

AWHIND



WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

THE PROGRAM FOR WRITING AND RHETORIC
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

THE CLASSIC

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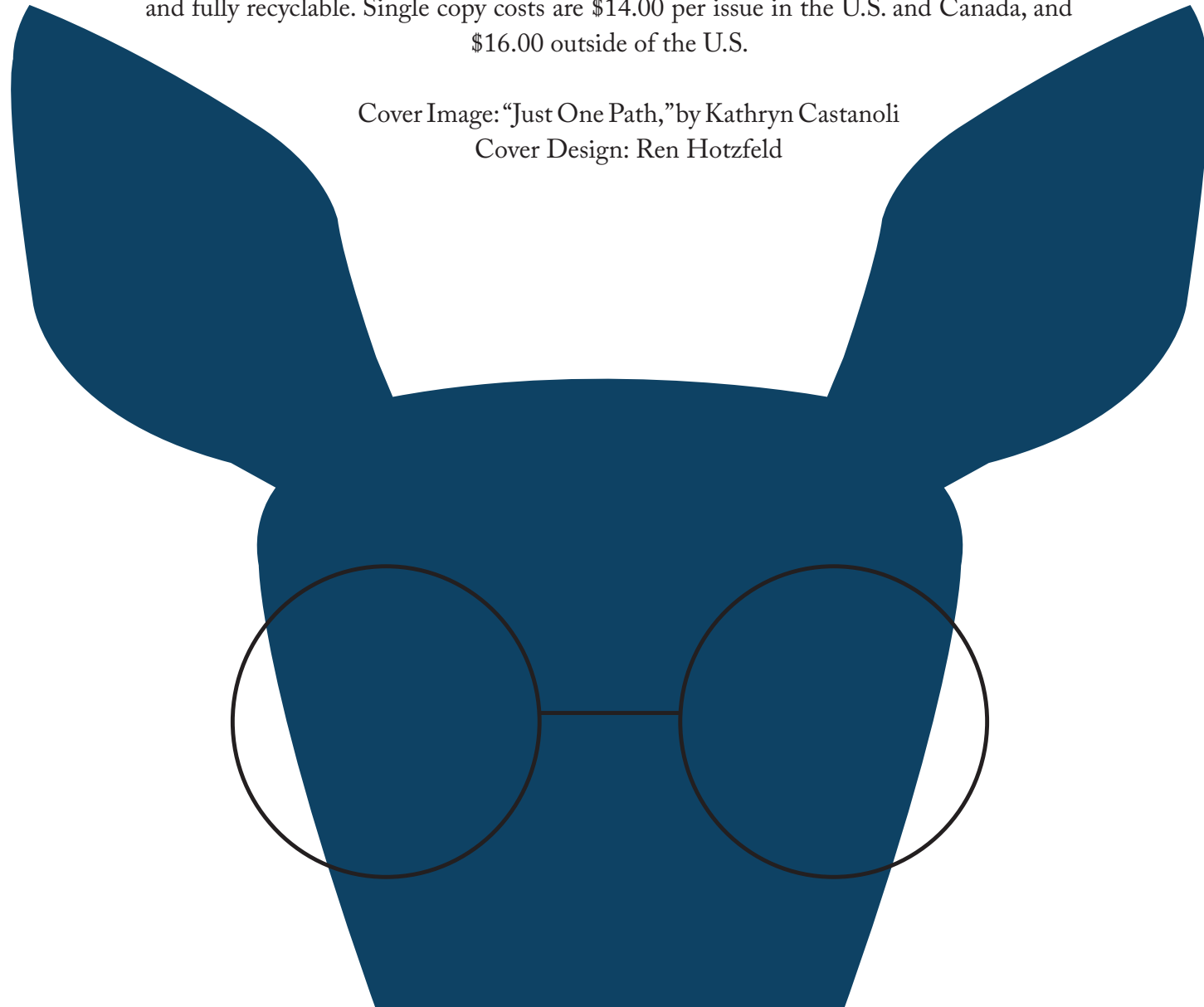
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ON HINDSIGHT

by HARRISON CANDELARIA FLETCHER

As a boy, I lived among fragments. Pottery shards. Skeleton keys. Strands of rusty barbed wire. Artifacts covered every surface of my Albuquerque home. My mother spent weekends exploring the back roads and secondhand shops of New Mexico, seeking treasures others had overlooked. She found inspiration in these relics and transformed our home into a museum, cathedral, and self-portrait. I'd often stand beside her as she assembled her discoveries into "shrines," before pulling me aside and pointing to a table holding a sparrow's nest, a Pueblo spirit rattle, a string of Tibetan prayer beads, and an antique clock turning in slow, dry ticks. "Look closely," she'd say. "Everything tells a story."

Lately, I have come to see the essay as artifact: not a replica of life, but a vessel shaped from what remains. Memory, inheritance, hauntings—shards of experience gathered and arranged to preserve not only what happened, but what it means, and how it burns. *Hindsight VI* shines with work shaped by that impulse: to make of experience something enduring and, in the making, transform it.

"Stripped," by Cheri Vazquez, is a fierce lyric essay in which a club becomes both prison and portal. The speaker measures life in "songs and dollars and stage sets," where time is sold as belonging. Moving through a dreamscape of mirrors, banana vodkas, faulty husbands, and bored bachelors, the essay traces how memory, trauma, longing, and displacement haunt the present. As the self shifts from wolf to fawn, predator to prey, braided vignettes deepen its atmosphere of instinct, grief, and endurance. "We dance gutted, skinned, and hollowed." What emerges is not confession but transformation: a search for a way back to "woods and horses and mud pies," and the feeling of "feeling held, feeling whole."

"The Candy in the Carcass," by Frico Ahrendts examines suffering and sacrifice amid the constraints of structural poverty. A moment of respite for a candy-hustling narrator becomes a crisis as he decides whether to rid his home of a mouse to ease his mother's mind. What begins as an act of kindness becomes a brutal trial as he confronts bitterness, guilt, helplessness, and the hardening demanded of him. The prose is sensuous and exact—"comfortable as a memory," "hot from the bones out"—while the recurring "*Ntick, ntick, ntick*" becomes a pulsing dread. "He knew he had to commit. With a clenched jaw he pushed himself one more time, his consciousness a descending nail."

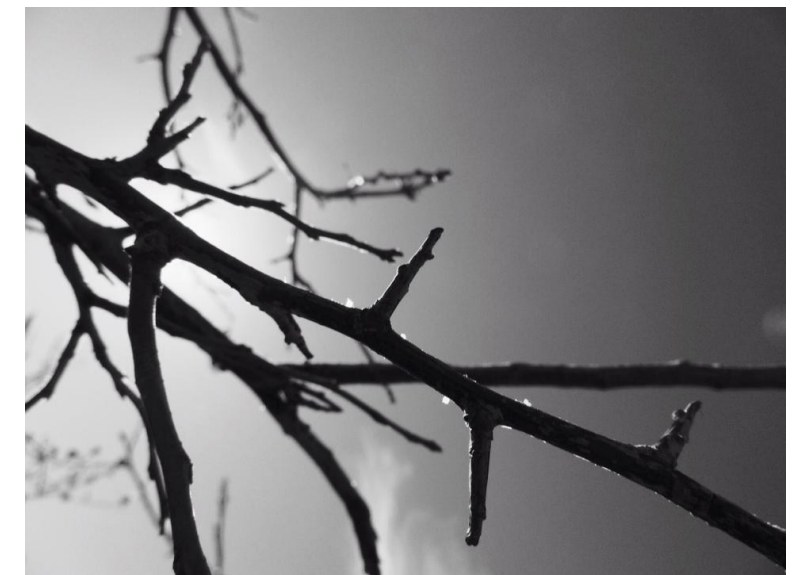
In Abigail Cain's "the sea and i are ill," cleansing becomes a ritual of return, where the body meets the tides of memory and place. Moving through camphor oil, salt, "silver shells," and "sick fingerprints," the poem mingles cells and sand in a terrain intimate and estranging. The sea is balm and erasure, "foamy enough to soap me and wash my skin away."

In "remnants," the language turns toward the mother's hands, tight braids, and a backroad world of "tangled cobwebs," oak roots, and myth. Images coalesce into a dark meditation on inheritance, where memory, body, and landscape hold the remains of the girl she was.

"Peerless," by Ashay Vaidya, follows a first-generation immigrant emerging from years of isolation to re-enter "civilized society," where "clean slates and silent rebirths" linger just beyond reach. In the intimacy of a classroom, he encounters a fellow student's fractured recounting of "innocence, love, and the loss of innocence to love." Its force unsettles him, eroding composure and boundaries: "This was her beginning, their crossroads, and his end." Braiding lyric fragments with incantatory prose, this striking essay traces how trauma can distort empathy, how longing becomes projection, and what it costs to keep asking "why" in a world unwilling to answer.

Taken together, the works in *Hindsight VI* make their own kind of shrine: a luminous gathering of artifacts, shaped with such care they become not only enduring, but alive.

Harrison Candelaria Fletcher is the author of *Descanso for My Father*, *Presentimiento*, *Finding Querencia*, and *Comfort of Stone*. His work appears in *New Letters*, *TriQuarterly*, and elsewhere. Honors include fellowships from the NEA, MacDowell, and the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, as well as the Colorado Book Award and New Mexico-Arizona Book Award. He teaches at Colorado State University.



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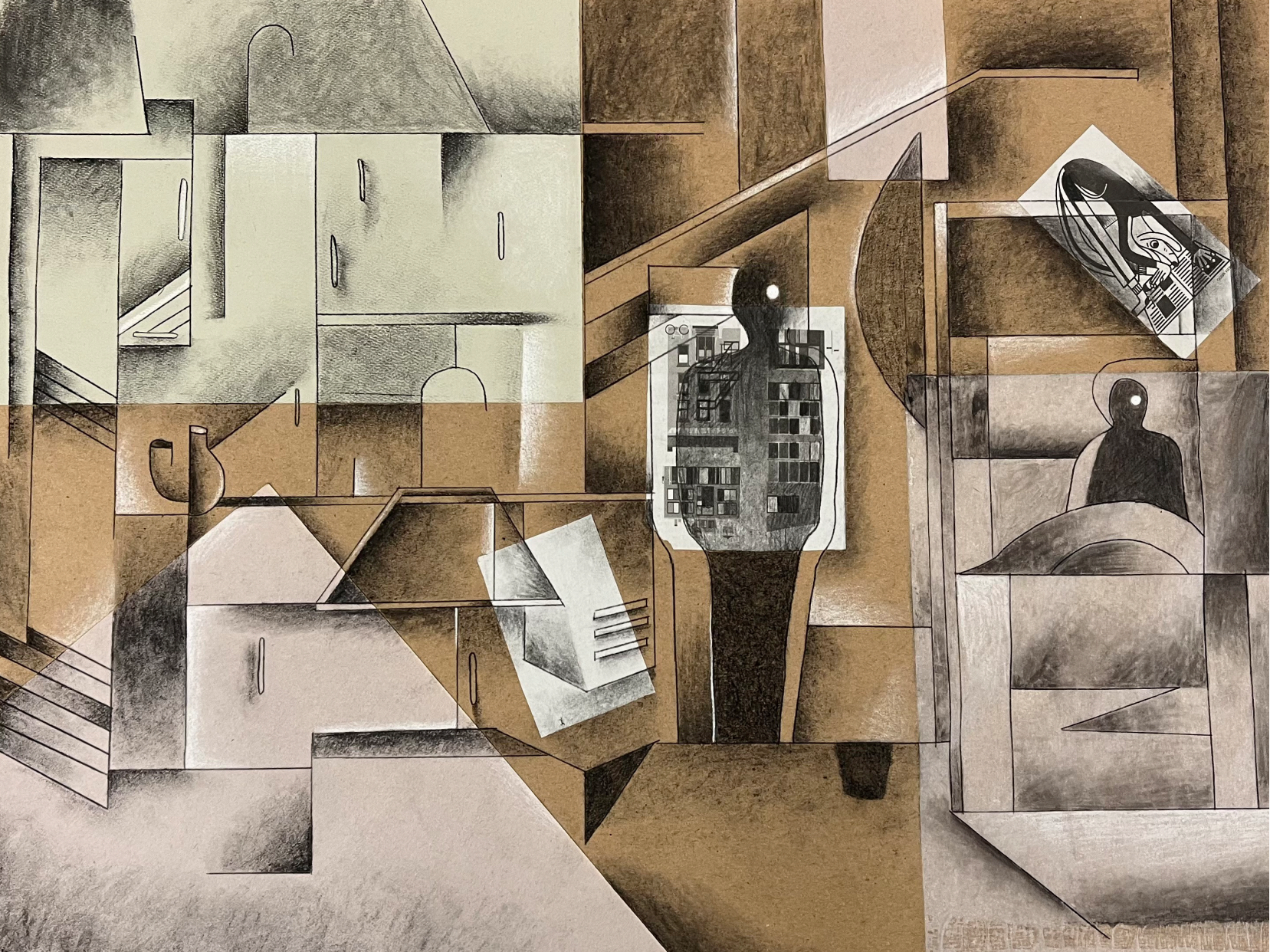
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Art by LILA BYRNE

PEERLESS

by ASHAY VAIDYA

It was a muffled, moody September morning. Alex woke up in the dark of dawn, yawning, shivering, and sweating. A first-generation immigrant, he often wondered if there was a trick to becoming acclimated to his new country's tempestuous nature. Another yawn, followed by a few minutes of staring at the pitted white ceiling that appeared designed to cover up years of accumulated dust and grime. Then, an intentional headshake to dissuade another directionless trip on the runaway train of thoughts, and he was finally awake.



The day promised to be a challenging one. After years of isolation, one more attempt at re-entering society. Civilized society. The neatly gift-wrapped one, with politeness, courtesy, and a capacity for empathy. Attributes he had fallen short on the last time round. Why else would society accept his long-drawn absence, and *he* accept ostracism?

It had to be mutual. And since the only world that came to a standstill for years was his own, it was safe to assume he was the lawbreaker in need of penance.



His mum—who was visiting—had prepared a hearty meal of spinach curry with peanuts and freshly-made flatbread. It was delicious, of course, and mostly worth spending the rest of the morning cleaning up. It would be done sooner, but the apartment came with an ancient dishwasher that broke down often. So, he preferred doing the dishes himself to avoid the headache of repeated dealings with the building's abrasive superintendent, who blamed most repairs on immigrants' ignorance when it came to using 'modern' technology. He didn't mind the extra work, although he did feel annoyed when thinking how much quicker it would be if not for his tremendous capacity to embark on meandering soliloquies at the slightest threat of performing repetitive tasks.

Around noon, after saying goodbye to his mum (and reminding her to lock the door behind him), he started on foot towards the school for his orientation. It was a beautiful fall afternoon, the first breath of crisp, cold wind made him gasp, and his eyes welled up ever so slightly, like when chopping a particularly feisty red onion. He took another breath, deeper this time. The pristine white snow on the sidewalk seemed to blend in effortlessly with the red, yellow, and brown leaves of the perfectly spaced trees that stood sentinel along both sides of the deserted, four-lane road. A day for clean slates and *silent* rebirths.

Rewilding

dear wheatgrass
&
wildflowers

what gives you joy?

and you, human, ogling them

from beneath fear
&
beyond hope

with love
&
loss

where is yours?

The classroom contained all the makings of a welcoming space. The student desks were spread around in a circle with an empty area in the middle for the staff to share their stories. There was a brown papier-mâché tree on one of the walls with white page-leaves that contained assorted hopeful messages handwritten by previous students. Another wall had three floor-to-ceiling glass windows that looked out onto a bustling side street leading toward the local train station. The far corner was lined with cardboard boxes overflowing with animal plushies, used books, and other curious paraphernalia.

Wary of his unparalleled potential for becoming distracted by pretty much anything, Alex found a seat near the center of the room so he could focus on the orientation. As he was settling in, the last student walked in and claimed one of the few empty seats, the one just beside him. She was strikingly beautiful... and having said that, there was something much more there that would righteously anger you at having received such an objective description. 'They' were graceful, but with an accessibility dreamers might foolishly use to assume being on equal footing even while worshipping those ethereal features. Somewhere along those lines, and unfortunately, remarkably far off.

Carefully, she (for his limitations were many, and thinking of her as 'she' was the first) began arranging her belongings one by one on the desk, pausing after her laptop was placed squarely in the middle. A small frown. Then, with one hand clutching the power cord, she asked nobody in particular, "Is there an electrical outlet nearby?"

_nhurt

are you
alive, dear technology?

unresolved past, undead present
addictive escape, distractive solace
none and all?

means of living, death to hurting
random cog, nascent leaf,
barely breathing?

The 180-minute classes usually ended swiftly. Despite feeling intensely personal, most of the topics also blessed him with a sense of evaporating doom through the connections they weaved between himself and this new ragtag, makeshift family—his cohort. Within that safe space, every story was merely and singularly human-centered, traversing the usual trappings of social norms and conditioning. As if they were finally free to tap into something more primal, more real, often substantially more visceral. And from those depths, begin anew.

As the months unfolded, Alex barely recognized how many of his existential lines were blurring. There was a gathering, creeping urgency (for his second limitation was now relinquishing the shadows) to his thoughts and actions that began feeling unsustainable. Like torrential rain barely held back by a strategically placed log of crumbling wood. Or thundering skies quaveringly restrained by a surreptitiously placed cloud of threadbare wool.

Every breath became a *reckoning* with the old way of life.

P_thy

embrace,
end.

the lore
the life
the care,
the fear.

become embattled in,
recklessness.

the doubt
the strife
the willful abandon,
the dichotomy of healing.

