



2021 • VOLUME I

CREATIVE NONFICTION

HINDSIGHT



THE PROGRAM FOR WRITING AND RHETORIC
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

FOREWORD BY:
JERICHO PARMS

CREATIVE NONFICTION 2021 VOLUME I

HINDSIGHT
creative nonfiction

2021
VOLUME ONE

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JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY (our former name) debuted with print issues in both semesters of 2013. Since 2014 we published annual print volumes. As HINDSIGHT (our new name), we will continue publishing annual print issues, while providing an online community for all genres of creative non-fiction at the UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER. We acquire First North American Serial Rights. We welcome CU Boulder undergraduates, graduate students, and recent alumni to our literary journal. Artists and writers of creative nonfiction interested in publishing in HINDSIGHT may refer to our Call for Submissions page for submission guidelines on our website.

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FROM THE STAFF

This academic year presented many challenges that the UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER students and staff faced with both innovation and humility. Our staff is proud to present this edition as the first transition from JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY to HINDSIGHT. We are grateful to our contributors, who, during a time of fearful uncertainty, chose to connect through art. We are thankful for our staff, who powered through the limitations of a digital world and still managed to compose this moving edition. We'd like to thank the CU BOULDER staff involved in the promotion of the journal for their great efforts in elevating the work of the CU BOULDER'S undergraduate students through creative writing submissions. Finally, we are grateful and indebted to the PROGRAM OF WRITING AND RHETORIC, and the UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM, as this would not have been made possible without them. We sincerely hope you enjoy the intriguing and diverse perspectives presented throughout these pages. Our editors believe this evolution of the journal offers some of the best writing and artwork we've seen yet and, as the CU BOULDER students continue to evolve, we are proud to provide a landing for their publication.

HINDSIGHT STAFF

Amidst all the tumultuous challenges of the past year, we would be remiss to ignore the people who keep us grounded and thriving. Much has changed since the journal's first issue in 2013, but one thing that will never fade is the brilliance of the artists who continue to share their work year after year. For their excellence and creativity, we are deeply thankful. This year, we especially want to acknowledge the inspiring ways in which many artists responded to the pandemic by channeling their complex emotions into their creations, producing striking and personal pieces. As we move into a bright future with a new name, we have confidence that our dedicated staff at HINDSIGHT will continue striving towards our vision of sharing the student body's outstanding writing and artwork in the best light imaginable.

ART DIRECTION

The HINDSIGHT Marketing Department would not exist without our dedicated staff. Every member takes on a different role to spread awareness of our journal, challenging each other to produce great work and keep the creative nonfiction genre alive at CU BOULDER. Each semester we run campaigns on our website, social media accounts, Radio 1190 and in print. In spite of COVID forcing us off campus, we continued to spread our journal's message. But this semester brought us a new challenge--a rebrand to HINDSIGHT from JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY. Please enjoy the first volume of HINDSIGHT. We thank you for providing our team with valuable artwork and writing, making the process of spreading our message that much easier.

MARKETING

GET PUBLISHED—IN PRINT OR ONLINE

All University of Colorado students (undergraduates or graduates) are eligible to send in writing for consideration by HINDSIGHT. All writing submissions go through blind review. We seek only creative nonfiction, in any of its genres:

- Creative Scholarship
- Narrative Journalism
- Humor
- Lyric Essay—the truth told with a poetic slant
- Travel, Food, and Sports Writing
- Portraiture and Memoir
- Graphic Creative Nonfiction
- Digital Compositions and Videos for Web Publication

ARTISTS

Send us your stories through artwork of any type for consideration by our Art Direction staff, for publication in either our print or online editions. We especially seek multi-media work for our website, including but not limited to: video, animation, music for podcasts, etc.

JOIN OUR STAFF

Take the spring section of the Journal Practicum (WRTG 3090) or sign up for a one, two, or three-credit INTERNSHIP in any semester with one of our Faculty Advisors. Internships are offered at both the upper and lower division level. We seek anyone wanting to learn Editorial, Art Direction, Digital Production, Podcasting and Video Production, or the Business and Marketing of a print and online journal of creative nonfiction—no previous experience required. A position on the HINDSIGHT staff fosters professional skills while learning about the exciting genres of creative nonfiction. As a member of staff working on the region's 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.

Find us online at: JOURNAL2020.COM

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FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE, IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

by KELA FETTERS

In 1348, as the Black Death claimed the lives of his friends and family, Francesco Petrarch, a prominent figure of the Italian Renaissance wrote, “Where are our sweet friends now? We are—why pretend?—truly alone. . . And behold, even as we speak, we too are drifting apart, and we vanish like shadows.”¹

Seven hundred years later, in the middle of the strangest March of the modern era, (most) world leaders scrambled to inspire global cooperation. I was attempting to maintain social cohesion on a smaller scale—in one small condo, shared by me and my boyfriend. Businesses were shuttered, grocery stores were barren, and a shelter-in-place order was forthcoming. Faced with an incalculable length of time in isolation, I opted to “shack up” during lockdown and weather the pandemic with my partner.

We lived hours apart and saw each other on weekends only, so we were giddy with the idea of spending an indefinite amount

1. Petrarch, Francesco. “Letters on Family Matters.” 1349. Accessed from <https://artofwriting.berkeley.edu/friends-lost-in-1349-petrarch>.

of time together under the same roof. Plus, the end-of-the-world atmosphere lent the endeavor a lacquer of intensity. I pulled into my beau's driveway, tooted my horn, and waved a bottle of wine and water-color painting supplies out the window. Our world was shrinking, fear and uncertainty blurring the periphery, but we were going to make the most of it, dammit.

We cohabitated for a grand total of seven days before it became painfully obvious that our lifestyles were not compatible (you play Call of Duty every night for how long?!). There are only so many arts and crafts you can make with a person before you find yourself sneaking off to the basement, desperate for a moment alone. After one short week of experimenting with love in lockdown, I found myself packing up my Honda outside of his apartment, sobbing.

I'm not alone in pandemic-related relationship woes: cut off from external activities and trapped together, many couples have called it quits. Ultimately, I'm one of the pandemic's lucky casualties—I walked away with a broken heart, not permanent lung damage or a deceased relative.

One thousand miles across the country, another partnership quietly imploded. Early on a spring morning, the phone buzzed: Grampa Bill was in the hospital with pneumonia, COVID-19 being the suspected agent.

It's a bit of an odd thing for a grandchild to write about her grandparents. There's space between us—cultural, generational, physical—that thwarts easy understanding. I got to know my mother's parents in two-week increments via road trips across the Corn Belt over holidays. Gramma and Grampa's house was boilerplate Midwest working-class: split-level, red brick, wide lawn, ringed with mulberry trees and adjacent to a cornfield. Three daughters were raised here, and countless grandkids. Constant traffic from IL-53 was the soundtrack to my childhood summer nights, tucked into bed in the guest room—the same bed in which my mother slumbered in her own youth.

As a kid, I simply absorbed my Gramma and Grampa the way I synthesized everyone in my world. Only later did I learn elements of their story that escaped me as a child. They'd met in a bowling league. Grampa was in the reserves during Vietnam. My ever-industrious Gramma had to be forced into retirement from the spirits bottling plant where she worked for decades.

My Grampa was a quiet man and a smoker fifty years strong. He chose detachment over small talk, which he couldn't stand. Some days, he smoked more cigarettes than he spoke words. When grandkids gathered in the kitchen to bake cookies or watch cartoons, Grampa remained in the family room La-Z-Boy, the television invariably on and tuned to NASCAR or CNN.

After a stroke the previous autumn, his doctor told him to kick the habit or die within the year. He was issued a portable oxygen concentrator, which hunkered under the kitchen table, purring mechanically, and whooshing intermittently. The machine fed him oxygen, cool and distilled, though clear tubing run under his nostrils. This tubing snaked through the old house, up the stairs and under dressers. Relatives were constantly tripping over it; young cousins used it as a jump rope when the adults weren't looking. Everyone watched their feet—no one wanted to be the one to unplug Grampa. Severed from his cigarettes, Grampa disappeared into the



easy chair, only extracting himself to mount the stairs for lunch. His ruined lungs protested as he ascended, clutching the railing. At the top, he rested for ten minutes to stabilize his plummeting oxygen levels.

Old habits die hard. Several months after the stroke, Gramma caught him in the garage, tubing pulled from his nostrils, cigarette in hand, inhaling blissfully.

For a virus of the respiratory system, Grampa was the dream host. My mom knew it, the doctors knew it, and in her own complicated way, Gramma knew it too.

The nucleus of Gramma Nancy's world was her kids and grandkids. She had a way of lingering on a subject a minute too long, be it potato salad or politics. She spun novels around a single photograph in a dusty frame. As a teenager, Gramma worked for a seamstress to save money to pay her brother Frankie's college tuition. Higher education was an aspiration she was never permitted. Through her life, she carried the hurt. Her mind craved patterns and order. She hand-washed dishes with sluggish precision, despite the new dishwasher they'd had installed. She was rarely without camera in hand, documenting every movement of the grandkids. She loved nothing more than indulging the babblings of a young grandson.

At noon every day, Grampa made a sandwich for Gramma and himself: white bread, Kraft cheese, deli ham, and mayonnaise. They sat together silently at the dining room table, Grampa's eyes cast downward at the crossword puzzle and Gramma's wandering around the room. The clock on the mantle ticked away the seconds with good, old-fashioned clamor. Sporadically, Gramma would bother her husband with a remark: "So, I says to Deborah down at the river that you'd be there Sunday to mow the grass." Grampa would grunt dismissively and return to his crossword. As a kid, I collected Grampa's newspapers after he'd finished with them. Without fail, the crossword puzzle was solved, neat pencil-strokes betraying a vast vocabulary concealed behind the silence.

As she aged, Gramma's spine bowed over. She mistook my mother—her daughter—for my teenage cousin. She put her jeans on backwards and struggled with the holes in her shirts. When someone mentioned the presidential election, she voiced her support of Jimmy Carter. She washed the same dish over and over, wearing her fingers raw. One morning, she fell asleep at the wheel and crashed her car into a ditch. By degrees, my Gramma was fading from herself, less the warm, maternal presence of my childhood memories and more a question mark drifting around an old house.

Gramma fought the winnowing of her independence with all of the awareness she still possessed, refusing caretakers and protesting her daughters' revocation of her driver's license. At the same time, Grampa recessed still farther behind the high-definition walls of the television, his damaged lungs confining his movement to the kitchen and back. In some ways, my grandparents' illnesses of mind and body are complementary, and I'd like to imagine them a unit of mutual support. But I know that their love—if once animated by some bowling league courtship—has been ossified by habit.

Then the pandemic struck. As the virus spread through Chicago and its suburbs, the family stopped visiting. My Aunt Joanie and her children dropped groceries at the doorstep and waved from outside the window. But hugging, touching, and visiting could be deadly. So Gramma and





Grampa were alone together in the house they'd occupied since 1971, that they owned in full and that Gramma covered in picture frames and white lace tablecloths. And shortly thereafter, Grampa was in the hospital, his ravaged lungs being drained of fluid. My mom hunkered on the other end of the telephone, one thousand miles away, fearing the worst. Then his COVID test came back negative. He was moved from the COVID floor of the hospital, stabilized, and discharged a week later. In the same amount of time I'd lasted with my boyfriend in his condo, Grampa had dodged the virus and returned to his roost in the La-Z-Boy.

Our elders are the overwhelming victims of the pandemic. Modern research and ancient wisdom both suggest that social engagement boosts longevity in life's twilight years, but one of the greatest risk factors for severe complications from COVID-19 infection is advanced age. To protect our vulnerable seniors, we've isolated them in retirement homes and replaced reunions with Zoom calls. In virus hotspots, nursing homes resemble prisons, with residents quarantined in their rooms, sans outsider contact. Our grandparents and great-grandparents, already marginalized in the public sphere, have been farther displaced. They face the elevated risk of acquiring an illness from which they may not recover. They endure this anxiety mostly alone. Ultimately, many of them will contract the virus, and some will not recover.

*Bereft of even digital
connection,
my grandparents have
each other and little
else.*

Last summer, my mother teamed up with her sisters to install a Wi-Fi router for Grampa and Gramma's home. It didn't take; Grampa was impervious to a screen he couldn't navigate with a remote, and Gramma couldn't make sense of it. The Internet arrived too late in their lifetimes to ensnare their minds the way it did my parents' generation.

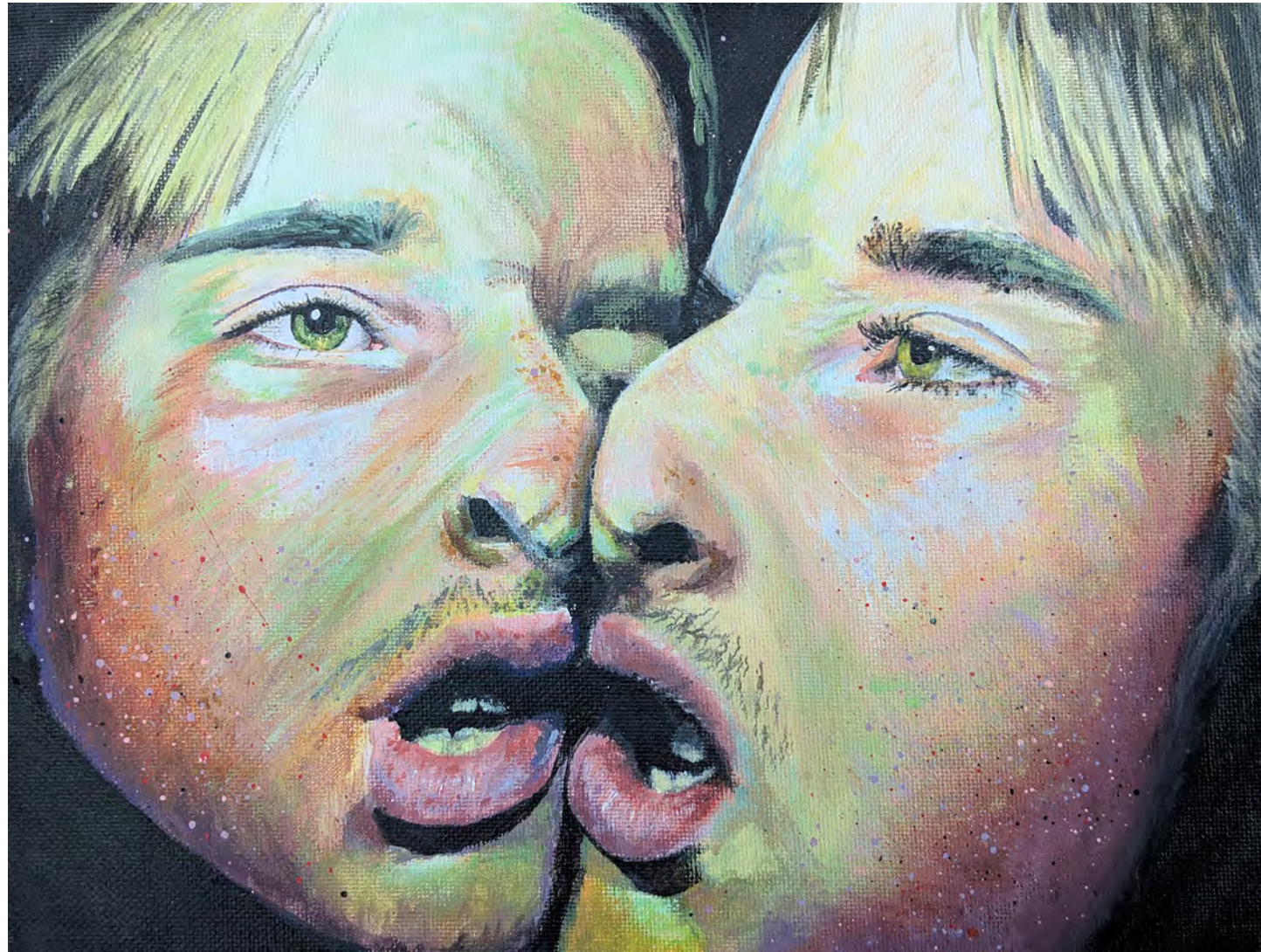
Bereft of even digital connection, my grandparents have each other and little else. I slipped away to the basement to escape my partner—Grampa has his garage and his smokes. While my relationship snapped with the frenetic drama of youth, my grandparents' will tolerate it all: the dedicated silence, the plastic tubing tangled under chairs, the daily crosswords, and dust gathering in the places Gramma won't remember to clean.

When I returned to my own empty apartment, public radio became my surrogate companion. Gradually, my loss was tempered by the electricity of living this historical moment. Cable news, I believe, serves the same purpose for my Grampa. Ceaselessly spirited away to the epicenter of global goings-on, Grampa leaves the bottom floor of the tri-level and exists somewhere else. The television is a conduit to his most lucid reality; Gramma pulls him back with her constitutive need. I long for the day when grandchildren can once again fill Gramma and Grampa's home, their presence easing the loneliness that the other cannot assuage. After all, the Black Death of the 1300s birthed the Renaissance. From the darkness crept much beauty.

My grandparents are Catholic, and when they married, they took each other in sickness, in health, for better, and for worse. The carapace of this vow may be the only thing holding them together. When I considered the endless identical days of an interminable shelter-in-place order, I bolted from my partner. My fear was that the monotony would calcify and define our eternity.

To parallel Petrarch, who described the loneliness of antiquity's plague, the coronavirus pandemic has forced a reckoning with love and loss. The human spirit is shuttered away, directed inward at self, companion, and immediate family. We have chosen this course to protect the elderly and vulnerable, who themselves suffer greatest from isolation. It is here, pressed up against a window into the past and looking out into the grey haze of an uncertain future, that we find on the glass the fingerprints of the inconsequential millions of our history textbooks, and see that their fingerprints match our own. 🐼





Art by ROB BALSEWICH

LINER NOTES FROM A TRANS KID

by JAQ BRODY

Hello.

You're reading this undergrad art journal. You're reading a college journal, and it's been a long day—a long year, even, already—and you're sort of bored, sort of dozing off, and then—the word "You" makes you snap up and pay attention.

You. Wait. Me?

You're less bored now. This text is weird, and you don't know if you like it, but you're definitely not bored. You've read a lot—you don't make it to Journal Twenty Twenty without reading until your eyes swell like water balloons that have grown ripe with summer heat—but you haven't read this before. Okay. That's something.

Hello.

It's the context that matters. A trash bag floating in the wind is only art if someone takes a picture of it. An upside-down urinal signed "R.Mutt" only becomes important when Marcel Duchamp resigns from the Society of Independent Artists because they won't put his toilet in a museum. The context is this:

a coworker, who you want to like, says his favorite author is Hemingway.

That's not the point, you say, frustrated. You like fragile masculinity within the context of trench warfare just as much as the next man. But you like Yann Martel, too. Rupi Kaur. You mentioned liking Rupi Kaur in a poetry workshop once and your head-up-his-ass graduate-student teacher rolled his eyes.

Who's your favorite author? Asks your co-worker. You tell him and he snickers.



Your favorite author is Brandon Sanderson. You've never read *Alcatraz vs the Evil Librarians*, though, which is apparently his best book. Though you've never read his best book, you used to stand in the mirror and quote Alcatraz' fiery love interest, Bastille, until your tongue sparked like a rocket.

Your favorite author is Kurt Vonnegut, right? Let's get unstuck in time.



You don't go for that small talk nonsense on dating apps. You prefer to meet people the old-fashioned way, but when you're bored (are you bored?) or lonely, you'll start swiping. An ex took your profile pic. But you chose your opening line, something to start a conversation, something designed to show your intellect and to test others'.

Hey sexy. What's your favorite word?

Shitwad, he says, the boy you later fall in love with. It's a pedestrian response. Plebian. This won't go beyond a hook-up, you think.

Who's your favorite author? He asks.

