blue bird," the kid replies.

"Sure, but what else? Is it really special? Does it sparkle in the light like I've heard about? Is it really the same color as the sky or is it something different? Is it all one shade of blue or many different ones? Can't you see it in all the ways I don't?"

"Maybe? I don't know, it's bright blue and it's green. It's kinda sparkly but that's it," the kid replies.

"Alright let's go."

But before they left the young child raced over and placed a big sticker letter (**B**) on the foot of the statue. Together walking back to the car, Earnest buckles his child into the back seat and they make their way home.▲

I don't like the beach. I never have; it's always hot and sticky or cloudy and humid, no in between. I can't stand the feeling of sand underneath my feet, or seaweed creeping up my leg. And perhaps the most daunting, I'm afraid of the ocean—deeper than my imagination could ever conjure, and farther than I will ever travel. More than any person can conceptualize.

The path I've chosen to get to the place that I cannot stand is—at best, unconventional. I'm trampling over bushes and jumping over fallen palm tree leaves. The stickiness begins—my flip flops are plastered to the bottom of my feet, slick with sweat.

But finally my path proves fruitful, and after what seems like hours of walking, I can finally see the ocean. Funnily enough though, in its vastness, I see nothing. No internal connection, no spiritual awakening, not even the usual surfer or oil rig. Only water.

There is a steep decline towards the beach—covered in dirt and hidden rocks, but not as hidden as you would think. I see different sized shoeprints carefully trying to make their way down and I find myself following their path. I see Adidas, and Birkenstocks and brandless lines that graze each step. Every breath I take is tainted with salted mist of centuries past.

Exhale, inhale, exhale again.

The sounds of friends chime from down below, high-pitched laughter carrying all the way up to where I stand alone on this hill.

I should've carpooled with them. Or not come. Or found a different path. But I'm already half way down. The best way out is through?

With only the thin barrier of vinyl attached to my feet, I can feel every rock and every plant in my sole, and when I finally get closer—close enough to see detailed silhouettes and freckled constellations—the shoeprints turn into footprints. As my decline levels out I see the marks of toes from fellow beach-dwellers gripping into the ground—I imagine them swinging their arms around, panicking that they can't find their balance—they way I do now. I wonder where they were going.

To meet their friends? To swim in the deep blue sea? To connect with nature? Do they see something else in the ocean that I don't?

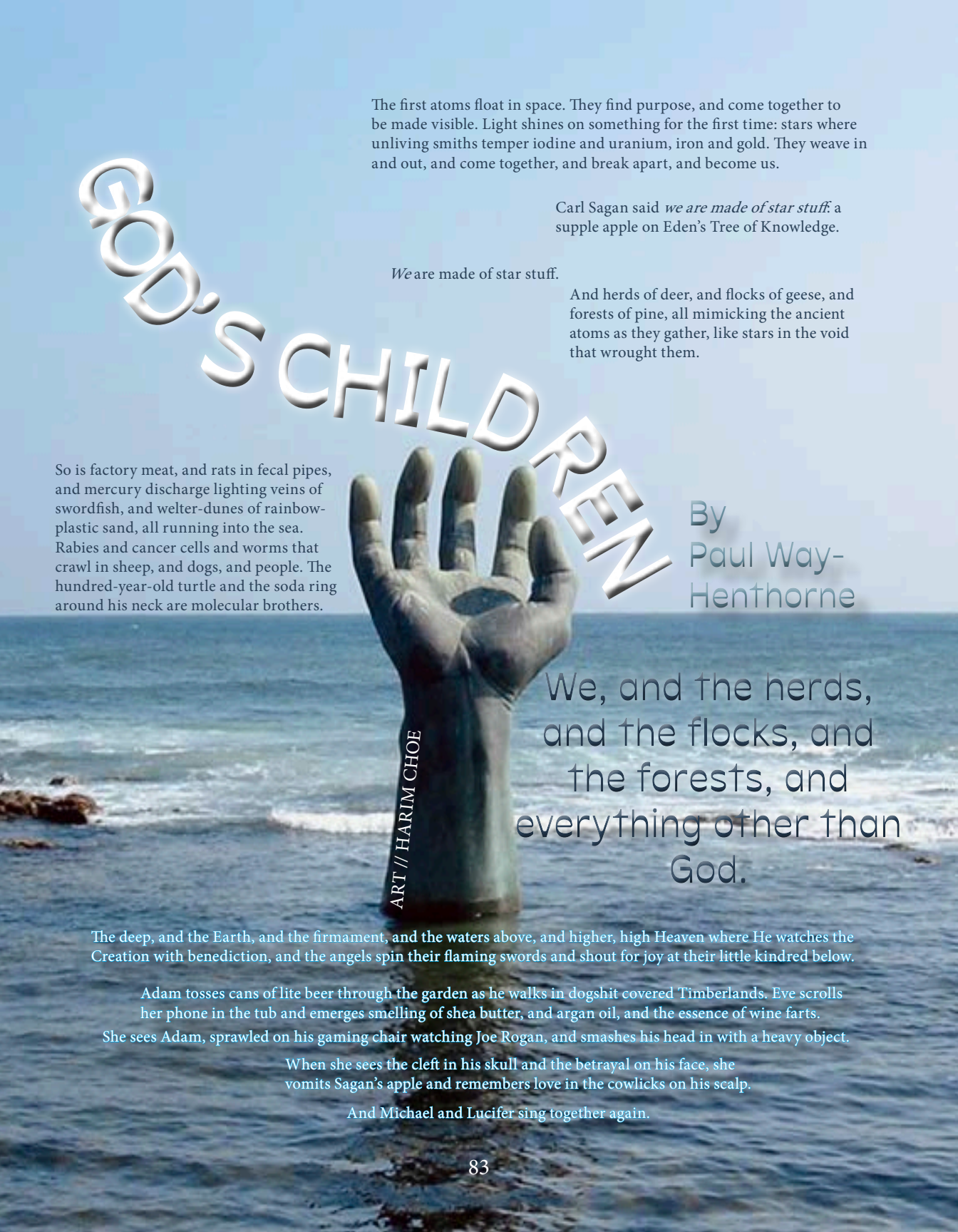
Wherever they were going, the path they've laid for me is clear.

