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The Rice Review Staff

A Note from the Editors

Uncertainty. Instability. Loss. These feelings, familiar to college students, took on new proportions this past year. As a pandemic halted lives and uprooted ways of life, we had to retreat into our own little corners of the world. For many of us, this meant being thrust back in time during our complicated transitions into adulthood. Many of the pieces of writing and art in this book are in response to this experience; to processing and reprocessing childhoods, and to figuring out how to reemerge from them.

By selecting the theme "Root," we wanted to explore how the past offers a chance to unearth those things that have led us to the present. We cannot know how to move forward without knowing our roots—whether those of our individual histories, or of the systemic racism embedded in the fabric of an entire country, as well as of the institution that gives this magazine its name. In a moment of distance and upheaval, we have the privilege of presenting stories that do the brave work of discovering and rediscovering what binds us.

A story, in a way, is a root. It is something that holds us down, ties us to the earth, and makes us remember that we are not individuals adrift in this world, but connected to the things and people around us. By paying attention to our roots, we discover the accumulations that have formed us and the parts of ourselves that need to heal. We also discover the things that make us feel like a part of something more.

Stories give rise to the best parts of being human: to empathy, connection, and collective healing. As we go forward into a changed world, it's important that we carry these qualities with us. It's just as important that we recognize the power of imagination, of naming the unnameable, and articulating that which does not yet exist. Only in this way can we build the consciousness for a better world.

We are so grateful to the dedicated community at Rice that helped birth and put together the pages of this issue. We would like to thank Ian Schimmel, our faculty advisor, for his thoughtfulness and encouragement, and for his continuous effort in building a supportive space and community for writing and art at Rice. We would also like to thank the R2 staff for going above and beyond to make this project their own, and dedicating their time to provide a platform for Rice writers and artists. Your enthusiasm and energy made this so much fun. This issue would not be possible without the support of the Rice English Department and the Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts or the continued generosity of the Husick family that supports R2 in all of its endeavors. We are also so grateful for our talented contributors and honored to be trusted with their work.

Lastly, we would like to thank you, dear reader. As this year reminds us how important connection is to all of us, we hope you will let the voices woven through these pages tell you their stories, and that you will unearth new connections in yourself.

Joshua Anil & Sanvitti Sahdev,
Editors-in-Chief

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Nasha Wanichiwecharungruang

One Thousand is Not Nearly Enough

Alice Liu

the sea birds
fold into the sky like
ever so many love notes, like
they know not of death.

senbazuru, I think, wondering
how they float like that, like
mass without weight.

how effortless a composition,
sheets and sheets of waxy Bristol
creasing form into horizon.

and I, living dog-eared and heavy-handed,
mortal, wine-flushed, violent
with desire.

and you, who will be gone soon,
tell me to lighten up,
that even I will grow old someday.

we can do this, for now. we can
watch the sea fold into the sky like
ever so many tissue paper wishes.

A Mother in the Hand

Elizabeth Rasich

The night the pit bull tears a hole in Opie's floppy Beagle ear is also the night Michael Phelps turns 28. This is when Aunt Shannon still lives with us, when we still take Opie on a walk every night, and she practices her parenting on me.

Our mission—we always have a mission—is to find the house in Fells Point where Michael Phelps lives and wish him happy birtthday. It's June, and he has already won 22 Olympic medals: eighteen gold, two silver, two bronze.

We dream about the inside of the house. Since Aunt Shannon does home remodeling, all she can think about is storage space. Where do eighteen gold medals go? Does he have a special hat rack to keep them organized? Does he color code them to know what year they were won, or does he throw them all in a shoebox and try to forget?

Although usually my dad stays at home and takes a nap on the couch, tonight he comes on our walk.

"Spur of the moment, huh?" he says, and immediately forgets his keys.

He wants me to teach Opie to walk in a straight line, but it's useless. Opie already has hypertension at three years old and is chemically dependent on smelling every mound of squirrel droppings in leash radius. Now he is tugging me all over the place, inhaling smells and bugging his eyes out of his head every time he sees a slowly rotting French fry drifting in a puddle.

Aunt Shannon laughs at the look on my dad's face.

"Empathy, Rob," she says. "This sidewalk is covered in the remnants of a hundred footprints and dog paws and bits of dropped food. It must feel to him like snorting a pinkie nail of cocaine every half-second."

My dad flicks Aunt Shannon on the back of the neck. "Stop saying that stuff in front of her."

Rory
Acrylic
Gordan Liu

* * *

A lot of people think my mom is dead. That's not true. She just moved to Italy. Here are the explanations I have gotten:

She is having a hard time. She is having an artistic crisis. She was only ever half-married to my dad. She gave up everything once before. She won't do it again. She is taking time off to go to Great Uncle Marco's art school and follow her dreams. When I am older, I can come to visit and see the Galleria Borghese, and I will understand. She has always loved my dad, but things have changed and they are learning how to be their own people. She loves me too much.

Aunt Shannon will be there to take care of me. Have I learned about divorce in school? Do they teach that in school? It is better to have a happy mother on the phone than a bathroom-weeping mother in the house. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. The cherubs on the ceilings of the churches remind her of me. I am a cherub on her ceiling.

* * *

We decide not to stray too far from our usual route. We have never seen Michael Phelps buying groceries, but that doesn't necessarily mean he isn't our neighbor. First, up the street towards the harbor. As cars thud over cobblestones next to us, Aunt Shannon points out all the houses she has worked on. There is the brick one where she found a small opossum family in the attic and the blue one with stained glass chandeliers in every room. My favorite is on the corner, right behind Bertha's Mussels, painted a deep, velvety purple and shining out golden light from every window. But none of them can belong to Michael Phelps. Where would he have put his pool?

Past Bertha's Mussels and the headrush of seafood smell is Broadway. Since it's June, all the high schoolers are out of school, holding hands and meandering the plaza at random. Opie is a narc; he can smell weed on anyone and lunges for every stoner he sees. My dad ogles the ice cream truck parked next to the tapas place and Aunt Shannon drifts vaguely towards a stand selling incense, but I keep marching on. They follow.

I scrutinize the shoulders of every tall man I see walking down the street. What is the way to say it? A simple "happy birthday," or will I have to string it into a full sentence? Can I just wave?

Aunt Shannon tugs twice on Opie's leash like she's trying to get off a bus.

"Let's take a breather," she says, and motions towards the Henderson's Wharf Hotel. "I need to pee."

It's been three months since I first found her topless on the couch, hunched over her folds, injecting hormones into a bruised patch of skin above her left hip. When she noticed me in the living room, she'd only winked.

"I'm baby making," she'd said.

Now I stare at her stomach as she walks towards the hotel doors. Is it rounder? Her dress whips around in the wind, and I can't tell.

We stare after her for a moment, until my dad breaks the silence.

"Should we go down to the water?" he asks.

* * *

My mom told me that every night in Rome the nuns dance in the street. On the phone she said it feels like they put on a show just for her. They bang drums and dance, and one of them stands on the church steps and warbles something in Italian. Their habits are gray and loose, and they shake tambourines.

When I mentioned Opie, she laughed a little, as if she were surprised he was still around. I reminded her that Opie was her idea. That she had just come back from a six week trip to Malibu and was edged all around in optimism, just like after every other trip. That she wasn't even angry that I had discovered my surprise pooping on the linoleum floor of the laundry room. That she was instead delighted, radiating joy from her cheek dimples, as she took me to the couch and set him on my lap, where he curled in the scoop of my legs and huffed himself to sleep.

"Do you remember what you said?" I asked her.

"Of course not," she replied, her voice distorted by our cross-Atlantic connection.

"You said I should name him Magnum Opus. Like the Hans Hoffman painting we saw at the MoMA. The big red one that looks like Texas drawn in blood."

She paused for a long moment. I could almost hear her shake her head.

"I would remember going to the MoMA with you."

* * *

While we wait on the dock, I keep an eye on my dad. His shoulders are hunched in. He keeps kissing my hair.

"You'll never get a tattoo, will you, Cate?" he asks while we both lean on the railing, watching the water tilt the buoys back and forth and up and around.

"Never," I say, and they tilt up and around and down again.

A few minutes later, Aunt Shannon returns holding an enormous pink-striped straw hat onto her head to keep it from flying away.

"Where'd you get that?" my dad asks, dumbfounded by its size.

For a while, we follow the shoreline of the harbor and its concrete pilings. I scrutinize the houses. In this part of the neighborhood, they are all stacked together like dominos. If you knocked one, they'd all fall down. Which house looks like it has a kitchen big enough to hold Michael Phelps' daily 12,000-calorie diet of egg sandwiches, chocolate chip pancakes, grits, omelets, ham sandwiches, pasta, pizza, meatball subs, and coffee?

Aunt Shannon and my dad have fallen behind while Opie and I lead the vanguard. Four months since mom left, and four months since she moved in. There was something about her lease, and the fact that she was already cooking everything and coming over in the mornings to do my hair. It was supposed to be temporary. But I'm learning that temporary things can often be final, and permanent things can be gone in an instant if you don't hold them to their promises.

Sometimes people ask if it's odd for me to have my aunt still living with my dad so long after everything happened.

"Do they do weird stuff?" Ava asked me once. We were trading bites of sandwiches at lunch.

"Weird stuff like what?" Hannah asked her, and I gave her a fruit rollup so she would stop asking.

"But I'm learning that temporary things can often be final, and permanent things can be gone in an instant if you don't hold them to their promises.

My dad and Aunt Shannon are friends now—not like Ava and Hannah, but something more side-by-side than that. When I hear him laugh, I know that Aunt Shannon is the one he should have married, the one he should have chosen. The fact of it comes to me simply, as if it it has fallen lightly into my lap on a cloud. If I left, maybe, if I wore one of Michael Phelps' gold medals and slept on his floor, if they could come together and be happy.

* * *

The last time all three of us were together was on a boat. My mom had gotten back from another trip, this time to Boca Raton. To get us all acclimated to one another again, the thing to do was to go on an oyster harvest. Back then Aunt Shannon was still dating Dwayne, who worked as a first mate and got us in for free. I was impressed by his dark neck tan and the fact that he looked me dead in the eyes when he said hello.

Everyone gathered at the railing. We saw the water turn from a muddy brown to a thin green to a color so final and blue I couldn't stop watching it slip against the smooth white sides of the boat. There was a speech about not falling over the side. I imagined being the one to do it, just so people would tell stories about me.

My dad tried to make conversation at the same time he worked to overhear my mom's animated conversation with another passenger.

"That's a nice dress. Is it new?" he asked.

He had bought it for me at Goodwill two weeks ago.

"Yes," I said, and asked him how oysters were harvested to get his mind off things.

He started in on rubbing his eyebrow, excited already.

"It's fascinating, really," he said.

While he talked, I watched my mom fix her hair in the reflection of the mast. She smiled at herself, then frowned, then smiled again and picked something out of her teeth. After a while she came over.

"I just met the most interesting man," she said.

When we had moved out to a patch of ocean where shellfish could be harvested, thick cables churned through the froth, pulling up massive wire cages filled with mud and rocks. We each got a screwdriver. Our job was to pry apart the big clumps of oysters that clung to each other in the thick, grayish mud and wash them together in a big bucket. Dwayne showed us how to knock them together and listen to see if they sounded hollow. If they did, we tossed them into the sea. Any oysters with an open shell, even just the tiniest gap, got tossed into the sea. If they showed any sign of weakness, any imperfection, they were tossed into the sea.

For a while, it was nice to sit in the sun and break the shells. I liked the feeling of the dark mud and the satisfying clunk of two oysters rapping against each other. My mother sat across from me on top of a bait cooler. Her forearms were covered in freckles, hundreds of

them; her hands were a pointillist painting slipping oysters away from their partners, cleaning them, turning them over in her palm.

Soon, though, she got bored and made some excuse about needing to stretch. My dad didn't say anything, just kept steadily cracking oysters apart and handing them to me to wash off the mud and pile in the wire basket. I was also getting painfully bored, so bored I could feel my skin starting to itch from the inside out. He had a look on his face that I didn't often see anymore, just the peace and pleasure of working with his hands. He wanted me there beside him so badly I could taste it.

* * *

Aunt Shannon laughs and the sound is big and throaty. I turn to them behind me, wondering if it's three-time Olympian Michael Phelps they've seen or something else. They wave me off.

"Go on ahead," Aunt Shannon says.

I take three steps forward, past the edge of Pitango Bakery. Something flashes, white and furious in the corner of my eye, and under the glare of a moth-buzzed streetlamp, a pit bull latches onto Opie's bony head. His whole body strains against the leash. The sound he makes is foreign and strange: a yelp strangled by the crush of the collar against his throat. All of it travels to me and into my body through the hand gripping the leash. My fingers twitch at every rip of the pit bull's jaws. Opie tries to run forwards and away, but I am still bigger than him, and I am rooted to the sidewalk, paralyzed. I scream and scream, my hand jerking in the air like a marionette. He has nowhere to go. I am holding him there.

After I am lifted off the sidewalk, after Aunt Shannon kicks at the pit bull until he lets go, after my dad carries me and Opie away, we find the emergency department for pets out by Johns Hopkins.

"This a logistical nightmare," my dad keeps saying, over and over again in the fluorescent waiting room. Finally, Aunt Shannon goes to talk to someone. The nurse is tired, worried, but when she sees Aunt Shannon's stomach, she smiles and whispers congratulations. Aunt Shannon glances at me, but I pretend to be reading a celebrity magazine.

"What's the status?" my dad asks when she comes back.

"He's stable. No rabies. Nothing that'll last except the hole in his ear," she says.

"Can you see through it? All the way through?" I ask.

Aunt Shannon nods. "All the way."

* * *

A week after Opie's attack, we go to the funeral of someone I don't know. He was my dad's friend from work. Although I want to stay home with Opie and cook chorizo with Aunt Shannon, she has an appointment somewhere. The only upside I can see is that maybe I will see my first dead person ever, and my recounting it will make Ava so sick she'll give me her Lunchable.

In Saint Casimir's, the frescoes are not just Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, but also Nazis shooting Polish people and missionaries getting their ears chopped off by Native Americans, and I think some pilgrims from the founding of Maryland. There is Latin on the walls, but I pretend it's a list of spells. Multorum vocatio. Paucorum electio. Omnium retributio.

I listen to my dad recite Robert Burns poetry about mice. I stand still in my black dress. When the woman next to us cries, I don't stare. When the eulogies are done and seemingly every Bible verse about heaven has been recited, the priest lifts his arms and the first row rises.

My dad isn't crying but he's sniffling, like he has a bad cold. I lean against him, and he's warm and a little sweaty. The sniffling stops and a kernel of pride wedges itself into the corner of my mouth.

When the row in front of me rises, I watch their belt loops pass and bide my time. When the last of them passes by I scramble up to get in line.

Rougher than he means to, my dad sits me back down. He gives me a strange look.

"You can't come," he says. When I open my mouth to protest, he shakes his head once, back and forth, like a military signal. "No," he says, and lurches past me. I weigh going after him anyway, but there is something about the set of his shoulders.

I settle for tucking my knees under me on the pew and squinting. Although my shoes dig in painfully to the backs of my thighs, I'm delighted. I can see the dead man's yellow face. It's as horrible as I hoped. It looks like it was sculpted out of ear wax—exactly the same orangey-yellow tint that I pluck occasionally from my ear canal. Ava will cry probably, so hard that snot dribbles into her mouth. And I will be like a sailor coming home and telling of the monsters she has seen. Look at that—the bags under his eyes are melting towards his chin.

Because she was afraid of eye bags exactly like those, my mom used to keep a bowl of lemon wedges in the freezer. She'd lay out on a lawn chair and put them under her eyes and come up sputtering when they melted. It was something she had read online. I wonder if at this very moment, while my lungs are filling up with Bible dust, she is sitting out on her back porch in Italy with a book spread over the rise of her belly and lemons on her eyes. Then, because I am feeling cruel, I imagine her in the casket at the front of the church. I imagine her collapsing while she watches the nuns, the slapping sound of her head against the Roman cobblestones. I imagine her tour guide boyfriend Gian finding her there, too late, and flexing his muscles at the sky. I imagine her thin fingers crossed over her chest, and her face yellow and corroded. I imagine again the slap, the slap slap slap of her head on the street. The rawness of my sobs, each of them foully rising like stomach bile, halts the ceremony completely. There is still a cord binding us together, and it is not manmade; it is made of man. It is made of something internal and gutless and unquestioning.

> And I will be like a sailor coming home and telling of the monsters she has seen.

* * *

Later, when I am sure my dad and Aunt Shannon are both asleep, I make my slow way down from my attic room to the ground floor, stepping on just the right spots on the spiral staircase to make my silent descent. Opie is sleeping next to the washing machine. I scuff my feet across the bare linoleum and lay down on the musty dog bed beside him.

The thing about Opie is that he really is the fattest beagle you've ever seen. He has a belly that rumbles constantly. When you rest your ear against it, it's like a conch shell. You can hear the ocean. It's a gentle sound. There's a slight rocking of breath, in and out, and a grumbling. Secret tremors. Disturbances in the deep beneath.

His big floppy ear is the softest part of him and the most complicated to pet. I take it gently between my thumb and forefinger and extend it to its full height. There is the hole. Already it has almost completely healed. The tear, which used to be raw and red and seeping, has crusted into black skin. A few scattered hairs are trying to grow through it, like weeds after a forest fire.

He doesn't move as I flop it gently over my face. I blink my eye open. I can see right through. There's the lid of the washing machine, and there's the peeling paint on the windowsill. There's a singular gray cloud, a barely visible omen of rain. There's the turret of the house across the street. And in the window of the turret, there's Michael Phelps at his kitchen table, sitting at a feast. On his left is thin crust Margherita pizza, perfectly round. Next to the pizza, Italian subs dripping with salami, fettuccini alfredo heaped in mounds, thick hamburgers glistening under sesame buns. On his right, stacks of chocolate chip pancakes sodden with syrup, cheesy grits hardening in cereal bowls, fluffy omelets studded with green pepper and onion, and slabs of egg sandwiches stacked like bricks. He nods at someone across the room, and I look to see my mother standing there in an apron holding a mixing bowl to her chest, cradling it like a newborn baby. Around her neck is one of his medals, a gold from Beijing, that rests gently against her softest cashmere sweater. She is singing something to herself. She is making him dessert.

hay sábanas fuera de la casa

Photography
Eliza Gaviria

Madelaine

Ana Paula Pinto-Diaz

It begins with mangoes.

Each time, a tender bud. A tree. A woman
who gathers the fruit and folds it gently
in her arms. The way I recall it, in the orchard,
their juices tinting her skirts.

It goes like this:

my grandmother's hands over
a white mixing bowl; the potted aloe
by the windowsill; a warm stirring—this occurring
over and over again, is kinder, and I
have taken it for granted.

Even now, each summer we have less weight;
each of us beginning
and receding. I watch her tend the rose bushes
out front. A hand in the dirt, the arch of a back
an avocado tree heavy with fruit.

The kind of breaking that gives way, after the rain,
to light: I watch everything I know in this small picture,
and I remember this:

I am small, years ago, an hour on the back steps.
The dill, weighed down by caterpillars;
the roses cradling a hummingbird's nest;

and mangoes, the soft kind, the flesh
that gives way under pressure. A woven
bag full to bursting with them.

My mother tucks a napkin under my chin.

Gold pools around my fingers, the corners of my mouth.

The Swan and the Mare

Lily Wulfemeyer

She knows that she should not talk to the man who talks to swans.

He sits at a new park bench every day, moving to be close to one swan in particular, visiting her whenever and wherever he can possibly find her.

The swan, from what little the woman knows about swans, does not look like one at all. Her eyes are as beady as a swan's. Her beak is black carbon like a swan's. Her neck, which looks nearly elastic, is as slender as a swan's. But her feathers are the pink of tea and fifth grade umbrellas, tinged orange at the edges. The man has a small collection of them which he has gathered over the years—he, of course, has never plucked one directly from the swan's puffed body. But the woman has watched him diligently place the toe of his shoe in the swan's tracks and follow her steps until they lead to a feather. Once, he waded into the water of a lake to scoop one from the disturbed surface; he trudged home holding it a foot away from his dripping body to keep it safe.

The man has shown the woman each feather individually, the way old women share their vintage button collections. He places his thumb and forefinger on the stalk, just low enough to not crush the gossamer tendrils at the base, and holds it steadily before her. Sometimes he allows her to run her fingers over the sherbet orange edges if she sits silently enough. Each time, she is surprised by how plastic the feathers feel and how the barbs are webbed, as if stuck together with a thin saran film. These are the kind of feathers made to crest the felt hat of a Peter Pan costume. They are not the right feathers for a wealthy heiress's pillow, and certainly not for the delicate girth of a swan.

The woman knows she should not talk to this man with his swan, but she still faithfully seeks them out every day during her lunch break. She comes to believe that the man is a chemist—or, perhaps, was, at one earlier point in time—because he wears a starched, white lab coat over his normal clothes like a cartoon character. A couple of weeks ago, he placed the coat on the ground about ten feet in front of the swan in hopes that she would nest in it. When she tugged at the seam with her carbon beak and relieved herself on the fabric, he still seemed pleased, balling up the coat and rushing off without a word. The woman imagined that he went home that night and spent hours pouring colorful liquids from beaker to beaker, hoping to create the perfect tea-and-umbrella pink to douse that white coat.

One afternoon in early August, he and the woman are walking around the running track, trying to spot the swan. He looks at the children tossing bread at mallards across the lake and tells her: "You cannot—whatever you do—you cannot feed a swan bread. There is something about the gluten that irritates their bowels." He pauses and rubs his nose. "Please don't feed her bread."

* * *

The woman's wife does not like that she spends so much time with the man. The woman often tells her wife that she sits with the man because she is sad for him. His beloved swan will perhaps never be the woman he wants her to be. There is, in fact, nothing for the wife to be worried about because his eyes could never see the woman in her work uniform the way he sees the swooping, melted oranges and pinks of the swan's liquid neck. He has never touched the swan and would, certainly, never touch her.

"I'm not jealous of that crackpot," her wife will say, before locking herself in the bedroom of their studio apartment, leaving the woman stranded in the barely-furnished living room. The woman will sink into a pillow on the floor and think about the man and his beakers, and how careful he is to never touch his swan. She can understand his simple inaction—she had barely touched anything besides the inside of her work gloves for years—even if her wife can't. At this very moment, her wife is likely taking a small cardboard box held together with a rubber band from the medicine cabinet, pulling out the pocked horse tooth wrapped in tissue paper, and softly, unabashedly thumbing it.

"He has never touched the swan and would, certainly, never touch her.

It is the tooth of a white mare, and it belongs to the woman, not her wife. It took five years for the woman to gain enough courage to ask her wife to marry her. Every day for three of those years, she went to the private ranch just outside of town to brush the mane of the white mare. She would straddle the top lattice of the ranch's fence, however painful it

was and for however long, and run her own hairbrush through the horse's hair until all the tangles were smoothed through. The mare's owner, whom the woman never saw, did not pay much attention to their animal's coat, so this detangling could take hours. The woman would brush through the satin locks once, twice, three times, and forget to stop, her eyes as wide as a river drowning each individual strand as the mare stood patiently, never acknowledging her. Occasionally, the mare bent her head to eat from the grass, and the woman watched as the rough tongue and lips coated the blades in saliva before consuming them. She wanted to feel that tongue on her own skin—like the pleasant sandpaper of a cat's lapping—but was too unsure how to initiate this if her hours of smooth brushing and caressing had not already.

One Monday dawn, as the woman stroked the horse's flank following a slow and warm brush, the mare gently folded to the ground and blinked her wet, stupid eyes once at the woman before closing them. It was a quick, simple death for a quick and simple horse. The woman's breathing remained regular and she only made gentle squeaking sounds in the grass as she arranged the mare's legs so they weren't bent and mangled under one another, and quietly left for her shift.

She returned that night with a pair of pliers. The mare's body was still on the ground, so the woman climbed over the fence and sat next to the horse, brushing the mane for the second time that day before using the pliers to slip a tooth loose from the spotted gums. With the tooth in her pocket and wrapped in a paper towel, she climbed back over the gate and walked all the way home.

But these days, when the woman's wife reemerges from the bedroom she will whisper something like, "Nasty bastards," to herself before searching the cabinet for a granola bar or saltines. The woman is never sure if she's talking about swan, the man, or her. Certainly not the mare, though: the woman's wife is often and ceaselessly enamored by the tooth without knowing why. She never mentions the mare aloud or asks her name.

* * *

The man rarely if ever talks to the woman about herself. When they do speak, it is usually about the swan—she has never told him about the tooth in her bathroom cabinet. But one day, in the rainy trench of October when she comes to join him on a park bench, they sit in silence for sixteen minutes before he turns to look at her work visor and collared shirt.

"Do you like working at Subway?" he asks.

"It's okay," she says, "but the double shifts get long."

He doesn't nod or indicate that he heard her. More minutes pass and she asks, "Do you love her?"

He says, "Yes," and watches the woman nod out of the corner of his eye.

"Someday, I hope to hold her hand. In public," he adds, keeping the woman in his peripheral vision. She nods again.

Sitting on the park bench, she imagines that she is walking home from work and comes across the man and his swan on the sidewalk. The swan has grown elongated legs with hinged knees, knuckled toes, human skin, and fishnet tights. The pink-dyed lab coat is draped over her scapulas to keep her warm in the shrill wind, and the man has diligently wrapped his fingers around the pink plastic feathers in her wings. The woman can see a smile cut through the swan's beak as they stroll down the sidewalk together. Neither of them acknowledges the woman who used to join them every day at lunch, but she is relieved that they are not afraid to hold hands in public. That they are happy.