Back home, he began disconnecting from the present and escaping into imagined scenarios that might transpire in class. He prepared for them, rehearsed potential lines, and anticipated possible behaviors with uncharacteristic obsession. His purpose was now this... this need to reclaim that one complete breath, one that had been painstakingly achieved after years of penance, and inexplicably lost in this purported place of healing. And to do so, he would need to be infinitely thoughtful and deliberate. Not one word out of place, not again (for his third limitation was new, but only as far as his consciousness was concerned).



The unraveling was slow and almost poetic in the way it began decimating him from within. His compulsion to act lacerated tirelessly by his incapacity to make a meaningful impact. The decades of trauma, muted and condensed, were re-lived repeatedly—by him and those he called kin—with no resolution in sight.

Yet, they persevered, scalding him with a scream that echoed through one objectively placed question: why could *he* not?

Rejoice

mushrooms & MADs,
and
whiskers on kittens

ticking clocks and silence,
and
extinction-level explosions

spot the differences
and revel
when you find

no one.

Her (their) story was as unbelievable as her presence in this forgotten, forsaken corner of the world—yet a fitting place to spread its wingspan, safe from the gouging claws of predators. It was a fractured recounting of morally polarizing thoughts and experiences threaded together with just enough baroque intricacy and delicate devotion to chase his mortality even deeper into the open arms of frenzied dysregulation (for his fourth limitation was not his own but internalized as one pervading countless generations).

But it was a simple tale, one with a beginning and a middle and a soulless end. It contained innocence, love, and the loss of innocence *to* love. Love; the maleficent entity. The element you rooted against with bloodcurdling vehemence. Love; the conqueror, subjugating the curious in its twisted glory. Love of *no kind* called love still by fools, fanatics, fascists and such others unfamiliar with the tenuous, trembling dichotomy of all things.

This was her beginning, *their* crossroads, and his end. Breathe!

H_b

pain, away
revisit, someday

pain, stay
water this desolate plain

pain, remind us to be gay
to love, to grieve

pain, do this so we may
feel you again.

His only defense was to shield himself from feeling the destructive capacity of her story. And his next act centered around the innate naïveté that afflicts most men—attempting to fix that which is beyond comprehension...to remedy that which, perhaps, *needs* to be radical acceptance.

This, he would not understand (for his fifth limitation was this narcissistic pursuit of empathy); choosing instead to die a thousand deaths on the insurmountable hill of asking ‘why’, barely standing but refusing to forgo unrequited curiosity on the damned river to cruel, irrational reality. And on the coldest, loneliest of nights, he would ponder the reason behind his relentless hunt for reason in a world dispassionately unwilling to offer any, empty palms facing heavenward in purposeless defiance against divine judgment, deafening him with the silence of privilege reserved for those in absolute power.

Yet for him, this world was now akin to the thin strands of a taut, frayed rope snapping free with disproportionately violent force each time it’s stretched beyond potency. Held together by the weakest of forces, constantly sundered by an impermeable dark. Meanwhile, those most influential jumped the same rope with reckless abandon, fattening themselves on the blessings of *Creatorial* neglect. ☞





Art by MICHAEL C. ROBERTS

DEAD HOUSE

by BHARTI BANSAL

When I was a child, visits to Nani were the only significant events of my year. The place, situated in the small town of Bilaspur, was surrounded by hills and a forest that would glow orange at night. The streetlights, strangely comforting, cast their turmeric-yellow glow over the streets, where stories of every kind hung heavy in the air. Beside the rented two-room house lay an abandoned house, infamous for the rumoured murder tied to it. I was intrigued, always wondering what I would find if I entered. Like any curious child, I wanted a little purpose and perhaps the fame of solving something nobody else cared for.

Within a few footsteps stood the infamous "dead house." Situated near the city hospital, it mirrored the hospital's heaviness. A shortcut to the market passed through the broken stairs near the dead house. I would look inside—it was always the same. Eerily silent, with a coldness that seeped even through its broken windows. This one-floor building, with its chipped cement and fading yellow walls, seemed surrounded by air that felt apologetic for its weathering.

The locals called it haunted. Like ghosts waiting for their family to return, the cold, dead people inside waited for the living. A simple building, sheltering death until it became its home, felt ironic. For a child's mind, it was too much to bear. So, I imagined myself entering it. Like the murder house, it gazed at me with grieving eyes, waiting for visitors, like an abandoned park with swings swaying with time.

The ghosts that roamed in the middle of the night cast shadows around the old building where we lived. A sprawling banyan tree, the district collector's grand house, and whispers about his mad wife—all of it felt like a fever dream. Mamu would tell stories of the ghosts near the temple, a few miles from our house. Strangely, these stories made me happy. The dead mingling with gods felt like a friendly diplomacy.

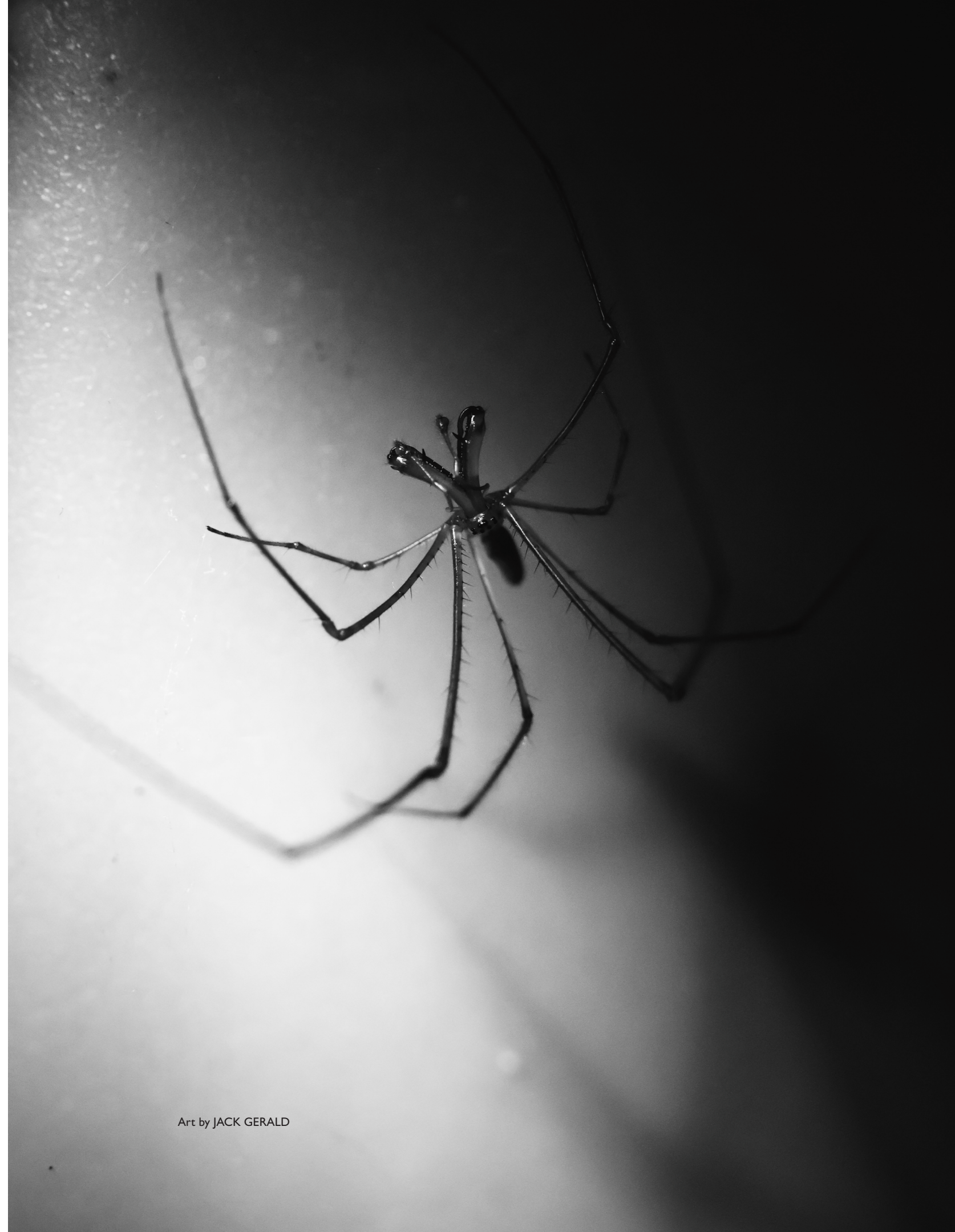
HINDSIGHT

Every evening, the sound of temple bells during aarti stopped the world for a moment. It felt as if all the ghosts lined up, awaiting their freedom. The dense forest whispered through the wind, leaving me scared and strangely certain I was meant for this eerie connection with the dead. But there were no dialogues, just a presence—a silent conversation only I seemed to notice.

The dead house still stands there, brooding. The living and the dead coexist. While life moves on its two feet, tall and proud, a nearby shop sells everything—sweets, ice creams, flour, and vegetables. It's a weak solace that life goes on, even as the dead lay resting. After Nani retired and we shifted to Namhol, the fear subsided. But the memory of the dead house, standing like an old man with a crooked back, still emerges as a symbol of what I have always tried to escape.

It calls me in dreams, where I am always running from it. Perhaps this is what my life holds—a curious conversation between the friendly ghosts of my memories and my present. Everything feels furiously calm today. The artificial yellow glow of broken streetlights reminds me of the time I stood so close to death that all I could do was look inside and pray no one looked back.

But it did gaze at me. Our worlds collided briefly, and for that moment, everything became simple—someone waits for us on the other side. A building, perhaps, or the chatter of a crowd falling on deaf ears. Something unsettles the heavy air around it. The imbalanced weight of silence on my shoulders reminds me that we all speak this language. Our hearts skip a beat as a quiet greeting to the dead. 🕸



Art by JACK GERALD





Art by SONALI ROY

FLATLINE

by J. M. SWEETING

The only way I can fall asleep anymore is to the steady hush of my noise machine; to be drowned by the sound of crashing waves in an attempt to calm my erratic thoughts and arrhythmia. It reminds me that there is something that rages louder than I, a stronger force to be suspended in and lost.

3:53 a.m.: the ding of a text alert jolts my heart awake.

First time Papou's eyes opened.

Looks like he's going into Heaven.

He is struggling with his breathing.

It is almost 4:00 a.m.

Peace, my dear daughter.

I roll out of bed, in yesterday's leggings and a sweatshirt smelling of hospital. My packed bag waits by the door next to my toppled old Converse. All I can hear is the *ba-bump ba-bump ba-bump* echoing throughout my chest and plugging up my ears.

Should I be there?

Mom??

I'm gonna go.

3:57 a.m.: I walk across the college parking lot to the neighborhood side street. There's never enough room to park near my dorm. I find myself praying up to the sky through tiny globes of tears forming in my vision. I accidentally call God "Papou," some 4:00 a.m. heresy that I dare to call a revelation.

4:03 a.m.: The car is cold, and the streets are silent. I drive alone onto Rott Road toward the towering shadow of buildings stenciled by dots of light against the acrylic sky.

4:06 a.m.: I park and pull my backpack weakly out of the car. It feels heavier than yesterday. The outside world is eerily still and misty with the light snowfall, too wet to be pretty. The only sound that breaks the blanket

of silence is my breath hitting the frigid air, but my lungs don't seem to remember how to expand. My fingers are white, numb, corpse-like, the blood withdrawn from my veins constricting in the cold.

4:09 a.m.: I run under the red EMERGENCY sign, glowing in the darkness like the demon eyes from my childhood nightmares. I groggily show my wrinkled, day-old visitor's sticker to the receptionist, mumbling half-hearted "no" after "no" to her drawling questions:

"Any fever, Hun?"

"Coughin'?"

"Cold symptoms?"

"Covid symptoms?"

"... in the last fourteen days?"

Each answer wastes a second that can't be regained.

When she finishes her interrogation, I turn left down the hallway and pass the bench on the left of the sliding doors, the one where I sat for hours yesterday listening to the same questions over and over and hearing the same stream of monotonous answers while waiting for any news from the OR. I turn right through the cafeteria, then down the empty main hall to the elevator. A few tired and overworked nurses are the only figures blurrily crossing my peripheral vision. I glance to my right. A bronze statue of St. Anthony stares down at me—his eyes, I suppose, purposely painted with stoic pity.

4:11 a.m.: The elevator emits its sharp ding at each level, stopping at the fourth floor. I wait impatiently for the doors to slide open. His room is right across from where I stand. I walk over. It's too dark to see inside the room. As my head aches, I realize that I forgot my glasses back at my dorm.

Mom, I'm here.

Can I come in?

No answer.

4:13 a.m.: Panic. *Babumpbabumpbabump*. Is it the right room? What if they don't want me to go in? We'll be over the visitor limit.

*Each answer
wastes a second
that can't be
regained*

A couple of nurses sit in their chairs chatting quietly, ignoring their monitors. A series of slow, steady beeps emit quietly from somewhere, the soundtrack to the longest minutes I've ever known.

The nurses don't seem to notice me.

4:14 a.m.: When I squint hard enough, I can barely make out the shape of someone moving. The figure moves closer to the door, and I finally recognize my cousin. Hands shaking, I open the sliding glass door and walk in. No one looks in my direction.

His urine bag holds barely an inch of Coke-colored liquid.

With somber faces and silent tears, my mom, aunts, and two cousins surround the bed, holding hands, rubbing shoulders. The noise around me changes. The soft whimpers of cries, the sniffing of noses, the barely audible rasp of his final breaths, and that slow, steady beat of the heart monitor. His mouth is open, eyes parted slightly as if he is looking for something, something beyond us.

4:15 a.m.: Too many thoughts, blurry thoughts. A final song—was it "Amazing Grace" or maybe the "Doxology"—and everyone is crying. I try to keep my voice steady. The others can't sing without choking on the grief bundling up in their throats like wet cotton balls clogging up a drain.

I put my hand on his arm. It's so cold, almost rubbery. His legs are hard and swollen, his face the image of a used-up body, an ancient vessel sucked dry of blood and parched for breath.

I barely whimper the words, "Goodbye, Papou. I love you."

4:16 a.m.: The beeping isn't steady. When did its rhythm change?

Slow beeps, even slower.

4:17 a.m.: The monitor flashes: 50s...30s...19s...11s...6s...3s...

4:18 a.m.: One long, steady sound. 



THE TIMES WE WERE DIFFERENT

by SUSIE POTTER



Art by JULIA SMITH

When I was in third grade, my best friend was Jamie Belle.

My mom was not a fan.

Jamie's own mother had been a drug addict, and she'd gotten murdered by some guys who my mom said "wanted her car."

"They told her they'd give her money and some drugs, but they took her somewhere secluded, shot her, and drove that car away," my mom had told me, my eight-year-old eyes widening in fear and shock. My mother always told me too much, at least in some ways. Every time she told me the story, another element was added. I didn't know what was true anymore.

"That girl is going to end up just like her mother, you mark my words," my mom said repeatedly.

I didn't know if that was true either.

Even though my mother didn't approve of Jamie, who was now being raised by her grandmother, she eventually considered that with my chubby stomach, cheap clothes, and frizzy hair, I didn't have a lot of girls offering to be my best friend.

So, she let me invite Jamie over to our place, a small apartment I was embarrassed of.

I was in a lying phase in third grade, and I had told all the girls in my class that I was rich, that I had a mansion and butlers. I'd bragged about it to Jamie most of all. She'd seemed the most eager to believe it, never mind that we went to an inner-city school where no one was rich or close to breaking even.

"Please, mom," I begged, "can't I go over to Jamie's instead?"

"No way," my mom said. "That girl lives over on A Street. There's nothing but drugs and prostitutes over there. No ma'am."

As if our neighborhood is any better, I thought, but I didn't say it.

I could have, though. But it wouldn't have mattered. My mother was going to hold firm. I could tell.

Scrambling, I called up Jamie and said, "My mom says you can come over...but not to our main house. You can come to our guest house."

I'd heard of guest houses on TV.

It sounded believable to me.

Everything on TV was possible, just not for me. Not here.

Jamie told me to hold on, and I could hear her talking to her grandmother in muffled tones.

Finally, she came back on, and she said, with a note of pride in her voice, "My grandma says if I'm not good enough to come over to your real house, I can't come at all."

"It's not like that," I told her.

"Well, still," she said, stumbling, sounding confused.

"Look," I said, "just tell your grandma it's my real house, okay?"

"Okay," Jamie said.

That was one of the things I liked about her. I could always get her to come around, especially if I pushed.

Her grandmother pulled up to our apartment—which was really part of the projects—the only thing my mother could afford after my dad, who had a real wife and family now, had left her. She came up and said hi to me. I saw a knowing look in her eye.

She understood why I said what I'd said. I could tell.

She didn't rat me out. She didn't say a word.

And Jamie never did either...even though, eventually, she must have realized, after coming to my place again and again, that there was no guest house.

I would have said something for sure.

We were different that way.



Much to my mother's chagrin, Jamie and I did not tire of each other. In fact, by fifth grade, we were still best friends.

My mom, after having taken a grudging liking to Jamie's grandmother—"She's a good woman, raising that child at her age. Shame how it's all going to turn out. You mark my words"—even relented and let me stay over at Jamie's house.

It was big and felt old and run-down, but no one hurt us in the night...except for me.

After her grandmother had gone to bed, I pulled out a VHS tape I'd pilfered from my older cousin's house. It was a horror movie called *Night of the Demons*.

"Wanna watch?" I asked, but it wasn't really a question.

"I don't know," Jamie said, eyeing the cover nervously.

"Come on," I said. "It'll be fun. Spooky." I turned out her bedroom light and put the tape in. It only took ten minutes and just the tiniest bit of eerie music for Jamie to cover her eyes.

"Turn it off," she whispered. "I can't watch."

"No," I said. "Come on, it's just getting good."

I knew I could pressure her into it.

"No," she said.

"Come on. Stop being such a baby."

At that, she did something I'd never seen her do before. She started crying.

"I can't," she yelled. "I can't watch it." "No, no, no, no," she said, her cries getting louder and more panicked as the spooky music amped up, as the first victim died.