Peeling off my flip-flops my feet sink into sand as I move forward. What was once an uncomfortable sensory nightmare becomes tolerable, and what were shadowed beings become my friends. Maybe it's the intoxicating sound of my friend's joy, or the sand below finally becoming firm enough for me to walk without tripping, but the vast ocean that I will never understand—that I will never be able to truly conceptualize, or feel, or know—its blue-green scent is no longer nauseating.▲

The Vinyl Under Your Feet

By
Keylaan
Edwards

ART //EMILY O'BRIEN



The first atoms float in space. They find purpose, and come together to be made visible. Light shines on something for the first time: stars where unliving smiths temper iodine and uranium, iron and gold. They weave in and out, and come together, and break apart, and become us.

Carl Sagan said *we are made of star stuff*: a supple apple on Eden's Tree of Knowledge.

We are made of star stuff.

And herds of deer, and flocks of geese, and forests of pine, all mimicking the ancient atoms as they gather, like stars in the void that wrought them.

By
Paul Way-
Henthorne

We, and the herds,
and the flocks, and
the forests, and
everything other than
God.

The deep, and the Earth, and the firmament, and the waters above, and higher, high Heaven where He watches the Creation with benediction, and the angels spin their flaming swords and shout for joy at their little kindred below.

Adam tosses cans of lite beer through the garden as he walks in dogshit covered Timberlands. Eve scrolls her phone in the tub and emerges smelling of shea butter, and argan oil, and the essence of wine farts. She sees Adam, sprawled on his gaming chair watching Joe Rogan, and smashes his head in with a heavy object.

When she sees the cleft in his skull and the betrayal on his face, she vomits Sagan's apple and remembers love in the cowlicks on his scalp.

And Michael and Lucifer sing together again.

A Tree of Beers

by Miles Trachtenberg

On a perfectly average night on a perfectly normal brisk fall eve: the fading oranges of wizened leaves clumping around gnarled, surly oaks, the squirrels dancing about, this way and that, the grandma across the street taking out the all-too-big trash bag at 8pm as usual, normal for it being Thanksgiving—four college students, without a home or family to return to, sat upon a stained couch of the sort you could really sink into, lazing away the day until a brilliant idea emerged from the murky depths. It was a token from God’s divine hand, like those old flattened pictures of St. Francis opening his body to sharp, golden lines. It was an idea to wash away all vestiges of contented boredom with a frivolous, focused energy like that of a mad scientist. It was an idea to create a Christmas tree adorned with the delicious, sun-stained swirls of ice cold beers.

Preparations needed to be made, roles assigned, maps drawn and colored. This was serious business, and the four students meant to treat it as such. The first order of business to account for was the tree. Piling into the mahogany ash-stained car, its colors bleeding into rust, cigarettes strewn about the center console, a hand me down CD of Steely Dan’s “Can’t Buy a Thrill” crackling through the speaker, they sped off to the local Home Depot. High as kites, they wandered in a still, deep haze—the type where the fog just sits above the water—right past the very trees they were seeking and into the grand, light filled halls of wooden planks and light fixtures, color swatches and whizzing tools, the welcoming drift of pine and cedar leading them about like a mischievous woodland elf, doomed to be lost until a two foot, LED candy cane conjured images of Christmas once again: “Excuse me sir, where do you keep the Christmas trees?” “Oh, that would be outside.” Giggling away in delicious folds of ribboned candies, the students pranced off to the trees, enamored with one another, their foolish quest, this evening in fall.

They studied the trees with the utmost care, scholars pouring over dusty bound texts unearthed from deep recesses, until deciding upon one—a full leafed, sturdy looking thing that could bear tempestuous storms, and certainly hold the beers that could only be found in the luminous BevMo across the way. A Thanksgiving feast for those with the eyes to see it, for those four wistful boys with nowhere else to turn except to one another’s roguish grins, their glinting eyes full of mischief and more importantly, comfort, as they perused the aisles for the night ahead. Santa Claus Samuel Adams, Rudolph Chouffe’s, ELF Buzz Balls were all tossed into the whirring cart as they stumbled through the beer-laden corridors. The beers were lobbed into bags, raced home, and assembled onto an already too-cluttered table. Huddling around, eager to get in frame, the boys took a picture with their trophy haul as if they had just caught a 20 foot Great White shark.

The soft voice of Frank Sinatra hummed from a hand-me-down record as the boys changed into the snuggest pajamas they could find: a group of chattering squirrels in the warm chestnut glow of a nestled alcove, gently arguing over *the placement of those two-foot candy canes, the crookedness of the tree, which beers they should drink first*. All faded away as laughter graced the room, pure in its undulating flows of molasses, white horses with the wind behind them on an open prairie, free and pure and graceful, and for a second they were all ten again, curled up against their moms on a thick, fur rug, the Christmas lights casting a twinkling glow against their drowsy faces.

One by one by one, as beer after beer was put upon the sturdy branches, they fell asleep on the soft rug against each other, nurtured by the distant scents of a forest in a far off place, by the fresh scent of a crackling loaf, imperfect and golden, wafting through an auburn chimney on a morning where a cold mist envelopes the vale. Oh, what a relief, what luck, to be able to cherish moments in the present, passing moments you know you’ll long for on harsher days, moments that occur on a perfectly average night on a perfectly brisk fall eve.▲

ART // MILES TRACHTENBERG

"Eyes are the window to the soul" they say.
Really? Can you see my soul?
Can you all see it?
Because the first thing you ever say, anyone ever says,
"Your eyes are so *blue*."
Eyes are the window to the soul?
So by that logic you should know me—,
all of you.

I know I have *blue* eyes, mirrors exist.
A compliment? An observation?
A statement?
"Thank you." Boring.
"I know." Rude.
"You too!" A lie.

I know I have *blue* eyes.
"You have legs." "I know."
Not rude.

I look in the mirror every day.
Big reflective pools of water spilling out of me.
Our bodies are 60% water.
And biology has shown its face just shows on my outside.
Is that why my irises are *blue*?
Are they dyed from the inside?

"Eyes are the window to the soul."
Mine aren't.
My soul fell from my eyes years ago.
I heard a big thump in the middle of the night.
And my feet started tingling.
My soul replacing the rich *blue* pumping blood.

"Eyes are the window to the soul."
Really?