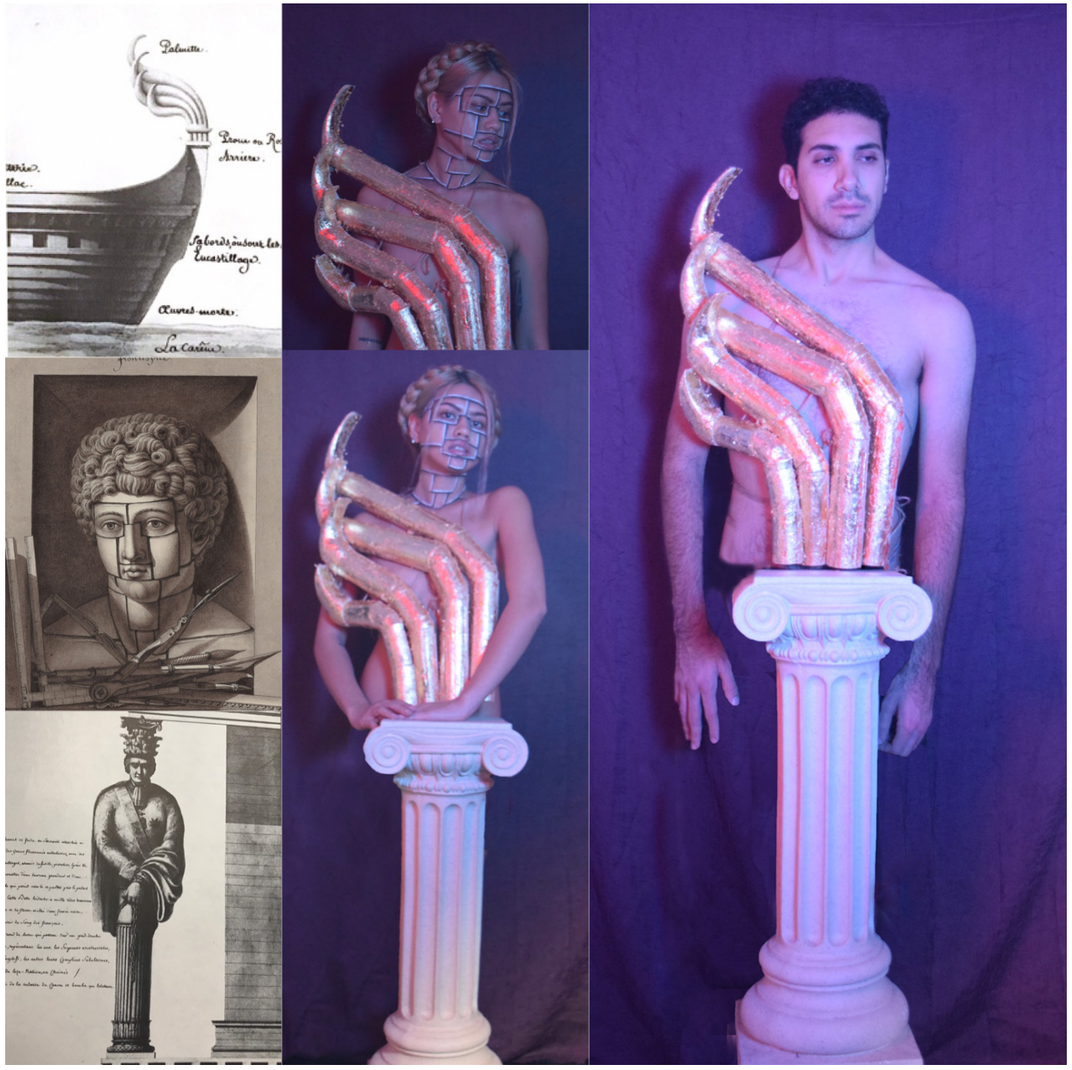
As she leaves to return to work, she thanks the man, but he is fixated on the swan preening herself on the surface of the chilly lake.

That night, she goes home to tell her wife that she saw the man and his sherbet swan holding hands on the sidewalk, clearly in love, and wouldn't it be so nice for them to have something like that, someday? She expects her wife to lock *herself* in the bedroom—thinks she might lock herself in if her wife does not—but they both lean closer, wires strung between their lips. They are in a wind tunnel together. Her wife tells her that on her walk home she passed the old art museum on Woodbury Street, the one that's usually empty aside from plaid schoolchildren and docents smoking on the front steps. But today there was a new exhibit, and the line wrapped around at least two corners of the building. When she asked what was going on, a couple—a man in a business suit and a woman in a red dress and fur coat—showed her a photo online of the painting that all the people had come to see. As her wife speaks, the woman feels as if she's balancing on the top of a telephone pole.

"It's a Renaissance painting," her wife continues, "of a woman having sex with an animal." Her wife thinks it's crazy, really crazy, that people are more ready to see women having sex with animals than with each other. Of course, the whole thing's probably pretty arbitrary, the Renaissance was so many years ago. But at least one hundred people, probably even more, were waiting outside in the cold to see it and that felt important to her somehow.

The woman nods and the wires grow more taught between their lips, like sinews of overworked muscle. She looks at her wife's nose, beautifully unbroken, and her wife's wrists, ready to be tied. She gently leads her wife to the bedroom, scared that she'll startle and run. They are such young newlyweds, they have had such little time to do things correctly, and it has all been so shy and delicate.

The woman pushes her wife's arms into the pillows above their heads. She licks her carefully, and runs a hand down her flank. When she licks between her wife's toes, she imagines it is like placing her tongue in the clove of a hoof. Her wife sighs, and her eyelids are shut, but her eyes are wide open beneath. The woman keeps stroking, slow and warm against the wetness, until her wife folds beneath her.



Lequeu

Photography
Sunee Kate Quirante

Our Own Making

Ana Paula
Pinto-Diaz

Convocación y Renacimiento

Statue of the Virgen del Panecillo, Quito, Ecuador

She who strangles the snake
reminds you of how it began: the volcano
gives way to a valley
gives way to a hill—and on it her body like a beacon.

Virgen; madonna; woman of the apocalypse

what we have taken
to mean salvation, and the whole world and our city
tucked neatly below.

In my dreams I am there: a graffitied highway, a gas mask for ashes, residue
of an ancient birth story I am hardly familiar with. For years I saw the snow:
I did not know it would be years before I understood.

Not God, but mountain. This earth cathedral; the wooded nave, the buttressless vault.
Cradle of everything we know, and have known, and will ever—
only until it swallows us whole.

The true colonial church is the facade; is my body
not that body trampled in the streets. But one seated, praying, deep
in its belly, a navel coated in gold.

Inside the woman chains the snake
and this time it surrenders. Outside a woman in wool
shakes a paper cup with two small coins in it. Wingless,
a lifted palm, empty.

It is like this for centuries: each time her march is holy, unguilded. And each time
after days of clashes a palm is offered empty,
shaking—but my pockets bear no fruit.

In the shadow of the valley all of us only
another in a series of centuries. Above us, on the hill, the dancer:

lifted palm, wings of aluminum;
a body verging on movement for decades—

the only one in the world with wings like an angel.

And so on, and so on—this story is ritual.

Second Son

Jenny Li-Wang

Your first memories are like this.

Kitchen fans over steaming food. The scents and smells of steaming food that cling, perfume-like, to the woman that raised you. After dinner, the murmur of indistinct Chinese leaksout from under the door of your parents' room. Vacant slippers form a pile in the hall.

You used to occupy your body with defiance. The smallest and the youngest and the quickest to anger. The woman who raised you recognized this defiance early on—probably after one of those fights with your sister that ends with you crying, rejected, and misunderstood. Your mother's remedy, and her greatest gift to you, is independence—a chitin shell, to restrain your tender insides and their naive, greedy hunger for total understanding and love.

You are so hungry anyway. She cannot give you what you want.

Instead, she gives you halved Asian pears, served scalding, steamed with rock sugar embedded into pale flesh like crystal teeth. She gives you hand-folded dumplings, carefully tucked into the thermos you methodically empty into trash cans at school, before your classmates can see and point out and make fun. Before your teachers can see and point out and make benevolent commentary about how your Chinese mother packs a lunch for you every day because she loves you.

They do not know your mother, but they do know other Chinese mothers, so this means they know your mother very well. In the same way they know this, they also know Chinese parents actually hold deep, secret love for their children, expressed through an encryption where food is the key. They marvel at the strange attachment the Chinese have to their secrets. It would be easier if they just learned how to speak English.

In the house that raised you, the bowl of congee before you is a cure-all for disease. Your parents take you to the pediatrician for doctor's notes, then bury unfilled prescriptions in the drawer along with your first-grade report cards. Years later, you rediscover this drawer while cleaning and chastise your parents for hoarding useless things.

Your mother's rationale for keeping them is this: You never know how a thing like this may someday be of great meaning to you.

* * *

Your mother tells you a secret.

This is a story of two eggs, she says.

In the polite, measured voice reserved for conversations with her American work friends and friendly American neighbors, she tells the only secret she's ever told you in front of your entire senior literature class. You all have just finished reading *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* together in class. By invitation of your teacher, your mother and several of your Chinese classmates' mothers emerge from their respective workplaces and homes to share their stories.

Your mother is not the kind of woman who volunteers to talk about herself. She is mortified by the kind of parents who would cry in front of their children. You tell her that her participation in this panel factors into your grade, and her paranoid fear of your academic failure outweighs her tendency to seal herself closed like a letter.

She studied English in a foreign language school in China, so her associations with the language are defined with reference to its utility, practice, and mastery. She does not say anything she cannot win. Every word she does speak is a stone thrown. A weight, the sound of impact, a job to do.

In the days of Chairman Mao, she says*, the Great Famine was followed by periods of other famine. Lesser famines, but still significant. At the time, we received food rations. I have three siblings: one older sister, one younger sister, and one younger brother. My mom took care of all of us by herself. For one month, a family our size gets maybe a dozen eggs. Now, my mom is very fair. On the days when we get to eat an egg, she boils it and cuts it into quarters and gives a piece to all of us. She splits the egg equally for all of her children.*

This is the story of the first egg.

* * *

Your sister tells you a secret.

You were too young to understand at the time, she says, but Dad lost two siblings

years ago. First was his youngest and only sister, our yi (姨). *Most recently, he lost his older brother, the eldest brother, our* da bobo (大伯伯).

When you ask for more details, your sister's eyes turn misty. It is at times like this that you remember she really is five years older than you. You, the smallest and the youngest, are protected by your sister's and mother's silence. Your sister's only response to the rest of your questions is to press the wet sockets of her eyes into her palms and recite that the deaths on this side of the family occur under sad and unfortunate circumstances.

When your dad's dad, your *yeye* (爷爷), dies in the summer, it takes a plane and a train and a car to reach the countryside of Longxi. The dirt road is narrow, flanked by sewage trenches you resolve never to look too deeply into. When your cousin turns into the neighborhood, he honks his horn. The chickens and dirty children on the road scatter and holler playfully at you through the window.

You meet all kinds of people over the next seven days. The house that raised your dad is made of brick and stone walls assembled in four parts: a storefront where local kids buy expired bars of ice cream, a pen for the pigs, a shed for corn, and a large room with a stone *kang* (炕) bed under which a fire may be lit on winter nights. The stone *kang* bed under which no fire now burns.

These four rooms are arranged around a stone courtyard. Over the next four days, the sound of woodwork coming from this courtyard wakes you at dawn. You hover at the door frame in the same clothes as yesterday, passing a towel wet with rainwater over your face to wipe the sleep away. Dozens of the skinniest old Chinese men you've ever seen move hefty planks of wood on clever riggings of rope into the courtyard. They are your *yeye*'s friends from his place of worship, the family neighbors, and relatives you've never met. Every day, you watch the progress of these men as they measure and saw and assemble a coffin for the man that raised the man that raised you.

Mostly, though, you sleep.

Your father is not afforded this luxury. As the eldest son now—as the eldest since his only older brother died under sad and unfortunate circumstances years ago—he is tasked with accompanying your now-widowed 奶奶 (*nainai*) in the greeting of guests. Guests are received in the cleanest room in the house, which also happens to be the room you are put up in. This means that you and your sister must make yourselves scarce or else relegate yourselves to the uncomfortable position of kneeling, stone-silent on the bed, as the entire house and the stone courtyard echoe with the high, wailing sound of your father and your *nainai* sobbing in mournful harmony.

The loudness of it all. The drumming of hammers and constant slamming of doors and trampling of feet through the house. The unashamed weeping of distant family you are ashamed not to know, let alone love. Grief is loud here. You thought it would be quiet.

So you make yourself scarce.

So you find yourself taking long walks into the fields, watching baby goats run little planetary circles around their mother and examining the baby centipedes, tiny and wiggling and independent, struggling around the dirt patterns made by the treads of your boots. The river and sky and soil are gray with pollution here. Life, defiant, finds ways to preserve itself.

At night, the men who grew up with your father keep vigil over the body, playing *mahjong* and drinking and smoking. When they shuffle them, you hear the porcelain tiles clatter against one another. A shower of noise, sweet and addictive, like the gambling game it is.

One of these nights, while lying on the bed you share with your sister and your father, he discloses his worry for your *nainai*. Your dad's voice emerges, strangled from a chest pressed under a weight that only comes from being the eldest son. The oldest and the smartest and the luckiest. He bears the look of someone who is haunted.

How will your nainai *survive this*, he says, voice crackling like tissue paper. You consider this question for him as well as he cries softly, leaking tears onto the rolled towel you all share as a pillow.

"Your dad's voice emerges, strangled from a chest pressed under a weight that only comes from being the eldest son.

Your father is afflicted by a great burden. He is the one who got the closest to getting out.

He is the one who got the closest but did not get out, because even though he lives in America with you, he stayed. He stays. Somewhere among the baby goats and the neighborhood that raised him and the uncles whom your mother does not talk about.

Your mother, second-eldest daughter of four, left China unburdened except for the expectation that she do well for herself. Your father, on the other hand, is tethered to this place. In America, he is a materials scientist, and his expertise lies in shooting ion beams at things and seeing what happens. He works in a lab, but his body is breaking as if under the

duress of hard labor. Still, he works later and later, and sends more and more money back. You are scared to ask where it goes. He is scared too. Your father must be the least defiant person you know.

And you think about your *nainai*, the woman who left her family at the age of sixteen to marry your *ye ye* and raised five growing sons through the Communist Revolution. Your *nainai* who, with her pension and the money her reliable eldest son secretly sends home to her, supports several of those adult sons to this day.

Your *nainai* has always struck you as some kind of wilted but resilient flower. These days, she hunches her shoulders when she believes that no one is watching. With new eyes, you see from where your father inherited his silhouette.

* * *

The story of the second egg, your mother says*, comes from your dad's family.*

Your dad grew up with four brothers. My mom was very fair, but the way that side of the family split the eggs was to cut them in half. The brother with the best test scores would get half of the egg for himself. The other three brothers would share the second half among themselves.

You raise your hand. *Was there one brother who ate the most eggs growing up?* Your mother fixes her eyes on you, incredulous. *Your dad, of course.*

The class bursts into giggles. She was not trying to be funny, but your mouth reflexively twists into a smile anyway.

Inside, you think about the kinds of times that would make half a hard-boiled egg seem like a precious reward to a kid. You think about the ethics of the half-egg—does nourishing the one most likely to get out mean condemning the rest?

Your mother's smile is tight-lipped for a different reason. You see the stone, bitter and unflung, in her mouth. She thinks about what kind of parents would not give each of their children the best they can offer. How they could choose only one to eat the egg. How the child who ate would forever be indebted for so greedily eating it up.

That side of the family, she says*, likes to joke that this is why your dad is so smart. When all the brothers see each other, so many years later, they still fight over it.*

All in good fun, I hope? your teacher says, still laughing.

This is the story of the second egg.

* * *

In the week at your *nainai*'s house, you quickly tire of your status as a soft American girl.

So you drag your sister over to the open-air kitchen at the corner of the house.

So you learn how to fold *hua juan* (花卷) with careful hands, clinging to the gentle corrections and fond laughter of your aunts and the neighborhood aunties teaching you. They could do this work infinitely better than you in their sleep. Instead, they share their craft with you two because you have endeared yourselves to them—not by your own merit, but simply because you are all family. A week's worth of funeral food is prepared this way.

As you fold the plushy dough into shape, hands soft with oil, you think of your mother. She is back in America, her vacation days already used up in a visit to her own parents earlier this year. She is probably getting ready for bed or already asleep. She always falls asleep the same way—her glasses askew, with a book splayed across her chest and the lamp on. No one is home to tuck her in. You feel a brief pang of loneliness on her behalf.

Later on, she will be furious when she finds out her daughters have been living like this—unshowered and ravaged by bedbugs and subsisting off hua juan for an entire week. The smell of cigarette smoke sticks to you. You contract bronchitis. She will yell at your father over the phone, voice distant and shrill, for not taking care of you.

You and your sister will immediately step in to his defense.

We want to be here, you say. As you say it, you realize this is true. *We're glad we could be here with you*.

We want to be here, you say. As you say it, you realize this is true.

* * *

These days, your *nainai* keeps repeating two words: *xin teng* (心疼). Literally translated, *xin teng* means heartache.

These days, you catch her murmuring it to the walls of the house—the house built by her husband when she was still a teenage bride. She whispers it to the sheets as she makes

the stone bed upon which she birthed five sons and a daughter. She tells it to the boiling kettle and the dusty display of cigarettes in the storefront and the feral cat that sometimes wanders, spectral, in and out of the house.

Her heart aches because it is broken. However, there are also times when *xin teng* does not mean heartbreak.

Those times are like this.

You step out of the car in Longxi. Your *nainai* hasn't seen you in years. This is the woman who raised the man that raised you. You nearly forgot what her face looks like. Her eyes grow wet behind her glasses as she folds calloused hands around your own. *Xin teng*, she says, pulling you around her shrunken frame. She says it again as she tugs apart the *hua juan* you hand her, a steamed dough flower dotted with scallion. You know enough Chinese to tell her, suddenly shy, that you folded it yourself. She is sweet to you and acts very impressed. It melts, soft and savory, on the tongue. Two flavors of love—sorrow and affection—occupy the same heart at the same time. *Xin teng*.

* * *

The beginning of the summer finds you back in China for the first time in four years. You and your sister and your father arrive at Xi'an International Airport in the early afternoon. You clank your luggage down the metal stairs of the plane, sweating under your sweater, queasy and exhausted. You do not sleep on planes.

These days, your *yeye*—who has not been doing well—has been especially unwell. You find out he is sick on Christmas, and after that, your father acquires the neurotic habit of constantly checking his phone. Your sister calls you to cry over things when she feels low. You spend your sophomore spring inhaling and exhaling, practicing the act of bracing yourself.

You are not sure who among your friends will care, so you only tell the few that you cannot get away with not telling. After, you look up and notice that you do not see their faces anymore. *Stage IV stomach cancer*. There is nothing to see. There is no reaction you want. You move your mouth and pray for nothing. Or anything, as He wills it. The only thing you want is for the apprehension to eat you from the inside out and to exhaust itself. Actually, there is another thing you want.

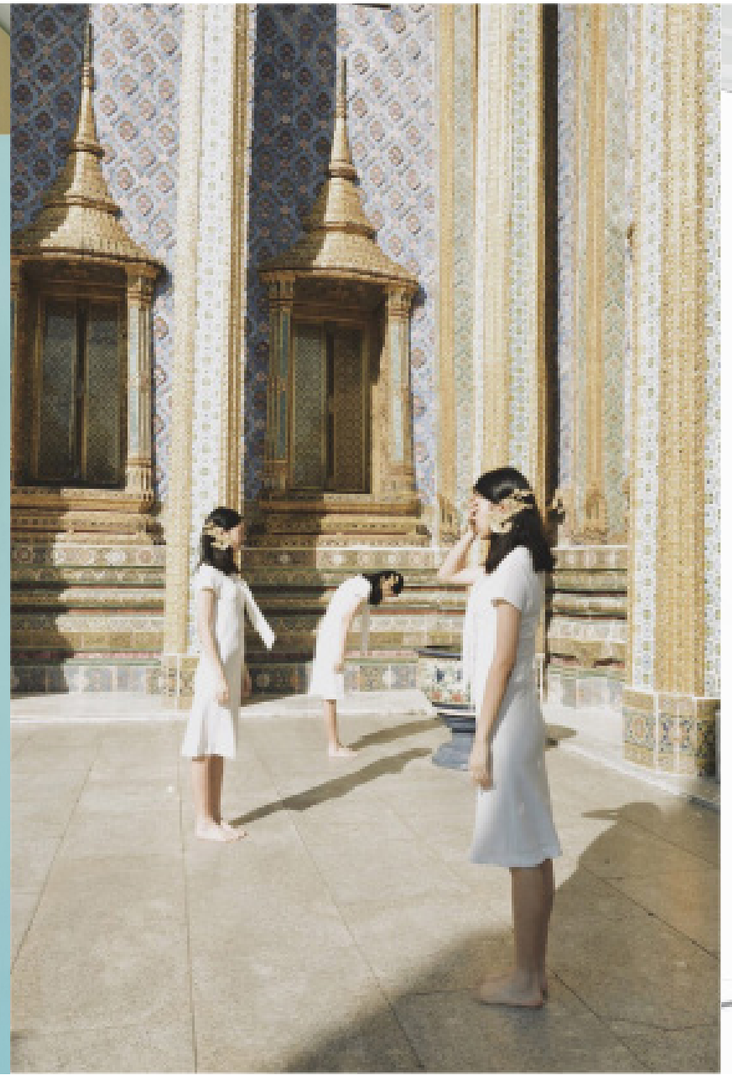
You disclose a secret.

My greatest nightmare is that he dies on our plane ride over.

In Xi'an, the airport shuttle shudders to life under your feet. You brace yourself against the metal rail next to you. Your father checks his phone. You watch the slope of his shoulders change imperceptibly. He looks up straight at you, and you feel like screaming. His face is gone.

Yeye *died*, he says, stunned.

You are unsure what to do with this information. Your mother's voice reverberates through the stone courtyard of your heart. You never know how a thing like this may someday be of great meaning to you. You never know how to find meaning in a thing like this.



Chain Reaction, Consciousness, Serendipity

Photography
Nasha Wanichiwecharungruang

AN INTERVIEW WITH LESLIE CONTRERAS-SCHWARTZ

Joshua Anil, Rynd Morgan, Sanvitti Sahdev

Leslie Contreras-Schwartz is the fourth Houston Poet Laureate, serving from 2019-2021. She is a multi-genre writer whose book *Nightbloom & Cenote* (St. Julian Press, May 2018) was a semi-finalist for the 2017 Tupelo Press Dorset Prize, judged by Ilya Kaminsky. She is also the author of *Fuego*, and was a featured poet for the 2018 Houston Poetry Fest. She is a member of the Macondo Writers' Collective.

Her forthcoming book, *Who Speaks for Us Here*, is scheduled for spring 2020 publication with Skull + Wind Press. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Pleiades, The Missouri Review, The Collagist, [PANK], Iowa Review, Verse Daily, Catapult,* and *Xicanx: 21 Mexican American Writers of the 21st Century* (University of Arizona, 2022), edited by ire'ne lara silva, among others. She is a graduate of The Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College and earned a bachelor's at Rice University.

As a fourth-generation Houstonian, you now have the honor of being the current Houston Poet Laureate. Poetry is often an individual affair, and as poet laureate, you now serve as the voice of one the largest and most diverse cities in America. How do you balance writing as a representative of the people of Houston, while still maintaining your individual voice?

When I began my term and started imagining what project I would focus on, I knew from the start that I wanted a project that would honor the voices of everyday Houstonians. As a representative for the people of Houston, I want to use this role to highlight the existing poetry that already takes place in people's live—they just might not call it as such. Bayou City Broadsides, the focus of my term, is a project that does just this—creates visual images with lines of poems from Houstonians. I view my individual work as separate, although most of my work does focus on community and human connection.

Your writing sometimes focuses on social issues such as mental illness, mass shootings, and trafficking, and you have talked about poetry as a space for marginalized communities to express their ideas. How can poetry serve as an avenue for social justice? How has it influenced your own engagement with poetry?

Poetry, and all literature, confronts the silences that contribute to injustice. It provides a light and can serve as a salve, or a confirmation of truth, or a way to hope. It contributes to the work of social justice by allowing us to name, categorize, and illustrate experiences of injustice in ways that are not possible through other forms of discourse.

As a poet, I am a fan of constant observation, of cataloguing details that others might dismiss. I am constantly engaged in this manner, and am often asking myself questions about the nature of other people's experiences, and how my own is a sharp contrast, has a parallel narrative or intersection, or a relationship in which I cannot draw easy conclusions. I question my role as a citizen; I question my experience as a woman of color; I question my privilege and lack of it. My poetry attempts to grapple with the questions of how and why we are connected.

The experiences you write about are deeply personal and often describe the trauma. How did you feel about publishing these poems? How do you write poems that rely so deeply on personal experience while keeping an audience in mind?

I do not write memoirs and my poetry collections are not personal narratives in verse. Many of my poems are based on personal experience, but it is important to remain cognizant of the difference between an author and a speaker. My poems have speakers, who may or may not

speak from my own experiences; however, my hand is curating the lyrical moment or narrative (if it's a narrative poem). I want an audience that is curious, and interested in the lives of other people—especially if it something wildly different than their own.

In *Nightbloom & Cenote*, the poems display a range of inspirations and references, including artwork, music, other poems, and dedications to other people. How do these inspirations come together, and how do you incorporate so many influences while maintaining cohesion within the collection?

Image is what holds my collections together. As well as sounds, rhythms, that I try to repeat or create variations. The content itself—well my mind is constantly thinking about music, books, art, other poems, and literature—so my poetry is influenced by the nature of my thinking. I am not a person who will write, for instance, a highly focused or linearly structured book.

Questions about God feel central to your poetry. As a Jewish woman who was raised Catholic, how does poetry help you synthesize the influences of these two different backgrounds?

I question the idea of God, which I did as a Catholic, and now as a Jewish woman. Most of this questioning comes from my own personal desire to understand human connection, and how it fails in terrifying, deadly ways. My questioning of God or study of God is based on my need to understand people, and how we are connected.

