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R2: THE RICE REVIEW
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RICE REVIEW



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LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

It's been a great year here at R2! At the start of the year, our annual Open Mic Night showcased amazing student performers. Later in the fall, we were lucky enough to speak with writers Victoriano Cárdenas, Andrew Porter, and Aris Kian Brown; you can find these conversations printed in this edition. In the spring, we were thrilled to receive 406 written and visual art submissions, the most any of us editors have seen in our time with R2. Thank you to everyone who submitted, and we hope you, dear reader, will consider sending us your work when submissions open in the winter. And now, some words from our editors:

MCKENNA TANNER

Dear reader,

I feel especially lucky to be writing this letter. This year is my fourth year with R2, and my second time being an editor-in-chief of R2. When I first joined the magazine, I thought that by my senior year, I'd have it all figured out. Of course, I was wrong. While I now know more than I ever thought I needed to about Submittable and InDesign, each year with R2 is an opportunity to learn from the people who make this magazine happen, and this year has been no different.

Through our contributors, both writers and artists, I've discovered new conversations about relationships, connection, and how these bonds become embodied within us. Our contributors this year are interested in the body in context: what shapes it, warps it, hurts it, heals it, and what we do with these changes. The pieces in this edition explore how connection becomes action—or, at times, inaction—and help us understand the consequences. Diving deep into family history ("My Mother's Family"), looking at the countless ways a conversation can go wrong ("What Are We Going to Do About Mom?"), finding the divine in the smallest moments ("Angel of the Lord Triptych"): this edition offers many paths to consider these questions, and I hope you'll try them all.

From the R2 staff, I've learned new ways to read. Each week's conversations, with all three of R2's sections, introduced me to perspectives on our submissions I'd never known to take, and gave me the gift of a stronger connection to each piece. These meetings challenged me to read closer, think deeper, and to

better understand the opinions of myself and others. I will always be grateful for this.

From Ariana and Katherine, my fellow editors-in-chief, I've learned to be a better editor. Thank you for your courage, passion, and wizard-like knowledge of Google Sheets organization. R2 has been so lucky to have your leadership, and I've been very lucky to work with both of you.

And with that, we give you the 2024 edition of R2: may it inspire and excite you as much as it has us.

Gratefully,



ARIANA WANG

Hi Reader!

R2 was the class that solidified my love for writing and reading. When I was a staffer, my assignment for each piece was to read it and write down my favorite quotes in a journal. My journal soon became filled with my own wonder. I cried, laughed, and fell in love as I dug deeper into the slush pile. Even if I will never meet some of the authors, I felt that my connection to them, which started as just going to the same school, found new depth and enriched my sense of community.

This edition in particular challenged my understanding of space in the text. When I first came to Rice, I was close-minded to experimenting with shape, having only mostly read prose in chapter books. But this year, several of our published prose and poetry pieces played with vertical and horizontal spacing. I found these pieces to change how I read, from the tempo speeding up with squished words in a line to a quieter voice whispering the text that was aligned to the right. Every weekly discussion for these pieces introduced new and exciting techniques from Rice students, showing how even undergraduate writing can be innovative.

Thank you to my lovely Editors-in-Chiefs, McKenna and Katherine, for all the late Monday night texting and PowerPoints made. Thank you to our supervisor Ian for finally responding to my emails this year and a never faltering smile. Thank you to our staffers and section editors for all the enthusiastic discussion and praise for the snacks and dessert that I picked out for the weekly meetings. Thank you to our lovely

submitters for letting us into your world. And thank you dear reader, for picking up a copy and reading the culmination of a year's labor.

Tag, you're it!



KATHERINE JENG

To whom it may concern,

Being a part of R2 has been the single most rewarding experience of my time here at Rice University. As a past poetry staffer and section editor, I have learned the power of poetry and the limitless definitions of "good poetry". This year, as an editor-in-chief, to be able to see the love, care, and attention-to-detail that the editorial team of R2 puts in behind the scenes has been truly inspiring.

To my fellow editors-in-chief, McKenna and Ariana, I feel incredibly honored to have your mentorship and friendship. Your unique perspectives and experiences made our EIC team a joy to work with and a foundation of support I often relied upon. With your graduation, Rice and R2 have suffered a great loss of wonderful talent, but I hope to build upon the work we've started next year.

To our contributors, I remain continuously amazed that such a small campus can have such an abundance of great talent. Thank you for entrusting us with your work, and I sincerely hope we have done it justice.

Lastly, to you, our readers: this selection of work presented before you is a testament to the dedication of our staffers and section editors. Where you may see a finished magazine, I see hours of passionate debates and careful thought placed in every piece, art, and layout. As you flip through these pages, know that this magazine represents a year's worth of work, culminating in something we're proud to show you and the greater Rice community. We hope you enjoy reading this edition as much as we did making it.

Poetically and literally yours,



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INDONESIAN LUNGS

JACKIE WU

CW: disordered eating, talk of weight and body image

I. Indonesian Lungs

Monalisa Boutique, Building 166 on KH. Zainul Arifin, is a forty-four minute car ride away from Kualanamu International Airport, which comes immediately after twenty-two hours of squealing babies and stale airplane oxygen. Pyramids of trash bags line the streets, but within two blocks of the boutique, the cracked pavement blossoms into bakeries and salons and apartments. And in front of the boutique's entrance are a familiar bitterness and a cloud of carcinogens; threads of cigarette smoke and the sound of laughter. I see my uncle step out the door of his mother's business, waving toward us as a cigarette slips loosely between his fingers. My mother turns to me, "Hold your breath," she says, and I realize only in the heart of Medan am I more often holding my breath than breathing. My father steps out of the car, and my uncle passes him his

cigarette.

My father smokes, but only in Indonesia.

My father never talks about Indonesia. When I asked him to teach me his native language of Bahasa Indonesian, he laughed, "When will you ever use it?" After all, we only speak Cantonese, a dialect of my mother's home village and pray to Chinese ancestors. Four generations ago, my father's ancestors immigrated from mainland China to Indonesia; in those four generations, they only married other Chinese-Indonesians, gave birth to more Chinese-Indonesian children, and lived among the other seven million ethnic Chinese people in Indonesia. Now, a New Jersey resident, he is more Chinese than Indonesian and more American than Chinese. He's been in America for twenty years, long enough to celebrate football games with beer and potato chips. And his sternness is almost always Chinese. *Sai wun*, he says in Cantonese, shedding his native language for my mother's. *Wash the dishes*.

Only his anger is Indonesian. It is only when he leaps into rapid-fire Bahasa, screaming and smacking his hand on the countertop, that I remember his heritage. *Adu mah*, he exclaimed when he threatened

to disown my sister, and although I've listened to the phrase for twenty years, I've never learned its true translation. The phrase must mean something so horrible, must consist of pure fury, that he'll dust off years of its disuse in rage. *Adu mah*, he yelled after I told him I was going to school in Texas. He apologized right before I left, or acted the most apologetic he could muster. *Hou hou hok jaap*, he said at the airport, switching to Cantonese, *study well*.

The few remnants of his heritage are occasional trips to Indonesia, which he only plans if plane tickets are cheap. As we wait to board the plane to Kualanamu International Airport, I stare up at my father's face. Looking at his dark eyes and spiky black hair, a stranger might call him Chinese—and perhaps, they would be right.

"I'm not Indonesian," he says.

"Chinese?"

He shakes his head again. "No, I'm American."

But, of his few Indonesian traits, my father is most Indonesian when he smokes.

When we stay in my grandmother's house in Medan, my mother, sisters, and I spend all of our time together—we present a united front as the only Americans in my father's family. My mother speaks in her native tongue of Cantonese, and we answer in English. The entire house echoes with our foreignness, serving as another reminder that although we are family, we are also outsiders. I wonder if to be Indonesian is to speak the language, to be woken up every morning by your mother knocking on your door and whispering *selamat pagi*, to be born and raised and spoken to by Indonesian parents and grandparents and siblings.

While we stay in our room, my father sits outside with our uncles and their friends. Each of them dons worn-out sandals or forgoes shoes completely, the soles of their feet blackened with dirt and concrete dust. Some of the men squat because it's easier to smash their cigarette butts onto the pavement. Others, including my father, lean against the walls while exhaling ribbons of smoke into each other's lungs. A filigree of ash decorates the concrete beneath them, piling up higher and higher as they spit and laugh and argue. They all

have dark eyes and spiky black hair, and they are never more Indonesian than now. My father has spoken more Bahasa in thirty minutes than in the past six years, and he breathes in the nicotine easily as if he had never quit in the first place. He switches between English and Bahasa, sobriety and smoking, fluently with no accent or hesitation at all.

When he returns to our room, he leans down to kiss my cheek. I hold my breath and push him away, squealing.

My father simply laughs. "It's worse not to smoke when others are smoking," he explains. He rinses his mouth with water in the bathroom, spitting out yellow saliva.

Indonesia is one of the most multilingual countries in the world. Like his birth country, my father speaks a multitude of languages—Bahasa, Cantonese, English, Malay, and Hokkien. In America, he is American; in Indonesia, he is Indonesian. He swaps identities as easily as he can tongues to camouflage himself. He is a man of many identities, just as he is a man of none.

I sometimes introduce myself as Indonesian, although I always clarify after, "My father's from Indonesia, but he's Chinese." I look downcast, shrug my shoulders as if I'm embarrassed to be caught in a lie.

"Do you think I'm Indonesian?" I ask.

"No," my father replies, "because I'm not either."

II. The Lifespan of a Breath

"I am the line between life and death," my father once told me.

When a patient needs to be intubated, they are usually on the brink of death. The muscles in their mouths are relaxed, and they might even swallow their tongue. This is where my father comes in—he takes the remnants of a breath, and elongates its lifespan.

**HE IS A MAN OF
MANY IDENTITIES,
JUST AS HE IS A MAN
OF NONE.**

The first step in intubation is opening the patient's mouth. He positions the patient on their back, and he faces their feet. He opens their mouth. In the second step, he lifts the tongue out of the way. "The tongue is a muscle," he told me, "so it'll be relaxed as the patient is dying." He inserts a laryngoscope into the patient's mouth. The laryngoscope looks like a large blade, nestled deep into their throat to help my father look into their airway. Then, when he sees the epiglottis—beneath the tongue at the back of the throat—he puts an artificial airway into the opening of the larynx.

"When you see death like me, you get used to it," he said. "I put my emotions away." I imagine picking apart his brain; it's a collection of rooms, each dedicated to a different category of his thoughts. Welcome to the Father Room, which contains everything he knows from the time my older sister was born to now. If we continue past the Childhood Room and the Career Room, we'll reach the Emotion Room. Step carefully, or his fear of heights will cling onto you the next time you stare over a ledge.

My father—Indonesian and American, or American and Chinese—is a man of two faces: a liar. In the first few months of the pandemic, both of us haunted by insomnia, he would scroll through the news in the middle of the night and point out strangers to me. "He was from New Jersey too, you know. Only fifty years old," he said, pointing to a man who had died.

COVID patients had stiff lungs, the insides of the tissue coated with layers of mucus. "They can't breathe," my father told me. "They need a lot of oxygen." He would insert a tube into their throats, the artificial airway replacing their failing ones; when their breaths disappeared, my father became their lungs.

Decades before his career in giving breath, he would stand in the Indonesian sun, flicking cigarette ash from his fingertips. In America, the patient on the bed could be his brother. Their lungs, blackened from nicotine, from addiction, from the Indonesian air, have hardened into stone as my father opens their slackened jaw. Does a laryngoscope look like a cigarette to my father as he pushes it down their throat? Does he handle the blade-like tool the same way as a cigarette, the weapon he placed between his teeth when he was in Indonesia?

Perhaps, since he understands the value of a breath, he isn't Indonesian. Or perhaps, he knows the value

of a breath *because* he is Indonesian.

"We thought it was best to breathe for them, these COVID patients," my father said, four years after the onset of the pandemic, "But apparently it was the wrong choice." Most COVID patients that required intubation died.

III. Seattle

"Hey! Long time no see!" Dimitrius steps out of the car. His shoulders no longer slump downward the way they used to, no longer hunched forward for the ground to swallow him whole.

I step closer to him, not quite sure how to greet him. "Thanks for picking me up," I say. I wrap an arm around his torso and, sensing his surprise, I quickly step back.

Dimitrius is taller now. When I saw him last, when I was fourteen and he was sixteen, we could face each other eye to eye. Ten inches in height and eight years of silence now between us, he towers over me. Although his dark eyes and spiky black hair haven't changed, his cheekbones seem to have grown sharper—or his cheeks thinner—much like he has hardened over the years.

"I'm glad to finally have family near me—"

"Only for three months though," I cut in.

"More like two, actually. I'm going back to Indonesia for a bit," he says, swinging open his car door. He ignites the engine, and the car sputters awake. "I haven't seen the family in three years, ever since I came to Seattle for college."

I imagine being my cousin, stepping off the plane and embracing the immediate blast of humidity in Medan. The heaviness of the air is a mix of cigarette smoke, warm condensation, and the weight of nostalgia, and he feels it on his skin. He marvels at how missing his country, how losing the past three years of home, is somehow more weight than loss. He drags his luggage behind him and meets his mother at the entrance of Kualanamu International Airport. *Selamat datang di rumah*, she says. *Welcome home*.

“You hungry? I heard that there’s this good poke place close to where I live,” Dimitrius suggests. “Apparently the owners are Indonesian, so they give a discount to anyone who’s Indonesian.” He pauses for me to answer, but noticing my silence, punches something into his GPS.

“I’m not really Indonesian though,” I reply, hesitating.

“Really? Well, I’m sure you can just say something in Indonesian and they’d believe you,” Dimitrius laughs. “Here, try saying something—*selamat siang*. That should be easy enough.”

Selamat siang selamat siang selamat siang.

To the American eye, our narrow eyes and tanned yellow skin are proof enough that Dimitrius and I could be siblings. To a closer eye, I couldn’t feel further from my Indonesian cousin. Although we are both Chinese, only he is Indonesian. Only he can speak Bahasa fluently with restaurant owners, only he was born in Indonesia, and only he has an Indonesian father. Instead, I sit in the passenger seat and whisper *selamat siang selamat siang selamat siang* without understanding. And then I think: if my father were Indonesian, then perhaps I could have been as well. *Selamat siang selamat siang selamat siang.*

College, it turned out, was not the time to worry about COVID.

I entered college at the height of the pandemic, with the memory of my father—a tired respiratory therapist—haunted by the climbing numbers of COVID-related deaths. However, within two years, I gained twenty pounds from excessive drinking and the absence of my father’s nutritional, home-cooked meals. In my first semester, I had broken down into tears on the phone with my father. *There’s something wrong with me*, I wailed.

Adu mah, my father muttered, when I returned home from college.

Now, two years after I started college, I lost fifteen pounds within the last two months in Seattle. When I stared at my frame in the mirror, my fingers traced my ribcage—a ritual so familiar that the skin above my stomach was stained purple from the indentation of my hand. In a way, little had changed between two years ago and now.

Dimitrius pulls into a parking lot, reversing perfectly between two empty spots. The “OPEN” sign on the restaurant door crackles with half-broken neon lights, and webs of cracks and potholes trace the pavement leading up to the door. As he locks his car, I realize that we are the only ones in the parking lot. “I’ve heard good reviews,” he reassures me.

We head inside the restaurant. “*Selamat siang!*” Dimitrius exclaims.

Two Asian women stand behind the poke bar. Their mouth widens into a deep grin, “*Selamat siang!* You are Indonesian?” they ask. Their eyes travel up and down our bodies, trying to identify our Indonesianness.

Unsure of what to say, I stay silent. Any remnant of *selamat siang* evaporates in my throat.

Dimitrius steps forward, speaking in a tongue that I infer to be Bahasa. Even after years of living with my father, I never learned how to recognize the language. He pulls out his wallet and pays at this register. *Ten percent discount*, he mouths at me, winking.

“Just wait till we go to a Cantonese restaurant,” I laugh.

“So, how have you been? It’s really been so long—what, eight years?”

When I last saw him, he was still baby-faced, a child in Indonesia. Eight years later, both of us have left our homes—him much further away than I. Both of our faces are now gaunt, chiseled by time and a longing for home. I want to ask him how he could bear it. I have been dissolving from the weight of independence, even though I am much less of a foreigner than him.

Instead, I say, “Yeah, I’m fine, just nervous about being in a new city.” I look away through the window.

“I’m going to a party at my university tonight, if you want to join. Thought you might want to meet some new people in the area,” he suggests.

The party that Dimitrius invites me to turns out to be a flop. When we enter the dorm, we see five people scattered around the room, three of whom are Dimitrius’ housemates—“They’re also Indonesian,” he mentions—and the hosts of the party. They toss a crumpled piece of paper to each other in the darkness,

their faces casting blue shadows from the LED lights on the walls. “It didn’t start yet,” he explains, noticing my discomfort.

“Yo, you’re finally back, Dim! And this is your cousin?” Dimitrius’ housemate stands up and gestures toward me. The blue lights mask his tan skin, but I observe his matted black hair and the slight foreign accent to his otherwise perfect English, much like my cousin’s.

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, HE IS BREATHING LIFE INTO SOMEONE’S STIFFENED LUNGS, HIS OWN LUNGS HEAVING FROM THE ADRENALINE.

They chat for a few more moments before we move outside to the garden behind their room. They squat to the ground, chatting and chuckling in a mixture of English and Bahasa. When Dimitrius excuses himself to quickly go to the bathroom, I am left standing rigidly beside them, too unsure to lower myself down closer to them.

One of them pulls out a pack of cigarettes. A flame flickers in his right hand, and he holds a cigarette between his teeth. He brings the flame to the tip of the cigarette, then exhales.

Hearing my stifled cough and remembering my presence, he holds the pack of cigarettes out to me.
“Want one?”

I hesitate.

My father smokes, but only in Indonesia. He is a foreigner until he exhales his share of nicotine and, only then, they remember that he is one of them.

“Come on, dude, it’s not that serious. You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” he says.

I reach over and grab a cigarette.

Dimitrius returns and notices the cigarette in my fingers. “I’ll have one too,” he says. He lights a cigarette, leaning his back against the wall. He stretches his hand out to me, the lighter in his palm.

I wonder if my father would smoke here. Across the country, he is breathing life into someone’s stiffened lungs, his own lungs heaving from the adrenaline. Years ago, I caught him sitting on the stairs outside our front door. It was the first time I saw him smoking in America. “Don’t tell your mom,” he chuckled, crumpling the cigarette beneath his sandal. “Sometimes, I miss home,” he sighed, looking past me, past the oceans and decades between himself and Indonesia.

I put the cigarette between my teeth. I never feel more foreign.



FAMILY PATCHWORK

CAL MASCARDO

MOTHER TONGUES

LAJWARD ZAHRA

Mohenjo Daro and Harappa were lost
one to flood and one to flame
loss is not new to the Indus
neither is disappearance from decay
decay from disuse might be new but I
collect my coins in my coat pocket
paid for by Urdu and another
ghazal gone and another
mother's mother's name lost
another element exponentially
decaying each generation is
another half-life and
my children's birthright drips
down diluted in DNA unwoven
by the violence of assimilation
the destruction of instinct
and you can count on people
gift salt for those wounds
but is there any fitting
eulogy for the visceral
loss of the rhythm I
recognized from
the womb
misplaced my mother
tongue bitten off
replaced with
half-formed phrases
forming

awkwardly in my
mouth
unsaid, clunking
uselessly down
my throat
a tumor that
makes it hard
to swallow
that my favorite
things have
become
foreign to
me



INTERSECTIONS
CAL MASCARDO



TIGER BALM BEFORE THE SHOW

RIYA MISRA

Take care with application.

Don't mistake freckled limbs for a sign of compassion,
and apply gently.

Don't mistake seized muscles for a sign of strength,
and apply sparingly.

Penché

and up.

Rub vigorously between the cracks of the knees,
and temples,
and sternum,

knead into the arches,
between the breasts,
knock on the bones like a mother's welcome.

Lovingly paw the bruises,
lap a rasping tongue at the sweat,
cup a heel,
a broken nail.

Ice, please.

Balance

and up.

Overuse paints a red rash that won't fade,
that begs scratches,
peeling away bandages,
and tape

and layers of hydrogen peroxide
soaked cotton pads to scratch down
through the layers
of scarlet skin
to the bone.

Pas de cheval

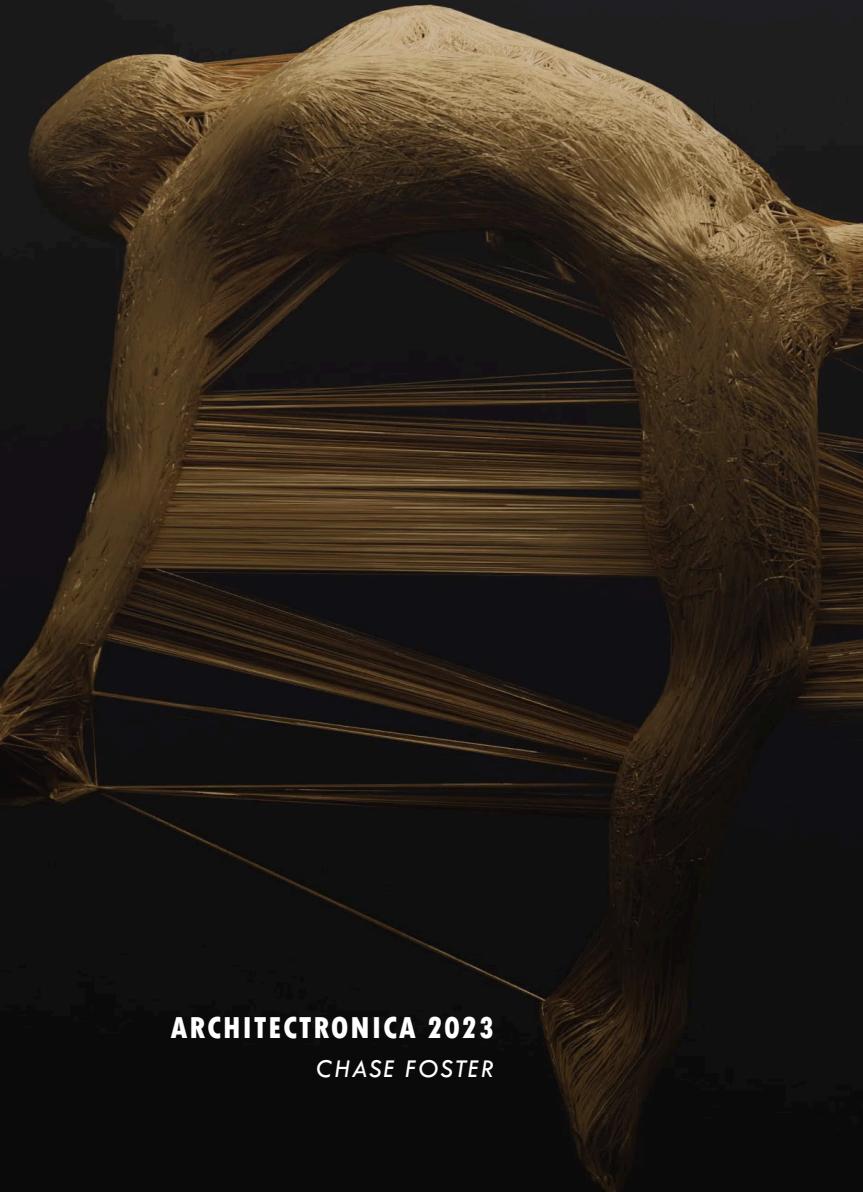
and up.

Dip a hand in and apply to the affected areas.
use slow,

 circular,
 motions on the muscle,
 inhale skin,
 sweat,
 curl into your lungs.

Hold it

and rest.



ARCHITECTRONICA 2023
CHASE FOSTER



EMERGENCY SURGERY

LILIANA ABRAMSON

17



SOON

CATHERINE ZHOU

VISUAL ART 18

ACORNS

ALLISON HE

CW: child abuse

Five acorns

I have a drawer full of acorns that I count every night. I scoop them into my palm and roll them between my fingers, catching their little grooves and dents, their flat chunks digging into my nails. I tell Mrs. Lawry that I counted five acorns yesterday before Meggie came into my bedroom and counted with me just to make sure. I tell Mrs. Lawry that five is a big number, even greater than nine, which is how old I am, because five means that I can go on the swings after school and feel the brush of air swiping across my cheeks with every kick of my legs. I like swings, I tell Mrs. Lawry. I don't feel like I'm tied to anything when I'm going up and down in the air and there's that swooping feeling in my belly, like how the sparrows might feel when they are playing with each other in the sky.

Mrs. Lawry looks at me funny, one eye squinted a little higher than the other, and she asks who Meggie might be.

"She's my mom," I say. "But she likes to be called Meggie, not 'Mom' or 'Mommy,' like I hear Peter call his mom when she drops off his turkey and avocado sandwiches, because then Meggie will take an acorn away from my drawer, and then I'll only have four."

Four acorns

Meggie makes instant mashed potatoes for supper and bangs the stirring

BABY'S BREATH
TESSA DOMSKY



spoon on the pot so hard that I shiver to the rhythm of the rattle. She hands the mashed potatoes to me, along with the spoon that she used to stir them, and then she smiles and sits across from me with a thick packet of paperwork in her lap. I bring spoonfuls to my mouth, seal my lips on the spoon, taste the metal as it leaves my tongue, and repeat. She leafs through the papers, and I watch her eyes move left-right-left-right across the page. I bring the plate to my face and lick the remnants of mashed potato clean off, like it was never there, then pat a napkin against my mouth, seeking every dip and crevice and layer of skin, and once I fold it and place it down on the table, the sound of rustling paper is gone. Meggie stands up so carefully that the chair behind her doesn't screech across the tile. She takes my plate and spoon for me.

"How was it?" she asks.

"Good," I reply.

Meggie falters. "There's still food on this," she says, looking at my spoon.

"I can clean it now," I say. But my voice is small. She smiles when she shakes her head. That night, I count four acorns and say goodbye to the swings.