David Foster Wallace. You're surprised at the question, but you don't have to think about the answer. *Infinite Jest* is the best book ever written.

Not bad, he says. Have you seen *This Is Water*?

This is water, you think, reading along in *Journal Twenty Twenty* about events that never happened to you. This is water. It's the context that matters.

*He submerges his head,
somehow still shouting.*

You type until your fingers blister. Your favorite author, Stephen King, writes six pages a day and so will you, which is why the homework is boring—you have so many other things to do. You have blisters to pop. At least when you have to read Hemingway you're learning how to write. What are you learning from this shit?

This is water, and it's the context that matters. Ernest Hemingway is taught at every university and he earned that. They all earned that—Steinbeck, Melville, London. They're all great authors. That's not the context. The context is that you're in a graduate-level writer's workshop where everyone has read until their eyes swell like water balloons and every man who names his favorite author names another man. A white man. A straight, cis, white man.

Your name is Balyena, and you live in the sea. The old man—not Hemingway's man, but Hemingway—tells you about his rival. His prissy, unsatisfied, unsatisfying rival. Who's a homosexual. But he has a wife, you might argue. Nonsense, says Ernest.

But does he like men? You ask. Your tail thuds through the tide like a landmine.

Ernest reaches up to touch the brittle hide of your massive belly. Well he certainly doesn't fuck his wife.

Ernest, you want to say, there is more to sexuality than fucking one's wife. And there should certainly be more to one's wife than fucking. Ernest doesn't listen, because you are half out of the water. This is water. He submerges his head, somehow still shouting.



But let's say that, in this context, we're being very generous and count F. Scott Fitzgerald as not entirely a straight cis white man. You didn't learn about his sexuality when you read *The Great Gatsby* in high school, and if anyone brought up Nick and Jay's inherent homoeroticism, you treated it with a passing interest, or worse, a dismissal. They didn't tell you Shakespeare was bisexual, either, and though they couldn't hide Oscar Wilde's absurd flamboyance and literal sodomy trial, they did focus more on the woman Dorian killed than on Basil's hopeless infatuation.

You are on your first date with the boy you later fall in love with and you're wondering why no one else ever told you that Shakespeare wrote *Sonnet XX* about the Earl of Pembroke. You're thinking that you don't mind gay men, just men who act



gay—this is why you so deeply identify with Hemingway’s heteronormative sense of masculinity. But then the boy you’ve just started to fall in love with moves on to a different Ernest, and his importance, the importance of being earnest, and for the first time your favorite author is not a straight cis white man, but the man in front of you.

At this point you’re angry. At this point you’re a gay cis white man and you’re angry that, except for in the single diversity class you had to take to graduate, four out of five of the authors you were told to read were exactly like you but straight and the other one was Jane Austen. And you didn’t even like Jane Austen.

You’re going to flip your shit when I tell you about Alice Walker.



At first, you don’t believe the boy you’re barely in love with when he says his favorite author is Angie Sage. She writes middle-grade books. She writes about the seventh son of a seventh son and his princess sister.

They’re good books, he says. You should read them.

They’re for children.

So? So was *Huck Finn*. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. *The Little Prince*.

If you’re angry, especially if you’re straight or white or cis or rich or worship the same god as everyone you know, go read Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* and maybe you’ll calm down.

Or maybe you’ll get angrier. Good. Be angry. Tell someone why you’re angry. As the not-male, not-white Zora Neale Hurston once said, “If you’re silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it.”

Tell someone why you’re angry. Then tell someone about your favorite author who is not a straight cis white man. Write down your favorite Rumi quote and pin it to your mirror. Add a reminder on your phone to read a lesbian romance novel. Pledge to study Baldwin.



You’re at dinner with the woman you’re so desperately in love with, and you’re trying to learn, and you ask if she’ll recommend you a book to read about women like her.

Trans women, she asks. Or chicana?

Both. Either.

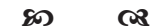
She shakes her head. I can’t recommend you a book. There aren’t any.

It doesn’t have to be classic literature, you say.

She shakes her head again. There aren’t any. I mean, there are some YA books with trans kids. But they’re mostly white. And even those are about being trans. Would you like it if every book with a cis man was about a man being cis?

You think she’s wrong, don’t you? You think there must be a book, one book, that talks about a trans woman whose trans-ness is not the point.


Look it up. Your phone is right here. Google books with trans women and tell me what you find.



There could be something, someday.



Your name is Balyena and you’re proud of your name. You’re proud to disrupt the water. When you beach yourself, you do it on purpose. Ernest and David and Jack all stabbed their carotid with a ballpoint and bled out on the page, but they died to end their world and you die to save it.

Your name is Balyena and you’re proud to disrupt the water. You write until your fingers blister. You write about a trans man and a gay woman and a brown trans gay woman so that the next trans kid doesn’t have to beach themselves beneath Hemingway’s bleeding fingers. You write, and it saves the world. 

*You’re proud to disrupt
the water.*





RED

by CAROLINE SITTER

Red:

You first saw it laid on top of you.
It began with pink tulle and tutus.
Then gilets and laces and rocks that were pets.

The candle lit on the bedside.
You stared into yellow and orange until your eyes ached,
so you quickly closed them shut.

You sat there,
eyes tracing each vein and the vague sense of maroon meaning
stained on the backs of your eyelids.

You loved dancing on the way to Granny's,
falling off of the prescribed path,
exposing your neck to the wolves.

You wrapped yourself in a cloak of secrets,
grinning as deep down you knew that
no one would ever know the real you.

Your fingers traced the edge of the perfect blade.
You always preferred your mirror to be a butcher's knife.

You felt

Red:

You jut your fingers into it.
You said you wanted to feel something.

Fingers were always a funny thing:

The slabs of meaty hands,
cooing and coaxing for the lotus to open
before gutting out their insides.

In dimly lit hotel rooms,
pictures of poppies and cherries lay
and the ladybugs hibernate for the winter.

Inside, though,
you felt the colors of the sunset,
fleeting and fixated for only a moment's notice.
The little death.

Once again, you wanted to feel something.
You then remembered the sensation of your fingers in the flame.
How each little piggie throbbed at the sight of their caramelized
skin being darkened,

turning

Red:

You remember the smell.
The foul and wretched stench of what left your body,
of what was misplaced and ill managed.

You count the days until you lose it again,
or until someone has to remove it for you.

It's natural they say,
an it is an it is an it.

The tips of your fingers painted
with varnish and spermicide
as the moon pulls your blood the way it wishes.
The rise and fall of an iron laced tide.

You grin,
at the crusted metal smell of the slaughtered cock's comb.

You smile,
at where smoke meets fire.
A floral minefield:
The smell of the perfect barbecue.

Red:

Taste it,
chicken.

Cherries, chilis and smiles soaked in grenadine

Watermelons taste sweet until the seeds sprout in your stomach
and the doctor keeps the medicine away.

Licking Satan's lips as
satin snakes slither through the gnarled roots of Eden,
attempting to find a home within you.

Their venom dancing on the tip of your tongue
each taste bud dazzled and dizzied
as you sway catatonically,
giggling at the hallucinogenic nature of such things.

It is only then, that the truth is laid on top of you.





Art by JORDAN ECKES

THE COSMOS UNDERFOOT

by SHANNON ROSS

Purple onions are the most regal of vegetables. I call them purple onions and not their barcode nomenclature of “red onion” because of the dye that rinses off the cutting board after you’ve halved and quartered and sliced them—purple. The halved purple onion is a bit of a marvel. In the Classical period, Greeks consumed barrels of onions before an athletic event; they drank quarts of onion juice and rubbed the acidic halves on their skin. Now we wince and leave the room.

I had time, during long summer afternoons, to contemplate the purple onion. I spent the summer seeding onions, watering onions, weeding around onions, harvesting onions, and then scouring my hands in their juices. My fingers spent hours removing the film behind the papery skin, carefully at first, and then with a gentle rehearsed sliding of my index finger, as if I were pulling a seam. I found them to hold a resilient seed tucked away under the film, known only to the observant few that feel the delicate fabric before it rips.



Never one for the prep involved in enjoying vegetables, I nonetheless found myself living on Turner Farm off the coast of Maine contemplating the onion, and its many cousins: garlic, scallions, leeks and chives, for an entire summer. I was about three crates' worth of onion-slicing in one afternoon, teary and hypnotized by the waving lines of the onion's interior. I imagined the bulb in its original home under the earth, starved of sunlight, bleached. I thought of farmers who turned asparagus white by covering the shoots up in soil, never letting the base of the plant see the sun. Magic, by way of tampering with photosynthesis.

The fan of green shoots, growing above the surface of the soil, is the onion's only chance at sunlight. Below the surface, its layers grew oblong at the base and reached for the surface of the earth until the lines met in a delicate neck. Again and again these lines formed, one around the next. They never weaved or intersected but rather cordially shrunk their width until they seemed to disappear at the top. Or so I thought.

It wasn't until I met the fourth crate of onions on the concrete floor of the barn kitchen that these beautiful arcing lines suddenly did meet. In a hurry to meet that week's Barn Supper demand, the farm crew left the tails of the onions intact. These tails served their purpose during the uprooting effort of the harvest, and were removed with a sharp knife before sending off to market. Customers enjoyed the fronds of carrots, as they could be used for garnish or proof of organic purchase, but there was no need for onion tails.

What a loss for the world. The tails are quiet proof of the natural world's artistry. Where I had observed, in the method of a pedantic scientist, the layers of the onion never meeting, the fronds had changed the narrative. Instead of closing to noth-



ingness, the layers began to weave together. They left their home of bursting water layers and opted for a more resilient material, similar to a corn husk. After the onion felt the breach from soil to open air, the husks began to weave and braid as if to add strength to their system when the moment of tension from harvest came.

I placed my knife down on the table, now dull from hundreds of strokes. I was struck by the beauty of it all. The purple onion was a jewel hanging from a braided necklace. Only a few, mostly farmers, knew the grace of a common vegetable.

In that converted barn kitchen, I fell in love with vegetables. Not because they are good for you to eat or trendy to roast, but because they are marvelous. The growth of any plant is a wonder to think about. Any human or critter with functioning color sight is biologically inclined to delight in the juxtaposition of a vibrant carrot folded into a rich soil's darkness.

It took years, and similar countless hours of exposure, that I fell in love with soil. In a way, I also fell for minerals, water, pockets of air, and a matter of all living things; all of which comprised an entire ecosystem quietly forming the earth.

The original term for ecosystem was "microcosm," or small world. A scientist in the 19th century gave this name to a lake he observed. While studying near Geneva, François-Alphonse Forel realized that in order to understand an or-

ganism, he needed to understand the surrounding small world: the external life, nutrients, abiotic material, and environment. Soil is considered an integral part of our larger ecosystem as humans; forests, food, and baseball fields all grow from it, any person could tell you that. Some may testify that soil is more than its tangible gifts. It is one of our planet's greatest stores of carbon. But few try to compare soil to the cosmos.



The cosmos are indefinite, a well ordered universe. We humans are mystified by the grandness and mind-blowing size of the mysteries of the beyond. The accumulation of material below our feet is also a well-ordered universe. A complex system of millions upon millions of bacteria, invertebrates, fungi, and other microorganisms form soil. Together they work to break down the debris left behind from thousands of years of life so that new life may breathe on our planet. Soil too is made of star stuff. The same elements that are in precarious balance in an exploding star, found in similarly vital ratios below our feet.

When we think of the absence of light at a black hole's horizon, it makes our trivial efforts seem small and the universe so wonderful. When we consider the soil, we can see that our efforts to maximize her, our tangible cosmos, and manipulate her into something that only serves us, proves that our trivial efforts have the potential to wreak havoc.

Our needs have poisoned the land. Rather than allowing the productive and willing workers of the soil do their diligence, we have created a masterplan to pull the rug from underneath ourselves. It started with the clearcutting of forests and depleting the deep time humus formation of soil to take place. Then we plowed the fine fur remaining from the forests, ripping the fungal threads from the perennial plants. When we found the short-stubbed roots we planted could not thrive in the soil, instead of returning to perennial growth and their long searching roots, we invented chemicals as a proxy holder of life. So it has been for generations now. But our soil's microbial community has grown weary, its planets and moons and stars destroyed by an abundance of fertilizer. Soil cries the chemicals from her system, leaching once-precious water into wetlands as poison. She loses her stability. With nothing to grab onto but the wind, her topsoil, which took thousands of years and cycles of life to develop, blows back into space.

Still, there in the earth's belly grows a purple onion. Not to be outdone by the cosmos, soil is a bit of a romantic herself. It turns out that if managed properly with regenerative, patient, and lifegiving practices, the soil could be our greatest chance of earning our planet back. If the tilling were to stop and nitrogen-fixing cover crops were to be planted in communion with perennial crops, soil could gain her strength back. In time, our soil has the potential to sequester 294 million tons of carbon

*Soil cries the chemicals
from her system,
leaching once-precious
water into wetlands as
poison.*

from the atmosphere a year according to a Congressional testimony by the American Farmland Trust. In this give and take between the atmosphere and soil, we humans could be the actors of healing and restoring the natural order.


When I cut purple onions, even now, thousands of miles away from Turner Farm, I feel a peace wash over me. I caramelize them in sweet sugar and butter and put them on toast with ricotta. A few years ago, a friend I farmed with in Maine called me about a new package of hybrid seeds she received in early February,

"You're going to love this," she laughed, well aware of my love affair with the inside of purple onions.

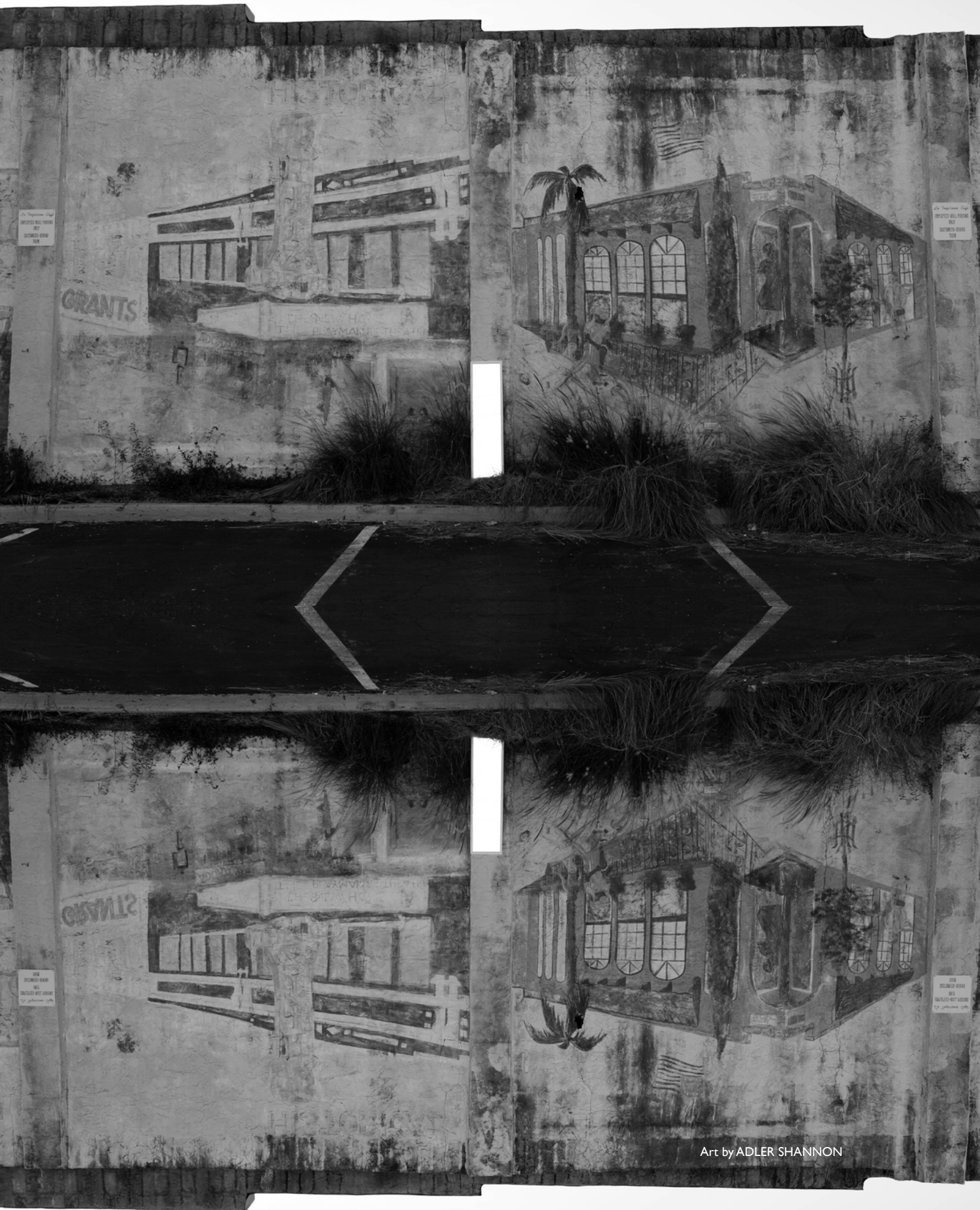
"These are a limited trial so we're the first farm to harvest them - they're called Flame Beets."

Noah sent me a picture, and I rubbed the grime off my cracked phone screen to get a better look. An unbelievably purple beet, the purest form of the color I had ever seen. The next picture the beet had been halved like a geode, revealing the internal blaze, fluorescent compared to the deep pigmented skin. In its core bright yellow and orange flames rose, housed within each other, dripping as if they were painted with oil. I was in love, this time with a beet.

Noah heard my reaction over the phone and read the quote on the back of the package.

"The tales soil will tell can only make us richer." 





Art by ADLER SHANNON

GOING SOMEWHERE

by GRACE SMITH

The gold watch on my left wrist was vibrating non-stop while I sleepily sat in my Anthropology lab. I looked around to make sure the coast was clear before I checked my phone. The only eyes on me were the blank stares from the dusty primate skulls sitting on the fake marble countertop. Coast clear. When I peeked at my phone, I noticed my mom had texted me one too many times. “That’s odd,” I thought to myself as I slipped my phone back into the bottom of my backpack to keep all my receipts and broken pens some company.

For the next hour, my brain tried so hard to focus on not dropping the monkey skull I had in my possession and on ignoring the annoying sipping sound the girl behind me made every time she had a taste of her latte, but I simply couldn’t. I wasn’t concerned that my mom was in a horrible accident, that she had bad news, or that the world was going to burst in flames, but seeing all the message notifications made me feel like something was up.

As soon as lecture ended, I grabbed my bag and bolted to the bus stop, mindlessly forgetting that my phone was at the bottom of my bag.



“I’ll check it later,” I said to myself out loud while walking down the auburn-colored stairs inside of Hale. The clock had just struck 3:05 P.M. when I reached the bus stop, which meant the Buff Bus would be there any minute.

I had an internal debate with myself for a minute until I finally got around to grabbing my phone from the bottomless pit that was my backpack. Seventeen unread messages. Two missed calls. One Snapchat notification. Hey! An album release. “Oh my God,” I quickly gasped. “That’s what I was forgetting. No... Maybe?” That annoying little version of myself, the one that walks and talks inside my head and that I insist remind me of things later, flashed a giant stop sign inside of my brain. I unlocked my phone to see a picture of a photoshopped cat with pasta on his head, giggled, and clicked on my messages. My mom’s texts popped up on the screen and then I realized what I had forgotten. Eviction day—or moving day, as my mom liked to call it.

Eviction day. From over one thousand miles away on the California coast, my mom texted me a few pictures of her tiny silver Honda Civic packed and ready to go to their next home—Motel 6. In every picture, my dad was in the background, sitting on the ground with his head buried in his arms. In every picture, my mom was cracking a smile. The last text read, “Don’t worry about me, I will be ok.” She would be okay. I knew she would be. However, I wasn’t OK. I thought I would be, but I wasn’t. I snapped out of my clouded thoughts. A flood of backpacks and people kept pinballing me between them, keeping me from getting on the Buff Bus. “Damn it. Ugh, well, maybe the next one.”