Your children appear in your work as well, both in your experiences as a mother and through your expressions of hope for their future. How do you feel about your children one day reading the poems in which they are mentioned? Have you shared any of your poetry with them? How do you feel about their future?

My children are not old enough to understand my poetry, but if they read it later I don't think they will be surprised. I speak frankly to them about the world at age-appropriate levels. And again, the children in my poems are not necessarily my children; the speaker of the poem is not me. I cannot say how they will receive my poetry as adults, but it might help them understand my mind and how it works.

You graduated from Rice and we were curious how your undergraduate experience might have influenced you as a poet. Do things about Rice—things that you either learned or felt or experienced while studying here—ever appear in your work?

I studied with Susan Wood, who was a great influence on me through her teaching and as a poet who I admired. In her classes, it was the first time I was treated as a serious poet. I was not a very social person, and still am not. I often fell headlong into study at Rice, because my mind was hungry and grew hungrier once I latched onto a new topic or idea that was new to me. Rice encourages this type of headlong plunges, part of what fuels ambition or studiousness, and I take that with me.

What is your favorite writing/thinking spot on campus? What was your favorite hang-out spot when you were a student here?

As a student, my favorite spot was a table hidden behind the chapel. It is no longer there. Now I appreciate walking under the oak trees; there are plenty to nurture thinking on walks.

What's one piece of personal or writing advice that you would go back and tell your undergraduate self?

Listen to yourself. Listen long and hard.

A Ghazal Since I Don't Want to go Under the Knife (Into Flesh)

Lily Wulfemeyer

A fish rots from the head down but I'd lose
my head if it weren't sewn to my flesh.

If I am woman hear me, soft,
fracture under the weight of my flesh.

A poem is a body / a tree is a body. How to have a body?
Imagine two souls trapped in identical flesh.

All of my portraits look like women who look like me.
I have yet to move into my own flesh.

My body has two tongues: one in my mouth & one in hers but
she gets to speak to strangers from my flesh.

Did you know / hermit crabs use babydoll heads for houses?
Maybe I should let them take her / move into her flesh.

Imagine two cameras facing one another. We have / we are
separate monsters bound to the same flesh.

It's a philosophical dialectic: she & I climb a tree & meet at the top. It's a family
lineage we share / but I break / I can't hold her body in my flesh.

Lovers gender my body as breast / hip / clit —
they don't see the buried tongue making a god of my flesh.

Watch me paint my face like I've waltzed through smoke. Learn
my name, the doppelgänger / see the not-blood heirloom of my flesh.

Others make me demon / faerie / body of unknown to silence
the living, morphing matter of flesh.

I bury my pet fish beneath a blooming red hibiscus / wish
that I, too, could let the soil reabsorb / translate my flesh.

If I speak the soil's ancestry / a language between fire & Earth / perhaps
I could create out of flesh.

Let me try again: I can bake & knead & build & braid but I need
more ingredients to mold the home of my flesh.

So give me six days to remake myself & on the seventh
I will dance like mad in my glistening newborn flesh.

See me stride like a panther as I shed my negative space.
I will transform / reject birth / claim new histories of flesh.

Imagine that I, finally, am they / them / their
flesh.

If nothing else, I will break the bodies of lilies. Use the tip of a knife
to pierce holes in my thigh & sew the stems, soft, into my flesh.

Escape Velocity

Hannah Young

Out in the town square of Old Baytown, under a night sky I hadn't yet learned to fear, that once charming man dropped to his knee and asked me to be his Valentine. I laughed and I grinned and slipped the ring onto my finger, letting Victor Valentine wrap his arms around me. What a name, right? His parents must've known that if they gave him a great name, he would feel the urge to live up to it.

As soon as I said yes, a mariachi band appeared from around the corner and struck up their tune around the fountain, playing trumpets like they were making love. He whisked me across the stones that were cracking under the pressure of weeds and clumsy feet, and led me in the type of dance that makes you forget you have a mind. In that moment, I was made of fluid movement and music. We danced amongst the lampposts that shone as bright as the stars, spilling into the empty black street. The band followed us as we skipped and waltzed down the streets of Old Baytown and her western storefronts, down past Sterling Library and the burger shack, past the large red brick church and all the way to his little blue house. It was our home now, he said.

It was small and falling apart, but so was the entire town. That's what gave Old Baytown her charm. The path up to the house was speckled with cracks where grass reached through to the sun. The door didn't sit quite right in its frame, and never shut all the way. At night, I could hear every car that passed by. But for all these things, for every stray cat, for every panel that fell off the fence, there was a Fourth of July parade and pumpkin patches and those inscrutable Texas sunsets.

Those first days passed in absolute bliss. Our home was always filled with the smell of rising yeast as I tried to perfect a star shaped, pesto filled tear-and-share loaf the way my mother taught me to make it. Victor would play mariachi softly over the crackling radio and work at the table, schematics spread out like spilled milk. We were both astronomers. Well, I was really a manager at the Mann Eye in Houston, and he was a supervisor at the Exxon refinery. He used to be a researcher at NASA, but they wouldn't support his project. They called it dangerous, insane, a fool's errand. I called it inspiring. Who wouldn't want to travel faster than the speed of light?

Back in the 2040s, the discovery of a reliable source of anti-matter set off a massive race between the nations to develop vehicles capable of deep space travel. No national agency had managed to travel beyond our solar system, but Victor knew that with a light speed engine we could get anywhere. Why take years to travel beyond the Oort cloud, if he could do it in hours at light speed? He left NASA so he could adapt their existing high-speed travel technology into something even faster. I had always helped him with his research. We spent many nights staying up late, surrounded by the latest textbooks on negative energy and exotic matter. When the sun passed from the window, I lit cinnamon candles all around the living room. Sure, it was a fire hazard, but it added a certain romance; it was like we were courting the stars.

The end goal was to travel to the center of a black hole and live to tell the tale. A black hole forms when a massive star has fused so much matter at the center of its core that it has created iron, and the iron can't fuse anymore, so the entire thing collapses in on itself with the luminosity of ten billion suns. All the matter that composes us explodes outwards in a supernova, and left behind is a ball of matter with an escape velocity so high that something would have to travel at the speed of light in order to escape its gravity. And thus, the black hole is born: a void that not even light can escape. If we could travel faster than light, then nothing could hold us back; no gravitational pull would be enough to ground us.

We always looked to the future. Every dream we had was of the fame we would get and the massive "screw you" we would deliver to NASA once it finally worked. I wish I had slowed down enough to really enjoy those days.

* * *

When my father died, we came into a decent amount of money, and my mother came to live with us. Victor was hesitant at first, but I persuaded him. She was a wonderful old woman, and I didn't mind living with her at all. As Christmas approached that year, she asked us where our decorations were. Only then did I realize that we didn't have any. We were so busy with the light speed engine that it had never occurred to us to decorate. So, on Saturday, she demanded we take a break from our work and join her at the Hobby Lobby and Michael's in the nice part of town. I had to drag him, but Victor came along. By the end

A black hole forms when a massive star has fused so much matter at the center of its core that it has created iron, and the iron can't fuse anymore, so the entire thing collapses in on itself with the luminosity of ten billion suns. All the matter that composes us explodes outwards in a supernova, and left behind is a ball of matter with an escape velocity so high that something would have to travel at the speed of light in order to escape its gravity. And thus, the black hole is born: a void that not even light can escape. If we could travel faster than light, then nothing could hold us back; no gravitational pull would be enough to ground us.

of our decorating excursion, Victor seemed much more relaxed. We danced again that night for the first time since our engagement, in front of a half-decorated Christmas tree.

The next day, we finished decorating our home. We took a break from the schematics that night, and sat together on the couch in a room lit only by the red and green and blue lights of the Christmas tree. My mom had long since gone to bed. Victor put his arm around me. He smelled like vanilla and coconuts.

"Are you using a new lotion?" I asked.

"Sure am. Now I smell even better than you!" he said, prodding my side playfully.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Valentine. I don't care what lotion you use, it won't ever smell better than my *scent au naturale*."

He laughed, but the smile turned serious. He drew a deep breath.

"Ruby, what are we going to do with your father's money?"

"Where's this coming from all the sudden? I thought we were just going to save it until we had clearer plans."

"I had a bit of an idea," he said hesitantly.

"Well, don't be shy."

"I wanted to use it to build a workshop. We're so close to being done with the design of the light speed engine. I think we're ready to begin gathering parts and building it." I sighed a little.

"C'mon, Rubes," he exclaimed, grabbing my hands, "just imagine how beautiful it'll look, sitting there!" He gestured to the corner by the fireplace.

"You know I want to have kids. A family. And you also know that's gonna take a lot of money."

"But I've been working on this engine for decades, Rubes. Decades."

"The money would build the most beautiful nursery. Light blue walls, white trimming, French sliding doors. I'll even paint little ducks on the walls!"

"We can have kids when it's finished. This engine is practically my baby, anyway," he said with a chuckle.

"Imagine how beautiful our kids would look! You know we would have some beautiful-ass babies. Some next level, model babies."

"Just think about it. Okay?" he asked. I agreed to think about it.

In the end, we went with his plan, even though I never really wanted to. But when I saw how hard he worked on the plans and the way he got flush with excitement when he

figured out how to make something work, I couldn't say no. How could I have? He pulled like gravity. I would have stopped him from achieving his dreams, but instead, he stopped me from mine. Sometimes I wonder if that meant I loved him more, or if I just loved him wrong.

There was no time for baking or music or dancing; every free moment, every empty second was dedicated towards building the light speed engine. We worked until he looked like a dead man, and sounded like a crazy one. He was always talking about how magnificent it would be. Humankind had conquered the land, conquered the oceans, conquered the air, and now there was one frontier left. With light speed technology, the entire universe would be open to us. There would be infinite potential.

Infinite potential started in a backyard shed. The outside was as ramshackle as the rest of Old Baytown, but inside, she was immaculate. Everything metal, polished to a shine. The light bounced blue and pink off the walls. The different engine parts, which we had spent most of the money on, lay meticulously sorted on a workbench beneath the diagrams of the engine. The top of the diagrams read "The Ruby II." I was Ruby One, of course.

> "Humankind had conquered the land, conquered the oceans, conquered the air, and now there was one frontier left.

More than once I caught him in the bathroom working on a speech for the Nobel Prize. He would get all dressed up in his dark burgundy suit, holding his comb like a mic, pausing to fix his hair in the mirror before he began. He would thank a plethora of people, all culminating with me of course. It was a bit ironic to see him dressed up in our dinky little bathroom, staring into a mirror cracked and yellowing. But when he turned and saw me, he would always blush and wrap me in a bear hug. Back then, I just thought it was sweet.

* * *

One night, Mom wanted to go out and walk along West Texas Avenue to see the lights and giant tree, so I took a break from work and walked with her. She bundled up in layers of sweaters and puffer jackets and scarves until she had to walk like a penguin.

"It's really not that cold out, Mom," I said.

"Oh, you can never be too prepared. Here, let me give you some mittens." I knew better than to fight it. We wandered out, down along the same streets that Victor and I had danced down when we got engaged. These streets still held all their old, western charm, only marginally disrupted by the sushi place across from the square. Imagine, a cowboy using chopsticks. Now that's something I'd like to—

"Honey, when are you two finally gonna get married?"

"What? Where is this coming from?" I asked.

"It's been seven months and y'all haven't even mentioned a wedding. All you do is work on that engine of yours."

"I thought you were proud of us!" I said, stopping in the road to face her. This was our life's work; it seemed ridiculous then that she could be so critical of it.

"Oh, I am, I am. But there's life out there more important than work, Ruby." She kept walking, her padded figure cutting a soft shadow on the street.

"We're so close, Mom. The engine is going to work. I just know it." We came upon the town square, with its lampposts wrapped in string lights and the towering tree, covered in bows and adorned with a glowing David's star like a crown. She sighed, adjusting her scarf as we looped around the tree.

"There's no point in travelling fast if you aren't going anywhere."

"You sound like a Hallmark card. Like, a really edgy Hallmark card."

"Just make sure you don't forget who you are."

"Don't worry, Mom. I won't."

When we came back home, Victor was passed out at the table in the workshop, drooling on the schematics, snoring loudly. I covered him with a blanket and sat in the chair beside him, looking over his work until I also fell asleep at the table with him.

It was only a few days before Christmas at that point, and I felt like I was being drawn down by his gravity, sucked in by the massive weight of his ambition. He left the door shut to carolers, and I did too. He set up a bed in the workshop, and I shared it with him many times. It felt like falling down a black hole. The thing about black holes is that after you've fallen down, there's nowhere to go. There's no final goal. You're just… there.

* * *

All I wanted was a normal Christmas. But when I woke up Christmas morning, he

wasn't in bed. I thought maybe he was trying to surprise me, but he was in the workshop, adding final touches to the engine. The fluorescent lights flickered above him. The room felt like a hospital: meticulously clean and haunted by some sort of intangible death. He worked slowly, like he was moving through water.

"Have you had anything to eat, Victor? Want me to grab you some breakfast?" He jumped up and ran over to me.

"I've done it. Rubes, I've done it! Come on, come look!" He ran back over to the engine, gesturing wildly. He flicked it on, and it spun and whirred and purred, just like an engine should. I felt the urge to rush over and pore over every little detail, to run my finger along its elegant design. The reflection of the Christmas lights outside flashed on the engine's glossy surface.

"Do you even know what day it is?" she asked.

"No. Should I?"

"Victor…" He put the schematics down. His eyes were tinged red. "It's Christmas."

"Oh…"

"Did you forget?"

"Yeah. I guess I did." The words passed like warm breath in cold air. He turned back to the engine.

Those holidays were gone in a blur. I have some vague recollection of them, but it's only a feeling, like when you try to remember a movie you saw some time ago, but can only remember an impression. Those holidays left the impression of dread deep in my mind. It was something about the way Victor talked. He sounded like he was talking to an empty room. New Year's Eve came and went; we kissed under the mistletoe; we watched fireworks. The year before we had gone stargazing, but now the night sky only held work anxiety. When we lost our love of the stars, we weren't really astronomers anymore. We had gone too far.

On the day after New Year's, we drove the long stretch of Tri City Beach Road down to McCollum Park, overlooking the bay. The trees stood far apart here, like they were afraid to talk to each other, but even more afraid of being alone. We sat down on the rocks, just listening to the waves slowly lap against them. He tried to skip some rocks, but there weren't any smooth enough. He rested his head against my shoulder, and I could smell that vanilla and coconut lotion again, making me feel warm inside. I began to cry. He was, understandably, concerned.

Talking to him was like trying to talk underwater. My words were eaten by seawater, briny and stinging, with only empty air bubbles to prove I said anything at all. I just… yelled at him. Yelled that this project didn't make sense anymore, that we were losing our lives, postponing our wedding over it, that he forgot Christmas (who the hell forgets Christmas?), that we built a workshop instead of a nursery. Oh, yes, he may have finished the light speed engine, but after that came jumping back in bed with NASA and a journey to a black hole. There was no end. There was no end to this scientific pursuit, and it wasn't worth losing our humanity over.

"My words were eaten by seawater.

He said what he always did; it was basically his religion at that point. We would become like gods, ruling over nature. Theory would have no hold over us, physics would be meaningless. Reality would, quite literally, bend to our will. Wasn't that something worth sacrificing for?

I told him, what's the point if we're going to die anyway? Maybe it made me selfish, but I didn't want to sacrifice everything only to die in the end.

He said nothing. I still don't know what was passing through his head. I guess he was just too tired to argue with me. The entire drive back passed in silence. Not the good, refreshing kind where you feel at peace. It was uneasy. The tension spread between us like a viscous film on old soup. I wanted to break that silence, to break free from the weight of his gravity, but I couldn't achieve escape velocity.

* * *

People always say that traumatic experiences get burned into your mind, but honestly, I can't even remember what day it happened on. I think it was in February. That night, I stayed in Houston after work to celebrate a friend's promotion with dinner. When I got back, he wasn't home. My mom said that he had just picked up and left; she assumed he was just out on some late errands. My stomach dropped; that wasn't like him. I checked the workshop. It was empty. Not just empty of him, but of the engine too.

I called him, but it went to voicemail. I didn't need him to tell me to know what he was doing. I got back on 146 without hesitation. The drive to NASA always brought us over the Fred Hartman bridge, with its bright yellow Whataburger arches. Whenever I rode passenger at night and we crossed it, I took off my glasses. You can see the refinery lights from

up there, and without glasses, they look like a grand city. Like New York or something. A lot of things look beautiful from a distance.

Back in the 20s, NASA's center in Houston was dedicated purely to research, populated only by scientists. But recently, it's become something of a Cape Canaveral. They've started launching and storing cutting-edge vessels at the property. It's hard to imagine that 100 years ago, they directed the Apollo missions from there. It's hard to imagine that the dream to go to the moon fundamentally changed my life. Sometimes I try to imagine what it would have been like without those missions. No NASA, no space research in America, no near-light speed engine. I guess it isn't hard to imagine.

I rolled up to the gate, preparing to leverage my popularity as a researcher to sweet talk my way into their space vessel storage facilities. The man in the booth guarding the gate leaned out and looked me in the eye. He was an old friend of Victor's.

"He's waiting for you."

As advanced as the sprawling complex was, I remember it looking like a series of suburban garage doors, reminiscent of home storage facilities. One of the garages was open, and the lights were on. Sure enough, his pickup was parked next to it, and he was busy installing The Ruby II.

The Ra IV was the fastest vessel NASA had built to date, and only the size of an SUV. The original Ra had been built for a close fly-by of the sun at insanely high speeds and just kept improving from there. The last big issue with travelling at such high speeds was that, as the ship approached light speed, colliding with nothing but a speck of dust could cause massive damage to the vehicle. Ra was the first ship to successfully employ magnetic fields to protect against the dust. Combined with our light speed engine and its reality bending Alcubierre-ian tech, light speed was in our grasp for the first time.

I got out of my car and stood by where he was kneeling beside Ra IV.

"You really have to do this?" I asked.

"It's my life's work. I'd never forgive myself if I didn't test it." He wasn't going to budge, so I helped him install the engine. If he was going up there, at least I could do my best to keep him safe. Surprisingly, it didn't take that long. He really had designed the engine well. It fit perfectly in place of the old.

Victor Valentine, the man who proposed with a pun. The man with a name so perfect, he was destined for greatness. The man with an inspiring, dangerous ambition. The man with disheveled hair and a weary look in his eyes as he strapped on an orange space

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suit. The sun began to rise softly over Houston, like a deep breath before beginning the day. He stepped in close to me, cupping my cheeks in both hands, and placed a kiss on my forehead.

"I'll see you soon, Rubes."

"If you're not back before dinner, I'm going to El Toro without you."

"Fair enough," he said with a light smile. "Dinner at seven, then."

The Ra IV hovered off the ground, taxied to the launch pad a couple blocks down, and I followed it in Victor's pickup. It shot off into the sky faster than fireworks, weaving trails of gold and azure and magenta behind, decorating the sky with ribbons.

Each landing pad had a small station, almost like an oversized port-a-potty, where a coordinator could monitor the vitals of whatever ship took off from there. I slipped into one of these stations to watch over the Ra IV. I fired up the display; everything was working perfectly. He was at 10% light speed. Then 20%…25%…After about 20 minutes he was passing the sun…70%…75%…The shields held up as he smashed through the Oort Cloud, but then they began to weaken. Shield integrity dropped 3%. I told myself not to worry. It was probably just a larger than normal asteroid, or something like that. He was approaching 97% light speed, almost time to activate those Alcubierre-ian mechanics.

The shields failed. I don't know why. He was at 99% light speed, the magnetic shields turned off, and he was torn to shreds by cosmic dust, like the aftermath of a supernova.

* * *

Yeah, there were news stories. Lots of them. *Mad Scientist Breaks into NASA, Steals Ship, Kills Himself. Brilliant Man Nearly Breaks the Light Speed Barrier. Noble Visionary Gives Life for Science. Reckless Scientist Destroys Billion Dollar Space Craft*. They spun it every way they could, of course forgetting that I had anything to do with it. But I preferred it that way. Luckily for me, the guard didn't report my involvement out of respect for Victor, so I didn't have to face any lawsuits.

Every story objectified him. They all cast him into a flat caricature of a human being, and it made the grief lonely. I guess that was my fault for not telling the press any better. It was my fault they villainized him and glorified him. It was my fault they had to do any of that in the first place. It was my fault he died. I should have just stopped him when he was installing the engine, but I helped him. I helped him and now he's dead.

I asked my mom to switch beds with me; I couldn't bear to sleep in our old room without him. It was kind of funny. Towards the end of it, he was barely even himself anymore, only an empty husk of the way I remembered him to be. And still I couldn't bear to be without him. The impression of his body in our foam mattress was just too reminiscent of when he was really there, but I had to take my pillow with me. I felt bad wetting my mother's with tears at night.

My mom spent as much time as she could with me after he died. She took care of the house so that when I came home, I could just sit in the armchair. She would sit on the couch next to me, crocheting a blanket, and tell me about her day. Constantly she was beside me, never even showing a sign of sadness. I would cry silently at night in the living room, and somehow she could hear me, so she would wake up, make me hot chocolate, and hold my hand while I drank it before sending me to bed. I needed to be treated like a child.

Maybe a month after he died, there was a city-wide blackout. Without electricity, there are no lights, and without lights, there's no light pollution. I could see the night sky. From where I laid in my mother's bed, I could see the stars through the window. Everyone was panicking about power plants, and looking for flashlights, and waving themselves with hand fans, but I remained still. The shining stars were taunting me. Seeing them again, I felt drawn down by his gravity, but it wasn't his ambition this time. Black holes are like ghosts. You can't see either of them, but you can find their presence through the impact they have on their surroundings. He haunted me in the media and in his shape on the bed and in the backyard workshop.

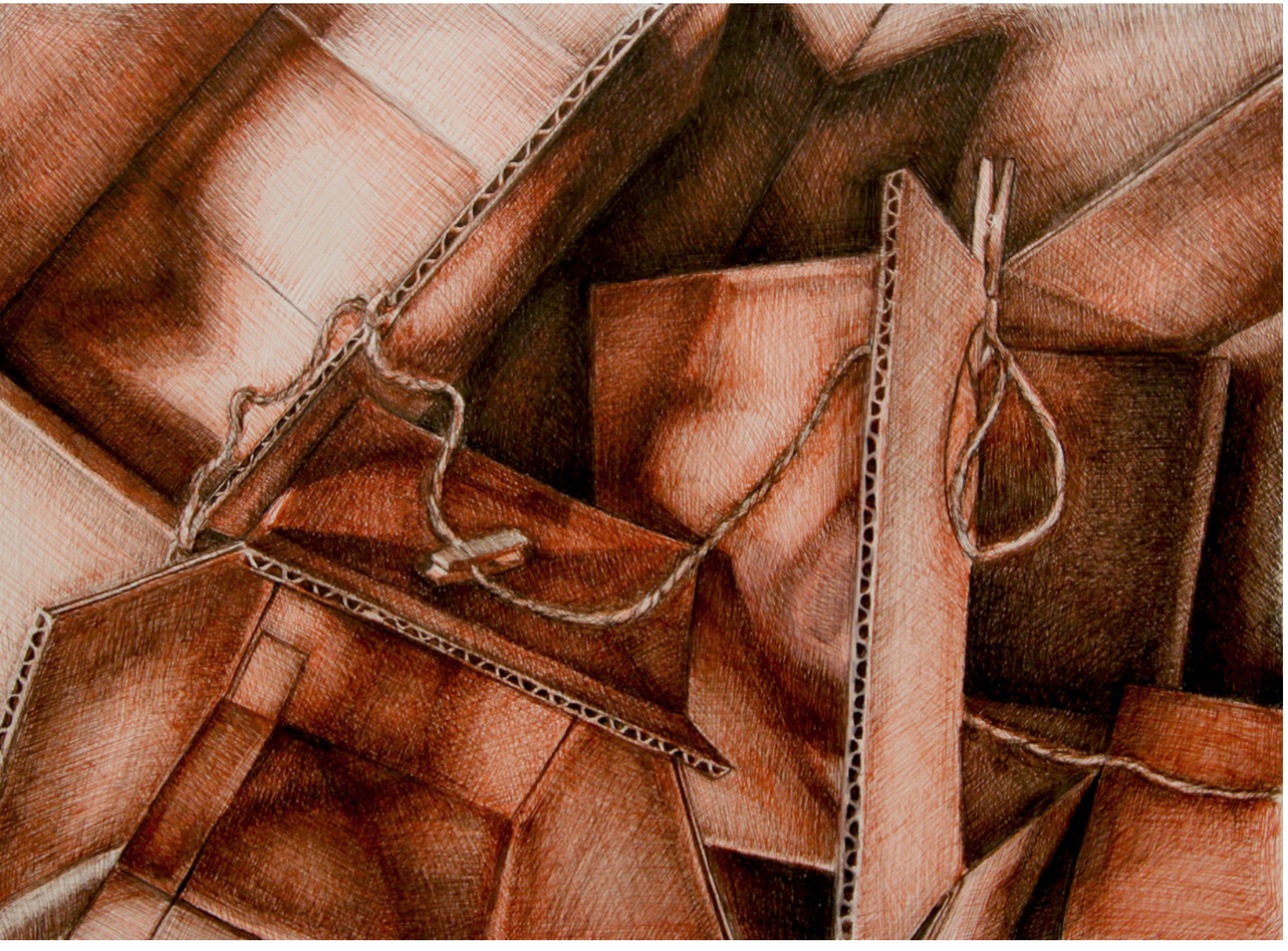
The next night, as I went through the mail, I saw a letter from NASA in a sleek black envelope. They wanted to test the light speed engine in a ship built specifically for it. It was his life's work; I shouldn't have just given it away, but I didn't care if they had it. What did it matter, if Victor was dead anyway? He had been wrong. There wasn't anything grand about conquering nature. I just wanted to be a part of it, but he almost stole that from me. Everything I had lived for at that point in my life was gone. My work and my love, both lost to the mad dream. I poured bleach into a wine glass. I never had the intent to drink it, but I liked to look at it swish around the glass as I toyed with it between my fingers. Death had never been so elegant. I should've known my mother would hear me. She stepped slowly from her room, sleeping gown rumpled, and stopped when she smelled the bleach. That woman's hearing could well have saved my life.