"Okay, okay," I said, alarmed. I pressed stop on the VCR.

"I'm sorry, okay?" I told her, putting my arm around her. "Really."

"It's okay," she whispered.

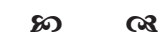
"Hey," I said. "I'll make it up to you. We can watch anything you want."

"Promise?"

"Promise," I said. I felt as though I had done something wrong, though I wasn't sure what.

"Okay," she said, smiling. "*Grease*. It's my favorite."

I thought it was dumb, all that smiling and singing. Jamie loved every second. I fell asleep halfway through, waking up for only a moment to find her rewinding the tape, pressing play again.



*but no one
hurt us
in the night
... except for me*



Sixth grade came, and all a sudden I was angry at everything and everyone, and I didn't know why. Maybe it had something to do with the growing sense of loneliness, of wrongness inside me, a feeling that I didn't belong. Maybe it was how my mom always seemed to criticize what I thought, what I ate, and what I wore—especially what I wore. Short skirts and tight tops that made the boys look at the fat that had morphed into curves.

I acted out in class. I was always in trouble.

“God,” my mother said, “why can't you dress more like Jamie?”

Jamie still wore her hair in pigtails and donned the same clothes we'd worn last year.

“I thought you didn't like her,” I said.

“I think there's hope for that girl after all,” my mother said.

I couldn't believe it. I was almost jealous, which was weird. I'd always wanted my mother to like Jamie.

“My mom likes you, you know,” I told her, as we browsed through the mall on a breezy Saturday.

“She does?” Jamie looked thrilled.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I like her too. You're so lucky,” Jamie said.

“I guess,” I mumbled, not feeling lucky at all.

“Hey,” Jamie said, pulling me away from the Hot Topic, “can we go to the toy store?”

“Aw, come on, we're too old for that,” I told her.

“Please,” she said, “do it for me.” It was so rare that Jamie tried to talk me into something that I agreed to.

We strolled the aisles, Jamie gushing over Barbies. “Are you serious?” I asked her.

“I only collect them now,” she said, flushing.

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes.

“Look at these,” she said, picking up a *Ren and Stimpy* doll. It farted when you squeezed it.

“Okay,” I said, “now that is cool.”

I took it from her, squeezed it myself. “It's queefing,” I told her, laughing, maybe a little too loudly.

*I was almost
jealous, which was
weird. I'd always
wanted my mother
to like Jamie*

“What's queefing?” Jamie asked at the same time a stern-faced saleswoman came over.

“Girls,” she said, “can you quiet down just a little bit?”

“Oh, we're sorr—” Jamie started, but I cut her off.

“Don't sell the stupid toys if you don't want people to play with them,” I spat. I felt better instantly. I had someone to take my anger out on, as if she'd offered herself up to me.

“Young lady...” the saleswoman began.

“Get a real job, dumbass,” I said.

The woman's face displayed hurt, and I didn't feel so good anymore. Her face then contorted into a round “O” of surprise, and I felt a little better, almost like laughing, and then I was. I laughed in her face.

“Get out of here right now,” the woman said, “or I'll call security.”

“Oooh, mall security,” I laughed. Jamie took my shoulders, started steering me toward the exit. Her voice was sweet as she turned around and said to the lady, “I'm so sorry about her. She's going through a rough time.”

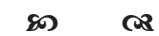
“What'd you do that for?” I barked once we were outside the store.

“You were being kind of...mean,” she said, the words hard for her to get out.

I wanted to rage some more, but I looked at her face. My friend. A constant in my life, and I sagged.

“I guess I was,” I said. “Sorry.”

“It's okay,” Jamie said, putting her arm around my shoulder.



The summer before ninth grade, everything changed. My mom met a man with a lot of money, a man who really liked her. They got married, a little fast, but she seemed happy. It wasn't so much that she loved him, but that she felt like she was finally getting her lot in life, the lot she'd always known she deserved.

We moved into a nicer part of town. I went to a new school.

I was okay with a fresh start. I felt like I needed one, but I was sad Jamie couldn't come with me.

We talked on the phone the night before our respective first days.

“I hope it's just like on *Saved by the Bell*,” she said, “and that I'm popular.” She paused. “It would be easier with you.”



"I was never popular," I told her, all the while thinking how naive she was. Saved by the Bell was a fantasy. A stupid show. Couldn't she see that?

"Well," she said, "I think you will be in high school."

"Maybe," I told her.

"Maybe I will be too," she said.

"I bet you will," I said, and I meant it. Jamie had gotten pretty in recent months, her legs long, lightened hair from the sun.

"I'll miss you," Jamie said.

"Hey," I told her, "it's just different high schools, not different lives."

"Yeah," Jamie said, "I guess."

There was a pause.

"Jamie," I said, "I'll miss you too."



I did end up popular in high school, at least kind of.

The school was different than our junior high, the people nicer, but in a fake way, a more stuck-up way. Still, it was easy to blend in, to pretend like I was one of them. They were all interested in this new girl who hadn't gone to elementary school with them. Plus, I'd learned to straighten my curls, to apply just the right amount of makeup.

"Not trashy, not flashy. Just the perfect amount to attract the right people," my mother had instructed me with a smile, makeup spread over the bathroom sink.

I meant to see Jamie a lot, to make things just like before, but I didn't. We did meet up at a coffee shop once, about halfway into freshman year.

You look different, she'd said. And I'd said, you do too. And she did. She was starting to look like the old me, and I more like the old her. It was as if we'd switched places somehow, like in that old Parent Trap movie she used to make me watch. We'd argue over who got to be Sharon.

After that meeting, there were phone calls, but they got increasingly sporadic. Suddenly, it was senior year, and she called me up out of the blue.

"Hey," she said.

"Hi?" I wasn't sure who it was. The voice was only vaguely familiar.

"It's me," she said, "Jamie."

"Jamie." There was a weird rush, a happiness in hearing her voice, but also a nagging curiosity about why she'd reach out to me now. I didn't even know her anymore.

"I was thinking about you," she said, "about when we were younger."

"Oh," I said. I hadn't thought about her in a long time.

"I was wondering if I could come see you. I've never been to your new house."

It didn't feel like my new house anymore. It just felt like my house.

"Sure," I said. "I'd like that." I'd learned to be polite.

When she came, she pulled up in a loud, rattling car. She had on a lot of makeup.

"Come on in," I told her at the door.

She studied me for a moment.

"Nah," she said, "I want to smoke."

"Oh," I said, "okay." I was surprised. No one I knew smoked. They called it passé.

"Can we smoke on the porch?"

"Sure," I said, "my mom's not home."

She smirked. I wasn't sure why.

We stood on the wraparound porch, the one my mother had built just last year, and Jamie shook out a cigarette from a soft pack of Marlboros.

"You want?" she asked as I sank down onto the porch swing.

"No thanks," I said.

She shrugged, lit hers, sitting on the edge of the porch, her feet dangling off like a swimming pool lay beneath her.

Silence. I wanted to fill it.

"So," Jamie said, after a minute, "you got a boyfriend?"

"Actually, yes," I told her. "His name is Logan. He plays tennis."

"Nice," she said. "I have one, a new one. His name is Mark." She didn't add any further details.

"Is he cute?" I asked her. This was how I talked with my regular girlfriends. Maybe it would work on her. Draw her out. I used to be good at that.

"He's all right," she said. "He's sure as hell better than my last guy, Remy."

"Remy," I repeated the name like it meant something.

"Yeah," she said, "he, I mean we, started out as fuck buddies, you know?"

I blanched. She must have noticed because she smiled, as if she liked the surprise on my face.

"What?" she said. "Surely, you and Logan..."



“No,” I said. “I haven’t, with anyone.”

“Wow,” she said, “well, when you do, you’ll see. It’s hard not to get feelings, even if you think you don’t really like the guy.”

I couldn’t imagine doing that with a guy I didn’t really like. Why would I? I just nodded.

“Anyway,” she said, “he got me hooked on...,” she paused to study my face, and then a look passed over hers, a look like she couldn’t say what she wanted to say, like I would never understand.

She cleared her throat.

“He got me in with some bad stuff. I’m doing better now though.”

“Good,” I said.

“Well,” she said, “it was really nice seeing you.”

For just the briefest of seconds, she sat next to me on the porch swing, wrapped her arm around me awkwardly, and she felt like the Jamie I remembered. I found myself hugging her, missing her even though she was right there.

“Take care, Lauren,” she said.

“You too,” I told her.

As I watched her leave, I felt a blackness, like something had gone wrong, like things were not fair.



Deep into sophomore year of college, just before exams, my mom called me to tell me Jamie had gotten busted.

“Trafficking drugs,” my mother said, a weird pride in her voice, “I always knew that girl would wind up no good.”

“You liked her once, Mom,” I said, feeling an ache in my gut.

“Did I?” my mother asked. “I don’t remember that.”

But I did.

I do.

I remember fake guest houses and horror movies and coffee shops and Barbies and pressure. I remember thinking I needed to be more like her.

*I found myself
hugging her,
missing her even
though she was
right there*

And now, almost twelve years post-college, I see her name pop up all the time, both on my Instagram feed and in news stories from home. She’s always getting busted for something. She’s always in trouble. She has two children. I don’t know who takes care of them between her stints in jail. I follow the daughter on Instagram, who I think is too young to have it. At only age eleven, she posts dangerous selfies and seems desperate for love.

I write comments on her posts like, “You’re beautiful! You look just like your mother when we were kids.”

I hope for her, though it seems bleak. But then, when I think of the bleakness, I feel like my mother.

Jamie logs into Instagram only sometimes. It’s very erratic. I don’t think she’s out of jail all that often.

One time, on my birthday, she commented on a picture of me, standing with my boyfriend—now my husband—in a fancy restaurant, grinning like an idiot.

She wrote, “I remember when we were kids. We’ve come so far girl! I’m so proud of you.”

The problem is, I remember when we were kids too.

I remember the times we were different, and nothing makes sense. ✎





Art by ELLIE MARCOTTE

EVEN THE IMAGINARY FRIENDS

by MEKIYA OUTINI

The obscure mechanics of their transmigrations could only be explained by the fact that their latter-day bodies were made of petroleum, the same organic molecules calling out to them across the ages, signaling to them, welcoming them home. For sixty-five million years, they'd drifted, aimless as the winds, jarred from their bodies by Chicxulub's impact; but now the homo sapiens had come along and started manufacturing collectibles, and it would be a foolish soul indeed that didn't seize the day and take up residence in a cozy lump of sculpted plastic, formally reminiscent of the body it had lost.

"Is there anything you can't see but still believe in?" my mother asked me once, and I, though small, gave serious consideration to the question, screwing up my face and pondering for a while before delivering the verdict:

"Yes. Air."

Possibly, my cognitive module for agent detection had atrophied. My social world was severely circumscribed, limited to parents, the shambling, glassy-eyed hippies with whom they worked at co-ops and farmer's markets, chance encounters with adults at the grocery store and on the hiking trails, and one aunt, who shared our trailer for a while and later turned up unresponsive in another, on the other end of North America, self-starved and alcohol-poisoned. The tendency to ascribe irregularities in our environments to conscious agents, seen or unseen, has been observed in many species and is thought to have emerged as a precautionary mechanism reflecting the high potential cost of mistaking a predator lurking in the high grass for the motion of the wind, and the comparatively low cost of

mistaking the wind for a predator; but in the stirring of the branches, I saw only air.

Then again, perhaps the evolutionary psychologists are right to treat this faculty as innate, not learned. I needed neither gods nor spirits to explain the nighttime gnashing of the trees, but the possibility of eternal souls, in which I had not previously believed, slotted neatly into a new metaphysics by which inanimate polymers could be converted into sentient companions: first the Quetzalcoatlus, a few inches long and painted in exquisite detail, red streaks bleeding elegantly into shades of gray, with pliable wings and an equally pliable disposition; then the camo-green Allosaurus, fixed in a pose of perpetual roar, jaws open, neck twisting leftward, frightful, certainly, to behold, but not frightful enough to save him from the family dog, who, finding him one night on a low shelf, chewed his feet off, sending him straight to my father's workshop for emergency surgery, where his mangled claws were stuck back on with paperclip bone grafts, so maybe his temper was a PTSD symptom all along; and then the Psittacosaurus, also a troublemaker, but of the less hostile, more mischievous kind, always poking her well-meaning beak into others' business; and then, before I knew it, they were legion.

They populated every surface in my bedroom, perching on the plywood slab that served me as a table, and in the cells of the cinderblocks supporting it, and on the upturned milk crates where my books lived, and on my headboard, and on every windowsill. When they didn't want to be found, they would conceal themselves between folded clothes, behind my window blinds, or high up on my dust-encrusted ceiling fan. They forged alliances. They nursed petty rivalries. They scratched each other, pushed each other, bit each other, called each other names. They were my childhood's longest running soap opera. They taught me the value of conflict in narrative. They became my social world.

By this time, we were out of the trailer and living in a small house in West Asheville, on a street that wound in three dimensions, first along the bottom of a valley, then up and out of it. In front of our house was a road, not particularly busy, and beyond, a rolling property owned by a rustic clan, the fecund land skewered on a long, anemic creek full of crawdads. Up the hill behind us was a narrow strip of woodland, a cemetery, and farther back, a public school. The shrieking from its playground used to fill my skies like the vocalizations of hungry Pteranodons, as integral to the soundtrack of my childhood as the nails-on-a-chalkboard jingle of the ice-cream truck

that I was always hearing, never seeing, never buying cones from.

Next door, over a fence line of boxwoods and honeysuckles, there was a trailer, rented out by a Korean florist, and in that trailer lived my first—and for a long time only—human friend.

Hers was a more classic story of domestic dysfunction: drunk dad, flaky mom, stepmom moving in to take her father's place when things went sideways, jealous, suffocating, soaking up attention that could've been hers. To get away from that, she spent her afternoons with me.

I was usually up until 4:00 in the morning, typing epic *Dinotopia* rip-offs into a chunky desktop, and would wake around the time she appeared at our door. My life had its own shape. Hers grew on a trellis called school. My parents would ask me now and then if I was interested in school, but I was reading above my grade level, and every year I passed the CAT. Though critical of the mainstream education system's mindless fixation on metrics, my parents were ready to cite those same metrics in support of a good cause. My father never lost an opportunity to make it known that North Carolina's schools had ranked among the worst in North America since the nation's founding. This tracked with my own low-resolution conception of "school" as all that senseless shrieking from beyond the cemetery and my neighbor's vexing unavailability before 3:30 in the afternoon. I saw no reason to attend.

There were more things in prehistoric heaven and earth and sea, for me, than were dreamt of in any school, much less in *Barney* or *The Land Before Time*. The need-to-know included my companions' Latin names, conveniently printed right there on their underbellies, beside their product numbers and the repetitive inscription "Made in Thailand"; which species had lived in which eras; which geographies they'd roamed; with which plants they'd coexisted; and in which climates they had thrived. God help the adult who crossed my path: the notion that anyone might not want to hear precisely how the Ankylosaurus got its armored scales

*There were
more things in
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was foreign to me. I gorged myself on the essential lexis—“quadruped,” “oviparous,” and “herbivore’s metabolism”—and regurgitated polysyllables with ease that must’ve been a little disconcerting, coming from a six-year-old.

What did I need with school? I had all the education and socialization I could need right there at home, conveniently stripped of the downsides. No peers could bully me, make a pariah of me, treat me as less than. That I belonged to this brood was a given. One Halloween, my parents helped me transform into a velociraptor, constructing a head, tale, and claws using cardboard, acrylics, and papier-mâché, and I spent the evening click-clacking around the neighborhood, hunched over, wrists bent before me, gutturally hissing—as, indeed, I often did without the costume.

In my room, I was surrounded by faithful companions, ready to ride or die twenty-four-seven, three-sixty-five. It made no difference when I slept or woke. They needed me precisely when and as much as I needed them to need me, never less and never more. They were no mere community. They were a platonic ideal.

Within a year, there were too many for all of us to pile into the bed or bathtub at the same time, as had been our habit up until then. They had to start taking turns. I established an elaborate system to determine which four or five dinosaurs would accompany me on any given evening—though this privilege could be forfeited with bad behavior and often was.

Then the bombshell: according to a science magazine, a consensus was emerging among paleontologists that pterosaurs could not have flown with water on their wings. There would’ve been grooves between their scales, and if too much liquid had accumulated there, they wouldn’t have been able to get off the ground.

For weeks, the Quetzalcoatlus—in many ways the first among equals, certainly the first to make her sentience known—had been patiently waiting her turn to join me in the bathtub, humble as she was; but if she did, I realized suddenly, with horror, her ability to fly would be impaired.

What to do?

For days, the question pulsed and gnawed, as red as an infection. But as often happens, its resolution didn’t come until long after it had been forgotten, evicted from my mind by the delectable immediacy of artichokes and baked potatoes.

My mother served the baked potatoes with butter, salt, and sour cream, and the artichokes with little metal cups of melted butter. We were to peel

their scaly leaves off one by one, dip them in the butter, then scrape off the fibrous flesh at the base with our teeth, lush yellow running down our chins. The spent scales were to be discarded in a bowl of stainless-steel.

This ritual grew more satisfying the more senses it engaged, and of course it concluded, as so many such rituals do, with the consumption of the heart. That was my favorite part. I loved working my way through the layers of leaves, salivating with anticipation, eager to prize loose the heart from its thorny enclosure, plunge it into the melted butter, and feel its flesh yield to my tongue.

I was so intent on making the most of that artichoke that I stayed at the table, peeling-dipping-scraping-slurping, even after my parents cleaned their plates, cleared their dishes, and went off to start a movie in the other room.

Then the eureka moment: the lightbulb above my head flickering on.

Unnoticed—who was there to notice?—I left from the table, retrieved my pterosaurs, half a dozen or so, and brought them back to the kitchen. There, using the leftover butter, I began to waterproof them.