While standing on the concrete sidewalk watching the campus visitors look at the brand-new CASE building in awe, my brain went back to thinking how my entire life had just been placed inside a couple boxes in a Motel 6. As I stood there waiting for the next bus, a redheaded girl wearing a bright blue backpack stamped with her sorority letters mindlessly chatted with her sorority sister loud enough for me to overhear. “Oh my God, I am so excited to go home and sleep in my bed. Ugh, so comfy.”

My bed. My house. My chair, my desk, my bathroom, my shower. My pink pillow case. The pictures, the concert tickets, the movie stubs, the play bills. My life. Gone. A ding from my phone brought me back to reality with a text from my best friend. “Did you listen to the new Hippo Campus album yet!?” “Nope, about

*Eviction day—
or moving day,
as my mom
liked to call it.*

to listen :)” I opened my music app and saw that my phone had already downloaded the entire Bambi album for me. How convenient. As I pressed play, the second Buff Bus came around and opened its doors. For some reason, something inside me refused to let myself on. Just as quickly as the bus came, it went. I had missed another.

My soul felt nonexistent. I couldn’t move. “What do I do? Where do I go? I’m only nineteen.” My thoughts were once again interrupted by the autotuned sound of an electric keyboard.

“I swear to God I wasn’t born to fight
Maybe just a little bit
Enough to make me sick of it...”¹

My attention turned to these lyrics as if the universe was giving me a weak pat on the back with a mediocre “sorry to tag along.” I was sick of it. So sick of the universe kicking me down when I’m just getting back up. After a few seconds of self-pity, I decided to focus on the album. The album was permanent. It wasn’t going anywhere. I commanded the little voice in my head to shut up - it was the least she could do for me. We could deal with reality later.

The next thirty minutes were spent focusing on the music and trying not to spiral. I was sad. I was so sad I couldn’t move. I couldn’t get on the bus. Where was I going to go? I spent those thirty minutes watching the buses come as quickly as they went, trying to convince myself to hop on and just go. But I didn’t. Not until the album played its last note. My headphones went silent and once again I had to face my reality. The next bus was waiting for me to make my decision. The bus driver impatiently tapped his hand on his steering wheel.

I’m not sure where or why or how, but I soon came to the conclusion that whether I got on that bus or not, my situation wasn’t going to change. No matter how many times I played that album on repeat and stood still on that sidewalk, the album was going to end, and I would have to go somewhere. The least I could do was give that old, crowded bus a shot while drowning myself in the soundtrack that would define my life up until this day. So, that’s what I did. Humming along, I pressed play, moved my legs and got on the bus that took me somewhere...

“I’ll be making my
Own way now to
Where I got to be...”²

1. Hippo Campus, “Bambi,” track 4 on Bambi, Grand Jury and Transgressive Records, 2018.

2. Ibid.





DANCING CLOUDS

by NATHANIEL HANKINS

Like sand in an hourglass with no time left. Just trapped. This saddens me for some peculiar reason. Time stands still in the scorched remains of this vessel. I finish my cigarette and flick the cherry over the railing of the porch and throw the butt in a trash can by the door. I head inside and place the jar inside a bag that has been packed for a pocket of time I have long since lost track of. My journey has no brake pedal, or so it would seem from the outside looking in. I head into the kitchen. My dad slides a letter across the table with a cup of black coffee.

“It’s from Colorado,” he states.

I open it. It’s a congratulations letter from the university.

“I was accepted.”

“You just got back, leaving again?” he asks.

“Not for several months, but I will be gone for a few days. I am leaving tonight to go back south.”

“A lot of grim stuff down there, I’m assuming the ashes, you sure it’s a good idea—alone at that?”

“Yea, I’ll be fine.”

We finish our coffee in silence. I get up from the counter and go grab my backpack and bag from the bedroom and take it out to the car. I start the engine and drive to the gas station. Top the car off on fluids, air and gas; drive home in time for dinner. I say thank you to my mother and father for the food and tell them I will be home soon enough. I hop in the car and hit play on my playlist while lighting a cigarette. Reaching into the bag, I extract the mason jar and set it on the console. I pull out and head south on Route 100 to I-95 southbound. It's 12 hours to Savannah.

I love to drive. Nighttime is the best. Especially in the summer. Turn the music up and roll the windows down. No one to bother you with meaningless small talk. I hate small talk. Good conversations should either have deep meaning or should be the evolved, overly revealing discussions that can only come from two friends who have been around each other for so long that small talk has disappeared and been replaced by topics that make normal people cringe or feel uncomfortable with that level of honesty. Without that it's just quiet, and the air takes on a peaceful aroma filled with the sounds of songs I've listened to a thousand times, fading into the wind. It is just me and my own thoughts. Lately, my thoughts of Thomas.

If one turn, one choice, or one passionate reaction would have been different, you would still be here. I wouldn't have to do this. Everything happens for a reason but what twisted purpose could this serve? No obvious phoenix will rise from your ashes. Little grains of memories vibrating to the rhythm of the asphalt. By chance? Is that how we got here? We base some theories of existence in simulation, random evolution, maybe the Big Bang or God. Maybe evolution was just a means of how and not necessarily why. Even free will, from some perspectives, can be considered a mere illusion or the mistake of a craftsman. Every creation has at least one. I don't think it was. I believe the old saying is true, that coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous. The moments in life where it becomes impossible to calculate the odds. Like sitting on church steps waiting for them to open, but the doors are locked. When you're about to leave, a guy rides by on a bike and says that it's always better to keep minor sins between you and the big guy. He winks and rides off, pointing up and smiling.

I pull over on 95 somewhere in Virginia. Get out of the car and stretch. Swipe my card at the pump; while it's fueling, I walk

*If one turn, one choice,
or one passionate
reaction would have
been different, you
would still be here.*

into the 24-hour piolet. These places became my home away from home a long time ago. I left home at 17 and never looked back. A rolling stone gathers no moss sort of thing, I suppose. That was before she ruined everything. Now all I can remember at these places is that day.

What could the sheer odds have been? The odds that when I went to get gas, she's standing there with scarlet curls halfway down her back. Arms stretched wide and looking up. Something caught her attention. She saw me and smiled, walking right up to me without hesitation. I said yes, just to the sheer confidence. She's never stayed in one place for long and neither have I. What are the odds that in that time and place our journeys would collide? When cold fronts meet hot fronts, they often create powerful storms. I used to think weather patterns were meaningless. Her eyes were always perfectly prepared, beautiful, and she knew it. Never overdone or falsely advertised. Just enough liner to create a raven tail reminiscent of Ancient Egypt. A bright green that slowly faded to a blue on black. Each eye had three little triangles of brown that disappeared in the sun or when you made her mad.

The year we spent in absence of control. Drowning each other in wine and moonlit beaches. Gently feeding each other gourmet meals that inevitably turned into food fights in public and getting kicked out of a friend's house. Lengthy walks on cobblestone streets guided by the gentle breeze through Spanish moss-draped willow trees. Ripping clothes off in the rain, racing back to an apartment where there is barely enough room for a bed, but it doesn't matter because it's enough. Waking up naked,



face down on a balcony, surrounded by empty wine bottles and dirty looks from neighbors. These are the places where time stands still, and phones no longer work because you don't care enough to plug them in.

True love exists in the place where judgment doesn't travel. There are no limits in these places, and they are a possibility for anyone who wants it bad enough.

Courage is the only barrier. As long as you don't go looking for answers why, the magic just continues.

I had a friend in high school whose heart exploded while running the mile in gym class. His parents made staying together after his death look so easy. Not that it was in the slightest, but it looked that way. They had a daughter that was older than him. Maybe that made it easier, having that hope to cling to. The

pressure to keep it together for her. We didn't have that. When Thomas went, whatever we were vanished with him. I haven't seen her in a long time. She resents me and I resent her. Somewhere in South Carolina, around three in the morning, I pull over and get gas again. I take a lengthy walk around the ghost-filled Lowes parking lot, chain-smoking cigarettes, forcing the smoke to dance in an irreverent way.

South Carolina takes forever to get across when you have been driving all night. I get back in the car and out on to the freeway. The rest of the drive is long and silent. I turn the radio off somewhere in North Carolina. The only noise is that of the wind and turbo diesel engines on tractor trailers passing by. I have often understood the appeal of such a profession. Interminable periods of silence and isolation. There's a certain freedom that comes with that life, and it has the potential to be quietly rewarding if you can shake the fear of your own thoughts. Suddenly the sun comes up. It directs my attention back to Thomas.

I often wonder, Thomas, what kind of person you would have become. I see your face in my dreams at night when I sleep. You have your mother's eyes. I often wonder what sports you would have played (if you had at all), or if I would have been at ballet practice screaming like I was at the football game. Either way, you were mine. I wondered how old you would be before I had to bail you out of jail for the first time. Or send money to Vegas because you're too broke to leave. I wouldn't have minded as long as you were truly living life.

Finally, I can smell the ocean.

"We are almost there, kid, hang on."

I turn off on Route 17 towards Island Expressway. We are hopping from island to island towards Tybee. I pull into the Tybee hotel, drive underneath it, park next to the water. I light a cigarette. It's quiet. I get out of the car and stretch my legs. The sun has just risen over the ocean. The clouds are large and fluffy like the jar of cotton balls in the doctor's office. There is a heavy sense of peace here. I step out into the sand, carrying the ashes with me. It's cool between my toes from the blanket of stars that's just been pulled off. I walk down to the water, turning right and walking towards the pier. The water, still warm from the day before, feels pleasant around my ankles. I walk down to the very southern tip of Tybee Island, past the pier.

There's a certain freedom that comes with that life, and it has the potential to be quietly rewarding if you can shake the fear of your own thoughts.

The water gets rough here. There is an old concrete crowd barrier with flaking yellow paint and broken corners. It's old and weathered from hurricanes blowing salt water. The rebar sticks out and curls back on itself like a caterpillar that's been touched, cringing in discomfort at its situation. For a second this makes me smile. I dig my heels into the black sand, then sit on the concrete barrier.

We sit here together for a while. Early in the mornings on the ocean, all the wind pushes the clouds around restlessly, in a chaotic way. Formations transform and blow about rapidly. They just sort of—dance. It has a rather breathtaking quality. Like Ancient Rome, a photo just can't express it. A tall formation breaks free from its formation and floats up, shielding the sun's emanating rays of sunlight.

I take my keys and toss them on the beach with my shirt and shoes. Unscrewing the lid of the jar, I gently tilt the container down. A gust of wind picks up and carries the ashes out to sea. I say goodbye to my son, Thomas, for the last time. Many years will pass, and it will never get easier. I will learn how to live with it without letting it show. This wound is one whose bleeding never ends. Every memory is a flash of warmth that races over your chest with thoughts of events that could have possibly gone another way. The odds were astronomical that it would play out like this. I awaken to the tragedy I am coauthoring. Everything happens for a reason, for which I have yet to realize.

I close the jar after rinsing it out and then something comes over me. I can't explain it. I run straight out into the water, smiling and riding waves. In this moment, I'm on fire. ☞





MY MISSING PUZZLE PIECE

by CLAIRE KURKER

I was three years old when my baby brother was brought into this world, screaming and crying as all newborn infants do, held tightly and lovingly by my mother in the hospital bed. This was the first time I met CJ, my brand-new younger sibling, and as I stared at him under the pale fluorescent lighting, I knew that I would love him unconditionally. As my parents told me years later, the day that he was born I refused to leave my brother's side and spent the next several days cuddled up next to him and my mom in that tiny hospital bed.

I was five years old when I sat on the kitchen floor of our old house watching CJ, now two, play with miniature toy cars. He slid them up and down the tiles, back and forth, occasionally making them race each other. With his chubby hands grasping his beloved cars, he gleefully exclaimed "vroom, vroom" and imitated other various car noises.

I was five years old still when CJ got his first ear infection. After a day of him holding his head and screaming, my parents took him to the hospital, where he was prescribed antibiotics.

They worked, and he got better—but not for long. CJ’s immune system was weak, and he was prone to sickness. This incident was followed by more infections, more illnesses, more trips to the doctor, each time leading to the same end result: more antibiotics.

I was six years old when I heard my parents’ worried voices through the paper-thin walls of our home. CJ was three years old, and he wasn’t speaking. The “vroom vrooms” that once came out of his mouth were long gone, as was his desire to race cars. Something, they began to accept, wasn’t right. Something, they were certain, had changed within my baby brother.

I was nearing seven years old when CJ received his diagnosis—his several diagnoses, to be exact. Each doctor had a different opinion, and each had something different to suggest. It was about six months after my family’s initial concern that CJ was correctly diagnosed with severe nonverbal autism.

I had just turned seven when CJ was enrolled in preschool. Moore-Weis was a private school for autistic children in a quiet area of downtown Austin. Each day, my mother would pick me up from first grade and together we would make the drive to Lorraine Street to pick him up from school. Next door was an old-fashioned drugstore with a diner in the back. On a good day, CJ would want to go inside and get a strawberry milkshake. On a bad day, he was already crying by the time he got into the car and he wouldn’t stop until we pulled into our driveway.

I was eight years old when the therapy sessions began. Each week, strangers who would later become like family would come into our house and work with CJ on things like motor skills and basic language. Aside from Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapy, every Wednesday my parents would drive him to a center that specializes in working with special needs children. They had a tire swing inside the building, which I thought was the coolest thing. Every Wednesday, CJ would go to a therapy session and I would swing back and forth on that swing.

I was nine when I first began to notice the looks and the comments we would sometimes get out in public with my brother. It isn’t just kids who can be cruel. Adults, often, are just as ignorant. CJ wasn’t always reserved and well-mannered. He would make loud noises if he was happy and would cry or scream if he was sad. My parents refused to keep him at home out of the public eye.


They weren’t going to dull his childhood for the sake of someone else’s comfort.

He was a human being, and he deserved to live the happiest life he could. The stares never bothered my parents, who would kindly explain to strangers that he had autism, and they weren’t going to dull his childhood for the sake of someone else’s comfort.

I was twelve when a boy in my class rudely asked me what was “wrong with” CJ, and “when was he gonna get better?” I vigilantly defended the boy who was still to me my baby brother, snapping at that dumb sixth grader, calling him ignorant. For a long time growing up, I got extremely defensive every time CJ was brought up by anyone outside of my family. I slowly learned to be more tolerant, and to educate people instead of reacting with anger. However, part of what that boy said stuck with me. Would CJ ever get “better?” Would there ever be a cure?

I was sixteen years old and going into my junior year when CJ started high school. He was at the same school as me, in an amazing special needs program. I would be able to check on him whenever I felt like he needed me—even though it usually turned out to be me needing him. High school could be overwhelming, and anytime I felt myself becoming wrapped up in the chaos of tests and grades and social pressures, I would find myself walking to room 342, peeking my head in to ask if CJ was available. CJ’s presence relieved any stress I was experiencing, and it was often that I would go and “check on him” when I was just having a rough day and wanted a hug from my little brother. I felt content knowing he was safe, and that I had a family member so close to me when I needed support. I felt content knowing he was right down the hall.

I was eighteen when I got ready to go off to college and leave my family in Austin. Before I left, I got a puzzle piece, the universal symbol of autism, tattooed on my inner arm. When it came time to leave, saying goodbye to CJ was the hardest part. I had no way to know if he understood where I was going, and no way to ensure he knew I would be home soon. It was my hardest goodbye. This was the first time I could remember not being with my brother.

I was eighteen years old when I started school at the University of Colorado Boulder. The adjustment hasn’t been easy, but it makes me all that much more excited to go home to my brother. He sends me emails every day, and they brighten my day each time I receive one. There is still no cure for autism, but that’s okay. I will always love my brother the same. We may be miles apart, but CJ will always be my missing puzzle piece. 





Art by AIDAN JONES

A CUP RUNNETH OVER

by NATALIE FINAMORE

I was late almost every day of my senior year of high school. I'd wake up ten minutes after seven and watch the clock change through gummy eyes. When I finally dragged myself to the icy bathroom, I'd try and fail to put my frozen contacts in with shivering hands. When I finally came downstairs, slit-eyed against the bright kitchen lights, my mother would sigh and repress her usual reprimand. Before I slipped out the front door to face my unscrapped windshield, Mom would hand me a travel mug of hot English breakfast tea with cream. "I love you, drive safely," she'd say. I'd arrive ten minutes after seven thirty, having gone ten over the speed limit with one eye closed against the glare of the sun.

When humans are faced with extreme, sudden stressors, our sympathetic nervous systems trigger a release of adrenaline, cortisol, and epinephrine, spiking our heart rates and dilating our pupils. The peripheral bodily functions, like digestion and the immune system, slow, and the surplus of energy prepares us for sudden, violent action. Our ears ring, and we must make the split-second decision on the best course of action for survival.

Scientifically, this is called the acute stress response, but we know it best as the “fight-or-flight response.”

In my last track meet of seventh grade, I ran the third-fastest girls’ 400-meter time in the state of Colorado. Track always made me nervous. In the moments before the gun sounded, I’d feel sick with fear, staring at my feet braced in the dusty gravel of the track. My vision would darken around the edges and my heart would feel heavy, each beat sounding through my echoing chest as if shouting its dread to my brain. I’d shift my sight up, looking for the puff of smoke in the air, because with the ringing in my ears, I didn’t trust myself to hear the gun.

When it finally sounded, I’d flinch and force myself to push off the line. My legs would drag for the first hundred meters, like I was wading through six inches of sand. By the time we reached the 200-meter mark, the nerves would wear off; my heart would then concentrate on the task at hand. I’d look around at my competitors as we rounded the third curve, wondering if they were as miserable as I was, but they wouldn’t seem interested in commiserating. I don’t remember ever losing a race. In high school, I switched to team sports.

In the West African country of Senegal, there are two ways to drink coffee. The first is instant, with piping hot water and powdered milk. The second is called Café Touba, named after the largest religious hub in the country. It’s heavily sweetened and spiced with cloves and Selim pepper, and it tastes a little bit like drinking hot Listerine, but not in a bad way.

I stopped playing in piano recitals at some point through middle school. Just the mental image of sitting at a Steinway in front of my peers and their parents, trying to hear the Beethoven through the ringing of my own ears, sent my heart racing like I was lined up for a 400. At my last recital, I’d forced my shaking fingers through the first half of Bach’s Minuet in G before losing my focus and having to start over. My mom sat next to me on the stairs when I finally told her, through a thick layer of snot, that I hated performing. “Oh, that’s all?” She asked with a little laugh, “You don’t have to do them. You just had to tell me.”

When I was young, probably seven or eight years old, we heard a rumor about a boy who’d died taking too many caffeine pills before a wrestling match. My older brother told me his heart had exploded. I eyed the baristas at my local coffee shop when my mom would take us in for Italian sodas and wondered if they knew they were dealers of death. In sixth grade, my friends and I went into that same coffee shop, and I ordered a *café au lait*, because I wanted to look cool against the vanilla steamers and hot chocolates they liked. That night, I lay awake until three, mystified and distressed at my own pounding heart.

In fourth grade, I won my class spelling bee, which qualified me to participate in the school-wide competition. On the day of, I stood with the other class winners in the biting cold of the cafeteria, dressed in a new green shirt. A mass of students sat on the floor before us, the competitors’ parents leaning against the back walls. I went up for my first word, “corner”. My heart had never beat so fast, my vision never so blurred with fear. “C-O-R,” I began, and then immediately doubted myself. My hands went cold and shivery, and I tried to unclench them from my jeans. I hated whatever path of victory I’d taken that led me to this point. What letter had I said last? C? “O,” I said, then, “Can I go back?”

At the end of the school day, I sat on a bench next to the playground, waiting for my mom and contemplating my failure. A boy I’d never seen before stopped in front of me. “Hey,” he said. “You

did really well.” Later, my mom told me, “It’s okay, because you actually spelled “coroner,” which is a much harder word.”