She didn't need to say anything. She gently took the glass from my hands and dumped it down the sink, then sat next to me at the kitchen table. My eyes were probably puffy from crying. She noticed, took my hand, and pressed it to her forehead briefly.

"Let's put these hands to good use, hmm?" she said. She jumped up, opened the pantry, and grabbed all the ingredients for a star shaped, pesto filled tear-and-share loaf. Her smiling eyes coaxed me to stand and find the recipe, but I knew it by heart. As I began straining the flour, she played mariachi over a softly crackling radio.

Smoke Break in Savannah

Photography
Eliza Gaviria



Boxes
Pen
Ashley Tsang

yes, i killed the hindus

Lavina Kalwani

my grandfather's face is a foreign land.
he has the kind of history that makes tourists
uncomfortable. wrinkles cut like rivers,
carved with promises of keeping a
partition alive. promises, it seems,
smell like blowflies.

when the British took over (as they tend to do)
they taught india how to tell the man next to you
that his heart is a lesser heart than your own.
indian politicians began to find blackness in all
religions but their own, curled their hearts down
to the size of stones and bullets
told my grandfather he was foreign land
told one people they were two
told two peoples they did not belong
in their homes anymore–

the gods were surprised to learn this.

when religion took over (as it tends to do)
it forced india to give the world a smile.
one beautiful land parting in two until the only part
that mattered were her teeth
barbed-wired and blinding.
india convinced herself that parting lips and lands

would make her strong.
she was not weak before this.
my *desh* convinced herself that her teeth–that
her teeth were not made of her people's bones
and that children had the courage of soldiers.

this convincing did not come gentle,
was not soaked in rosewater or mango juice.
this convincing dragged with it the feet of
fourteen million bodies.
fourteen million bodies.
fourteen million bodies.
fourteen million bodies.
fourteen million bodies.
slowly now, my *desh*,
remember what you have stolen from yourself–
f o u r t e e n m i l l i o n b o d i e s .
two million corpses.

two nations blossomed, drunk on each other's misery
they made the largest mass migration in human history.
instead of salvation they burned lips and tongue and left only
grandfathers on roadsides, eating hope.

mine dressed in all white, wore a long beard, and
painted himself into the imposter in his mirror.
he was stopped by groups of muslims
did you kill any hindus today?
yes, i killed the hindus
for nearly a moment, the machetes went hungry and he
walked on toward the land where muslims were the imposters he
walked to a home that cracked rivers on his skin he
walked barefoot he

prayed to the bewildered gods that he
walked on cold and dry ground.

the ground was warm and wet and sickening.
it was a ground used to things falling down
and staying there; he prayed
he would not be the next thing that fell down
and stayed there.

my grandfather did not ask to be carved with courage.
this courage came from having nothing on his back,
from wearing quiet like a cloak
like a blanket he did not have
like a suitcase he could not bring with him.
he brought his courage,
but I think he left his god back home.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK HABER

Kristie Lynn, Marcus Munshi, Kierstin Wilkins, Hannah Young

Mark Haber is the Operations Manager and a bookseller at Brazos Bookstore. He has taught both middle and high school English. His first book of short stories, *Deathbed Conversions*, was published in 2008 by Summerfolk Press. These stories were translated into Spanish and published in a bilingual edition in 2017 as *Melville's Beard* by Editorial Argonáutica. His first novel, *Reinhardt's Garden*, will be published by Coffee House Press in October 2019 and was longlisted for the 2020 PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Novel. Mark's criticism has been published in *The Rumpus, LitHub* and *Music & Literature*. He has served as a juror for the National Endowment for the Arts translation grant as well as the Best Translated Book Award.

***Reinhardt's Garden* has very unique formatting. There are no paragraph breaks, and the text also seems to blur present and past time, creating a dream-like quality. As the narrator recounts their memories, it is easy to get lost in the prose and hard to tell what is present and what is past. What were you hoping to accomplish by writing the book in this way? Was writing in that form ever difficult? Did you have to contort yourself into this style, or did it feel like the natural voice of the book?**

My intention for writing this way was two-fold or maybe even three-fold. I wanted a book that was ecstatic, that was exaggerated, sure, but captured the energy and digressive nature of how our minds work. All of us are constantly digressing when we think and talk, whether we realize it or not. I wanted a story that was told in this way, that begins at A but goes to H and L before returning back to B, something almost circular. I'm also a huge fan of 'voice' in literature. I wanted to write a book where the *way* the story is told is as important as the story itself. Is our narrator a hypochondriac? Why is everything he tells us, the reader, colored by his infatuation with Jacov? Another thing: I'd read many books written in this style that I really admired, books by Thomas Bernhard, Roberto Bolaño and many more. I didn't want to emulate as much as wear that influence and make it my own.

It felt like the natural way to tell the story. I'd written a couple novels in my 20's (not very good, tucked away in a trunk somewhere) and those were the books I'd had to contort myself to write. This felt very natural and honestly, liberating. It had its challenges, of course, but just the normal struggles that go along with writing. Dense, unbroken writing allowed me to move back and forth in time much easier.

What inspired this book? Was there a particular moment where the idea for the novel stood out to you? What kept the project going?

I knew beforehand that I wanted to write a short, novella-length novel. And I knew I wanted it to be dense, unbroken prose. I'm also a huge fan of Latin American literature and wanted something that took place in a jungle. That's all I really had. Other than that I just started to write the story and the first few pages are almost exactly how I began the book. Little was changed.

The pursuit of melancholy is so central to this book. At times the pursuit feels satirical, but other moments are breathtakingly sincere. Why did you decide to write an entire book on this subject? If you had to describe melancholy in your own words, not the narrator's or Jacov's, how would you describe it? Did your views on the topic change throughout the writing process?

It's funny, I never set out to write an entire novel about melancholy. In many ways it's not really about that. It's certainly the focus of the characters, but not really the story itself, if that makes sense. It's a book about people not communicating with one another. Look at all the instances in the story where communication is broken, either because people hear what they want to hear or the language barrier. Jacov is pursuing a man whose books he's

intentionally *misread*. They have a translator/ interpreter in the jungle who can't do his job. There's also Jacov's invented language with his dead sister that no one else understands. So the story is really about a group of characters unable to communicate.

My views on melancholy evolved a bit as I wrote the book. I did some research and read some books of philosophy about the emotion. Melancholy has a colored history; romantics believed it was an ailment of artists. Others believed it was tied to the body's humors. But it's such a human emotion. What I mean is all of us feel blue or out-of-sorts sometimes. No one is immune from feeling melancholic. It's a very democratic emotion, that way.

***Reinhardt's Garden* possesses a panoply of striking images. For example, comparing dust to melancholy. When writing, how do images like that come to you? Do you find the some are easier to come by than others? What's that quality or circumstance that makes the former happen?**

There's different types of writers, those that plan and plot out what their story or novel is going to be and those that sort of make it up as they go along. I tried plotting out my books when I was younger and for me, it lost something. So I sort of fly by the seat of my pants. I have a general idea of where the story is going but each day it's sort of an adventure. The dust and melancholy comparison just came out as I was writing. The magic of storytelling I guess.

Jacov is one of the most fascinating characters in the novel. He was deeply relatable in his struggles with melancholic emotions and childhood trauma. But he was also easy to dislike because of his ridiculous narcissism. What inspired the character of Jacov? Did your understanding of him change as you wrote deeper into the book?

I enjoy characters that are a bit extreme, and that's what Jacov is to me. He is very unlikable, a narcissist, selfish, arrogant, etc. I certainly found out things about him as I went along, motives, desires, etc. But I enjoy characters that are a bit off-kilter. I envy writers that can write subtly and about subtle characters. I just don't have that in my wheelhouse.

As younger writers, it's easy for us to believe that finding the right mentor or workshop or canon of books will unlock the key to our own writing. Likewise, the narrator in *Reinhardt's Garden* seems to rely on Jacov to an almost obsessive degree, searching for answers about malaise. Do the two quests for knowledge (writing on the one hand, the source of melancholy on the other) feel related to you in any way?

Great question. I've never had a mentor but I'd always wanted one! I've had some really excellent teachers but there's always been something else, something inside me, call it a desire, an urge to tell stories. Books and literature have been my mentor, truly. Being a voracious reader has been the biggest influence and guide for me. Roberto Bolaño said: *Reading is more important than writing*. And I agree. Read everything you can. Find the books that speak to you, steal from them, borrow and imitate, and over time your voice emerges. Reading a wide range of books informs your views on storytelling, history and culture as well as the ways you want a story to unfold (as well as what you *don't* like).

I think the character's quest is similar to the quest for writing and knowledge. I believe fiction writing is an exercise in finding things out. I think fiction writers don't have the answers, they have the questions. So I write from an urge to *know* things, not because I have answers to the big questions.

Did you write this book with a particular audience or person in mind?

I've always believed in the adage: write the book you'd want to read. So I tried to write a book that I myself would like. Strange and literary, with a love of language, but also accessible. I didn't want to write a 'difficult' book. I wanted to write a book that someone could sit with and enjoy. I know the unbroken text can be challenging but I didn't want it to be off-putting. I think, or at least hope, that after the first few pages the book 'clicks' with the reader and it's a joy. I also wanted an audience of readers who enjoy literature in translation because, aside from a few authors, my biggest influences are writers who've been translated from other languages.

We're heard that you're the go-to-person for great new book recommendations. How do you pick a book to read, or are you someone who is able to consume whatever is in front of them? Can you give us some of your top recommendations at the moment?

Of course! I love suggesting books! To be honest, I often choose books based on the publisher. New Directions, for example, a publisher from NY that's been publishing incredible books since the 1930's. I know if they've published something it will be a work of quality. It may not always be my favorite thing, but it will at least be interesting and original. I also judge a book by it's cover. Truly! Good book design is important! I mean, if the first few pages don't measure up that's one thing, but I think publishers realize they have so much competition these days in the form of digital media that books need to bring something special to the table. So if a publisher cares about what's inside they will also make an effort on the look and feel of the outside.

OK. *Hurricane Season* by Fernanda Melchor is a new book that's incredible. She's a young Mexican writer and it's a dark, brooding novel about a small village in Mexico where the body of a woman, everyone called 'the witch' has been found. It's told from different perspectives. It's violent, poetic and really stunning. *Weather* by Jenny Offil is fantastic. A contemporary look at American life, marriage, academia. And another book just coming out in May is *On Lighthouses* by Jazmina Barrera, a wonderful collection of essays about, you guessed it, lighthouses. It's very philosophical and mixes memoir and history into the essays effortlessly. It's wonderful.

What are the biggest non-literary influences on your writing?

Do films count? I mean, films are *written*, so they're definitely literary in some respects. But I love the films of Wes Anderson. And unconsciously, probably just life experience. Mostly it's books though, sorry.

We've been asking pretty serious questions so far, but we want to end on a more lighthearted note. If you had to do an escape room with two characters from *Reinhardt's Garden*, who would you choose and why?

Great question! Probably the unnamed narrator and Ulrich. Ulrich because he would find a way to get us out. The narrator because he at least wouldn't hurt me or the process of escaping. Can you imagine Jacov? He'd only be interested in getting himself out and probably at everyone else's expense!

Kyle's Throne

Colored Pencil, Acrylic Paint,
and Chalk Pastel on Paper
Mallory Newbern

Recycle

Acrylic and Pen
Ashley Tsang

To Give Shrimp Wings

Kristen Hickey

The Celts have legends about them.

Shapeshifters, banshees, green-eyed nymphs forced into hills and underwater at the behest of swords and Christianity. They ruled the land for years, waging war, falling in love, and learning that which cannot be known. When the next wave crashed ashore, carrying humans in wooden boats, it became obvious that there was only space enough for one people. Short and finite life spans juxtaposed with the overwhelming reach and rebirth of legends. Human mortality, in the end, somehow won. In Ireland, they are the Tuatha de Danann, fairies from across the misty seas. In Texas, they are shrimp.

There are small craters on the pink peak (if one can call a round monadnock peaked) of Enchanted Rock. Sturdy watergrasses interweave with the clean lines of the water that puddles here, flickering and reaching like fingers of flame. Paddles of cacti only ten feet away. The warming wind sends dry, not-dead-just-waiting tree limbs rattling against each other, a disconcerting sound that rolls down the surface of the rock. It is an oasis in the desert of hill country. When the fall rains come, they lay down a pond of sky-reflective ripples that turn dirt into mud. Almost like it's easy, like there's nothing better to do, a kingdom grows overnight.

> In Ireland, they are the Tuatha de Danann, fairies from across the misty seas. In Texas, they are shrimp.

The water gives shelter to the smallest: bacteria and protozoa that thrive in the damp, cooling space take on the deadness left behind from last season, gobbling up detritus before tiny photosynthesizers take hold. The algae is a green carpet that spreads across the water, like an interior designer trying to make a house a home, livable and desired.

There is a stirring under the water.

The folk are emerging from the fringe they've been pushed to by necessity and

There are plenty of fish in the sea

Digital Photograph Collage
Eliza Gaviria

changing times, always changing times. They bring with them an old magic, more ancient than the land itself. This line of shrimp is 400 million years old.

There are eggs resting here, you see. They will endure freeze and thaw and fire and wind for as long as the siege lasts. They need it; thrive off the dryness before water birth. They are minuscule black pepper balls, shriveled and raisin-like in anticipation of the being that will spark forth from within them; like the magically growing sponge-capsuled dinosaurs of your childhood, sudden and marvelous.

The water is alive.

It has been, for a while now. But when the first shrimp sneaks out of its egg, the scene changes entirely. Everything in the pool seems like it has been preparing for this: bacteria, microzooplankton, and algae are evidence of a well-stocked pantry ready for a sudden influx of hungry mouths. The shrimp feed by filtering the water that surrounds them, taking in the minute nutrients that sustain them for a puddle's lifetime—and beyond.

Celtic fairies are not the fluttery grandmothers of Sleeping Beauty. They are fiercely opinionated warriors and lovers, rulers and bards. They are also not quite fairies; no, they are gods, renamed and restructured to reflect a general renunciation of (and nostalgia for) magical beings.

Fairy shrimp are also not fairies.

They are most definitely made of magic, though.

Fairy shrimp live their lives in the upside-down. They lay back, skimming their meals off the underbelly of the water as they drift. Without an external shell, they are easy and delicious prey for fish and birds. Accordingly, they are nearly translucent and do not make their homes in permanent neighborhoods where fish might thrive. Their two eyes work on a series of built-in mirrors for a compounded view of their aquatic home—not much to see from our height, but a shrimp eye exists on a scale beyond yours or mine.

Fairy shrimp are remarkably considerate creatures. Oxygen, when they need it, is caught in one of 22 swimmerets: hairy legs that function doubly as propellers and a respiratory system. Breathing is not an entitlement, though we may like to believe it is. Fairy shrimp are used to existing in a world where oxygen must be shared across living kingdoms for collective survival. They continuously monitor and adjust their oxygen consumption based on the needs of their environment. They do not build factories or plants when they interpret an abundance of oxygen; they do not call inter-pool conventions to construct rigid guidelines when oxygen is running low. They take what they are given, never more. There is an implicit understanding that the fragility of an ecosystem is overcome by the strength of the beings that reside within it; that if one piece is knocked out of place, the entire enterprise comes crashing down.

The crashing down is easy.

It happens every year. Water at Enchanted Rock doesn't stay still for long—a few months from when the first fall rains start to when they slow in the spring. There are periods of ebb and flow within the seasons, too; mini-bankruptcies that put a pause on the economy of an ecosystem until the next bout of wet. Vernal pools are made to fade every year. The water evaporates slowly, leaving damp, muddy soil behind for the wildflowers and grasses that fall from birds and the wind. The flora doesn't last much longer than the fauna, and eventually everything subsides to a dry, cracking layer of dirt that is inhospitable to the already living. To the unborn eggs and cysts of the last watery generation, though, it is a safe haven. When the water returns late in the year, the cycle starts again. Repeats, repeats.

The crashing down is easy.

In July of 2016, a hiker set fire to a vernal pool on Enchanted Rock. It was in its drying stage, the last grass and brush starting to die out. In a transient life cycle, though, death is never quite permanent. Even when the pool looks barren, the fertility of the next season is already planted, waiting. What might have resembled a dusty clump of dying grass was an entire ecosystem hibernating, resting for a growing season on its way. The dried vegetation burned easily, leaving behind a charred crater abutting the withering husk of a tree.

The isolation of the vernal pools prevented the fire from spreading to other off-season ponds, but that is a small joy in a great catastrophe. The isolation of vernal pools also means that each is unique in its shape, lifeforms, and seasons: a personality that, once destroyed, is impossible to fully recover ever again. Although the pool was quickly repopulated with plants and eggs similar to those it had once carried, post-mortem human intervention will never quite be able to restore it to a state before human intervention. When the cycle is broken, it shifts in nearly imperceptible ways that we may never quite understand. Generation after generation may eventually rebalance the pool, but it will never be the same.

It was October when I first visited Enchanted Rock, just a month after Harvey swept through the eastern coast and a year after the fire. The rock was untouched by the hurricane, its pools full and rippling with the deep blue of the Texas sky. I sat there for a long time, gazing into one crater and watching the flittering dance of its inhabitants.

The sparkling waters were an unexpected sight upon rounding the top of the rock,

but I couldn't bring myself to consider them out of place. To be out of place is to assume a right and a wrong space in which to exist, which I am repeatedly finding is an assumption always proven incorrect.

Three months earlier, I had fallen into urban exploration with a friend who has since faded out of my life. We climbed through an abandoned auto factory reclaimed as a graffiti art installation by Philadelphians with steady, spray-painting hands. Water pooled on the black roof of the factory, stagnant and heated and, somehow, supporting the growth of a dense ring of cattails. The soft breeze toyed with them, sending ripples across water that looked toxic. Cattails are famous for their ability to filter pollutants out of water—they bring a purity to the spaces they inhabit, even if these spaces are not as friendly to their intrusion. Small somethings stirred the water on the factory roof as well, taking the grime of an industrialized city and making a home out of it. I wondered at what chain of events must have occurred for this place to come alive on the bones of a thrown away human invention.

There is something about these hidden enclaves of diversity that feels like an underdog story. The success of a species in surviving outside of what we assume to be its ideal habitat excites us. It means that adaptation is still in motion and evolution is still rolling. It means that our destruction of the Earth is not inherently the destruction of its life forms. Creatures that we like to consider much lesser organisms are growing in and reshaping the spaces they have found, regardless of how uninhabitable their homes may seem.

We think, when we find against-all-odds survival stories, that some of our burden is lifted. That the world will withstand whatever factories, litter, and pollution we throw at it. We are wrong, of course. If we let them, these stories will soon parallel the fading mythology of the Celts.

Vernal pools are one of the most at-risk environments in the United States. They sprawl from Pennsylvania to California and service an enormous variety of creatures. Some animals—like fairy shrimp—are obligatory residents of the puddles. If the transitory pool doesn't exist, then neither will the fairy shrimp. A broader community containing newts, toads, birds, and deer builds its neighbourhood around the pools too. These are places unlike any other, where beings can grow, drink, hunt, and reproduce. For all we like to pride ourselves on our history, these neighborhoods do the same. 85% of amphibians that live in vernal pools return to breed in the same pond in which they were born, ignoring other suitable habitats for the pool they consider their home.

When it's gone, it's gone.

This is the importance of preservation. Vernal pools bring themselves back to life every season—a resurrection that's been worked out and functioning for 140 million years longer than we have. The intricacies of this system escape and enchant us alike in our heavy hiking boots and simple eyes. We want to witness the magic, but it is as easily seen as it is destroyed. The crashing down is easy.

We don't often realize an object or creature's inherent self-value until it is pointed out to us. Once we recognize it, it's our duty to do the pointing out to others, carefully, thoughtfully—the whisper down the alley of conservation. Over and over and over until it's been said enough times, enough ways, enough places, that it is understood. This is a responsibility of humanity, I think. We shirk most of them, but this—this is easy. This is talking. About whatever catches the eye, whatever looks like it needs a hand up from the ditch we've dug for it. Fairy shrimp may be small, but this is no excuse. We are small. All of us.

Later during the night that I discovered fairy shrimp, I found the Milky Way for the first time. It shrinks our world, bringing a new perspective to my own microscopic life. I have never felt so tiny as I did under the sky that night, never seen quite so many stars in my life. The darkness domed around me, the moon so faint that the stars outshined it. The scale of everything felt wobbly and circumstantial.

We think we are special because we stand on two legs and our thumbs are opposable and our brains quite large. We are special. As are fairy shrimp—with their seasonally eternal lives, bodies tuned for backstroke, and the measure of their every breath. Imposing a hierarchy is a defense against the ego-wounding blow of realizing that we are not more special. We are different. But we are not more.

In that moment under the broad sky, the fairy shrimp became larger than the stars, the moon smaller than the vernal pools. And the stars, while they were there always, faded with the dawn and returned with the dusk, joining a cycle that is bigger than the universe.

We find the shrimp may know more than they let on.

“In that moment under the broad sky, the fairy shrimp became larger than the stars, the moon smaller than the vernal pools.

Blossom,
Upstairs Neighbor

Underglaze on Stoneware
Gordan Liu

PTSD

Katimah Harper

A ringing in my ears that you can't hear
I am brushing my teeth when the
Phosphorous turns into blue paint
Bubbling out of your mouth
I blink and it's just me in a mirror
With horrors that crawl beneath my skin

I flinch when I hear fireworks
I do not know how to tell you that the sparks
Look like dead bodies flying through the air
That when you hug me at night
Beneath the covers I cannot breathe
From the casket you have just buried me in

Why is my body no longer a safe haven
But a vessel for this recurring death?

A sudden flash of red turns into an ambulance
We are playing house when I remember that
Dad is dead, that dad is not breathing, that dad
Needs me to put life back in his chest

The instructor blows the whistle
Tells me that I have pushed too hard
And broken Annie's ribs

He does not know what to do
When I fall apart on the gym floor
And force my screams into her plastic lips.

I can't keep still

Photography
Eliza Gaviria

Sunny Day

Neha Tallapragada

Esme's saying something, but I can't hear her because the sun is drowning her out. It's the type of harsh winter sun that doesn't match the chill penetrating my bones. That icy, burning November light that elicits sweat from every fold of skin and pulls tears from my eyes in the same moment that the wind pushes all the hairs on my forearms to stand up. The sun dashes shards of this unforgiving light everywhere, illuminating the sparkling mica in the faded grey sidewalk and the rusted metal of the chain-link fence and the murky depths of the flagrantly polluted creek that Esme and I stand next to as she slowly, patiently explains to me how to die.

I watch her mouth form words but understand nothing. The sun is killing me. I'm reminded of those Charlie Brown specials that sometimes come on the TV in the corner store where the grown-ups sound like wah-wah-wah and you never see their faces, except I feel guilty because I can see Esme's face. In fact, I am looking straight into her round brown eyes. I stifle a yawn and wonder what I'm doing here at 7:30 in the fucking A.M. on a Sunday. I should be asleep. No, I should be in church. I should start going to church.

Esme hands me a finger of chalk. She says that if you're going to die, you'd better be prepared to leave evidence that you were on the earth to begin with. To make people acknowledge your life. To make yourself unforgettable, unerasable. I look at the chalk, then at her again. I tell her I'm a terrible artist.

Esme presses her lips together into a thin line. Esme is the type of person who knows what type of person she is. Esme went to UCLA and got a minor in gender studies and uses words like subaltern and biopower and positionality. I don't know any of these words. I don't even know if I'm a morning person or not. I don't know a thing about myself except that I really want to know what it would be like to touch Esme's back, clean and smooth.

She looks at me with an accusation in her face, and I wonder if I've said that out loud. Then she points to my shoes.

"Can you run in those?"

I tell her I can. She scrunches her nose and marks something off on the clipboard she's carrying.

"You're wearing long pants. Smart. Do you have goggles?"

"…No."

"Get someone to lend you a pair. A bandana, too, you might need that. Is your phone charged?"

"Esme is the type of person who knows what type of person she is. Esme went to UCLA and got a minor in gender studies and uses words like subaltern and biopower and positionality.

I smile in apology.

"Well, if you can't record anything, I guess you can write it down somewhere."

"Record what?"

She checks her watch. "Okay. We're almost set up. We think the cops'll get here in a few, but the ACLU has some legal observers waiting out front, so don't panic."

"Cops? You asked them about doing this, right?"

"We informed them," she says tersely. "Let's find a place for you to be."

I haven't talked to Esme since the tenth grade, a time when we embarked on a friendship so brief and intense that my face gets hot whenever I think about it. Then she graduated early, and I didn't hear from her until a couple of weeks ago when she found me on Facebook. I can't tell if she still wants to know me or not, but I'm having a hell of a time trying to puzzle it out.

I follow her brisk stride along the sidewalk past the creek. Dead yellow trees wave at me as we turn the corner to the city hall and I—transfixed by the back of Esme's head—almost brain some unsuspecting guy with the sole of my sneaker.

He jerks out of my way, and I mutter a *mea culpa*. The entrance to City Hall is crowded with people like this guy. Young and old, dressed in black and draped over the steps and the sidewalk, even over the sides of the fountain in the middle of the pavilion. The stream of supine demonstrators leads all the way out into the street. I'm reminded of those pictures of beached whales.

Everyone's bodies are outlined in white chalk. They're still talking in their immobilized state, turning their heads slightly to babble about what they ate for breakfast or whatever to their fellow corpses. Something about this freaks me out. I don't know if it's the fact that they're all play-acting as cadavers, or the fact that we're all collectively pretending that this is something normal, reasonable, to do. What the actual fuck.