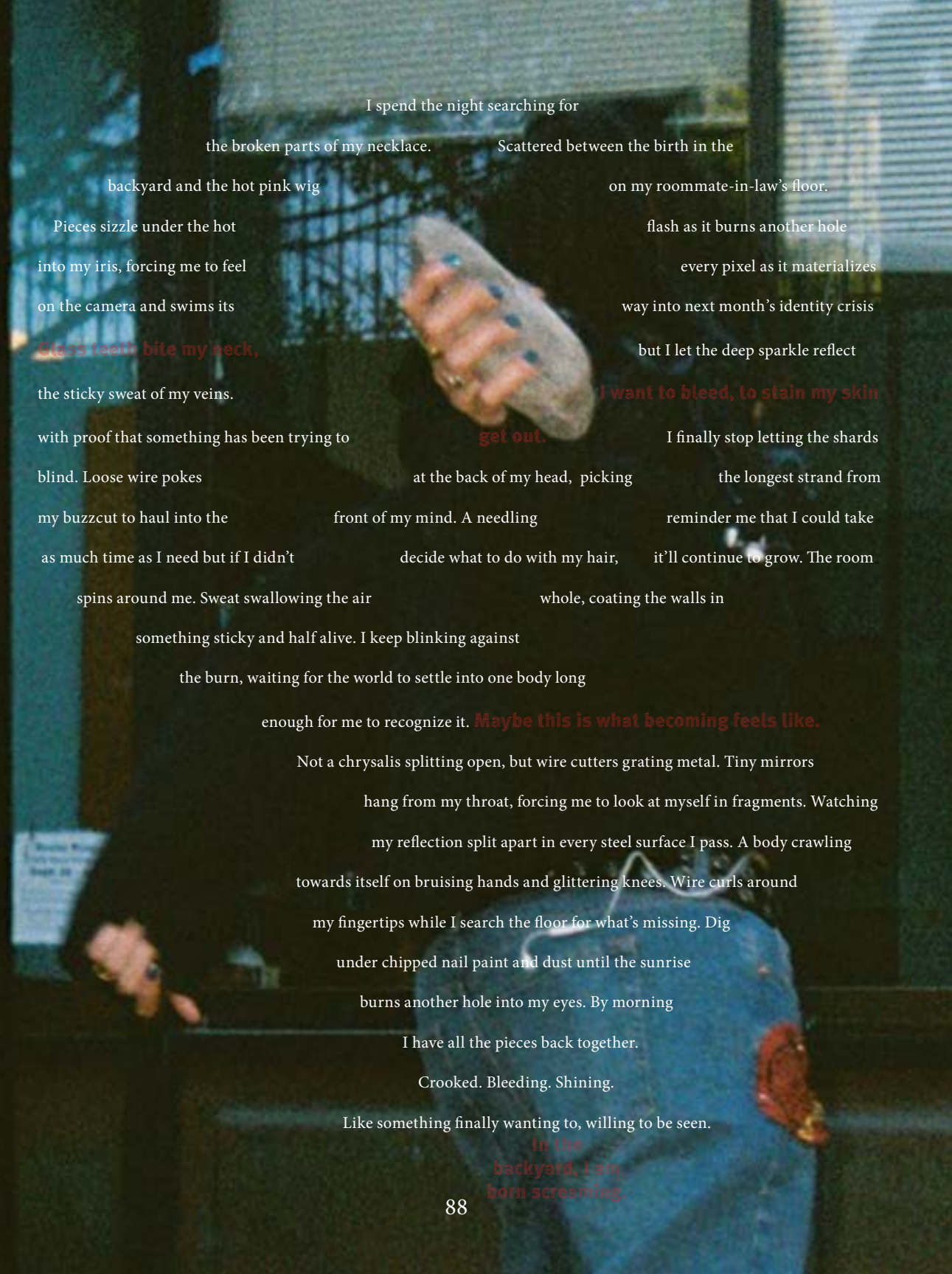
Do my eyes don toe rings and ocean *blue* nail polish?
Do they jolt back if they're touched right in the center?
Are they covered in sticky tar from where the *blue* monster fills up
my eyes?

My shoes have souls in them.
But to see them, you'll first find
unlaced sneakers or seven-year old leather flip-flops
Both with worn down soles.
My soul is wearing through soles.

An invisible rock in the ocean sliced open my foot one day.
The rich *blue* blood spilled red.
And a part of my soul must have seeped out.
I wonder if it tumbles around in the surf,
And that's why my eyes are so *blue*.

My feet that take me to the ocean,
My feet that carry my soul,
My feet that colored in my eyes.

Feet are the window to my soul.



I spend the night searching for
the broken parts of my necklace. Scattered between the birth in the
backyard and the hot pink wig on my roommate-in-law's floor.
Pieces sizzle under the hot flash as it burns another hole
into my iris, forcing me to feel every pixel as it materializes
on the camera and swims its way into next month's identity crisis
Glass teeth bite my neck, but I let the deep sparkle reflect
the sticky sweat of my veins. **I want to bleed, to stain my skin**
with proof that something has been trying to **get out.** I finally stop letting the shards
blind. Loose wire pokes at the back of my head, picking the longest strand from
my buzzcut to haul into the front of my mind. A needling reminder me that I could take
as much time as I need but if I didn't decide what to do with my hair, it'll continue to grow. The room
spins around me. Sweat swallowing the air whole, coating the walls in
something sticky and half alive. I keep blinking against
the burn, waiting for the world to settle into one body long
enough for me to recognize it. **Maybe this is what becoming feels like.**
Not a chrysalis splitting open, but wire cutters grating metal. Tiny mirrors
hang from my throat, forcing me to look at myself in fragments. Watching
my reflection split apart in every steel surface I pass. A body crawling
towards itself on bruising hands and glittering knees. Wire curls around
my fingertips while I search the floor for what's missing. Dig
under chipped nail paint and dust until the sunrise
burns another hole into my eyes. By morning
I have all the pieces back together.
Crooked. Bleeding. Shining.
Like something finally wanting to, willing to be seen.
**In the
backyard, I am
born screaming.**



a work in progress
By Yogita Sharma

ART // YOGITA SHARMA

ART // SEHEJ PAWAR

YES MOM, I'M GOING OUT WITH MY FRIENDS

BY SEHEJ PAWAR

Anxiety's driving,
on the wheel, speeding,
asking me every five minutes
if the world's mad at me,
or if I left the stove on,
or if my heart's still beating right.
He never lets the music play too loud,
but somehow it does.

Depression's in the backseat,
window down,
letting the cold hit his face
like he's trying to feel something.
He keeps reminding me
we could've stayed home
and been sad for free.