Even now, having passed fourth grade, I lose my ability to multitask when I’m stressed or nervous. I envy my peers for their ability to compartmentalize, to say, “it’s not productive to think about this right now, focus on the task at hand.” A single “can we talk?” text sends my heart into fits, sets my brain on a singular track of worst-case-scenarios that can’t be derailed until it’s seen closure. The starting gun for a track meet still gives me shivers, turns my muscles cold. The word “coroner” still makes me think of that frozen, grey cafeteria, trying to focus on the red blur of my mother’s winter jacket against the back wall.

My first real relationship took two and a half years to end. Sometime after, I went home for dinner and fought with my mother, who was worried about whether I was sleeping enough. To apologize, she drove me home and helped me change the sheets on my bed. That weekend, my dad texted me, and we went to his favorite café in Denver to talk about anything but my breakup. He got a pour over and drank it black. I got a Vietnamese, satisfyingly over-sweet and coated in cinnamon.

When we drink caffeine, our bodies release adrenaline, cortisol, and epinephrine, the same hormones that trigger our fight-or-flight response. Our blood vessels constrict, our hearts race and our minds can focus more easily. The average adult human can safely consume up to 400 mg of caffeine per day, but over time, we develop a tolerance and need to consume greater quantities for the same effect.

I try to keep my tolerance very low: a cup of tea a day through high school and most of college, a rare cappuccino on test days or for hangovers. In high school, a friend of mine drank two quad-shot caramel lattes a day. Her system was constantly flooded with caffeine and sugar, and her backpack rattled with spare change and anxiety medications. I’d give her the Starbucks Rewards stickers off the Costco-sized bags of coffee beans my parents would buy, hoping to relieve the fifteen-dollar-per-day burden on her bank account.

There have been over eight thousand episodes of Jeopardy! aired to date, the last 36 years of which have been hosted by Alex Trebek. In a recent interview, Trebek confessed feelings of deep depression while undergoing treatment for pancreatic

*They were
dealers of death.*



cancer. But he says his job helps him keep going, because it wakes him up.¹

At least once a week, my roommates and I gather in front of the television and binge on recorded episodes of *Jeopardy!* until one of us gives up and goes to bed. We shout our mostly incorrect answers, and we have a house rule that if someone needs extra time to answer the question before the timer goes off, we pause it until they settle on an answer. I watch the competitors sweat under the bright studio lights, their hands shaking on the little remotes, and I'm glad I'm here, comfortable and warm in my living room, with a pause button and no public humiliation if I get a wrong answer.

In Senegal, tea is served after dinner in a series of three small glasses, each round sweeter and stronger than the last. The leaves are a mixture of peppermint and Chinese green tea, mixed with sugar and poured back and forth between two pots to develop a froth. It's considered a useful social tool, good for making visitors comfortable.

I barely slept my first week in Dakar. The mosquitoes slipped through the gaps in my curtains, ravaged my exposed arms, and swelled the space above my left eye. On my third day, I acquired a mosquito net, which I rigged up from the corner of the wardrobe using the handle of a spray bottle and a heavy book. Over the next couple of days, the itching slowed, and my eyebrow returned to its normal size, but I still found myself wide awake into the early morning. When I learned to politely decline the third glass of tea, I began to sleep better.

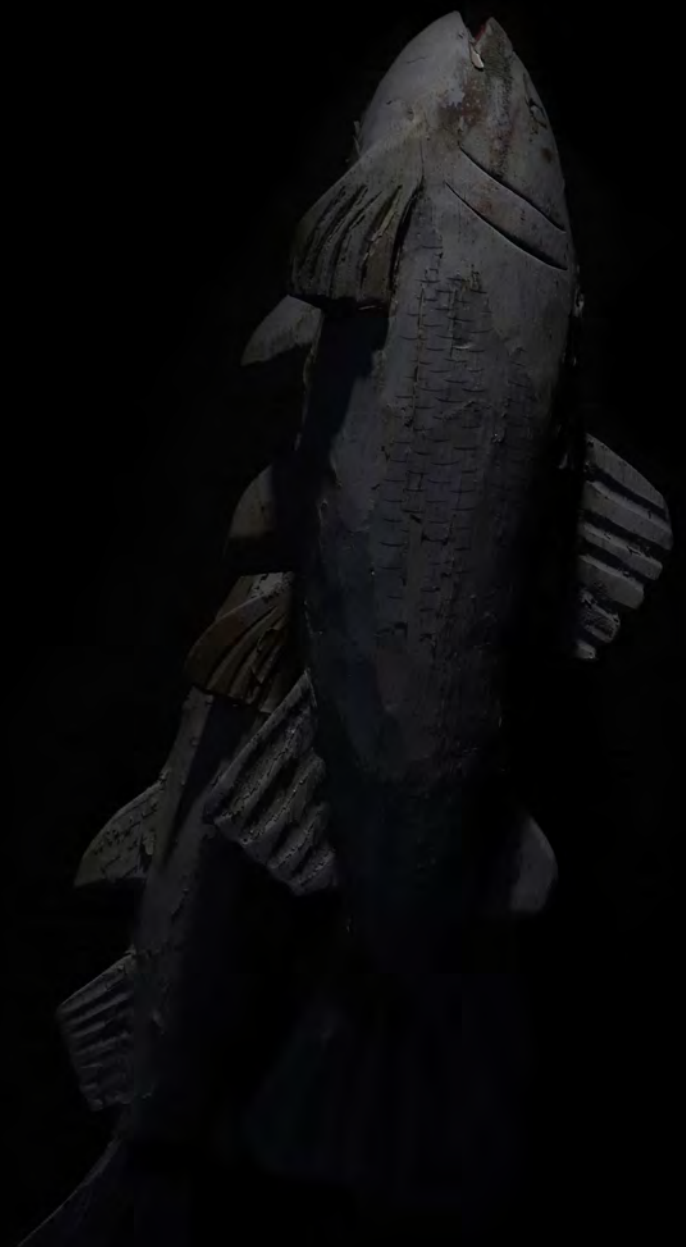
After every Hanukkah dinner with my relatives in Massachusetts, my uncle Eric takes drink orders and spends the next twenty minutes distributing cups of hot Irish breakfast tea and black coffee, which we are free to augment with cream according to our own Kosher preferences. We sit around the packed table, starting conversations and debates while we wait for our mugs to cool. My younger Jewish cousins make a beeline for the playroom, because hot chocolate is made off-limits by the presence of milk. I always ask for decaf tea, because the time change already makes it hard

1. Proto, Dominick, Angeline Jane Bernabe, and Cameron Harrison. 2020. "Alex Trebek Shares Details of Experimental Treatment for Cancer Battle". Good Morning America. <https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/culture/story/alex-trebek-opens-battle-cancer-experimental-treatment-memoir-71872701>.



enough to sleep when we visit.

My father loves coffee, which is lucky, because he also loves staying up late. It's a trait we share. Our brains work best between the hours of 11 PM and 2 AM, as if we'd just finished a fresh pot. When I come home to visit, the two of us will sit in comfortable silence for hours every night in the spotty light of the floor lamps, until he gets up, stretches, and gives the cat a last kiss on the forehead. One of us will ask, "Wanna drink coffee and stay up all night?" And the other will laugh, because of course we do. The comfort of the night is somehow purer than the light of the day. But if we never go to bed, we don't get to drink the first morning coffee. ☪



JERSEY BOYS DON'T CRY

AN ODE TO THE GAY VOICE IN POETRY

by CHAD TANNOUS

B_{urn}

When walking on the cobbled sweating streets,
Through center town, I stop to have a drink.
Begrimed the fog in valley sets to speak,
To visions of the "what's already seen."

Like one who acts like god is here to give,
The mucid trace of once experienced:
Begets my physic, like a snuff, and hence.
The lighting call of music down the lane.

The frisk and gambol sure'd my measure;
That I should keep on dancing like a child,
With youth by candle light and flushed with mead...
Not drowning now but flying promenade.

By the labyrinth of what's Implied in thee,
I'm running through the halls of jubilee.

With longing to the forests edge I creep...
 Imbibe upon the sweet lycanthropy.



Magnolia

you'll find it on the back streets
 on hot and humid nights.
 you'll smell the night is tinged
 with something saccharine bleeding
 melancholic.

remembering nights when me and my guy
 would be altered and grow nostalgic;

remembering times when decaying crusts of summers
 browning bronzed you;
 ask me how the back end of his thigh tastes...
 fluorescent?
 what about the inside of his neckline...
 phosphorescent?

full gut but somehow craving,
 so sweet but somehow rotting,
 in the halogen lights,
 what is this smell?
 magnolia



Deep Shreds
 new paper shredding machine
 warm plastic air blowing out
 fresh and clean
 take all the discourse
 and throw it away
 matrice the letters
 and get them to say

01010001
 I'll give you my mistakes
 to make people forget them
 I'll give you my cards
 so nobody can use me
 give you my statements keep the stuff and
 stop giving my hours away for free.
 I think all day about coming right home
 opening the mail and then shredding away,
 the cascading strips like pieces of meaningless data concerning and conversing with one
 another about meaning
 I daydream about feeling your pinion gear beating
 against that matte black edge I banged in on the way out of staples
 to plug and press
 shuffle and set
 wait and guess
 do I lead or feed?
 confetti or slice?
 dice or dash?
 slash or gash?
 this open hole
 of teeth and cutters
 cluttered and covered
 by spacers and bases
 eating the faces
 of people I pretended to be
 just pulling them in
 ripping strand by strand
 skin from flesh
 muscle from joint
 name from sex
 temper from mind



Burn it down
 last time we tried to change the world too fast to try to change the world too fast we tried to
 change the world too fast last time we tried to change the world too fast to change the
 world this time we hope the change we try will last.



FLYING THE LONELY SKIES

by NATALIE FINAMORE

On a standard Tuesday night, Chicago O'Hare airport is a quiet, sparsely populated landscape of fluorescent lighting and muted carpet hallways. The escalators hum and the odd gate agent passes by, heading for the CTA Blue Line that runs under Terminal 1 and winds its way downtown to the Loop. The sound of footsteps on tile floors is muffled by the rolling of suitcase wheels, the light murmur of check-in kiosks, and the beeping of an electric cart as it creeps along. But this library-like atmosphere is hardly O'Hare's only mode of operation: the airport was 2019's sixth busiest airport, handling an average of over two hundred and thirty thousand passengers per day. In terms of total passengers for the year, it ranked just behind Tokyo Haneda and Dubai International. From 1963 to 1998, it was officially the World's Busiest Airport, and today operates an exceptionally equal ratio of international to regional flights. It also happens to be, in a way, my brother's second home.

March 17 of 2020 was a Tuesday, but it was hardly standard at O'Hare. It followed the worldwide recall of Americans abroad on the Saturday before, which resulted in a bottleneck of travelers at International Arrivals and an internet-famous six-hour wait for customs. Thankfully, I arrived late to that particular party, and when I found myself at the top of the same staircase where I'd seen hundreds of luggage-laden Americans waiting in line, their shoulders brushing and breaths mingling, I paused. The hallway before me was barren, the customs line in front of it barely filling half of the rope barriers. An unmasked customs officer compared my unmasked face to my passport photo and handed it back to me.



At baggage claim, the conveyor belts trundled their way along, muffling our worries with their hums. I found my suitcase and pinballed around the International Arrivals terminal, hopelessly lost. After three passes, I received guidance from a kind older Wisconsinite couple and finally found my way onto a bus to meet my brother in the frigid Chicago air outside Terminal 1. He hugged me and slung one of my backpacks over his shoulder. A pamphlet from customs on disease transmission poked out of my pocket the whole time.

Will is a young pilot, recently turned 25. He started flying out of O'Hare as a first officer for a small regional subsidiary airline at 23 after graduating from flight school just over a year ago. Late last fall, we stood together in our hometown rec center, sweating between sets of squats, discussing his job. An older man, having overheard our conversation, approached us and asked Will to confirm that he was, in fact, a professional pilot. Upon receiving an affirmative, he turned away, but gave one last glance back at my brother. "Huh," he said. "That's a little scary."

Will's love for aviation began early, so I've never been intimidated by his ability to find a career so young. But my brother barely looks his age when he's in uniform, much less when he's in shorts and a t-shirt, his curly hair just a bit too long. Even when he is dressed to fly, in a white button down that would make 1960s NASA engineers jealous and a black suit jacket with silver stripes across the cuffs, I think, "it's not Halloween yet." Of course, I would (and have) trusted Will with the task of flying me in any metal tube through the sky, but the man's reaction makes sense. We want to believe that when we fly, our lives are in the hands of the experienced pilots, the ones who have seen and done it all. But the ranks of the commercial airborne can hardly provide us that comfort, because most of them look just like my brother. His classmates, fellow graduates from the University of Oklahoma Aviation program, present a similarly youthful face of the future of commercial flight. While they're all highly trained and qualified pilots, they could also pass for the pledge class of a Midwest frat: just baby-faced enough to get carded at the bar, just ragged enough for you to know they've each ducked death once or twice.

Upon graduation from flight school, new pilots are assigned to fly out of a major flight hub, which for the big-league airlines is a high-capacity international airport like O'Hare, Dallas Fort

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Worth, or John F. Kennedy. If the pilot doesn't have the luxury of uprooting their life to be close to their hub (a friend of Will's, with a wife and newborn in Dallas, was recently assigned to JFK), they have to catch flights to work, known as "deadheading." But new pilots flying red-eye shifts and sitting early-morning reserve (pilot-speak for on-call) hours can't easily find flights that get them to their hub in time, and that's where the crash pad comes in. A crash pad is an apartment outfitted to hold six or more temporary sleepers while they're on duty, like a truck stop for aviators. Occupants can rent a "cold bed," which is a spot in a bunk that's guaranteed to be empty when they need it, or a "hot bed," which—you guessed it—has the chance of being occupied when they show up. With one bathroom and unwashed sheets, most crash pads are hotspots of drama and disease, but they do the trick.

Anyone could tell you that flying is a lonely profession. Most pilots are away from home a minimum of sixteen days every month,¹ which doesn't leave much time to make new friends in a new city. An average trip lasts four days, and a crew sticks together for that whole time, so they do have plenty of bonding opportunities on and off-board. Will's been to Mexico twice with two different crews, and they went to a gay club the first time and an ice-skating rink the second. The more experienced crew members recommend their favorite restaurants and bars in a new city, and last week Will sent our family group-chat a picture of him and his crew sightseeing at the lighthouse in Providence, Rhode Island. The problem is it doesn't last. "Each member of a crew can come from a different city," Will tells me, and crews are rarely scheduled together more than once. "It's not like an office job, where you see the same people every day. You get four days with people to see if you want to be friends, and after that, it's up to you."

When it comes to family, time off is prioritized by seniority, so new pilots are almost guaranteed to miss several years' worth of Thanksgivings, New Years' Eves, and other high-travel holidays—Will spent last Christmas in a hotel room in Portland, Maine, and the one before that on reserve in his apartment in Chicago. And maintaining a personal life is hard: many airlines

1. Blakemore, Erin. 2016. "Think Your Job Is Depressing? Try Being An Airline Pilot". Smithsonian Magazine. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/airline-pilots-are-really-depressed-180961475/>.



don't grant time-off requests for crewmember weddings simply because they happen so often. A study by the *Journal of Environmental Health*² puts longtime airline crew members' rates of depression, insomnia, and feelings of social isolation much higher than normal, although it's not clear that these issues stem directly from the lifestyle. As passengers, we often think of flying as a social calling, to see our family and friends. But to the people who fly the planes, the same flights that bring us closer to our loved ones bring them further from theirs.

Of course, they chose this path. My brother loves flying twice as much as I could ever hope to love my job. He grew up learning to fly with our dad and spent his afternoons with remote control airplanes in the park. He hit a thousand hours on Microsoft Flight Simulator before I reached the fourth grade. He spent the summer after his senior year of high school getting his private pilot's license, his first two years at the University of Colorado studying aerospace engineering. When that line of interest ran its course, he transferred to OU to learn to fly professionally. Now, he flies for half the month and plays flight simulators with his friends the other half; sometimes, when I open my computer, I get a Steam notification that he's playing a game called "Airport CEO." When he comes home on a weekend off, he takes our Dad's little Cessna out for entire days. The longer he can stay off the surface of the earth, the better. Flying was originally my dad's hobby, but it's become my brother's livelihood.

When I call Will, he has an equal chance of being in a generic hotel room in the eastern United States as he does of being in his Wicker Park apartment. This month and through the New Year, he'll be living out of a hotel in Dallas, training to fly a new type of aircraft. When he is on duty, his airline, a subsidiary of American, flies regional routes that regularly put him in Fayetteville, Providence, and White Plains, which he does his best to explore through running and the occasional restaurant. But he can't deny that transient life gets to him sometimes. "The problem with Southwest pilots," he complained to me the other day, "is that they're so goddamned happy all the time." South-

2. Wu, Alexander C., Deborah Donnelly-McLay, Marc G. Weisskopf, Eileen McNeely, Theresa S. Betancourt, and Joseph G. Allen. 2016. "Airplane Pilot Mental Health And Suicidal Thoughts: A Cross-Sectional Descriptive Study Via Anonymous Web-Based Survey". *Environmental Health* 15 (1). doi:10.1186/s12940-016-0200-6.



west Airlines pays hotels to provide their crew with meals when they arrive, so they don't have to carry a four-day trip's worth of dinners and breakfasts with them. According to Will, no matter where you travel, a Southwest crew will have none of the expected cynicism that comes along with the career and far too much pep. It's implied that a respectable pilot should and will act unflappably blasé, regardless of the circumstances. When asked about what it's like to land a full aircraft, Will shrugs. "It's just landing a plane, but with sixty-five people in the backseat."

My family had Thanksgiving eleven days early this year to accommodate Will's schedule. He tends to pop in and out of my childhood home with little fanfare. There's a new girl he's seeing in Chicago who works in healthcare and lives near Wrigley Field with her two special-needs cats. "I was a little nervous the first time she came over," he said, taking a glass out of my hand and drying it off. I can see why—with a foldout of a cockpit on the wall and a cold soldering iron on the floor next to the closet door, his apartment stands as an engineer's poster child for bachelor pads. His closet is full, not of skeletons, but of aviation paraphernalia. "I think I need to get a bed frame," he said right before we went back to the dining room. "Where'd you get yours?"

He's also frustrated, he said, because he started texting with a cute flight attendant recently. But given the nature of their jobs, they're rarely ever in the same city. "Twenty-some years of minding my own business, and suddenly I have options? In a pandemic?" He hasn't even been able to get a cat yet—such

solitude is prohibitive for even the most independent of pets. I can only imagine two girlfriends might be significantly more difficult.

If being a pilot is a lonely profession, being a pilot in a pandemic can hardly be easier. Isolation has descended upon us all, and airports have taken the brunt of the bad publicity. For many, abstaining from travel was the easiest adjustment to make, rather than cancelling birthday parties, lunch dates, or any of the other mundane activities that made life humane. And when the initial surge of travelers dwindled, it really dwindled: Forbes.com reported a drop from 2.6 million air travelers per day in the United States to just over 95 thousand by mid-April.³ Flights were canceled, pilots were furloughed, and planes took off half-empty. In late April, many major American airlines opted in to the CARES Act, which included a \$25 billion bailout meant to keep them afloat through the passenger shortage. Will managed to avoid near-certain furlough in this way: instead of being unemployed for the next several months, he was assigned to sit reserve, but never received a call. For most of spring and into summer, he did what most of the rest of us did, which is to say that he sat at home being only occasionally productive and socially isolated. A friend of his, a former employee of Air Wisconsin, wasn't so lucky—hired just six months after Will, he didn't make the cut-off and now, waiting to come off furlough, works for Swissport managing fueling schedules.