Three or four women draped in bright blue jerseys, the kind we used to wear in phys ed, chat as amiably with each other as if they were on a brunch date. Esme waves at them as she leads me to the steps, bookended by piss-stained statues of soporific lions, and points out that some people are wearing blinding white polos. These are the voluntary paramedics, she says. Best to memorize their faces now.

"Wait. Wait," I say.

Esme whips her head around. I struggle to figure out what I'm asking, then produce some kind of mangled question from my mouth.

"So we…we just lie here?"

Again with the knitted eyebrows, with the two lips becoming one. She says, in clipped syllables:

"Sam. We are not just *lying* here. This is a *die-in*. This is a confrontation with the city to force them to recognize how many of us they are allowing to be killed, every day. If things continue the way they have been, we are as good as dead."

"But we're still just…lying down, right?"

"There's no more space for you here," she says. "Let's go somewhere else."

We tiptoe over everyone until we reach the edge of the sidewalk. She indicates an empty spot in the middle of the street. I shake my head.

"No way."

"Sam—"

"Dude, this is in the middle of the fucking road. I'm gonna get run over."

"You're not—the purpose is to obstruct incoming traffic. Here, give me your chalk and I'll trace you."

After a few silent seconds, she sighs.

"Sam, come on. Trust me a little."

I lower myself to the ground. Esme politely presses a hand to my knees to flatten them, rendering me spread-eagle. She takes my stick of chalk and leans in to draw my outline. Her hair dangles in my face and brushes my nose. I pray to whatever god is up there to suppress any urge I have to sneeze.

"You smell good," I say.

"Sandalwood. Move your arm." Then, "You're done. I'll be back later."

She leaves me there, all alone on a black shore with whoever else was brought in with the tide.

* * *

I forgot sunglasses. The sun, the petty, vile winter sun, assaults my eyes. I feel like an egg. Just lying there and frying on the ground. The heat blurs my vision and nauseates. I forgot water. My throat is dry, and my stomach is churning. I see a car approach out of the corner of my eye and the voice in my head caterwauls, *poliiiice*???? and the churning intensifies. I should be working. I should be at my job. I should get a job. I should get a boyfriend. I should get a boyfriend and make myself love him and then maybe I wouldn't be doing stupid pointless shit like this, to try to…what? Why am I here? I think about Esme's long, slender neck.

The woman next to me nudges my arm. I roll my head over to face her, careful not to move any other appendage, or I'll smear my chalk prison.

"First time?"

I nod.

"You afraid?" Her eyes crinkle at the corners. "I'm sorry to tell you, the fear never goes away. It gets easier to deal with, but it never gets less scary."

"Why's that?"

"Well, for one thing, the cops keep upgrading. First, it was just batons. Now, it's tear-gas grenades and full-on fucking missiles." A note of concern enters her voice. "You don't have a bandana."

Tear-gas? I change the subject.

"Why are you here?" I ask.

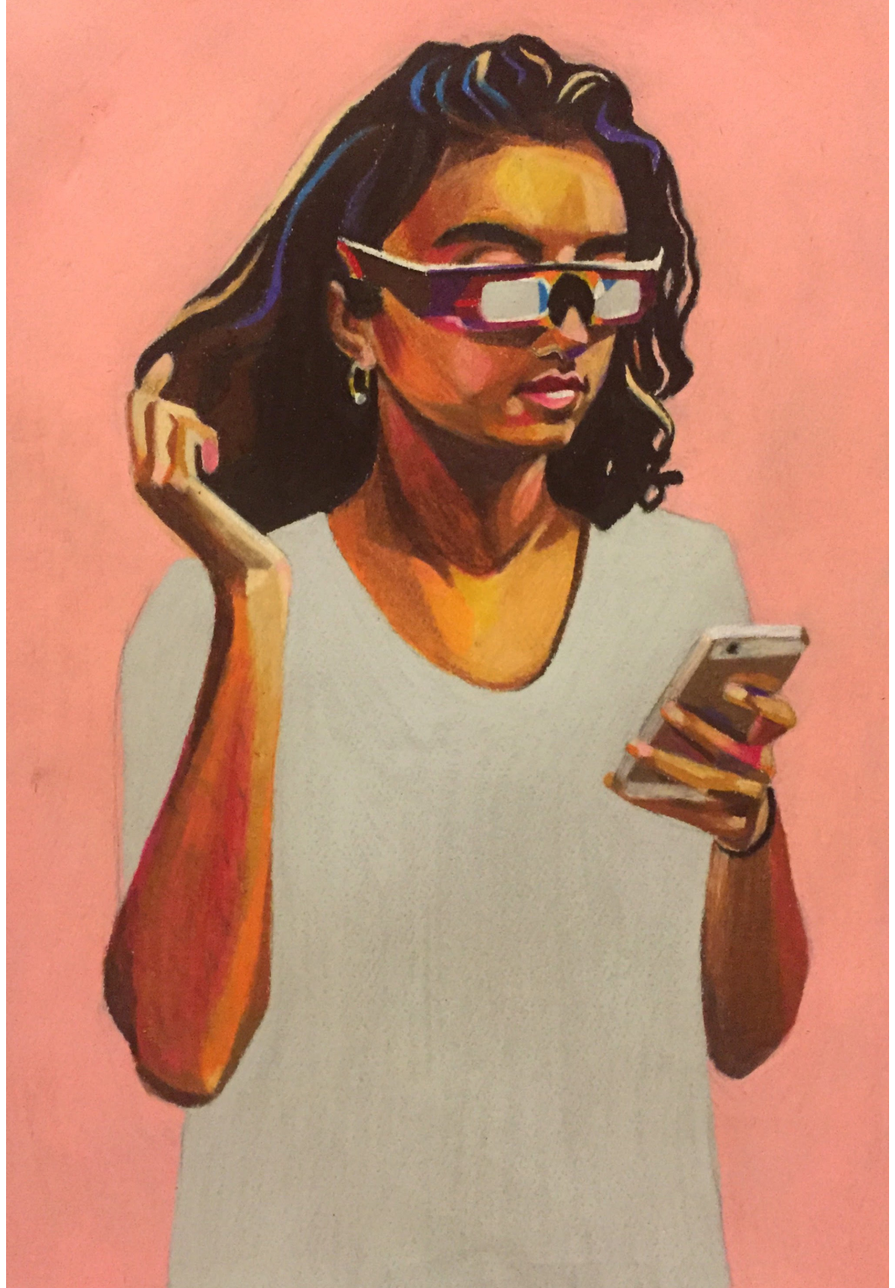
"Why are you?"

"Yeah, I'm trying to figure that out." I prop myself up on my elbows and squint at the end of the street, where a flock of police officers are perched on top of their Camaros and Camrys. They look more prepared for a zombie apocalypse than for…whatever this is.

"What's your name?"

"Sam," I say.

"Isa."



An Uneventful Eclipse
Colored Pencil
Gordan Liu

"Look, Isa, do you really think this is gonna change anything?" I gesture toward the other protestors.

She exhales.

"Did you know her?" she asks.

"No."

It's the truth, so why do I feel guilty as soon as I say it? I really didn't know Maya. She was a year below me in high school. I didn't know about her love of music, the same music that's gently pumping out of a broken speaker from somewhere right now. I didn't know that she left a mother behind, a mother like my own, one who has arms like tree trunks and who threatens you with the same rolling pin she uses to fill you to the brim with food. Esme's Twitter page had to tell me that, and maybe it would have told me more, but I deleted the app before it could. Knife attack on the subway steps. "Racially motivated." She lived a block south of me. I don't know. It doesn't matter to me. I didn't know her.

"Bullshit. Yes, you did know her. We all knew her. Because she is me. And she is you. And we could be her one day, too." Isa purses her lips.

"I know people like you," she says. "You think you're the only normal one here. You think the rest of us are killjoys, but we're the normal ones. We're the ones with feeling still left in our bones. You're dead to it all, aren't you? But it's the world that's made you numb, not us."

I didn't cry when I found out what happened to Maya. Or when my neighbor's face popped up in the obit section of the paper that I use to pick up my dog's shit, or when one of my classmates rang me up to tell me that our old Spanish teacher got capped while mowing his lawn (his own fucking lawn). Or when I read about what happened in Wisconsin and Charleston and Pittsburgh. I didn't cry. I couldn't. What would be the use when the same thing will happen tomorrow, maybe to me? Does everyone else think about it? Do normal people think about it? Are they like Isa and Esme? Or are they like me, pushing it down and just trying to live their fucking life even though they know that someday this sickness will come for them, too?

I didn't cry when I found out what happened to Maya. A buzzing white noise in my head, like radio static, and then nothing. Is that what being dead is like?

"You're full of shit," I say, looking at no one in particular. It's hard to breathe and I don't know why. Isa laughs and leans forward.

"Glass houses, Sam. You're afraid of what you'll feel if you allow yourself to grieve,

Sam. You're afraid of what you'll do. You're afraid of what will happen if you become like us. You're afraid—"

"Maybe I am," I blurt. Sweat blooms on my scalp. "Maybe I am afraid." If I open my heart the way she wants me to, who's to say that it won't kill me just the same?

"But does any of this stop it?" I sweep my hand over the graveyard we've found ourselves in, over the gargoyle-faced police officers. I know my voice has risen, but I don't know how to make it go down again. "It won't change anyone's minds. It won't stop what's happening to us. It sure won't stop the boys in blue from doing what they're gonna do to us today."

"You're an asshole," she says. "And you're grumpy. Hold my hand."

She clasps my fingers in hers and we press our spines into the ground. Her palms are lined and rough. My eyes water from the sun. Someone's voice—Esme's voice—blares through a loudspeaker. It's time, she's saying. It's time to die.

And a match lights or a switch flicks and now the only sound is the rustling of trees. Everyone is down, everyone is grasping onto each other's hands and arms and legs, black-shrouded soul cases staring up at the sky the same way I am. A shiver runs down my back. I can't even hear anyone breathe.

One of the police officers pulls out his own loudspeaker. His words wash over me but don't sink in. Something about traffic. Something about consequences.

"Move."

Esme materializes in front of me. I shift my body as she drops down and stretches out next to me. Not butterflies, more like hornets, flit around in my gut. She brings out another stick of chalk, and I watch her painstakingly trace her ghost onto the road. The police start to move like jungle cats down the street, lithe and dangerous.

"What are you trying to show them?" I ask. Isa flicks me on the arm.

"Esme, this girl is hopeless," she whispers. Esme shoots her a death glare and turns to me.

"It's not for them, Sam. I know I said it's to show the city what we're made of, but it's not really about that, either." Her face is so close to mine. "This is not about showing anyone that we're stronger than them. This is about us showing each other that we are together, like always. That we can heal together, one more time. This is an act of remembrance. Again and again and again."

"That's the corniest shit I've ever heard," I almost say. But I don't. I don't know

why. Maybe because it's harder to tell her this when there's only a centimeter of separation between us. Maybe it's because the eerie quiet makes me feel that saying that, that saying anything, would rupture something sacred.

A cop stops in front of us. Her belt bears the unholy trinity of a handgun, a big-ass billy club, and a canister of something ominous. I have major déjà vu, even though I've never been here before. Like I'm reliving someone else's memory. My breath emerges in shuttered gasps.

She sighs. "Get up."

"I'm good right here, actually," Isa says with a grin.

The cop pinches the bridge of her nose. "If you could," she says to Esme, "please get up."

Esme grips my hand so tight that her nails dig into my palms. I tilt my face upwards. The cop's scowl and grim warnings are drowned out by the sun and by the deafening sound of my own heart beating, struggling to jump out of my throat. I could run. I could get up and go, I could get out of here before...Come on, I urge myself. Let's go. I don't want to follow Maya, which is what, I realize, it's what I'm really afraid of. I don't want to be another god-damn martyr.

But no one has gotten up, no one has run. And now I'm looking down past my feet, past Esme's delicate ankles and I see a sea of people just like us, bodies intertwined. Solemn, pious faces, like fasting saints. And my legs don't move. Something's locking me down here. We are prostrate in the eye of the hurricane, waiting for the inevitable.

The cop sighs again, world-weary when she has no reason to be. You don't have the right, I want to tell her. I'm tired, too. Maybe that's why I'm really here, and not in a bed or a pew. Not because I'm angry, but because I'm so damn tired. Not because I'm not religious, but because maybe this is another form of prayer.

The cop shrugs. "Your funeral."

I close my eyes.

"But no one has gotten up, no one has run. And now I'm looking down past my feet, past Esme's delicate ankles and I see a sea of people just like us, bodies intertwined. Solemn, pious faces, like fasting saints. And my legs don't move. Something's locking me down here. We are prostrate in the eye of the hurricane, waiting for the inevitable.

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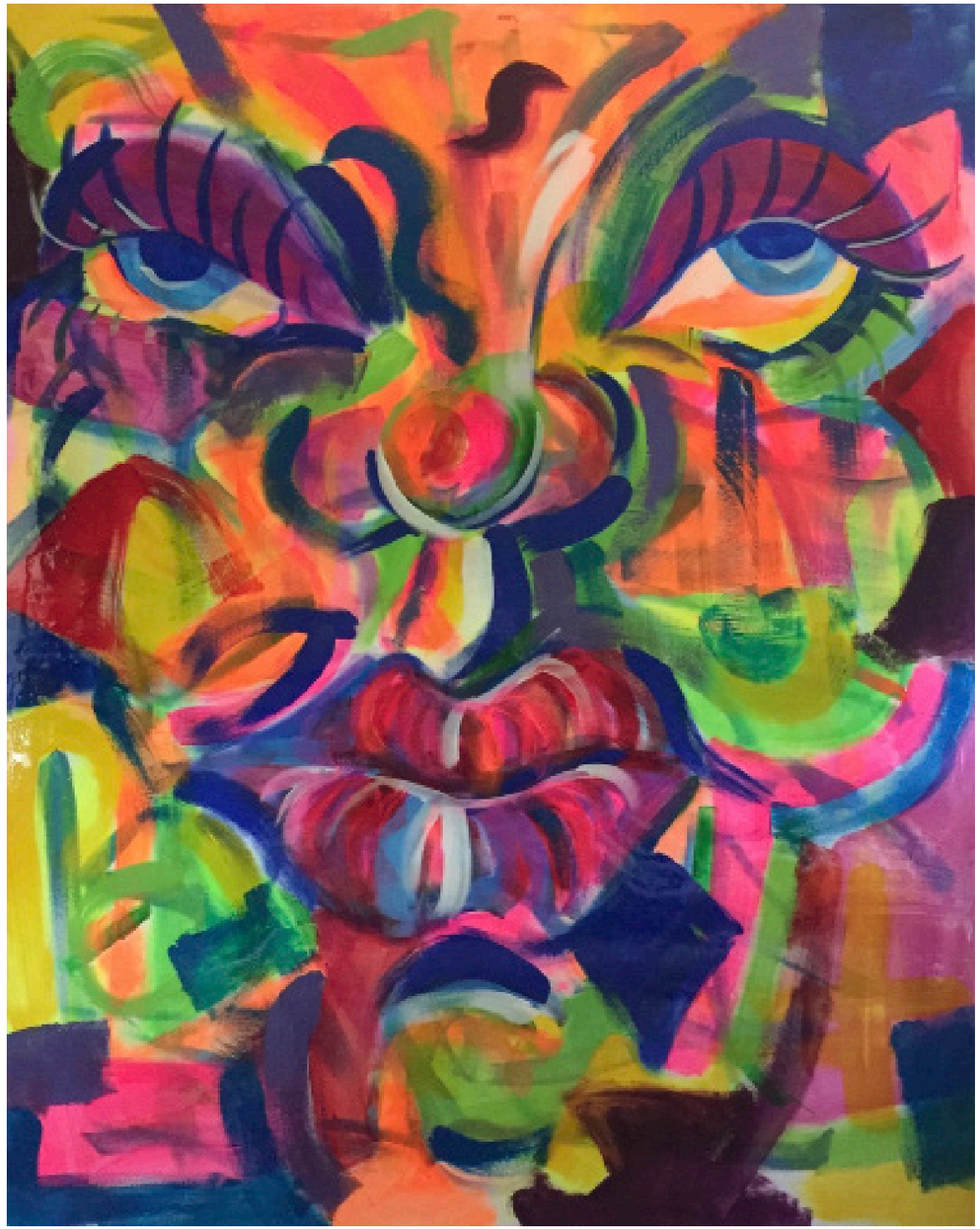
Midwest

Lily Wulfemeyer

Litost is a nearly untranslatable Czech word, a state of feeling miserable and humiliated… Litost connects insult to revenge, with the desire to strike back at the perceived source of one's shame. ~ From Urban Dictionary

Inside: a caricature of intimacy. Dough sweats in a silver bowl like glue and borax, my chicken knees knock together, I am ready to step out of my skin. There was a gash in the sea to swallow my homeward plane, but I missed it by dreaming of blooming eye sockets. I've been gone for over a year; now again, I stand in the doorway. I turn, see the sliding back door ready to crumble like Oreos in milk, the gaunt flies, the chemical swing set slowly being eaten by squirrels, churning in their stomachs. In this house, my mother taught me to pray with the three W's: Who, What, and Why. Who told the purple to run grey, what is the breaking point between whisper and croak, why must I make small incisions in my thigh to try and step out of my skin? Is it okay to keep running? There is a boy in this town who taught me to angle a rifle's barrel and to break my knuckles on the corner of a wall. Awake tonight, I will hallucinate him in my room, his hands hanging like scissors, like the red claws of a crab that he will hold to my throat. I do not pray for princes. I do not kiss the frog in the hostas or the snake curled in the crabapple because I'm afraid of murderers. I remember now how Fisher-Price lemons stopped quenching me—before I chose to leave, I buried the neck of a rooster sectioned from its body like an orange, a river of sweat for lightning bugs to drink, and a ribbon of hair for another me to be made beneath the swing. Now again, I will churn the soil with my bare hands. I will unearth the litost from the clay under the cover of the never-black Midwest dark. Everything feels soft, cliffedge, and so risky. It is time to step out of my skin—it is keeping the dirt out and my body in.



Rolling My Eyes

Acrylic paint and resin
Mallory Newbern

Some Things Come Back

Kristen Hickey

I stand in a white-carpeted underground, brightly lit. My hands tremble. When the fear comes, it is always as a sparking thing that wears at the joints between my fingers and burns within my ribcage. It rushes my blood through all its errands, draws the warmth back from my toes. It peaks at night, in loneliness, in the fringes of my taut senses.

Manuel trips coming down the stairs. There is the terrible sound of flesh on wood, then the *thonk-thonk-thonk* of three steps skipped. "Mother *fuck*," he says, but he laughs anyway.

"Are you okay, Man?" I ask.

He rounds the corner, bearing his PARTY NECESSITIES box. "Might need to sit on a cushion for the next few weeks, but I'll be fine. You ready to help hang this stuff?"

I did not ask Man to host this party, but he has been adamant that I deserve this, that I need this. Fleetingly, I think I agree.

My first role tonight is as tape dispenser while Man arranges the walls to his liking. I get lost in the stretch-tear-roll stickiness of the masking tape that mediates the decor and the white paint.

Eventually, Manuel steps back to better admire his handiwork. CONGERTZ, he has hung in balloons across the south wall of the basement.

"What do you think?"

"Brilliant," I say. I am wondering if the basement will feel less full when the others arrive. It is stifling and cold, and I am dressed for the longevity of memory rather than for this hole in the ground. You would think being held so close to the heart of the earth would be warmer, but Manuel is on an energy plan that doesn't care so much if his home is unkind.

"How does it feel," he asks as we deck the room in streamers, "to be done?" His walls are unblemished; the cobwebbed corners are only visible when I teeter on the top step of his footstool.

I make eye contact with a spider perched atop a silky pearl. "Jesus, Man, you're

about to be overrun."

"What?"

"Spider egg," I say, leaping off the footstool. The end of the streamer I had thought to hang floats to the floor.

He groans. "I'll get the vacuum."

* * *

Man's house is pretty new. The only tenants before him were a family of four and their pack of dogs, whose fur he found embedded in the carpet for three years after he moved in. Still, still, there is a shadow that waits around corners. I don't like to move through his rooms without someone breathing next to me. It is easier to watch the lives of girls I once knew on Instagram float by until Man returns. When I look long enough at the high-contrast of my phone's display, my nervous senses fade and the real world dulls, grows even around me.

I don't think I'll ever tell Man that his house darkens me. It's not his house, fully; it's the basement, and the reflective surfaces that seem to mark his every wall.

* * *

Man makes it down the stairs in one piece this time, the vacuum bore proudly in his arms. While he is gone, someone waits behind my back: immobile, solid, until I gather my courage to look, and then there is nobody.

"Someone else I haven't spoken to since middle school is engaged," I tell him.

"Weird how that keeps happening," he says, plugging in the vacuum.

"I don't understand the mentality," I say.

"I bet it's being in a long-term relationship," he says. He sounds not even slightly bitter.

When he vacuums up the spider and her eggs and all of her craft, I regret saying anything. They would have hunted his home clear of insects, at least. I feel the chest-scooping guilt for a moment, and then Man turns off the vacuum and hundreds of small black spots leg their way away, pouring out of the machine. Man and I scream and scream. He switches the machine on once more, rolling over the babies until it seems there must be none left.

We stand there, then, both of us staring at a running vacuum tethered to the wall, bound by the radius of its cord. The fear of the horde keeps us still, keeps us stupid. And for all my new doctorate has given me, there are no problem-solving skills that will fix this.

"What if we just leave it?" I yell over the noise of the engine. "Move the party upstairs?"

Man looks at the vacuum, then back to me, then back to the vacuum, measuring my seriousness. Finally, he shrugs, rips his CONGERTZ off the wall, and heads upstairs. I follow him, casting one last glance at the icy, screaming room under the ground.

I am thankful for the spiders.

* * *

A few months after our first meeting, Man and I sat restlessly at a warm cafe, waiting for our drinks.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" I asked.

Man laughed. "What an opener, Ile."

"Was just wondering."

Man shrugged. "No," he said. "Not even a little. You're a scientist—you should know! There's no space for that in a world like this."

"No space?"

"Yeah. Atomically, and everything. And there'd have to be a whole system of who gets to be a ghost and who doesn't, or else the entire world would be jam-packed with ghosties and they wouldn't be able to move even a foot."

I nodded, slowly. Man took this as an encouragement, and I listened, rapt, for the next hour as he reasoned his way through all the realities in which ghosts could not exist, in which science will not stand for embodied grief, in which echoes are only for real live voices, not for existences.

It was then that I decided that I would keep Man around, even if sometimes he said the wrong thing, because he has a knack for talking away my fear when I need it the most. All I have to do is phrase it as *somebody was talking about ghosts again* and he will fly into his defensive position, offended at even the suggestion. I wonder that he has not yet picked up on it, the lying repetition; he never asks why so many scholars might be so fascinated by ghosts. The only ghosts psychologists care for are the ones in your head,

and I am becoming more and more convinced that mine are not of my own invention. Still, though, I find a shield made out of Man's faith in science.

* * *

"I'm excited to meet your school friends," Man says, as we race to make his upstairs look like a party venue.

"God knows you've heard enough about them," I say.

"Get a few glasses of champagne in them and I'll hear *all* your embarrassing stories."

I grimace. "You've heard plenty. I think the whole Freud thing was enough for a lifetime."

A laugh wheezes out of Man, unexpected and bright. "I forgot about that! More talking material, bless you."

I grab one of the gold balloons littering the floor and rub it violently against his hair until he looks like he's just stuck a fork in an outlet. He shrieks and squirms and laughs, but I have no mercy.

"That's what you get," I say, laughing.

He raises a balloon in his hand as if he wants to do the same to me, but he ends up just spiking the balloon straight into my face. "Your hair looks too nice to ruin," he says, by way of explanation. "I'll get you back later."

* * *

The PhD was my brother's idea.

I shook him awake at 4 a.m. on Black Friday in my junior year of college, desperate to connect the sound of breathing to a living body not my own.

"Whaflurgh—Ile? What's wrong?"

"Do you—do you want to go shopping?"

"Right now? Jesus, Ile, I was sleeping."

"There's a watch I really wanted, I—"

"A watch."

"Yeah."

I could see only a misplaced shine on his eyeballs and the deep, pocketed shadows around his jawline and eye sockets. I could tell he was looking at me, though I couldn't see the direction of his mouth or the thought in his eyes.

He sat up. "Let's go, then," he said.

It was only on the way back from the mall that Danny turned to me. We sat in a line at a stoplight fifteen minutes from home. I couldn't decide if it was very, very late at night or very, very early in the morning; the precipice between yesterday and tomorrow seemed to lengthen for every tick of my turn signal.

"What are we doing here, Ile?" Danny asked, finally. "That watch wasn't even discounted."

I adjusted my grip on the steering wheel.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said, my tongue growing thick in my mouth. "Yeah, I'm just—"

Danny drove the rest of the way home.

* * *

And now, if you add the rest of those lovely boiled tomatoes to the food processor—

—our recap of yesterday's top 10 FAILS, starting with Phillies' pitcher—

—hairy face? Introducing a new epi—

—vastating loss for presiden—

—three trapped in Magnolia County house fire. Officials have not yet released details to the press, but a strong odor of gas remains in the air around the neighborhood. Action News 10 will be first—

Danny grabbed the remote out of my hand and switched the channel back to the cooking show with the soothing woman and her rustic-looking kitchen.

"I don't think listening to death will make the ghost thing any better," he said.

I shrugged. "Sometimes it helps."

Danny shook his head. "I'm trying to understand it, Ile. Did something happen?"

"A lot has happened," I said. "But I don't know why *this*, specifically, happened. I fucking—you know how many times I've wished I knew? Why they—why I feel things?"

"You should figure it out," he said. "Stop wishing. Do some poking around. You can't be the only one dealing with this."