Ten minutes must’ve passed before my nape began to tingle: someone else was in the room. Tucked in the corner made by the refrigerator and the wall, I was invisible from the hall, but my father, as usual around that time of night, needed another beer. Now he stood over me, one hand on the refrigerator door, the other wrapped around an empty glass, stained with tawny residue and tufts of foam.

“Son,” he said. “What are you doing?”

Perhaps because he couldn’t accuse me of waste—the butter, one way or another, was there to be consumed—I do not recall experiencing fear.

Matter-of-factly, I explained what I was doing.

He said, “I see.”

“I don’t want anyone to be left out,” I said. “They don’t deserve it. They haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Okay,” he said. “That’s fine. But maybe you could use a shortening with a lower price point?”

My mother appeared, peering over his shoulder, somehow channeling the spirit of the rearing prairie dog: “What’s going on in here? What are you guys doing?”

“You’re like a child, Donny!” shouted my father, rounding on her, not un-theatrically, “who wanders in, in the middle of a movie and wants to know what’s going on!”



My father has always expressed himself most fluently by quoting films. This line from *The Big Lebowski* is among his favorites, often used on my mother, and sometimes on me.

“But what’s going on?” she asked. “Are we having a party?”

“Your son,” he said, plucking a beer from its plastic loops and setting it on the counter, “has decided to butter his dinosaurs.”

“What? Why?” She made a beeline for the cupboard where the potato chips were stored. “Why is he doing that?”

“Ask him!”

As I explained once more why I was buttering my pterosaurs, my father found a bottle of canola oil in a cupboard, poured a generous helping into a bowl, and handed it to me.

Laughter—real, organic, spontaneous laughter—really isn’t in my mother’s repertoire. She chuckles, she giggles, she labels things as “silly,” and once in a blue moon, she may produce an onomatopoeic “mwahahahaha!”, but there are no belly laughs on her side of the family, no tears of mirth, no bodily guffaws.

That said, there could be, and often were, many things at once in her giggles: hints of the maternal impulse to find, in every peculiar shenanigan, proof of her son’s exceptional creative genius; the rueful concession that such things are not done by respectable people, and perhaps should not be done by us; and the eager recognition of the child who spots her best friend on the playground, in the midst of inventing a game that she would like to join.

“I’ll be back,” said my father, exiting through the storm door with his beer in hand. “I need a cigarette.”

By the time he returned, I’d finished waterproofing the pterosaurs and was carrying them into the bathroom, where steam was rising from the tub, on paper towel palanquins.

There would come a time, of course, when the novelty of waterproofing would wear thin. Casting about for some excuse to spare myself the tedium, I would remember that my pterosaurs, not yet aware of the latest from the

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paleontologists, had flown just fine after previous swims. Perhaps they’d transcended that particular vulnerability when they’d reincarnated as plastic replicas—which, after all, didn’t have discernible scales on their wings, much less grooves between them; and which, anyway, relied on my muscles to power their flight, even when they were dry.

There would come a time—still years away, but not so many years: not fifty, twenty-five, or even ten, but just a few brief years—when these tendrils of skepticism, rooted at first in self-interested soils, would push further, into the chinks between the propositions that propped up my animism, so that seeds of doubt could be sewn.

There would come a time, a dark time, when the story I’d been telling would start to spring holes. When the web of camaraderies I’d fashioned would lose its stickiness and tension. When the life force that had sparkled in my comrades would recede. There would come a time, too, when my one and only human friend, tired of life with her mother, would trade in that life, of which I was a part, for a new one, this time with her father. When she wouldn’t call anymore. When she would stop taking my calls.

And then there would come a time—ten years? Fifteen?—when her postcards would start landing in our mailbox. But they wouldn’t be addressed to me. She used to marvel at how I went silent down when my father yelled, my nervous system locking up, instead of talking back like her. She used to cringe and bristle at his rage. Once, I even watched her scratch the inscription “Mark is evil” into his workbench—an inscription still not sanded out to this day. But she would come to remember my parents as role models, the responsible authorities she’d never had.

There would come a time, and then another time, another time, a time upon a time, a once upon a time; and I would pass repeatedly, as everybody must, through those dark nights of the soul, bereft of all that once sustained, deserted by the power to conjure new worlds, abandoned even by imaginary friends; but, more than once, I have emerged. Into that emptiness have poured new intimacies, stronger ones. And if I must go down again, I will again, breath held again; and if I must again, I will come up again; and in the meantime, in between those dark nights, are the incandescent ones, butter-yellow, with no one excluded, no one grounded, no one left behind, all of us impervious to that which would’ve dragged us down, and no slipping-falling-getting-a-concussion on the tub’s rim, lipid-slick though it may be, and beneath those iridescent bubbles, no one drowns. ☞





Art by KATIE GINSBURG

DESERT TO THE SEA

by TRAVIS PENNY

It's difficult to navigate a single thought when it arrives like a missing heartbeat—sudden, jarring, and laced with a pleasure I didn't ask to remember. But I do. I wish I didn't. Memories don't ask permission for entry. They're like concrete feet in summer: bonded, gripped, submerged in you. They told me that the warmth at the bottom of the bottle would drown me gently, so I surrendered to their false truths. The warmth was at first invisible, then invincible—floating, yet drowning in secret. If I stayed long enough, I wouldn't notice myself disappearing.

Was it their lies, the mirage, or the warmth I chased that led me here—to this empty valley where thirst has dried away? Echoes from previous souls sound like promises we once believed. I didn't fall into this place. I followed directions to my own despair. It feels like standing in Death Valley with an empty canteen. The heat offers itself generously, pressing into skin, convincing the body its end is not near. But there's no nourishment in it. This valley earns its name—no investigation required. The heart burned alive. So, I sit beneath the stars, weighing distance against hope, wondering which one might let me reach it. I gave up my wings for love. Now I stand among voices and faces—surrounded by movement—yet the frequency that my soul searches for answers with a silence so deafening it hums.

With no wings now, I must gather my feet from this dizzy spell and trudge through the quicksand. I'm learning the cruel truth of the ground. The sands cover the air, and my lungs cough and gasp in search of my empty canteen. I taste the grit on my tongue—bitter, metallic, like regret ground fine—while the quicksand pulls me under. The compression of my body feels so comfortable, forgiving. But long ago, I learned comfort is death. So, with each step and every thought, I heave these weighted feet.

The sun begins to surrender, staining the sky like a healing wound. To the west, the mountains rise in silhouette. I must rest, but a coughing grip holds my lungs, and I wonder how I'll escape death during the ascent and descent of those jagged cliffs. Distance has grown teeth, and my body is a debt I can no longer pay. I must rest. I must let my breath slow.

As the sand shifts, a cruel deception sets in—offering shimmering hope. The smell of her perfume is in the air, the scent of love hypnotizing. My mind, unwilling but truthful, chases this mirage. I've already lost my wings, so how far can I truly fall this time? In her glow, I see why I stayed. Love was a cathedral of light, a captivating hum that made the horizon look like a promise instead of a threat. It was beautiful enough to make the sacrifice feel like a gift. I see my own hands unfastening the silk and bone, laying them down like a discarded coat. I didn't lose them in a storm; they weren't stolen in the night. I gave them up because I was told love was a fire that would keep us both warm. I didn't realize I was supposed to be the fuel.

In the mirage's spell, she appeared like rain ready to quench my thirst—impossible, inevitable, a vision that answered the soul's deepest drought. Her laughter echoed as distant thunder, promising storms that would flood the barren canyons of my heart. Eyes like an oasis, deep and unending, drawing me in with reflections of a self I longed to be—whole, unscarred, alive. She was the horizon's curve, bending light into shapes of eternity, where every glance whispered secrets of forever.

I fell because her touch was the first cool breath in endless heat, dissolving the walls I'd built from dust and doubt. In her arms, the world softened; the thorns of solitude bloomed into roses that didn't bleed. She wove spells with words—threads of silk that bound without chaining—making vulnerability feel like victory.

How could I not surrender? She turned my shadows into constellations, mapping a sky where I could finally navigate without fear. Love, in her form, was a symphony of sand turned to glass—fragile, brilliant, refracting every color I'd

*Love was a
cathedral of light,
a captivating hum
that made the
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promise instead of
a threat*

forgotten existed. Yet even as I chased, the air thickened with illusion, her beauty a veil over the void. The fall was sweet, hypnotic, but the ground rushed up unseen and unforgiving. The impact shook the body to the soul.

Don't tell me what I need; I was built for times like these. It's time to climb. I pay no mind to your words—lies dressed like truth, but not for me. The sunshine hits the jagged cliffs, reflecting like razor blades. This path is mine; I'll do it my way. Blood leaves my hand with each new grab; stable rocks shift as I lift my weight. Eyes search for a safe grip, my feet slipping on the bloody cliff. My life dangles. The only thing left to do is smile—and pull myself up. Life is strong and short—you can't stall out. I stay steady. I keep moving. The top is in reach, my head spinning from the loss of the past me dripping down the cliff. The mind knows the top is just a point where the journey changes direction.

Claiming the top, my lungs pull in new air—a fresh breath. The atmosphere is thick with a salty promise, the gritty, choking dust swept away by the breeze. My eyes are unsure what to believe: the sight of beautiful water and cascading waves, reflecting the sunshine with a glistening shine of hope. Downward now—not dragged by quicksand but guided by gravity's gentle nudge. My feet find placement on sun-warmed stones that invite instead of bite. No more mirages here; this is real, tangible—a hidden crease in the earth's skin where the desert meets the sea.

When I finally reach the beach, I strip off these heavy boots. The sand between my toes is a sensation of freedom. As my eyes lift across this oasis, I can see the truth in me and across the way: a little tiki bar, tattered from heavy tides but still standing.

A bartender with sun-warmed skin and a smile, seemingly familiar. Before words can be spoken, she slides the bottle my way. No more false truths or fake warmth—just condensation rolling down the glass, honest and cool. We don't talk much; the ocean handles the conversation. I sit with my toes buried in the sand, just enough for the tide to touch and not drown.

This day is finishing what it started. The sun lowers itself into the water, setting the sky ablaze with amber and gold. I take this drink not to disappear, but just to stay. ☪



PRETTY RED POPPIES

by MOHAMMED AHMAD

You shot my world into its final demise,
I remember looking pretty red,
like poppies, my veins sporadic like

the ones I remember
faintly
in that yard

Familiar blood rushes through their dark disks
Those same poppies we found in that garden,
near a thousand-year-old house

that felt lost
I never knew I carried similarity
with an old stone building

I may be old
in my mind
face still the bloody image of

blued youth
but somehow
I remind myself that this is all I could ever need.

The taste of a sweet summer
an olive tree sprawled, inviting in my midst,
and your nude arms wrapped around my neck

Tugging against my shoulder
You seal our vicious nights
with a kiss

I wear you like my favorite necklace
I found solitude in this depression
I learned how to

bask in it,
to take
a rest

The rest was nightmare
despite how softly I lied
my head, after hours of laying every poppy to rest

growing in this disturbed pasture,
I woke up to my reality
threatened, a cactus tree, a refusal of death

a push hard against the occupier's thumb
I plead to God,
let me breathe summers sweet air again

let me brush honeyed fingertips
against rough branches,
their stubble slicing

the tips
of my skin.
I remember the blood looked

pretty red, sweet juice
an apricot in June
daunting thoughts speeding in my head

I may seem extravagant, ethereal, not of this world
but I'm simple, the sun and the moon,
The dark thickens

I press it all behind me
A lightless sun
missing its rays



HINDSIGHT

“Years of fragrance from pretty red poppies
was never enough for me
to stay” is what I mean to say,

I've spent years
watching the send off
of tiny bodies

wrapped in shrouds,
red-stained dew
dripping off poppy petals



Art by TRENT BJORKMAN





STRIPPED

by CHERI' VAZQUEZ

Art by ALLISON MURPHY

In all nude strip clubs, it's illegal to sell alcohol. You can sell time. Body time. Belongingness time. A shot glass worth of not being lonely time. I sell time with my smooth skin and sharp hipbones. A song's worth, three or four minutes of me pulling at the darkest corners of your soul space. We count time in songs and dollars and stage sets. You can buy a bottle's worth of time. The club serves Martinelli's sparkling cider in the champagne room, the same stuff mom used to buy for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Once past the door, you leave behind the memories of yourself, of hay-filled barns, taffy pulls, whole days writing stories only your mom ever read, playing an antique violin, shaking a jar of cream until it turns to butter, cupping kittens in your too-small palms, feeling held, feeling whole.



You are an elephant. Your ears, grey and impossibly wrinkled, sweep the dust and crinkle like newspaper. Puddles form beneath your tusks. Salt and dirt and your body's own supply of water. Ocean wave tears trickle from your pooling eyes, evaporating in the heat and leaving stains like footpaths. The blood of your blood stands nearby. You hear his calls and the herd echoes; a distant siren, a call settled deep in an unopened hold in your mind. A cloud of fungus gnats hangs above her a few yards away; her ivory plucked from their sockets. Her eyes stare dry and wide, void of the life you remember. You will always remember. You feel no sense of time or future, empty space, dark and aimless. And so, you lie, and so you die. Wildly loyal and intensely burdened with memories, an elephant might lose the will to live without his mate.



Every few nights, my head warmed by licorice liquor, he walks me the three blocks to the club. The same plaza is home to a head shop and a place that sells birds, or fish, something

small enough to be put into a wired cage or bowl. One shot of pre-shift freezer Jägermeister turns to three, then a Gatorade bottle half filled with tequila because hands—because eyes, because 19, because stage names—don't shield you from finding yourself in a hurricane. The waves will crush you, leave you clawing at your own throat, unless you ride them. So, I learn to ride them. I numb my tongue and lips with little bags of coke and wear a black leather vest and climb a pole in black shiny boots. I carry a silver studded black clutch and stack 1's and 20's next to Caramel Kiss lip gloss. Sometimes, I remember I like to read, and I bring a library book, or I half fill out a job application while waiting to hear the DJ call my name. I come from woods and horses and mud pies, and I watch how the girls draw their eyeliner, so they look like fawns or tigers, and they show me how to cut the string from a tampon. We circle each other, pretending to touch, to care, to reach inside and feel around for the hot breath.



You are a lupa, a she-wolf. Lupa from the protean mouths and sinuous minds of humans can also mean sexually voracious female, or whore. You weave through redwoods, tongue out, tasting frost and the shadow scent of prey. Tiny tracks line the snow. Your twitching whiskers brush dead leaves. You track a meager meal, watch it scurry, barren brush to burrow. Alive inside your moon eyes lies a story you don't know how to tell. Drag marks in the ground around your den. A struggle. The smell of dogs. Bits of fur and crystal pellets litter the ground. So, you leave. Your thinning body, the winter eating at your fat stores, whispers—desperate, proud, scavenger, hunter. You have no cubs to feed, teats sunken in, shriveled up like Arizona creek beds. You only want to survive this one day or seven or forever until your coat grows past the thickness of your packs', the ones you see through dark shed windows hanging limp, tacked to splintered walls.



Strippers go through a lot of baby wipes in the summer. We wipe away sweat and strangers, sun warmed, between each stage set. During breaks, we drink mini cans of sugar free Red Bull and Pepsi in 20-ounce bottles and smoke Camel Crushes in front of the long mirrors. We carry plastic cups filled with Sprite to the locker room where we choke down mini banana vodkas. The house-mom arrives in the afternoon and plugs in her crockpot. Between faulty husbands and bored bachelors and boys in black V-necks, the dancers fork over stage dollars and eat fried rice and glazed chicken. We slam lockers, clamp hair in straighteners and dig through duffel bags of G-strings. The men who wait on the other side smell like Icebreakers and cool wintergreen soap and mud caked boots. They smell like chicken wings and curry and ranch and IPA. They smell like the interior of cars and the tops of microphones and of scalp beneath buzzcuts. I follow their eyes to the girls on the stage. I taste their desire, putrid and heavy. I wear smaller tops and glow in the dark heels like a sign reading, "Drink Me" and they topple like chess pieces. I let them untie bows and guess my real name. You're empowered; they tell me. Every night I leave cloaked in their secrets.