Kids these days are lonely—there's no two ways about it. More than any generation before, young people are experiencing social isolation—and not just because of the pandemic. Over-emphasis on productivity and professional advancements means that we are encouraged to spend every idle moment working on our futures and our résumés, not building friendships. In the airborne world, this translates to flying as often as possible to build a logbook of flight hours upon which promotions are based. But this summer, we all experienced a period of forced idleness everyone responded differently to: journaling, workout videos, and virtual internships all made it into my newsletters from the university. Instead, I went to stay with Will in Chicago for the



month of June while he sat reserve, which meant we just had to stay within two hours of O'Hare during his on-duty hours. We toured Jackson Park, after which I read *Devil In The White City* in two days on the back porch. We went to visit his pilot friend—coincidentally, also named Will—and sat on the back porch of the attic apartment he shares with his partner, Daniel, and two guinea pigs named Molly and Marina (so I must concede the point that it is, in fact, possible to have pets as a pilot, but only if you live with someone who will take care of them). We bemoaned our woes under the bright sun: my brother Will his lack of flight hours, our friend Will his furloughed state, and Daniel his twice-a-week retail job, watching the airliners fly the pattern into O'Hare and feeding leaf after leaf of romaine lettuce to the squeaking pigs. It was, after all, the most conversation any of us had had all summer.

Even when he is flying, Will struggles to find people to relate to. "There's such a large gap in age between direct coworkers," he texted me from Dallas, after I accidentally called him during his class to ask for remarks. "Most captains I fly with are 20 to 25 years older than me, and that can be difficult because we don't often see the same way on social issues." Indeed, aviators tend to make up a strongly conservative community, and Will often spends hours in the cockpit with captains who still call it the "Chinese Virus," or who will rage against the youths of today without realizing they're talking to one. His job places him in most direct contact with people—usually men—who are old enough to be his father and have been doing the job as long as he's been alive. Their disenchantment with the lifestyle can get frustrating to someone who's hardly ever wanted to do anything else with his life, so he and I will trade venting sessions over text every so often: I about my classes, he about the racists to whom he occasionally must demur.

But the dissonance isn't necessarily one-sided. When 9/11 transformed the commercial aviation industry entirely almost twenty years ago, many of these older pilots were already established in their positions and have since struggled to adjust to the changes. The wide gap in pilots' ages means that the newcomers are presenting challenges to such an ideologically settled population. Some of the people they're now working with were barely out of kindergarten in 2001, and halfway through middle school when the economy collapsed in 2008. "Those events are a bit

3. Sachmechi, Natalie. 2020. "Airlines Are Being Bailed Out Again, Here's What Economists Think Will Happen Next". Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nataliesachmechi/2020/04/17/airlines-are-being-bailed-out-again-heres-what-economists-think-will-happen-next/?sh=6b524214356f>.

more abstract [for us] than they are for our older co-workers,” Will says graciously, although I’m not certain he’d receive the same kindness in return. Many of these older pilots bonded over and shaped their careers around these struggles, but to their new co-workers, they’re barely even memories.

Will and I grew up flying; our dad was a hobby pilot before Will was even born. An early photo of my brother shows him in a Cessna 182 sometime in the first six months of his life, smiling toothlessly at the camera in my mother’s arms, the distant ground visible out of the window. Dad used to fly us to Christmases in Buffalo, which was slower but cheaper than flying commercial, or a quick twenty minutes out to breakfast in Greeley. But this was all a bit too tame for him, so in June of 2004 my parents thought, “what if we put two under-ten-year-olds in a small plane for two weeks?” And we packed up and flew across the Yukon to Alaska. I don’t remember much from it, having been five at the time, but the photos are priceless.

Dad’s whole camera was packed with images, each named with his typical cynicism, of the desolate mountain ranges and deep valleys I was too young to appreciate. Instead, I am drawn to “ho hum.jpg,” in which an eight-year-old Will stares resolutely at his Game Boy Advance while Mt. McKinley looms out the window. Another, “watch where you’re going.jpg,” shows him in the co-pilot’s seat, smiling at the camera, not looking at the mountainside that sits just a little too close for comfort to the right side of the plane. When we got home, we absolutely hated the slideshows, because they ended up being what felt like hours and hours of mountains and glaciers and lakes and “Dad, can’t you take pictures of people for once?” Alaska has by far the lowest population density of all the United States, with 1.3 people per square mile,⁴ and the highest ratio of small airplanes to people. We desperately wanted Dad to show us pictures of people, but the fact is that there weren’t all that many people to take pictures of there. Little Cessnas, like the one we were flying, are often the only way for Alaskans to get mail, medicine, and

Another, “watch where you’re going.jpg,” shows him in the co-pilot’s seat, smiling at the camera, not looking at the mountainside that sits just a little too close for comfort to the right side of the plane.

4. “Population Density In The U.S., By State 2020 | Statista”. 2020. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183588/population-density-in-the-federal-states-of-the-us/#:~:text=As%20a%20whole%2C%20there%2were,1.3%20residents%20per%20square%20mile.&text=Simply%20put%2C%20population%20density%20is,the%20area%20of%20the%20country>.

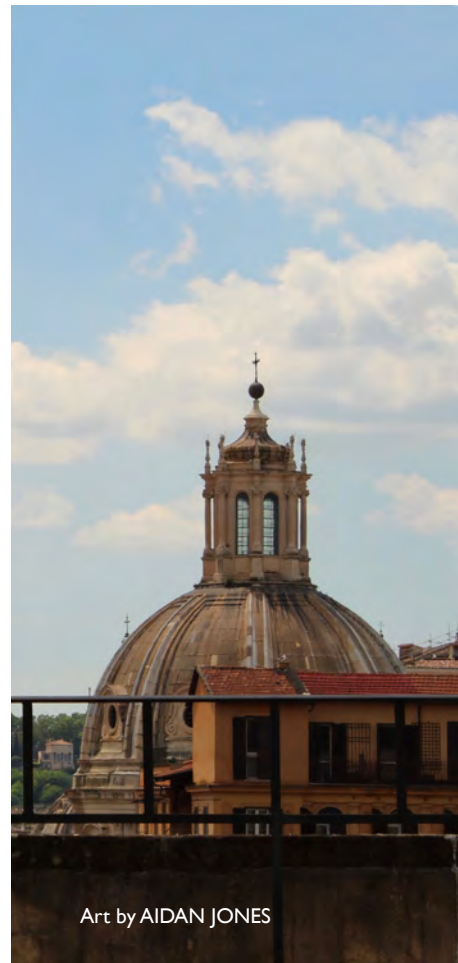
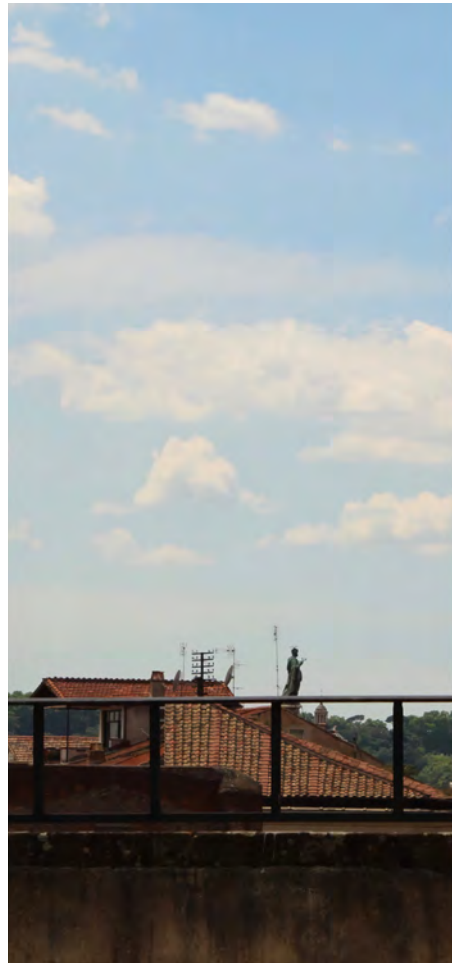
tourist traffic. We were traveling through the loneliest state in the country, and it showed.

For one week each July, a hundred thousand airplanes of all sizes converge on Wittman Regional Airport near Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Small planes line up in rows and attendees camp under their wings for the week, risking thunderstorms and mud for the world’s largest fly-in airshow, which offers aerial spectacles and more explosives than a Texan Fourth of July. Aviation’s age gap exists at Oshkosh too, but leans even more heavily towards the geriatric, which can become downright cringeworthy. When older men strike up conversation with Dad, it’s not uncommon for me to receive either absolutely zero attention or absolutely inappropriate amounts of it, complete with condescending questions: “And do you fly too, young lady?” We love Oshkosh, but a great deal of that comes from our ability to laugh at it. Every afternoon, patriotic music and misguided proclamations issue from the airport loudspeakers seemingly at random, as Soviet-era war trophies make low, loud passes along the flightline, trailing blue show smoke and pursued by triumphant—if not chronologically realistic—Mustangs.

Will hasn’t been able to make it to Oshkosh the last couple of years, but he’s usually amused and unfazed when we tell him about the political environment. It reminds me that while this is a tourist attraction to us, it’s not too far off from the realities of his job, the consequences of a transient lifestyle. It’s easy to try to pin the conservative politics of aviation on age alone, but the truth is that by nature, a professional pilot is removed from the neighborhood, the diverse community, and is socially isolated from nearly everyone but his co-workers. It’s easy for him to sink into the culture of a heavily capitalist, economy-driven industry, the echo chamber of blame and who’s costing who jobs. And it’s easy to forget that, among all of this chaos, young pilots are growing into a career that actively nudges them away, that says, “Aren’t you tired of all this? Your captains disrespect you, your bunk might be occupied tonight, your friends are scattered across the country, and you can’t even get a cat!”

But that’s the thing, isn’t it? They’re not tired of it. Some people like to stand on the ground and gaze at the stars, but for pilots like Will, the view from the cockpit will always be sweeter. ✎





NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

by EMILY ANDERSON

A dim haze filters through the blinds covering the two windows of our cave-like dorm room. The first window sits in the far corner, so tucked away that the light barely reaches the edge of the rug. The other window casts the same stale light on my roommate's bed, where I can see her legs sprawled between her comforter still wearing the jeans she wore last night.

I am disoriented in the dark corner of our room. My skin is cold and dry. I sit up and feel a headache coming on as I start feeling for my phone in my sheets. No luck. I glance at the floor hoping it fell in my sleep, but instead let out a sigh. I scan the crumpled biology homework, dirty laundry, napkins, the tins of Chipotle take-out containers, a hairbrush, an exploded compact of bronzer, mini red Solo cups, two rotting apple cores not far from the trash can lying on its side, an open bag of tortilla chips, strawberries — there are strawberries on the ground, free from their container, slowly losing their bright red coloring. I take note of the different cosmetic bags, all open and spilled across the desk, each belonging to the girls here last night, yet I am not sure

where they ended up. My makeup brushes are sporadically laced between eyeshadow palettes foreign to me, a few somehow finding themselves in other girls' bags. I have always hated sharing.

The clutter on the desk complements the elaborate trappings of the wall—maps of Chicago, skylines, sorority letters, pictures. Too many pictures cover the wall, edge to edge: me and my best friends, me and my dog, my brother's football picture and my sister's yearbook photo, a picture of the view from my bedroom window, pictures from prom, graduation, so many pictures of familiar faces that my roommate knows the name of every one of my best friends from home. I glance over the faces smiling back at me and I feel like crying.

It's Sunday, I think to myself. Again. Already Sunday. The list of to-do items swirls around in my head, which includes a lot of what I put off last Sunday. This list includes cleaning the room. Our room isn't messy in some Project-X, ridiculous time-of-our-lives, teenage mess type of way. Our room is a disaster that screams nothing is going that well and I lost my Sociology textbook and I'm out of clean yoga pants and I had FatShack delivered three days in a row and I can't find my Buff One. The cycle continues, or rather, pushes me along.

I hear the muffled ringing of my phone somewhere underneath me. I frantically slide off of my bed and land on my feet with a smack to the cold, tile floor. I fall into a pile of clothes under my bed and start tossing things this way and that. My phone hits the wall with a thud, and I dive to answer.

"Mom?" My voice breaks. "I want to go home."

The air feels different. This type of cold feels clean. Smells clean. I roll over in my bed, my sheets smell of fragrant detergent. The soft blue walls glow in the light cascading in through the window which overlooks my backyard, and from here I can see the row of snow-capped arborvitae trees lining the edge of our lot.

My bed, two nightstands, a desk, and a dresser are the only things touching the floor. Now my feet. I walk across the room to my own bathroom, the glass shower door and its white tile shining in the sun pouring in through the skylight. My gaze locks on my reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirror. I look different. A little different than I used to. Maybe it's being back in this lighting, maybe it's. . . I don't know, my eyebrows? I'm almost alarmed at how pale and sunken my face looks.

Over the sound of brushing my teeth, I hear the low rum-

*The cycle continues,
or rather,
pushes me along.*

bling of my siblings yelling at each other a floor below. Almost bittersweet, at first. I can track their movements by recognizing the sound of each of their footsteps. I take note of my mom's frantic and angry stomping and hear as she makes her way up the stairs to my door, her words becoming easier to make out as she continues yelling at my siblings to stop yelling.

My door flies open. I pause, toothbrush dangling from my mouth. My mom is almost short of breath, her blonde hair sticking out every which way from a low bun. Her eyes are tired, yet obviously upset with me when they meet my gaze after scanning the room.

"Em, c'mon, it's almost 12:30," she says, practically still yelling, basically whining. She shakes her head in disappointment.

"Yeah?" I murmur as I finish up brushing, spit, and turn the faucet off.

"Are we going to breakfast or not?!" She throws her hands up.

"We're going to breakfast?"

"I wanted to. But that's great, Em, good afternoon. You know what, how about you go back to sleep. Just go back to sleep." She starts closing the door.

"Wait—Mom—Wait, what?"

"No, Em, it's fine," she screams back, already stomping down the stairs again, where I hear her muffled, "You two can stop arguing because we're not going anymore anyway."

I fling my door open and follow her. I scan the various lines needed to talk her down, as per usual: Mom, I didn't know we were going to breakfast, why didn't you say something yesterday, I'm sorry I slept in, I needed the sleep, you should have woken me up, it's 12:30 anyway, why did you wait this long, what's with the dramatics this morning, all to which she'll cut me off with a "Will you stop it?! Stop! I have a lot to do."

"Good morning, stupid," my brother snickers in passing. "Glad to see you upright today."

It's only 12:30, I think to myself. I've had worse wake up times in the recent past.

I start walking back up the stairs as my mom attends to the pile of envelopes and magazines and miscellaneous papers and lost things in the pile on the dining room table that still sat tall when I left for school four months ago. I check my phone for the first time today and end up tripping on a barricade of laundry baskets on the second floor, some full of clothes, some full of crap—books, hangers, old Little League trophies, mementos. I drop my phone and it tumbles near my sister's door, who pauses, stares at me as she wears her grouchy expression, slowly picks it up, and hands it back to me in disgust. She glares for another second or two before slowly turning around and hiking through the piles of clothes and boxes of old sentiments that I tripped on in the first place.

"Aren't you all so glad I'm home?" I yell sarcastically, angrily, before closing my door, jumping on my bed, and throwing the comforter over my face. I set an alarm for 1:00.

As I close my eyes I hear my dad's booming voice from downstairs scream, "What the hell is everyone yelling about?"



“No seriously though, how’s Boulder?” All attention in the familiar basement shift to me. I give a telling shrug, and some of the boys roll their eyes. My girlfriends’ glance at each other, then back at me in a slow panic, knowing I’m not sure how to answer and that I’m hoping my moment in the spotlight fades quickly.

“C’mon, you go to school in the mountains,” Nathan laughs. “It looks ridiculous.”

“Yeah, it looks like you’re having a riot,” someone adds. I know I haven’t posted anything in a while since that would require me leaving my dorm room, which has lately felt like a black hole. I guess one post on the top of a mountain in the middle of August leaves a mark.

“I mean, it may look like that but.... I’m not gonna lie, it’s just alright.”

“Dude, I go to school in Iowa and you’re telling me Boulder’s just alright?” The boys laugh and snicker in confusion; some think I’m being coy, and some think I’m being a brat. I think of the only two people I consider friends and the landfill that is my dorm room and my non-existent social life, since the weekends seem ruled by kids who live on campus, far from my overflow-dorm, a bus ride away. I think of the parties that kids who don’t go to Boulder must think I live for, but I picture myself alone close to 1:00AM, scavenging through the crowd for something to chug to cloud the awareness of the fact that I know no one in the room. I think of how desperately I look at the pictures on my wall every day and wish that I was back here, in some basement we used to hang out in, in the middle of my hometown, with people that remind me of who I am.

“Yeah. It’s just alright.”



It’s a weird thing to go back and visit your high school after you’ve spent a year in college. It’s weird catching up with old teachers and coaches, engaging in conversation while they have to pause at times to supervise the classroom, take a question, address the team—like they’re responding to a life now foreign to you, yet right in front of your face, a life they’ve still been living since you left it behind. It’s weird to see a part of your life moving on just as gracefully and uninterrupted as it did while you were still a part of it.

I picture myself alone close to 1:00AM, scavenging through the crowd for something to chug to cloud the awareness of the fact that I know no one in the room.

It’s weird to come back home and realize that the mess seemed to follow me. Home was no longer the glittering daydream or the fallback plan. My house was a mess, my family was still rough around the edges, and I still found myself draped in the sadness and fear for the future that I carried while at school. Messes can behave like that—shapeshifting, following you wherever you roam, meanwhile Home seemed to be something that kept running from me. I couldn’t find it anywhere. I didn’t feel that my hometown was really for me anymore, just a pit stop to look back and reminisce before we all got on with our new lives again, back to school. The start of sophomore year was coming in hot.



My room is very pink. Super pink. I mean, the walls are grey, obviously cheaply repainted too many times, and the closet doors are a weathered wood with outdated gold knobs. But anything not up to my landlord is pink, which I would have never picked in the past. Too girly, too prissy. But now, this year, I love it. It’s mine.

The walls are adorned with my own drawings and a few posters. On the corner of my full-length mirror hangs a fuzzy leopard print coat and a pink cowgirl hat. My desk is white and clean, built myself per Target’s instruction manual. On it sits three mason jars—one for eye makeup brushes, one for blush brushes, and one for pens and pencils. All of my makeup has found a place in one of three cosmetic bags, all of which are neatly packed into my makeup drawer. My bedding is simple and pink. I have two pictures in the room, each framed, each of my two best friends from home. One sits on my desk, the other on my nightstand in between my digital clock and a small plant. There’s one other picture in the room, huge, printed, and hung over my desk—me and the friends I made earlier this year.

It still gets messy sometimes, as everything does. But the mess doesn’t run as deep anymore. Everything has a place.

I get a text from my roommate, my best friend: Where r u? Wanna hang

I respond: Ya, I’m Home.



PEGASUS: SONG TO MIKE

by CHRISTEN MALLOY

He showed up like a long shadow
on an evening sun
hidden behind grey boiling clouds,
accompanied by a howling wind
and a driving rain.

His face was long and bothered
his Native roots bringing out red
in an already ruddy
stubbled salt-and-pepper visage
of years spent flowing through life
with different types of people
through different passages of time.

The tattoos, faded green-and-black
on hairy arms that shined
and sagged slightly from age
showing through in wrinkles and frowns -
a map of life, of all those that mattered
told silent stories
of lives, loves and losses,
all present in between faded lines -
a canvas of lived experiences,
a face that could charm
with piercing-blue-eyes
and a cunning, sharp, smile.

Master craftsman, motorcyclist and guitarist
last of the true old hands
of some guard of men, whether good or naught,
that had hands that longed to fix,
solve, tinker, measure, and gesture
in broad sweeping waves
with their fingers in the air.
We stripped the large musty carpet

and rolled it into a corner
and measured the old floorboards below
setting bags of tools
round in a circle on the floor -
he paced the room thinking
hands tracing across walls and moldings
up-and-down along the sides
of doors and windows
as eyes saw through -
beyond what was,
in order to see what could be -
a future space
envisioned and planned
inside a steel trap
set behind a furrowed brow.