Three acorns

Meggie is showering when her phone starts ringing. I hold it in both my hands with my nails far, far away to avoid scratches on its blinking surface. I reach the bathroom where Meggie is showering and hear the rush of water on the walls. When the phone stops ringing, I stop moving, like we are one unit. The rush of water stops, too, and Meggie comes out of the shower in a towel to see me standing there with my arm stretched out and my palm flat, holding the phone.

"What's this?" she asks.

"The phone was ringing and I tried to bring it to you but now it's stopped ringing. I'm sorry. Meggie, I'm sorry."

She's smiling so wide that her cheeks twist and her skin looks very white. "How many times has this

happened?"

I shake my head. *I don't know. I don't know.*

"You have one job, and that's to bring it to me. *One job.* You can't even do it properly." She laughs. "I don't know why I keep you around, honestly."

Meggie doesn't let me answer. She tells me to go to my room and sit on my bed. Even while my ears are pressed against the pillows, I can hear the click of the lock as it turns into place on my door.

I thought there was something kind of silly about how Meggie locks my door because one time in homeroom English class, David said that when he gets home, he always locks the door to his room so that his parents can't bother him when he is playing *The Crescent*.

"Isn't it the other way around?" I asked him.

He glanced at me sideways. "Huh?"

I felt my neck flushing red. I wasn't very good at explaining things. "I mean, aren't your parents the ones who are supposed to lock your door?"

David squinted at me and sneered. "I think you've got it mixed up. You should go check your door when you get home," he said. Everyone laughed.

I did check my door. I tried to see if there was a secret lock compartment, so I pushed and pulled and tapped different rhythms like they do in the movies, but nothing happened.

Two acorns

Mrs. Lawry calls Meggie in for a parent-teacher conference, and at first I hope I've done something

wonderful like score high on my multiplication tables, but when Meggie returns home and shuts the door without looking back, I know that it's not about the multiplication tables.

"Mrs. Lawry told me something interesting today." Meggie shrugs her purse off her shoulder. "She said that she's worried about you. You don't really talk to anyone in school. You don't say anything in class. You barely exist."

I stare at the folds of the carpet, saying nothing.

"What? Aren't you going to speak?"

"They think that I'm weird because I don't play with them. You said not to...unless I have five acorns."

"I suppose it's my fault then, that you don't speak."

I nod without really thinking about nodding. It's a small nod, but Meggie catches it before I can will myself to stop. She stiffens.

"I don't want you to make trouble for anyone, but that doesn't mean you can't *speak*," she says.

Later that night, when I count two acorns, I can't help but remember that Meggie wasn't always like this. Meggie used to bring me to the flea market with her, where she would lay out her nature crafts and ask me to get the attention of people walking by.

"Do you like acorns?" I would ask, or, "Ever wanted a dreamcatcher made out of leaves?" People would smile, and even if they didn't end up buying one of Meggie's nature crafts, they would still stop by to listen.

That was a long time ago, when I was five and Daddy would join us at our stand. He was always the best at talking to people who were interested in Meggie's nature crafts. Meggie would get mad easily and scowl at people when they said numbers that were too low. Daddy would always stay calm and respond with another number that made people nod.

I miss Daddy a lot. I miss the way he held me against his cheek while we watched cartoons. I don't tell Meggie any of this. I did once, and she took out all five of the acorns in my drawer, clutching them in her palm and throwing them over the backyard fence until there was only one left.

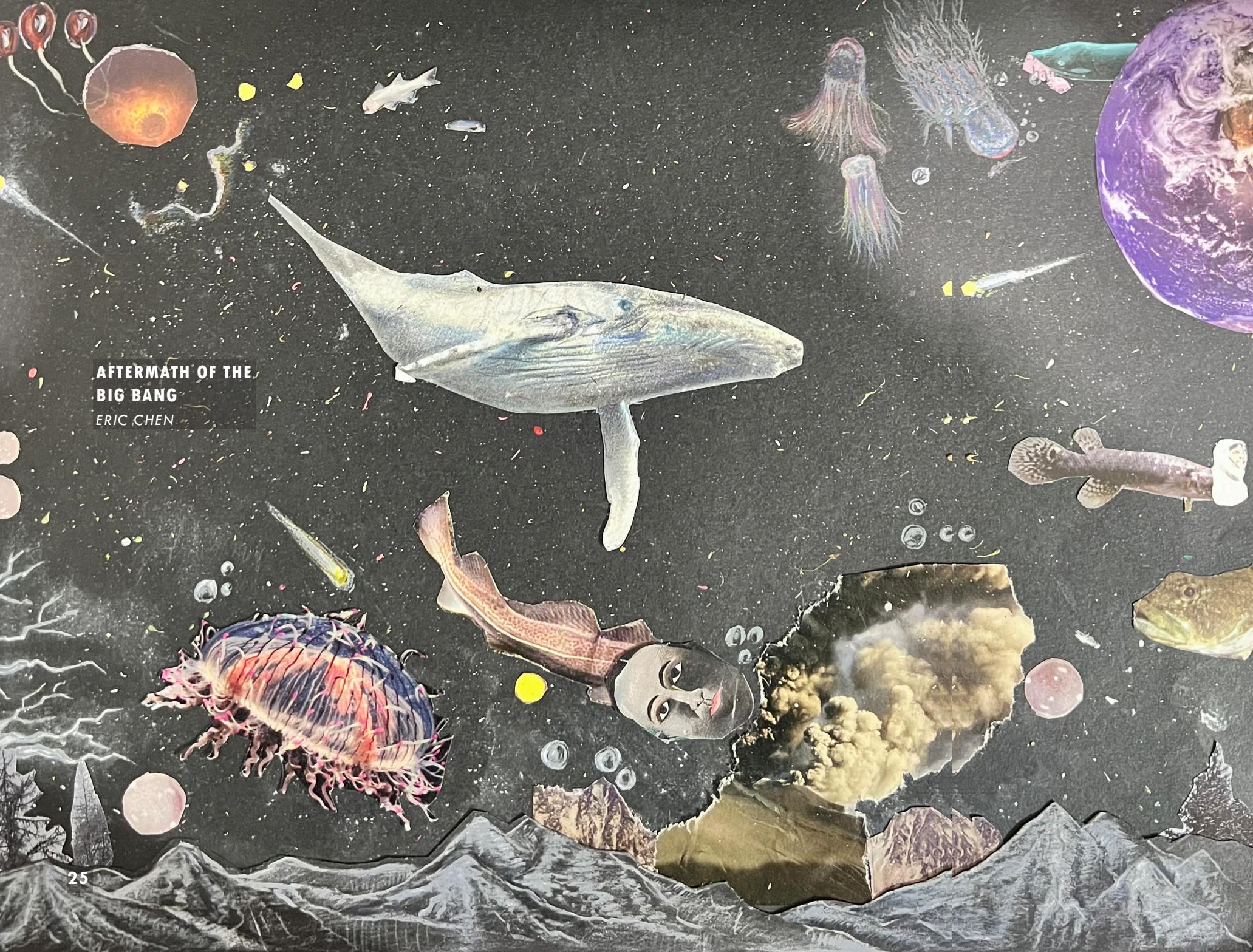
Meggie said that Daddy left because he caused too much trouble. He left his jeans piled up on the living room carpet. He forgot to wash the dishes too often. He smacked his food loudly and didn't even finish it. This is all according to Meggie, but I don't remember any of it bothering me. I miss Daddy.

One acorn

Meggie sees the wet tears on my cheeks that night and takes away another acorn, so that I have just one. I have to be good after this, to stop upsetting Meggie because that's all I ever seem to do. I have to be good to avoid being out in the backyard like this, which Meggie said would happen if I got down to one acorn. She says that it's healthy for me to learn discipline this way. I guess there's nothing wrong with that because Mrs. Lawry says that discipline is important, too.

In the backyard, the cold feels like a layer of needles against my skin, a prickling sensation I struggle to snuff out with my hands and the hotness of my breath for the next few hours until sunrise.

I make up for the discomfort by looking up towards the stars. The stars don't say much. That's alright to me because I don't either. The stars are there, together, pulsing to their own uneven beats even when stars around them burst and die and disappear. I admire that the stars know this and keep going anyway.



AFTERMATH OF THE
BIG BANG
ERIC CHEN

too old to pretend i am of the moon and sea

ALIKA JIMENEZ

CW: blood, brief mention of injury

i.

you are waiting for a whale to swallow you whole.
this is highly unlikely, seeing as the esophagus
of a humpback whale

measures only 12 to 15 inches in diameter: the size
of a large grapefruit. you're bound to lose patience
watching the sun expand like a fork-pierced egg
yolk,

leaking into the ocean. you expect a whale's rescue. the skin to glisten
in the night, silver, beating their tails,
when the water and
the whale let go of each other
all at once.

ii.

while you are waiting for the whale, you train
to leap into the cracked crescent
of moon.

every time you throw your head back to breathe, to clear your vision
from your salt-crusted hair,

to see the craters clearer,
she taunts you.
every time you throw your head back to breathe, crash back down in a
circle of isolated storm, you have to squint to spot it, but there is a place for you
up there

in those ashy basins you strain to see.
like her surface, your body is easily dented by touch.
unlike hers, the indents stem from a childhood underwater.

iii.

a splinter of barnacled steel bulges through your muscle.
you are jaggedly split,
just in time to stop you from swimming back down to try
and jump again.

iv.

while you are waiting to die, hold a bubble of air
in your mouth, swollen,
tender.

you think that the worst part, worse than the saline froth rolling like
nitric acid in your softly torn cheeks, is letting go of the moon. and you won't find another
whale,
not now that blood has spilled.
looking up, you can make out a blur of silver, and you know
you are crying. strips
of flesh wave in the water, like the handsy seaweed you've always flinched away from.
ribbons of scarlet diffuse into the pearl rays.
you just wanted to see the moon up close, to breathe something that isn't salt
and blood,

to be alone because the ocean is empty, not because
every creature, including your executioner, has left you behind.

v.

while you aren't waiting anymore, your arms,
moon beams,
pierce the slightly shivering sea, harpoon through your human legs. the water
is cold.

...

you want the touch to stay
when seaweed slithers up your
human
legs, but it recoils, like octopus tentacles the seaweed can taste
your un-marine skin and un-marine blood—you don't *belong* here anymore.
but you don't want to be let go of: not by the moon
or the whales or even
the sea grass.

there is no silver shine as the slimy strands release your legs. you think you will dissolve
in the lulling waves before another whale returns.

there would be an ease in unfolding, petaled gift, under the moon.
but you are not a moon flower.

there would be an ease in being swallowed
by a whale, beating the ocean sterling still.
but your body is not swallowed by a grapefruit's shadow.
an ease in playing sea monster for 1000 moons longer, but
you are not a child anymore. you are not
of the moon.

you are not of the sea. you
are
not of anything.
the water lets you go.



COSMIC JELLYFISH
ERIC CHEN

29



DAISY CHAIN MAIL
CHARLOTTE GIDLEY

VISUAL ART 30

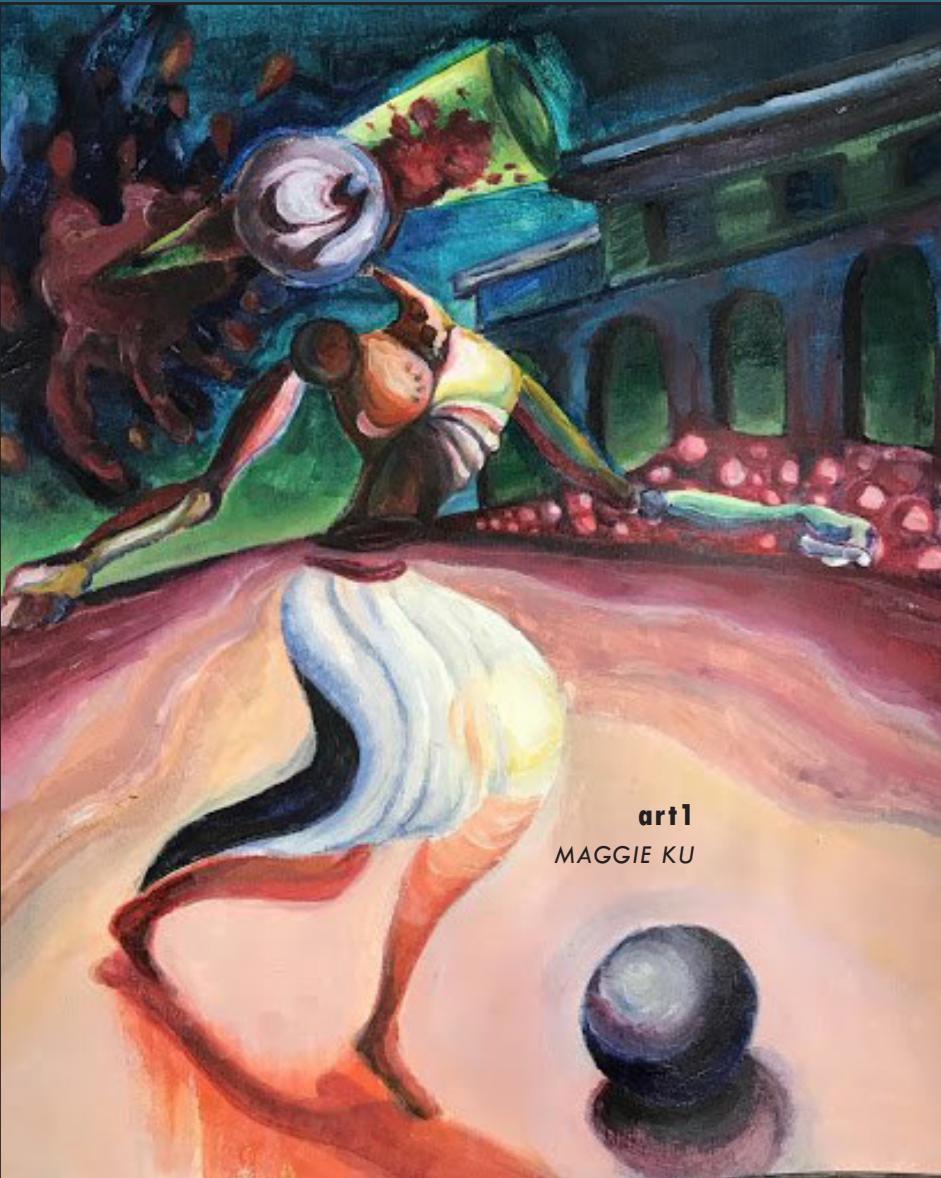
THREADS

LAJWARD ZAHRA

Painful, wet, January
the birth of the year and
we're cording our umbilicals together,
severed by kitchen scissors
your short hair and my first
white strand in your palm
I swept your DNA from an art room floor;
knitting along with the sisters

I'd decided I had a soul
of a prehistoric spear fisher
when you wore my mother's dress
looking in a prison sink mirror
with a bloody ear.
The piercers on 4th have nothing on me
or cult dancers;
our October is a fire of her own.
I danced around her until I
was taller than a sundown shadow.

Climbing up out
of vagabond mirages shaking off
travel dust and notice
a tear in my image that I mend
in your form



death and a 2007 hyundai tucson (a letter)

ANDREA PLASCENCIA

CW: brief allusion to self harm

L—,

Can I tell you a really fucked up thing? When Ed died two days after you broke up with me, I felt really relieved: relieved that I had a legitimate reason to be sad, not that he had died. Ed was really special, the kind of special you write stories about—but this is for later. Anyway, the thing I just said—it's fucked, I know—but I remember feeling that way. I remember thinking, *See, this is the kind of grievance that I can explain*, the kind of thing that would get you extensions and a free pass for falling behind in classes and in your life. What normal people call a “rough patch.” It’s socially acceptable, kind of.

I’m sure you understand me when I tell you that death has a striking undeniability. I mean, not that you can’t be in denial when someone dies, because I definitely was for a while—still am sometimes. But

there’s a physical component to it. There’s the coffin, for one. And usually a body that goes inside of that coffin. Or, if it doesn’t strike your fancy, there’s the whole cremation thing; body turns to ash. And then you’re stored away in an urn. Whatever method, there’s a physicality to it. It’s a big thing, death.

And there’s so much mystery and intrigue and not-knowing-ness to it, it makes sense that people give you a free pass. Like, what kind of monster would you have to be to deny someone a little bit of a break when someone they know has crossed over into the, uh, *other* place. If you believe in the other place. Do you believe in the other place?

And, you know, if you have a particularly stubborn



employer or professor who just doesn’t believe you for whatever reason, that a human life you were intertwined with has been terminated and you were absent on some particular day because you went to their funeral, you can provide them with an obituary. Obituaries are kind of my thing. Another fucked up thing: I was really excited to read Ed’s obituary. Like I said, he was the kind of person who deserved to have heroic tales written about him. He wasn’t, as white people say, your average Joe. Did you know he played drums in multiple bands during his lifetime? That he graduated a semester later because he had to undergo chemotherapy during college? I didn’t even know he had cancer. Really, whoever wrote his obituary did a phenomenal job because they painted such a lovely picture. It was so wonderfully Ed. I was especially grateful for the absence of clichés. I don’t know who wrote the obituary, but whoever did probably knew him personally because it was too rich in detail for it to have been someone who did not. Usually when relatives or close friends write the obituary for their dead person, it includes something stupid like, “Jane Doe gained her angel wings on January 1, 1995.” If I die first, can you make sure my obituary doesn’t say something stupid like that? You can just say that I’m dead. No embellishments, no angel wings, and definitely no stupid-ass picture of my face photoshopped onto clouds. That last one isn’t about the actual writing of the obituary, but just make sure it doesn’t happen. Please?

Where was I? Oh. The undeniability of death. It’s so real that it’s almost unreal but the rituality and mysteriousness that surrounds it—it’ll make sense to people if you’re bummed out about it. But still, there’s a physicality to your hurt—proof. A casket, an urn, a gravestone to mark the site of the place where your [insert dead person’s name here] will rest forever and ever.

Breakups and heartbreak, though—that is slightly different from death.

Although it is like death in a way. At least it was for me.

Sk8r bois think radically w the environment

CAL MASCARDO

I don't want to tell you about how we met. I want to tell you about a poem by Shel Silverstein. The poem is called *Somebody Has To*.

The first time I read this poem, I was 16. It comes from the Shel Silverstein book, *A Light in the Attic*. L's mom's copy. She was an elementary school teacher. She left him her collection of books, and this book was a part of it (of course, at 16, I don't know this, yet).

For whatever reason, he chose this poem to take a picture of. He uploaded the picture to his finsta (fake insta, or an Instagram reserved for people you've deemed cool enough to share your shitposts and sorrows with). When I joined his spam account, I did a deep dive. I know this is dumb, but I was awkward and when you're 16, joining someone's spam is like crossing over into sacred territory. I was fascinated by him for some reason. I wanted to know more.

Somewhere around the bottom of his Instagram, I see it. I like words, so I'm excited when I see it—I think that maybe he likes books, too.

Cool. I click.

I read it. It's beautiful. It makes me sad, in the way that Shel Silverstein usually makes a person sad. I never mention this to him later on when we are together. I regret that I never mentioned it.

If you were sitting across from me right now, I would ask you about it. Why did you pick this poem? Was it something you did without thinking? Was it a cry for help?

Lately I've been thinking about that poem a lot. I'm not sure why. Is it because Ed is dead and I'm resorting to children's literature as an attempt to heal? Is it because I feel shit and I miss(ed) you and it's easier to glorify the past—the beginnings of us—when I knew so little about you and I hung onto every little thing—like your spam page—because I wanted so badly to know you? I don't know. I just can't stop thinking about this damn poem, and I hate that Ed had to go, because somebody has to.

There's these baskets at the library; they look like the regular baskets you'd see at the grocery store,

but they're actually a little bit different. They have this special handle so you can set the basket down and wheel it around instead. The baskets at the library are blue, and they devastate me every time I look at them. They're right next to Elevator D, which as it so happens, is my favorite elevator (solely based on the fact that this is the one that gets stuck the least).

They're just baskets, but you know how sentimental I get about everything. We had the exact same baskets at Reaper, except they were yellow instead of blue. I remember when our orders were especially big at work, Lauren would always tell me to use the big baskets because they had a handle and made it easier to push the shit around. It was a fun summer—the summer I worked there.

My first day of work, I remember Ed's brother David called me into his office to sign shit. You know, because when you get a job there's paperwork and questions and stuff. He called me in, and I was nervous until about two seconds after arriving at his office, when I read the nameplate that sat on his desk. It said:

FUCKER IN CHARGE

of you fucking fuckers

After taking note of this extraordinary nameplate, I looked behind David, who was busy gathering the shit I was supposed to sign. As he rustled papers, I took note of the cardboard cutout behind David's swivel chair. There it was in all its glory: a cardboard cutout of Brad Pitt. And then he asked me (he being David, not Brad Pitt): "Is this your first job?" I told him yes, to which he replied, "I'm sorry. This is a strange place."

I learned that summer that yes, it was a very strange place. It was a place filled to the brim with Dungeons and Dragons figurines that I did not understand, celebrity cardboard cutouts, and geeky millennials with colored hair who told me that they too had been English majors in college!

It was a strange place, but it was perfect. I learned how to maneuver a pallet jack (though admittedly very poorly), walked up and down stairs all day long, packaged figurines into boxes, and then lifted said boxes into their rightful place on the shelves. When I was doing inventory stuff and walked from the internet department over to the warehouse, I would always look for Paul, who was usually at his station. I would smile at him and then proceed to flip him off. And Paul was a good guy, so he reciprocated the

sentiment by lifting his middle finger up toward me.

The summer I worked there was also the summer before I left for college, the summer that I visited you in Canyon for the first time, and the summer that *Call Me if You Get Lost* by Tyler, the Creator came out. I remember sitting in the parking lot of a CVS Pharmacy in early July, and you looked at me and said, “Meh, it’s a 6/10.” I thought this was unfair and wrong—that the album deserved far better than a 6/10—and then you smiled and asked me to wait there. And, like always, you asked me to lock the doors if I felt unsafe.

You always told me to lock the car if you were leaving me there alone. You walked into the CVS and I fiddled with the volume and smiled. I missed you already, and I couldn’t wait for you to come back. I didn’t lock the door after you because I thought I was safe.

I thought, *this is what love feels like.*

A wise woman on the internet—I think on TikTok—said that the song *Silver Springs* by Fleetwood Mac finds you when you need it. And you know what? That bitch was totally right.

If you go to a psychologist and you talk about death, they’re most likely gonna tell you about something called the five stages of grief. They go something like this (though from lived experience, the order may and probably *will* vary):

Denial

Anger

Bargaining

Depression

Acceptance.

You may experience some more intensely than others or go back and forth between a couple. Whatever the case, it’s OK. “It’s part of the process,” they’ll tell you.

And it is.

But the thing is, time is so distorted and meaningless and stupid when your boyfriend of three years breaks up with you over text and your family friend dies two days after that you can’t even tell your head from your ass, much less know what stage of grief you’re in. The best measure for my grief, or more specifically, for the stage of grief I’m inhabiting at any given point in time, is music.

Around the time that Ed dropped dead, I was horribly ensconced in a Phoebe Bridgers phase. These are the songs my mom would deem as being “canciones para cortarte las venas con galletitas de animales.”

(Spanish to English translation: “songs to cut your veins to with animal crackers.” See, I hate translating things because they just sound so stupid in English.)

Anyway, the excruciating cocktail of songs in my December rotation. I feel like all of these songs fall under all the stages of grief except for acceptance.

Anything *but* acceptance.

What the fuck does that even mean? Acceptance?

On the day that we buried Ed, it was raining. The day before, I had taken an Uber and I overshared and I ended up talking about my dead family friend—how the first thing I’d be doing over my break was attending his funeral. I told my driver about rain being forecasted, and he told me that that was a good thing. He’d heard somewhere that this meant your loved one had made it to Heaven. Comments like these normally make me want to curl my fist into a ball and bash the other person’s nose into their brain, but that day, I thanked him for that. On the bus back home, I cried for a while and tried to look for Ed in the clouds.

The morning of the big day, I woke up early, took a shower, stole mascara from my mom (waterproof, always), and hopped into a pair of black tights to go with the black dress I’d be wearing for the festivities. I remember getting ready in the mirror and thinking this was all really stupid—he wasn’t really dead, he just wasn’t here. I was actually worried about not being able to cry (in hindsight, very stupid).

When we finally got to the funeral home, I remember feeling uncomfortable. Not because it was

freezing and we were essentially surrounded by the dead, but because the funeral home seemed to have a theme, and it was horses. Picture frames of horses hung everywhere, with ugly-ass wallpaper—arguably much more horrifying than the whole Ed-turning-into-a-vegetable-and-dying-thing.

My dad was a pallbearer—the shortest one, actually, which was funny when it came time to carry the coffin—so they asked us to get there early. As soon as I stepped into the chapel before the service, I looked at my mom and immediately went from laughing internally about the horse theme to suppressing sobs.

It's ridiculous the things that will send you spiraling when you're fragile.

For me, the thing that turned my heart to flaming hot, oozing mush was the slideshow of Ed pictures, set to a piano rendition of fucking *A Thousand Years* by Christina Perri (another thing that under any other circumstance would've made me want to punch a man—"this is some white people shit"—but because the occasion was so sad, I didn't think too much of it at the time).

I must've watched the slideshow a thousand times, tapping my mom on the shoulder every few minutes for a Kleenex (conveniently, she sat next to the box). Pictures of Ed, Dave, and Vicki sticking out their tongues for a selfie. A photo of Ed (also his Facebook cover photo) standing next to his two vintage cars. A photo of him holding one of his grandkids. A photo of everyone at Reaper on Halloween.

He loved his cars and he loved Dungeons and Dragons.

But he loved people more. He loved them so much that when his organs failed and he was unplugged from the machines on Thanksgiving, he held on for four hours—wrestling in the in-between—even though the doctors said he'd pass on maybe 20 minutes after.