"They're all hacks, though," I said. "Ghost shows are made for viewership, not for sorting me out. It's all in my head, really. I just can't get out of it. God, I need to get out of it." I ran my hands through my hair, smoothing it down and pulling it in measure.

Danny tilted his head. "You remember that time in grade school when you were terrified of worms, and then you did that project on them, and then you loved them?"

I laughed in spite of myself. "That three-foot, paper-mache earthworm? I was so proud of it."

"I wish you made it cartoony and not anatomically correct, but yeah, that one. Do you remember that? How the understanding balanced you?"

"Are you saying I should do a research project on ghosts?" I asked drily.

"No," Danny said, slowly. "Grad school. For psychology, or neuroscience—something that forces you outside of your head. And to see the world—as it is—not as you imagine. I think it would help."

"And I'll see all the ways that I'm crazy?"

"You're not crazy, Ile. I think there's just a rational half of you and an irrational half. You just have to listen more to the rational one."

I thought about it for a few days, and I came to believe that the thinking itself was the problem. There had to be some degree of knowing, some truth on this planet that I had not plugged myself into. And once I found it and claimed it as my own, my sight would shift like a slide reel, and I would instead experience the world softly and welcomingly. And all the shadows would settle back into their places, and my vigilance might fade.

* * *

"Did I tell you—yesterday—Noy and Adia and Claire and Frankie were talking about whether lost thoughts can become corporeal? Broken promises, too."

"No, you didn't," Man says as he's portioning out chips, popcorn, and pretzels into big crystalline bowls. "You'd think they have better things to do with their time."

"Yeah," I say. "But don't you think that's crazy?"

Man pushes the last bowl into alignment, dusts off his hands, and looks at me, smiling. "What do you think, Ile?"

"I think you think it's crazy. I know you do."

"No, but what do you think of lost thoughts? You've got the doctorate now. You're more an expert than me."

My breath quickens. This is not our routine. "The whole thing is—outlandish. Stupid, really."

"Why, Ile? I want to learn. Tell me."

"I—well, the atomic thing, first off, and—you know, thoughts are never physical to begin with, and—"

A shadow moves across the wall. I stand, frozen, wordless. Then, a flash of bright yellow light splashes in through Man's tall windows. A car.

"Someone's here," I say, and I am saved.

* * *

Manuel's biggest fault is that his loneliness convinces him he's in love with me. We have been friends for nearly five years now. Still, still, there are moments when I catch his eye and there is something shadowy hidden behind his vision. When he gets drunk enough, he asks me to dinner, to a movie, to a long walk on the beach. If I am not with him, I will wake up to three new voicemails and blurry pictures of him at a bar. It's gotten better over the years, but there is still a half-buried feeling lurking, waiting.

"Manuel's biggest fault is that his loneliness convinces him he's in love with me.

If I was kinder, I would enfold myself in research and working out and the squadron of graduate students who I have nearly everything in common with. Except for the ghosts. So I tell Man that I'm focusing on myself, that I value him too much as a friend. And he accepts it and we go out to dinner anyway, knowing that this is a date in all but vehement name.

It's not that I haven't thought of dating Man. But his deodorant smells like my own fear echoing back at me, and though he has inherited great wealth, he will not give his change to the woman who lives in the intersection near his office. For as much as I love Man, I am not sure I trust him. Or maybe, I have this backwards.

* * *

I was not old enough to remember the first ghost I saw. My mom talks about it some times.

"Dad and I would wake up in the middle of the night, hearing you cooing and laughing and carrying on! And when we would go check on you, thinking maybe your brother was playing with you—nobody there."

"You were such a happy baby," my dad said last Christmas, the past softening his gaze. But I know. I know. I had not been alone. I haven't since.

* * *

The party is vibrant. We louden the music enough that nobody can hear the wailing of the vacuum downstairs, but conversation flows easily and I am glad to be in Man's house for the first time. There may be something in his basement, but the liveliness of the party upstairs brings me solidly to the realm of the living.

I am laughing with Claire and Noy, two of the girls in my cohort, when Man approaches, red-faced and loosely grinning.

"You must be the famous ghost-hunter psychologists," Man says, slinging an arm around my shoulder.

Claire and Noy shoot me confused glances.

"Manuel is a lightweight," I say, smiling nervously. "Aren't you, Man?"

He laughs. "I'm a cheap drunk, is what I am," he says.

"You guys are really cute," Noy says.

I shake my head, but Man plants a sloppy kiss on my cheek and moves away, distracted by some loud laughter across the room.

"We're not dating," I say, but Claire just laughs.

"Get on it, then!" Claire says.

Noy shrugs. "Why the hell not, Ile? Might get rid of that stress knot in your shoulder, at the very least."

I watch Man move across the room. He bounces on his toes as he walks, and when he is drunk, his hips dance more than mine.

"Maybe," I say, quietly. We turn to talking about Noy's undergrads.

Cold Chicken

Colored Pencil and Acrylic Paint on Paper
Mallory Newbern

* * *

After the party is over and Man is safely asleep in his own bed, I close the door of my apartment, toe off my shoes, and curl myself into my favourite arm of the raggedy couch I bought off a neighbor two years ago. It had been far too cheap, and he had been in far too great a hurry—I steamed it, repeatedly, once it had entered my possession, but I still wonder if this was the last evidence of the affair he had been having next door with the maybe-legal teen. I'd grown so used to the sound of them fucking—her, too loud, her half-pleasure a performance; him, too quiet, his focus all internalized within a four inch region. I don't know if they broke up, exactly, or if she just broke herself trying to dock in the rocky seas of "we're practically divorced already, just waiting on the paperwork." I don't miss it, really, but sometimes I hear the echoes of it if I press my ear to the couch's cushion and still my breath. It is throaty *yeahs* and knees hitting linoleum and an arrhythmic squeak and the banshee foretelling youth's death. It was *sound*, though; there's little beyond shitty sex that is so profoundly for the living.

The couch, at least, is very comfortable, and for that I am grateful.

I flick on the TV and am joined shortly by Buster, who seems to appreciate the noise as much as I do. Buster is the tabby I adopted as soon as I graduated college—in part as a reward for surviving, but mostly so I could still claim a roommate in my home. Buster doesn't mind that the television is always talking, or that I sometimes leave on every light, or that occasionally I will not sleep for three days. She thinks it's great fun, I imagine, being a middle-aged cat with an ever-growing basket of toys and treats.

> There's little beyond shitty sex that is so profoundly for the living.

"You are a very good roommate," I tell Buster, and she looks pleased enough, kneading the rolls of my stomach vigorously. It is late already, but Buster sleeps with the sun and I am in the mood for a horror movie.

Danny thinks it odd that my most concrete solace comes through movies meant to terrify audiences. I started watching them at the onset of grad school as a sort of exposure therapy—to force myself into deciding that this is a mindset, nothing more, that I've constructed in myself. In movies, ghosts are not real, but people are, and they are terrified.

When the actors earn their wage, I find companionship. Their fear makes me feel less alone. And though I've yet to see a film that inscribes me perfectly, there are moments in each that draw me to tears for their solidarity. What started as exposure therapy is now the slowing, warming comfort of feeling seen by a cast and crew. And Buster hardly minds the movies, anyway.

I feel the air in the room change about me as the others filter in to wait behind me. Buster turns to look at them. The ghosts that I live with have been somewhat tamed by time and a cautious acknowledgment; they are not domesticated, but they are predictable, and the violence to my senses comes less often here.

* * *

My first two years of college were built in me, studious, partying, expanding. I did not have ghosts because I ignored them. I felt movement in the air while my roommate slept; I saw dim light crawl along the floor near my closet. There were whispers in the empty bathroom when I awoke too early after a night spent drinking. My fingers or my shoulder or my ass would freeze, abruptly, as something brushed by, and it would be hours before I could again feel anything properly. I did not have ghosts because I ignored them, and because I ignored them, they grew daring.

Sometimes a textbook page turned beyond my fingers. The light in my sophomore year room thrice burst as I was leaving for breakfast. There was the vague feeling of being watched from the windows, from the mirrors, from the shining porcelain of the toilets. I laughed about it with my roommate—the haunting of 419, we'd joke with the boys upstairs. She never felt it so profoundly as I did, but she felt it; I know because she took to wearing thick sweaters in our room, with its thermostat set to 75. I know because she rushed to fall asleep before me, every night taking a handful of melatonin gummies and swiftly dropping out of existence. I know because she did not argue when I asked if we might leave the blinds shut at all times; if we might close our closet doors at night; if she might hang her bathrobe elsewhere; if I might install a powerful nightlight. She did not argue, and the week after I purchased my nightlight, she bought her own, a halo of soft yellow light to guard her feet.

* * *

I think most people imagine that ghosts are only one sort of thing, but I am nearly certain they are many. Before Man, I will not share this, but I have a theory that moments and bodies traipse behind most of us, like a pilgrimage of past lives, and I've had enough of my own to populate my apartment. I don't want my parents' ex-lovers or Danny's dead dog or my cohort's failed ambitions or the chill in Man's dark white basement to live here with me, too.

* * *

It is 2 p.m., I am still hungover, and I have yet to leave my bed for more than a bathroom trip or a cereal expedition. Buster is curled up at my feet, the afternoon sun filtering through my beige curtains. In my waking spells, I alternate between bleary-eyed reading and staring at the ceiling, wondering what I'll do with my days now that everything is done.

Finally, I twitch my toes, rustling my blankets, until Buster stirs. Her eyes darken and grow rounder and rounder, tracking the movement of the sheets until she pounces, biting through the cloth. We make a game of it for a few minutes, her chasing my hidden fingers and toes, me yelping when she makes contact. Suddenly, she stills, her gaze whipping away from me.

The doorbell rings.

Neither of us moves, long enough for another ring to echo. Buster moves before I do, taking off towards the front door. I throw a sweater on over my ratty sleep shirt, struggle into a pair of sweatpants, and follow Buster.

Another ring.

"I'm coming," I yell, though I do not quicken my pace. I am thinking about the last time my superintendent dropped in, an event that always holds the discomfort of being chastened for my living habits at the age of 28.

Buster is sitting a few feet back from the door, her ears slicked back and the tip of her tail twitching. I frown at her before finally opening the door.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, my voice escaping before I can tame my hostility. It is Man, carrying two lidded cups of Styrofoam-tasting coffee.

"I thought I'd stop by, see how you're holding up," Man says. His smile wavers.

"Oh. Thank you," I say, accepting the coffee he presses into my hand. I look at his left shoulder instead of his eyes.

"Can I come in?" he asks, finally. I can tell he is peering around me, trying to get a look into my home.

"I'm not really...in a state for visitors right now."

Man shrugs. "I don't mind."

I *do*, I think, but because it is Man, and because Buster doesn't speak English, I step aside and he shuffles into my home.

"Ile…" he says, drawing the last syllable out into silence as he looks around.

* * *

In October of my junior year in college, I stopped trusting mirrors and windows and shining picture frames and the glossy darkness of a turned-off television. Reflections have always drawn me uneasy, but it was only in October that the fear blossomed into my vision.

The duplex that I shared with two others had once, I think, been owned by a dancer. The living room was half-panelled in mirrors and overly large compared to the kitchen and bedrooms. For our first few weeks living there, we thought it great fun—an expanse of wall space to check our makeup, to pretend we could be ballerinas, to take pictures of ourselves before a long night out. I saw things, shapes, shadows swallow each other in the mirrored reality, sometimes, but nobody else took note of it, so I said nothing.

It was in October that my reflection started to shift without my permission. I remember gazing deep into its fluorescence, fixing my eyeliner, and finding a reflection delayed by a copy-cat's close watch. I returned, night after night, to watch the other me, casting itself into a poor mimicry of my own body. I was afraid, and I was entranced; whenever I passed by the mirrored wall, I looked only to the aberrations of my foolish self. And I missed, in the background, the gathering of things and thoughts that were very nearly real.

I don't like to think about the thing itself. It fills my heart and head to bursting with wobbly blood, and I can hear nothing else beyond the movement of rushing fluid through my ears. I will say only that in the planes of mirrors, I have found every fear that has ever swallowed me.

My roommates returned from class to find all the mirrors shattered and me, bloody and pale.

* * *

"What is this, Ile?" Man asks.

I look around as if I'm seeing my home for the first time, too. Scraps of fabric, Chinese menus, pages of notes are hung on every reflective surface. I collaged my shining fridge, the mirror by the front door, all of my microwave but for a small, eye-sized gap to watch the turning of the food. Every doorknob is wound in a soft coozie of yarn, and I have not polished my furniture in years.

"It's comfy," I say, finally. "I like it like this."

"It looks like a serial killer lives here. It's *claustrophobic* like this, Ile. Let me help you redecorate, fix it up—make it shine—"

"I don't want it to shine," I say, harsher than I intend.

He holds his hands up, a peace offering.

"Do you, uh, want to watch TV?" I ask, uncertain of what else to say.

Man shrugs.

"You can meet Buster," I say. "I'll go find her for you."

I leave Man on the couch and go hunt down Buster, who had fled from the entryway as soon as Man entered. I finally locate her under my bed, eyes glowing softly. "Come on, scaredy-cat," I say, drawing her out with treats and my soft voice. She stiffens in my arms as we approach Man, but he is gentle with her, and she lets him scratch her ears for a few minutes before she runs away again.

"She's not used to strangers," I say, by way of apology. "Not that you're a stranger, just—"

"You've never had me over," he says.

"I knew you'd react the way you did," I say. "With all your design expertise."

Man purses his lips. "You could live better than this, is all."

I shrug. "I'm happy here with Buster," I say.

Man lifts a hand, slowly, then combs his hair back with his fingers. "Ile...about last night—"

"It was wonderful, Man, really—it's been a long time since I've had a party, and it was more than I could have ever asked."

Man smiles. "You deserved it, Ile. I'm so proud of you." His hand raises once more—this time, it draws towards me, tucks my hair behind my ear.

My blood thunders in my ears like it does when I am in a fit of terror. I have to still myself, remind myself that the body only has so many reactions—that it's all in the mind's interpretation.

I decide this is not fear I'm feeling.

* * *

"How do you ever have a sense of what you look like?" Man asks a few weeks later, letting himself in with a paper bag full of wine and cookies. "I was walking to the store and caught a glimpse of my hair in the barber shop's window. Almost stopped to get a trim on the spot," he says.

I turn from my nest on the couch. "I dunno, how *do* I look on a daily basis?"

Man laughs. "Beautiful. Stunning, even. I've no clue how you do it, though." He drops a kiss on my forehead as he sinks down on the couch beside me.

"At least I've got that going for me," I say, hitting *enter* three times on my CV. Man sighs. "Don't even know if I want these jobs," I mutter. "Might as well go into real estate while I still can."

Man snorts. "You'd have to hire me to stage every place you find," he says, gesturing around at my home. I stick my tongue out at him and re-focus on balancing my holy trinity of spacing, lettering, and font size on the screen.

Man has been a welcome distraction from the job applications. He's been here more nights than not, and I've yet to feel the dark unease that resides in his basement. I am hoping beyond everything that Man is no more or less than I expect of him. The sex, at least, is good.

* * *

There is a piece missing from the collage I constructed over my bathroom mirror. Man promises he did not remove it.

* * *

"I thought the ghost thing was research, just—not something that you *believe*, Ile? You believe all that?"

"How could you *not*? You've made something evil in your basement. You don't feel it? You don't see it?"

"Oh, so that's why you don't come over? You're afraid of the dark?"

"I'm afraid of *you*, Man. Who hurt you to bring something so violent into your home? Who did *you* hurt?"

"This is not happening. Call me when you want me to pull you out of whatever crazy fucking headspace you're in. *Jesus*. I'm not *evil*, Ile!"

* * *

When Man leaves, something malevolent and amorphous slips into the space that he once occupied. It repeats his motions, coldly and without the love that has always, always danced through Man's veins. It watches me at night, perched on the edge of my bed. It brushes my hair from my face as I hunch over my laptop. It pulls back my shower curtain, unpeels the duct tape with which I then try to fix the curtain to the wall. Each cup of tea that I pour never steeps; even a minute after the kettle has whistled, the water is without any warmth. Buster refuses to follow me around anymore, as if the thing has become my shadow now, and she can only avoid it when she avoids me.

I spend an hour each night looking at the mirror-collage, where I've taped a piece of unused toilet paper to cover the gaping hole at its center. I will myself to peel my safety away, to look hard into what Man and I created. It is better to know the darkness than to fear it blindly. But I will not. I cannot. The doctorate has given me nothing for this, beyond the stress of joblessness and the realization that there is a world that exists beyond science's known bounds.

Buster and I make do for two weeks. Most days, I am at a nearby cafe for as long as I can manage, sending applications to any university or lab or bank that I stumble across, and I am preternaturally productive, though I am able to sleep only when my body exhausts itself so thoroughly that even the eyes on me can no longer spark me awake.

But one day in the second week, I look at Buster and I realise that I can see the outline of her ribs, and her skin stretches tight over her spine and bony pelvis. There is a rage that floods me, hot in every direction.

I call Man.

* * *

When Man arrives, the ghost that he had left behind grows agitated. It ruffles the papers that cover my fridge. The television flickers black twice. My left hand stiffens with cold.

I do not look Man in the eyes when he enters my home.

"I know it's stupid, for you," I say, finally, staring hard at his right ear. He is leaning against my kitchen table, arms folded and eyebrows pulled together in a frown. "I'm not asking you to believe. You don't see what I see. But—"

For a moment, the tears choke me. Man pushes away from the table towards me, then stops, two feet away, hand half-extended.

I cough. "I can't—the mirror," I say, finally. "Physically, I know—it's irrational. I can't bring myself to look in the mirror, but I—you're, you know, better than me. You've always helped." I know I'm not making any sense, but the thing that Man and I created is standing closer to me than Man is, and I can tell it is listening.

I push myself into Man's confused arms. "Please," I whisper into the lapel of his coat. When he finally reciprocates the hug, it is almost too tight, and I feel the bump of the kiss he places awkwardly next to my eye. I wonder if Man can feel the way my hands are shaking, half from the cold, half from the knowledge of what is to come.

If I were better, or kinder, or wiser, or braver, I would do this part on my own. But there is something in Man's steadfast disbelief that I need, even as he imagines that I have lost the scientific part of my brain. If he wants a hypothesis, then I will tell him: if the mirror is freed, then so, too, will be the others. If we gaze deep, then we will recognize the hesitation of our own shadows. If I am gone, then my ghosts will come with me.

* * *

When we first went out on a proper date, just the two of us, I spent longer getting ready than I knew I needed to. Man had seen me in the same sweats for days in a row, running on little more than caffeine and bagels. But Man, I knew, liked the idea of me, a newly-minted doctor neurotic enough to provide for a handful of quirks, but well-grounded at the roots. I couldn't blame him—I liked that idea of me, too.

We met at a pizza place halfway between our two homes, and when Man walked in, he brought with him that heady perfume of guilt, love, fear, sex that he'd worn for me since we first hooked up. He kissed me on the cheek and smiled, brilliant and naive. For a night, we believed in the same world.

* * *

"Jesus, Ile, you're practically vibrating," Man says as we stand before the mirror, side by side.

"I am not looking forward to this," I say.

"I'm sorry for the things I said," Man says, instead of all the things he could be thinking.

"Me too," I say. "I'm sorry, too." I realized the day after he left that if Man and I were able to create something so cold from a relationship so short, the darkness in his basement could have been born of anything—a bad dream, a broken promise, a slow love caged and rotted. The Man that I have been holding at arm's length is not the real Man. When I tell him this, he rubs his eyes with the back of his hand and gives me a wobbly smile.

"I've missed you," I say, finally. I reach out, thread my fingers into his, and with my other hand, I tear the first bit of paper away.

Pain

Photography
Nasha Wanichwecharungruang

Our Own Making

Ana Paula Pinto-Diaz

Analysis of the Rose as Sentimental Despair

Twombly makes your body
a stranger: you become her: the rose that unravels
the wound of loneliness that remains unspeakable
and what I imagine heartache must look like
on a tightly-pulled canvas.

a number of strangers
enter under a condition of stillness. of silence.
no one speaks but wanders, looking. you and I
for the love of it: we walk like mystics
in a trance, spin like dervishes in silence—
every sound will stop if you let it.

really I admit
my knowledge of your body is only this:
the sense of a figure in a midtown gallery,
skylight fragments pooling softly on the side
of your face. and each time it is like this:

the rose bleeds out

light, as we conjure it, begins to settle—

every aspect of this body gives in to it.

Poor Man's Soup

Jennifer Fu

"Ma, teach me how to make poor man's soup," I ask, approaching her turned back as she stands in the dim kitchen light. She makes no sound of acknowledgement as her right hand dexterously wields a wooden spoon and her left hand grips the worn handle of the wok.

"I thought I already showed you how to make that," she said.

"Yeah, a long time ago. But now I've forgotten."

I peer over her shoulder. She is making *hong shao rou*[1], one of my favorite dishes. It is named for the glistening redness of the meat as it stews in a savory broth spiced with star anise and ginger. My mother had stopped making it for a while because of its fatty content and my father's pre-diabetic liver incapacity. However, I have just returned home for winter break after a semester abroad, and I suppose she feels a little indulgence is due.

"Later then, I will teach you to make poor man's soup. Not that you shouldn't be able to figure it out." She chuckles and her doughy arms, revealing a surprising strength, overturn the wok and heap the meat onto an awaiting plate. Standing at just under five feet, she weighs less than 110 pounds but can carry twice what I can. Her voice is incredibly powerful, full of tenor and resonance. It pierces like a javelin whistling through the air before thudding into its target with uncanny precision.

A practical woman, my mother was the oldest of four children. When she was younger, my grandfather fought in the Vietnam War and my grandmother spent all day teaching at a schoolhouse. She grew up in rural China during the Cultural Revolution, under the new 'modern ideals' of Mao Zedong, where a common phrase filling the workrooms was *women hold up half the sky*. And by women, they meant little girls too. At ten years old, my mother would carry her baby brother on her back and a sister in each hand to run errands, grocery shop, and cook. Women may have worked in the fields and in the kitchen, but they were still the last to eat at the table. While my uncle wolfed down the few morsels of meat the family could afford, my mother and her sisters chewed on grass roots, pocketing their

[1] Red braised pork belly

their lessons in how to care for others more than themselves. After high school, my mother took up nursing school because it was fashionable for young women at the time, and it was a good, reasonable profession. Then, when she became a wife and a mother, what was reasonable for her changed again, and she left before completing her degree to immigrate to the U.S. at my father's urging. He told her she couldn't be a nurse in the U.S. anyway and that he would find her a job in the lab.

* * *

When I was five and we were still green shoots in American soil, I shared a bed with my mother in our two bedroom apartment in northeast Atlanta. We would lie on the twin sized bed, she on her side and me on my back. The A/C was perpetually broken and the heat of the Georgian summer glued our skin together with sweat. Lying next to her at night, I would refuse to sleep until she sang me a lullaby or told me some ancient Chinese folk tale.

However, some nights I could not sleep, my gaze tentatively following the flickering bars of light on the ceiling as cars passed by outside. As a child, I had an odd fascination with and an unconquerable fear of death. Hand nestled under the softness of my mother's arm, I would watch her chest rise and fall like the ocean's lapping tides. The fall of her breath never failed to rise again, but I would wonder if the cycle might break if I stopped paying attention. Once, I prodded her awake and asked, "What happens when people die, mama?"

Without opening her eyes, she muttered, "Nothing."

This answer did not satisfy me. "So they just become… nothing?"

A silence.

"Yes."

After a moment, she stirred and murmured with a matter-of-fact cluck of the tongue, "But everyone dies, Jia Ni. It's not as if it's only you. It happens to everyone."

As if that made it all right. Everyone dies so it's OK. I tried to accept her rationalization and let my heart slow into slumber, but I couldn't deny the deep fear that continued to press against the inside of my skull.

* * *

After my father finished his post-doc in Atlanta, he accepted a research position at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. This was in 2003, before the housing bubble popped, and my parents became first-time homeowners with the money they had saved up renting a tiny apartment in Atlanta, splitting two thirds of the cost with the bank. My father was so excited about the house that we went there the very first night we got the keys, even though there was a thunderstorm and the electricity wouldn't be turned on for a week. Under the thrum of thousands of raindrops, the big window in the living room projected a square illumination on the floor. Mother and I lay in that ocean of light, watching the streams of water droplets race down the window pane, listening to thunderclaps echo through the empty rooms, and wondering about our future in the house.

The Dallas house had a small, sloped closet under the stairs. It was my little secret for a while because the door was rather inconspicuous, and my parents didn't find it for the first few months. I smuggled pillows, blankets, and my most favored stuffed animals to accompany me in the hideout closet. When my mother did eventually find out, she put our spare chairs, vacuum, and cleaning supplies there.

Sometimes when I overwhelmed her, my mother would put me in the closet too. She would turn off the light and close the door. It didn't have a lock, but each time I would try to leave, she would put me back in. After a few rounds, I grew more afraid of her kicks and slaps than of the darkness. I stayed. What had seemed small before became infinite in the dark. The slanted ceiling meant the back of the closet forever recessed into the unknown. I crouched near the door, pressing my sticky cheeks against the rough carpet so I could be close to the solid yellow line on the floor, the only source of light. Through the opening, I could hear my parents' chopsticks faintly clacking on ceramic at the dinner table. I thought about trying to sneak out but I wasn't sure which I was more afraid of: what could be at the back of the closet, or my mother.

* * *

Around Christmas, when I was eight, I began to realize that Santa Claus was not real and that my parents had stopped loving each other. There were the typical signs: my father sleeping on the couch, my mother growing increasingly irritable—but one night, it exploded.