In the dead of winter
weak coffee and strong cigarettes
got work on the farm done
in all weathers,
for the better
because a farm always needs fixing -
somewhere.

I would meet you
by the rusted old red barn
beneath the solitary
brown-and-yellow chinaberry tree
that would bloom the brightest shades
of purple and pink in spring
only to shrivel and wither in summer
under the unrelenting gaze of a sun
that cooked and cracked the earth,
turning soft soil to broken clay -
the green grass,
losing its color -

would change to swaths of
russet golds and mustard yellows,
beneath bright blue skies
and rolling clouds,
marching inland from the Gulf -
folding and flowing across the land
shaped like motherships,
anvils or crowns -
depending on the season
and the direction of the wind.

His hands worked on wood
like Moses parting water
a magician of measures,
cuts, and corners -
his eye for carpentry
was fine and precise.
A series of thoughts
became actions -
a man of his word:
who sometimes spoke
in riddles,
rhymes
and verse.

You took me to places
secret spaces
small and dark
and full of smoke and cards
old boys hanging around tables
like sausages in a smoker
drying out and seasoning
over time.

You taught me to roll smokes
in the wind and rain
untold numbers of hand-made pleasures -
the smell of Bugler from an open bag
shoved hastily back
into long coat pockets,
would mix with the rain on the earth
and wet hay and fresh shit

as thoughts drifted back to work
amid hacking coughs and growls
glancing sideways to spit like a cobra -
always with an attention
to the direction of the wind.

Your tiny silver airstream
parked by the shiny tin barn
above and beside
the long stretch of cow pasture,
the metal gate, and the town graveyard -
filled with the history
of local Black folk -
going back so far in time
tombstones get lost
in the unending encroachment
of a densely growing forest line.

His greatest gift
a skill beyond words -
to sing the steel harp
like Hendrix bent chords.

A twangy wail
would rise up
echoed from inside
the carapace of the silver trailer -
or sometimes around campfires
bright and warm -
or carried up
on the wind in storms -
to flutter and warble
bittersweet songs
beneath brooding clouds
masking pale full moons.





Art by HAILEY CADE

THE ROCK PUBLIC

by PATRICK YEHLE

I was young when my political career kicked off. I have seen friends turn to enemies and enemies turn to friends all for one cause, for one sole purpose, for one aspiration. Power. Two syllables, five letters, simple enough to teach a child but strong enough to destroy an entire society. Power led me down a road of creation, a road of enlightened thought, and poisoned my heart and mind into destroying both myself and everyone in my wake. This word is what led to the creation and downfall of my greatest childhood achievement, Rock Town.

Fourth grade in Crested Butte, Colorado began like any other year. My classmates and I returned grudgingly to school, where we endured classes and escaped by the end of the day with our minds barely in one piece. We suffered through the morning looking forward to the only true release from the shackles of our desks: recess. When recess came around, we would race out the doors like a stampede of rabbits. Our activities consisted of what you would expect. We had the swingers on the swing-set, the ballers with the wallball, and anyone who was not a part of those

groups dispersed into the perimeters of our school. I, for one, could not find any true group to identify with. I would often find myself in a little grove just playing with rocks and sticks, trying to occupy my time before I was called back to my classroom prison.

I was a bit of an outcast in fourth grade, or at least I was during recess. I would find that many of my closest friends would play soccer in the fields or perform flips off of swings and I preferred to keep to myself. Was it because of my inquisitive mind? My thirst for knowledge and wisdom? I would like to think so, but if you asked my colleagues, they would have said that I was fat. Regardless, I was a child who aspired for more than sports or toys; I craved for something outside of the standard form of childhood, I wished to break the mold. This grove was where I could think of everything I hoped to achieve one day.

This grove was my recess home. It sat in the corner of the lot, trees lining the perimeter, the center filled with grass. The groundskeepers would only tend to the lot once a month, leaving the scenery often untamed. It was a garden of the wild, fierce mountains, filled with rocks and twigs, leaving space for my mind to run free.

As an orange glow filled the valley and the breeze rolled in, more people joined me in that grove. Some were outcasts like me, some were expelled from the swingers for hogging the set, and some just got bored playing wallball every day of the week. As we sat and twiddled, two classmates approached my corner.

The first to introduce himself was Josh the Divine. He stood over me with angelic grace, due to either the sun blazing behind his head or his divine essence. His hair was dark and brown, flowing to his shoulders. His voice was high pitched but smooth; he soothed everyone with his presence. His eyes were blue as the sky, his face soft but caring. As he approached, I felt his loving presence through my bones calling me into a deep friendship.

Standing next to Josh the Divine was Noah the Wise. Noah was not Josh, not by a longshot. While Josh the Divine carried this divinity in every step, Noah the Wise stepped on the footprints left to soak it up. His voice would crack on every syllable. He had a set of teeth that only a bunny could replicate and hair blonde enough for a farmer to harvest to meet his wheat quota. Despite his unpolished appearance, he was no fool. Josh the Divine could lift your soul; Noah the Wise could lift your mind. As Josh the Divine would fumble on his words, Noah the Wise would fill the holes with ideas of a thinking philosopher. These two young men joined me in this grove and sat next to me. As we sat there and played with rocks, something happened. Something changed.

"Everyone gather around me!"

My ears perked up as I heard Josh the Divine yelling at everyone.

"I created something! Something awesome! Something of my own design!"

Everyone turned to Josh the Divine to see his hands trembling, a marker at his feet. That marker, a red Sharpie fresh out of the box. That marker, fresh-scented and full of life. That marker was the spark that gave life to our Adam. Josh the Divine was holding a rock, but this rock was no longer just earth, it was no longer just an extension of nature, this rock was life.



The rock had two eyes, eyes that could pierce even the coldest of hearts, and a nose that was chiseled by the gods themselves. And a smile that could swoon any heart. This rock was now Bob, and Bob was the foundation upon which we built our magnificent new civilization, Rock Town.

Suzie followed Bob, Tom followed Susan, and soon our tribe became a village. Neighborhoods were created out of cardboard from our trashcans. Town squares were filled with statues made of sticks depicting famous rocks that came before. Streets were lined with crisp fall leaves. This grove was growing, and it could not be stopped. Each rock was given a unique job: some were bakers, some were smiths, some were farmers. Every recess saw a new citizen join as we used every marker given to us by our teacher to bring life to our newly founded society. By the end of the first week, the grove had a center that sprawled out to the edge with rocks and cardboard structures inspired by the ancient Greeks' marble temples. Each street was bustling with static life, rocks posed with their tasks.

Just as the ancient Hammurabi had his code, we developed rules for this new land.

*Love Everyone
Hate No One
No Copying Rocks' Names*

The rules were simple, yet perfect. Inspired by Plato's *Republic*, we strived to discover the true meaning of justice within our society as our little village exploded into a sprawling metropolis filled with generations of Rock families. Bob had grown into an old man with 15 pebbles of his own. Susan had passed when the rain came through and washed her soul from her body. And Tom? Tom was convicted of violating the second law when he was found destroying the local bakery for selling him stale stick bread. We sentenced Tom to spend the rest of his days in the local river.

The flow of time progressed as the branches of the aspen trees turned barren, and the mountains surrounding our town began to transition to inverse ice cream cones. Fall was cementing itself throughout the town. Our school decorated itself with the kindergarten hand turkeys and the elementary school Halloween projects. Rock Town continued to grow.

The city became increasingly difficult to manage, and eventually history took its course. We had to form a governing body.

I met with Josh the Divine and Noah the Wise after snack time.

"I created Bob. I am the creator of the rocks and therefore rule over them."

"Josh, that is unfair. I made rocks like you. Hunter made rocks. We all made rocks. Are all of us rulers then? Or do we rule over all the rocks we made? Then who tells us the rules? I believe we should vote."

Noah the Wise made a good point. If we were to succeed as a true society of just values for our Rock People, we must follow a truly equitable governing system. While Josh the Divine called for the creation of a divine monarchy, Noah convinced the group to shift forward to a democratic system. Not knowing what a "democracy" was, I immediately called dibs on being



mayor. I was promptly shut down.

Recess rolled in and we all rushed outside to our majestic grove. As Avery set up her neighborhood and Gage was busy making Tony (the quarterback of the Rock Ville Roccas), we gathered everyone in the town square.

"Hear ye hear ye, next recess we will hold elections for Rock Ville mayor, anyone who wishes to participate please raise your hand."

Everyone raised their hands.

I anxiously glanced at Josh the Divine. We could not have this many people run. I reconvened with the founding members.

"Now what?"

"Tell them they all can't run."

"How?"

"Hmm, Noah do you want to run?"

"No, I like making rocks and don't really want to be in charge."

"Ok then you can decide who gets to run."

He seemed content with the role he was assigned. We all proudly marched back to the town square.

"Noah is now the leader of the election, Noah who can run?"

"Everyone can!"

Josh the Divine and I nudged Noah.

"I... mean only people who I like can run!"

Josh the Divine and I nudged Noah.

"And that is only Josh and Hunter! See you all next recess for the election!"

The group grumbled and complained a little, but they eventually went back to expanding our town. Noah the Wise, Josh the Divine, and I all high-fived. I came to a sudden, yet startling realization. I was no longer their friend; I was their opponent. Friendship vanished from my mind as I plotted to convince everyone to vote for me. Josh looked at Noah, Noah looked at me, I looked at Josh. We held a three-way staring contest in silence. We knew big changes were coming.

I sat down in my rock mansion with my colleagues of rock citizens and devised a plan. I would promise a society of perfection. We would enforce all laws equally, and we would strive to better the world not as individuals, but as a group. We would move society forward collectively and work to make sure no rock was left to die, like Suzie, who was left to the elements. This was my purpose, and there could be no way for me to lose.

The next two hours of class flew by and recess returned. The air was vibrating with anticipation from the citizens of Rock Town. Everyone wanted to know who would lead the future of our society. We sat in the grove, eager to have our first Rock Town election. As Noah the Wise approached the group, something seemed off about his demeanor. He carried a swagger that was overly confident, especially for Noah the Wise.

"Welcome to the first Rock Town Election! First we have Hunter!"

I waved to the group. Some kids clapped, but most were just indifferently drawing on rocks.

"And we have..."

Noah stopped. Noah and Josh whispered to each other. Noah stared at the grove for a whole minute in deep thought. Josh smirked as he glanced sideways at me. I knew something was wrong.

"And we have Josh with me as his Vice Mayor!"

I was floored. I had been betrayed by the same two men who founded this land. The same two men who helped pen the three perfect rules. The same two men who knew the stakes of such a political backstab. I ran away in tears, thus disqualifying my ticket. Needless to say, I lost.

Rock Town continued the same as before: I advise changing to "as more rocks were added and jobs created, society moved forward as though no election had been held at all. However, Noah the Wise and Josh the Divine had changed. They wore a paper hat with *Rock Town Mayor* and *Rock Town Vice Mayor* etched on the rim. They had final say as to who was allowed in the town. Something was changing.

As I sat in the bathroom crying every recess post-election, I grew exceedingly disillusioned with the original ideologies of our society. Justice? Fairness? Equality? All were distant concepts to me as I reflected on my failure. I had one more trick up my sleeve, a move that would cripple Josh and Noah's tyrannical rule. I would make a new town, a town where only one rule existed. I ran to my desk and grabbed a piece of paper, a red crayon, and a piece of Scotch tape. Just as Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door, I walked to the grove with my materials. Noah and Josh stared, everyone else glanced up from their houses, and I wrote. I wrote like a madman for five minutes straight and derived a document that would kindle the flames that burned Rock Town to the ground.

NEW ROCKY HILLS!
COMING NEXT RECESS!
ONLY RULE IS NO RULES!

I left the note taped to a tree. The fall wind promptly blew it off, but the message was sent. Josh and Noah had a new competitor. The times were changing.

The next day, I strutted into school with a box of fresh markers and my secret weapon, Legos. I started building houses in the back of the grove. The Rock Town community looked out at my new creations, with Lego houses, some envious of the prospects of a rule-less society. It started with Christian. He complained that Gage had stolen his rocks name for the third time. I offered for him to make all the rocks he wanted over in Rocky Hills, regardless of name. All he had to do was move here. He accepted. Next came Avery. She had run out of cardboard to build a house for Tiffany. I handed her a box of Legos and let her loose.

And like moths to a lamp, I took Rock Town. One by one, I had citizens joining the ranks. We had Tim the Fireman, Tim the Tight End, and Tim the Bold(er), all citizens of Rocky Hills. We had a growing film industry ever since Jordan got an iPod with a camera and could record movies. Avery made houses that could have never been dreamed of with the old cardboard material of Rock Town. I had won.



The mountains were now turning into fully fledged white caps and the leaves were all but a fading memory for the town. Camp 4 Coffee went from serving iced coffee to hot coffee. We had to start bringing snow pants to recess, and my dad made me shovel the porch once a week. Rock Town was fading into obscurity as Rocky Hills emerged as the next great empire.

But as every great empire rises, it too must fall. I ran out of Legos, Christian and Gage were not speaking due to the abundance of Tim's in our society. Noah the Wise and Josh the Divine had no one to govern. The grove was getting emptier by the day and was soon as barren as when Bob was first brought into this world. By the time lunch rolled around, I noticed that Josh the Divine had left me a note.

Meet us in Rock Town after lunch.

Although I had seen Rocky Hills fall just as Rock Town had, I could only blame Josh the Divine and Noah the Wise for its demise. What could they wish to speak to me about? Peace talks? Never. A union of cities? I would rather die. An apology? As if. I ate my food and ran to the grove.

"What's this about Noah?"

"Hunter, we are... sorry. Josh never meant to harm you and I could not see the town turning to," Noah looked out over the now baron grove, "this."


I did not know what to say. I was bitter. My friends betrayed me for power, and now that I had achieved more than they ever could, they dared apologize? What could I do? Well, being a fourth-grade child, I had an obsession for action movies, and somehow my brain came to a perfect conclusion. I turned to Josh the Divine and Noah the Wise.

"Walk with me."

We walked along a ridge that separated the grove from the playground. As we looked out on the children playing and what used to be our perfect society, I reflected. I saw a land of potential. A land where men could achieve more than any mortal could. A land where anyone could be anything. A land where Tim could be a defensive tight end who also fought fires. A land where Bob grew from a small child to a grandfather of 20 pebbles. A land where we came together for one true cause. As I stood looking out, I saw Josh the Divine to my left and Noah the Wise to my right. Josh the Divine, the creator of the first stone. Noah the Wise, the father of democracy. And I, the one who did nothing. We stood in silence.

"Well Hunter, do you accept our apology?"

I raised both my arms forward, as if I were to put them behind their shoulders for one big group hug. I elbowed both in the stomach, like any good action hero would, and bolted to the playground. I saw both of them writhing behind me on the ground, and Josh the Divine screamed out something along the lines of *'I curse your descendants'* or *'What the hell dude.'* I could never tell.

Politics is never easy, but power is. Power creates, power unites, power corrupts, and power destroys. Power was all I wanted and is what I achieved. All in the name of Rock Town. 



Art by HAILEY CADE



UNCERTAIN FUTURE

by KELLY VANDEKOPPEL

You're never expecting that call. The emotions flood your body and you cannot comprehend if you want to cry, scream, or sit in utter shock. It is a call that sends you into panic. Your heart feels torn. That call was the call a 17-year-old girl from suburban Colorado received one Friday afternoon near the end of July, 2017. Her older brother arrived with tears already streaming down his face. Together they hopped into his car and raced to the hospital. Speeding in a panic, she tried to comfort him by rubbing his back as they drove the short distance.

"It's gonna be okay," she tells him. "She will be okay."

They arrived at the hospital, rushing through the white-washed halls towards the luminescent red letters spelling EMERGENCY ROOM. They found their dad standing in the doorway. Their mother lay with her eyes closed, in a hospital bed clearly too short for her 5'10" frame. She looked pale and thin, a lifeless expression on her face. The girl's brother rushed to take the wobbly chair at her side, grasping their mom's hands tight as the girl sat at the desk in the corner of the room. They all sat in

silence, preparing themselves for the doctor to knock on the glass door. The next half an hour became a blur as the words, “tumor,” “baseball sized,” and “surgery” circulated their heads and tears welled in their eyes.

Looking back, I now realize how I believed it was some sort of game, an imaginary experience where you are existing, but your physical body and mind are not connected. I remember when my mom first came out of surgery, her head was wrapped in bandages. She remained completely unconscious for several days. We nicknamed the surgeon, Dr. Rauzzino, the “Blue Flash” because he could be in and out of the room within minutes, having attended to every inquiry. He was the best neurosurgeon in Colorado and he happened to be in charge of my mom’s surgery. He was a true Godsend. Yet even those angels cannot perform the miracles you wish for. The “Blue Flash” knew it was bad just by looking at it. Pulsating, vicious tumor. We were going to have a long road ahead. She had a stroke during surgery. We were told a centimeter cut could be the difference between life and death. The morphine they prescribed made her more of a ghost than before.

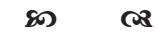


The years from sixteen to twenty-one are arguably some of the best of a person’s life. The number of milestones and new adventures that begin can be the catalyst for the amazing life anyone can have. Most teenagers and twenty-somethings are excited about taking road trips with friends, going to college, meeting new people, finding someone who loves them and maybe being a little rebellious. I would say that I have had my fair share of such events - getting a tattoo with my best friend spontaneously, going to frat parties and finding out they are not all they are chalked up to be, and meeting new friends that I never expected to meet. A month before my 18th birthday, I had just come back from a mission trip to the Philippines, where I had experienced God in ways that I had never seen before. The laughter of kids and the work we did to help restore the churches and schools on the island provoked such a “Jesus-high,” I knew nothing could break me down. I was wrong... My dad used to joke that when my mom did something, it was all or nothing, and in this instance he was right. Of all the cancers she could have had, she had to have one of the most aggressive forms of brain cancer possible. Can you ever expect something like that to happen? There are always chances for any sort of disease, but the words “cancer” and “my mom” in the same sentence never came to mind before. She was one of the healthiest people I knew. She should not have been chosen for the fate she received.



My mom handed down the lovely genetic trait of a bad back, requiring the occasional chiropractic adjustment. It was one of the things we loved to do because our chiropractor was more of a massage therapist who could remove all the knots built up. At this point, she had been sick

for several months but was getting better. She relearned how to walk by herself, she used the cane that turned into a whacking stick when one of her kids got too far out of line. Her head was shaved, not due to the chemo as we had all feared, but instead from a secondary treatment in which she had little electronic probes put on her head. She became skilled at wrapping different colored head scarves over her smooth scalp, meticulously tucking the cords that connected the probes to the battery pack she carried. Her oncologist was happy with her progress. The treatments she received every other week were becoming easier for all of us. Yet during this time I resented her. There were so many things that I felt I was missing out on during my senior year of high school and I blamed her. When my mom lost her balance and slipped off the adjustment chair at the chiropractic office, I almost felt like she deserved it because of all the things she took away from me. I felt like I had been given this burden of a thousand pounds resting on my shoulders in those moments, with the fear of the unknown clouding my mind. She was fine, and we walked around the aquarium that afternoon, four trips back and forth through the maze of fish tanks. She wanted to get her steps in. I have not been back to those places since.