While we waited for the service to start and watched the slideshow on a loop, (presumably) the funeral director came up to him and gently put on Ed's glasses—a little "Here you go, friend. When you go to Heaven, you wanna make sure you can actually *see!*"

L—, in our three years of canoodling and being best friends, we definitely talked about Heaven and Hell and God and do we believe in any of that. I was skeptical about the whole God and Heaven thing—I still am sometimes. But if there is a Heaven, I know there's a super special place for the guy that, on his hospital bed, made time to ask my dad if his truck was fixed yet. I know there's a special place for the man who (along with Dave and Vicki), basically gave my dad a truck just because they could.

The week after he died, I had therapy. I cried to my therapist, telling her about the unwavering kindness of this man and how sad it all was and yadayada. "How lucky was I," I remember telling her, clutching Kleenex, "to know someone that loved so much. To know someone so kind."

He was surrounded by love. He was the very embodiment of love. Maybe it makes sense that his heart was the thing that killed him.

I rode the death wave for a while. I was home, but I still had finals, so I sent out stupid, meaningless emails to my professors about how a family friend had died, and "Hey, could I get an incomplete, maybe? Thank you for your understanding. All the best," and other bullshit.

The thing about death and dying and breakups and the sudden disappearance of certain people in your life is that when you're at the river of your existence, the world keeps tilting on its stupid fucking axis. Yeah, your world may be over, but if you want to get your degree, you need to turn this in. You need to show up. They tell you to grieve, but you understand that you can't grieve too long, that there's an unspoken rule, some kind of two, three-week—a month at most—rule. You can only grieve for this long and after that, people expect you to rise from the ashes of your depressive episode and continue hanging in there, or whatever.

HE WAS SURROUNDED BY LOVE. HE WAS THE VERY EMBODIMENT OF LOVE. MAYBE IT MAKES SENSE THAT HIS HEART WAS THE THING THAT KILLED HIM.

But you would know that death and dying and breakups and the sudden crumbling of your world as you knew it doesn't work on a timeline. I'm sure you know.

I would hope you do.

But at the same time, I'm heartbroken, because I know you know because your mom is dead and that's devastating and I'm sorry I didn't ask you more about it but also you should know pain because you broke me, but I care about you more than I care to hold onto my anger for you.

Last Thanksgiving, before Ed dropped like the bird you eat at dinner (the turkey drop is a real thing), I was slightly wine drunk at your uncle's house—fuck that guy, by the way—and we held hands on the couch while the other drunk adults played Pictionary. I had my head on your shoulder and petted their dog with the hand that wasn't holding yours and I remember thinking, again, nauseatingly now, *this is what love feels like.*

When I was little, I remember thinking that love was something that happened once—that there was a definitive moment when shockwaves went through you and your brain made a little ping! noise that indicated you were in a state of in-love-ness. And maybe for some people it happens like that. Maybe there's a single moment where you just know. But I was really lucky, because for three years I had a plethora of moments like that.

Or I thought I did.

But as a wifebeater named John Lennon would say, "Life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans."

I want to be more angry about the whole you-dumping-me-over-text-after-three-years thing.

Somedays, I really am. But mostly, it just reminds me about how stupid men are when it comes to delivering bad news.

Do you know how my dad told me Ed was gonna die?

Here goes:

The day after you dumped me, my parents came down to Houston for Thanksgiving at my uncle's. You were supposed to come too, but I think the breakup would've put a damper on things. So anyway, my parents spent the entire day driving down I-45, and somewhere around 10 p.m., they made it. My dad stood outside my dorm, waiting to walk me over to the parking lot where my mom and my brother waited for me. He kissed my forehead and gave me a hug. He laughed at the opossum we walked by on our way to the car and took a picture.

When we made it to the car, my brother asked, "Are we gonna tell her?" It kind of flew over my head. And then about 20 minutes later, while I listened to The Smiths, my dad blurted out:

"It's not looking good, *mija*."

I was very confused, so when I pestered him for answers, he told me that earlier in the day, around noon, Ed started feeling weird. The source of the weirdness was an infection—a fairly uncomplicated thing in the realm of medicine, right? Well, it would've been uncomplicated and easy to fix, if the man hadn't suffered a heart attack in August. The infection could only be treated with surgery, and his heart was too weak. They gave the family 48 hours to decide on surgery.

The next morning, though, my dad asked me to reply to a text from David. He handed me his phone. David had signed a DNR. His organs were failing. I understood that this was it.

The fucker in charge was dead.

L—,

I wanted to tell you that you were right. When someone dies, you wait and you wait and you wait for it to feel real, and it really never does. There's some part of you that is forever insisting on the dead person's reemergence. Like, I know they're gone, but I swear, if I squeeze my eyes really tight and imagine them, I'll somehow manifest their physical form. They'll stand before me and everything will be fine.

I'm sitting here, trying to remember those in-between weeks. The weeks after the breakup and after Ed died—the weeks before the funeral. I can't remember much. I remember being angry and feeling disappointed and then feeling angry with myself for being angry. I wasn't even angry with you, which was arguably worse.

I think I started to hate everyone but you.

I remember this one day in particular. It was December, and I just wanted to go home. I got off work and walked to the coffeehouse. I didn't want to do homework or sit in my dorm. I didn't want to be here at all. I tried to ponder reasons to keep living, and I landed on coffee, so there I went.

While walking over from the library, I saw the Baptist Student Ministry outside. They were offering pancakes in exchange for you asking them a question. I thought it was funny—my mind immediately raced to see what out of pocket question I could come up with. "Hello fellow BSM, uh, member. Student? I, uh, yes, I want a pancake and oh, by the way, why did your God kill my boss?" (I didn't actually ask this—or any question, for that matter).

I ordered my coffee, and I asked my best friend if he wanted to join me and grab a pancake after. 10-15 minutes tops. He replied that he was sorry, but he should really study. I said it was fine, but it wasn't really fine. It was just pancakes and coffee—not a big deal—but it made me want to die.

There was no one. I couldn't call you. I didn't want to call my dad so he could tell me that Ed was in a better place and that we needed to be strong, or thankful, or be something other than upset. I didn't want to call my mom because if I heard her voice on the other line, I would've fallen over.

And apparently I couldn't even get a fucking pancake.

It's funny the things that send you spiraling when life goes to shit.

The pancake/coffee thing was the tip of a big-ass iceberg of grief.

[Back to the funeral home again, circa December 2022—Ed laying in a coffin, because he's dead]

So, the slideshow played. The one with the pictures of Ed and the piano rendition of *A Thousand Years*. I don't want to talk about it anymore because there's too much to say and also because I can't scramble up the right combination of words. Nothing feels sufficient.

I'm tired.

I do want to tell you, though, that I can't listen to *What a Wonderful World* by Louis Armstrong anymore. It used to remind me of the 2005 cult classic animated movie, *Madagascar*; this song plays in the background while Alex is all alone in the jungle. Now it just reminds me that the good ones always die too soon; the good ones always go off to polish the stars, because somebody has to.

I want to tell you that Ed was in a long distance relationship with a woman named Victoria. She lived in Australia, and they hadn't seen each other since the start of the pandemic. When Ed died, the funeral was put off for a few weeks for two reasons: 1) so Ed's lover could book a flight and 2) because apparently a lot of people died on Thanksgiving, and the horse-themed funeral home was all booked up.

Victoria ended up missing the funeral. There was an issue with her visa at the last minute, and she was unable to go. In her place was a lovely (also Australian) gentleman who brought her words with him to deliver to all of us who sat crying in the pews.

Truth be told, I can't remember everything she wrote anymore, but I will never forget the end of her speech:

"Go on, my darling. I'll catch you on the flip."

Lessons from a woman I will never meet

That day, Victoria taught me that grief is a bitch but it is so intricately, profoundly, annoyingly rooted in love.

I learned from this woman—who loved her partner so dearly that she sent someone from across the globe to deliver these words of love—that the purest act of love is letting go. Even when you don't want to. Even when it was unexpected, or when it feels like it happened too soon.

If the love was real, it will always feel too soon.

My friend Isobel will tell me (right after everything has fallen apart) "I know you've experienced magic before, and you will experience it again." In a voice memo, months after everything has fallen apart, Isobel will read to me, "If the pain was deep, we have to let it go many times in our lives."

In other words, it may take a very long time. Maybe a month.

Maybe a year.

Maybe seven, like swallowing gum.

It's agonizing. It's supposed to be.

But grief, I remind myself, isn't an absence of love. It's love-overload. Homeless, displaced love.

I tell myself,

I've experienced magic before, and I will experience it again.

And I hope you do, too.

And I tell myself that if the Other Place is real,

I hope Ed is in the presence of boundless magic.

I tell myself,

I've experienced magic before, and I will experience it again.

I don't know when.

And that is OK.

I will write the words over and over until they become true.

I will wait here.



IT'S NO USE CRYING OVER SPILLED MILK

ASHLEY ZHANG

ANGEL OF THE LORD TRIPTYCH

SHEM BROWN

CW: selfharm

An angel of the lord speaks to you tenderly in a Kroger checkout aisle
with paper wings, fastened to her blue vest
angel says, *November will be kind to you*
angel says, *so how about that rain last night?*
angel says, *do not think yourself insignificant*
angel says, *and lo, Jacob wrestled with the angel and was smote*
upon the thigh. and he would not let go without his blessing,
and the angel bestowed upon him a new name and made of him
a new man.
angel says, *we're not that different, you and I*
angel says, *I love you*
angel says, *that'll be \$31.65*

An angel of the lord calls for cleanup in aisle 41

with the glare off her plastic nametag near blinding your sight
angel says, *bush honey, don't sweat it*
angel says, *try not to step near the glass*

angel says, *I'm going to tell you something. Are you ready to listen?*

angel says, *the flood came for all men and it will come for you too, but fear not, for He and I are with you, and through Our words you shall be saved. and you shall emerge from this darkness at last into the light, and never, ever harm yourself again.*

Do you understand?

angel says, *I used to cry when I bit the heads off animal crackers*

angel says, *I love you still*

angel says, *I'll pay for the olives*

An angel of the lord turns to face you in a dark September cinema

with a technicolor halo projected round her head

angel says, *what the [] are they charging for ticket prices these days?*

angel says, *I miss Leonard Cohen deeply*

angel says, *Polaroids are one of the few holy relics left to mankind*

angel says, *you shall not always feel this way. there is more*

to life than this pain that consumes you. meanwhile, the world turns. I promise you, beloved, there will be more.

angel says, *it's in the past. it's in the past. it's in the past*

angel says, *I have loved you always. be vigilant*

angel says, *he was better in Crash*



AN INTERVIEW WITH VICTORIANO CÁRDENAS

EDITED BY RILEY COMBES, JOANNA CORAM, KAITLYN KEYES,
HADLEY MEDLOCK, and MCKENNA TANNER

In an effort to better engage with the literary community beyond the hedges, R2 staff conducted interviews with three writers in the fall of 2023.

In the first of these interviews, we spoke with Victoriano (Tori) Cárdenas, a poet based in New Mexico whose recent collection, *Portraits as Animal*, was published by local indie press Bloomsday Literary. We sat down with Tori to discuss his journey into poetry, writing through his transition, and saving your darlings. This interview was edited for brevity and clarity.



R2: How and when did you first start writing poetry? What made you want to pursue publishing a collection of poetry in the first place?

Tori: I first started writing when I was still in high school. I was a big emo kid, and I would listen to my favorite albums over and over again, so the first poetry collections that I had were those little CD albums with the lyrics. And I was obsessed, right? But then when I got to college, I was like, okay, it's time to be an adult. So, I really tried my best to pursue academics that were gonna get me a job.

It was in a poetry class that I got a copy of Natalie Diaz's *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. It had just come out the year before, and when I got my hands on it, that collection changed everything. It's partly memoir,

it's partly poetry, it's partly generational history of trauma. It just blew everything wide open for me. I started thinking about poetry differently. I started thinking about my own fiction differently. I'd always really loved storytelling, but it hadn't seemed like that was related to poetry until I read that collection. After reading it, at first I was like, I want to write poems like that, and then eventually I realized I wanted to write a book like that.

R2: We were really struck by the imagery in the collection, especially the imagery rooted in the American Southwest. Where do you look for stylistic influences for your work, and how do you approach incorporating them?

Tori: I grew up in Taos, and I was recently looking at this temperate zone map. Northern New Mexico is in this weird temperate zone where it's really green and moist in the middle of the desert. It feels like this oasis there. There's already so much inspiration that I take from that landscape.

There's also the art scene—Taos is one of the biggest gallery towns in the world. Taos and Santa Fe have this big reputation for being art centers, and the art that comes out of there is really beautiful. The only problem is it's extremely expensive, very exclusive, and it's not really for poor brown kids in Taos—it's for tourists. But just having all of that imagery around me really influenced me.

As for literary influences, I like Rudy Anaya's work. I had a book of his poems and *Bless Me, Ultima* growing up. I hadn't read a lot of poetry growing up, but I also like Natalie Diaz, Eduardo C. Corral, Luci Tapahonso, and Layli Long Soldier. I also really like Jake Skeets—we were classmates together at UNM.

I love poetry that's very focused on natural images to tell a story, so Mary Oliver is another inspiration. I think, by looking at a landscape, you can tell a story, even if it's not obvious. I really like to look at poetry that's sparse on the page in terms of content, but where the natural imagery really shines through.

But I don't know that I'm a very sparse poet myself. I think my poetry might be clutter-core, like my apartment. I kind of like jamming a bunch of stuff together, but I really love and gravitate towards poets

that have beautiful natural images, and that's it. I think one of my favorite forms like that is in a poem from *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, "The Clouds are Buffalo Limping Toward Jesus." It has a really long title, and that's another thing I like because I'm an emo kid, but then it's just like a couple words on the page. The poem looks like little clouds on the page. It's so beautiful, and I love it so much. Stylistically, that's the kind of stuff that I like to read. However it comes out in my own writing is still to be determined.

R2: We were very interested in the way that you spoke about gender and transitioning. Could you speak on the experience of writing about transitioning and reflecting on this journey in poetry?

Tori: I don't know if I could talk about transitioning without also talking about learning about the colonization that my family and my ancestors went through. When I first started the MFA program, I really started reading a lot more about my Taino roots. My dad's from Puerto Rico, and my mom is from here in Taos. Learning about how so many of my ancestors were killed by Spanish colonists got me really angry. I started down a different rabbit hole of trying to reconnect. Part of that reconnection was looking into Taino cosmology: What are Taino beliefs? What's the belief system?

I found out that the main deity in Taino cosmology is Yocahú-Bagua-Maorocoti. Yocahú is yucca and represents masculinity and manhood, and then Bagua is representative of the ocean and femininity and women. Maorocoti is literally "neither and both." So they actually acknowledge three genders in Taino spirituality. I was like, Oh, that makes a heck of a lot of sense, I wonder if this goes any deeper. I asked a historian, "What do you know about the acknowledgment of third genders?" He said that third gender people are acknowledged in Taino culture as kind of a shaman class, and so while you weren't necessarily one or the other, being neither and both, you served this role in the community as a mediator or sometimes a spiritual leader. Growing up I always wanted to be a priest or something of that sort. I was raised really Catholic. They were like, well, you can't be a priest, but you can be a nun. Go be a nun, do nun things. And that didn't sound the same to me at all. But knowing that I've always been really spiritual and also trying to reconnect with my indigenous spiritual roots, transitioning made a lot more sense.

I think being able to break apart some of those bigger traumas, and not just my personal history, but my generational history, like my ancestors' history, the veil kind of came away, and I was able to see not only have I been miserable because of all these colonial factors—losing my religion, losing my community, losing my name and my language—but I also lost a lot of my spirituality, and my family lost our spirituality. By assimilating and trying to keep ourselves safe in a Spanish Catholic society, and then American society, we lost a lot of who we were, and so I see transitioning not just as a personal journey, but maybe a generational one, and a lot of it is healing, and I hope that maybe by healing myself, I can heal that line as well.

R2: We were struck by the collection's dedication to "Anyone who has had to camouflage their true self." What was it like to try to capture the essence of the collection in a short phrase? What does that phrase mean to you?

Tori: Like I said, I grew up really loving the little album things in the CDs. One of my favorite albums is Fall Out Boy's *From Under the Cork Tree*. On the back of that album, in the acknowledgements, Pete Wentz wrote "If you're not outraged by the world, you're not paying enough attention," or something like that. I was like, that's so cool, I want to do that someday. So it was sort of a nod to that.

I'm also late diagnosed autistic, and over the last three years, I've been figuring out what masking is, how I do it, and how difficult it is for me not to mask, with people that I know and people that I don't know. Masking is like having to camouflage who you really are so people don't see how weird you are, right? Also, being queer or trans in a really queerphobic, transphobic church environment. There are a lot of different ways that we hide ourselves. We hide our trauma, we hide our fear, we have to hide a lot of different things to be able to survive. Whether that's camouflaging yourself through your language or the way that you look, for anyone that's had to do that, I hope this book helps a little.

R2: Many of our readers are aspiring writers themselves, and so we were curious if you have any advice to share. What was something that you wish you could've known as you approached the process of creating this collection?

Tori: My advice would be just write as much as you can whenever you feel like it. And I wish I would've known that you can push back against editorial feedback. I think that being in a program that favored the Iowa workshop style, you get discouraged from responding to feedback. I had my first short story published, and I was really excited. They were like, "Yeah, we just need to do a couple edits," and I was like, "I'm sure I've got dangling modifiers and stuff like that." But I was not expecting a ton, and then the Google Doc came back covered in red; almost everything was changed. Big chunks were taken and moved, and I wouldn't have done that. But I accepted all the changes, because I thought, "This is the editor, they know better. They know what they're doing, they know their magazine and their audience, and they know what people wanna hear." That story's since been anthologized, and I think it's the short story that people see of mine most, and it's frustrating 'cause it doesn't sound like me. There are things I wish I could change now. As an aspiring writer, know that you can always push back if you feel really strongly about your work or, you know, your darlings. I know they say, "Kill your darlings," but if it comes to it and you wanna keep it, keep it. Say, "No, I'm taking my darlings to another journal, thank you very much!" If you feel very strongly about your work — stand behind it.



THE HYBRID
CONNIE NI



COPING
CATHERINE ZHOU



I COMPLETE

HOPE YANG

Clock ticks tock tick tock time running
I work I write I grind I speed I loud I silent I stress I think
I math I paint I scream I deep I be I do I leave I sleep
rinse and repeat I'm running down with the clock
that's chiming six forgot the dream juggling at once way too many things
no balance just all this teetering more more more need more for me
I fear I sorrow I shame I mad I hungry I obsessed can't sleep I trapped
did I go wrong somewhere running on these feet oh God no what is happening
because this wasn't what I chased I fought I wrestled I sought
this wasn't what I meant it to be so could you give me a little bit of reprieve?
could you take this away from me? wake up to a smiling moon and weep
fields of flowers giggling at bees slow slow jog on New Year's Eve all the life I hadn't
seen and all the things I truly need could it all fall together fall together in line in beat
because all this time I was never really the one holding it together, making it complete





MORE THAN ENOUGH

CHARLOTTE GIDLEY

IRREVERSIBLE

AMY CAO

CW: suicide, depression

By the time I landed in Atlanta, by the time I was able to stop hyperventilating and shaking, my wife had already been in the hospital for three days. She'd spent two in the ICU, where she had her stomach pumped. Half a day in the psych ward. I found out from the nurses. They whispered even when we stood on the other side of Katherine's closed door.

The doctors, too, spoke in soft voices when they addressed me, as if I were the one they didn't want to startle. A discharge plan tomorrow, a check-in with the hospital psychiatrist next Thursday, and recommended medications. She's okay. She'll be home in no time. Hang in there. The last resident patted my shoulder as he shuffled out behind the others.

I shifted from standing beside Katherine's bed to squatting. Lines years beyond her age were etched in the skin around her eyes. Her face was slightly jaundiced. I couldn't remember the last time she had looked so exhausted.

"Hi," I whispered, so quietly I almost didn't hear myself. I brushed her matted hair out of her face.

Katherine fixated on the bulletin board directly across the room, her lips pressed tightly together. It had been hours since I first entered, but she hadn't spoken a word. Her expression had been blank when the doctors made their rounds, too. Now, she avoided meeting my gaze, but I could see her chin quivering.



Her eyes welled.

I squeezed her hand and held her as she slowly, wordlessly, began to unravel.

Venus flytraps can count to five. Everyone who graduated from our college dorm knew Katherine was a plant fanatic, not just in raising them, but in knowing about them too. Flytraps snap shut when their calcium reaches a certain level, with at most five electrical stimulations from their environment. I was a neuroscience student at the time, when we were dating. I liked her niche facts and the little slips of paper she would jot them on—usually whatever she could find in her bag—so I started collecting them in a mason jar. I called it my Jungle Jar, although afterward, she said Venus flytraps and most of the other plants she mentioned don't grow in jungles. They're carnivorous because the Carolina soil they grow in doesn't provide enough nutrients.

"Would they be thriving then, hypothetically, if they were in a jungle?" I asked.

"No, they'd probably die." She handed me a sticky note about how all blue roses are genetically engineered to be blue. She went with a streak of non-jungle facts for a month, but she never brought the label up again.

It would be a while before she stopped our little thing, sometime after we married, saying she couldn't keep track of what she had and hadn't already given me, and that memorizing these things wasn't fun anymore.

After I dropped out of my second year of medical school in favor of research and heavily in debt, Katherine proposed moving in with her. In her quaint uptown apartment, she used to do the New York Times crossword every morning, old-school, at the breakfast table while I cooked us eggs and packed her lunch.

"Aiden, quick, what're the trees that grow at Muir Woods?"

"Redwoods? But that was easy. You knew that."

She smiled knowingly. "I couldn't have done this one without you," she'd say. Or sometimes, "Isn't it crazy that we just know things? Like our synapses will fire in exactly all the ways that get us to think of the right word at the right time. No one ever thinks about it. It's so natural, why would you?"

Then she would put her pencil down, and I would give her her lunch and kiss her goodbye as she hopped from her seat and rushed to work. She was an accounting manager, and her job started earlier and ended later than my graduate courses. I found myself cooking often.

A few months ago, Katherine stopped asking for packed meals entirely, and she set aside the crosswords in favor of laying on the couch before going to work. I should've realized she was changing, but not by her own design. Around that time, I had just started preparing for my thesis defense, and I was too caught up in my work to notice. The last time she'd said anything related to lunch, she'd turned down leftover potato au gratin from the night before, shouldering her purse in preparation to leave.

"Aiden, I don't want this. I have lunch at the office."

A worm of disappointment squirmed in my stomach. I'd spent a long time looking for a potato recipe I thought she'd like.

She paused before continuing, "I mean, they're providing free lunch now. You don't have to pack anything for me anymore. Actually, I'll probably be coming home late for the next couple of weeks, so don't prepare dinner for me either."

She slipped her shoes on and didn't wait for me to say anything back before disappearing through the door. It wouldn't have mattered if she had stayed a minute longer. For all my years of research and studying, not a single thing I had learned helped me know how to respond. Katherine was my first and only relationship. As I ate my egg and her uneaten one, too, I rubbed my thumb against my index finger in a self-soothing, cyclic motion. I couldn't help but think she was falling out of love with me.

I was at my desk in the living room when she entered the apartment that night, probably sometime around 9 p.m. She removed her heels and dragged herself toward the bedroom, past me, in a daze. Even in



EVEN IN ANGER
JOOHYE LEE

the cast shadows from our fluorescent kitchen light, the circles under her eyes were visible. I asked if she had eaten, but I was unsure if she had heard or seen me at all.

She was listless like this even when she came home at normal times. Every time I placed food in front of her, she refused and went straight to nap, often for hours. She stopped solving crosswords, caring for her plants, and really doing anything she used to like. Her hobbies hadn't made her "feel feelings" in a long time.

She had demonstrated by gesticulating for me once, in a car ride to Target. "If this area is happy, and this area is sad, or angry, or whatever else"—I saw, from the corner of my vision, her hands wave above and below her shoulders—"this is what normal emotions are like." She drew a sinusoid in the air with her finger, oscillating between the two imaginary regions. "I'm like this," she said, holding her arm parallel to her shoulders. "I don't think I'm sad, I just don't really feel anything anymore." She trailed off in nervous laughter as if she had just confessed to an embarrassing story. I parked the car and laced my free hand into hers, dispelling her diagram.

I probably said something stupid, like, "Don't worry, sweetheart, you'll be back to normal soon."

A few times, I heard Katherine crying in the bathroom with the shower running. She would lock the door so I couldn't see her. When she came out, she would be smiling and composed. I never mentioned it because I figured she didn't want me to hear or know. On days like those, when we would go without speaking to each other just by chance, I missed what it was like to hear her laughing about something silly her coworkers did, at our dining room table over some scraped-together meal. I missed when she would guess the ingredients horribly wrong and remind me that cooking and "brain science" were the two things I could do that she couldn't figure out. At the time, I thought she was just petered out from work, so I tiptoed around her whenever she was home.

The drive home together after Katherine's discharge was different from when I drove to the hospital alone, back early from an Australian research convention. Coming directly from the airport, I used every red light as a chance to stop the onslaught of racing thoughts and unhelpful blame, and the corkscrew tightness in

my chest that worsened the closer I got to Katherine. All I could think was, God, how could I not have done anything? How could I have been so out of touch? *How could she not have told me?*

Stopped with my left blinker *ticking, ticking*, I couldn't help but wonder if this was what our kitchen clock sounded like in the quiet after the paramedics shuffled out. In the ungodly hours of the morning, time had marched on through an absence of stirring in our sheets, an absence of our breathing. For the first time since that unknown Atlanta number—the Grady Memorial Hospital front desk—had called, I let myself understand what it meant for Katherine to have taken so many pills they needed to put her in emergency care. As I pulled into the parking garage on autopilot, I imagined the pagers of her attendings going off as she remained unconscious and unstable, IVs and tubes shoved into her body to rid her of the toxins she had voluntarily ingested. I sat for an hour, engine off, chest heaving, grappling with the idea that had she not called 911 before she fell unconscious, to make sure her body wasn't the first thing I saw after I got home from my trip, I wouldn't have seen her breathe again.

I wrapped my arm around Katherine's waist as we hobbled together to the car, side by side. The doctors said she was fine, physically, but I was scared she could shatter into pieces at any moment, like a poorly mounted vase.