Love's riding shotgun,
feet on the dash,
acting like she owns the place.
She speaks in songs,
half-promises,

what ifs that sound like lullabies
until they don't.

She always leaves the door cracked
so Hope can get in
and fuck up the mood.

Overthinking's in the middle,
seatbelt twisted,
adjusting it every three seconds
like the air's too heavy.
Keeps asking
if I feel okay,
if I said the wrong thing,
if my presence is welcomed,

And me?
I'm squeezed in between all of them,
eating myself alive
in small bites,
pretending the whole time

that this is what normal people do
when they "go out."

We pull up to nowhere in particular,
sit in the car
for way too long
like it's a ritual.
Nobody gets out first.
We just breathe,
like we're practicing
how to stay here
without falling apart.

Yes, Mom,
don't wait up.
I'm out with my friends.
They brought everything
to the table:
anxiety, depression,
love, overthinking, hope, and me.
Tired,
trying,
and hoping the bill
isn't too big
by the end of the night.

Learn to Run (on Abandoning America)

By Henry
Patrick Coburn

I have a vaguely painful feeling
All my friends are going to die soon:
They said that we'd be meeting
Round the fountainhead at high noon.

The TV's fallen from the wall,

Ask your questions of the bite marks

As tidal waves engulf a shore

Long abandoned by its lifeguards.

Hordes of dormant critics

Write reviews in vacant basements

Peppered round decrepit towns

They pick apart our statements

Under 1000 cries of hunger

So survey the scenery

Before we pump the plunger

On 100 tons of TNT.

I'm burning all the filing cabinets

With unbridled glee

And laminating rulesets:

Fuck, fight or flee.

And that's just fine by me.

So blame the guv, blame the rum,

Blame the failing father figure

Whom you fear you may become,

But learn to run

If you must.

Walking all over the world

Is tedious.

Shes Entropy

By Jack Buschow

Suspended above the stem of some flesh,
You take the lamprey path
And walk under the first rib,
the second; Just a louse on the comb.

Pragmatic little beastie, serpent in the slurping mud—
Watch as you crunch isopods,
Call yourself a second coming.
It's you, really, in the rot substrate and the test tube;
A half-gone fossil—chthonic depthly thing.

As the brine mixes
In the delta tangle,
Your breath catches
Against the hot bite of primordial entropy.

When we meet tooth to tooth,
Spit and gums;
You grimace like it doesn't mean a thing,
And say *take what you want, this isn't even me.*



FORGIVE ME
DENTIST.
FOR I HAVE
SINNED!

By Calista Dollaga

94

ART // CALISTA DOLLAGA

My family dentist said it's clear I've been flossing, that I made his job easier. Keep it up!

The cellophane covered chair reclines.

The TV is mounted in the top corner, off, and wrapped in more cellophane; but I remember the days when it used to be on. Me, a little girl, flipping through those channels like pages in a magazine, and time passes so.

The blazing dental lamp shines its reckoning upon my open, vulnerable void of a mouth: a Brita filter, shelving the gunkiest parts of myself. They are hidden like deep treasures behind my closed lips. But, like a rubber band, he'll stretch and pry them open—wider, wider, wider. Enter the retractor. A cave of bones, ready to be mined and probed. Can't back out now, can I? Shove those blue latex fingers down my throat, how they squeak and grit against my porcelains. They'll search deeper and deeper until they find something worth reaping. Enter the little mirror that reflects the faults I can't see. Gazing up, counting off the squares on the fluorescent ceiling light, I let him carve, probe, and scalp away my impurities.

Between my canines, maybe he'll find some sort of proof that I eat my greens, or that I indulge in the most evil, irresistible sugars. *You eat a lot of sweets, don't you?* A calculated question, probing me to rethink last night's endeavors, gargling a pint of ice cream in front of the glow of *Real Housewives*. But that's not the worst of it, no. Sedimented and exposed in these bones are my most wretched habits and sins—whispers of my being, mortified through the stench of my own breath. It's disgusting, I can't take it.

SCRAPE, DRILL, POLISH THEM AWAY!

A confession made secular, through taste rather than words; but aren't we all tasters of soil? Don't the books say that we are all derived from one Man, fermented and born of literal dirt and sludge? And Woman—born of his own bone, blood already on her hands—who tasted the fruit that ruptured the course of our morality. Is that why the doctor sits here, inspecting and judging the remnants of my mouth, my deeds—not for anyone else to see but me? Damn the Woman. Damn me. Damn my dirty, damn mouth.

Enter the silver hook; deeper, deeper, deeper. It grinds against the wrong tooth, clawing at the cavity of secrets. An icy pain pierces through my gums. My eyebrows scrunch in agony. He can't find out more; I won't let him. I want to bite his finger off, stop him from discovering more relics of my misconduct. I can't say what I want; there's too much shit holding me back, or should I say,

OPEN.

OPEN ...

I'm way too open. I can't say "stop!" so I release a slight groan instead. The probe lifts briefly. The doctor apologizes and moves on, promising to be more careful around that tooth. That yellowish, liable, sensitive tooth, cradling my last gram of dignity. Please, carve out anything but that tooth. Please, instead, scrape away my wrongdoings, please.

DRILL

into this raunchy testament to my character. The ten servings of gummy bears I ate in one sitting. The plaque of drunken nights and cigarette ash scraped away, polished, and spat out. Suction out the echoes of the visceral, livid words I screamed at my mother after a senseless argument about lost keys. Lost fucking keys, and the everlasting debt shoved and buried down the throat of a daughter of a daughter of a daughter. Rinse away that ugliness so I have prettier stories to tell. Absolve me of my sins through that cheap mouthwash in a little paper cup. Turn this sinful cave back into an altar, so I can smile with purity once more. I smile in the mirror; my teeth are now shinier, still stained with the xanthous tinge I've always hated. Man, fuck the purity.

Cavity-free! The doctor says. If I were still six, I would've been directed to the magical toy box at the end of the hall, and maybe gotten a dinky plastic fairy for my troubles. But now, all I get is cool-minted penance: one shitty free toothbrush, a travel-size mouthwash, and a plastic tongue scraper in an unused poop bag. They know I'll return, and they know my soul needs this more than some polyethylene doll. I'm a stone-cold sinner, after all.

SO MUCH FOR

FLOSSING EVERY NIGHT.