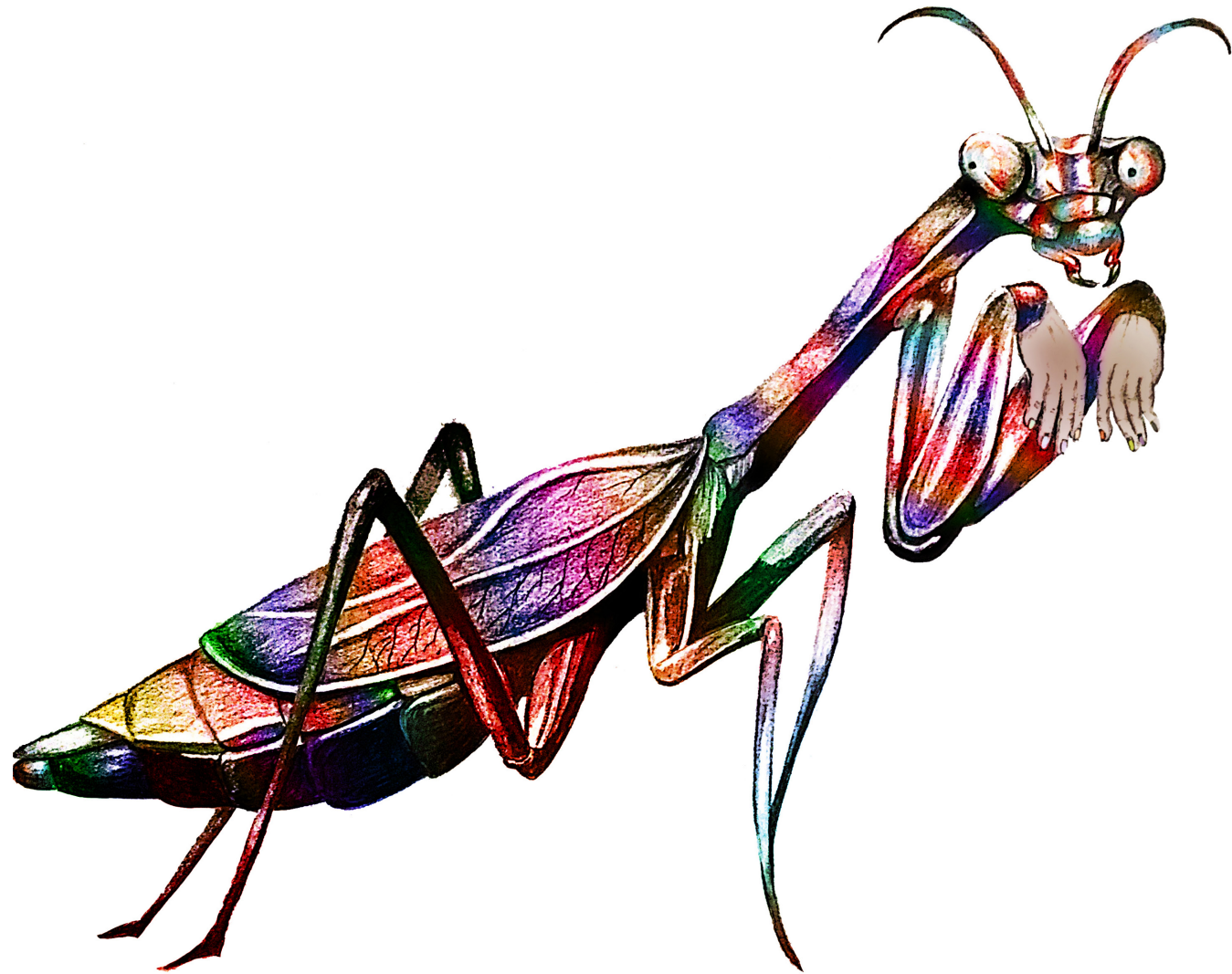


You are a musk deer. Flecks of bark sit in your gums, the sun warming your back. A flash of orange. Of human. Tail flicking, sensing a darkness, you run. Metal teeth lie under the dirt. You see one of your kind, stomach open. Their scent removed, you smell oil and rust and carcass. Someone will wear their musk like a second skin. They will be wrapped in the arms of a lover and yours will be inhaled and praised. You turn away, stumble into cold creek water and drink. Then, drawn to the familiar you go back and fold your legs underneath your own stomach, whole and warm, next to the mass of bones and still wet tongue and stay until the morning fog settles, and everything is covered in clean. Frosted bottles fill to the brim with being, with aliveness. The compounds from a harvested musk pod create the illusion of sensuality.



The molly creeps in slow and heady. It takes my hands, floats them through the air. I cross them behind my head, lie back, and feel the cool of the stage beneath me, the bass vibrating. Friday afternoons feel like waiting for a plane to land, all apprehension, readiness, and sick thrill. We wander from the bar to practice pole to an empty stage. I feel the gel capsule between my teeth before swallowing it dry. The locker room fills with voices and laughter; later there will be tears and tissues dabbing at eyelash glue, but not for me. My dance partner tucks me under her shadow when I don't know how to stand or speak. We flit like a bluebird and a raven, the men flock to our light and dark. I watch dollar bills float in the mirrors, sweep them up by the armful, and in the back, we count and divvy them up through clouds of cigarette smoke and Victoria Secret body spray. Bruises line our shins, and residue gathers on our bared hearts. We dance gutted, skinned, and hollowed. I'll dance until I find a way out, a path lined with darts, poisons, and spring traps, until I find the door and enter the world again, stripped.





Art by GALEN RODA

THE CANDY IN THE CARCASS

by FRICO AHRENDTS

*N*tick, ntick, ntick.

The cherry flavored rolling papers had gone stale floating loose leaf in his book bag. They tasted like artificial flavor grape drink rolling papers at the point his tongue dotted across the glue. All good though, he'd copped these off a friend of a friend anyways.

The glue sticks to the back of his thumb on his first attempt at tucking the joint. He'd stuffed too much in too short a paper, but he was determined to get the whole ten bag in there. His thumb pressed on the voluminous thonkie, and the other thumb rolled the bud inwards. Immediately, the paper beneath the gum tears beyond the point of doctoring. Jay closed his eyes to let the sting pass. When it did, he dumped the weed back onto his Geometry homework folder to start again.

*N*tick. Ntick. Ntick.

The morning illuminates the foot of his twin bed, the white wall, and the sparse crack in between, through a dusty bug screen. The baseball themed ceiling fan buzzed with a slight wobble to keep Jay cool in the approaching Summer, without blowing the rolling papers off his bed. His stress test. The dusted blades in the shape of baseball bats circled a plastic mitt with a glass baseball in it, serving as the case for the light that was off to save power. Jay was not a fan of baseball. And Jay's real name was Darrell.

Aside from his single Naruto poster, a workout mat, and a dresser with a top drawer that would slide out and hit the ground if not pulled carefully, this was his ten by twelve slice of peace. And the faint smell of Granddaddy Purp made it whole.

He'd crushed the paper before unraveling it to roll this time. A trick he found made it easier for his clumsy hands. He looked toward his open book bag at the side of his bed. It was filled with binders, as well as the candy he sells to fund his little habit. That and the occasional pair of Jordans if he was diligent enough in selling and saving. And he always was.

Ntick, ntick, ntick.

He'd gotten one of his first real world lessons through selling candy: inflation. The twenty-five pack that got him through two or three days of school went up by three dollars since the year started. As much as his mom talked about inflation, he knew it could shoot up even more. "Yesterday's price is not today's price." The takeaway for him *and* his customers. Though he was as eager to enforce that as he was to start his joint over again. Kids have no shame in being shiesty, and selling candy puts you at the forefront of that.

He crossed the worst of it when he successfully tucked the paper. His joints were never pretty, but they were always serviceable. He was new to rolling and still found it a stressful process. But that tuck was the bulk of it, and it was comfortable as a memory.

Ntick, ntick, ntick!

He gently licked the gum side of the paper, noting how much smoother it is to do after the tuck. His thumbs kept the bud packed tight in place. His index fingers and lips folded over the top. His mom and her talk of inflation rang in his head. The image of her sitting at the dinner table with her wine glass and her chin in her palm recurred enough to have stained his mind like an LCD screen. The particular sadness on her face; as if she was waiting for something.

The joy of completing the joint is tainted with bitterness, but he takes care when twisting the end anyways. He dusted the dark green bits off his lime green homework folder back into his grinder: small and metal; ridges on the sides with an outline of Bob Marley against the Rastafarian flag. He brushed his free hand through his dreads, for sure getting residue in them, before letting them fall back in his face. He never once thought actively about the influence. Like his name, he just fell into it.

His pride in his dreads also tainted in bitterness. His sigh was deep as the joint fidgeted between his fingers. His mom was losing her hair. She'd told him it was genetic, but he knows intrinsically there was more to it. She worked two full-time jobs all to keep most of the bills paid most of the time. All for him to have a place to live and finish high school. Something he was easily on pace to do. Which is part of the bitterness: an ever-present bitterness with himself.

Ntick, ntick, ntick.

He knew his mom was strong. He knew she never wanted to lean on him. Rarely would she take his candy money or call her sister to help her if she was behind. She'd rather them sit and eat by candlelight. He didn't know if he was strong like his mother, but he knew he was proud like her. Proud *of* her. And that pride was part of the bitterness.

Holding his work up to his face, he took two test puffs. The joint tensed and pulsed like a paper cocoon ready to bust and evolve. It staved off the bitterness he didn't want to sit with.

Candy is candy, but an ounce might be just as doable, to be real. I mean, I know Fredo can get me right for a hundred-sixty. That's twenty-eight dime bags for two hundred-eighty right there. That's a hundred-twenty flip right there. If I move that in about a week, that's a month's worth of candy. And I'mma keep moving the candy. Boom, that's damn near the light bill right there.

He rubbed his forehead. *Ntick. Ntick. Ntick.*

If I could really help out moms...she wouldn't take it though. But if it was enough, she wouldn't not take it. It would just be what it was, right? Just like it is what it is that she works two jobs right now. Right. Bro, I could really make some shit shake, like for real.

Ntick, ntick, ntick. He'd finally heard the noise in the living room: what he didn't realize he'd been denying. But he was determined to finish his thought.

Shit man, niggas is wildin' out here these days. Jon only moves dime bags and niggas still robbed him. He's stupid though, too shoutout. No way I'm moving like him...but still his thoughts turned to emotions without words. Like the ones his mom's face and wine glass brings out. In her bathrobe without her wig. He'd donate his hair to her if he knew you could do that with dreadlocks.

Lemme just take care of this mouse for her.

He killed the fan. In the hallway leading to the living room, he killed the AC. He'd cracked the windows and sliding door since it seemed like a breezy day. He knew his mom would be happy to see it off when she got home, whether she said it or not.

*He'd donate his
hair to her if he
knew you could
do that with
dreadlocks*



In the living room, the *ntick* noise, now sharp and real, came from the other side of the couch. He'd set the glue trap under it last night and taped it to the ground out of fear the mouse would just run away with it like a cartoon character when its first two feet got stuck. *Ntick.*

He passed the dining room table. His mom's chair was the only one pulled out. The empty space occupying his peripheral as he crossed.

The mouse was fully on the trap, but hopping with it as much as the folded duct tape underneath would allow. Each *ntick*: a jump that moved it maybe a centimeter forwards. Judging by the few feet the trap had moved, it must've been at it for hours. *Ntick.*

He knelt towards it, and his breath, suddenly choppy, surprised him more than the mouse flinching. He didn't think this far when he was setting up the traps last night. All he knew at that moment was that its presence had really upset his mom, and that peanut butter would work better than American cheese.

He reached for the edge of the trap. *Ntick ntick ntick!* The mouse thrashes forwards. The ferocity of its fight behind its black beady eyes paralyzed him. His heart pulsed with his entire body. The tail of the mouse was at least as long as its body and pitch black. It flicked with as much fight as the little being in front of him could conjure.

The bitterness in himself turned to anger towards the amorphous feeling inside him that he refused to unpack. So he walked to his room and grabbed an old running shoe. Because he also refused to risk a bite from a creature fighting for its life.

Again, he passed the empty chair. He braced and froze on the throw twice. The mouse had a presence now. Its short, thick whiskers, damp from its running snot and curving into the glue, painted the distinct picture of a child in over its head. He looked at the empty chair, then back into its black eyes that could not comprehend the specifics of the danger it was in. He committed to the throw.

It grazed the edge of the trap closest to its head with enough force to tip it over, with the mouse pressed between the shoe and the trap. It squeaked for the first time. A squeak piercing and desperate. He stood close enough to feel the resonance in the air with each squeak.

It fought. Rubbing against his shoe, now moving inches away from him. His collar bones tingled. He ran to his room and fought past the shoe boxes under his bed until he found the other worthless shoe. Right before he was about to give up and grab his new Oreo Fives.

The space around the empty chair felt oppressive. With an arm too tense, he slung the shoe down. Dead on the back of the trap. The first shoe shoots out, and the mouse is on its back, squealing so much louder than he thought a mouse capable. Nothing subtle or distinct about it: universal terror through a strained throat.

With a damp neck and hot skin, he knelt again, reaching for the plastic trap. But the thrashing again stops him at the heart. He played that game with himself four more times

until he accepted his current state. He paced a moment before truly making his mind up.

His bare, moist foot goes into the shoe. And without realizing his own hesitation, he presses down on the back of the trap. Its rib cage expands against his foot with each scream. Each scream in defiance of the pressure he tricked himself into thinking was enough. He resets. His upper body sizzled. He imagined this is what it feels like right before getting struck by lightning: a dread that flutters just above the skin, between you and the air.

He pressed again. His being seeped in bitterness, with a mind unable to command the body to end the mouse's suffering. By holding onto that thought, he was able to break through himself and squeeze hard enough to stop the mouse from squeaking. His big toe radiated a tingle all the way up through the bottom of his knee, as if his leg was experiencing queasiness as its own being. *Ntick* as his foot slid across the tape.

Through his toe he knew. He knew it was still alive. He knew he had to commit. With a clenched jaw he pushed through himself one more time, his consciousness a descending nail.

He didn't have words for the moment. Only an electric amorphous feeling, and that sharp moment in time. After a few seconds he knew.

He grabbed a plastic bag from under the sink and picked up the trap: the thin black plastic rectangle filled with glue, peanut butter, and what was once the little being that had spent at least two days in his mom's townhouse with them.

When it came to throwing it out, there was no remorse. Disposal was never in question. Though he decided against a burial because he knew stray cats would dig it up. There was no remorse in cleaning the floor either. Absence of blood in the spot helped, but so did knowing mice spread disease. There was much remorse in running the washing machine with just his old running shoes in them.

He sat on his bed, hot from the bones out, in a level of alertness brand new to him. Ashamed. Part of himself felt this event wasn't on a level to draw all this out. Nonetheless, he'd never wanted a joint so badly in that way as he did at that moment. He eyed it, then refused. He stared at the wall for a while first. ☞





Art by DANIEL WORKMAN

A MOTHER'S VOICE

by HARRY GORDON

A couple of days ago I came across some black-and-white photographs of my mother taken in the late 1930s when she was no more than 17 or 18 and still Mary Ella Gray. I don't think of her as the pretty, young girl that she was (do we ever of our mothers?) but rather as the short, plump, feisty and formidable matron of the later years.

Because she was self-conscious about the gap in her front teeth back then, she seldom smiled openly in any of her pictures, which to my eye gave her a slightly sly, mischievous look. Not that she had much to smile about growing up during the Depression on the state line between Tennessee and Mississippi, so far back in the woods that she was never quite sure which state she was born in. To help support the family, she quit school in the eighth grade to work in a factory making clothes for laborers where she once accidentally sewed her thumb to a pair of jeans.

She came to Southern California during World War II looking for FDR's New Deal. What she got instead was my father who was at the time serving as a medic in the U.S. Army Air Corps. Within a few months of their wedding, he was shipped to North Africa which is where he was when I was born. When he returned after the war, my mother told me, he wasn't the same man and within a year he hit the bottle and then the road with about the same enthusiasm, abandoning us both forever. All I got was his name, Harry Arthur Gordon, Jr.

In those days children like me—those conceived just as the father was departing for the war—were called “Goodbye Babies,” and my mother with one of those babies to raise alone suddenly, decided to take me home to her family, back to what I would later call Tennessee. The train car was full of uniformed servicemen homeward bound for the first time in years. Many of these soldiers, sailors, and airmen must have had Goodbye Babies of their

own that they had never seen. One sergeant near my mother asked to hold me, and then others politely requested the same until soon I was passed up one side of the entire car and down the other and finally into my mother's arms again—kissed, cuddled, and tickled all the way. I wish my father had been there to see it.

Once back in Southern California my mother soon married another man, in part I suspect, to provide me with a father, a man whose absence I would have preferred. He quickly transplanted us in the Central Valley where he took a job driving a tractor on a farm while my mother worked in the fields. I can still see her picking cotton outside of Bakersfield, bent almost double and dragging a six-foot-long sack up one row and down another like Sisyphus.

Unfortunately for her if not for me, in a few years her second husband, like her first, hit the road. She got something out of that deal though, my sweet half-brother Mick, but that's about it. For over two decades she supported us by working six days a week as a grocery store clerk in Upland, California, and on Saturday nights waited tables in a country and western bar in Riverside. As a single parent and a child of the Depression, my mother became obsessed with frugality, often at levels that defied logic, content to burn 50 cents worth of gas to use a 25-cent coupon. But she endured, and so we survived.

Gun-shy perhaps, my mother waited until I was out of high school and the house before she married again, and this union took. She eventually enjoyed a long and satisfying retirement traveling the United States with her husband in an RV, often scurrying about national parks on a scooter and doing what she called makin' pitchers. She never completely lost her creamy southern voice but denied till the end that she even had an accent.

She had an inspired gift for malaprops, once referring to a judicial "plea bargain" as a "flee bargain" and on another occasion describing me—with accidental insight—as her "pillow of strength." When my brother married, my mother declared that her new daughter-in-law had "hit the mother lobe."

*I can still see
her picking
cotton outside
Bakersfield, bent
almost double
and dragging a
six-foot-long sack
up one row and
down another like
Sisyphus*

Whenever she did anything that required concentration, her tongue peeked out slightly, a trait I teased her about until I realized that I do it myself. She got shorter as she aged, so behind the wheel in her little Honda with not much more showing than that bushy mop of gray hair, it looked as though an Ewok was driving.


Though she had little formal education, she insisted that my brother and I attend college, and she was there at our respective graduation ceremonies beaming and "makin' pitchers."

She was stubborn, thin-skinned, and sentimental and held a grudge longer than any Hatfield or McCoy. She was also loyal, supportive, and utterly dependable and instilled in me a secular standard of right and wrong that I have lugged around with me all these years.

My mother and I did not always see eye to eye, especially in my early years, but as we both aged, we established a workable détente and in her final years a positively warm rapport. I called her Momacita by then, and she always called me simply "Son." Eventually widowed, she moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to be close to my brother who looked after her till the end with an unwavering and admirable devotion.

On my last visit we were alone in her apartment when she asked me to check the messages on her old answering machine. One of them was from me that I had left a year before. I asked her why she had not erased it.

"I just like to hear your voice," she said. It broke a little of my heart to imagine her alone there at night replaying old messages for company.

A few months after she died, I got a call from my own son Patrick and during the brief pause before he spoke, I heard my mother say "Son?" It was not a voice from the beyond, of course, but rather something I had recorded somewhere deep inside me and something that, like her, I won't erase. I just like to hear her voice. 