She still had yet to speak to me, but occasionally, she opened her mouth as though she wanted to say something. She nodded nonverbally when I asked her things like, "Do you want to go home? Are you hungry?" Neither of us had spent much time at home in around a week. Any food in the fridge—not that we stored much in the first place—must've gone bad.

"Do you want to get fried chicken?" I asked. It was the one food she liked but hadn't indulged in in forever. I buckled in and watched to see if she would do the same. Her face was turned away, her hands clutching her elbows.

"Kath?"

After a moment, I touched her arm gently. Only then did I notice her knuckles were white with the pressure she had been seizing herself with. I reached over the other side of her face and turned her head to

face me. Her eyes were red and puffy, new silent tears overrunning dried paths, snot leaking from her nose. I kicked myself for not realizing sooner.

"Come here."

I wiped her face with my sleeve, hugged her head, and rubbed her back.

She let me, until slowly, like a faucet opening after a freeze, she began bawling audibly. Gasping for air and wailing like a child, a replay of what I had been doing alone in the car days before.

She brought her arms up around my shoulders and buried her face in my collarbone. As her tears seeped into my shirt, a wordless understanding passed between us. We lent ourselves to one another for the span of a finite fuse. As long as I could still feel the warmth of her skin, I vowed I'd ask after her sealed thoughts, cook her endless dishes, and watch her fall in love with whatever it took for her to be whole again.

She squeezed me tight, the muscles in her hands trembling from lack of use, or malnutrition, or maybe from the oozing return of life. We stayed that way for a long time, neither less shaken than the other, holding each other for the future we still had.

SHE COULD SHATTER INTO PIECES AT ANY MOMENT, LIKE A POORLY MOUNTED VASE.



THE IDEA OF YOU

AVALON HOGANS

I'm peeling oranges at the dinner table.

I'm listening to that song with the operatic hook,
the one that makes you cry.
What I'd pay to lick up your tears.
Your smile is so much more abstract than mine.
With all those red triangles and blue circles in your teeth
and those green loop de loops I get trapped in when I sleep.
I'm wrapped up in it,
the acidic torture of your laugh.
The kaleidoscopic curves of your vision
becoming mine that mimes mine minding yours.

I'm peeling oranges at the dinner table.

I'm taking the kitchen's granite tops for granted.
You haven't spoken to me in two weeks,
but I know you're thinking about me.
Because when I turn around it's 2:22 A.M.
And I can hear your laugh, the way it booms in the theater.

Yes, the oranges at the dinner table.

I remember our short conversation
when you told me not to doubt myself.
I took that as a sign that you want me as your meteor.
I took that as a sign that you like your juice pulp free.

The daisies stare at me, wilting.
The wooden chair creaks at every orange crushed.
Orange juice seeps into every paper cut on my fingers,
into every open wound of my heart
like I'm waiting for a bandage.
Like I'm waiting for a call back,
but it's too late.
Because all my secrets already take up your shadow,
and you don't even know it.

I wish I was closer to you.
I wish I was closer to you.

I burrow my head in your neck
and I seep into your bones and skin.

So now I'm squeezing oranges at the dinner table.

I wish you could taste these oranges at the dinner table.

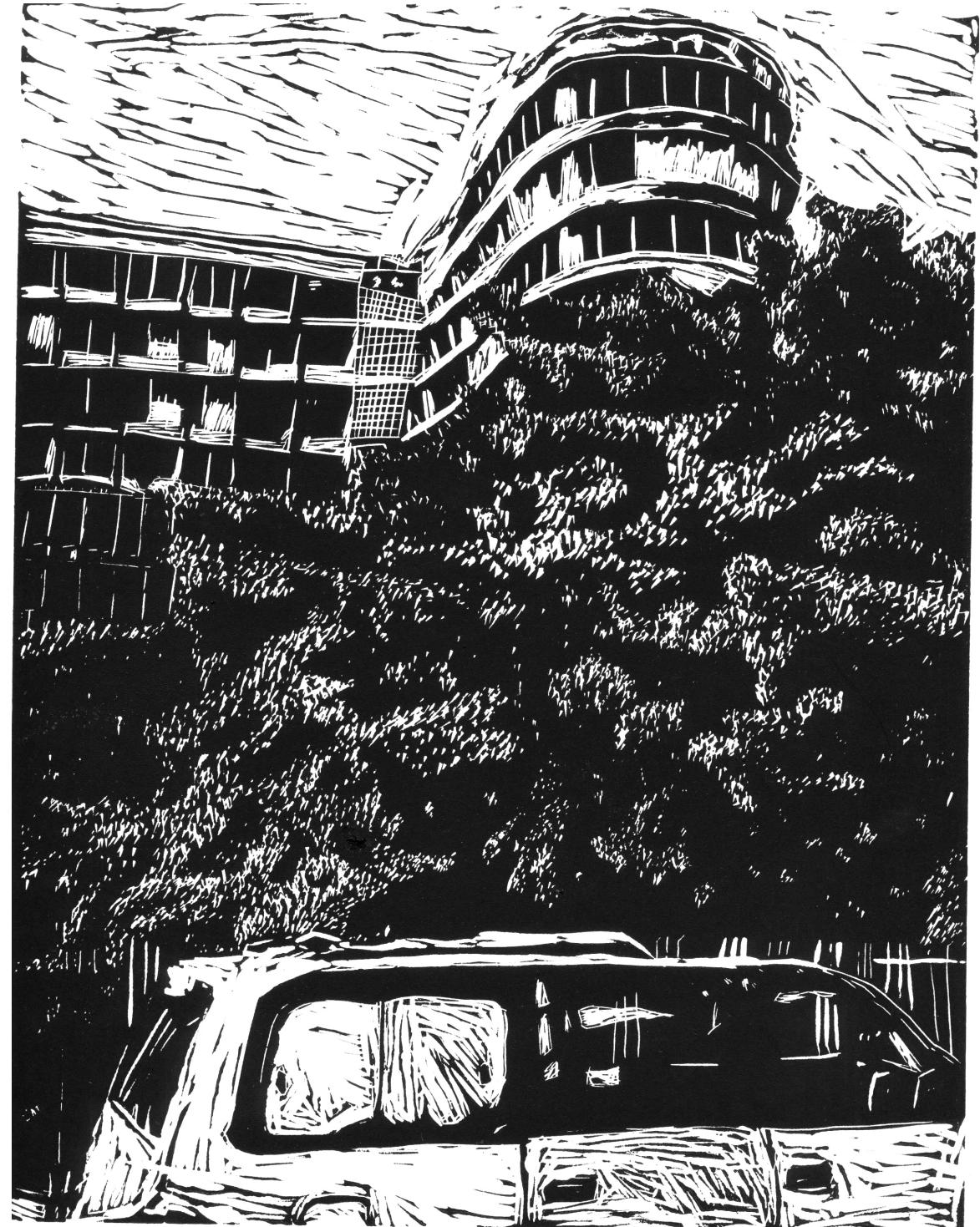
And before we know it,
we're ocean waves and soil and milky ways
and a king sized casket for two.
We bleed into each other until we discover religion.
Our crimson spirituality crochets the sunset to the hill.
We spit fire and rain and love from the sky.
You create new colors with your tongue.
I cradle the moon.
You down your orange juice.

You don't remember my name.
I know where to find you.
I know who your friends are.
They say you're painting with another girl.
I ram your head through a blank canvas.
I mix my misery in your juice
then slam the glass against your forehead
again and again, until you leave mine.
I see your skull and it's so plain and white and red.

My hands hurt like my heart.

I'm beating oranges at the dinner table.

I'm leaving the oranges at the dinner table.



REMEMBER, ICARUS

MADISON BARENDE

Mamá made wings from candle wax.
Remember, in the blinding dark
that snuck around the labyrinth walls
and daily solved our maze,
she dripped hot wax between our shoulder blades
in blessing.

*I remember choral car alarms
at night, and I remember slanted neon
and the sour scent of cigarettes
that drifted through our windows when
we searched for shreds of sky.*

She promised sky. She promised sky to us,
the language of deep waters sealing promises like pearls,
starlight tangled in your curls when you would walk
beyond the limits of the labyrinth, to the sea
to find stray seagull feathers, scattered in the gloom.

*And there were games we played
with temporary structures, chalk on concrete
washed away with each new rain,
imagined wonders shifting shape with each refrain,
imagined futures, in the distance
and the dark beyond the stars,
between parked cars.*

Between realities and stories told,
and seagulls on the parapets,
the boundaries of the labyrinth she designed,

the scent of candlewax, the sense
that it was time for us to finally cross the sea.

*Your skull became a beacon,
blinding light that you had swallowed,
spilling gold between your teeth,
and the acceptance letter trembling in your hand,
and silver seagull feathers sprouting from your hair.
The work of decades, waxen wings
adorning your shoulder blades, we watched
in devastation as you fell into the sky.*

Your silhouettes grew smaller with the distance
and your memory concealed by depths of fog,
unfathomed sky and sea surrounding,
ruddy brick and scent of oak, stars planted
solidly in void. I flew towards sunrise,
and forgot you, and the labor, and the neon
and the scent of melted wax.
Pale feathers made of airplane tickets
bore me towards the sun.

INCOMPLETE EXPLANATION OF MY SISTER

ANONYMOUS

CW: mention of suicide, PTSD, mention of sexual abuse, emotional neglect

I'm 3 and █ is 7. █ knows names of streets and kids in our Atlanta neighborhood, but all I know is I sometimes have dreams where toddlers walk upside down on the ceiling of my daycare. I don't know if these dreams predate my real first memory, which is driving with Mom in the UHaul onto our new street in a new state, watching Barney and eating crackers while Dad and █ follow in the car behind us.

My reality, save for dreams, starts here, long before the 72 hours.

█ goes to elementary and I go to preschool. █ has no friends, no neighborhood kids she's grown up with, but I'm still a sponge, and everyone I meet is a friend.

After 2 years, █ starts 4th grade at the gifted magnet school. She can't seem to make friends even here, where the students (allegedly smarter by a few dozen IQ points) should be nicer, kinder, unlike typical 11-year-old assholes. Puberty widens the social rift; █ grows breasts before other girls, and her classmates whisper that she's stuffing her bra. She adapts, using baggy clothes and bad posture to hide her unwelcomed womanhood. By middle school, █ is less bullied and more shunned.

Unfortunately, invisibility is sometimes worse than torment.

MY BEDROOM
TESSA DOMSKY



Long after the 72 hours, Mom tells me that she used to be terrified of [REDACTED]'s loneliness. She was worried someone would take advantage of it, give her attention

which was all she wanted

gain her trust

she was so little

she was so lonely

(could I have been her friend?)

I'm 13 or 7 or 10 and I hate how [REDACTED] lingers when my friends come over. On my kindest days, I don't interfere, but sometimes I act cruel; I steer the conversation to things she can't talk about—kids at school, makeup or clothes, or shows we like that [REDACTED] hates (or just doesn't have a special interest in, which might as well be the same thing). Or I just ignore her until she leaves, retreating to her room.

But there are days when I regret this.

Like when she says a brief 'hi' or just shuffles silently, maybe angrily, between the kitchen and her room.

(but we can't always know whether or not to blame ourselves for this, my parents and I. [REDACTED] has good days and bad days and bad weeks. Some days she wants to talk for hours and some days talking is like pulling teeth. It's up to my intuition to figure out which day today is.)

Or when a new friend comes over, and [REDACTED] falters making conversation, says something wrong or forgets the script, and when she walks away my friend crinkles their nose and says, "That was weird." And I feel my ears heat up and my throat twist, but I just shrug and say, "Yeah." I move on, but I really want

to strangle my new-friend, soon-to-be-not-friend. I want to make them hurt for saying what they weren't supposed to say out loud.

(because I hear myself—

my embarrassment

and my cowardice

and my judgment

—in the way they say, "that was weird")

Before the 72 hours, I'm 10 or 12 or 8 but mostly I'm in fourth grade because mostly [REDACTED]'s in eighth.

[REDACTED] and my parents are arguing over god knows what,

probably that her grades are falling because she hasn't turned in any homework assignments

probably because she spends all day in her room and says she was working but what was she doing?

What was she doing when my parents asked her all those times what she was doing?

probably because she mixes up her morning meds and her nighttime meds, which she's been taking since she was diagnosed with ADD at 8 or 10 or 2, so then she can't focus all day and she can't sleep all night and she can't focus all day

probably because my parents know she's gifted—they know it! She's smart enough to succeed so it must be a matter of will. Must be a problem that can be solved

probably solved by removing [REDACTED]'s bedroom door, so she can't be tempted to waste the day away behind it.

And I'm 10 and 12 and 8 and I'm playing on the family desktop computer, hearing and trying not to listen to the shouting, and Mom or Dad or some mix of them comes and tells me, "Thank you, Thank you for being so easy. Nobody has to check Your grades, make sure You turn in Your homework; nobody has to

take Your door off its hinges."

How wonderful it is to not be worried about.

I'm in college long after the 72 hours and my college friends ask me if my sister and I fought growing up—and they mean bicker and push and wrestle, fight—and the answer is always a boring "no."

Because I'm 8 and my best friends are Megan and Abby who are 9 and 7. They live next door and I go over to their house a lot. They fight relentlessly, in that special way siblings fight: name-calling, weaponized selfishness; the older ignoring, the younger tattling. The younger one fights to be a part of the world the older found first—and wants to keep to herself.

■■■ and I never fight, because I never bother her and her friends, because ■■■ doesn't have friends over, because ■■■ doesn't have friends. Despite my young age, I understand she doesn't have the social skills her peers have so keenly developed, and in spite of my age I'm kind enough not to voice that.

So Megan and Abby fight relentlessly over nothing, but when they start to get mean I tell them I'm going to leave their house if they can't get along. Their mother loves me for this. I love petting their dog and sitting on their big pleather couch and seeing what two sisters can be like. Fighting for space.

One saying, "Look, I'm leaving you," and the other begging, "Take me with you."

Just before the 72 hours, I'm 13, and as a hand is reaching to knock on our front door, I know what is about to happen. It's that strange intuition I won't be able to explain, won't possibly consider mentioning to my heartbroken parents. That before that knock hits my ears, I know ■■■ has texted short letters of departure to her contacts, made some kind of restless peace with herself, and swallowed a bottle of pills.

(What kind, I don't know exactly, but they were tame enough for Mom to label this a cry for help, an explanation of a suicide attempt much more appealing than, well, suicide.)

And it's the calm-but-firm voice of the EMT that haunts me for those quiet 72 hours, bouncing around my head as I try to picture his face. I try to conjure ■■■, wherever she is, but all that comes is the knock and that voice.

After the 72 hours, I'm in college and I'm 18 and 19 and 20 and this week I'm 21 and when I meet people sometimes they ask if I have any siblings

and I say yes I have a sister

and I say she's older

and I say she's 4 years older

and they keep asking

and I say she went to school in Tennessee

and if they press it I have to say

she dropped out or

she took medical leave and never went back or

she just has a lot of trouble.

She has trouble with her health, and she has trouble with jobs, and she has trouble doing most things a normal person could do.

And I want to say sometimes I have to be the person to help her do those normal person things and I hate that but I hate myself for hating it but I'm supposed to be her little sister. She doesn't help me choose a college or talk to boys or pick out prom dresses; I help her apply for a passport without having a panic attack.

And I help my parents too, when it's too hard for them. I moderate, or I act as messenger. I soften their requests of her; I translate her grievances into terms they'll understand.

AND I HATE THEM FOR THIS TOO: THE WAY I'M SUPPOSED TO BE BRAVER THAN THEM, KINDER THAN THEM, SOFTER THAN THEM.

And I hate them for this too: the way I'm supposed to be braver than them, kinder than them, softer than them.

I'm 12 going on 13 and I'm 19 in college all at once and the timing doesn't matter because the words Autism Spectrum Disorder have finally entered the conversation and made some things easier. Easier at 12 to answer my friends' "How is █?" questions. Easier at 19 to explain to strangers-who-will-become-my-friends why I seem more like an older sister than a younger one.

But sometimes diagnoses make things harder, too,

Like when explaining our relationship requires an alphabet soup's worth of acronyms;

Like when █ tells me her therapist said people can develop PTSD from emotional neglect in childhood, and I don't like what she's trying to say about my parents;

Like when I know all too well what depression, anxiety, and panic look like, so I would never dare use them to describe myself.

I'm 16 and in high school when my parents have to drive to Tennessee after the 72 hours because █ has checked herself into another 72-hour stay. I know I shouldn't worry. "This is a good thing," Mom consoles me, "She knows she needs help." I know she's right, and there's no use in me worrying, but I can't seem to focus on my schoolwork. My best friend is shaking me by my shoulders, begging me to ask my teachers for extensions, but all I can tell her is, "I'm fine! I don't need extra help."

Long after the 72 hours, I'm 20 and I'm home for winter break, and I'm glad to see █ because we go too long without talking while I'm at school. And I want to tell her that I'm so sorry I don't call her more—

(as if I'm the only one who can call and she's the only one who can answer, but that really is the reality, and I can't pretend to not know it)

And when we go too long without speaking, I don't know what kind of sister I'm going to come home to.

And I want to tell her I'm sorry that when I visit home it feels like I'm on vacation but she's a prisoner of some kind, and I'm almost taunting her with my freedom when I say goodbye to board the plane back to Houston. And I don't know how she got stuck back in Florida after she made it out.

(I mean, we both know the facts. She escaped Florida by going to college, but then she dropped out instead of killing herself, and then she stayed in Tennessee because of her boring downer incel boyfriend but eventually she left him, which I'm glad for because I was worried she never would, and so there was nothing anchoring her anywhere and Florida's gravity dragged her back "home.")

So we reconnect and maybe I help her feel less stuck, less left behind.

But before long she tells me something I don't want to hear, like what Mom said that made it hard for her to eat in front of other people, or how when Dad said, "It's not fair," that made her think he'd be happier if she were dead. And my stomach turns and my face gets hot, And I want to tell her to stop lying about my parents,

I mean our parents,

And I want to go scream in the faces of her parents,

I mean our parents.

But most of all I want to be 3 and 9 and 13 again so I can tell her I love her so much more than I ever

said. So I can tell Mom not to worry, I won't let █ be so starved for attention that somebody molests her—and while I'm at it I can beg her never to poison my brain with that fear. And I can tell Dad that I'll make sure █ does her homework, you don't need to take away her door again, and by the way that's a pretty fucked up punishment! And I can tell all of my friends that they're going to be her friend now too, and nobody can say it's weird, even if she's weird (our 3 and 9 and 13-year-old vocabulary fails us), and maybe we should be friends with the other weird kids at school too so they don't ever think the world is better off without them.

After the 72 hours, █ comes through the front door of our house and I stand right there, right in front of her, right there so she can take me in her soft arms and hold me tight against her shoulder and I can feel that she's sorry, I can feel that she's saying I'm sorry and I didn't mean it and I know you would've stopped me if you knew. And I'm saying it right back to her, I'm saying I'm sorry I wasn't there, whatever I've ever said I didn't mean it, I'm sorry I wasn't a better friend,

(I'm sorry I'm not a better sister)

But really we're just holding each other, silently. Her arms around me have never felt more There, I have never felt more Here. And if we let go I'll float away and she'll sink, so we'll just stay there, standing, holding, waiting.

DOGWOOD

TESSA DOMSKY



AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW PORTER

EDITED BY AMELIA TSAI, BASMA BEDAWI, KAYLA PEDEN,
KYRA MCKAUFFLEY and ARIANA WANG

Andrew Porter is the author of *The Disappeared*, published in April 2023 and longlisted for The Story Prize. New York Times described *The Disappeared* as “filled with subliminal strangeness and endings of uncanny attenuation.” He currently teaches at Trinity University in San Antonio as Director of the Creative Writing Program. R2 spoke to Andrew to learn more about his views on navigating adulthood, his writing process, and advice for younger writers. This interview was edited for brevity and clarity.



R2: Do you have a particular memory of when you thought writing fiction was something you would do as a career? Can we go back in time and start with you as a younger person?

Andrew: Sure, absolutely. It was in college that I first became serious about writing. I knew I loved writing more than anything else, and I just wanted to figure out: how can I have a life in which I'm able to do that? Around that time, I started to study the lives of other writers who were maybe 10 or 20 years ahead of me. What I discovered is that they all took slightly different paths, and some of them fairly circuitous paths, but a lot of them went to graduate school, did these MFAs, which I knew nothing about at that time. That was a first step toward committing to the [writing] life. But even after I finished graduate school, even after I

finished my MFA, there were years where I was really still considering going in a different direction. Because it's a hard life, particularly when you're starting out. And I was worried about, am I gonna be able to do this? Am I gonna be able to afford to pay my rent? And there were times when I hadn't been writing for a while, I was low on money, and I would go to the library or the bookstore and look at the LSAT guide. So even into my late twenties, I was still vacillating a little bit. Then I got a job, a visiting writer position at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, and I thought, these people are hiring me to be a visiting writer for a year. I was probably about 26 or so, or 27, and I thought, okay, I have to live up to that. That's when I really fully committed. But there were quite a few years where I was not sure, and that's very natural. Even at your age, I was really nervous about the idea of it. None of my friends in college were doing anything remotely like that. They were all pursuing much more practical career paths, and so I was nervous, but I was committed to figuring out a way to make it work.

R2: Do you think your perception of Texas has kind of evolved after having it so prominently featured in your stories?

Andrew: Texas is a weird place. It is a complicated place, but I don't have complicated feelings about San Antonio. I really love San Antonio, and I also love Austin and Houston. Setting the stories in these places is a way of celebrating them. I wanted this book not to be a critique of these places, I wanted to be more of a celebration of them, but my version of San Antonio is simply that, right? One person, or actually a number of people, pointed out to me that even though the book feels like Texas, it's not the kind of Texas that a lot of people imagine, right? It's a Texas of artists and academics and that type of thing. That's my world, and those are the kinds of circles that exist in here. In many ways, this version of San Antonio is just my version of my little world here. I wanted it to reflect the mood and the feel that I associate with it. So I don't know how well that translates to readers, but for me—those stories really reflect the way that I think of this little part of Texas where I live.

R2: We noticed there's a lot of ambiguities and questions that never get answered in your stories. For instance, in “Austin,” we never find out what's causing the strange noises, and in “Vines,” we never learn

for sure whether or not Maya is the person in Lionel's painting. We were wondering, when you write these stories, do you have the answer for those questions already in mind, do you come up with that afterward, or are they unknown and ambiguous even to you?

Andrew: Yeah, they are. I have always loved to leave unanswered questions in stories, and ambiguities that are ambiguities even to me. For the examples you gave, I don't have answers for those. I just decided not to decide for myself. I do that because it keeps that story interesting to me, but it's also because life is filled with ambiguities. So often, when we experience an event, or a series of events like the characters in these stories, we're left with some questions that will never be answered about that experience, right? So I personally have always liked leaving unanswered questions, and I also like it in other people's stories when there's certain things that are left unanswered. Those end up being the things that in my classes we talk about over and over, and debate.

R2: We also noticed a theme of stagnation during life after youth in these stories. Since we're about to enter a post-college life where we have more freedom to make our own choices, to what extent do you feel like the stories in *The Disappeared* are a cautionary tale or an "I see you" moment? How did you view life after youth while writing this collection?

Andrew: I mean, a story like "Rhinebeck," that story is kind of a cautionary tale, right? That's a story that is warning people not to live in this false reality for too long, or you may end up 40 years old and in exactly the same place you were when you were 23. But other stories, I don't know if they're cautionary tales, they're just kind of what happens to you in life when you reach a certain age. They're more reflections of things that I think a lot of people my age and even younger have to confront. But none of you have to worry about that for a while.

R2: How do you write the endings of your stories?

Andrew: For me, an ending either appears during the process of writing the story, where I see that final moment and I know, 'okay, this is how it's gonna end.' Or if that doesn't happen, then it tends to elude

me for a little bit, and often it's the last thing that I do, where the rest of the story is 80 or 90% done, and I'm just stuck figuring out how to end it. But I guess I know when an ending doesn't work. It'll bother me because it'll be like, this is an okay ending, but it's not great or it's just not resonating in the way I want, so I'll just keep going back. One of the things I discovered in doing that is that the answer to that question of 'how do I end it?' is almost always in whatever I've written so far. So what I do is I go back, and I really reflect on what else is happening in the story. What have I introduced? What themes are there, what images, what objects, what details, what's something that I could bring back?