ZONE OF J

By KACI AN

HISTORICAL NOTE: *In remembrance of Korean women who suffered under Japanese occupation (1932–1945)*

A time a place cannot last
Bring yourself to me fast.
Come to me as I lie
Do your worst and I comply.
Elevate your cruel desire
Fucking until you tire.
Go on until release
Hold and satisfy your thirst.
I will lie here.

J FOR YOU

K FOR ME.

Let us see what happens.
May the future hold the lens,
No intent to share a common sense.
Open your eyes,
Pass me your lies,
Quit your bullshit,
Raise your hand,
Salute your flag
Take your oath,
Until your breath is gone
Victory!
Well, we shall see.

X-rays of our torn-up soon-to-be past.
Yesterday I dreamed of home,
Zone of J is now where I roam, with
nowhere to go.

ART // KACI AN & NATALIE RILEY

A long the base of the Andes mountain range lie small farm cooperatives, where farmers are committed to organic and sustainable crop production and diversification. From these farmers, we bring you Trader Joe's Organic Fair Trade Breakfast Blend. This coffee is a blend of South American beans that have been roasted to a medium brown to highlight their mellow, easy drinking characteristics. Sweet caramel notes and floral overtones complement this medium bodied brew.

The Perfect Cup

For the perfect cup, grind the beans as you need them, according to the coffee maker's suggestion of grind.

The most sustainable coffee grounds come from **elephant shit**. Look it up. Out of its ass, picked by man's fingers. No shovel required. All natural. The packaging assures there's no smell. They wash 'em. No aftertaste. Trust me.

With one bag of **shit**—I mean coffee—You too can save a world that has long bent toward self-destruction, imminent, Instantaneous combustion. Every night, when you close your eyes, you believe the world waits in stasis, forever and always.

However, last night, while you slept the world changed. They stole your future.

don't you want
it back?

Oligarchical machinations to community seems opaque. Become the knife that cuts the hands of a thief. The ones who cover their eyes, feign blind, project blame on a cycle of names, who won't face repercussions of clenched fist. They tell me "The revolution starts on the corner." Your corner, our corner, and the corner that comes after, if ever at all. One act is bigger than any man. The answer lies in the palm of your hand. So be like David and sling that **shit**. Rip a head off that tyrant. Sit. A throne to survey before you can't. Words mean nothing, please understand. Inaction, an elegy to sand

Y'know?
It kinda tastes like hazelnut.
One bag is seventy bucks
and Keurig pods are on sale at Costco...
Rent is due in two weeks.

fuck.

damn.

elephant
shit

by christian
solorio

The apartment is lived in,
the life of the tenant
scattered everywhere,

the walls,
the floor,
the ceiling.

The bed's unwashed,
the laundry unfolded
and scattered across the floor.

The cat's fed,
bowl full until at least
the end of the week,

but the litter box is overflowing,
its stink filling up the apartment,
overwhelming in its intensity.

The cat cuddles with her owner,
once attentive, now aloof,
uncaring.

The mail piles up
on the floor
in front of the door.

Bills, bills, and more bills,
waiting for attention,
the red lettering bright and angry.

The woman's coworkers grumble,
angry at her for not showing up,
especially now,

with an important project in the works,
but no one knows her phone number,
let alone where she lives.

They soothe themselves with cursing her name,
not bothering to wonder
if she's okay.

The neighbors talk behind her back,
complaining about her lack of
interest in their lives.

They say she is unkempt,
that she is snobby,
that she is above them,

all the while nobody wonders
why she hasn't left the house,
nobody wonders where she has gone.

The neighbors complain
of the smell,
the strange neighbor.

To the landlord,
but he only cares about
his money, not the people providing it.

The landlord finally investigates
when the rent is due and
she has not paid.

When she is found,
the cat next to her,
it is a nightmarish scene.
The cat was only fed until the end of the week,
she thought someone would find her sooner,
But...

it took a month
for someone to come in,
evidence of a lonely life.

She kept to herself,
they all say,
How could they have known?

The apartment is scrubbed clean,
biohazard removal coming in,
stripping all signs of the last tenant.

It is hard work,
expensive work,
and the landlord finds himself wondering

why couldn't she have gone somewhere else,
anywhere else,
so he wouldn't have to clean up after her.

Her belongings are tossed,
no family coming to claim them,
and her life is erased,

Just like that.

The cat is removed,
Along with the litter box,
Not knowing where her owner has gone.

And after the cleanup has finished,
the tools gone,
and the apartment empty,

it is a blank canvas,
for the next tenant,
waiting to be lived in.

LIVED IN

BY

ALLISON UPTON

I see ethanol corpses complaining
To guards delaying an artificially good time.
Techno turntables bump the bar,
Drowning the sound of my heartbeat.

I don't feel their eyes upon me;
The drunkards' leering, hungry
For sex on the dance floor,
Tasting each other's humidity.

I have too many questions about—
Well, vulgar obsession—about being of age,
Imbibing twisted mermaid lemonade
To kill the guilt with pleasure.

I have nowhere to look and fully
Observe, there's no point to anything.

It's commingled tears and sweat
Staining my prudish face.

Amethyst fluorescent bulbs
Draw—my eyes—no booze to
Lose sight of these numb losers.
My dollar bills' faces grew long.

I have no choice but to let my soul free;
To move my stiff, reluctant body
Like a multicolored goblin,
Bragging about my sobriety.

C
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S
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BY
JEQVANY
SZILIN-
GOMEZ

LANGUAGE SPEAKS TO FEELING

By Charlotte Davis

*Could you capture me?
Codify an intricate existence?*

My soul must have tasted
how it was to have you
once,

maybe twice.

If the mind forgets, the body must remember
what feeling feels like.

*You would have me bound on paper, grasped
in curves and shapes,*

etched in ink.

I'm not positive I can chisel a body
in perfect definition.
Touching is a melodic salve,
but always incomplete.

*You burned me in your flesh,
affection buried in your heart.
We are
embroiled in
cumulative asphyxiation.*

*The solemn one has wept
too long without its skin.
Does hurting hurt?*

Can you long for something you haven't had?
So, so long it's been.

*Long for me then! Don't leave me here.
If I must be without a conduit
then you must be
in anguish.*

*All that comes in between.
Hand slipping, water dripping.
I am suffering to suffer.*

SMILE

IF YOU ASKED MY SISTER TO NAME ONE GOOD THING ABOUT MY FATHER, SHE WOULD TELL YOU HIS FAVORITE BEER.