THE SACRED RANGOON

by KATIE LI



Art by UZOMAH UGWU

“Three trays of cheese rangoons. Each tray is made up of thirteen rows and eight columns, which amounts to one hundred and four rangoons. So, that leads to a total of three hundred and twelve for today.” I continue to think to myself. “I make new rangoons at least twice a week, refilling three trays each time. In that case, I have made one hundred sixty-two thousand two hundred forty rangoons in the past five years!”

I hum a light tune as I fold the last cheese rangoon into its iconic four-pointed star formation. Loudly clapping off the corn starch stuck on my palms, I watch the “snow” sprinkle onto the shiny steel table below. I reflect on all the rangoons I have made. According to the Japanese legend of a thousand paper cranes, I would have enough “paper cranes” for about one hundred and sixty-two wishes. Carefully placing my version of cranes into their metal trays, the crinkle of plastic reaches my ears as I wrap these floury delights. The crinkling plastic echoes its crackly sounds throughout the kitchen until the hums of the refrigerators and grotesque grumbles of the at-death’s-door machinery overtake these sounds. At the end of the day, I will never be able to stand before the sacred crane, or should I say, “the sacred rangoon.” But with focus and determination, just maybe, some wishes can become reality.

The kitchen faucet uncontrollably drips as cracked and calloused fingers dance across the grease-coated calculator buttons from a distance. Father starts to sing a funny made-up tune, and we join in a short laughter. Our laughter reconnects us again after a hard day’s work of bickering, yelling, and getting burned by relentless oil. Once the sun sets and the short arm rests halfway past nine and the long arm ticks onto thirty, the cleaning crew hurriedly comes out from its burrows. My sister and I nodded to each other with a new day’s motivation of going home as early as possible. Although

it never comes to fruition, it does not stop us from trying every single day. While listening to the swish-swash of the chemical-drenched mop swiping across the floor, I take a glance at our welcome door. The parking lot lights flicker a dull orange, and the insects mindlessly swarm the dully lit awning lights. The chime that accompanies the opening door and the electrical buzz of the dusty lights fade into the background; I have slowly come to appreciate these sounds. Whenever the chime blares, new and familiar faces step through the door. Our welcome door used to slam relentlessly onto itself, but a nice gentleman who happened to work in repairs offered to fix it for us for free. It was a small gesture, but one that we appreciated and so we placed an order of free cheese rangoons into his order as a small token of our appreciation. By sharing stories over the wait for food, the community is brought together. The conversations between people who normally would never meet, if not for our restaurant, act as supporting vocalists to the clamor of the chaotic kitchen. My hand itches to scratch graphite onto textured paper; I want to capture this moment.

I can recall being about five years old, carrying my favorite waxy “weapon” called crayons. Well, I never thought of them as weapons, but they sure were according to my immigrant parents. In their absence, I often conversed with the house’s silent whispers in their stead. My imagination was my only entertainer. Grasping my crayons, the white walls practically beckoned my inner artist. My early creations have faded from a bright waxy blue to a faded green, still leaving its historical mark. Mother and Father scrunched their noses and crinkles formed between their brows as I saw the dim reflection of my work in their dark brown eyes. Well, color me blue.

My fingertips gently trace over the repainted walls where my unlucky creations are buried deep within multiple layers of white paint. The surviving creations and fantastical cartoon characters continue to live under our dinner table. Textured papers, HB pencils, and brushes went untouched as school papers replaced them. My hands became occupied with doughy skins and ground meat. Watching the dumpling fan

out as my fingers mechanically pinched and folded, a small smile formed as I created something out of nothing. My mind wanders with the possibilities of creating and my unwavering determination encouraged me to further explore the arts. Originally, my Chinese parents doubted all sorts of artistic endeavors. Their focus on obtaining financial security caused them to scrutinize my passion, but my passion only grew stronger and with time, they came to appreciate and even support my artistry. I never thought they would tell me to keep drawing and keep my passion alive: the same passion that whimsically graffitied the walls of our old home.

Walking with careful steps holding the cold trays of wrapped rangoons in my arms, I am reminded of the beginnings of my story. In seeking opportunity and security, like many other immigrants, my parents came to America leaving their family in China. Reflecting on the struggles we have faced as a family, there is beauty in the lit-up sign of our restaurant. Perhaps I’ll even draw it someday. The dim neon lights of our restaurant sign were our beacon, our own statue of liberty.

“Give me your orders, your desires. Your hurried requests yearning for good food.” ✎

*the same
passion that
whimsically
graffitied the
walls of our
old home*





Art by KATLIN RISEN

THE IMMODERATE PAST

by T. R. HEALY

"Turn your eyes to the immoderate past,"
Alan Tate, "Ode to the Confederate Dead."

The first time I visited the American South was when I flew across the country to go to college. It was a long time ago, a time I realize I had let slip past me and had almost forgotten, as if I had never left my home and gone so far away. But later, when I returned to the South after so many years, I was surprised to find myself thinking back to those years one afternoon while walking through a wooded island of live oaks and Sabal palms and tupelo swamps in South Carolina. I was in a place I had never been before, remembering another place I had all but forgotten.

That afternoon, I was walking with my cousin, a soldier stationed in the South, along with other members of our family. As he crept ahead, following a small path through the woods, he suddenly disappeared over a steep little rise, and when I climbed the rise, I saw him standing in a grove of live oaks talking with a ghost of the Confederacy. Startled, I blinked my eyes, not believing what I saw, then I hurried down the rise and saw that the ghost was in fact a tall lean man wearing a gray infantryman's cap. He was painting the two faded cannons mounted in the grove, trying to preserve these relics of the Civil War. I listened attentively as my cousin spoke with the man about the range and accuracy of these ancient guns, about the movement of Union troops along this stretch of rough ground. The ghost spoke as if he had been there, describing in vivid detail the skirmishes that had occurred on this island. In a corner of my mind, I could see plumes of smoke issuing from the cannons, trees collapsing, men falling to the ground.

As the ghost spoke, I felt as if I were back in college listening to my favorite teacher, an eminent historian of the American Civil War, lecture on the ravages of the conflict. I was a senior then and vividly recalled how tired I had become of school, not merely of the work that was demanded of me, but of being treated as a student, as someone whose only purpose in life seemed to be to attend school. My senior year was a terrible, exhilarating year in America, a time of political assassinations and furious demonstrations, a time that threatened to unravel the fabric of the Union once again, and I could hardly wait until I could venture out into this strange, angry world. I regarded my senior year as sheer drudgery, precluding me from entering a more exciting existence. In many of the classes I attended that year my attention wandered, and my eyes turned from the instructors to the windows along the walls which I would gaze out at, lost in my dreams. But in the Historian's classroom when I looked out the windows I imagined I could see the images he spoke about in his lectures: the strange fruit hanging from trees, the auction blocks, the smoke and thunder of the battlefields, the tattered guidons snapping in the wind. I saw these images of the Civil War so clearly through the windows I forgot where I was and seemed to be in another time like this Confederate ghost, a mute witness to the seemingly irrepressible conflict.

One afternoon, in conjunction with a paper I was researching, the Historian invited me to lunch, and as I sat at the table with him discussing John C. Calhoun and the Doctrine of Nullification, I felt for the first time in my life as if I had stepped out of my childhood into the world of adults. Of course, I had nothing to say that he didn't already know, but for the duration of the lunch I thought I did, imparting my opinions as readily as I had taken to place my lunch order. When he asked me to compare the current dissensions in the country over the hostilities in Vietnam with the dissensions of a hundred years ago, I did so, swelling with conviction. I left the table feeling twice my size, a grown up at last.

A few months after that lunch, after I had graduated from school, I was back in the South, being trained as a soldier,

and often I thought back to that afternoon with the Historian whenever some drill sergeant screamed invectives at me for some misdeed. I was not so sure then I wanted to be out in this other world, thinking how much more pleasant it was to have lunch with the Historian, making believe that the observations I was making were of interest to someone besides myself.



I smiled to myself, still not convinced I wanted to be in this other world. That afternoon, as I stood in the grove and listened to the ghost, I also seemed to hear the mellifluous voice of the Historian, merging in a single strong voice, and try as I might I was unable to separate the two voices. I was glad, too, feeling as if I had not entirely left the world of my youth, and briefly I closed my eyes and saw again the images of the Civil War I had observed through the windows as if I were indeed back in a classroom.

*the strange fruit
hanging from
trees, the auction
blocks, the smoke
and thunder of
the battlefields,
the tattered
guidons snapping
in the wind*



THOSE WHO ARE APPLAUDING

by RITA LIN

I still have a clear memory of the very beginning, it was a sunny afternoon, I was four years old and had just woken up from a nap. Birds chirped at the window, and the camellia mother watered on the windowsill was blooming. Suddenly, sweet music echoed in my ears as happy elves danced around flowers. I stood up at once and looked around inquisitively. It was my mother who was viewing a video. I can remember vividly that the man on the video was dressed in a dark blue tuxedo and playing before a huge "monster". His fingers moved rapidly, a torrent of notes spilled out as his fingers moved. I widened my eyes in surprise, stared at the video for a few seconds, then pulled the phone from my mother's hand, dancing and exclaiming. "What is this? It is so funny, I want to play it too."

My mother gently caressed my head and said, "Babe, this is a piano, a musical instrument, do you like it?" I blinked my eyes and shook my head hard. I did not realize at that moment that my careless words would change my entire childhood.

Seven days later, on a usual evening, when I returned home from the park, I was surprised to discover that the giant whom I had seen in the video suddenly appeared before me in my living room. My parents led me to the piano and explained to me that my professional career of studying the piano had started. My parents told me I should obey the family principle that, if you don't do it, do not do it, if you do it, do it best, and sponsored me by hiring the best piano teacher in our town. I undertook the adventure of piano practice amidst confusion, happiness, and uncertainty.

I deeply regretted it soon afterward.. The chaotic staves looked like curled earthworms to me, spanning octaves with acute and flat marks. All of these gave me a splitting headache. My hands at age five could not fully span the octave scale. I tried to open my eyes as wide as possible to see carefully, but I still played it wrong. Every mistake made me shudder in fear. The cost of being wrong was my mother's disapproving frown, the teacher's deep sigh, and the realization that this child has no talent for playing the piano. Each practice session

ended in tears. I'd cry, covering both hands over my eyes, then crawl off the piano bench on my fours, retreating to a corner and vowing that I would never play the piano again.

"I hate it!" I once shouted.

"You said you liked it!" my mother exclaimed, folding her arms.

"I didn't know it would be like this..." I complained. But under the disappointed gaze of my mother, I always crept slow as a snail back to the stool, wiping away tears as I climbed up to try once more.

The black and whites were like a definite contract. They intruded on the hours spent with friends. They were like iron bars—cold, hard, unyielding—confining me in a limited world of repetition and tension. Each note was a step, each scale a threat that there was freedom beyond discipline I couldn't understand.

I practiced day after day, year after year, under the huge pressure of my teachers and parents, with teardrops, routine and mechanical practice. Three years passed like a flash of lightning. When I entered primary school, the school was planning to create a band. When I got the news, my parents had already enrolled me in the selection. They chose the songs for me and set a rigid practice schedule—four hours a day. "Not good enough. Do it again." That was the endless chorus in our house. And somehow, in all that noise, I began to wonder if I would ever hear my own voice.

Time went quickly, and selection day finally came. I still remember that it was summer and the sun was scorching on the earth. The cicadas were hoarsely screaming in the trees. I was standing at the door of the selection hall with a heavy music score in my hand. My mother's reprimanding in normal practice suddenly flashed in my mind: "This part is wrong, do it again. Not good enough, still not good enough." My blood was chilled in a flash, and my hands which were about to push the door gradually fell down. My whole body was rigid. It was definitely a very hot summer, but I felt as if I were standing on the ice and snow. I felt that I was frozen and could not walk. I stood at the door for quite a while, and after a long pause, I turned and walked away.

"Lin Shuoran to the music room, please," the loudspeaker echoed. But I was hiding in the bathroom.

Drip. Drip.

The faucet leaked, each drop a taunt.

I bit my lip. I didn't move. Yes, there is no reverse in this story. Finally, I missed that selection.



HINDSIGHT

After I started college, my friends would always invite me to concerts. I would always go into a coma whenever I saw the singers singing with all their heart and there was always a beam of light on the stage for the keyboard player.

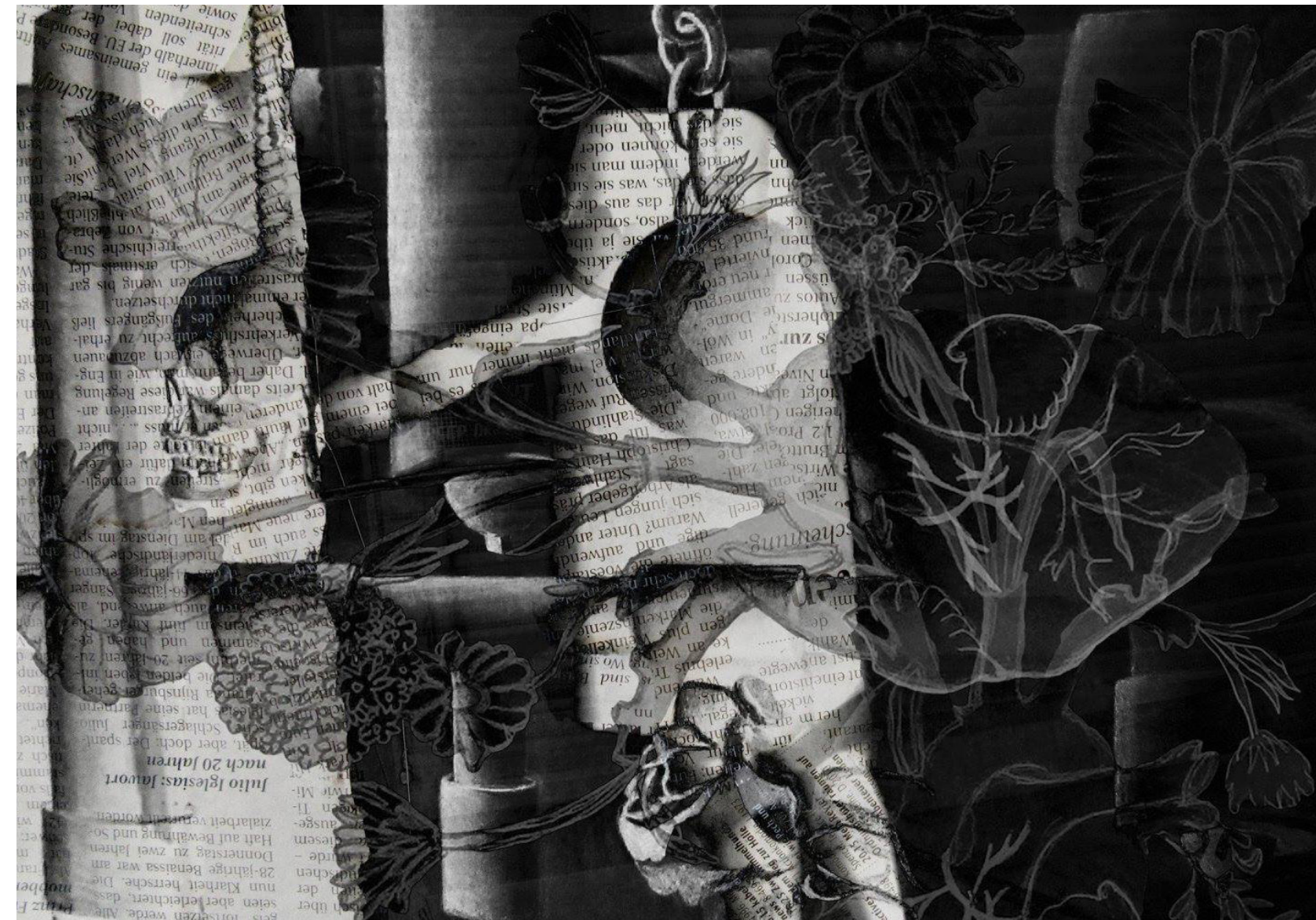
I have imagined a thousand times what I would have done if I had actually opened the selection room door at that time, and how I would've done it if I had the courage to step out of the bathroom. Could I also have become as cool and stepped onto the stage like those keyboard guys? Was there some ray of light that I could have touched? Could I also be the person who surprised me when I was a kid?

Unfortunately, life is not the same as in the movies. Unfortunately, not all people are heroes in Marvel, not all will be reborn like the main character in the movie, and not all can break through themselves and slay the big boss at the critical moment of 'life and death'. At least I was not that hero at that time.

When I was 20, at the end of a random concert, recalling my tears practicing the piano, and looking at the band playing passionately under the light, I suddenly accepted it. At the end of the song, I forgave the child I once was. Following the warm applause of the crowd, tears dripped. I thought that being a person who applauds in the crowd was also cool.

After returning to China during summer vacation, I opened the 10-year-old piano that had accompanied me, wiped off the dust on it, and played my favorite songs of that year. The notes flowed out of me with clumsiness, not so smoothly, not sounding like the music I imagined in my childhood. I closed the cover of the piano slowly and looked at the window. It was summer again. My mother no longer cultivates camellias anymore. What I saw were the tall trees outside the window. The sun was brightly shining and the breeze blowing gently. The leaves' shadows on the ground gently swayed, as if dancing a waltz. No longer iron bars, the rhythm of life now felt soft, free.