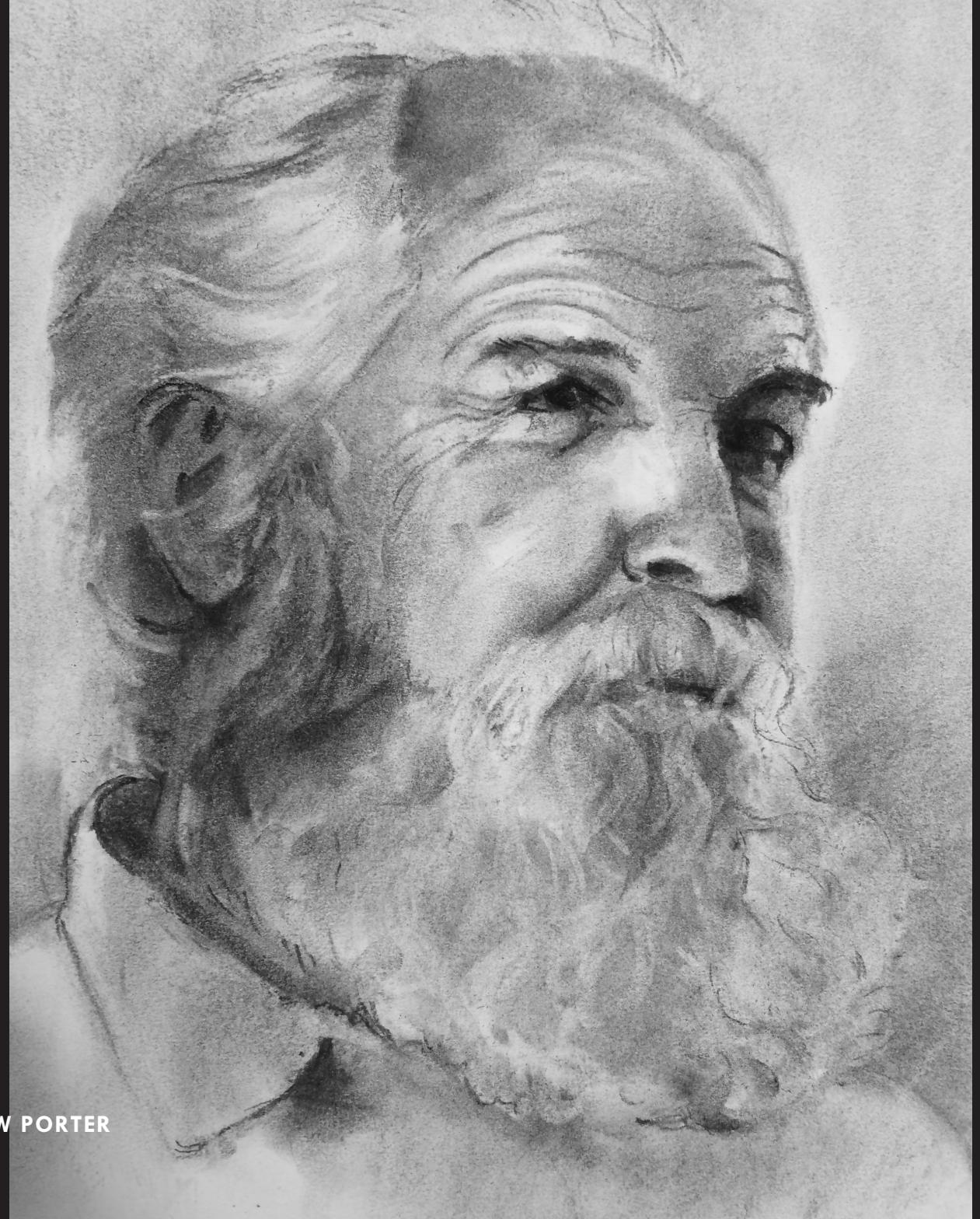
R2: What advice do you have for aspiring writers and writers trying to break into the publishing world?

Andrew: One piece of advice that I always give to my own students who are graduating is I encourage them to find community. When you're an undergraduate, you look around the room, and you have a community of other like-minded people, right? And you feel like being a writer is totally normal, and you have friends who are doing it. But when you're out in the real world, so to speak, you can feel like you're the only one who's doing this, so it's very important to seek out other writers who you can connect with. Even if you don't like to show your work to other writers, just [meet] for coffee and talk about books or talk about your writing projects in a general way. It's so important to feel validated. You can find a community in an MFA program. You can find it in a writers group. You can find it in any number of places. But you can also just find it by connecting or staying in touch with writer friends. And for me, that got me through those years of self doubt, when I was really not sure if I could do it. And naturally a lot of students do go on to MFA programs and that becomes a place where they begin to build that community, but you can even find it online on Twitter, although Twitter is no longer Twitter.

In terms of breaking into publishing, the first thing I'd say is make sure that you're ready to venture into that. Make sure that you're at a place with your work where you feel ready for that. Because there is a lot of rejection for everybody. For example, when I was your age, I wasn't ready to send out to literary journals quite yet because I was still too overly sensitive and too full of self-doubt to make myself vulnerable in that

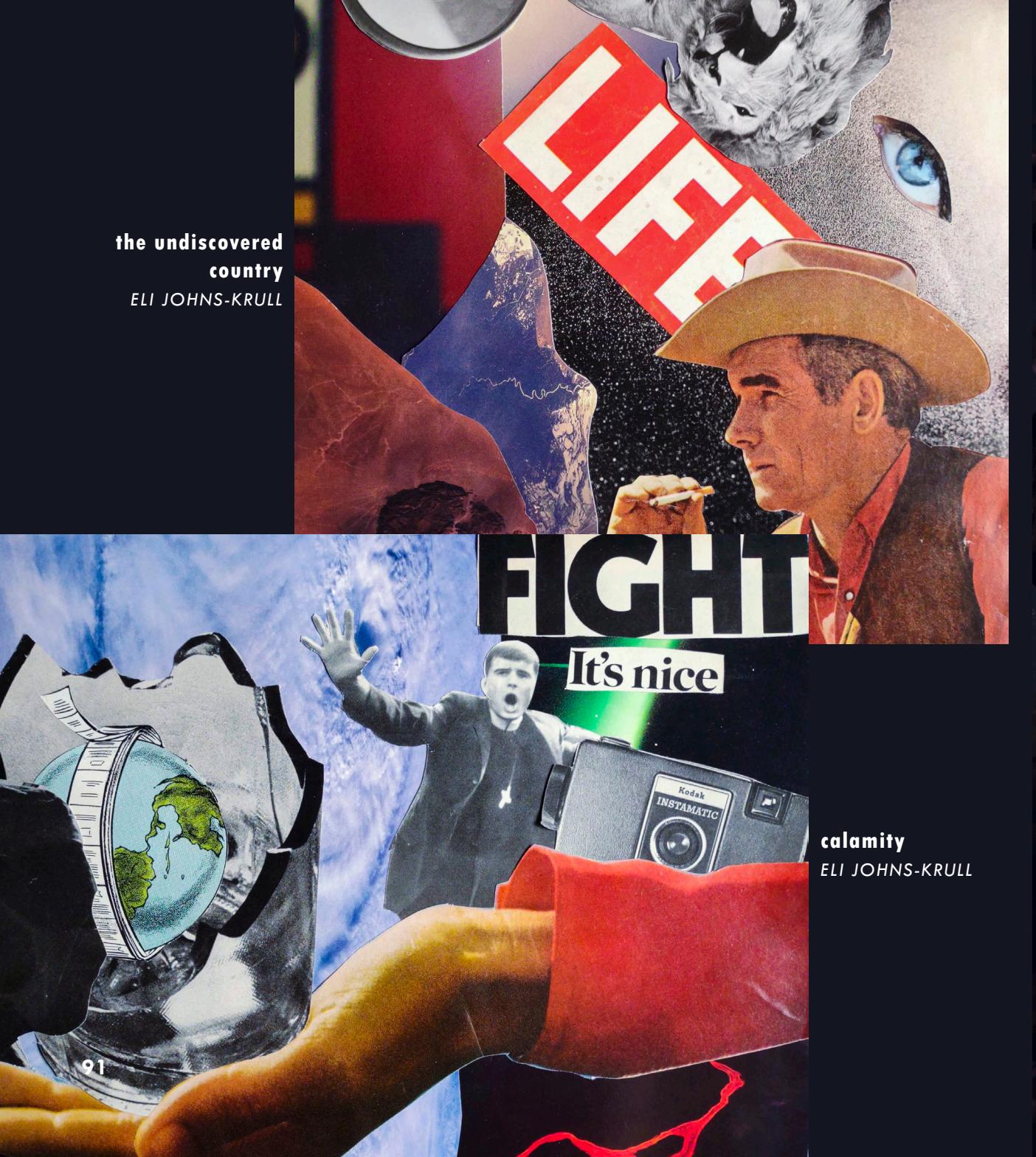
UNTITLED

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way. But not too long after that, I started to feel ready for it. So I would just say, build your body of work, figure out what you're doing artistically, and then venture into the publishing world, because when you feel confident about what you're doing, it's much easier to stomach the inevitable rejection, which is a part of every single writer's life. All of your writing professors have faced rejection, you know, everybody does. And so you need to be ready mentally to handle that. But beyond that, I mean, it's just—just send out. You've got to cast a wide net, keep knocking on doors until doors begin to open. I don't know that there's a secret recipe to it, I think it's just persistence and not getting down when things are not working out. I'll tell you something that helped me a lot when I was beginning to send out work, which was that every time I got a rejection for a story, I would throw it out, and then I would immediately send out the same story somewhere else. So I always had the same number of stories out there, but the way I dealt with the rejection is like, okay, I'm not gonna think about this. I'm gonna cast another story out into the universe. I'm gonna knock on another door and see if it opens. That was helpful to me. Breaking into the larger publishing world with books and stuff like that, that's a whole other thing, but I think at your age, and in the years to come, publishing is largely about just getting comfortable sending your work to magazines and stuff like that. Or at least that's how it was for me.

the undiscovered
country
ELI JOHNS-KRULL



calamity
ELI JOHNS-KRULL



“What are we going to do about Mom?”

SPRING CHENJP

CW: terminal illness, medical procedures

“What are we going to do about Mom?” Oliver asks.

He’s hunched over the wheel, staring at the Chevy in front of us. I suck the last of my latte through the straw. It’s cloyingly sweet. I’ve been eating junk every day this week, but it’s okay. I’ll get back on track after all this is over with.

“Nothing. It’ll be fine,” I reply.

I turn back to the passenger side window. It’s almost dark. I’ll have to hurry if I’m making it to girls’ night.

Or maybe it went a little something like this:

“What are we going to do about Mom?” Oliver asks.

He’s hunched over the wheel, staring at the Chevy in front of us. The rain’s coming down hard, and he turns the wipers up. All it does is smear motor grease around the windshield. He needs to wash the car, scrape the bird droppings off the hood. I’m not going to tell him that now.

The watered-down hospital latte goes in the cupholder, on top of some crumpled receipts and loose change. I’m almost done with it, my third

one today. Already I feel the ache behind my eyes from too much caffeine and too little sleep.

“We wait.”

Or maybe not that. Maybe this is better:

“What are we going to do about Mom?”

Oliver’s knuckles are white on the wheel. I can’t imagine it’s comfortable with all the rings he’s got on—three thick ones on each hand, edgy pseudo-occultist symbols—but maybe he wants the pressure. Something to ground him.

I bought him his first ring for his 16th birthday. It was worth four hours of flipping pizza dough until my forearms ached, scrubbing plastic containers clean of pepperoni and chicken bits with scorching water and cheap disinfectant, rushing from class to work to the library and doing it all over again the next day. I chose good sterling silver from a reputable company (limited restock, took ages to ship). I search his rings, but he’s not wearing it.

I put my watered-down hospital latte in the cupholder. The straw’s mangled with bite marks, and my tongue feels tender from running it over the plastic in circles. “I’m not sure.”

I look away, dodging the stare I know is coming. The silence stretches on. I consider half a dozen



WHAT WE LEAVE BEHIND

CHASE FOSTER

responses, then non sequiturs, imagining how the words would hang in the air.

At a loss, I repeat myself. "I don't know."

Or:

"What are we going to do about Mom?"

"I'll tell Dad," I say. I realize he'll probably outlive her at the rate things are going. Wonder what karmic intervention lengthened his life at the expense of hers. Remember the story our mother told us about her first date with the handsome boy in her university class, sharing a mango tart in a four-star hotel. Think about the old man lying in bed, browsing the Internet or watching old Chinese movies, anything to pass the long days and longer nights after retirement. Picture the too-large house, four bedrooms and two-and-a-half baths for children who've fled the nest and grandparents dead long before their visa applications were processed.

I FEEL A SUDDEN LONGING FOR MY LITTLE BROTHER INSTEAD OF THE MAN SITTING NEXT TO ME IN A DESIGNER TEE AND RIPPED JEANS.

"What are we going to do about Mom?"

"When did you get a perm?" The soft words and solutions I think of stick in my throat, so instead I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. Last time I saw Oliver, his hair was stick-straight, hanging limply over his forehead in a sad attempt to grow it out. I made fun of him for it then, but now I feel a sudden longing for my little brother instead of the man sitting next to me in a designer tee and ripped jeans. His brow furrows, and he glances at me, a quick sideways flit of his eyes before returning to the road. He hunches tighter over the wheel, and I feel the sudden acceleration pressing me back into my seat as the speedometer ticks up another five miles.

We don't speak for the rest of the drive.

"What are we going to do about Mom?"

"Does it matter?"

Appointment after appointment, papers pushed in front of me that I skimmed and signed because the doctors told me it was the best option. Even if I sat down and read the damn things, I wouldn't have understood the jargon anyways. Ventilators and feeding tubes. No one told me you can't talk with a feeding tube in. I thought it was a big straw you drink nutrient sludge out of; I figured it'd taste nasty, but that it'd be a thousand times better than cutting a hole into her throat and feeding her that way. Listening to my mother try to talk through the delirium of pain meds and not understand that she can't, hearing the hiss of aborted breath over plastic tubing because I can't explain modern medical interventions in my broken Cantonese. Having to tell her, over and over again, she can't talk, she has to rest, and not being able to explain why.

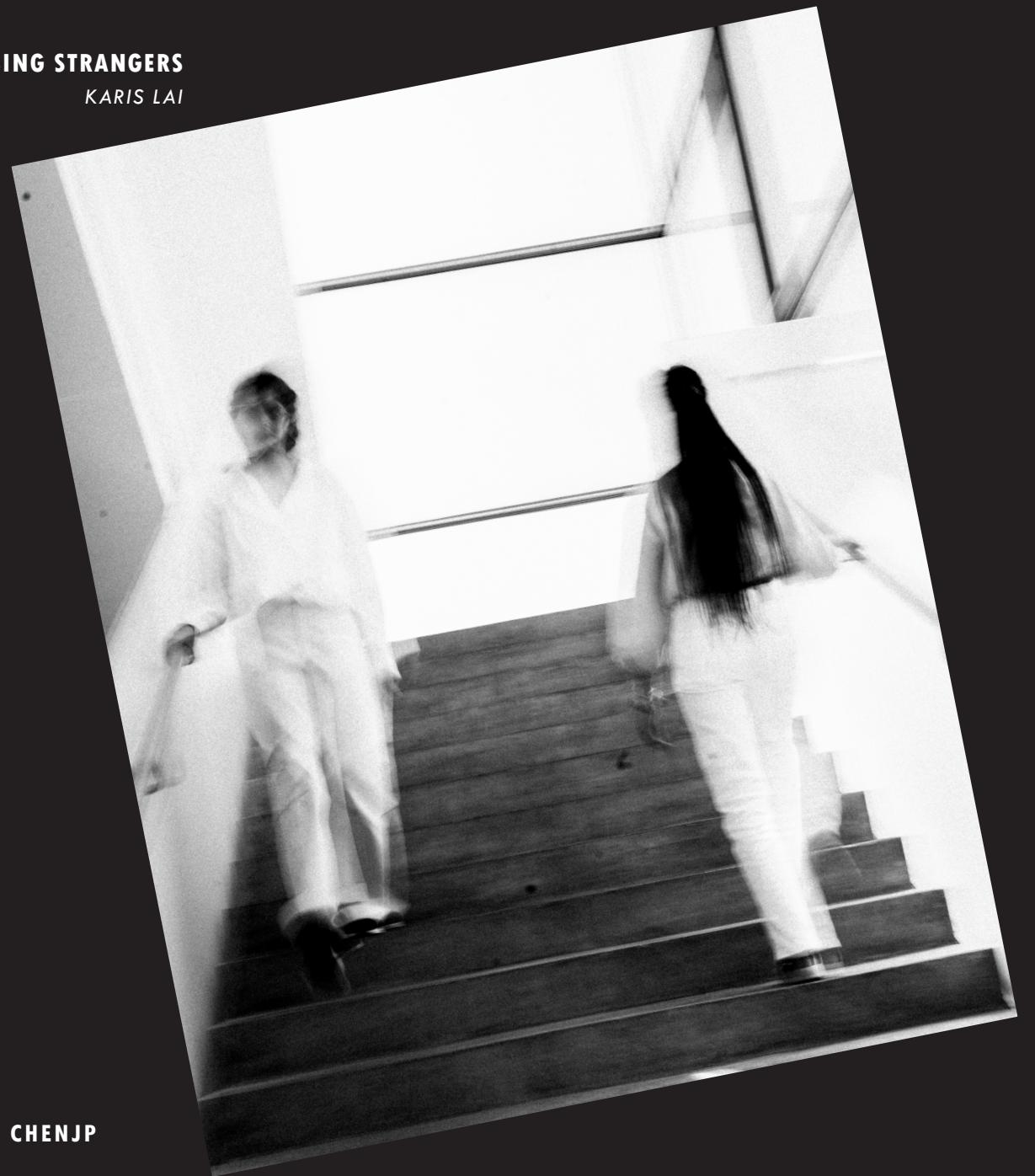
He looks my way, his tone high with shock before sliding into something decidedly more bitter. "Yeah. It does, actually."

You're deflecting, he means, though he won't voice it. Not now, when we send each other funny tweets and pictures and make very little conversation that matters. Not after I couldn't make cousin Roro's wedding because I was traveling for work, or our family vacation because I had to close a deal, "all hands on deck, this is the big one." Maybe he would have said it straight, way back when I was in college and homesick, but there's five years between then and now.

"What are we going to do about Mom?"

He's glaring. The Chevy's going five under the speed limit. Not that we have anywhere to be. Not that there are many more appointments we'll have to make.

I crumple the coffee cup in my fist. It makes the soft, pathetic sound of paper scrunching, half-drowned



out by the rain on the windshield. “I don’t fucking know! What am I supposed to do about it!?”

Then, very quietly, half to myself, eyes on a drop of milky brown coffee dangling from the rim of the cup, right over my bright white pants. “I thought you’d know.”

“What are we going to do about—”

The Chevy we’re following brakes. Oliver swears, stomps on the brakes, slams both our heads against the headrests. In slow motion, I watch my lukewarm latte spill all over my white pleated pants.

“Fuck!” Not thinking, I dive into the glovebox, rooting around for the napkins Mom always kept there before it became Oliver’s car. My fingers close around something soft and plasticky, and I pull it out. There’s five little rectangular pills in a beat-up plastic bag, one of them cut in half. “What the—”

“Don’t.” Oliver’s tailgating the Chevy as we pick up speed, keeping us uncomfortably close. I see his lips purse, watch his fingers tighten on the wheel.

“What do you mean, ‘don’t?’ What is this, how did you even—”

“It’s just Xanax!” He glares at me, actually looks away from the road and into my eyes, and I have the sudden urge to giggle because if I don’t, I’ll scream. It’s so childish and exactly like how we used to argue, but we’re going eighty on the freeway, and I can barely make out the road ahead of us in the downpour.

His head snaps back to the road. I can see the tension in his shoulders, the red spots rising in his cheeks. I’m still holding the plastic bag. I inch it back towards the glove box, drop it in like it’s burning me, slam the compartment shut.

The coffee is drying, cold and sticky on my lap. I shift uncomfortably, tug at my pants, let go because they were expensive and I don’t want to stretch them out even if they’re already ruined. I watch Oliver signal, switch lanes with a jerk of his wheel, pass the Chevy.

“It’s just Xanax,” he mumbles again, and I feel furious tears pricking the back of my eyes.

“What are we going to do about Mom?”

He’s not looking at me.

It takes me a second to process that he’s speaking, another to make sense of his words. I’m leaning my head against the window, half-closed eyes turning the motion blur of the streetlights into patterns of light and dark against my lids. Halfway dozing, leaning against the door and focusing on the vibration of the engine against my skull, I tell him, “I don’t think more chemo’s going to help.”

I turn my head towards him when he doesn’t respond, allow the blur of blinding white t-shirt and dark jeans to sharpen into my brother. Take in the shudder of his exhale and the reflection of the Chevy’s taillights in his eyes. Slowly, conspicuously, I rest my head back against the window and close my eyes so we can both pretend he’s the only one crying.

I wish it went like:

“What are we going to do about Mom?”

He’s playing something electronic, a slow beat and synths behind pitched-up vocals, but he’s turned the volume down to talk. I feel my foot tapping to the rhythm and, out of long-ingrained habit, fight the urge to nod in time or betray any other sign of, god forbid, liking his music.

“She doesn’t like parties, and we don’t have anyone to invite anyways. I’ll make a dinner reservation.”

Some upscale Chinese place—not “Chinese-inspired,” actually Chinese. Not in Seattle’s Chinatown because she says it’s unsafe, but maybe some place we haven’t been before. A nicer one, with a trendy cocktail selection and smaller portions. I can afford it now. She can’t eat much after a chemo session, but we can take it home for later so she won’t have to cook. We’ll make sure to order something that reheats well, then.

“Can we do Din Tai Fung?”

I glance at Oliver, surprised. We haven’t been in years, since the day we went to Wild Waves water park. I was in eighth grade, so he would’ve been in fourth. I didn’t realize he remembered.

“Of course we can do Din Tai Fung.”

But really, it almost went like:

“What are we going to do about Mom?”

I glance at my brother. Take in the dark circles under his eyes, the grown-out stubble, the nail beds raw and red from being picked at. We’re in the fast lane, going fifteen over the speed limit with the wipers on high, and I can barely see the divider lines. Oliver doesn’t pull off. I don’t tell him to.

“I think she wanted to be buried,” I reply.

There’s a plot of land somewhere in southwest China at the edge of a little farming village thick with the smell of livestock in the summer heat. I’d say Guangdong Province, but with a flash of guilt, I realize I don’t know Chinese geography well enough to be certain. It’s surrounded by four walls and no roof, with a small shrine to Buddha or some other deity I never asked the name of, and ash from countless sticks of incense ground into the stone floor. I can’t imagine putting my mother to rest there. Not after spending her entire life trying to escape it.

I consider an American cemetery, filled with rows of crosses and overshadowed by a church. My mother left the church after a year. I can’t put her in the ground next to people who don’t speak her language either.

Oliver’s eyes flick to mine in the rearview mirror. It’s adjusted wrong. I fight the urge to straighten it for him. “When did she tell you that?” he asks.

“Never.”

Because I can't think about how it actually went:

"What are we going to do about Mom?"

"Sorry, what?" My work phone's buzzing. I fish it out of my pocket. "Sorry, I have to reply to this," I say.

"This is important, Erika."

My schedule's packed. My heart rate's picking up just thinking about it. There's too few hours in the day to get all of this done, and too few in the next, and the next one after that.

"Can we not talk about this right now?"

"Not talk about it? Are you serious?" Oliver bites off the words, swerves into the next lane, and nearly

**HE'S TRYING VERY, VERY HARD
NOT TO SCREAM, OR CRY, OR
BOTH AT THE SAME TIME.**

clips the Chevy. My head snaps to the left and the seatbelt cuts into my chest. "Not talk about it like you didn't talk to me about—"

"What the hell, don't drive like that, I don't want to die—"

"Well, Mom didn't want to either!" Oliver's face is contorted in a way that means he's trying very, very hard not to scream, or cry, or both at the same time. "That's the one thing she wanted, a long life, and you—"

"You weren't picking up, I knew it'd wipe her savings and quality of life after—"

We're shouting over one another now, the car's swerving with Oliver's white-knuckle grip on the wheel and his sharp overcorrections along the curve of the highway.

"You could have waited! We could have decided together—"

"Are you serious? The doctors said I had minutes, and don't drive like this, you'll kill us both—"

Just like that, the fight leaves him. Oliver eases off the gas, slumps down in the seat. Merges out of the fast lane. I glance at him, then the road, then the droplets smacking against the windshield. Look back at him.

"Why." His question comes out like a statement. "Why'd you sign it."

I open my mouth to defend my reasons—it's what the doctors advised, my research told me it was humane, he'd been fighting me on it for months, if it wasn't yesterday, it'd be another day next week, or the month after that, certainly before Christmas—and shut it, knowing I can't find one he'd accept.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asks again. Then, as we take the exit that leads home, back to where my father will be staying up late waiting to hear about what should have been a routine visit, spoken so soft that it's almost a whisper, so soft that I'm not even sure I heard it right, "You killed her."



ELEGY ON A BREAKUP

SADIE SIEGEL

When you walked from the fields, never to return
the stalks of the corn we had husked bent to the soil and wept
shriveled into the dirt they faced
and the underripe peaches we left on the trees dropped like rocks
to be stolen and treasured by squirrels.

I cursed the land for its slow and cinematic retreat
to wilderness. The grass and vines tried to overtake the forest
in the clumsy way of young nature, so long forgetting
its last freedom from order. Neat rows of saplings
you nursed and pruned, now rotted and misshapen
twisting under weight of wild honeysuckle.

I watched the decay from my window
over tea and whiskey

and wept with joy that our crops might be erased
by the ground which fed their bloom
so morbid and right.

BLUEBONNET EYES
BRYAN MENDOZA



But in this fallow
I'm afraid the weeds have sprouted in our buried garden
Clovers dotting orchard groves and
Sweet dandelions mourning trampled thickets.

Those flowers scorned, plucked to save the host
now whispering light and soft
from the roots I let dry out in darkness.

And I linger on the weeds
with a nostalgia stained by jealousy
For they are the only ones remembering our fruits and grain.

Dandelion, what was the taste of the blackberry
and the soft touch of the peachskin?

They know the roots are firm and dry.

And I ask the weeds,

Do they know what you are growing now?
Do you remember what we grew then?



EL PAYASO

ANWULI CHUKWUMAH



In forward slash visible still

CAL MASCARDO

one cut won't hurt

EMILY HUYNH

I am cutting my hair in the bathroom,
five-dollar scissors hacking their way
through the strands of hair I have
pinched between finger and thumb.

There's a plastic bag in the sink which
I dissected with a kitchen knife.

I looked into the hair donation process earlier.
It requires a lot of planning, said the Internet.
*The hair must be eight to twelve inches long and
bound by rubber bands, but your recipient will be grateful.*

Planning: there was
five minutes between me Googling *hair scissors* and buying them
one day between buying them and them arriving in my mailbox
half an hour between them arriving and me sawing away with the blades.