Earlier that day, my mother had gotten an email from my teacher asking for yearbook art and their name and year in tiny print at the bottom. I liked to draw, so my mother excitedly urged me to submit a design. Finding that "Bear Creek Elementary" refused to fit on the meager 8.5 x 11 inch printer paper, I tried to shorten the "ELEMENTARY" to just "ELEM." My mother disagreed with this. There's no way I would win without spelling out the entire name of the school. Taking my pencil, she filled it in for me in small neat letters under the first line. Taking one look at it, I declared that she had spelled it wrong, that there was no "i" and she was missing the "a." Her eyes grew hard as her face flushed. My mouth suddenly ran scarlet, and I didn't realize what had happened until I saw her right hand pointed up, fingers sharpened like a spear. Tears bursting into my eyes, I told her she was stupid and that she couldn't even spell. I said I wished I had a proper American mother, with wavy blonde hair, blue eyes, and perfect English, someone who wouldn't make me feel like a statue sitting next to her at parent-teacher meetings. Wielding an eraser, she smeared the greasy graphite across the paper, and I wailed that she had ruined it. My father came downstairs and they started to fight about how to spell ELEMENTARY, the mortgage, the lack of responsibility she said he had for parenting. I didn't know why it was such a big deal for her to admit she forgot how to spell a word, but apparently it was the last thing she needed to get into the car and start the engine. Red-faced, with black hair sticking to my shiny cheeks, I scrambled after her. The blinding white of the headlights blew into my face, and my father gripped my wrist until they turned white as I writhed trying to reach her. I couldn't see her face.

In the week that followed, I sat in the backseat of my father's 2002 Toyota Camry as we circled around places where we thought she could be: at the school parking lot; the nearby grocery store; a park we went to once. I don't know why she came back, but I guess it's hard to run away when your husband is also your boss. The second time she left, I was ten, and we were living in a townhome in Orlando. Once more when I was thirteen, and we were still staying in a small apartment in Kansas City. The third time, I didn't even get off the couch to watch her go. A couple of days later, I woke up to her sautéing bell peppers in the kitchen. I walked past her to the dining table, and we did not speak of it.

> "Red-faced, with black hair sticking to my shiny cheeks, I scrambled after her.

* * *

I remember the first time I tasted poor man's soup. That night, we had just returned from a month-long visit to China, and I walked through the front door to the sight of all 20 of my goldfish floating dead: pale bellies to the ceiling in their forgotten aquarium. In the time we were gone, the zucchinis in the vegetable garden had grown longer than my arm and twice as thick. We picked them and lined them up on the dinner table in order of biggest to smallest. My mother proudly grumbled that there were far too many, and they would rot before we could eat them all. That night, she made poor man's soup, incorporating two of our fattest zucchinis into it. I knelt by the window overlooking our vegetable garden and blew on the steaming stew, cupped in my hands. Perhaps it was the heat of the steam on a cold night or the comfort of its fullness in my stomach after I had just lost my goldfish, but after that, I told everyone that my favorite food was soup.

Mian geda[2] is colloquially known as poor man's soup in the Chinese countryside because it is essentially made from leftovers. Previously the poor man's only choice of food, it is now the exhausted and resourceful mother's antidote to needy children. I grew up eating poor man's soup. We would put all sorts of things you would never guess in it, the secret contents of our refrigerator that we had forgotten about. A portion of squid that reappeared in the bottom drawer of the freezer. Too many chives from a bountiful garden harvest. We dived deep into our refrigerator and resurfaced with treasures, dumping them onto the beach that was our kitchen counter.

Most of the ingredients that would end up in our soup came from the local 888 Supermarket. At the time, it was the largest Asian supermarket in the Kansas City metropolitan area and probably the entire state. Every Asian person around (and the occasional adventurous white person) congregated there each week to get their taste of home. I loved going to that market. Even now, I can imagine myself walking through the front entrance, past the poorly built rack of bamboo stems in fat buddha pots, and stopping at the built-in bakery filled with sweet pineapple buns and red bean mochi. The place was huge and had everything from chrysanthemum tea to durians to little socks for your chairs. And it wasn't just Chinese stuff; there were Filipino, Indian, Japanese, and Vietnamese products too, all mixing together in the chaotic order of the aisles. My mother was at home in this jungle of goods in a way she never was at Walmart or Target. This was her domain; she knew how much a good fish was supposed to weigh and what fruit fit the season. At one end of the deli aisle you could find wonders other places would never dare to stock—chicken feet, beef tongue, and once, I strolled past an entire pig head sealed in saran wrap. Past the deli was

[2] Dumpling knots

the fish, and you knew when you were getting close because the smell was unmistakable. They kept foot long snowshoe crabs, catfish, and squirming eels in stacked tanks, their glassy eyes observing you. Mother scanned the rows and pointed to a small pink salmon. Even though the staff there seldom spoke Mandarin, she was taller with them at the register, no longer apprehensive about receiving a confused stare when they were unable to understand her broken English. With some gesturing and a sharp yes or no, she got what she wanted. Taking our bounty home, my mother prepared delicacies such as century egg in soy sauce, shrimp wonton soup, and braised pig knuckles.

* * *

By the age of 16, I was outlandishly nervous. Naturally skittish, you could say. Mother and I disagreed over everything. The smallest thing sent me into a numbing frenzy. In those later adolescent years, I felt like I was observing my life unfold in a fish tank. You know when you're staring into an aquarium at one of those fancy restaurants? And the fish tanks are all lit up in an eerie blue light and decked out with plastic undersea castles, hiding behind neon kelp, and it looks like someone ate too many fruity loops and vomited directly into the tank? I watched myself move through the hours of the day like the kaleidoscope of fish move from one side of the tank to the other, drifting aimlessly, their little fishy eyes unblinking and vastly obsidian. You can get sucked into watching them for ages, wondering where they're going, so that the din of the restaurant fades, and you're just concentrated on those translucent fins, ethereal in the fluorescent light. I don't remember what exactly mother was screaming about at that time. She likes to say things over and over again so it feels like a tape stuck on a particular segment, catching on itself and repeating over and over and over again. Biting. Made you feel like you were going crazy. I couldn't tell if I was always neurotic or if she put it inside of me, like she had too much of it, and it had to go *somewhere*. I think fish tanks are not very smartly designed because the density of the glass and the water often distort what's going on inside. The fish can pass by a rounded corner of the glass and suddenly seem to be stretched a couple of extra inches. Surreal, magnified, warped, and honestly kind of funny.

I was having a panic attack. Through the distorted glass, I saw myself shove past my mother and out the door. I watched myself sprint down the stairs, almost busting my face against the stairwell. Pounding through the kitchen, seeing the twin river birches through

the long windows in the dining room. Opening the back door and running out into the moonlight, and I was wearing a ratty t-shirt and no pants. It was fucking cold. The grass glimmered indigo in the dark, and it felt good against the soles of my feet. I realized I had messed up. There wasn't anywhere to go in this enclosed space; I was still trapped. This wasn't like when I was nine and I ran out the front door onto the summer asphalt of the streets and kept going until an old white woman asked me where my mother was. This time the streets were empty, save for a line of lonely streetlights, and I wasn't wearing any shoes. So instead of running, I hid. From above, at a watery height against the starless sky, I saw my gangly body, ghostly in the moonlight, climb the twisted cherry tree in the corner of the yard. From above, I looked like a white plastic bag caught in the tree's limbs.

* * *

Sometimes, my mother says that we should not have come to this country. It is too far from family, and it has a strange, hard language with sharp cages around its words to emphasize their individuality, their aloneness. If Mandarin runs swiftly, holding hands with each lyrical character, then English likes to be by itself, clipping the end of each note like high-heels bouncing on vinyl. She says that we would be rich now if we had stayed in China, if we knew that an economic boom was headed there while a recession was coming to America. Besides, America was my father's boyhood dream, it had nothing to do with her. My father retorts that it's not the country. He complains that she is never satisfied, and that nothing will ever satisfy her. She walks through life as if she has been robbed of something—of what, I doubt even she knows. It is hard for her to physically show happiness. Like it might run away from her if she turns around and shows it her face. Maybe it is because she has always had a habit of pawing at thing; she can't let a single loose thread lie flat. She just keeps fussing with it until the entire thing unravels into a huge, tangled mess.

* * *

Two days after I asked my mother to teach me how to make poor man's soup, it snows for the first time that year. It's a Sunday, and none of the roads will be cleared until the next day. Unable to do the weekly grocery shopping, my mother decides this is as good a time as any to whip up an easy meal. I pull out a wooden cutting board from its nook above the microwave while my mother examines the contents of the fridge. She selects two red beefsteak tomatoes, a handful of raw bacon strips, one egg, some cilantro, green onions, garlic, and two leaves of napa cabbage. I get to work on the tomatoes, cutting one first in half and then into slices of wide-mouthed crimson grins. My mother examines the girded ventilator.

"Look, there's oil up here, leftover from the cooking." She tsks as she carefully wipes off the sticky amber substance with insistent swipes. "You have to make sure to do this before you cook or else it will drip into the food. This residue is extremely carcinogenic."

The propane stove flickers on, and the flame's tiny blue teeth begin to gnaw at the bottom of the wok. The oil is crackling now, calling for its first sacrifice. I put in the pieces of chopped bacon and turn them over themselves with a wooden spoon. The fat of the bacon caramelizes and brings out a glassy red hue. Before the edges start to curl up into crisps, I sweep in the cabbage and tomatoes. The three ingredients wrestle for room in the wok, and I leave them to cook.

"Now, this is the tricky part," my mother says as she comes back with a bowl of flour. She pours a little bit of filtered water into the corner of the bowl. "Slowly fold the flour into the water, so it turns into *geda*, into little clumps."

I take the Brita into my hands and tip it slightly into the bowl. A bigger-than-expected gush of water spills in, and I clumsily stir the flour into it. And repeat. With each tipping, I recite my mother's words in my head. Not too much, but just enough.
Me and her. Working side by side, enclosed in the amber kitchen light, one, the quiet blue shadow of the other. I look over at her as she opens the lid of the wok, the light of the ventilator outlining her high cheekbones, the steam curling up into her bobbed hair. I try to memorize her like this, her back to me as she rocks the wok, like a barnacled black ship careening on an ocean of blue flames. I notice the new age spots on her hands, the streaks of white hair that she grew lazy of dyeing black again.

Sometimes, when I watch her sitting at her desk at night, I feel a strange sort of disquiet. I am standing at the base of the stairs, my body angled towards the living room, when I catch sight of her, head collapsed against her rounded shoulder. Her eyes are closed, and her computer has turned black from prolonged disuse. In the sallow light of the lamp, her skin looks like it is made of wax, and every dip of her acne scars is pronounced. Shadows catch on the worry lines now ever-present under her eyes, by her curved nose, cradling her

chin. A carved furrow in her brow mars her face even in sleep. I can't stop staring because she looks dead. Or like she could be dead. Even though I logically, realistically, absolutely know she is only sleeping or resting her eyes for a few minutes. I wait a couple of seconds, my body tense and drawn, as I fix my eyes on her just to make sure, to check that her chest is still rising and falling. Her bathrobe lifts up barely half a centimeter, but it's proof that she's still there. I want to call out to her, but the seven feet between us is inconsolable.

Yet, there is a comfort in still being able to observe.

These days, my mother and I can barely speak the same language. Each time I come back from college to sit at my parents' dinner table, I find it harder to recall simple words like 'refrigerator' or the difference between middle school, high school, and college. They slip my mind as the years slip by. I ask my mother for her recipes; I try to regain a native tongue I grew up eating with, but am forgetting with each day I spend away from home. Maybe if I memorize these ingredients, the little tricks to recreate the exact taste of her food, I can hope to remember, I can begin to understand.

* * *

Lately, I have started cooking more. At first, it was out of necessity, but now it is a comfort and oftentimes even a yearning. I make amatuer Chinese dishes, like egg tomato, mapo tofu, and even *pi dan zhou*. I've gotten into the habit of adding avocado to mapo tofu, my own little twist to a Sichuan classic. Living in a new city, I come home late after the sun sets. In my kitchen, I keep the pans drying on the electric stove so that they are always ready to go. On the windowsill, a philodendron vine provides a canopy for a few spices, sesame oil, and soy sauce. I open the fridge and see a bowl of leftover rice, a few eggs, two beef franks, and a clump of browning cilantro.

Take out the hot dogs. Remember to wash them thoroughly with hot water, don't you know that the preservatives on them can give you heart disease? Now, get the flour and pour it into a bowl—any bowl that you can clean easily later, it doesn't matter. Slowly drizzle in water, not all of a sudden or you'll be sorry. When you have the pot set to boil, you can start the noodles. Like when you were a child. Stretch the dough, long and far. And remember to lay them in the soup gently, like foxes sleeping in the snow.

[3] Century egg congee with pork

Brother

Mixed Media with Acrylic and Colored Pencil
Ashley Tsang

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAGGIE SULC

Julia Fisher, Ella Hoyt, Rebecca Noel, Theresa Vanderventer

Maggie Sulc is a scriptwriter and dramaturg hailing originally from Tennessee and Texas. She first embarked for Canada after completing her BA in English at Rice University and spent 2014 acquiring her MA in Theatre and Performance Studies at York University, interning with the Shaw Festival's literary management department, and imbibing as much performance as possible. Maggie now divides her time between developing new writing for stage, screen, and podcasts, promoting new writing and writers through the Toronto Cold Reads, and serving as a live-in mentor and support worker for two adult women with developmental disabilities. Current writing and dramaturgy projects involve haunted antique dolls, adaptations of poetry into theatre, humanity's first contact with alien races, and theatre and television for young audiences. More of her day-to-day adventures as an expat and personal views as an emerging artist can be found at https://gladlybeyondaustinausten.wordpress.com/

Welcome back to the pages of *The Rice Review*! You have special ties to these pages. You graduated from Rice with your BA in English and during your time here you were Editor-in-Chief of this very magazine. We're curious: are there any books, classes, or professors that influenced your writing and/or career arc? Have your experiences as EIC ever helped you in your current profession?

To be honest, I expected to be a part of *The Rice Review* when I first started at Rice. I knew I was going to be an English major and I picked up a copy the first time I visited campus. I volunteered for almost every event and attended every staff meeting during that first year and slowly worked my way up to Editor-in-Chief. My favorite parts were the Big Read every year and working with individual writers when I was Fiction editor my junior year. I learned a lot from rejecting friends' work from the magazine that definitely helps me keep a check on my personal blindspots and loyalties in my professional writing and career.

I didn't realize that I was going to catch the theatre bug during the first few weeks of my freshman year and end up devoting so much time and energy into producing shows with the Rice Players or seeing two of my own plays produced on campus. At first I thought, "Theatre? That's going to be even less useful than your English degree!" But I use my theatre training so much in my day-to-day. It's the most intense form of collaboration I've ever experienced so it's helped me learn how to work with people I love (and people I hate), prioritize my time, and communicate clearly with both "cast" and "audience" alike.

When people ask me how I ended up in Toronto, Canada from Texas, I often credit my experience studying abroad during my junior year at Rice. I do sometimes regret not going to a country that didn't speak English, but I did really learn how to live in a different country during my fall term at Hertford College at Oxford. Instead of traveling to a new European destination each weekend, I really spent my time exploring the city and joining student clubs when I wasn't reading or studying. If I hadn't already had that experience of flying across the ocean on my own to a place I'd never visited, I don't think I would have accepted the spot at York University's Masters of Theatre and Performance Studies without ever having been to Canada before.

I don't have enough time or space to list all the books, classes, and instructors that shaped me during my time at Rice. But I will mention Judith Roof. Performing in Judith's Modern Drama class during my junior year was one of the scariest, most rewarding things I've ever done, but more importantly, that class led me to send her my plays to read. She convinced me to switch my Victorian literature focused senior thesis project for a scriptwriting portfolio. My second play The Failures would have been a disaster without her guidance and many of the stories in *The Familiar* wouldn't exist—as many were originally part of that senior thesis portfolio. And finally, she was the one that suggested I give Toronto a look when applying to graduate schools. There were many people at Rice who inspired and supported me, but Judith definitely played a key role in bringing me to where I am today.

Could you tell us a little bit about what inspired *The Familiar*? Was there a moment

where you thought, "Now that's a great idea for a podcast?" Was your vision ever in doubt?

I knew I wanted to make a podcast for a long time. I had a lot of ideas and short plays—some of them from my senior thesis at Rice, some of them I wrote during grad school or just afterwards—and wanted to release them somehow. And I knew from producing theatre shows with the Rice Players that self-producing anything is a lot of work. Thankfully during an artistic residency in spring 2015, I met my co-creator Sadie Johnston and then the idea started to become real. She's very much into the technical side and great with contracts, scheduling, and those kinds of important details so we made a great team. At first I was worried that I had too many ideas and would have to release multiple podcasts but she said, "No, you can release them all as one." Realizing that I could create an anthology series opened so many doors for me. Plus as an avid listener, I hadn't heard too many anthology series yet and none that had a narrator with their own story.

The most important thing I did to get *The Familiar* made was to prioritize it and to make super accessible, small goals to get it done. It's definitely hard to make art since I'm no longer in school and it's not my full-time job. But once I knew we had a great idea and a team to work on it together, I knew that we'd do it and that I'd put my other creative goals on hold because this one was the most important.

There has been a steady increase in the popularity of podcasts over the last few years, and traditional podcasts tend to be nonfiction stories or journalistic exposés. *The Familiar* occupies a different space, similar to the popular *Welcome to Night Vale* series, in that it functions in the entertaining and underexplored area between fiction audiobooks and podcasts. Why did you choose this medium? What's exciting about it? How does the experience of producing this project compare with others?

As soon as I started listening to podcasts—which oddly enough started right after I graduated from Rice—I started searching for the fiction ones. It took me a long time to find them! Now I find new ones every week. The problem I think is not that the area is unexplored, because now it's exploding in almost every subgenre you can think of, but more that we don't have a great way to share fiction podcasts (or any podcasts) with people. When I promote my podcast, most of the people following the #audiodrama hashtag or in the Cast Junkie Discord server are already avid audio drama/fiction podcast fans (good example: do you know what either of those are?). We do have a few critics like Wil Williams and Elena Fernández Collins who review and promote fiction podcasts, but it's not in the mainstream media most of the time. And that's frustrating for me because I want new people to discover how awesome podcasts are and get totally sucked into the vivid science fiction, fantasy, and other worlds they create through sound.

Trying out a new medium for storytelling wasn't something new for me when I began developing *The Familiar*. I'd already been experimenting with writing plays that didn't necessarily happen on stages and written large pieces of a performance series that used podcasts, augmented reality, and site-specific performance before I began work on my podcast. As a playwright, I love that podcasts are like theatre in that you don't fill in every detail for the audience, but that unlike theatre, they can be enjoyed anywhere and at any time. It has always been hard for me to gather my friends and family in one place at one time and now that I live in Canada and my immediate family lives in four different cities in North America, getting to share this with them via the internet, whenever it makes sense for their time zone, is an awesome feeling. That for me is why I create any art: so that it will connect with someone else. I live for those "Aha! I've felt that!" moments with audience members.

Finally how does the experience of this project compare with others I've produced? To be honest, it reminded me a lot of my days producing theatre with the Rice Players when I was an undergraduate. Except I had to source the budget and I didn't have an organization with a built-in support system and years of branding and community recognition behind it to tap into. My co-producer jokes to her friends and family that she has two jobs right now: her full-time one and this one. Only the second one doesn't pay! It's a lot of work, but I expected that—thanks to the Rice Players. It's all worth it to me because of the community it created and is attracting right now. So many of the actors we hired are now friends. I didn't realize that I had so many great people in my network until I asked for help—like realizing my boyfriend had connections to graphic designers and audio engineers. It can be tricky to recruit and collaborate with so many other people to make my vision come true but it's also my favorite part of theatre, film, and podcasting. My original vision grows into something so much greater when I allow others to be a part of it.

Traditional fiction podcasts tend to follow a serialized format. Though *The Familiar* has an overarching narrative of Leo136's search for b33nthere to connect the episodes, the podcast is more of an anthology series with Leo as the narrator. What considerations went into this choice and what have been the successes and challenges of it?

Ever since I began writing, I've been a short story writer. My first impulse is to make everything short and concise. So many of the play and screenplay ideas I adapted for *The Familiar* were already in bite-sized, standalone pieces. The trick was in finding something that would weave them all together. I knew that I wanted some reason for people to want to follow along every week, my "So what?" for putting the podcast together as a complete work of art. My co-creator suggested a narrator. I went away and began stewing over who she would be and why she HAD to tell these stories. It couldn't just be a throwaway reason, but something that felt like life or death that would drive her narration and give her a compelling plot as well. What unlocked it for me was the character exercise in The Dramatic Writer's Companion. By answering those questions as quickly as possible, I revealed Leo's character and suddenly I knew exactly what to do. I pitched it to my co-creator and she loved it, too. To figure out how to write her intros and outros, I watched pieces of *The Twilight Zone*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and *Shelley Duval's Faerie Tale Theatre* in order to see how some of my favorite, iconic narrators did it!

To make sure the narration worked, we had an outside workshop director come in for a table read of the prologue teasers and the first two episodes. She helped us ensure that hints of Leo's story came out in those first episodes but didn't give away the whole story. I'm glad we did because I ended up making more edits to those first episodes than to any other part of the first season. Getting that foundation set up from the get-go was tricky but rewarding in so many ways.

We're told that the characters of Leo136 and B33nthere have met through "Discord," an online messaging platform. Why were you drawn to a story involving relationships that have been formed over the internet?

Leo136 and b33nthere's chat room friendship and ensuing crisis that leads to *The Familiar* all came from my initial character work developing Leo and the series as a whole. I didn't set out to create a piece about internet connections. I set out to find a reason for our narrator to tell stories every week. Through that character development, I realized losing connection to someone that Leo cared about would push her out of her comfort zone to find any way possible to reach b33nthere.

I was also influenced by other podcasts and the many ways they frame their worlds. So many of my favorites—T*he Bright Sessions*, *Wolf359*, *The Message*—have an in-world reason for why each episode is a podcast. For example, *The Bright Sessions* episodes are all recordings of counseling sessions. I knew I didn't have to do this, but since we were going to have a narrator and not just tell these stories on their own, I thought it would only add to the story. I will admit I'm still learning how to use Discord myself. Thankfully the actor who plays Leo has a son who spends a lot of time on Discord and he gave me a quick walk-through.

You have written previously about your experience working to become a playwright in Canada and seeing over 90 performances during your first year in Toronto. Did any of these performances inspire your current work? What else inspires your writing, outside of literature and theater?

Looking back, I'm not sure how I went to that many performances in my first year in Toronto! I certainly attend a lot less now than I did then. But I do fill my brain with lots of amazing art and nature whenever possible. I can't point to any particular piece that influenced *The Familiar* but during the first year in Toronto I came home from a performance of David Ives' *Venus in Fur* at Canadian Stage and feverishly wrote the first scene of my latest full-length play *Raggedy's Kingdom*.

Each story in *The Familiar* has a story behind it. A few of them were part of my senior thesis portfolio of scripts. One was inspired by a writing prompt another Toronto playwright gave me on a whim. One was inspired by the name of a University of Texas softball player I saw on TV while visiting some Rice friends a few years ago. I have to admit the first story just came to me one night… when I couldn't fall asleep. Some of the stories I'd been writing for years and others I wrote very quickly once I knew that *The Familiar* was a go. If it's taught me anything, it's that writing as a discipline has to be practiced, but inspiration can

sit in my head for years before it's ready to be transformed into anything share-able.

I used to feel bad about watching so much television and movies but I have to say that binge watching the second season of *Sabrina* (the new one on Netflix) helped me solve some plotting issues with Leo's narration! Right now most of my inspiration comes from comic books (*Papergirls*, *Saga*, and *Descender* are my favorites) and other podcasts. Instead of listing all the podcasts I love, I'll just add that this week *The Carlotta Beautox Chronicles* and *Sidequesting* have been making me smile.

Besides your work as a scriptwriter, you also describe yourself as a dramaturg. This is a term some may be unfamiliar with. What is a dramaturg? How does it differ from being a scriptwriter or playwright, and does this feel like your preferred relationship to theatre?

I've heard many different definitions for what a dramaturg is since I first heard of this role during my senior year at Rice. Some call dramaturgs editors, but for new plays. Others equate them more to research assistants, as they consult with the director on historical or on-stage details to fill out the world of the play. My favorite definition is that the dramaturg is there to stand for the story. The playwright wrote the framework for the world, the director sees the vision for the play and oversees everyone as they work together to create it. These two people are also there to make sure the story happens, but there can be a gap between the playwright and director, the director and cast, the playwright and crew, et cetera. By serving solely as steward to the story, the dramaturg ensures all these gaps are bridged and all the elements and collaborators come together to tell the story the way it needs to be told.

I love dramaturgy because I enjoy research, but don't like research for research's sake. I love having a practical reason for it—and because stories are my lifeblood, that's practical enough for me! During my first few weeks at Rice I auditioned for Rice Players' production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Or I should say, I went to the first night of auditions, realized I wanted to be in the crew instead of the cast, and came back to the second night of the auditions as the assistant director. But as much as I enjoyed directing, it never felt completely right to me. I didn't have an overall vision for the way the play should look and feel. Once I learned about dramaturgy three years later, I realized there was a word for what I wanted to do in the theatre—if we weren't producing one of my scripts!

Dramaturgy prepared me for the job I have right now as a Marketing Manager at Nelson, an educational publishing company. I work between the sales team and the publishers to ensure the "story" of each of our educational resources is told to the market. It's collaborative and it requires research as well as writing and long-term strategic thinking. I never knew it's where my theatrical career would take me and I'm so grateful that I can keep honing these skills in my full-time career as well as in my creative life.

What advice would you give aspiring writers who are seeking to pursue a career path similar to yours? What do you wish you could back and tell your former Rice-undergraduate self?