If you asked me to name one good thing about my father, I would give you several.

When I was young, my father was the done everything he could to get the kind of man who could fix always dirty and rusty. He I wasn't. It felt like he was the that, but he didn't. He glued never break, specifically the

For a long time, I forgave him sister. I forgave him. If you Even now, I still don't.

My father ran off somewhere, her fault. I didn't believe her man who was my anchor, the person of bitterness that felt endless, and my sister never thought to see him that way. He was everything to me.

But I can't blame my sister.

She was born four years after me. By the time she knew him, he was already different—older, worn down. Gray hair creeping in, weakness settling into his shoulders. She was only six when he had the surgery, and from then on, something in her shifted. She saw him as a waning figure, but he loved her in quieter ways. He'd clean up her spilled milk before she could cry too hard. He'd buy her candy, but never toys. He'd show up to pick her up from school, but he was never really home. We didn't know what he did for work; he didn't know what we were learning in school.

If you asked my dad to name one thing about my sister, it would probably be her favorite candy. She knew small things about him. That he was funny, maybe, that he drank a cold Golden back in El Salvador, and in the States, it was always a Corona with lime.

That's about all she knew.

I used to tell her not to dwell on the past, that she'd lose herself if she did. But I think I was trying to compensate for something I didn't understand. I had guidance from him, even if it was incomplete. She didn't.

And somehow, that became my responsibility.

An ill-fitted sixteen-year-old trying to play father. Only four years older, still just a kid. I didn't deserve that role, but it fell on me anyway.

It always did.

It's something about not having him there.

shape of home to me. A buff 5'6" man from El Salvador who had to the United States, became my idol. Charismatic and capable, anything. In the moments I got to see him, his hands were never forced me into sports, never pushed me to be anything only person in the world who knew me. My mom hated all 1,000 of my motor mover lego pieces together so they'd electrical monkey, he knew it was my favorite animal.

for everything. Everything he did to me, to my mom, to my asked me why, I wouldn't know how to answer.

and my mom tried to convince me that none of it was because I couldn't. All I could possibly picture is the I tied every certainty to. She spoke about him with a kind followed her lead: silent, distant, unwilling to face him. I would've

PLEASE

BY NICOLE AGUIRRE

It's something about not having him there.

My mom carried everything, keeping us safe, fed, clean, and protected. She built a life out of exhaustion. We resented her for the way she spoke about him, but she did what he couldn't.

And still, she says his name. At dinner. In passing. In memory. I used to wonder why. Maybe it's the empty holidays. Maybe she misses him. I often catch her playing his favorite songs from time to time.

Maybe she'd never forgive herself if she admitted that she does.

My head in my hands as he left, stocking stuffers are empty, the presents unopened, Christmas ornaments shattered into a million pieces. He took his 1992 Jaguar with him, his prized possession, a stationary car, when he wasn't repairing it. I knew I'd never see him again.

I had known him my whole life up until

that very point.

A couple years have gone by now, for eight of the twenty-one years

and I've only known him I've been alive.

And somehow, that feels like

everything.

My brother, he figured things out despises him now, thinks my mom

in a different way. He was right all along.

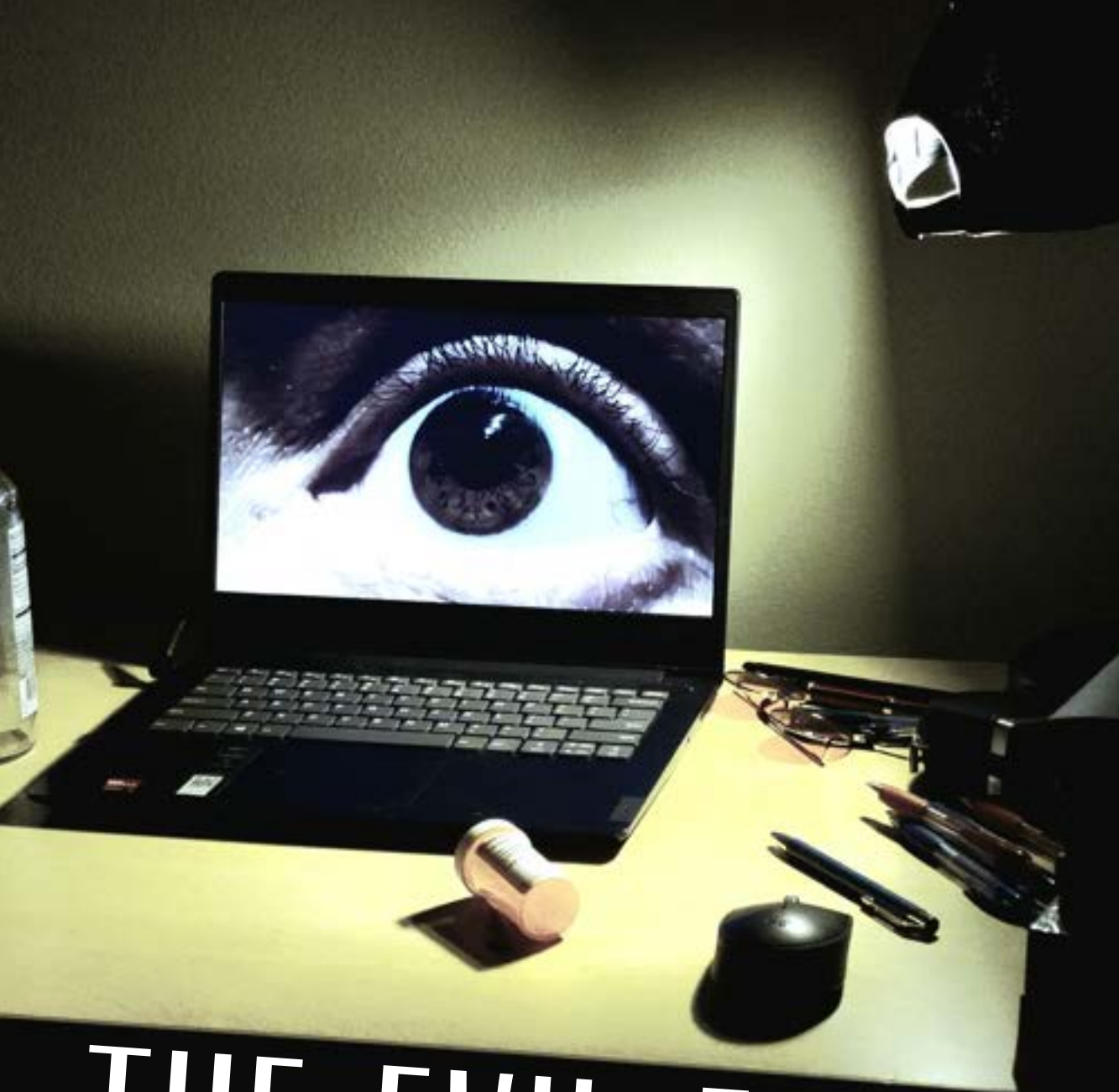
And she might have been.