My mom is a supermom! I know that everyone says this, but in my case it was true. She was an athlete who could have gone to the Olympics if it hadn’t been for a back injury in college. Afterwards, she became a psychology teacher at our local high school. She was so clearly loved by all her students that it became a running joke in our family. They’d find us at restaurants, stores, even on vacation in Mexico, yelling ‘Hi Mrs. V!’ Their adoration even worked to our advantage, securing us discounts at places where her students worked. Mom was dedicated to her family, always making sure to call her own mother every afternoon. She did everything she could to make sure her kids were successful, even down to having boxes of extra school materials in our basement that could sufficiently stock an entire classroom. Those are the things I’m grateful for. She was the type of mom who came to every practice, school event, swim meet, football game, team lunch and piano recital. She was always there. You could rant to her and she would listen. You could discuss hard topics with her, and she would always have the best advice. She was also very fashionable, even if her style was slightly stuck in the 90s with turtleneck sweaters, bright colors, pointy shoes and occasional blue eye liner. Her hair was naturally curly, like a blonde afro that made her unique among the other moms her age. My mom could also make this whistle sound that both my brother and I could identify from far away - it definitely came in handy when she needed to get our attention during an event. It’s these moments, that whistle, that I miss most.

December was her best month. She had been home for three months at that point and was becoming independent again. That Christmas was the same as usual; dinner at my Grandpa’s house, cookies for Santa (even though I was 18 years old), the annual ‘I got the family heirloom orange juicer’ picture to my Uncle Bret. When she became sick again in February, her





personality changed. She spoke less and her use of emojis in texts became more frequent and random. Even after the first few falls, no one wanted to acknowledge what we all were seeing, and we certainly wanted to hide our fears from her. I sought ways to bring back my mom, such as trying to entertain her. Sometimes through crafts or trips to the mall where we would attempt to find the ugliest pair of shoes. Other times we would watch *Say Yes to the Dress* or take our dogs on a short walk. Dancing was another amusing activity that I did in attempts to get her to laugh. I would say “Jump, shake your booty, jump, jump, shake your booty” as I hopped around our living room like a buffoon, waiting for her to smile and shake her head like she knew I was a total dork. As that next fall semester came, I went off to college only an hour from home. I attempted to live as normally as I could knowing that I wasn’t. I went home every weekend, called every night and cried often in my dorm room when I felt the stress of it all caving in. The questions would swim around my brain and become prevalent during those silent moments where you cannot help but think of the “what ifs.” One of those nights I practically begged God to make it stop, to fix the situation, to make everything better... as it should be. I wished so hard that something would change because we had tried all the treatments. We were running out of time.



Saying goodbye was one of the hardest things I have ever experienced in my entire life. What does a person say to someone who is minutes from slipping away? I do not really remember what I said except that I hoped she could hear me. Watching her again in a hospital bed, this time without cords or tubes. Her hair was still shaved short except for the dirty blonde

peach fuzz peeking through. Many people came to see her in that last week, some who had been there through it all and others who had not. My best friend flew in from college to be with me even if the conversations were just to distract my mind from the sounds and smells of hospice. What I really hated were those people who said she would want to pass alone all by herself. It would be the most peaceful situation for all of us. I hated everything they were saying, I hated the idea of not being there and the feeling of coming back in the room to find her still awake. The guilt rushing into my heart. When that bell finally rang, I didn’t really know what to expect. What are you supposed to do when the person you have paid so much attention into for the last fourteen months isn’t there anymore? Are you just supposed to pick up your life and start again? Are you supposed to grieve? I don’t even know how to grieve.



*I live everyday
questioning if I did
everything I could
have done in those
moments.*

It has been four years since I received that call and two years since my mom left this earth. I live every day questioning if I did everything I could have done in those moments. Some days it brings pain and the fear of something similar happening to me in the future. Other days, I remember the good moments and joke with my dad and brother about the look she used to give us with the squinchy eyebrows and lips telling us that she clearly did not approve. At times, I feel lost without my mom and I wonder what it will be like to live without her. I wonder what it would be like if she were still here. Would she approve of the choices I have been making? What would she think about the pandemic and the quarantine? Sometimes, I feel like cancer is mocking me when I see other people survive it or when we learn about it in one of my biology classes. I hate Mother’s Day. And her birthday. I hate when other people talk about how annoying their moms are. I hate when I have to go to the cemetery. I wish I could do it over again, just so I could have her back. Life has become new and different; some things get easier and others don’t. I do not know what the future may hold but I hope that whatever comes, my mom will be there, watching over me through it all.





Art by CALLIE JAMES KEATING

WHISPERS OF CHILDHOOD

by SRAVYA DHANWADA

Waking up is easy in Hyderabad. While the heat of the afternoon discouraged me from waking up late, mornings energized me. Mornings contained the leftover chill from the previous night and mist from dew that made it easier to breathe. The fresh air would enter my lungs and cool even the angriest cells in my body. Mornings didn't attract the neighborhood aunties and their loud gossip, so the birds had it all to themselves. The sparrows, ah those darlings, were sure to be participating in some bashful chatter, but the croaking pigeons, oh! They were plotting where next to take a poo. "Hmm should we try the house at the end of the lane? They've been too rude to our brother pigeons lately. Or maybe we should try that lovely Shabana auntie's house! It seems like they've just gotten a fresh new paint job!" Ah, but even those hateful pigeons couldn't ruin a morning like this. Like Snow White, I was greeted with the chirping of the birds and the smell of damp soil. If I woke up early enough, I'd be able to hear the faint and distant sounds of *azan*, calling Muslims to prayer. I never understood Arabic, nor the messages

of Allah sung by the muezzin, but that gentle hum of prayer that traveled through the town never failed to enter my heart.

Hyderabad isn't perfect. In fact, it is far from perfect. It is always hot and there is too much dirt on the roads. There are no crossing signals for pedestrians, so one would just have to trust their gut and gamble with death each time they wanted to cross the roads. If it knew we were having too much fun, it'd cut the power at the most unsuspecting times, leaving us to fend off the heat without the air conditioner. Hyderabad also witnessed the bulk of my awkward and embarrassing childhood. I dreaded the weekly errands run the most, when my mum would send me out to get some household essentials. Despite having taken Hindi as a second language in school for nine years, I was incessantly stubborn in getting better at it, and in my shy, mumbling voice I'd ask for a kilo of dal (lentils). The problem came when the store cashier would ask for "*bees rupiya*" (20 rupees). I'd never gotten to counting in Hindi past ten.

Sometime in the last two years I lived in Hyderabad, I grew to be less picky with food and enjoyed it more. I came to understand that fine dining never offered the same satisfaction that a *bandi* (food cart) on the side of the street could. Restaurants were just an outlet for fancy people to spend their money. The real fun was getting to stand underneath the hot Hyderabad sun, eat a fantastic plate of *Idli* (steamed rice cakes) with an assortment of spicy coconut and tomato chutneys for under 50 rupees, walk a few steps to the chai stand, and finish off breakfast with some lemon tea. On days too hot to drink chai, I'd settle for a chilled glass of sugarcane juice. If I begged enough, my mum would let me eat *meetha Paan*, a betel leaf wrapped around jam-like mixtures of tutti-frutti and chopped dates.

Thursdays were auspicious days to visit the nearby Sai Baba temple in Jubilee Hills. It was a small two-storied temple with only one main prayer hall, tucked away in the gullies behind the main road. It sat between the house of a shady politician and a men's tailoring store that altered all my sister's pants. After offering coconut and marigold petals and receiving the priest's blessing, we'd sit on the marble floor for a few minutes before we left. I was convinced that I accompanied my mother to the temple simply for the *prasadam* (religious offering) in the form of delicious roasted chickpeas, but a small part of me was drawn to the temple. Perhaps it was the ringing of the temple bells, or

*Hyderabad also
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childhood.*

the sight of young ladies with jasmine garlands weaved through their braids, or the smell of calming incense that wafted through the halls that charmed me. An empty temple had all the qualities of a peaceful sanctuary.

Sundays were for nerds. Real nerds. Like those who had some monstrous insatiable appetite for books. My sister, for example. The city had a lot of secrets and the weekly book fair in Abids was one of them. There was no WhatsApp group, Facebook page, or city events department that scheduled and organized the booksellers to appear. They just came. Vendors would lay out mats on the side of the Abids main road to stack their books and would sell them every Sunday as long as it didn't rain. I have no clue when this crazy tradition started. I just hope these traditions will remain until I visit again. Books would stretch out for a few kilometers and in between, my sister and I would stop by for a *chaat* (spicy and sweet Indian hors d'oeuvres) break. We'd come across exhilarating teenage fiction, historical non-fiction, decades-old magazines, cute little children's books, and even those ancient saucy adult romances with half-naked white people on the cover. It was here that my sister tried to teach me how to bargain (i.e. throwing pride away for the sake of a good deal).

First, one must act like they've seen a book with much better print and quality than the cheap photocopied pirated version being sold. Then, one must harness that mindset to offer a price so shamelessly low that one would think they hadn't a cent in their pocket to spare. If the vendor is humiliated, well... no problem! This kind of audacious selfishness—to not care about the respect of the seller—was something I've never actually learned well. So, while I ate chili-seasoned cut guavas, my sister would go ahead and take matters into her own hands. She'd make sure she saved enough money to buy two bus tickets for the journey back home and finish off our day with a shared cup of *ice gola* (sweet flavored ice).

Monsoon season is Hyderabad's first-born son. It receives more love and attention than that received by the hot and dry seasons combined, as in a city that feels like it's constantly on fire, rain soothes the dry earth and relaxes the roasted air. Magic would settle around as each leaf gets wiped of dust, glowing a splendid green underneath the cloudy sky. Every evening that our kind monsoon visits us, we tell stories of how monsoon and chai fell in love centuries ago. My sister thinks monsoon is too


*Monsoon season is
Hyderabad's
first-born son.*

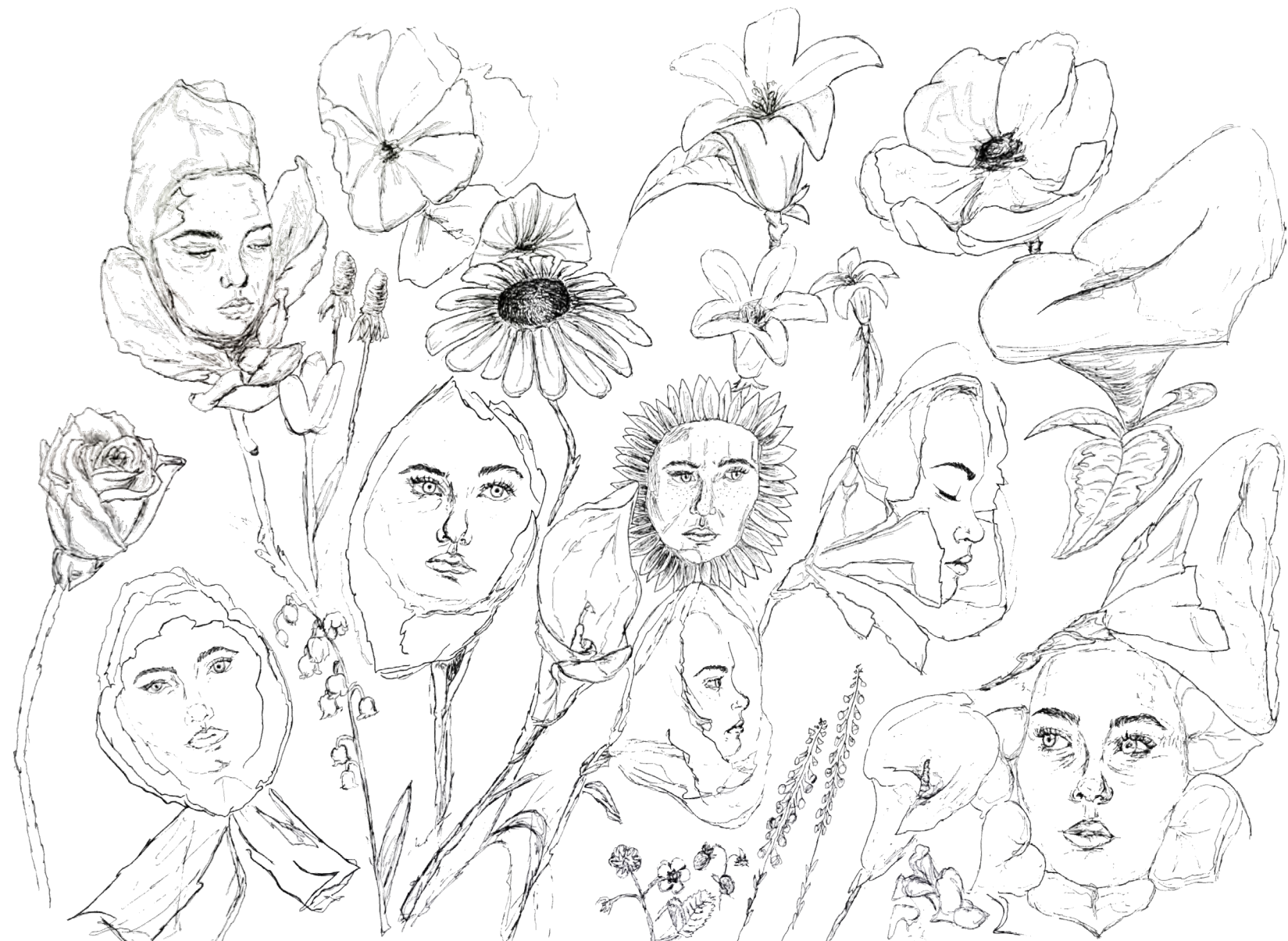


clichéd and wrote a love letter, but my grandma thinks they both are brave enough to elope. I personally think that they never got married since they're still madly in love. Like this we gossip, sipping on tea while I quietly wonder if the love I'll have will be just as warm. Of course, the hated mosquitos want to hear the stories too—they've got nothing better to do when it rains.

Hyderabad was founded by Mohammed Quli Qutb Shah. The Qutb Shahi dynasty took care of Hyderabad and its states—Telangana and Andhra Pradesh—until the 1600s, when the Mughal Empire annexed the region. The Qutb Shahi Tombs, located on the border of Shaikpet and Towlichowki, house the past rulers of the Qutb Shahi Dynasty. Built centuries ago, the tombs are one to two-stories high, square-like and topped by a circular dome, constructed in Indo-Islamic architecture. The tombs are scattered across the land, separated by neatly-manicured gardens. The archways that line the border of the tomb are tall and grand. Restoration work is always ongoing, considering only a few of the colored decorative tiles remain. Unfortunately, the tomb walls still bear scribbles of hearts and the typical “Raju loves Lalitha” graffiti. Sometimes the gardens would be used to hold concerts, not the head-banging youthful ones, but the ones where guests stayed seated in their chairs. I remember swaying to the romantic voices of Runa Laila and Shafqat Amanat Ali as they sang old Bollywood classics while wondering if the Qutb Shahis felt equally as satisfied (most probably not). Historical monuments like these are spread throughout the city but the tombs always feel the least noisy and crowded. I guess the thought of spending the day with dead men from the 16th century could have been a slight turnoff to most tourists. The sky over these gardens was uniquely vast. The city had too many narrow streets and towering apartments to ever get a good view of the sky, but the gardens of the tombs offered a rare horizon. When the sun was getting ready for the night, it would wash the sky a hazy yellow and disappear silently.

Nights in Hyderabad were a secret affair, passionate and dreamy. When most of the public retreated into their homes, the empty streets became sacred. Any unease twisted up in my heart would melt away instantly if I took a late-night scooter ride. The light from the streetlamps tinted everything and everyone a soft orange, and any unfamiliarity that tensed the air before was replaced by an intimate understanding. The smell of dust danced

with the warm wind to the tune of a happy child. Strangers in a nearby auto (auto-rickshaw) became friends if an '80s Hindi love song played from the auto's speakers. Hyderabad was so beautiful that its shortcomings didn't matter anymore. After all, it knew my deepest secrets, watched me stutter and cry, and loved me constantly. The city whispered some affectionate lullaby on those nights, making falling asleep easy too. 



WATER'S EDGE

by CAROLINE SITTER

Change : something we tell ourselves to escape the present.

present : something we hope will change in the future. something we neglect as we hope for the future.

future : if we keep using fossil fuels, aquatic life will die due to acid rain.

rain : i have always hated crying, even when i'm alone.

alone : i'll never cut an onion in public.

public : according to Greatist Magazine, here are seven tips to cut an onion without crying:

1. freeze it until it's numb
2. soak it in cold water (not as effective)
3. use a super sharp knife
4. microwave it until it nearly burns
5. lodge a piece of bread in your mouth (even when it's soggy)
6. wear goggles

7. plug the onion's wound with your cutting board to stop the bleeding

bleeding : a physical and emotional reason for people to feel miserable.

"There are two means of refuge from the miseries of life: music and cats."
Andrew Schweitzer

cats : they say cats have 9 lives ... they say lots of things.

"If you kill a black cat, you sacrifice your soul to the devil."
"If a cat sneezes three times, someone will catch a cold."
"Cats can suck the breath from sleeping children."
"Black cats protect fishermen at sea."

sea : different from seeing.

seeing : how many people would wait in line to see an aquarium for the souls of the dead?

dead : yellow-finned clusters and eels that spiral, the stingray flutters effortlessly - a different world trapped behind a shred of glass.

glass : something we rely on to keep us safe.

us : pollution affects everyone, on every scale.

scale : rat races and coral crawls, plucking daisies in protest to pushing, all in hopes to forget.

"Forgetfulness is a form of freedom."
Kahlil Gibran

freedom : something we all want.

want : synonymous with the root of suffering.

suffering : the precursor to laughter.

laughter : something you probably can't do when you're dead.

dead : death is bad because we don't understand it, forgetfulness is worse because we do.



do : the opposite of don't.

don't: important lessons learned from childhood:

1. don't step on the cracks, or you'll break your mother's back.
2. don't jump into water after you've eaten or you'll cramp up.
3. don't place the dishes directly into the dishwasher... let them soak first, then rinse the gunk away.

*"Sticks and stones can break your bones,
but words can never hurt you... unless you believe them.
Then, they can destroy you."*
Charles F. Glassman

you : a reference point we use to identify "me."

me : an abstract concept.

concept:

noun: concept; *plural noun:* concepts
1. an abstract idea; a general notion.

notion :

1. there is a Japanese art known as Kintsugi. the purpose of this tradition is to use a golden lacquer to repair broken pottery, making them more unique and beautiful than they were before. sometimes, I felt like this. sometimes, I didn't.
2. a word that rhymes with ocean

ocean : 70% of the Earth's surface is water.

water : water is both a solid and a liquid.

liquid : there are two main properties to a liquid:

1. liquids cannot be compressed, they are free flowing
2. liquids have volume, but no fixed shape

shape : something we rely on in order to create a sense of meaning in our world.

world : a place full of hatred.

hatred : one of seven deadly sins.

sin : a taboo way to have fun.

fun : the art of the pyromaniac.

"It was a pleasure to burn"
Ray Bradbury

burn : according to Urban Dictionary, "burn" can be defined in three ways:

1. slang: to disrespect someone (to diss); to make fun of someone; used by a third party after a first party makes fun of a second party. Brought back to life by the ever-popular *That 70's Show*.
2. slang: to smoke marijuana.
3. verb: to char or scorch something using fire.

fire : to be consumed in one catastrophic moment, silent but beautiful.

beautiful:

type 2 supernovae explosions are the most mesmerizing in space. their violence captivating seas of dark matter, living out the darkest, most secret stories deep in divots embedded in fabric brains. to float within fantasy, stuck between space and mind as opposed to forgotten time. Temporarily brighter than the rest of the galaxy, they live fast, and die young. much like water, much like the ocean, a sea of blue and red.

red : the color of 6 pomegranate seeds.

seeds : a way for men to gain control.

ctrl : + alt + z

z: a number. According to buzzfeed "staying up past 11 is super hard" when you're twenty six.

6: a letter for gibberish. a letter for failure, freaks, flowers, and Swedish fish.

fish : jelly fish have no brains, hearts, or eyes. they flow freely with the current.

current : cyclic. also synonymous with present. something we neglect in hopes that people will change.