I believe this is the best time, and I have the best life now. ☪



Art by JULIA SMITH

i take mother's camphor oil / clear the salt of the cold ocean
from my pores / collect seashells in baskets / paint them silver
with my snot / wade barefoot where the weeds wash up with low
moans / thermalize my once goose bumped skin to the waves /
where the tides vomit salt water / erode sediment from the sand
castles of yesterday / i name the sea the Thief of Pillars / rub the
homemade label / dappled in mother's handwriting / between
my fingers / feel it crumble from the small brown bottle / moist
with sweat / the sea dew candies the minty atmosphere of my
nose / like the tall blades of grass candy the rickety wooden fence
/ like the molecular glass candies the drier parts of the sand /
with the same sparkle commonly caught in the shine of camphor
oil against freckled skin / i leave the brown bottle with the basket
of silver shells / where it becomes a grave for grains of sea salt /
which stick to the indentations of my sick fingerprints / i move
further in / lingering in the deeper parts / where the surface of
the water is foamy enough to soap me and wash my skin away.

REMNANTS

in the backroad where
i hang onto the winding
tracks of the heart the way
mother wove the braids into
my hair even when i cried—
she's pulling too tight at
the tangled cobwebs in
the kitchen window
white reflections of
silver dew drops once
all too familiar to the gaze
that clutched my girlhood—
these things that no longer
hug the temple of my head
the way the broken struts
of my 2000s sedan
hug the shock of oak roots,
lumps of doe meat, and lost
hooves of appalachian myths
woven into the backroad's
pavement like the carrion of
the daughter i once was.

THE SEA AND I ARE ILL

by ABIGAIL CAIN

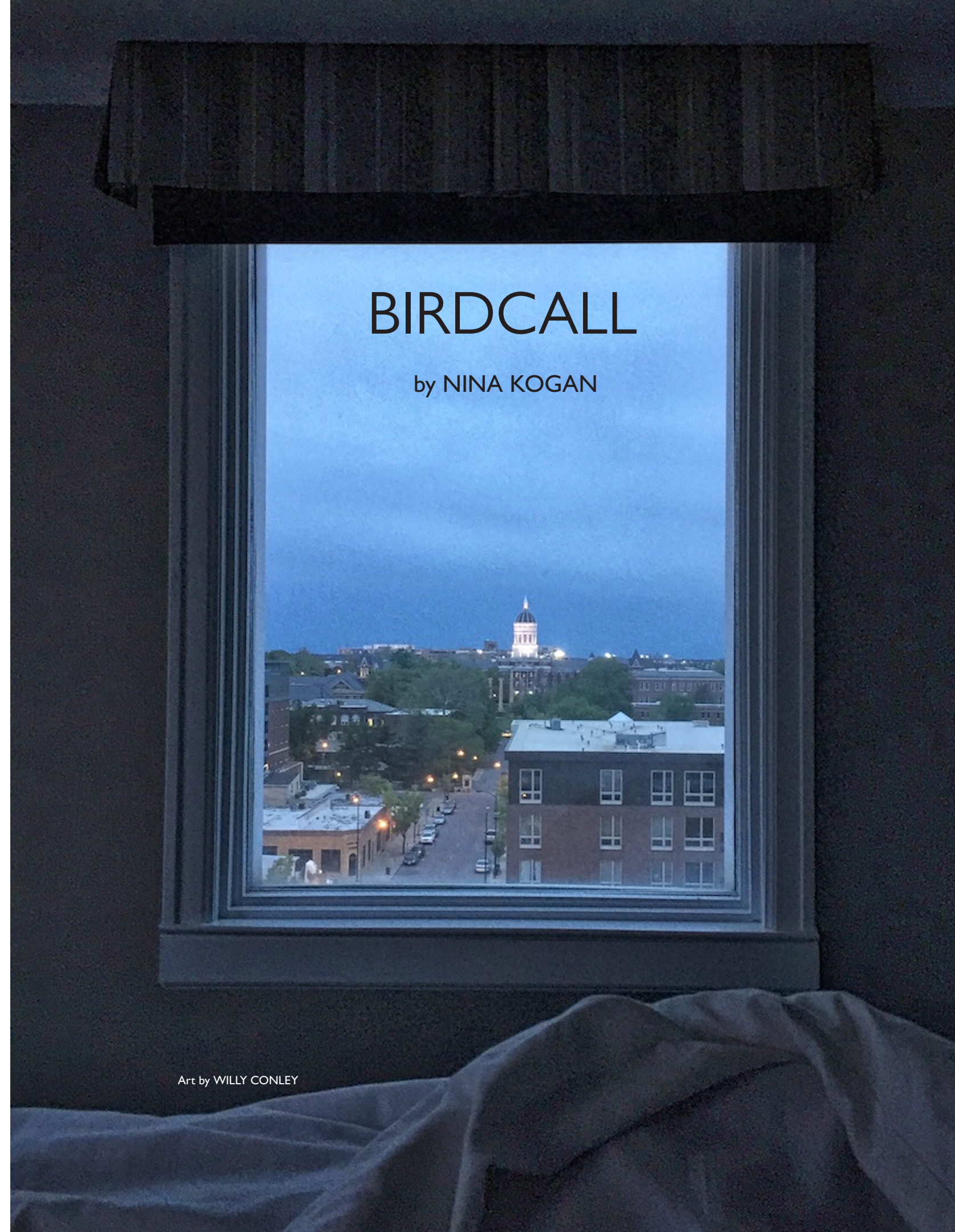
HINDSIGHT
PROSE CONTEST WINNER



Following acceptance into HINDSIGHT, strong contenders were voted on by our editorial team. “Birdcall,” by Nina Kogan, engages readers in vivid imagery.

Thank you to the Program for Writing & Rhetoric for funding this contest.

Spring 2026 Editorial Staff



Art by WILLY CONLEY

I watched the deep blue of dusk roll in from the damp wooden bench of a schoolyard as I waited for the taxi. The middle-aged man renting me a room in his apartment had insisted again and again that he take nude photos of me for his photography project, cradling a camera in the crux of his right elbow. When I took my bags and left the key in his metal mailbox, he left me a message stating that I was too young and inexperienced to deal with such situations. There will be many times in life, he had written, that someone will ask something of you that you do not wish to do. Behind the school, a group of boys drinking bottles of beer laughed and danced around a makeshift campfire, their shadows blooming across the brick wall.



I sat alone in the lobby of my new hostel, burrowed in the dark weight of a Western-European forest, peeling back the skin of a clementine. The bitter orange scraps packed themselves under my nails. My grandmother once told me that when you peel a clementine in one piece, you can whisper a wish into its rind. Halfway through, the skin tears. I make a wish anyway, though the meaning feels distant, as it has gotten increasingly difficult to read my own mind. Any clarity was only nested within the understanding that there was some unknown absence strung across me like a sheet over an open cage. A thought of this nature knows only to follow you. There is no room for it in your palms, and there is nowhere else for it to go. It was this that I had come to ask of myself: that if the missing shape of my real life called out to me, I would answer. I would go anywhere it asked me to.



On a whale-watching boat tour, I sat in a dimly lit corner of the empty main cabin littered with jackets and paper plates, looking down at the dark water. The mass appeared several times, its heavy skin twisting between wind and waves, and the boat circled back towards the shore. Along the coast, the constant downpour of rain had carved muddy divots into the earth, bogging down the purple flowers blooming from its gut. As I waited for the bus, I sat crouched on a damp wooden bench, chin digging holes in the flat of my left knee. I searched for poems between the lines of my cracked phone screen, wiping away the drops of rain falling like stones onto the words. I read the one about the crying of a night bird through scattered trees, and the one about the man with the parakeets resting on his shoulders, and I wondered if it all came back to birds. Two falcons circled overhead, running like children in the dim sky.




I switched seats with the woman on the train who preferred being closer to the window. For two hours, I looked past her towards the charcoal earth scattered with moss, at the swollen yellow of the sun shyly filtering through strands of her black hair like the first hum of morning light melting behind an opening door. I had learned, throughout the quiet curiosity of the past few days, to be especially observant of passageways. A window outlined with wooden trim, white and peeling, looking out towards a river weaving through a dense wood. An arched doorway carved into a stone wall leading to a stained-glass panel of a vulture adorned with the relics of a saint. Two young girls running in zigzags down the long hallway of a castle, their fingers brushing gently past the grooves in the walls, dust spinning in the light.



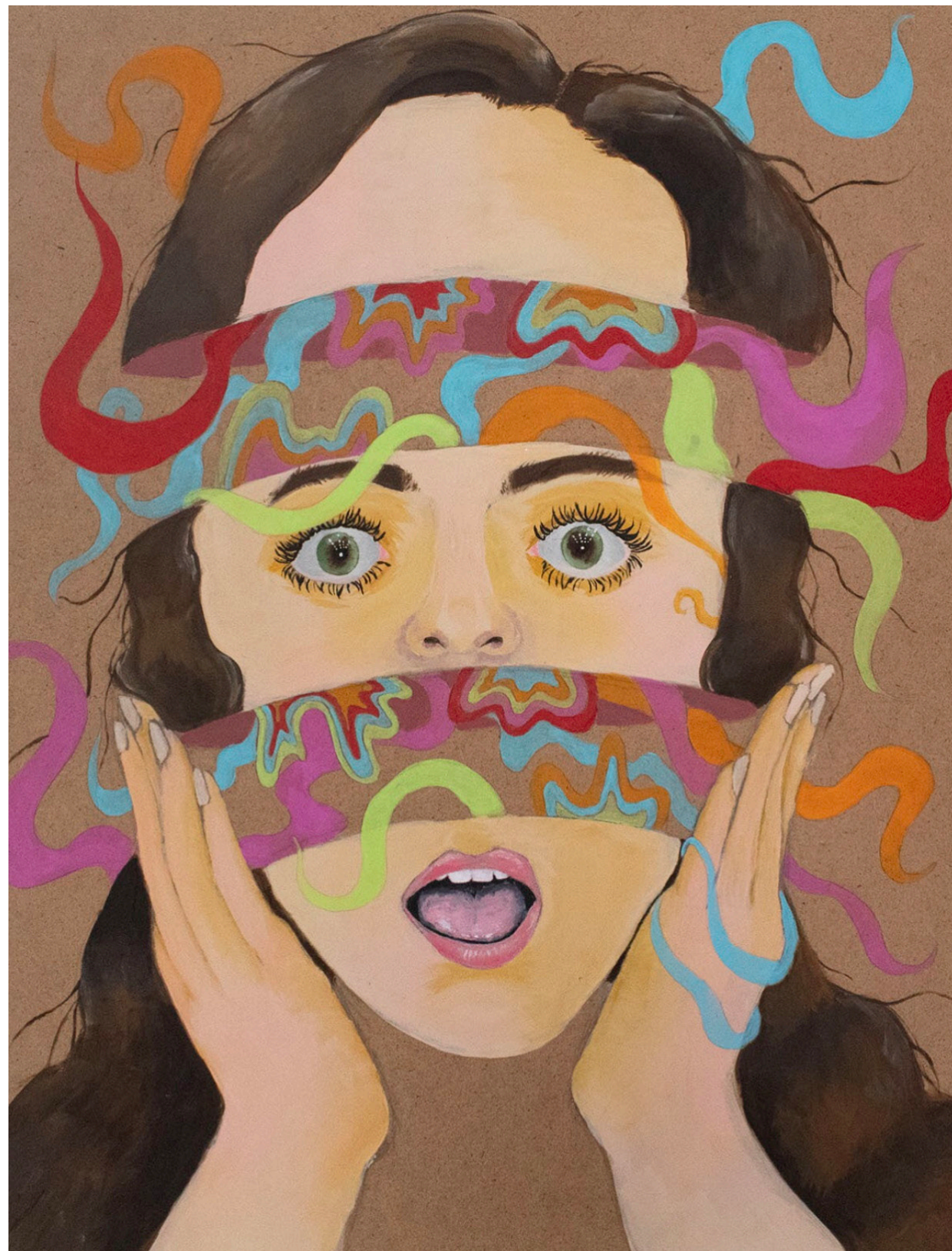
Among the distant hills, just beyond the reach of the winding tracks, sprouted quiet towns with stone houses painted in varied peeling shades of yellow, blue, and green. An old woman in a pink, floral nightgown hung laundry on a clothesline suspended across the pillars of her balcony: a pair of wrinkled blue jeans, a ruffled summer dress, a child's t-shirt with the name of a local soccer team. In the shade of the cobbled street below her, a cat carefully licked the backside of its tired paw, dirtied white fur brushed by the gentle hand of the wind. The streets were lined with bicycles and swaying lines of citrus trees, lemons, and oranges eclipsed by the nods of tattered leaves. I picked at the empty spots of skin inside my tattoo, thinking of the birthmark on my thigh that I had not seen since I was a child.



The train moved quickly through the darkening fields, each town sinking time and time again behind the hills as they dissipated to memory. The quiet balance of life remained untethered from the passing of my shadow along stone walls, for lemons would continue to grow and fall and grow again, dirtied shirts would always find their way back to loving hands held under the run of warm water, tongue would continue to meet paw on shaded, rugged streets.

It all wilts and falls and returns again, grass drifting backward through knowing tracks, body lying still. This sweeping need, most of all. This bitter skin. In sleep, it often visits me, a strand of fur picked up by the wind, carried over fields and hills and valleys. The familiar shape of a mourning dove adds the fur to her nest in a tall pine outside my bedroom window. As I lace up my shoes, she calls out my name, and the trill of her voice sounds just like the singing rails of a train. 





Art by PAYTON O'BRIEN

THE DEAD FISH

by ELIZABETH JEANE

Fifth grade—the year curiosity reached its peak. Under every rock, there was a metropolis of roly-polies and centipedes. Behind each cracked door hid my brother with his Nerf Gun militia. Blue-haired ladies at church dotted on me, informing me I was one of the good girls. I only had one problem: a friend Mom claimed was a bad influence. Her name was Tessa.

Tessa was a redhead with a smart mouth. She was in a trampoline, tropical-vacation kind of family. On top of her sleek granite countertops lay rows of crisp brown Trader Joe's bags, smelling faintly of curry and coffee.

At Tessa's house, we were allowed to take her iPad into her room, close the door, lie flat out on the bed, and explore. Every girl at that time had one fascination: One Direction. It was devious, the night we searched each band member with the keyword shirtless. We didn't know what we were doing, only that girls were supposed to like looking at shirtless guys. Then, in gaming chat rooms, we competed for who could collect the most internet boyfriends. Whoever could speak sexier in speech bubbles.

Driving home with Mom the next morning, I was asked the expected question: what did you two girls do last night? I left out each detail she wouldn't approve of. It wasn't lying. It was leaving out some of the truth. Once home, I excused myself to the bathroom, turned the water as cold as it could go, and splashed it harshly on my face.

After that night with Tessa, I explored my own iPad in a brand-new way. A flopping inside me grew meaner like a dying fish in my stomach. I'd hole up in the bathroom, staring at my tomato cheeks. If the church ladies knew, they'd never call me a good girl again, I thought to myself.

My mom grew up in a time when it was passed around in brown paper bags, when only boys were interested, and video stores hid it with a back-room curtain.

My brother had rules: he had to plug his phone in my parents' room at 9:00 pm, check in, and keep his door open.

I learned how to clear my search history. I learned how to fake being sick. I learned how I could disappear into a back corner of the house for hours, claiming I was working on homework. I had a lock on my door, and I learned how to use it.

Seventh grade was the beginning of the end.

"You ready, honey?" Mom called from the hallway.

How close she was gave me a rush of panic. If she stormed in here and ripped the iPad from my hands, it would be over. But I knew the risks. I was good at this. I was in my brother's room, so I slipped the iPad underneath the couch cushion. I pressed the cool of my palm to my cheeks and slinked to the door.

All afternoon, we ran errands. For keeping Mom company, I was promised a delicious pile of cotton candy confetti ice cream. But between Walmart and Michaels, we got a call from Dad.

"No. I haven't seen it. Hold on. Let me ask Hannah," she turned to me, "Have you seen the iPad?"

Shit.

"Nope."

I prayed that pulling off couch cushions was beneath Dad.

When we got home, there were wet rings beneath his armpits, and his face was red. Mine was too.

"I'll look too," I offered. I felt the dying fish's body beat against my ribcage and beelined for Peter's room. My fingers trembled as it opened to the video I had been enjoying. X. X. X. Close every tab. Clear history.

"I found it!" I screamed.

Dad came running. Mom leaned hesitantly in the doorway as Dad wrapped me in a relieved hug.

Later that night, Mom and I cuddled up to read under her shabby green comforter. Crickets chirped, and a warm sticky breeze blew in from the window.

"You wanna tell me what really happened today?"

*I had a lock
on my door,
and I learned
how to use it*

She lowered her reading glasses and glared at me. Mom was rarely ever upset. The dying fish did a somersault.

"W-what do you mean?" I stammered.

"You just happened to find that iPad the minute we got home?" She said flatly.

"Yes." I choked out. A red-hot rash crawled up my neck.

"That's convenient," she pushed her glasses up on her nose and returned to her book. I hopped out of bed and turned to face her. The dying fish slapped against my ribs.

"I can't believe you," I yelled.

"What can't you believe?" She questioned.

"I've done nothing to make you distrust me. I follow all the rules. I never mess up. It's hurtful. It hurts me that you think I would lie."

I had gone too far. There was no turning back.

"Okay. I'm sorry."

It was curt. She didn't mean it.

I stormed out of the room.

I made it a couple of steps into the hallway before a strange tingling overcame me. The dying fish swirled and swished against the lining of my stomach. It fought to survive, and I fought to crush it. I laid a hand flat on the wall as the dying fish forced itself tightly into my esophagus. It was traveling up, approaching the back of my throat. Panic set in, and I raced back to my mom. I opened my mouth to apologize, to warn her of the morbid position I was now in, but a bath of seaweed and lake water preceded a huge, dead bass tumbling from my mouth and onto the floor. It was finally still.

"I have something to tell you, and I'm scared that when I do, you're gonna hate me." ❧





Art by KATHRYN CASTANOLI

THE GOLDILOCKS ZONE

by J. W.

Aquinas

*If everything is such that it is able not to exist, then at some time nothing existed in the world. But if this were true, then nothing would exist even now.*¹

¹ Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica: Five Ways*. 1265-1274.