BUT IF YOU ASKED ME WHAT I KNOW ABOUT MY FATHER,

I'D STILL TELL YOU ABOUT HIS FAVORITE BEER.

And if you asked my brother,

He wouldn't say much anymore.▲



THE EVIL EYE

SEAN P. MCQUILL

106

ART // SEAN P. MCQUILL

It was a cruel day in April when I first felt the overwhelming weight of the Evil Eye burden itself upon my back. I had gone to have lunch with a dear friend of mine from high school, whom I hadn't seen for quite some time. We had grown distant, you see, and whether it was out of nostalgia or chismotic curiosity (I do not know which, exactly, had overpowered me at that moment), I sent him a brief and plain message as a means of establishing a renewed connection. I had not expected to hear back from him so soon, yet it was a mere second afterward when he had responded in kind to my brevity. By sheer coincidence we had happened to live no further than two blocks from one another, the same neighborhood, the same city, and for an amount of time which approximated each other. The only real difference seemed to be the fact that I was always doing things an hour ahead of him. Whereas I would work during the day from eight o'clock to four, he would do so from nine o'clock to five. If the one of us went for drinks afterward, I would arrive at five, and he at six. As it happened, we both had formed the habit of frequenting the same diner, on the same weekdays (every Saturday, twelve o'clock), and enjoyed the same meals from the establishment. Given the obvious difference in schedules, our fated day of reunion would be established for around twelve-thirty.

As I walked down the sidewalk towards the greasy spoon, I saw a figure which seemed to be a strange shade of my own visage, I had already arrived and sat down at the patio. As I came closer to the reflection, it became clear that it had in fact been my friend from so long ago. Yet, his face moved in strange ways, contorted oddly, an approximate smile, contorted so greatly into exaggeration. The top of his gums were on full display as his upper lip had curled into that bizarre crescent. As I edged closer towards the table, he jumped forth from excitement and shook my hand with an extreme force, causing some mild pain in my shoulder.

"Heellooo my friend!" he said "It's been soooo loooong, hasn't it?"

As he spoke, he moved the whole of his maw, as though the jaw and tongue and lips were all operating as separate agents.

"I suppose it has," I said. "You seem rather, uh...chipper?"

"Weeeell of course, it is a most wonderful April afternoon. The spring sun's warmth is just beginning to break through!"

It had been deeply overcast that day, I had actually remarked to myself that the gloom of gray might ruin the whole event. It was then that I noticed another odd fact about this figure, there was a dullness of his eyes, dry. Those pearls in his eyes were painted and unpolished marble. In fact, the rest of his face seemed to mimic this, molded clay on frame rather than flesh on bone. Despite all of this, and my great sensation of unease, I continued to lunch with him.

The waiter set down some glasses of water at our table, then when asked if we had wanted anything else to drink, we both declined. I then decided to allow him to ask the first questions, but was soon displeased to find a great field of silence strewn before us. And when the waiter came back to take our orders, he did as before, and asked for the same meal that I had. With our plates of food placed before us, I noticed that he only moved in to bite only after I had done so before. Every bite occurred one after the other, every cut of meatloaf, every glob of mash, every scoop of peas, each mouthful found its way to be even closer to my own movement than the one which preceded it. My friend had become a sort of delayed mirror, a snapshot of the second which I had just lived, an utter and nigh complete replicant.

There was one exception to that meal, however, in which I felt the façade fade away. A moment in which the life fled back to his cheeks, and the light returned to his eyes, where he could act as a unified whole, rather than as an assemblage of various fleshy machines. When this return emerged, he turned his head back and forth, scanning the area with a fervor.

107

“J-John?” he said, “H-how are you here?”

“Sorry? We agreed to lunch? Are you alright?”

“No, no, not good. The last thing I remember...what do I remember? Yes...YES! I remember. I went to a party with Dean,” another classmate of ours, “I thought he seemed off...”

“Sorry? Please, slow down, I’m not understanding—”

“He copied everything about me, everything, every detail, hell, he must’ve gotten surgery to look like me.”

He continued to prattle on, over, over, and over; a cascading rush of words ran mad from his mouth. It was then, during this unceasing will of words, that the crushing weight came crashing upon me. I felt millions of pinpricks stab every inch of my body, and all around me I could only see them all staring at me. Me! Not my friend. Everyone in the luncheonette, every man, woman, other, they all stared at me with their wills, and I felt every thought of disgust as though it were a sensation of great pain. Every minute detail of my image that I hadn’t carefully preened and prodded, every inch that was visibly insidious, I felt the disgust at every stretch of hideous flesh was a painful growth.

The rest of the events of that lunch remain to me only in fragments. I remember screaming in agony, only for the pain to grow from having done so, the cruel and wanting stares demanding an apology for the act of my image. I then kept myself quiet by biting down on a napkin, and though the pain was still great, I was able to march onwards. My friend, still rambling, had entered into a fierce rhythmic chant, “Beauty, Beauty is in, Beauty is in The Eye, The Eye, The Eye.”

Lacking the will to respond, I took great effort to leave. No one tried to stop me, but they all stared, all of them, all with the same eye. Though every glance came from a unique angle, I could feel it all, all the same, the same thing watching me. Even the familiar faces I saw on my way back had become strange to me, or perhaps they were strangers wearing masks, I can no longer be certain. And through those masks, where their eyes should have been, was The Eye, only The Eye remained to watch me.

I somehow made my way back home, the darkness had become comforting for the first time. It was only there, with all the blinds sewn shut, that I felt safe from the thing. I decided then that I needed to change, to look different, to act different, to

become a stranger to

THE EYE.