JUNE 27, 2020:AURORA, CO

by CHLOE ANDREWS

“They are lucky that what Black people are looking for is equality and not revenge.”¹

It is not a coal train with the rickety, rusted metal and open roofs that is stopped before us. There are none of the familiar insignia on the beige carts, even with the graffiti forming little mountains of pinks and purples at the base of the car. The panels are almost transparent with the lines between the slats clear. All the cars are empty. Empty, hollow, and frozen on the tracks in the center of the road. The railway lights haven't stopped blinking, the little black and white gates dropped like the train isn't enough of a barrier. I think, is this legal? Can a train stop without an emergency in the middle of the highway? I see a man

1. Yashar Ali, “They Are Lucky That What Black People Are Looking for Is Equality and Not Revenge.” Pic.twitter.com/j1G6ZOe13G,” Twitter (Twitter, June 5, 2020), <https://twitter.com/yashar/status/1268933041864364032?lang=en>.

standing before the train, holding his bike and waiting in the summer heat rolling off the asphalt. Ten minutes, twenty-five. Standing completely still.

Not one of us is surprised when Lauren suggests that the blockage is intentional, the cops closing the road to the protest, just as it starts. We sit, watching as suburban cars with too clean paint pitch themselves over the median and escape the line of traffic. Four wheeling in the middle of a city. It's not about whether the cops truly prevented us from exercising our rights, but that none of us would argue that they wouldn't.

The train moves, over half an hour later, crawling down the tracks. The man with the bicycle cycles away, stillness to movement.



People pour over the sidewalks, waiting patiently for the lights to change, riddled with signs like ants carrying the cast-off crumbs of a picnic. People honk and cheer as they drive by, waving in recognition of "Justice," "the cops and the Klan go hand in hand," and "Elijah McClain." Elizabeth's horn is broken, but we wave as we circle the parking lots and fields, searching for parking where the cops won't slash her brand-new tires. We settle at a Family Dollar, retracing the white lines and moving cars until she selects a spot in the corner of the lot. We run in for candy and snacks because the sugar will push us through hours of standing. All I can think is that Family Dollars stock desperation on the shelves, packed between all the orange price tags. The kind that sinks through your pores and sticks to your ribs, perfectly compact in the shape of a dollar sign. There is so much wrong with a world where people who aren't broke college students need this, that the woman checking out before us asks the cashier for her total before placing an item on the counter. \$21.37. \$23.48.



We follow the signs, stepping across crosswalks, waiting patiently for the little white man to appear and give us permission to reach the other side. We follow the people with their boards dug from the recycling, embroidered with their handwriting,

*Not the tired,
exhausted hope
that's frayed at the
edges, but the kind
of stubborn hope
that refuses to
yield because they
will change the
world themselves,
even if it means
they have to pull
it apart with their
teeth.*

their time. Their devotion. His name follows us down every street, entire signs covered with his last words.² Elijah McClain. Red, black, and all of them echoing with the gasping memory of being unable to breathe while officers of peace, of the people, held him down for the color of his skin.³ It's a movement of the people, in a world where we boycott stores for justice, where reusing means something. There are high schoolers, standing on the stage, organizing all of us. Speaking of allies and their own lives. Of their world, their community. Their leader is young, a girl in mom jeans, and bold in the face of the injustice she's stared at all her life, telling us to stand up, because this is a protest, we're supposed to be uncomfortable.

I think, "I respect your rage." Other people whisper their awe and amazement because she just told off a crowd of adults. They are proud of her, though none of us know her personally. Someone else whispers that they would follow her anywhere as she leads us through the streets, chanting "Whose streets?" "Our streets." Because they belong to us, the people. Not the cops, not the government. Us. For a moment, stopping traffic feels like it reminds people of that. Abiding by laws is a choice, and even traffic signs can be disobeyed if there are enough of us. We kneel in traffic, circling in the center of the intersections with the teenagers in the middle, and yell his name until the neighborhoods hear us, until the cops and the city officials hear us. We march for blocks, walking between the carefully painted lines on the blacktop. We balance on the sidewalks, the medians, the yellow and white lines. The government is a government of the people, and laws only work if the people decide to listen. A Karen, a white supremacist, yells at us, and the high schoolers stop us all. They tell us that we are better, that there are things to be ignored and people like that are it. We are better than that.

We march down streets emptied of cars as a mass of bodies, standing in the middle of the street and rejecting the rule of law that tells us where we are allowed. Our physical presence empties

2. The Last Words of Elijah McClain: A Candlelight Vigil in Los Angeles by Black Women Lead, The Last Words of Elijah McClain: A Candlelight Vigil in Los Angeles by Black Women Lead (L.A. Taco, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOP1b9WCg4A>.

3. Rose Minutaglio, "Elijah McClain's Family Is Suing Colorado Police and Medical Officials," ELLE (ELLE, August 11, 2020), <https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a32959153/elijah-mcclain-last-words-bodycam-nathan-woodyard/>.



the streets, and it is amazing that the cops have not emptied them for us. And I am so ridiculously proud of these kids, though I am barely older than them, standing for what's right and speaking better than most of our elected officials. They are filled with rage but are filled with hope too. Not the tired, exhausted hope that's frayed at the edges, but the kind of stubborn hope that refuses to yield because they will change the world themselves, even if it means they have to pull it apart with their teeth. It burns, fills the megaphone and the echoes off the buildings.

We stop, kneeling in a circle around them, knees pressed against the asphalt where it digs into our knees, and scream. We shout and slap our hands against the cardboard signs, drumming noise from the depths of our bodies, and she turns in a circle. She looks at all of us, watching everyone follow her directions, standing for what is right. She must feel like the center of the universe, one filled with hope, and people willing to make it better.

We march back towards the capitol to the police headquarters. Lauren gets a text that the police are preparing to release a long-range, weaponized sound device. Ear plugs will not protect us. I feel insanely protective of the high schoolers, feel the need to put my body, my privilege between them and the people that clearly want to hurt them. They are kids, and I respect their rage. If I can use my body to keep them safe, I'm going to. It's irrational because they're not my kids. But I think it anyway, feel the need to defend these bright lights, this bravery with all five feet two inches of me.

An echo of a different protest years ago fills my head: "this is what democracy looks like."

The high schoolers get the message about cops preparing to use military grade weapons on their own citizens and encourage all the middle schoolers and high schoolers to leave. When we get close enough, it's obvious that these people are boiling with a rage built after years of staring at injustice and seeing nothing change, that they are ready to stand. They have ski goggles, helmets. Gas masks. I tighten the goggles around my own head, and stand among them, chanting until my voice cracks, and I keep screaming anyway. Until I feel my vocal cords breaking over the words, crackling around the edges. Elijah McClain. Over and over, to the cops that know his killers. They took those officers off the streets to protect them. Part of me wonders if that protects us too because this is a sea of anger. Righteous, but still

burning, and I know if we seek revenge, it's over. But we fill the trees and the sky with his name, reminding the cops dressed in military grade protectants that they cannot murder people and expect to walk away. To call their mothers. We stand before the police station, watching cops in full riot gear staring down at the unarmed protesters, chanting back at them. Watching them try to intimidate us into leaving. Every time they make a move, reaching for the canisters before them or the bright orange rifles, someone shouts, "hands up" and we reply, "don't shoot."⁴ Over and over, an entire crowd with hands in the air, shouting "don't shoot" to the people meant to protect us. Every time the cops try to tell us we're there unlawfully, we drown their words in our rage and disappointment, and the chanting only grows louder. Until my body is trembling with the force of my yelling and my throat is sore. I don't stop.

I think, "if you're going to tear gas me, go ahead, and I watch the kids in front of me, moving so they can shift farther back." Farther from the cops not wearing masks, and when they emerge with gas masks, we drop goggles over our eyes. They shoot off a false round and the protesters scatter, stepping back. Ready to run. And then we step back into formation. Waiting for them to truly begin shooting.

People tell us not to run, that we'll bottleneck and trample our own people. When the cops start advancing, they don't look like people. They look like insects, encased in black, bullet proof vests and double layered helmets. Lauren refuses to move, says she sat down, and we lose her in the crowd. She's there one moment, standing by the tree with her bright blue leggings, and swallowed by the crowd the next. We don't run. We walk, taking single jolting steps over the grass, always looking back for Lauren as the cops advance. But she's lost in the rush of people. The adrenaline races through our body until we're shaking. But we still stand before the violins because Elijah used to play for the kittens at the humane society. And now we're trying to make society humane, trying to remember someone as more than a hashtag, another name on an endless list. And so we stand, and

4. Marc Sallinger, "Aurora Police Came on the Loudspeaker Multiple Times to Tell People the Protest Was Declared an 'Unlawful Assembly.'" I Have Not Heard Any Correction #9News <https://t.co/ciRMoiGBM0>," Twitter (Twitter, June 28, 2020), <https://twitter.com/MarcSallinger/status/1277036849207422976>.



people tell us not to give the line, to protect the stage. Like we're at war.

I know what either tear gas or pepper spray tastes like, but I don't know which because they don't tell us what they sprayed.

There is a girl, running and sobbing through the crowd, in a white shirt, the letters BLM painted on the fabric, separated from her friend in the rush, and terrified. Not for herself, but for her friend, because of the cops. The medics circle her, trying to help her find her friends while she sobs.

Lauren texts back, saying she's burned and that we should bring water. When we find her through the crowds, her skin is covered in chalky a white powder, burning red underneath, from the medics. She gave her tear gas neutralizing spray to a man who got it in his eyes and couldn't see. Couldn't breathe.

The paper masks don't stop it from getting into your lungs. And Lauren wants to stay. So, we do, standing across from the cops. All five-foot-two of me against these people in full body armor, staring directly into their eyes. They won't look at me even as I take the smallest steps forward. I want them to see me. Their eyes are flickering over the crowds, never stopping long enough to really meet my eyes for more than a second. But they look at me as I barely blinking, and even when they look away, I know they can feel me staring. I know they can see me, hear the people around me laying their pain at the feet of the cops. To know I'm a person, that we're all people. Completely unarmed, in shorts and raincoats in case they gas us again. I lift my goggles to stare at them better. To watch their eyes.


They rotate the cops, moving them down the line to prevent them from getting too attached to the protesters. The second cop is visibly uncomfortable, shifting, moving his baton. Back and forth. Rocking on his feet. His face twitches, the muscles contracting, barely noticeable expressions rippling beneath his skin. Like he might be listening. I want to tell him that he's a person. That he has a choice in all of this. That "I was just following orders" has been an excuse used in too many atrocities. I just keep staring, waiting for the seconds he meets my eyes. I don't know if he can see me as a person, as an individual.

We watch the violins and cellos, the haunting rise of it, because we are here for Elijah. They play "Tis a Gift to be Simple," a song that I remember singing in second grade, and I don't know

*All five-foot-two
of me against these
people in full body
armor, staring di-
rectly into their
eyes.*

if anyone else knows the lyrics. But I do. Tis a gift to be free. Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be. And isn't this it?

A man interrupts the violins and talks about armed aggression. That it's legal to carry weapons in Aurora. That "this peaceful shit will get you killed." That the civil rights movement didn't come just because people marched. That revolutions are not always peaceful. He reminds us of history, of the thirteenth amendment, and being 3/5th of a person. He is jaded, and so certain that new laws won't save us until after his people are already dead. Because aren't there laws against killing? What does it do if you're already dead? "They should be grateful that we're seeking justice, instead of revenge," echoes in my head from earlier, from the teenager whose heart burns. And somewhere in his head, in seeing his own country vilify and damn him, there isn't a line between the two. And I know where I stand. They can tear gas me; they can shoot me. Attack their own people as we march on the government that belongs to us, but I'm not going to show up with a gun. I am a child of peace and that is not my way. I could not kill someone. I think, stupidly, of Batman, and how this system might be an absolute wreck, but it's what we have. I have to believe we can fix it, that by standing here, with my body as a physical barrier to stop traffic and my voice raised with hundreds of others, we can make something better. I do not agree with him, but I do not blame him either. He's spent his life so afraid, attacked by the institutions meant to protect him, that there is nothing but rage left.

This is my chance, our chance, to make this world better. We might not have made this system, but that doesn't mean it's not our job to fix it. 



CONTRIBUTORS

AUTHORS:

EMILY ANDERSON grew up outside Chicago, Illinois, and is currently a sophomore at CU Boulder. Originally eager to pursue Biology, her sophomore year writing class, WRTG 2020, reinstilled her passion for writing and was one of many factors that led to her changing her major to English this year. Aside from writing, her passions include drawing as well as playing the guitar and piano.

CHLOE ANDREWS is a senior studying Creative Writing, Philosophy, and Women and Gender Studies. She grew up in Breckenridge, Colorado and developed a love for the steading feeling of the outdoors, as well as a love for all things fantasy. She likes to joke that it comes from growing up in a place directly in the junction of fairytale and horror movie. Chloe is currently trying to figure out how to make a living in creative writing in a post-coronavirus world.

JAQ BRODY has been writing since the age of eleven and currently pursues a double major in Creative Writing and History from the University of Colorado Boulder. Their work has been featured in literary journals including Voice of Eve, Random Sample, and Light and Dark. Jaq typically focuses on LGBTQ themes and interpersonal relationships while making use of lyrical language. "Liner Notes from a Trans Kid" is dedicated to their brother, Sinjin, for contributing to a better world.

SRAVYA DHANWADA is a Biochemistry major with a heart that dabbles in the arts. She relives her memories and feelings through writing and occasional slam poetry (when she can find the courage). She is an EMT hoping to pursue a career in healthcare.

KELA FETTERS graduated from CU Boulder in December of 2020 with a degree in Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology. She is currently pursuing her dirtbag ambitions in the high country as a backcountry ski instructor. She can't keep away from the keyboard, and continues to write essays on topics of personal interest.

NATALIE FINAMORE is a CU senior studying International Affairs, French, and Political Science. She was born in Boulder and grew up in Louisville. She has studied in Dakar, Senegal and Edinburgh, Scotland, and loves traveling, dancing, cities, and staying up late. After she graduates, she hopes to disappear to Eastern Europe and Turkey for several months and get a little more experience in the wider world as she studies.

NATHANIEL HANKINS wrote "Dancing Clouds" to capture a transition from uncertainty in chaos to peace through a long drive.

CHRISTEN MALLOY is a student at the University of Colorado Boulder finishing a degree in Computer Science with a minor in Mathematics. She is a poet, author, programmer, musician, and avid cyclist.

SHANNON ROSS is a senior at CU Boulder, where she studies Environmental History and Evolutionary Biology/Ecology. She began to farm during a year off in order to find a cheap place to live and has been playing in the soil with plants every summer since.

CAROLINE SITTER is entering her senior year at CU Boulder, majoring in English and minoring in Film Studies. She was born with a statistical anomaly known as microtia; in other words, she is half deaf. As writing has been a great source of pleasure in her life, she often finds herself using writing to explore her relationship with the physical world through sensations and emotion, while pushing herself to paint new, abstract perspectives on the world around us.

GRACE SMITH is a CU Boulder alum who graduated with a degree in History. She spent her undergraduate career writing in her journal about the ups and downs of being a college student and began publishing some of her work via Her Campus Media. After graduating with the class of 2020, Grace began to freelance more of her writing and hopes that one day writing will be her full-time job. This piece is dedicated to her 18/19 year old self who so desperately needed to know that the bus would eventually take her home.

CHAD TANNOUS is a senior at CU Boulder studying PR and English. He is the Vice President of CU's Psychedelic Club, and the chapter president of CU's Students for Sensible Drug Policy chapter. He is currently writing and self-publishing a thesis that examines the correlation between prohibition and rape culture.

KELLY VANDEKOPPEL is a junior studying Molecular Biology at CU Boulder. She wrote her personal essay "Uncertain Future" in a Creative Nonfiction class she took this fall. This is her first time submitting to a journal.

PATRICK YEHLE is not often a writer of nonfiction storytelling and stays more in the territory of argumentative essays. However, he had such a blast writing "The Rock Public" and considers it some of his best work.



CONTRIBUTORS

ARTISTS:

CALLIE KEATING is a freshman at CU studying Business with a minor in Art Practices. Callie has been exploring photography and digital media since she ran her first editing Instagram account in the sixth grade. She fell in love with photography because of the way it can capture a single moment and isolate it from time. She likes to use this ability, along with Photoshop, to create surreal images that make the viewer question the photograph. She hopes that whatever she ends up doing in the future will involve both her business degree and her creative skills.

ADLER SHANNON is a senior at CU studying Media Production and History with a minor in Anthropology. Born and raised in an incredibly diverse area of central Florida, Adler's work focuses primarily on unseen and underrepresented beauty in his local communities. Adler shifts between photography and film as his primary artistic medium, with a recent ethnographic focus on the Nepali community of Golden, Colorado. Going into the future, Adler hopes to attend grad school for an MFA in film direction and screenwriting.

JASEY CHANDERS is a freshman at CU Boulder double majoring in Computer Science and Creative Technology and Design. A passionate designer and creator, she is happiest when diving into a new project. Whether it's painting unique bird artwork, writing code, starting businesses or volunteering, she loves turning ideas into reality. She has been drawing and painting birds since 2015 and has developed a style involving a mix of watercolor, acrylic and ink to capture the avian world around her. She's always loved the complexity of the faces of raptors and finds painting them to be a powerful way to appreciate the beauty of our fellow creatures.

AIDAN JONES is a sophomore majoring in Strategic Communication with a focus on Media Design. About six years ago he enrolled in a digital art & design class which sparked his curiosity for all things design. Starting with logos and graphic design pieces for clients, he later fell in love with photography and began incorporating it into his art. More dedicated than ever before, he strives to create a portfolio that displays his photography, videography, graphic design and personal art. Always experimenting with new forms of media, Aidan's main focus is to capture the world how he sees it.

BECKY HARKIN was born in Hoffman Estates, Illinois, and spent the majority of her childhood in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. She began her studies at the University of Colorado Boulder where she is double majoring in Sociology and Studio Art. Her art emphasis is split between painting and drawing, as well as the digital arts. Harkin's piece, *Garden of Quarantine*, was created in the initial lockdown of April 2020. This pen and ink piece arranges a series of self-portraits describing the various emotions and fears people face when forced to look within.

JORDAN ECKES is a graduate of English Literature at the University of Colorado Boulder. Storytelling is her passion, and she has long been pushing herself to discover all the ways that one could tell a story. That's when she stumbled upon the camera. Her challenge is always this: to try to capture the exact feeling of a certain moment in her photos, so when you look back on it you feel that same exact way. When she isn't diving into photography, she is skiing the back bowls of the Rocky Mountains on the weekends.

ROB BALSEWICH is a senior at CU Boulder studying Studio Arts and Psychology. When he's not playing the drums in a live band, Rob makes art about color, multisensory experience, and self-portraiture, among other things. Rob most often works with acrylic, graphite, light, and digital mediums.

ALEX POSEN is a senior studying Geography and GIS at CU. He grew up in the mountains of Colorado where he found photography was the perfect hobby to accompany his outdoor adventures. Alex is passionate about the intersection of art and technology, using one to enhance the other. In the spirit of this fusion, he used a drone to capture the fall scene depicted in his photograph.

HAILEY CADE is a double major in Environmental Studies and Studio Art, discovering knowledge throughout her college journey that she transforms into expressive artwork representing these two lifelong passions. She is inspired heavily by contemporary sculptures, the environmental art movement, and American traditional tattooing. Ultimately, her artwork expresses problems from environmental epidemics such as societal inequities, anthropogenic pollution, and ecological degradation.

CLAYTON MONTGOMERY is a senior at CU Boulder studying Creative Writing. He's from the small Colorado mountain town of Basalt, where he grew up skiing, snowboarding, hiking, and camping. Photography has always been one of his favorite ways to exercise his creativity, whether it be with his film camera or simply his phone. Clayton is excited to continue building his portfolio of photography and writing once he graduates. He hopes to publish both a novel and a book of his photographs one day.