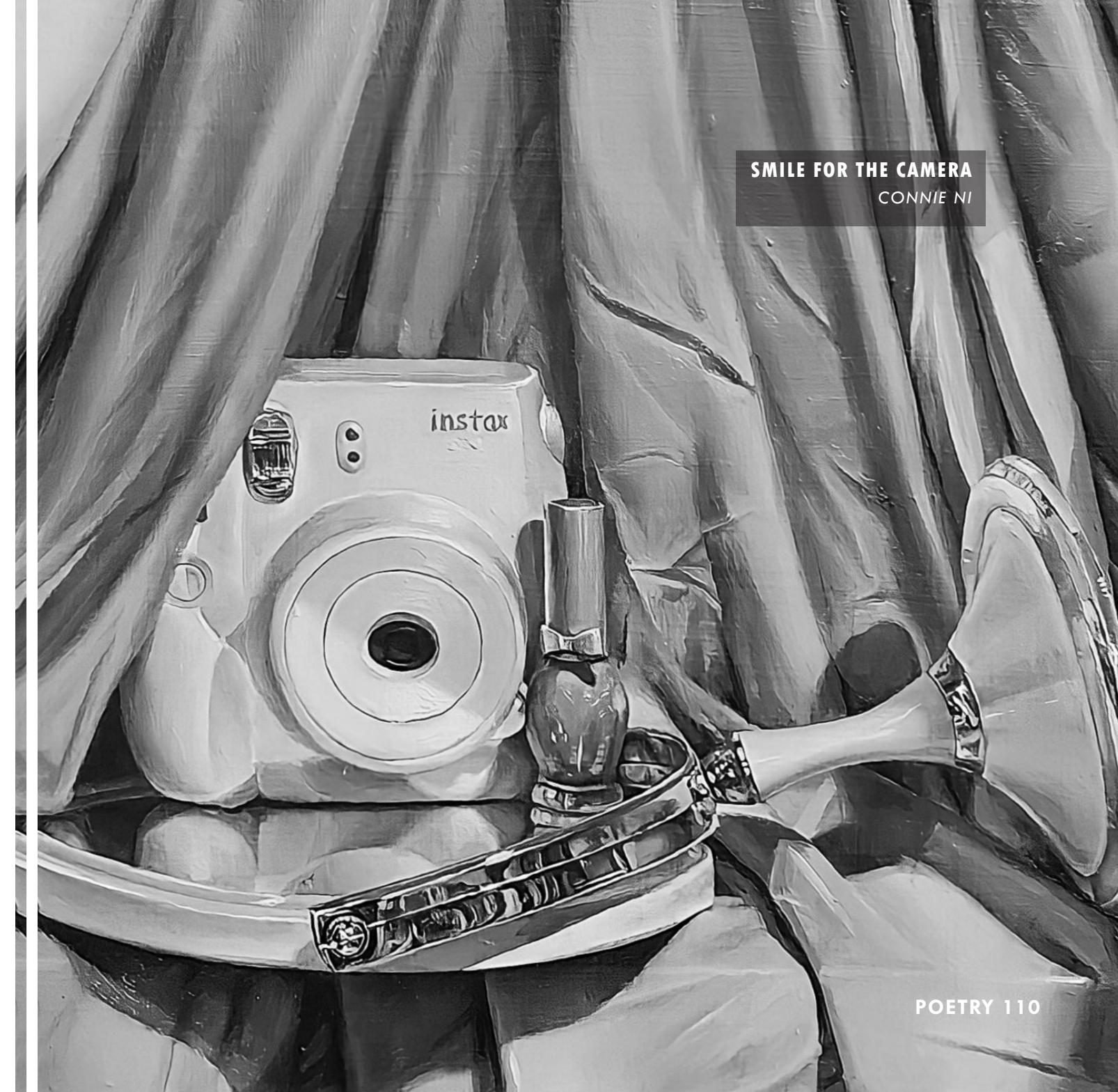
I looked at the scissors and thought,
These are not what I need, but they will do.

Back home, *Babà* cut my hair, holding it
delicately between calloused fingers
as we sat in the yard for hours. Careful not
to cut too much; long hair means a long life,
a beautiful daughter.

I'm sorry, Babà, I think, looking at the ragged edges in the mirror,
every cut as clear as day in the locks framing my face—
for cutting too much,
for failing to be a daughter,
for leaving home so he can never cut my hair again.

(In the movies, a girl cutting Her hair is meant to be a symbol of empowerment. But I am not a symbol, or a girl, or free. I am eighteen and hating the feeling of hair touching the small of my back, beneath a fan that is not mine, beneath a roof that is not mine, beneath a sky that is not mine. I am cutting my hair in the bathroom, and grieving for a thing I cannot know.)

SMILE FOR THE CAMERA
CONNIE NI





RAJA
IVANSHI AHUJA



THE COLLECTOR
CONNIE NI



AS ABOVE SO BELOW

TESSA DOMSKY



WHAT WE HOLD

JINA PARK

CW: domestic abuse

I often think about hands. More specifically, I think about the Victorians, who sculpted disembodied hands out of porcelain and appraised the worth of a woman by the calluses on her fingers. I think about the Egyptians, who cut off the hands of their enemies to ensure that their foes, in their mutilated form, would be denied entry to the afterlife. I think about Jesus, who saw Peter drowning in the water and extended his hands to save him.

It must be an inane thing to think about, these hands. But the truth is that two maidens in Pompeii held hands moments before their death by volcanic eruption, and the world has never forgotten them since.

A truth that a violinist may tell you—with a sour look on their faces, no doubt—is that part of a violinist’s potential depends heavily on the genetic lottery. The ability to stretch your hand to an octave chord, the width of eight whole notes and the length of a scale, without practice and without pain, is a coveted gift among musicians. Niccolò Paganini, born in 1782 with Marfan syndrome and known for his abnormally large hands, went on to compose devilishly difficult pieces that only he, with his long fingers, could play with ease. In the modern day, mastery of Paganini’s works is a highly lauded feat: that a violinist with palms of average size and fingers of average length could master the techniques necessary to reach the height of the “Devil’s violinist” himself.

My hands have never been enough for music. My pinky is about the size of my little toe and my fingers stopped growing after the sixth grade. Someone like Paganini, then, was far beyond my reach. I didn’t stop trying, but sometimes you have to grow up to know when to give in.

Here is a simple fact: no two people—not even identical twins—will have the same fingerprint.

Fingerprints form as the fetus inside the womb, still a developing clump of cells, rubs its fingers against its mother's uterus to create a random expression of ridges and whorls. In a world where more than one person can share the same name, fingerprints then become our most certain identifier. And so the marks we leave behind—smudges on glass panels, imprints on a dusty shelf, streaks left on concrete chalk—remain as an echo of where we've been and what we've done.

The truth is that I want to leave a part of myself behind, even long after everyone has forgotten my name. Maybe some distant years into the future, someone will see an imprint of what I've left behind and send a thought into the beyond—an acknowledgement that someone like me really did exist.

Suppose a musician stood before the Victorians, except she was a woman. Years of practice with her instrument warped her fingers into ugly, misshapen masses, yet the music she could play, once her stiff fingers let her play at all, was so beautiful that it could have come straight from the angels themselves.

Suppose now that you are the Victorian, present to judge the musician's worth by her beauty. Which factor outweighs the other?

Back when the women in my family were still religious, my mother and I used to pray. She'd cradle my fingers in hers, bow her head, and whisper rapid prayers in Korean. I only understood half of what she said—partially due to the language barrier, partially because I was distracted by the way her hands felt around mine, something warm and soft and gentle. It felt good to be held.

As I grew, the physical distance between us widened like a growing fissure. When I hit puberty, it became embarrassing to hold my mother's hand; when I hit my twenties, it became too shameful to ask for it again. And so I never did.

I can't remember the last time we held hands. But that's the funny thing, isn't it? A mother's touch is

both something you can never forget and something you will always long for.

The anatomy of a hand is a complex thing. With 27 bones, over 100 ligaments, and an intricate cross-hatching labyrinth of veins and nerves, our hands make up the most flexible part of our bodies. Interestingly enough, the fingers contain no muscles; each fine movement is controlled by the cerebellum, which fires a neural impulse to upper motor neurons that will carry the electrical signal down to the small muscles in the wrist and hand. These fine movements allow us to carry out the minuscule motions in life: writing a letter to a mother, tucking the hair behind a child's ear, wrapping your fingers around a lover's palm. These hands can hold so little and so much all at once. With these hands, we create machines; we form art, we write stories, and we make music. We change history.

For a while, I tried to make music. But to play the violin is to know pain, and I have known that pain for over ten years now. Once, I ripped my fingers on the violin's strings and watched blood drip off of the steel and onto the fingerboard, so dark against the ebony that it looked like pomegranate juice. When I told my violin teacher why I had band-aids on at my lesson, she laughed in sympathy and gave me a small bottle of what looked like nail polish.

"For the cuts," she said. When I looked at her in confusion, she explained, "You can't practice with a band-aid; you won't be able to feel for the notes on the fingerboard. This will help you keep practicing."

That night, I uncapped the polish while my mother looked on in muted horror. The packaging that came with the bottle said "NEW-SKIN LIQUID BANDAGE: seals out water, germs, and dirt" in bright bolded letters. The cuts on my fingers had stopped bleeding, but the gashes ran deep. Apprehensively, I smoothed the paste over the pads of my fingers, blew them dry like I was giving myself a reverse manicure, and went to go practice the violin.

I bled anyway. Liquid bandage, my ass.

**I BLED ANYWAY.
LIQUID BANDAGE,
MY ASS.**

Suppose the Victorians were long dead and gone, and now your value was measured by all the things your hands could create. What are you worth?

Here is another truth I am tired of telling.

One day, when we were still living in Kentucky, my father cut strawberries for me. I was still crying from having to leave my mother and brother in Iowa, from having to trek across the United States without half of my heart. When my tears ran dry, I rose from my cocoon of tear-stained blankets and padded to the kitchen.

What I saw then, in the kitchen, was the back of my father, who was useless in the kitchen and incapable of preparing anything other than premade Costco meals. In one clumsy, mammoth hand he held a tiny strawberry; in the other, he grasped a knife, pointing it downwards as though the strawberry was susceptible to scalpel dissection. Slow as a snail, he etched the point of the blade around the stem of the strawberry.

I retreated silently into my room. Twenty minutes later, my father burst triumphantly into my room, holding a bowl full with bright red strawberries. The strawberries were sour but I could only taste the sugar sweetness of summer. Each bite felt warm, as though the strawberries were filling up the hole in my heart, strawberry by small strawberry.

Five years later, my father tried to choke me on the brown, crumb-stained couch in the living room. It had been an argument—something stupid, something so pointless it makes me cringe to say it out loud. But the point was that I had underestimated my father's temper—or, perhaps, assumed that I had been exempt from it. But even children are never exceptions to a parent's violence—a lesson I had learned too late.

Minutes later, after I had locked myself into the bathroom and tried to learn how to breathe again, all

I could think about were the strawberries. How my father's fingers had trembled as the knife bit into the strawberry. How those same fingers had dug into my throat. How to reconcile the two into one, inescapable truth.

The truth is that you can love someone and hurt them anyway.

The truth is that you will be hurt by someone—and yet, like breathing, remember how to love them back.

I am still thinking about hands: hands that create, hands that destroy, hands that embrace and define and abandon. It feels good to be held. It hurts to be driven away. How is it that no matter how long time marches on, no matter how much humanity evolves, these things still remain the same?

Suppose you're standing at a crossroad, where one path leads to Heaven and the other to Hell. A keeper guards the crossroad and can tell you which path is which, but you have no way of knowing if he's telling the truth. The only way you'll know, he says, is if you pay your worth.

The paths are identical, so there is no choice but to pay. You lift your hands, but in your palms you hold nothing. Your worth, then, boils down to the molecules of air spilling through your fingers, the lines creasing your palm, the prints staining the whorls of your fingertips.

Or perhaps the answer lies somewhere beyond your skin. Perhaps your worth is all the people you've met:, all the hands you've held, the smiling faces you've cupped between your palms. The warmth of their bodies is still an ember's glow in your veins. Perhaps you are the culmination of all the love that has passed through you. Perhaps you are more than what you hold.

The keeper smiles and points to the left.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ARIS KIAN BROWN

EDITED BY DOYIN ADERELE, GRACE KWON, JACLYNN SCHWANDER, ASHLEY WANG, and KATHERINE JENG

Aris Kian is the 2023-2025 Houston Poet Laureate and ranked #2 in the 2023 Womxn of the World Poetry Slam. Previously an Inprint C. Glenn Cambor Fellow, she received her MFA from the University of Houston. R2 spoke to Aris on her writing process, her love of slam poetry, and her relationship to Houston. This interview was edited for brevity and clarity.

R2: What do you do when you're not writing?

Aris: I feel like I spend so much time not writing, but I'm still in a poetry world. I find myself organizing a lot, going to events where we're thinking about how to build community, and thinking about the future that we want to see for this city. When I'm not in those spaces, I am often just vibing in my room, just trying to watch another terrible rom-com. I've watched *Red, White and Royal Blue* like six times just because I'm obsessed. But also, going to see my friends. I love just doing anything with my friends, eating, sitting in space. I will just have them in my house, and it's just a nice little break.

R2: When you write a poem, who is your intended audience? Do you imagine you're speaking to someone in particular, and does that person shift depending on the poem?



Aris: Yeah, it definitely shifts with the different poems that I write. This week, I am writing two commission poems. And for those, I think about who's going to be the audience—who's asking for it. So, there's going to be a room full of librarians: I'm thinking about how they would feel seen and how we think about the relationship between me and libraries. And that's a different audience than, say, a commissioned poem that I'm writing for families of victims of traffic violence. So now, I'm thinking specifically about families. Whereas in my own personal writing, I think about the audience second. I think about if I am my own audience, if I'm reading this, am I excited about what I'm writing, and do I feel drawn to the content? And then the second time is like, if I am performing this for an audience, who do I hope will hear this poem? And it's okay if the only person that I hope hears that poem is me. I just have to make that decision because I do think it's important to think about. I refuse to not think about audience when I write because I'm intending to share my work.

R2: Do the topics you write about come first, and the form follows, or do you usually decide on a form and then imagine what topics might fit well within that vision?

Aris: Right now, it really varies. For example, I have this poem that I wrote that I just loved—I don't know if y'all know the movie *Candyman*, but I wrote about *Candyman* and if *Candyman* was set in Houston, and my relationship to violence, and state violence, and all that sort of stuff. I loved it, but as I sat with it for a long time, I realized that I kept repeating very similar words. And I realized, oh, the pattern of state violence is cyclical. And through thinking about that, I turned that poem into a sestina because the cyclical nature of a sestina really pulled out its themes. When I turned it into a sestina, it became a completely different poem. But sometimes I'll write a poem with a form in mind, and I'll be like, "Oh, I want this to be a singular block with no punctuation. I want it to feel like a run-on sentence. I want it to never end. I want it to be constantly right-branching," all that sort of stuff. And then I'll read it, and I'll be like, "Oh, this actually needs to be all over the page with a whole bunch of spaces and blocks because what I'm actually trying to get at is breathlessness. And maybe breathlessness doesn't show up as well in this poem if it's all in a block. Maybe it

shows up if I'm seeing the expansiveness of it." I take it poem by poem. And I think as I continue to write, I'll be more able to identify it earlier. But as I'm still developing my writing practice, I'm recognizing how I'm being pulled in so many different directions.

R2: You mentioned that you started taking poetry seriously about 5 years ago, but what about slam? How did you get involved with slam poetry? And how did you get put into your team?

Aris: I went to University of Houston for undergrad, and I was gonna be a lawyer, so I was taking my English major. There were 2 tracks: literature and creative writing, and I was like, I think creative writing is it. So I was writing poems for projects and workshops, and at the same time, I was taking my advanced level of poetry classes. I also tried out for the slam team, Coog Slam, and made it on. So I started taking poetry a lot more seriously in my major, and I started doing slam. And I thought, wait, I actually really love doing this. This is actually what I think makes sense. And during that time, my professor told me, you know, you can go to grad school for this. And so I applied for grad school. The slam poetry excitement and community that I fostered was right alongside when I started taking poetry more seriously. It was almost a direct result because I had a community that cared about poetry, and I was around a lot of people that did slam for years. So my slam world opened at the same time I understood I wanted to write in academic spaces.

R2: You talk a lot about working with teams and being on the slam team. What does making a poem with others look like? And what does it look like when a poem represents your personal experiences, and you're opening yourself up to the critique or feedback from others?

Aris: It's rough. You can write a poem and say, this is my heart y'all, and they're like, yikes. It's a very vulnerable space to be in. So, I think there's many different approaches. I was very lucky and blessed to have a really amazing first team, so it felt very seamless. We would write our own individual pieces with the same topic and then weave our favorite parts in. That was a very organic process. The team that I'm on

now is different, and I love it. They're a lot more experienced writers and they'll bring in whole pieces that are almost done and say, "just write into it," or "this is pretty much done, we're just gonna split up what we're gonna say." Or we're all writing together, and it's a lot slower because we sound different, and we're trying to make sure it fits. It's a very organic, messy, and strange space. Sometimes you can be working on a poem for weeks, and then you share it out loud, and it's like yeah, we're just not gonna do that poem. We're gonna keep that in the living room. This will be a living room poem. It depends on writing style, but it's also dependent on being willing to kill your darlings. Like that line you really love is not gonna work in this piece, and you just gotta let it go. Because your team should be honest with you about what's working and what's not working. It really depends on the team. It depends on trust.

R2: Do you have a specific moment or experience when performing slam poetry that was your favorite?

Aris: I love a responsive crowd. I'm just obsessed. I think it's an ego thing with slam poets needing to hear how people are feeling about the poem. So I love when a crowd is responsive and they want to snap or yell, or join you in the poem; that feels really really good. I think one of my favorite moments, I have this poem called "Keys" where I have a part in it where I say, "A man once, mid-sentence of a speech I gave him about the hurt he gave me, fell asleep in my bed in his outside clothes" And every time I do that poem, the audience is often like, "What do you mean in your bed?" It's the outside clothes, like that is a universal "why, ew" type of vibe. So every time I was on stage, I would say it, and I had the biggest audience reaction to that, and we just sat in there for like 5 seconds of just like, how egregious, which is a significant amount of time in the slam world. That was really fun because I was able to drop the performance of it, and I could just enjoy how incredulous the moment was, and how we all felt. It felt really organic and like the audience was with me instead of just watching me. That was really lovely.

R2: As a poet, you're probably used to being vulnerable through your writing. However, your role as the poet laureate means you interact with the public at a larger scale now. How do you balance

maintaining your introspective, personal side as poet with the very public side of interacting with others as the Houston poet laureate?

Aris: In my experience and background with slam poetry, we're called to be very vulnerable to a public. There are also some circumstances where you get off the stage, and it's not just the poem—now people want to talk to you about it. And you have to be willing to either share more or put up a boundary and say, "Nope, that was for the stage, and that's what I wanted to offer, and that's all." With the poet laureate role, I feel equipped to [be vulnerable] because I've had that background. It's just at a larger rate or a larger scale. I also choose my poems a little differently because if I'm doing an event with the mayor, sometimes people don't want to hear about my own personal story. People want to hear more general poems, or poems that think about an idea as opposed to the personal. I'm trying to figure out how to balance that so I'm not taking up too much space in a space where I should be utilizing my platform for something that encompasses more than just me. I think it's something that I'm still learning to balance.

R2: We were especially drawn to your poem "my grandmother say, inside or outside" and how it pulls out these different hyper-specific aspects of Houston and also collapses the boundary between what's inside and outside of your house as a way of demonstrating the invasiveness of gentrification. When you're writing poems about Houston, how are you able to decide what details to include, and just overall, how are you able to distill and make personal a city that is so big and diverse?

Aris: I think that's a question that I am constantly, constantly thinking about because my main goal is never to remove myself from my own words, like I don't want to speak for anyone. I have no desire to be an authority on any sort of experience or idea. When I'm thinking about my relationship to Houston and any sort of experience that I feel could be universal, I really try to root it in the personal and in the very specific. So I think about my relationship to my grandmother. She was born in Houston. She has a different relationship to Houston. And I have a relationship to Houston as well, and I talked to my

grandmother about her relationship to Houston as I was writing that poem. But it was also inspired by a conversation that I had with elders in Third Ward about how they felt about their community. So I was like, I could just write a poem about my grandmother. I could just write a poem about the community elders in Third Ward. But what really draws me into this, and what makes me excited about writing this poem and what makes me actually connected to this poem is that we are all living in this overlapping space at the same time. Like, I am as connected to this ground, this land, as like my grandmother, as those community elders. And to remove that personal relationship, to remove that truth, would be a disservice to the poem.

R2: Speaking to your personal relationship to the city, what would you say you love and hate most about Houston? And are there any misconceptions about Houston that bother you?

Aris: I would say one of my favorite things about Houston—it feels like a literal universe. I think everything is here; it's really hard for people to beat Houston. There's just a place for every single person. It feels like home in so many different pockets. There are places where you can walk in, and you'd be like, "I'm in a completely different city," but it's still Houston, and you know it and you feel it. That is unmatched. That's untouchable. I love that. I'm obsessed with that. Something I don't fool with about Houston is just that the people are obsessed with their cars. I'm so sick of having to drive. Can I have a singular train? I would take the train all the time. I think it is a disservice to have as many freeways as we do, and I find myself writing about freeways often. I also have a love-hate relationship with freeways because if I'm on 45, and I'm listening to Don Toliver, I'm just like, "This is the best city in the world!" But yeah, I hate 610; I refuse to engage with anything 610 West. I have a lot of big feelings about freeways.

There's a lot of different pockets of Houston, and I don't know if people know that. There's this understanding of Houston as primarily a club spot, which I think is fine. I think it's dope. But nobody talks about how multicultural, multilingual, how artistic, how grassroots, how, like, interconnected the city is. I think people just focus on the very top level things.

R2: Do you have any advice for aspiring writers and poets? Was there any piece of advice that really stuck with you as you pursued this career?

Aris: I'll start with the advice that I was given that has shifted me, which was 'earn your statements.' I have really big thoughts, feelings, opinions, vibes, and I put them on the page. I was never told that those didn't matter or not to say them. But 'earn your statements' really forced me to think through how I offer them to people, how I think about them in my poems. So, what world am I creating? What circumstances am I setting up in the poem before I then offer a statement? This allows me to think through image, the cinematography of the poem, language. It's like, where did you put us? Did you earn it, did you earn that statement? Any advice that I would give is to write the thing and then edit later. You never have to share anything you do not want to share; you should never feel pressured to share anything you don't want to share. But there is something really necessary about being willing and open, courageous to say the thing, being honest about your truth. Not everybody needs everybody's thoughts; sometimes you've got to keep it in the drafts. But putting it into the world and then choosing when to edit, choosing when to keep it to yourself, I think, is really really important. That's the discretion part of being a poet—knowing what right rooms to put specific poems in, knowing who to share with, who to ask the right questions to.

R2: What's something about you, your work, Houston, or really anything else that you wish people would ask you about more?

Aris: I don't think I talk about my relationship to empire enough. 'Cause I'm extremely critical of statehood and empire and the US and corruption in places of power, but I don't know if I'm ever very clear about where that stems from, where that actually genuinely is rooted. Cause one, I don't have a lot of poems about it. I also don't really have a lot of opportunities to talk about it because people don't ask, because [when] they just see Black women, they're like yeah, period, you hate it. I'm like, that's one aspect,

but I don't think we really explore people's genuine relationship to empire.

Both of my parents were in the military, and like I've grown up in the military. Both my parents were in the Air Force. My dad was in the Air Force, retired after 12 years. My mother was in the Air Force, retired after 28. I would be in elementary school and I would stop and salute the flag. We would have a point towards a flag whenever the anthem played. It is literally ingrained in me to be patriotic. It is ingrained in me to remove myself from the spoils of violence but to reap the benefits of them, to remove myself from the people who have actually suffered as a result of what makes me privileged. In another aspect of that, my family is directly traumatized by their relationship to the US military. My mother has PTSD and is on 100% disability. My father does not even engage with his relationship. And so I would be really interested in talking more about what it looks like as a military brat to have to unlearn our ideas and understandings of empire, to have to unlearn our understanding of the US, and to have to have more intentional conversations about the US's relationship to other countries that it has destroyed for the purposes of our ease. I would love to talk more about that. I think that would be the thing that I would wanna explore more, be asked about more. Like, check me, you know what I mean, like people don't check me enough, you know.

R2: Lastly, what do you see when you think about Houston? If you could summarize Houston in one image, what would it be?

Aris: I see Houston as this hungry, metal-swallowing monster. I just think it's this literal beast. This literal silver-toothed beast that's chomping everything, but also has its mouth open, which to me. A mouth open is like I am wanting, I really do want, but it's never-full. I see this really ridiculous beast, but also this thing that desires and wants, and that is in essence very, very beautiful and very, very human. There's this very human image tied to this very metal non-human image of Houston.