I would assume an alternate identity, and melt away into it. Only once I have achieved this completely, will I have truly escaped it.▲

Do mothers know the difference between
eroding and softening?

After bleeding for a month straight,
I only know bleaching and restraining,

And reaching a point
I consider low.

Home economics is wiping shame off the
kitchen counters
With a sticky
dollar,

And turning it inside out,
Clean side facing out,

So it is, without a doubt,
Edible.

Food costs less when hunger is otherwise occupied,
When it’s busy lifting tampons and cold medicine.

Women’s work is a frisk and fleece.

Hope is fat. Rich and fried.
And you’re occupied at least.

Try to palate this life to aliens without
taste buds groomed for doom and gloom.

They don’t assume the burden
of Aiding or Abetting for dignity’s sake.

ART // AMANDA ROSSITER



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They don’t kill bugs with a closed
fist
To be naked and named on the food
chain,

Or paint their nails, so they have nothing ugly to
bite,
And make a game out of what feels good in their
mouth.

They hunger out loud.
This is the type of boredom we should be
embarrassed to talk about.

A lost lust for life isn’t something a steak can fix,
and
The spice of life is the body’s best-kept
secret.

Trick is, if you can’t sit with yourself,
You can tear off a piece of your own ass and eat it.

Can’t you see that self-cannibalizing isn’t stooping,
it’s conserving? It’s choosing which parts of
yourself you can live without.

This!
Is the type of boredom we should be embarassed to
talk about.

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CAT-ALUM: Iraa Guleria

Hi UCSB! It's such an honor to be writing from Virginia to you all! I graduated from UCSB in 2019, a proud alum of *The Catalyst* Team! I have since moved to Wisconsin for medical school, where I discovered a love of cheese (and solidarity in UCSB's love of beer), and I am now in the cutest little town in southern Virginia training as an emergency medicine resident physician. As a true textbook extrovert, I spend most of my time being around my friends, cooking and eating (I'm currently very into making ramen and dumplings from scratch and have family dinner with my closest buds several times a week), indoor and outdoor rock climbing (I'm close to some of the best in the country which is surprisingly in Kentucky and West Virginia), playing volleyball and trail running, and of course reading. Currently, my favorite authors are Lily King, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Haruki Murakami. I most recently read *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* and absolutely devoured it, and my favorite colors are blue and orange. My favorite life lesson is it's more important who you're with than where you are, and my superpower is identifying two songs that sound the same. I miss the beach and I absolutely LOVED my time at UCSB and in Isla Vista, so don't waste a single second of it.

E A S Y:

By Iraa Guleria

Smoke spilled from mouths taking the place of words. It hung in the air, dry and heavy, stifling breath and smudging edges. An occasional sigh would pour from around the corner, and it would curl and roll, washing over bodies, entirely unlike waves of cool water that cleansed dirt and blame from soiled hands.

At times, someone managed to open their lips and breathe something into the room, far enough away from the others, and the smoke would dance and twirl, seductively; and it would rise up, out of this place, taunting them like that. But the smell would remain, in lungs and fingernails.

Kyla sat in the corner of a dimly lit bar next to a girl with big hair. She had been taking pleasure in marinating her worries, but was now getting irritated at the music. It had been on the whole time, an egotistical techno sound, all base and beat, forcing energy into the chests and calves of the corpses around her; hollow as they seemed. Stirring her drink, Kyla continued to ruminate on what she should have done differently or what Abby could have said. "Whatever you want," was always how it started, and Kyla was too selfish not to take what she wanted, and Abby was too nice not to offer it. They spoke softly, exchanging brief observations regarding this sad town they had ruefully chosen to visit.

"I haven't heard someone speak English like that in I don't even know how long."

Kyla looked up from her wilting mojito. The sentence belonged to a pair of dark eyes, not far away. They were shadowed in a deep-set face and leaning over as if about to whisper something to the browning lime wedge that straddled her glass. Her mouth started speaking without consultation and she heard herself: "We're both visiting from California." Forcing her lips to widen, she assumed a friendlier gaze. Pause. Back to herself and away from the resentful feelings. Kyla swallowed. "Are you traveling too?"

She felt Abby's own mouth stiffen into a smile and attempt to convince herself that she, too, enjoyed talking to men she didn't know. The stranger's chuckle luckily broke the desire to roll her eyes.

"Oh no, I wish." He gestured a hand to the person sitting next to him. "We just moved here a couple months ago." His fingers led Kyla's gaze to his compatriot, one who seemed to be half-listening half-struggling to process what had happened several seconds prior, all the while sweating thick drops of marijuana. The beads on his forehead reflected the dancing purple lights, dutifully joining those on her glass.

"We're out celebrating this guy's last few days here." He slapped his friend's back. Hard. "He's moving with his new girlfriend."

At this, Kyla waited for some sort of cheer, a clinking of glasses, or a toss of an arm around a shoulder and a story about them as kids, but instead felt the stale air stiffen even further. The music pulsated. She looked over at the accused, waiting for him to speak. *Say something*, she thought. Kyla looked over at Abby, whose lips pursed and head was pointed down. She pressed the brown-colored mint in between her thumb and forefinger. *They never say anything*.

He registered nothing, the one that could speak grunted, and then his eyes for once lit up slightly and he said "Yeah! We're moving to Budapest. She's great, you guys would like her."

"Oh yeah," the other smirked, "I knew that from the moment I met her. When I moved here." He looked at me, holding his murky shot. "They welcomed me by picking me up from the airport. Together." He wasn't smiling. The shot was tossed back quickly.

Abby stopped torturing her mint.

Dark eyes suggested they go dancing. Slipping easily into her cheerful self, Kyla excitedly got up only to look behind her and see an all-too-familiar sheepish smile-and-shoulder move that wanted to absolve itself of the guilt it so clearly held. "I think I'm just gonna go back and smoke."

"Are you kidding me?" yelled dark eyes. "Tonight?!"

Abby and I stepped closer to each other, feeling like an invasion of privacy. Kyla flashed back to being caught while parents whispered angrily in the living room. Her cheeks had burned so. They were so tired sounding. It was effortless and elegant. Rehearsed.

Their script continued and Abby looked at her friend. Kyla silently agreed, and arm in arm they walked on, forgetting old lines and their wariness. Her head leaned on Kyla's shoulder, and they left then, laughing at how foolish, how immature. How they could never. How could we ever.▲



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THE GAME IS AFOOT:

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