Goldilocks Zone

The condition of a planet must fall in a very specific range to support life. Far from a fairytale, the science behind the habitable zone is overly complicated with countless factors in play. The planet can't be too close to the sun, and it can't be too far; it must be just right. The planet's rotation cannot be too slow, or one side will freeze while the other one burns; it must be just right.² The sun that the planet orbits can't be too large or it'll turn into a red giant and swallow the planet, but it can't be too small, or an atmosphere won't be created; it must be just right. The planet's orbit must be circular to remain approximately the same distance from the sun consistently; it must be just right. The planet must hold these conditions unwaveringly for billions of years to allow evolution to occur, but it also must change to adjust to stars aging and growing hotter. And somehow, our Earth is just right.

Faint Sun Paradox

When the Earth came into being, our Sun's output was almost 30 percent lower than it is today. This would make the temperature of the Earth's surface too cold to support water, and consequently life. But life existed regardless. Scientists have examined possible theories as to how this happened: atmospheric composition, faster rotation, albedo, a larger sun that then lost mass, a collision of planets that knocked the Earth away from a hotter zone, a hotter core, a core closer to the surface, etc. None of these possibilities fit as a solution to the paradox.

The Goldilocks Zone

*But as suggestions accumulate and are discarded, one conclusion seems ever harder to ignore: we are even luckier to be here than we thought.*³

Drake Equation⁴

Frank Drake proposes the following equation to determine the possibility of extraterrestrial, contactable life:

$$N = R_* \cdot f_p \cdot n_e \cdot f_l \cdot f_i \cdot f_c \cdot L$$

N = civilizations (in our galaxy) that communication with is hypothetically possible.

$N < 1$ means we're likely alone in the galaxy, $N > 1$ means the existence of other contactable civilizations is likely.

R_* = average rate star formation.

f_p = fraction of stars with planets.

n_e = average number of planets per star that could potentially support life.

f_l = fraction of those planets in which life develops at some point.

f_i = fraction of those planets with intelligent life.

f_c = fraction of civilizations that develop technology for interplanetary communication.

² Cramer, John A. "Habitable Zones." *Salem Press Encyclopedia of Science*, Jan 2023.

³ Clark, Stuart. "How was Earth's life kindled under a cold sun?" *New Scientist*, 13 Feb 2013.

⁴ Drake, F. D. "Drake equation: Physics Today." *American Institute of Physics*, April 1961.



L = length of time that those civilizations release detectable signals into space.

Using NASA's star formation rate, the rare earth hypothesis value, Mayr's view on intelligence, Drake's view of communication, and Shermer's lifetime estimate, we get the following equation:

$$N = 1.5 \cdot 10^{-5} \cdot 10^{-9} \cdot 0.2 \cdot 304 = 9.1 \cdot 10^{-13}$$

Meaning, based on estimated values, we likely exist alone in this galaxy and the observable universe.

The Goldilocks Zone

We exist on the planet that supports life merely because it is the only [known] place that supports life; we have to live in a universe in which life could exist, because if life couldn't exist, then we couldn't be here.

Frank Drake

The astrophysicist and astrobiologist Frank Drake shares his name with a comic book character. The character accidentally resurrects Dracula, his ancestor. He narrowly escapes death at the hands of the vampire, but then Drake attempts suicide.

The Goldilocks Zone

*I was so desperate to be understood that I would grab people and shove them inside my heart—where they stuck out like splinters, and it would hurt every time I felt anything.*⁵

Theological Hypothesis

God created the Earth in six days; and on the seventh day, there was rest. The theory that we came into being through an all-powerful, all-good divine being fails to account for the rest of the planets in the universe and beyond it. The value of living beings is higher than almost anything else, which is why humans with free will are allowed to express that will. If the value of living beings under God increases the value of the world or the universe, then more worlds and universes should have living beings to maximize goodness. This is what an all-powerful, all good God would do: maximize goodness. But we seem to be on the only planet with existing intelligent life. *Surely the proportion would be much, much higher if the cause of the multiverse were a purposive being likely to value life.*⁶

The Goldilocks Zone

I may not be of much value to the world. But you think I'm important, and that's enough.

Simulation Hypothesis

Mental states and consciousness are a function of the information that is processed in a biological system, the brain, a system that in principle could be duplicated within a sufficiently powerful digital computer. As such, on this view it would be possible to construct a conscious, thinking mind

⁵ Knight, Eliot. "Untitled post." *Tumblr*, 2017.

⁶ Rota, Michael. *Taking Pascal's Wager: Faith, Evidence, and the Abundant Life*. 14 April 2016.

*in a purely digital medium.*⁷ Supporters of the simulation hypothesis often argue that if whole-world immersive simulations don't exist, that means humanity has died off before we developed the technology needed to create such a thing. The belief that we exist in a digital simulation is also a type of hope for long-term human survival.

The Goldilocks Zone

It doesn't seem to matter that much. Even if you and I are digital creations, we still exist. Look around you. Look at me. We still exist.

Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder is characterized by "high highs" and "low lows." People with this disorder experience mania, a stage of high energy in which they tend to make reckless and rash decisions, and episodes of depression, a state of low energy often accompanied by negative thoughts and suicidal behavior. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when I was fourteen years old. When manic, I've hooked up with strangers recklessly, taken untested drugs from people on the street, sold my body, and lied about my age to try to enlist in the Air Force. When depressed, I've done worse.

Goldilocks Zone

I used to wish that I could experience life the way everyone else can, without it tearing me apart.

Reincarnation

*I like to pretend I already died and asked God to send me back to Earth so I can swim in lakes again and see mountains and get my heart broken and love my friends and cry so hard in the bathroom and go grocery shopping 1,000 more times. And that I promised I would never forget the miracle of being here.*⁸

The Goldilocks Zone

*The club is bumping, the ladies look good, and the alcohol is flowing. There is much pain in this world but not in this room.*⁹

⁷ Drob, Sanford L. "Are You Praying to a Videogame God? Some Theological and Philosophical Implications of the Simulation Hypothesis." *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 1 Jan. 2023.

⁸ Bell, Olivia. "Untitled post." *Tumblr user @arthoesunshine*, 23 Oct 2022.

⁹ Dimitri. "Raver Kid Reacts to Bin Laden's Death." *YouTube*, 14 July 2013.

*I was so desperate
to be understood
that I would grab
people and shove
them inside my
heart*



Drowning

A long hike, a conversation about Teddy Roosevelt, a tall rock. Changing into my swimsuit behind a towel, my hair matted and sweaty. A lake. The tall rock, and a flip off it. Cold water. A seizure. Coming back to life with hands pushing hard on my ribcage, over and over. A second chance.

The Goldilocks Zone

They said I was lucky to be alive. That's the day I took "Lucky" as a nickname.

Theodore Roosevelt

Former President Theodore (Teddy) Roosevelt was a sick kid who had a fascination with taxidermy. As an eight-year-old, Teddy started a makeshift taxidermy museum to preserve the animals he found or killed (starting with a seal's head). Picture the scene: his parents worried they were going to lose their son to illness or his severe asthma, his doctors gravely admitting there was no cure, Teddy obsessed with preserving once-living things, and a collection of dead animals.

The Goldilocks Zone

I look at you. You look back and give me a smile as if it's a gift. Mine has always been a little crooked, but yours is just right.

Spiders

I read somewhere that if you catch spiders in your house and put them outside, you've all but killed them. Indoor spiders are suited to their specific environment, and they won't survive even a slight shift in the conditions they exist under. My place is old and full of spiders that have as much of a right to be there as I do, so I leave them alone.

The Goldilocks Zone

I get more spiders in the winter. They like the heater in my room.

Queer Utopia

José Esteban Muñoz proposed an image of queer utopia, of what it looks like outside of linear time and futurity.¹⁰ He argues that queer utopia is atemporal, that it exists in fleeting euphoria and flashes of ecstasy. It's the glitter on your skin at a gay club, sparkling in the flashing lights as you dance pressed against other sweaty bodies, hips moving together and smiles mirrored. It's the moment you realize that this is the life you get to lead,

¹⁰ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Here and Now of Queer Futurity*. 30 Nov 2009.



that it doesn't matter that you can't tell your parents about where you are, that your future but more importantly the present belongs to you and your queerness. It's the glitter on your skin on the bus ride home, falling onto the seat and leaving traces everywhere you go. It's the glitter on your skin that may have washed off in the shower, but that you'll reapply next time you go to the club. It's moments in which you exist in your queerness, as your queerness.

Goldilocks Zone

I pause, take a breath, and look around me. As I write this, I'm in my friend's apartment surrounded by the people that I love. Music is playing. Cookies are in the oven. I'm finally smiling.

Suicidality

Rewind seven years and you'll find me drafting a suicide note.

Goldilocks Zone

Now, I can't remember why.

Augustine

*Yet all things should rightly be praised in virtue of the fact that they are [in existence]! For they are good merely in virtue of the fact that they are ... someone who loves to be more than he hates to be unhappy, shuts out what he hates by adding to that which he loves.*¹¹ ❧

¹¹ Augustine. *On Free Choice of the Will: Book 3*. 388-395.



CONTRIBUTORS

Art by CLAYTON MONTGOMERY

MOHAMMED AHMAD is a Palestinian-American journalist and poet reporting from Los Angeles. He holds a Master of Arts in Professional Creative Writing from the University of Denver. His journalism has appeared in outlets including *Newsweek*, *Knock LA*, and *The Forge*, and his poetry has been published in Metropolitan State University Denver's *Roadrunner Review*, and *Canyon Voices*. He is the co-founder of Poets for Palestine, a poetry collective and monthly open mic series in Los Angeles, Denver, and New York City.

FRICO AHRENDTS is a writer from Broward County, Florida. He studied filmmaking in the BFA program at University of Colorado Boulder. His working class upbringing deeply flavors his work, often centering on the surreal intersections of bureaucracy, class, and the weight of modern existence. This is his first publication. He is currently honing his craft in an MFA. His hobbies include reading manga, boxing, and long aimless walks.

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LILA BYRNE's passion for art began as early as she could hold a pencil. She has since taken as many art classes, including programs at RISD, Pratt College, and Stamps at University of Michigan. She has designed logos for various businesses and has assistant taught in an art school. She always looks for ways to learn more about the art world and is excited about this opportunity. She creates her pieces using many mediums to learn exponentially.

ABIGAIL CAIN is a lesbian writer hailing from Appalachia. His work is upcoming or has been featured in *manywor(l)ds*, *Gorko Gazette*, the *1455 Young Poets Anthology*, and more. His debut novelette, *Girls are Fish*, will be released in 2027 through Girl Noise Press.

KATHRYN CASTANOLI is from the Chicago suburbs, and since 6th grade has documented nearly everything in her life. She always needed a camera in her hand, taking funny photos of friends for her middle school yearbook, or nearly every high school sport. Living in Los Angeles, all she could think about was leaving the city to see nature. She chased that thought to Boulder, Colorado, to be at its doorstep day and night.

WILLY CONLEY is a photographer and writer with work in *Photographic Memories*, *Plays of Our Own*, *The World of White Water*, *Listening Through the Bone*, *The Deaf Heart*, *No Walls of Stone*, *Visual-Gestural Communication*, and *Deaf World*. He is a retired Professor of Theatre Arts at Gallaudet University in D.C.

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T. R. HEALY was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest and is the author of the novel *Red Right Hand* (Golden Storyline Books, 2025).

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J. W. is a queer, multifaceted author who has published short stories, non-fiction essays and articles, and poetry. He's currently an undergrad at CU Boulder.

NINA KOGAN is a fourth-year student at the CU Boulder, pursuing a BFA in Cinema Studies with an emphasis in Film Production. Though she has had a deep love for writing since she was a child, "Birdcall" is her first published piece. Outside of writing, she enjoys watching horror movies, attending shows within the local Boulder punk scene, illustrating designs for her co-created sustainable fashion zine *Superstitchin*, and any other form of hands-on artistic endeavors.

KATIE LI grew up in Aurora, Colorado, and is a fourth-year undergraduate student at CU Boulder. She's majoring in Psychology and enjoys intertwining her creative works with elements of her upbringing. Her passion for the creative arts began at a very young age, with pale green crayon drawings under the kitchen table.

RITA LIN is drawn to the quiet intersections of music, memory, and place; she explores how sound can tether strangers and awaken what we forget we carry. With a background in both technical study and narrative reflection, her work leans into the small, unscripted rituals



that shape emotional life. She believes the most powerful performances are often the ones without a stage.

PAYTON O'BRIEN is a CU Boulder alumna with a degree in Media Design and a minor in Business. Expressing herself creatively is one of her greatest passions. Art has always been a major part of her life, from painting with her grandpa as a little girl to becoming the appointed Creative Director for CU Boulder Freeride. Payton's goal is to become a graphic designer in the outdoor industry, and more specifically, to design and illustrate graphics for snowboard companies.

MEKIYA OUTINI is an author, editor, and MacDowell Fellow. His work has appeared in *The North American Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Chautauqua*, *MQR*, *Grub Street*, *Modern Literature*, *New Contrast*, *Men Matters*, and elsewhere. His collaborations with his wife, Itto, have been supported by the Steinbeck Fellowship, the Edward Albee Foundation, and the New York Mills Cultural Center. They're currently collaborating on several books and co-hosting a podcast about literature and the arts, *Let's Have a Renaissance*.

TRAVIS PENNY is a writer exploring themes of resilience, memory, and the spaces between loss and meaning. His work often draws from lived experience and quiet observation, seeking honesty in imperfect moments. He writes flash fiction and creative nonfiction, and has been published in journals such as *Hindsight*. When not writing, he enjoys reflection and crafting stories that search for understanding.

SUSIE POTTER graduated from Meredith College in 2009 and went on to earn two graduate degrees at North Carolina State University. Today, she works as an English and Creative Writing professor and finds great joy in helping her students. She also enjoys publishing works of her own and has stories in *The Colton Review*, *Raleigh Quarterly*, *Broken Plate Magazine*, *Big Muddy: A Journal of the Mississippi River Valley*, *The Chaffey Review*, *Existere*, and *HitchLit*. She is currently working on a novel, and when she's not busy writing or teaching, she takes ballet and pointe lessons, runs, and figure skates. Love to Justin, Marcia, Stephanie, and Smudge.

J. M. SWEETING is a Colorado native and a Montessori educator. She has a deep love for writing, singing by the ocean, reading multiple books at a time, listening to movie scores, venturing into the Rockies, and finding beauty in the small things. You can find her work in publications by the *Avalon Literary Review*, *Asterope*, *Wingless Dreamer*, and *The Closed Eye Open*.

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CHERI' VAZQUEZ is a Colorado-based writer. She studied Linguistics and English at The Ohio State University. Her work has appeared in *365 Tomorrows* and *Bending Genres* and is forthcoming in *château*.

KATLIN RISEN is a CU alum and Duke graduate student studying history. While her academic interests lie in gender in the space race, her creative endeavors focus on crochet, 3D media, and photography. In her free time, she likes to cuddle with her tortoiseshell cat, Casserole.

MICHAEL C. ROBERTS is a mostly retired pediatric psychologist after an academic career. He has returned to his avocation of photography. Although he often relies on digital photography, his passion is a retro-analogue format of film. His photographs have appeared on journal covers and in literary publications. His photographic book of film photographs is available on Amazon: *Imaging the World with Plastic Cameras: Diana and Holga*.

GALEN RODA previously attended the University of Colorado at Boulder.

UZOMAH UGWU is a poet and prose writer, curator, and multi-disciplinary artist. Her poetry, writing, and art have been featured internationally in various publications, galleries, and art spaces. She is a political, social, and cultural activist. Her core focus is on human rights, mental health, animal rights, and the rights of LGBTQIA persons.

DANIEL WORKMAN finished the Isaacson School of Photography Program at Colorado Mountain College, where he focused mainly on photojournalism. He is an alumnus of the Eddie Adams Workshop XXVIII and hopes to one day use his skills in photography through the lens of anthropology to tell powerful stories around the globe.



SUBMISSIONS

HINDSIGHT and our sister journal CHANGING SKIES read submissions year-round. We accept work through Submittable, and practice blind review on first reads. Accepted work may be published in print, online, or both. We seek only previously unpublished creative nonfiction in any of its genres. We do not accept work generated, even partially, by Large Language Models or Generative AI, and we fact-check. We retain First North American Serial Rights until first publication date, after which all rights revert to our contributors. We only disallow work from current and recent staff, and from teaching faculty at our home institution, the University of Colorado Boulder.

Artists, send us your work to accompany writing in HINDSIGHT and CHANGING SKIES in print, online, and for marketing materials. We accept only previously unpublished work including but not limited to photography and other digitized art, and video and music for online publication. We also retain FNASR until publication, and we also consider all art for future publication and marketing, unless otherwise requested.



JOIN OUR STAFF

Current CU Boulder undergraduates can join staff by taking Journal Publishing (WRTG 3095), or signing up for a one, two, or three-credit Internship (either upper or lower division) with a Faculty Advisor in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric. We seek anyone wanting to learn the Editorial, Art Direction, Digital Production, Podcasting and Video Production, or the Business and Marketing aspects of a print and online journal of creative nonfiction—no previous experience required. A position on the HINDSIGHT staff fosters professional skills while students learn about the exciting genres of creative nonfiction. As a member of staff working on a premier print and online journal of only creative nonfiction, students learn with other students, gaining an unparalleled experience on campus. We exist to serve and further a community of creative nonfiction writers (and artists) across campus, and globally.

Undergraduate students at the University of Colorado Boulder publish creative nonfiction from around the world in two annual volumes.



Our parent title, HINDSIGHT, suggests reflection and looking back, while our logo and colophon (a “hind,” or female red deer) center our themed title, CHANGING SKIES, in the environment. Both titles publish creative nonfiction grounded in memory, movement, and the stories we carry.





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