STILL LIFE OF
SURREALISTIC PLANTS

ERIC CHEN

GROCERY LIST FOR EX-GIRLFRIENDS

RIYA MISRA

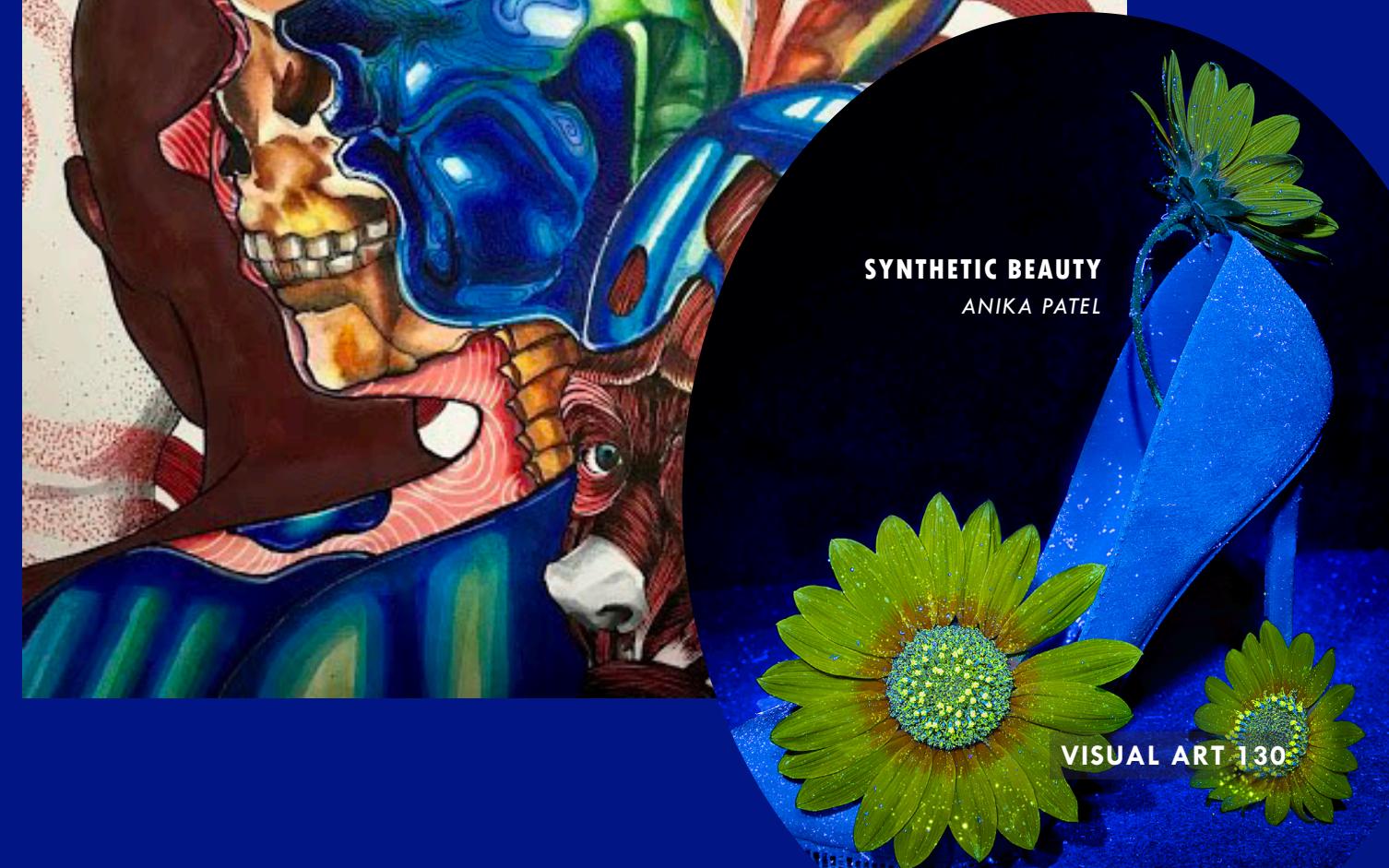
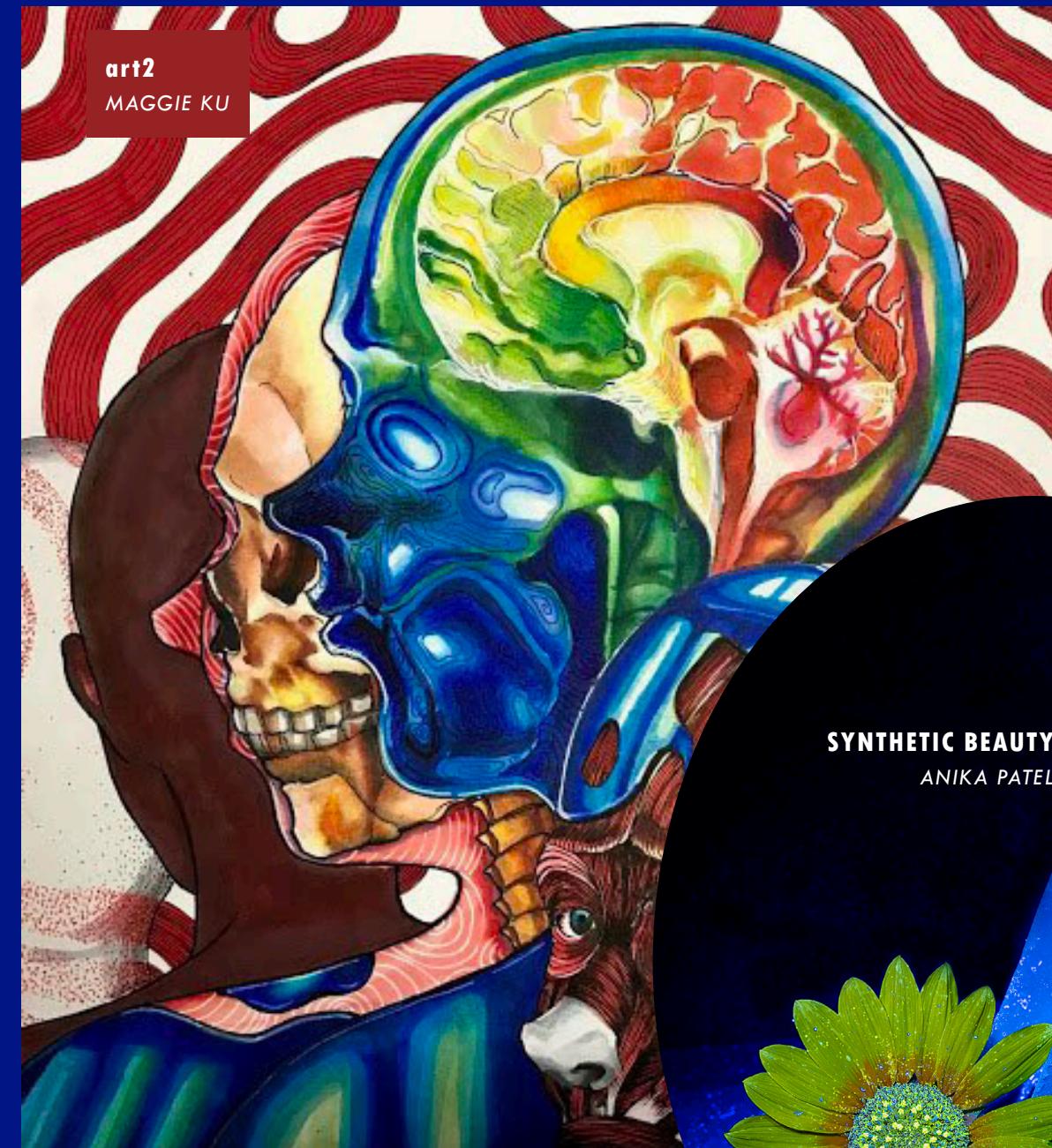
with cucumber flesh and gnawed melon and wilted
stray crumbs, menthol-numbed lungs,
loose-toothed, slack-jawed dumbed tongues.

chew her down to blood
nectarine. toss stones to ants,
also looking just to build a home.
plum, persimmon, passion-fruit.
to bite, to forget, to rot.

stinging nettle of a kettle chip
salted like a father-in-law.
plantains roasted until burnt,
belly-up as a babe.
griyo for the girls who don't eat.

with bitter gourd and barley
breath clutched like a child to mother,
burning the mugs in which we steep tea.

sharp-tongued, loose-toothed girl,
flat on the roof of my mouth like a thing i know.
or used to, at least.





vroom vroom

JACK DZIAŁO

CW: internalized fatphobia

do you ever
feel
like a
fat
fucking
race-car
driver,
aluminum
grinding on
asphalt? pedal's
down, you're
flooring it
yet it's clear
from the
s
c
r
a
p
ing
that you aren't
getting
a medal
anytime soon

honestly, it's embarrassing
those sparks that fly
out from below your car
they are loud
they shine brightly

so you lose weight
find a new job
start birdwatching,
playing guitar

either way
you'll still be a bad driver
no wins
no trophies
no fans
but burnt rubber
and rusted rims
suffice
in making it
across the finish line



art3
MAGGIE KU

TO BE, OR NOT TO BEE

MARLO WILCOX

CW: Harm to bugs

When I was nine years old, I jumped out of my second story bedroom window. And when I broke my arm, I blamed it on the color of my wings.

In the years since, I've considered what the doctor setting my bone could have said differently to alter my course. Perhaps if he'd chosen his words more carefully, I would have called it quits. If he'd said, "Humans can't become bees," or, "Color is not what gives bees their aerodynamicity," it may have—after some time with a dictionary and maybe a physics lesson—put a stop to things. But unfortunately, all he said to me was, "Humans can't fly."

Obviously. That's why I was trying to become a bee.

So the next day, after stealing as much paint and glitter from my poor teacher as I possibly could, I ran to the library and printed out enough images of bees to account for at least a few acres of deforestation. Then, with a paintbrush wedged between my hand and cast, I meticulously detailed the cardboard, duct tape, and zip ties that made up my wings. Five hours later and they were completed, metallic green contrasted against the yellow and black of the rest of the uniform.

An hour after that, I had my second arm set and cast in a 24 hour period.

There's a laundry list of things made more difficult by two broken arms. Surprisingly, things like eating, peeing, and writing are not at the top of the list—

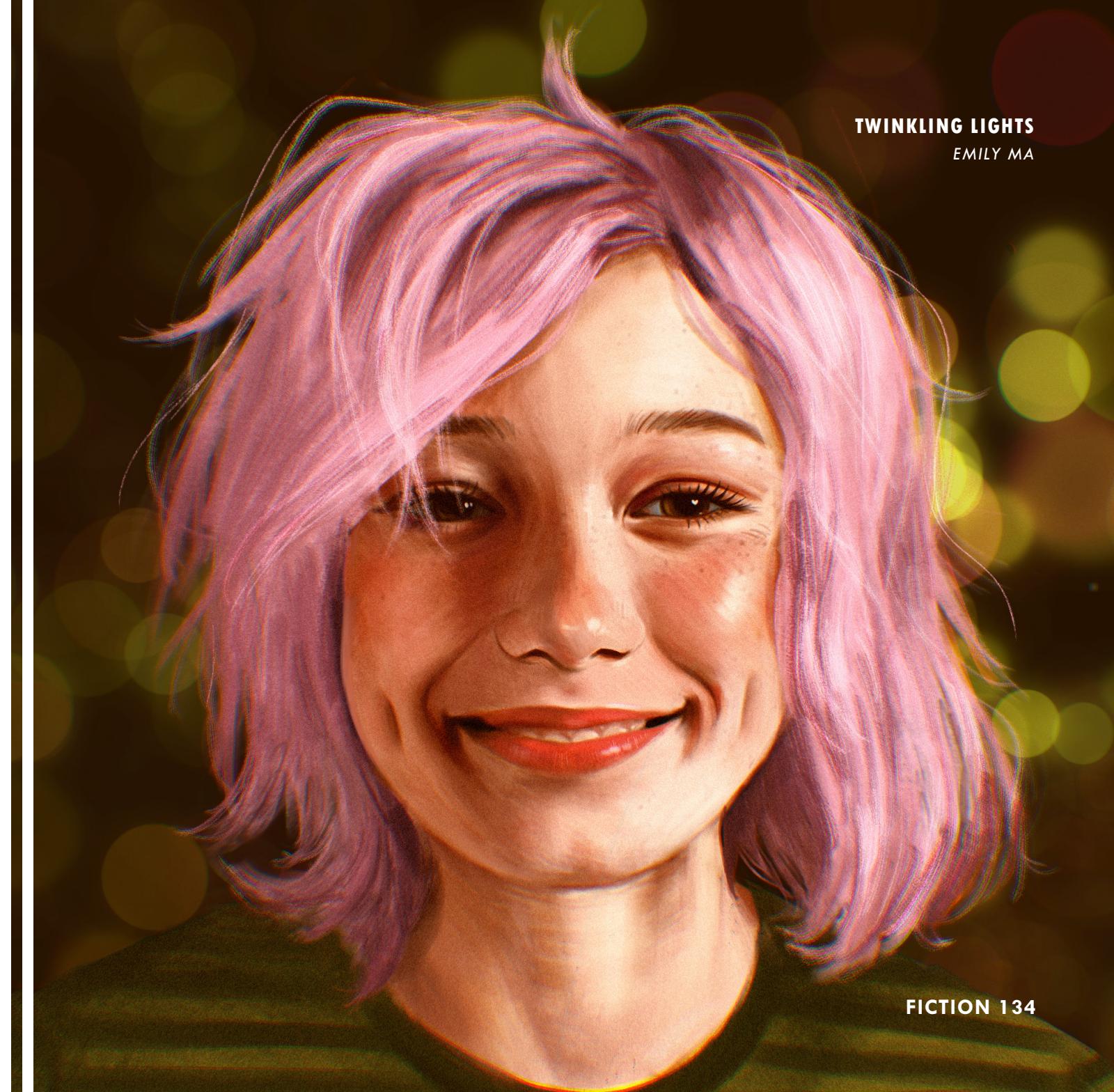
BEE

MARLO WILCOX



TWINKLING LIGHTS

EMILY MA



though I did have to get fairly adept at doing all of that with my feet. Instead, the most difficult thing to do without full function of either hand is operate a hot glue gun. And seeing as how hot glue was fairly integral to my becoming a bee, I was forced to remain earthbound for a few more weeks.

In that time, I did about as much reflecting as a nine-year-old is capable of, which eventually amounted to finding an answer to the inevitable “Why?” I got every time someone signed my second cast. Explaining *what* I was doing was one thing... I was becoming a bee. But explaining *why* was much trickier, and “Because

I'VE ALWAYS STRUGGLED WITH THE IDEA OF “WALKING A MILE IN SOMONE ELSE'S SHOES.”

I’m not one” wasn’t satisfying to either me or my fellow fourth graders. It was difficult to put into words then, and it’s difficult to put into words now.

I’ve always struggled with the idea of “walking a mile in someone else’s shoes.” It was my teacher Miss Lang’s favorite phrase. She said it constantly, and of course it made sense when applied directly to my classmates. Alison Crawford’s shoes, for example, were two sizes smaller than mine and lit up with every step. Obviously walking a mile in her shoes would be excruciating.

But when Suzie Greene sobbed to our teacher about Alex Hansen squashing a bee and Miss Lang told him to walk a mile in the bee’s shoes, I couldn’t help but ask her, “What shoes?” How could Alex put himself in the shoes of something that doesn’t have feet?

Even if he made tiny little bee shoes and then stood in them, he wouldn’t be any closer to knowing what it would be like to be a *bee* wearing them. He would still be Alex, just in shoes that really, really didn’t fit. And still, there were people who felt for the bee, who didn’t want to see it harmed. Why was it that Alex had no trouble killing the bumblebee, but Suzie acted like he’d killed the pope?

And, more importantly, how was I supposed to feel?

Thus, the investigation was afoot. As established, standing in its shoes wasn’t an option. So, naturally, the only way to know what it would be like to be a bee, to know whether or not I was supposed to care, was by becoming one.

And that’s how I broke both of my arms.

To my credit, though, I got close. I painted my Christmas onesie black and yellow and constructed additional legs out of pool noodles. I even covered them with double-sided tape, so that bee-me could pick up pollen. The crowning jewel, however, was the wings. Constructed from mesh, cardboard, and a lot of hot glue, they attached to my arms and looked almost like the real thing. Especially when I flapped my arms really fast. Then after the first arm break, when I put much more attention into the bee-ness of the wings, they were nothing short of gorgeous—just, unfortunately for my other arm, not quite capable of flight.

Being grounded, both physically and by my parents, meant that I was forced to approach the problem from a more sociological direction. I surveyed both Alex and Suzie to figure out what made them feel the way they did about the bee that Alex had stomped on. The results varied.

Suzie was first and took a lot longer than Alex, mostly because of all the crying. Through the sobs, she told me that all she could think about was the bee’s little bee-wife and little bee-children waiting for him to come home from work, only for him to never return.

It was then that I became a bit concerned about Suzie’s understanding of how bees work... and her home life. I taught her about the structure of bee colonies and assured her that the bee most certainly did not have a wife. She remained steadfast. *What about his children?* I told her that bees don’t really care about that sort of thing like we do. She told me that I couldn’t know that for sure... and I stopped pressing.

She had me there.

So I moved on to Alex. The conversation, combined with the lack of crying, was made much shorter by my instincts for self-preservation. When I asked about the bee he had killed, Alex didn’t respond, but motioned for me to follow him to the corner of the playground, where he began digging. Finally, covered in dirt, he pulled out a mason jar and presented it to me proudly. Inside were dozens of dead insects, mostly bumblebees.

As I slowly backed away from the budding serial killer, I asked him one question: “Why?”

He shrugged and told me it was fun. That was all I needed to hear.

Nine-year-old me would have been delighted to know that scientists have a word for Suzie and Alex; though it would be a number of years before I learned what “endmembers” are, even then I still recognized that the pair represented extremes on a bee-coveting spectrum. Alex, on one end, saw the bee as a toy. Suzie, on the other, saw the bee as a person.

And because I couldn’t prove either wrong, I vowed that as soon as my arms were healed, I would do everything within my power to finish what I had started. I was going to become a bee, no matter what it took.

I did get nervous when I read that bees don’t have bones, but I figured I’d cross that bridge when I got to it. I was determined: I had blueprints, I had supplies, all I needed were my hands. And if they’d healed just a few days sooner, I likely would have broken them again.

My casts—one black and one yellow, in case you expected anything else—were set to come off on the same day, and with so much riding on regaining my dexterity, I started getting a little antsy.

Three days before I was to be freed, after several weeks of incessant droning, my parents took me to my uncle’s farm where, sure enough, he raised bees. So, after I forgave my parents for withholding that information for my entire life, my investigation became observational.

I watched the hive for five hours.

The first thing I learned was that Suzie was definitely wrong. These were not people. Thousands of individuals flew to and fro with a single purpose, *their* purpose, for the sake of the entire colony. Some of them found food. Some of them built the hive. Some of them raised the young. But without fail, not a single bit of energy was wasted, and every bit of it went into the colony. There was no selfishness. Definitely not human. Definitely not people.

The second thing I learned was that Alex was equally wrong. They were far from toys. They were complicated in more ways than I could count. For every dance to communicate food, there was another to

communicate danger. Each individual served a monarchy that I couldn’t even see. It was like listening to an intense conversation in a language I would never understand in a country whose name I would never know. I was an outsider, and toys don’t have outsiders.

I had learned a lot.

As the sky showed its colors and the shadows grew long, the colony slowed. And by the time the first stars twinkled, the bees had settled into a soft droning. Except for one.

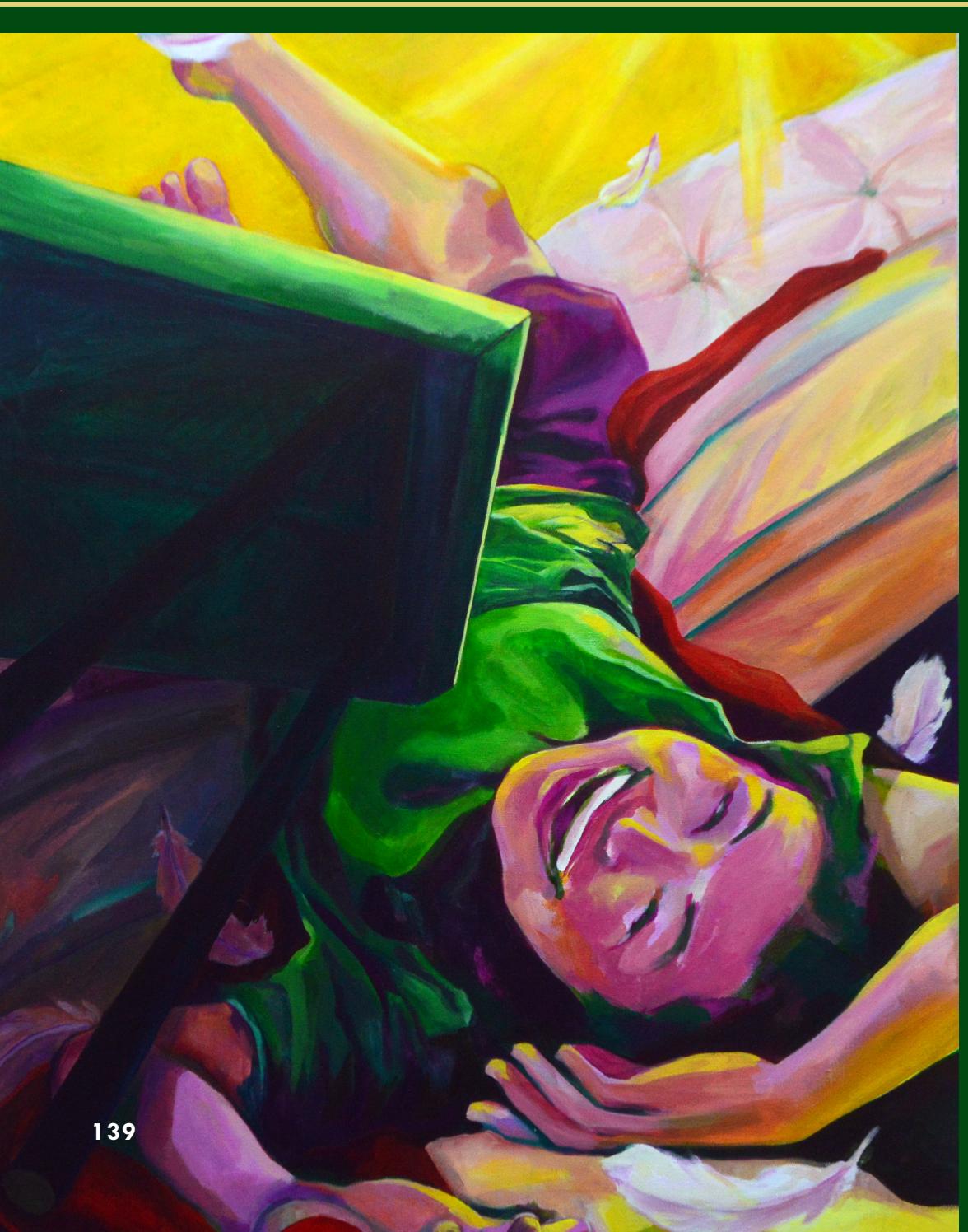
The low light, combined with my mother’s shouts for dinner which I pretended not to hear, made finding the source of the buzzing pulses tricky. But after a few minutes, I found the last bee of the night hopping about ten feet from the hive.

There was something wrong with her. Every few seconds she would flap her wings and leap as high as her little legs would get her—hardly above the short grass—before she would fall and take a few defeated steps toward the hive. Her wings were deformed. She had no chance at flight, and ten feet is a long way when you’re the size of a penny. But still, she kept going, kept trying.

And it was getting her nowhere.

I watched the cycle for a few minutes. While I’d observed the colony for hours, this was the first time that I’d seen an individual with an individual challenge. It was a great addition to my study, and I should have been excited. What better way to finalize my bee transformation? But I wasn’t. The longer I watched her struggle, the more time passed between flight attempts, the larger the pit in my stomach grew. I had to do something.

A lot of things happened in the next few minutes. First, I gently carried the exhausted worker to her hive. Second, I found the answer to the question that had cost me three months and two arms. And finally, my investigative journey came to an end. After all, I knew what it was like to be a grounded bee.



LAUGHTER'S
INTOXICATION
AND THE FALL
ASHLEY ZHANG

139

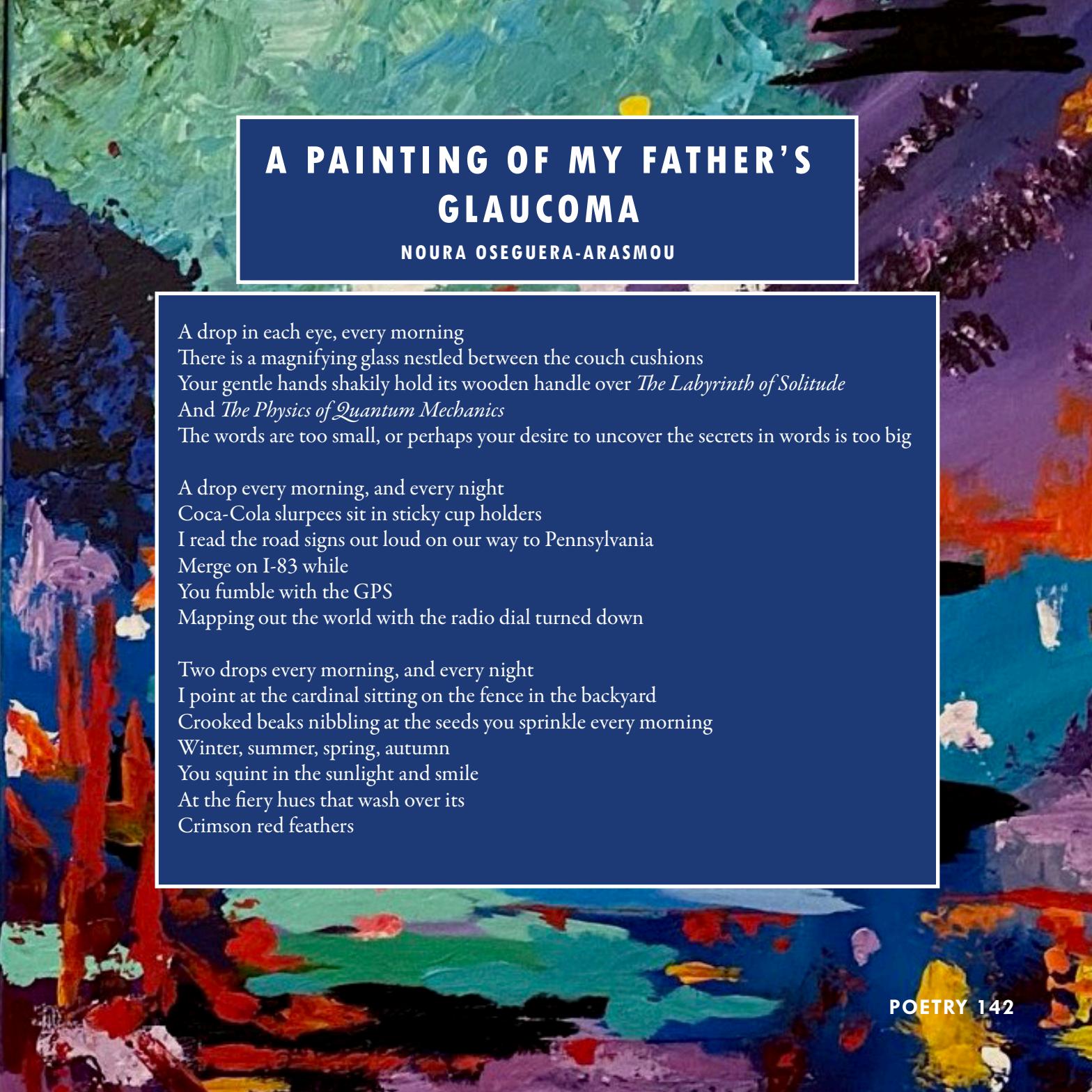
ALTOID
PANDA
EMILY MA



VISUAL ART 140



mountains2
SACHI KISHINCHANDANI



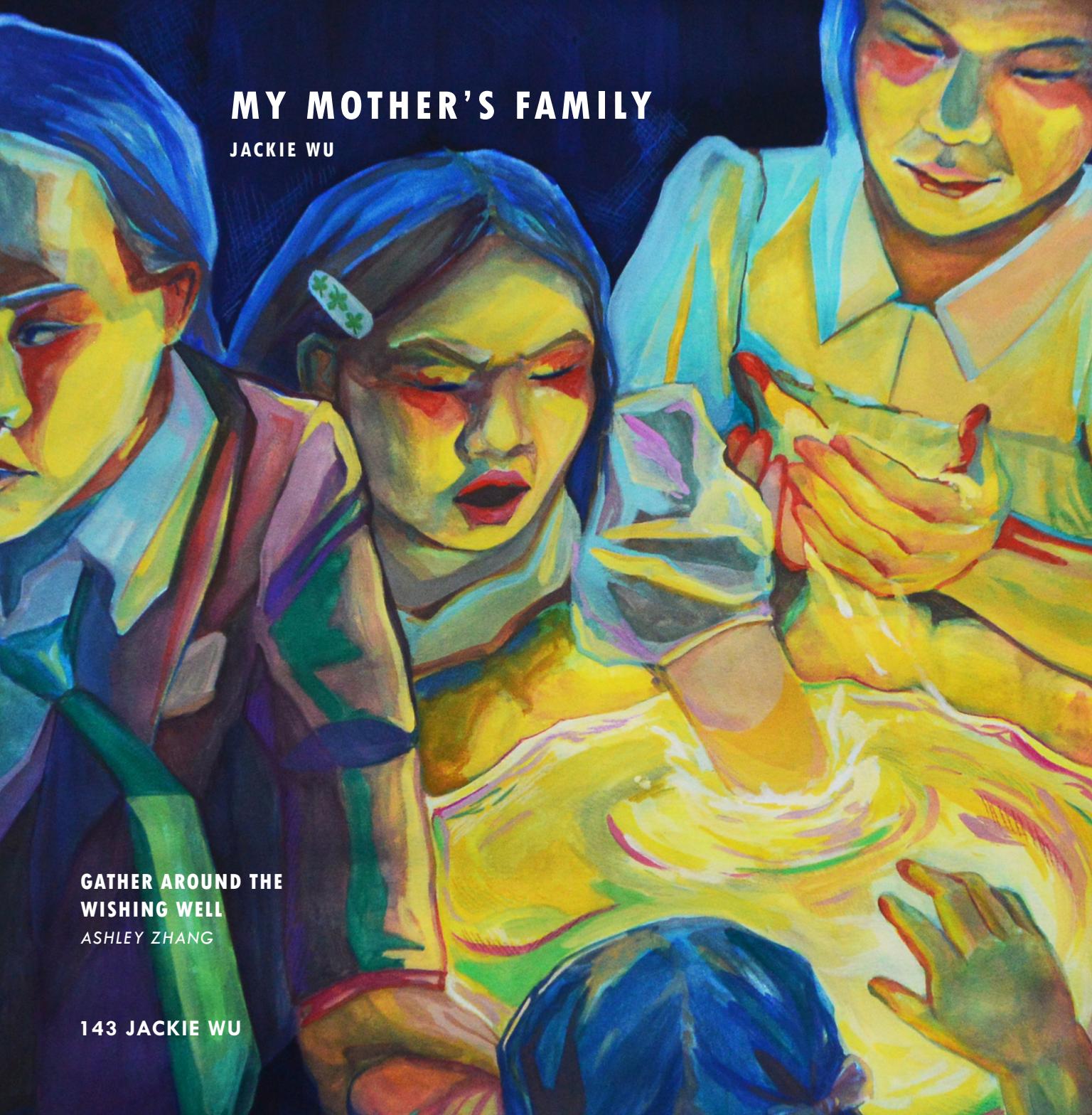
A PAINTING OF MY FATHER'S GLAUCOMA

NOURA OSEGUERA-ARASMOU

A drop in each eye, every morning
There is a magnifying glass nestled between the couch cushions
Your gentle hands shakily hold its wooden handle over *The Labyrinth of Solitude*
And *The Physics of Quantum Mechanics*
The words are too small, or perhaps your desire to uncover the secrets in words is too big

A drop every morning, and every night
Coca-Cola slurpees sit in sticky cup holders
I read the road signs out loud on our way to Pennsylvania
Merge on I-83 while
You fumble with the GPS
Mapping out the world with the radio dial turned down

Two drops every morning, and every night
I point at the cardinal sitting on the fence in the backyard
Crooked beaks nibbling at the seeds you sprinkle every morning
Winter, summer, spring, autumn
You squint in the sunlight and smile
At the fiery hues that wash over its
Crimson red feathers



MY MOTHER'S FAMILY

JACKIE WU

GATHER AROUND THE
WISHING WELL
ASHLEY ZHANG

143 JACKIE WU

CW: sexual assault

Tai-po has young hands. Never mind how my great-grandmother's paper-thin skin spills loosely from her bones into a million jagged creases. A constellation of sunspots is sprinkled between her veins, and it tells the story of her ninety-one years. Hands once gentle enough to coerce spoonfuls of bland white rice into the mouths of her children, her husband's second wife's children, and then her children's children; hands sturdy enough to guide their first steps through the streets of Guangzhou; hands steady enough to shut the door of her husband's home and follow her children, her husband's second wife's children, and her children's children to Toledo, Ohio.

When she wraps my tiny hands in hers, my skin, tanned from hours of playing catch with my father who desperately wants me to be an athlete, seems to darken against her translucent grayness. Her hands look like they have lost all life, but I know that they are as young as mine.

The life line is one of the most important lines on the palm—the line starts beside the thumb and swoops down, reaching for the tip of the wrist. A deep, tender life line represents a life rich with vitality and love. The longer the life line, the longer one's life will last. I imagine that Tai-po's life line was not just a crease in her palm, but a gaping hole stretching across her entire hand. When she wraps my hands in hers, I imagine her life line deepening in her palm until it becomes the only wrinkle in her skin.

"I hope you're paying attention. Now is not the time to be thinking about anything else." Mom's hand curls around the handle above the passenger seat so tightly, I can see the tips of her fingers digging into her palm. She stares straight ahead, her mind

CREATIVE NONFICTION 144

imagining her own life lines fading into the blur of the highway beside us. “You’re going to kill your mother, you know. Either from crashing or from stress.”

“Relax, Mom,” I chuckle lightly, glancing at her. “I’ve driven this highway, like, a thousand times.”

The space between us is wide, the silence heavier. I keep my foot on the gas pedal, holding my lips taut.

“So, baby, how is college? We miss you—eyes on the road!—now that you’re all the way in Texas.” She always mentions how far away I am from her, now that I live in Texas, especially after she begged me to live closer to home. After I moved, she became an expert in weaving my betrayal into conversation.

My throat tightens.

Kneeling in the corner of the bathroom floor, crying and begging God to give me strength. Washing chunks of vomit out of my hair in the shower as I pieced together fragments of the past night. Running mile after mile until the pain in my legs devoured the heaviness in my chest.

I swallow the past few months back into my throat. “Mom, you were right. About everything.” I imagine the words in my mouth, how bitter they feel against my tongue. And it just feels unfair to complain about the college I can only attend because of her, inside the car she bought for me; to complain about how far Texas is from New Jersey when so many years ago, my mother and Tai-po traversed an ocean to come to the United States; to complain about anything in the shroud of privilege my mother fought for, exposing how lesser of a person I am compared to her.

My mother likes to say that she is the definition of the American dream, but to me, she is also the definition of a Chinese woman.

My mother comes from a line of strong women. Tai-po, her grandmother, was the matriarch before her

WHEN SHE WRAPS MY HANDS IN HERS, I IMAGINE HER LIFE LINE DEEPENING IN HER PALM UNTIL IT BECOMES THE ONLY WRINKLE IN HER SKIN.

death, which left a hole in my family for my mother’s mother *Po-po* to fill immediately after the funeral. In a midwestern city where only 1.34% of the population is Asian, Po-po bought a dilapidated, 1,506 square foot house with three suitcases of cash that she saved from being a professor in China. “Always work hard,” Po-po would tell me, winking. In a way, today is not much different from thirty years ago when she first bought the house—she still toes the poverty line, relying on government subsidies to live in her home.

For Po-po’s daughter, an immigrant college student in 1985, this means that she works twelve hours a day, seven days a week.

We need you at the restaurant, *Fan* (my mother is not yet a Real American; she still wears her Chinese name). *You want white lice?* *Fan* asks the customers, and since r’s and l’s bear no difference to an immigrant but transforms a food to an insect, the non-Asian people in the Chinese restaurant laugh. We need you at the restaurant, *Fan*. *Fan* has no money, no support, no sense of home in Ohio, so she works seven days a week, balancing her job as a waitress with her 2.8 GPA. She burns her hands on the bottom of bowls of rice—a source of comfort now an abuser. She rushes *white lice* to customers who don’t know that the rice was steamed, and before that, it was soaked, and before, it was washed with both expertise and impatience, it was bought from the back right corner of one in three Chinese markets in Toledo, picked from some unknown rice paddy by some poor woman in some Southeast Asian country so *Fan* could earn fifty dollars for the day. But *Fan* knows, so *Yes I work*, she says.

Fan has a green card, which means she’s Immigrant and not Real American. The restaurant’s customers remind her of that every day, when they speak in their Real American accents. Her wrangled English, scrounged from restaurant receipts and college classes, brands her as too Alien and too Oriental and too Communist.

Today, decades after earning her PhD, authoring hundreds of papers, and sharing speeches at global conferences, she has shed her Chinese name *Fan*. Her articles—cited by thousands—are written as Maria. Maria has transformed her roots into success: “See how amazing your mom is? No English, and still, so successful!” She pauses, the way she always does before saying what she truly means. “And I not even Real

American!"

"You *are* a real American," I say, missing the point.

When I think of myself as a Chinese woman, I feel as though I'm missing the strength that my mother and her family have—the strength that a woman needs.

"I'm doing okay, I think," I reply. My eyes don't waver from the road.

"That's great, baby," Mom says, and she leans back in her seat, finally relaxing.

No, Mom. Look at me, look into my eyes, and tell me you know that I'm not okay. Take me home and tuck me in bed because for some reason, all I want is to be young enough again to hide in the comfort of your shadow.

When my sister and I turn thirteen, my grandmother and mother sit us down in the dining room. We're excited—we're now thirteen, now teenagers, now basically women.

Po-po raises an index card a foot away from her face. Chinese characters litter the front side, and I notice the number *6* interrupting the stream of characters, planted squarely in the middle of the card. "One in six women in the US is a victim of..." she begins, but I don't remember what follows.

Eighty-one percent of women will have experienced sexual harassment in their lives.

As I write this piece, I text my sister who lives 1,500 miles away from me: "The rite of womanhood is an index card with the number *6*."

She responds: "???"

Some will experience it in the second semester of their freshman year. Some will laugh about it the next morning and wake up sobbing months later.

This is where I lose control of the narrative, where I am not yet the writer of the story. I watch it unfold the way I have a thousand times before: paralyzed in my bed at 2 AM, my breath caught between my throat and my heartbeats, remembering all the words I should have said and feeling the weight of the ones I didn't.

I wake up at 7:30 every morning and take three vitamins—one vitamin D ("All Asians are deficient in vitamin D," Mom says) and two supplements that Dad claims will improve my mood. With each pill, my tongue traces the incantation: *It wasn't your fault. It wasn't your fault. It wasn't your fault.*

I stare at my phone screen, which reads *No Caller ID*. My therapist could be ten, one hundred, one thousand miles away, and I wouldn't know. Through the speaker, her voice emerges from the static, shaped into vibrations of *it wasn't your fault* and *how do you feel and you don't owe anything to anyone*.

Okay, I hear myself echo.

Years later, after I have written and scrapped and then rewritten and torn apart this piece, I realize that I still cannot write any more than a couple paragraphs about that year. Last year, at the end of this piece, my English professor suggested that the narrator speak more about this experience. I write more of my mother's story, about conversations we've shared, about my culture; yet as I drag memories to the surface, they come not as words, but as shards, as shattered fragments of the person I used to be and wish I still were.

What does it mean to be a Chinese woman?

I think of Tai-po's body beneath me in the local Toledo cemetery, six feet below the family she brought to America and an ocean away from her first home. Mom hands me three sticks of incense, igniting the tips with a gas stove lighter. When the wind battles the whimpering flames into dust, my great-uncle whips out a blowtorch and relights the tips. "You can't stop Chinese Memorial Day" he laughs, puffing up his chest.

Chinese gravestones are flat, unlike Western ones. Tai-po's gravestone lies flat in the ground, sunken into weeds and uncut grass, invisible in the matrix of concrete slabs surrounding hers.

"In death, we're all equal," Mom explains. "You can be rich or poor when you're alive, but when we die, we're all the same. We're all beneath the ground anyway." She hands me a wad of heaven bank notes, traditional Chinese money to be burnt in prayer.

My hands shiver as I reach for the notes. *Please be well in the afterlife*, I pray to Tai-po. Flakes of ash dissolve into my skin, leaving faint pink marks on my knuckles. *And please give me strength*, I add.

I'm learning to walk again, I think.

I spend the first couple days in bed. In the next few weeks, I bounce between friends, counselors, therapists, and never my family because I know they will ask too many questions.

Every night before I sleep, I send a prayer to Tai-po in hopes of manifesting the same strength that brought her to America. Every Sunday, I call my grandparents and listen to Po-po prattle away about the lunch she cooked.

I wonder if, some day, the pieces of my body will be more than remnants of a trauma I still can barely write about. If they will ever be my great-grandmother's, my grandmother's, and my mother's flesh and blood.

After Fan's twelve hour shift, she finally crumples onto her bed. The next day, she starts her shift at 7 AM. She wipes down the tables and adds quarters to the cash register. She shapes her lips into English syllables as she reads yesterday's receipts. She washes her hands with ice cold water, then grabs steaming bowls of rice. Her body, beaten by yesterday, today, and tomorrow, stands up straight and meets the first customer in the restaurant.

No, I'm not learning to walk again, but to sleep.

To eat.

To breathe.

I remember Tai-po's hands—hands that I will forever know as young. Hands of vitality, of love, of importance. Hands that raised three generations, hands wrapped around mine.

My grandmother's hands are strong—I have never beaten Po-po in an arm wrestle. Our last encounter happened when I was twelve, and it ended with a loud smack on the dining table and another title of arm wrestling champion for Po-po. Although I have no doubt that I could win now, Po-po's hands are the strongest ones that I have ever known.

My mother's hands are soft—they have caressed my cheeks a million times, unfortunately even popping

into frame during a few of my Zoom calls. Her hands are soft because she's a doctor who now works from home, her PhD scrubbing away years of calluses formed from the bottoms of bowls of rice.

I look down at my own hands, which tremble slightly on the steering wheel.

"Mom, it's hard for me," I admit, as she sits beside me in the passenger seat. The words come out twisted and cracked, spilling out of my mouth like an open wound. My knuckles whiten, and I can almost hear the acceleration of her heartbeat as the car weaves shakily through the highway. I blink away my blurred vision and bury the back of my head into my seat. I taste my weakness and every single nightmare in the back of my throat. "Everything is so hard."

Mom stays silent for a moment, then shakes her head. "You are Chinese—Chinese woman." She pauses. "You will endure. You will live."



FLYING FISHES

CAROLINE POLLAN

15

writer's block

JACK DZIAŁO

I want to write!
I want the words
to come
flowing
out like black-
and-orange butterflies
fly south.

I want to write
about things
that make you
stop,
just for a moment,
but the words
sound all funny.

I want to write
like the greats,
so I copied them.
I've tried smoking
cigarettes, being
miserable; I even
bought a typewriter.

I've tried writing
about beauty, nature,
God, love, sunsets,
grass, France, birds,
the works,
and yet I still don't feel
like a writer.

I was walking
the other day
and saw
a chalkboard that read
owens birthday parte
in a child's
scratchy handwriting.

I think I'll give up
writing, because
how could I ever
compete with that?



2024 GEORGE G. WILLIAMS AWARDS

R2's annual writing contests are sponsored by the George G. Williams Fund. The contests are juried by professional, non-Rice-affiliated judges. This year's judge was best-selling poet and author Taneum Bambrick. You can find their comments about each of our winners on the next pages. Each of the recipients is awarded a monetary prize as well as recognition. Many thanks go out to the generous donors who support Rice's undergraduate creative writing endeavors.

OUR JUDGE | TANEUM BAMBRICK



Taneum Bambrick is the author of *Intimacies, Received* (Copper Canyon Press 2022), and *Vantage* (American Poetry Review/Honickman First Book Award 2019). Their work can be found in the *New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *American Poetry Review*, and their essay "Sturgeon" was selected for the 2017 BOOTH Nonfiction Prize. A 2020 Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, she lives in Los Angeles and is a Dornsife Fellow at the University of Southern California where she studies poetry and nonfiction.

FICTION

WINNER | "What are we going to do about Mom?" by Spring Chenjp

The title of this story is also the question that repeats between two siblings: "what are we going to do for our mom." Rather than becoming cliché or expected, this refrain acts as a kind of bridge for incredibly cinematic moments between siblings—scenes bursting with color, food, and delights. We see, in this story, that messiest part of humanity: the creatures within us that do not always know how to care for others, and struggle to contain our fears and weaknesses, even when someone most needs us by their side.

RUNNER-UP | "Acorns" by Allison He

CREATIVE NONFICTION

WINNER | "Indonesian Lungs" by Jackie Wu

When I read this gorgeous essay, I thought "why do I get the pleasure of reading this before it is published somewhere huge?" I read it twice because I didn't want to let the details and textures of this writer's imagery out of my head. A lung is a fragile, feathery machine that this essay uses as its center. That center has a pounding, urgent way of trying to answer the unanswerable question of belonging to any place, especially after the experience of immigration. What does it mean, for example, that this narrator's father only smokes cigarettes in Indonesia, yet works on lungs in the medical field in the United States? This is a serious writer with an eye for detail, and I won't soon forget the heart they apply to every scene.

RUNNER-UP | "My Mother's Family" by Jackie Wu

POETRY

WINNER | *“Remember, Icarus” by Madison Barendse*

I've read many poems that reference Icarus, but I have never read anything like this poem. The myth is retold through a speaker who does not desire to abandon their home or their mother. There is a deep sensual brilliance to this writer's form. We have stacking images, wax on the shoulder blades. This is a poet of sensual and environmental detail, much like Sherwin Bitsui or Richard Siken. When I read this, I felt so acutely that I would be reading poems by this poet again.

RUNNER-UP | *“Angel of the Lord Triptych” by Shem Brown*

COVER ART

WINNER | *“Below the Lilies II” by Bryan Mendoza*

The R2 EIC team: Every year, the R2 editorial team carefully selects the magazine's cover art. Finding a piece that not only captures the diversity of voices featured in R2, but also captivates readers is a difficult task. This year, we were drawn to “Below the Lillies II” for its emotional complexity and depth.

2024 CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Madison Barendse has walked into Mordor and is currently searching for the One Piece. She aspires to become a full-time mad scientist.

Shem Brown is a freshman at Rice University. He is the proud owner of a Wikipedia umbrella.

Amy Cao enjoys eating chicken poppers from the Floridian(?) grocery store Publix.

Spring Chenjp would like to believe she lives hard.

Jack Dzialo likes to hang out with friends, use his phone, and listen to music in his free time. And also eat food.

Allison He is often judged for eating salmon with barbecue sauce, and 100% of the time by people who have never tried it before.

Avalon Hogans is “more than just a poet.” She is also a creative director and can write creative nonfiction if she has to.

People will tell you that **Emily Huynh** is secretly an android in disguise. Pay them no mind.

Alika Jimenez is a gender non-conforming 18 year old rediscovering their creative expression alongside their studies. Many of their pieces stem from a need to cope with or understand feelings about family, gender and sexual identity, the future, anatomy, nature, and music.

At the time of writing, **Riya Misra** has 12,483 unread messages. She's still sorry for not texting you back.

Noura Osegura-Arasmou can often be found lost in a good book or lost in thought—sometimes both at once.

Jina Park loves getting eight hours of sleep every night. She hates reminding people that her first name doesn't start with a 'G'.

Andrea Plascencia is most likely to be found re-watching Gilmore Girls, or the 1997 live performance of "Silver Springs." She misses Blockbuster.

Sadie Siegel is a woman who makes constant plans that never get done. We're excited to see where life takes her next, for she certainly has no clue.

Marlo Wilcox usually has her friends write her bios for her. None of them were available.

Jackie Wu is trying to collect Smiskis. Email her at jw139@rice.edu if you have any extras.

Hope Yang loves eating fish more than admiring them.

Lajward Zahra is alright with the pen but much better with cloves of garlic and a cast iron. Do not ask her about a certain NBC show.

Liliana Abramson is regularly caught by her professors digging through the dirt for acorns around campus. Pro tip: the trees by the rec have the best acorns.

Ivanshi Ahuja thinks Ivanshi Ahuja is pretty cool and talented.

Eric Chen is founder of Chenism, his own art movement, and a certified mini gym rat. He is also a second degree disciple of the Stream of Consciousness Technique.

Anwuli Chukwumah is deeply concerned about the state of today's society. She doesn't understand why people eat boiled eggs.

Tessa Domsky is spiritually a pilgrim.

Chase Foster: Architecture student and 3D digital artist on the side.

Medha Fotedar is a huge night owl. No wonder she ended up at Rice.

Charlotte Gidley loves to make tedious and silly things that are simultaneously practical and usually incorporate anthropomorphized woodland animals.

Eli Johns-Krull is still thinking about disappearing into the woods.

Sachi Kishinchandani is a Senior at Baker college. In her free time, she likes to mindlessly watch YouTube videos and drink boba so she doesn't have to confront the drab reality of her STEM major.

Maggie Ku draws.

Karis Lai prefers to immerse herself in the 4th century over the present.

Joohye Lee can guarantee that any and all hair used in the making of her artwork was locally and ethically sourced.

Emily Ma goes feral for frozen tiramisu.

Cal Mascardo is two children piled on each other's shoulders underneath a large trench coat, where they

disguise themselves as one almost-adult human being.

Bryan Mendoza is in a love-hate relationship with physics. When he's not napping, he's battling the effects of capitalism on Houston urban planning.

Connie Ni took a long time to figure out her name isn't Connie In.

Anika Patel, boba's biggest financial supporter, can often be found googling pictures of French toast or perching on top of a fridge like a gargoyle. Guard your lemons.

Harshitha Pelaprolu is probably wasting time on the couch with her roommates.

Caroline Pollan loves to create fantastical artworks inspired by the natural world. She is studying Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and Visual Art here at Rice.

Ashley Zhang loves chimkens and would like to own some.

Catherine Zhou feels like a plastic bag drifting through the wind wanting to start again.

2024 STAFF BIOS

McKenna Tanner can't, she has rehearsal.

Ariana Wang doesn't have a poké flute to move the Snorlax in front of her door. Guess she can't go to class.

Katherine Jeng wants you to know that the keyboard shortcut for an em dash on Mac is option+shift+hyphen.

Doyin Aderele does not understand.

Basma Bedawi [redacted] [redacted] [redacted]

Riley = **Onika Combes** = Burgers

Joanna Coram will find out at some point whether she has permanent eye damage from looking at the solar eclipse.

Emelia Gauch is checking to see if this book has gluten in it.

Kaitlyn Keyes was The Imposter.

Pls let **Grace Kwon** know if you need anything from Target. She needs to meet the \$35 free delivery minimum and she can only eat so many gummy worms.

Kyra McKauffley used to have a pet ghost shrimp.

Hadley Medlock is very very sleepy.

Kayla Peden procrastinated writing this bio.

Jaclynn Schwander is only slightly obsessed with her super spunky and funky dog, Gizmo.

Hannah Son wants you to call her back. Don't.

Legend has it **Amelia Tsai** is still out there somewhere, trotting in her little red striped sandals.

Ashley Wang is slightly allergic to many fruits (e.g., apples, pears, cherries) but simply pretends she isn't.

Hannah Abell was too busy playing 2048 and suika during class to write a clever bio.

Rita Ajit is right behind you, isn't she?

Angela An loves saying no yeah. Yeah no.

Isabella Campos can't stop speaking about herself in the third person. She can feel people getting annoyed with her as she writes this bio.

James Cancelarich is only here for the snacks.

Kat Codiamat actually isn't part of R2, but just hijacked the bio page to say hi. Look mom, I made it!

Sloane Domingo's biggest stressor is the consciousness of being perceived. In related news, they will be here all night trying to come up with a bio.

Connor Findley dolorem ipsum quia dolor sit amet consectetur adipisciing velit

Izzy Gutierrez is chronically online. If she doesn't text you back in under a minute, she is either at work or she just doesn't like you.

Jules Houston is picketing with a sign that reads, "Long Live Rice Theatre," and rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

Ian Kim has been thoroughly conditioned by his phone's morning alarm. Rumors say that if an alarm goes off near his proximity, he'll wake up from reality to find it was a dream.

Adam Leff has given up on constructive criticism and moved on to the altogether more satisfying destructive criticism.

If you can't find **Rachel Parr**, she's probably somewhere playing Sudoku or making a friendship bracelet.

The only barrier to **Nithya Ramcharan**'s greatness is the NYT Sudoku. In the meantime, she's gonna yap and wait for 9 pm instead of doing work.

Amanda Simpson's bag spawns new books when she isn't looking. It's at 50 lbs and growing fast.