When I look back on my time at Rice, I don't have many regrets, if any. It's funny because during my early years at Rice, I imagined having a life very similar to the one I am living now: working full-time in publishing and creating art as my passion. I thought I had left that path many times, but somehow life led me back here. I would love to just tell my past self that trusting my gut will always be the best way forward. It doesn't get any easier to do that, but it's always right. Oh and it will always seem like everyone else is doing more than you. They're not, you're doing enough—especially if you are doing what you love and doing it right.

Right now I'm looking carefully at my life to find ways to make it more sustainable. Part of that is because I'm learning about gardening and permaculture and part of it is because I've learned from work in some super toxic environments that the circumstances I work in and the people I work with need to all be focused on sustaining and supporting each other—not just churning out things and burning out everyone as they go. The way creative work gets made matters just as much to me as the final product. I want to keep making plays, podcasts, scripts, and whatever other forms my writing needs to take. In the past I thought that meant that I always needed to keep pushing myself to try new things, face my next fear, set another higher goal. After moving to a new country and facing so many of my past limits, I've learned that sometimes I don't need to push myself further. Sometimes I have to sit in a safe, steady place in order to create. So if no one has given you permission to do that yet, that's

my advice to aspiring writers: find the sweet spot between taking the risks that will inspire and expand your horizons, and pausing to listen and translate your life experiences into the writing that will connect, inspire, and expand the horizons of others.

***The Familiar* will be coming out with another season! What new directions do you see the podcast moving towards in the future? What can we be on the lookout for?**

I have plans for season two of *The Familiar*, both in terms of Leo's arc and what kinds of stories she'll be telling. Those I cannot share with you. What I can share is that I plan to recruit other writers to craft some of the stories in the next season. If the show truly is about broadening perspectives, then I want queer stories. I want stories from BIPOC writers. I want stories from people with different lived experiences than my own. Everyone can be on the lookout for two things: a fundraising campaign and then the call for submissions. Because if I bring in a diverse writing crew, I want them to be paid for their talents. In the meantime, the more love this season, the easier it will be for our crew to start laying plans and setting timelines for the next one.

Family Photo

Acrylics
Gordan Liu

Market

Ana Paula Pinto-Diaz

The scent of it familiar for blocks: fresh and rotting fruit,
twenty kinds of potatoes still carrying the earth on them.

This is the center of life: hundreds of bodies sweating and hungry,
and the dogs waiting for scraps. One hand for change and another

for this woven plastic bag, bulging as we do, bellies rounded
for a moment rich with newborn fruit. A certain red—a beet,

this textile, hands raw with labor—my feeding is the work of centuries.

In that corner: vegetable foliage, birds of paradise, little Amazon bared
for our taking. Still damp with its rains, still home to the grasshopper,

the mantis that came so far upriver in its folds. The smallest of bodies
that have known this land before it ever thought of us; before this basin

knew a mouth to sip from it; before the cacao seed was plucked;
before, even, it had a name—and so long before it began to burn.

All beneath these small, green tents: where we have sheltered from rain
with the dogs and the flies: if only we had stayed like this, weaving

between sacks of rice, gathering shellfish, spitting out seeds.

Chop Chop

Pastel

Rachel Wang

Not a Lie

Caleb Dukes

Content warning: sexual assault

(What you are about to read is meant to be spoken aloud. If you won't shout it from the rooftops, then you may as well not read it at all.)

It wasn't the song that was playing when it happened that changed me. That's what most people assume. They think that I must have it stuck in my head, going on over and over again. Like all the minute little details are what keep me up at night. Or they think that I've kept it buried deep down inside of me and that when I finally hear it I'm going to break down and shatter. The truth is, I don't even remember what that song was. It was faded and muffled in my head. Just a dull bump-bump-bump.

(On each bump, pound your fist on the nearest solid surface.)

That's how they all go. It doesn't really matter what it was. Those types of songs are all the same song. Plus, the whole night was pretty foggy anyway. I remember everything, but I couldn't feel it happening. Before you ask, no, I don't know how much I had to drink. I don't know when I started or when I ended. I didn't count them. I was in his room, and I felt safe. I was surrounded by people that told me they loved me. I didn't feel a need to count anything. It was all okay. Everything was so okay…

At some point, he asked if he could hug me. I said yes. He was my friend, after all. And he asked me. Who asks their friends for permission to hug them? That's what made me think it was so okay. I thought he was so okay.

(Ask the person next to you for a hug. If they say yes, hug them. If they say no, that's okay.)

Then we were walking. Very slowly. Very wobbly. There were several stops along the way. People went home. Others just needed water, needed air. I took air several times. And at some point, we made it there. To the bump-bump-bump room.

(Pound your fists again.)

And everything was still so okay. We danced. We sang. Of course, I don't remember what we sang. But we definitely sang... It was so, so okay. Then there were the hands. It started with the hands. They were in my hands. They were on my arm. I didn't fight it. I thought it was okay. Then the hands were all around me. It was a hug. That was okay. I had said a hug was okay… Then the hug didn't stop. It kept on going. I was being hugged all over.

I did escape the hug. I got out of it, and the hands were reaching elsewhere. Reaching toward things that were not mine. That did not belong to me. And those things that did not belong to me did not like the hands. They shoved the hands away.

(Ask for someone's hands. If they accept, shove them away.)

And those things found me. They took me away from the bump-bump-bump room.

(The pounding should be instinctive at this point.)

Those things took my hands and took me away. And I was safe from the never-ending hug. I didn't want to keep the things that did not belong to me there, though. After all, they were not mine. They deserved to go back to the bump-bump-bump if they wanted to.

(Pound-pound-pound.)

And it was... what they wanted. So they left. And then I was there. Not far, but I thought far enough. I could still hear the bumps, but they were even more faded. I guess I wasn't far enough. Maybe I should have gone so far that I couldn't hear the bumps. Because soon I could hear all kinds of bumps.

(Your pounding should increase as you read this next section. By the time it is over, your hands might be bloody.)

Bumps of music... Then bumps of footsteps. Then the hands were in this room. The safe room. Suddenly, the hands were on me again. Not my arms, not my own hands, not my shoulders, and not even my waist. Before I even knew what was happening, the hands were on my face. They were grabbing me with intention. They didn't ask permission. They didn't care if I was okay. They just did it.

Then all at once, the lips were on me.

(The pounding has ceased. The bumps are in their brains.)

And I went blank. And all I felt were the bumps. And it seemed like forever. And it was not okay.

And then it was all over. The lips retreated, the hands receded. The whole body disappeared. He drifted into the distance... And I broke. The bumps numbed. They were still there, but I no longer heard them. No longer felt them. I had been poisoned by the lips and every sense shrank.

I was dying.

I was more painfully alive than ever.

I was alone.

I was in a room full of other people.

The tears started to fall and even though everyone saw, no one saw.

Not really.

(Be silent for a long time. Long enough to make them uncomfortable.)

It wasn't until I was truly alone that I started to feel again. The utter shock of it kept me from comprehending the storm around me. There was rushing and hiding and crying and hurting and walking. Oh, so much walking. But when I was finally alone again, that's when I was hit with it.

I closed the door to my own room, the one that belonged to me. I didn't change, I didn't wash my face. I just put in my earbuds and melted into the floor. A symphony of light and color lit up the world around me. I flew far away and escaped the bump-bump-bump forever. I had no idea what was to follow, but I knew one thing: nothing would ever be the same again.

I don't think anyone understands that. Unless they have been through it themselves. But my life changed forever sitting on that floor. I was at peace and for just that one moment, the chaos dimmed and my life was preserved. I would never be the person I was again, but right there, it was okay. I was wrapped in the music of all my emotions and they did not need to pour out of me. They were filling me, and I was staying afloat. They were mine, and I didn't need to give them to anyone. My anger, my pride, my sorrow, my joy, my nothing, and my everything.

They would not be taken away by any hands.

The song that changed me.

Was not a lie.

(Never speak again.)

Apples

Lily Wulfemeyer

She tells her partner that the apples have started to rot on the counter, and then she cries and then he cries and then she cries even harder. They had purchased those apples the first night they fucked. When she moved in, they brought the apples back to their home and set them on the counter together. They used to share one on every day of rest, letting the juice dribble down their chins. Little does he know, she has never once rested. She is too afraid of the apples rotting, because next are the bananas and then the avocados. The avocados are always the weakest of the bunch.

Her partner tells her that she should sleep in the empty chapel over the bridge and across the river. They are no longer the kind of couple that eats fruit together on the day of rest. Even though they've entered and cupped and bruised one another on the counter, it has become desecrated and sunken under the weight of spoil.

She hears *the beat beat beat of* iridescence—a moth is trapped in the coffee pot next to the apples. *But I already took the horse over the bridge and across the river this morning,* she tells her partner*, and there was a great odor. A horrendous smell. A fucking stink.* He leans against the counter, glaring at her.

The moth is living and burning in the coffee, trying to shape and flap wings that are disintegrating. She stares at the moth and thinks of a phoenix with clipped feathers. It smells like the chapel that morning, like the stink that killed her horse, sent her back to the church's oak tree, back to the chapel without a horse, and back to the oak tree again, looking for a place to burrow under the roots. She had gone to see the stained glass, angelsex, and catastrophe. To see something marvelous, so she could finally rest, eat, and be merry. To slip into the chapel's closet where she could wrap herself in layers of pelts meant for the wise men. Instead, she found a fucking stink.

Her partner asks her about the stink—*what made it so* fucking, *dear*? He thinks she must have been fucking someone other than himself. That they bought the wrong apples. She has become ancient, her body medieval to him. *And who lets horses die like that anymore?* he asks.

Outside, past the window over the counter, she can hear lemons and mangoes growing from their backyard oak tree. She takes a deep breath and the miniature carved wooden bears and cats and ceramic pots on the windowsill rattle. *No*, she says, *I just bought the wrong countertop.*

Inside of herself, she can hear a gurgle and feel a lurch. He is crying, scrambling to cup the mucus of the wilting avocados as it slips off the counter. She has stopped crying and realizes that if she opens her mouth her throat must split to welcome the bear that will walk along her tongue. Her eardrums must break to make way for the branches of the oak tree.

The stink, he wails, *what made it stink?* She has always known that her partner cannot stand unanswered questions about her and the chapel. Without the apples, she wonders if she has enough in her core to offer him for dinner, like pollen stored in the face of a daisy.

She plucks the seed of the avocado from his cupped hands and plants it in the gaping pith of a mango. *You know that will grow into a tree,* he says*. There's not enough space in the pith of a mango for a tree,* he says. *What the hell are you going to do with a tree?* he asks.

As she smooths sopping mango over the seed, the counter grows like a ceiling of clouds pregnant with ice, and she hides beneath it for shade. He hides with her but keeps searching for the brown river of fruits with a flashlight like a baby rooting for a nipple. She digs and plants her toes deep like the seed. She thinks it would be best to move into the mango pith so that every day she can till the flesh around the avocado tree and sleep in its branches like a leopard.

It was the rotting apples, she says suddenly. He turns the flashlight on her like they are at a campfire, telling scary stories in the woods. *They caused the fucking. And now it is too thick in the chapel to breathe.* His form is chiseled out of shadow; she sees limbs, hairs, moles on his body that seem new and terrifying.

He yells at her: why doesn't she just move into the empty chapel over the bridge and across the river if she likes it there so much? He is young and has an empty, waiting stomach. He hasn't noticed, but she's been gone for ages, searching for a sun, a fever dream, the perfect pew for two bodies to lay side by side.

I am the only person to visit the empty chapel in years, she whispers.

And I am the one who left the apples to rot, she says, louder. *It wasn't the wooden bears, the angels, or even the catastrophe.*

I left a woman in the empty chapel the night we bought the apples. You used to call her my worst self before you forgot about her—but I never forgot, she says.

So I have already gone to the empty chapel this morning. I know I promised to never talk to her again, but I missed her. Don't worry—she only left parts of herself for me. A bundle of hair, a fingernail, the food we had stocked our own home with, all wasting away, smelling like petrichor and her perfume, and I can't stand it. She covers her ears, can feel leaves sprouting already. *All of the pews were absent of bodies.*

She confesses: *I love her, but she made her home elsewhere after we bought the apples.*

He holds the flashlight steady against her cheekbones, like he can banish her with golden light. Her lips are heavy and sweet with mango juice, an avocado seed tucked beneath her tongue.

In the chapel, she says*, I have let all of the things rot.*
The apples are gone, she says*, and I'm weary of being errant.*
I have already gone, she says*, and you know that I cannot keep.*

Rodney

Charcoal

Rachel Wang

Nose Job

Elizabeth Rasich

The messiness was the same as it is for everyone else. Aaron was bored, wandering, and confessed his wanderlust for other female landscapes. There were tears, snotty blankets, and awful reality TV that made my life feel more coherent by comparison. A surprisingly mature Italian restaurant strategy session. An uncomfortable meeting with a priest, recommended by Aaron's mother after eight years of Thanksgivings together. A brief experiment with an open relationship that shot through my body like cocaine—an ecstatic high of making out with strangers, fucking them in their exposed-brick lofts, and crawling back home sobbing. Finally the separation, and the negotiation over the cat. Aaron got the cat.

Now, on a Monday in July, my car struggles a bit going down the hill. She is far past her prime—worn, scratched, marked up. Everywhere she is dented, dimpled like the cellulite I have begun to find in the most unlikely places. Up ahead, there is a mismatched couple with their pinkies intertwined walking down the hill. She is bursting out of her bikini top, and he, with his ear gauges and patchy goatee, is nodding as she chatters happily. I watch them and wonder if I've done the right thing.

I like to think of myself as logical and analytical, but I am always brought low by mirrors. The loose skin under my arms. The fine line wrinkles webbing across my forehead. The strong jaw and the hooked nose that make me look like Strega Nona. At night, I think about freezing my eggs. Aaron never expressed any serious interest in children. He thought they were cute, he liked playing tag with the ones that could talk, but there was never any part of him that would be able to handle the responsibility. He couldn't even have a dog. He needed a cat like Noble, who shat where he was supposed to and could be left for days at a time with a big bowl of water and a pile of food. Meanwhile, with every period, I was shedding the best of myself.

Then two months ago, for my 34th birthday, I gifted myself a visit to Ella's favorite doctor. Ever since I met her in college, she'd had a round face with hair that hung flat from the sides like a child's stick figure drawing. A few meetings with a maxillofacial surgeon

and consultations with a quirky salon downtown and she was a new woman. It was the same for me. In less than five minutes, Dr. Khoury had diagnosed me as a half-Lebanese—we always recognize each other—and I was officially a career woman with an unfortunately aquiline nose. He said he could fix me.

It's not that I believe I shouldn't age, or that I reject it as a natural process. But why does it have to happen so soon?

I panic and call Ella.

"Honey?" She always answers the phone like this.

"I think I have crossed over into the realm of the totally unfuckable."

"Jesus. You're on speaker." As if her kids don't already swear like sailors.

I hear her take me outside to the expansive backyard of her new house, just fifteen minutes away from my little one bedroom apartment. Ella has figured out a way of walking through the world so that nothing touches her. She has decolonized her diet, she has optimized her workout routine, she has gone through vaginal rejuvenation. And despite knowing I cannot become her, I know I am trying to borrow parts of her to fix myself.

"Ella has figured out a way of walking through the world so that nothing touches her.

It was her advice to ask for a transfer to the Richmond office after the breakup. She thought being close to friends might help me attach myself to somewhere new that could be all mine. She is the expert on moving—three husbands, six or seven cities. She is so good at uprooting her life, keeping it alive during the transition, and planting it again somewhere new, somehow stronger and better than before. I had never been that way: one man, one city. Then, of course, everything happened. All the clutter of an upturned life. I needed the change.

On the phone, I explain the torrent of youth streaming down the hill next to my car. I tell her again how stupid it is, how vain, to get plastic surgery now, how it is just patching a hole in a sinking ship. I question why I didn't warn anyone in advance, why I said I was going to Barcelona on vacation instead of breathing through nose splints on my couch. I glance at the brick façade of the office, and I tell her again how far I have come from where I was supposed to be.

The man with ear gauges says something to his girlfriend and glances back at me, confused by the middle-aged crone watching people from her car in the middle of traffic. I shiver and melt into my seat. I pretend I was staring past him, towards the grassy field where three young men in athletic clothing are jogging, spreading out, hand signaling to each other. One pulls a frisbee from under his arm and tosses it lightly, nonchalantly. His sandy-haired friend catches and tosses it back but it catches the wind, spins out of control, and slams into the road ahead with a loud crack. I hit the brakes as all three men come running. They jog in unison, on their tiptoes, in perfect form.

The blond one runs out into the road. He gives me a lot of time to think while he scoops the disk from the street, frowns at the crack on the side, and holds it up to his companions. I tap the horn lightly, roll forward a little; he snaps to his senses. Then suddenly lifts up his shirt to his chin, as if flashing me, and touches both peach-colored nipples with his middle fingers. He sticks out his tongue. I freeze, clutching the top of the steering wheel.

A volley of horns starts up behind me. Each honk saying: plow through him and let us get where we are going. Each of them thinking: this pathetic bitch in front of us has far too much respect for human life—yes, even for the human life that is now flicking his tongue between two V-shaped fingers while his friends laugh uproariously. He joins his friends. I can't help it. I watch. Miraculously tan legs. The sheen of sweat on the back of his neck. The grip of the athletic shorts on his ass. Maybe—such a sexual gesture—could the nose job have worked?

I look in the rearview mirror at the new nose. Instead of bumpy and fleshy, it's straight, with a highlighted bridge and slightly upturned tip. When I went into my appointment with Dr. Khoury, there was a brochure of nose types: the celestial, the snub, the duchess, the fleshy, the Greek, the hawk. He let me take a brochure home. That night, I looked up each one, and stumbled across an article in Cosmopolitan about what your nose shape means for your 40s. Because I had a large, bony nose it meant that in my 40s I would be a perfectionist who spends money easily and has trouble letting things go. But I chose a duchess nose from Dr. Khoury's chart. According to the article, my small, petite nose will now make everything in my 40s come easily, including career, children, and love. That sounds pretty good.

The frisbee boys return to the grass. We're not far from my street; they could be my neighbors. I live in the left half of a small duplex in Oregon Hill next to a pair of college students I've never seen. But I've heard them. They play banjo music on their porch until the early morning, wailing about butter beans and unemployment. I'm always too embarrassed to tell them to stop. They're the ones being assholes, and yet the thought of telling

them to shut up sparks in me a deep, stomach-electrifying fear. So they play on, and I sleep with a pair of clunky noise-cancelling headphones that leave black flecks of faux-leather in my ear canal in the morning.

It was Ella who told me about the tour guide, and it was the tour guide who told me about Oregon Hill. It's an old Irish neighborhood that juts out next to the highway. It used to be so far out from the city center that getting there was like taking a wagon out west. That's what the tour guide said. She had blindingly white hair cropped at her shoulders, and thin, insistent panty lines showing through her slacks when she walked. To our right, we would see the following: mural in progress on the wall of an old tobacco warehouse. Thrift store run by nuns. Noodle place. Edgar Allen Poe's house. The gleaming capitol building, a miniature of the White House, designed by Thomas Jefferson. When the tour guide wasn't looking, I had put my foot on the synthetic green of the lawn—expressly forbidden!—and stepped where the ponytailed Father had, possibly, stepped. In the moment the possibility felt like enough. Of course, even if I have seen what he has seen, heard what he has heard, and stood where he has stood, I will never know him. It is true of figures of history, Aaron, and everyone else I have ever loved. When I tell Ella this, she rolls her eyes.

At the bottom of the hill, I turn into the long drive to the office. Dread churns with hope in my stomach. I check my nose again. It does look good.

At the end of the drive, the company sign is still the same sad brick as it was two weeks ago but, I notice, one letter—"F"—has fallen off into the underbrush. I am reminded, again, that this is not what I am supposed to be doing. This consulting firm was a last resort after graduating from an archaeology Ph.D. program into a horrible job market. I took what I could get, which turned out to be surveying empty lots for possible cultural significance. There wasn't ever any.

As I pull in next to the parking garage, I wave my badge at the man in the security booth. He motions to me to come through but I pull up to the security window instead. He checks my badge and scrutinizes my face every morning. This is the first test. As he leans over, I hope stupidly that he might congratulate me. But he wasn't expecting this; he's slightly suspicious. This could be some sort of break-in, the beginning of an action movie, an attempt to get him close before I lunge out of the seat to crack his nose with my skull and rob the place, steal state secrets, whatever.

"What can I do for you, ma'am," he says. One hand is resting on his belt, probably for early access to a taser. No way he has a gun, I reason. Nothing anyone does inside is important enough for that.

"Oh, I thought you were waving me over," I lie.

He smiles. "No, ma'am. Go on ahead."

No matter. I speed through the levels of the parking garage to the third floor. There are a dozen empty spaces, but I pull in next to Nick, who is getting out of his car. I've always liked Nick because he's never asked me a single question about where I came from or why I ended up here. He accepted my arrival as if I'd always been there.

"Notice anything different?" I ask him, giving him the best angle—from the right side, with my hair tucked gently behind my ears, looking up slightly.

He squints at me.

"Changed your hair?"

"Look at my face," I hint.

His confusion sparks a laugh. Why do men pay attention to the minute details of a few select parts of a woman's body, and remain completely oblivious to everything else? Aaron liked to brag he couldn't remember anyone's eye color, not even mine.

Nick shifts his briefcase to his other foot. It's his field briefcase, dusty and worn. "I'm bad at noticing this kind of thing."

I turn my head from side to side, slowly. Every day after the surgery I had recorded videos of these slow turns and sent them to Ella. The swelling going down steadily, the new sleek shape emerging. She told me I looked like a Lebanese Blake Lively.

He shakes his head, lost.

"Look," I say, and unclip my badge. I show him the old picture taken after three teary tries at filling out an I-9 form for my new Oregon Hill address. "Look at my old nose!" I stare out from the picture in an ill-fitting Ann Taylor trouser suit, my nose bumpy and bulging from my face like a cancerous growth.

He scrutinizes it but comes up empty. "It looks the same."

I glance at him, but he's telling the truth. Impossible.

"It doesn't look better?" I insist. "You can't tell the difference?"

Comprehension seems to dawn on him. "It's beautiful, Victoria," he says, but I can tell he's just placating me. "Really."

He passes me back my badge and I quickly clip it back on my chest. It doesn't matter, apparently, that if I had sneezed anytime in the past fourteen days I could have blown the bones in my face apart.

From the window slats of the garage, I can see the yellowing stucco of the office. The dread grows fuller and deeper, taking on its own, separate heartbeat in my chest. Repressed memories flood back: the open office floor plans meant to encourage collaboration, the "synergy zone" where all the furniture is covered in wool, the dusty bowls of candy left out on filing cabinets that everyone feels too guilty to eat. And the whole office filled with people, all of them noticing or not noticing, saying something or not saying anything at all. A bolt of apprehension worms its way from my neck to my tailbone. Eight claustrophobic hours ahead.

But no. I get back in my car and shift it into gear. When I yank the steering wheel hard, it recoils against some internal mechanism. Painfully slowly the car pivots. I feel it as a metallic extension of my body like I never have before. Outside, a long line of cars has piled up in front of the security booth. The drivers inside give me strange looks—who is she? Someone's wife?—as I pass them going the other way.

A moment later I am swinging into the parking lot of the tiny, underfunded visitors center at the Tredegar Ironworks next door. Gravel has spilled out into the main road. Instead of white paint to mark parking spots, there are large chunks of limestone, bone-colored and stained with rain. I park facing the river, squeezing in next to a Honda Civic with a fuzzy steering wheel.

Usually, from my window on the ninth floor of the office I have just fled, I can look down and see the James bursting through the concrete, glass, and steel. I stare at it whenever I can, this raging river, frothy and constantly moving—like God has taken a giant whisk and decided to stir until the end of time.

I sit for several minutes with my hands on the steering wheel. Now that I'm closer, I see that the river loses some of its grandeur under scrutiny. Don't we all. Sweat pools under my fingers and behind my ears. The air conditioning has shut off along with the car. Clear voices ring out, teenagers make their way into the water. The river isn't high; it hasn't rained in weeks. Large expanses of rock are exposed and people lie tanning themselves on ratty bath towels, drinking vodka and Mad Dog from clear, unmarked bottles, stretching up and reapplying sun lotion.

I text Ella that I'm not going to work. I can't. She calls me, and I let it go to voicemail. She texts me to go inside. I tell her the truth, which is that I'd rather jump in the river than show my face. Then I FaceTime Aaron.

He notices the change immediately, and I almost cry.

"You didn't need surgery," he says.

"Yeah, well." I hang up.

I unbuckle one shoe, fumbling, and then the other one. My toes stretch out gratefully. I'm shaking, I notice. I look in the mirror at the nose that is not my nose, the face that is not my face. I release my hair from its ponytail, and then take my silk shirt from the confines of my pants, drawing it over my breasts and my head. Then, barefoot in my camisole and cuffed pants, I open the door and step out, picking my way gingerly over the gravel and across the road to the coolness of the rocks. The water rages a few feet away, kinetic, nimble and massive at once, sparkling and seething with power. I hope against hope someone will yell out, "Nice tits!"

"I look in the mirror at the nose that is not my nose, the face that is not my face.

As I pick my way among the rocks, moving downstream, the baggy folds of my camisole occasionally catch in the breeze. The warm air drifts over my stomach, running lovingly over even the small sagging softness of my belly.

I find a rock, largely abandoned except for the remains of an illegal campfire, and settle. I've done it. I don't even look towards the office, and its looming, oily blue windows, letting it fade into a dark blur in the far corner of my eye. And when instead my eye catches on the water snake standing upright on the riverbed like a reed, swaying gently in the current, the joy comes from nowhere, maybe from the ground itself. The shape of my face does not matter here; all that matters is that I can see this.

On a small outcropping that holds a grassy park—the remains of an old prisoner of war camp—they are setting up for a concert. This weekend they will all come. I know them: the festival-goers, the chirping children with parents to hold their sweaty hands, the wallet wavers, the belly-flashers, the girls looking for their friends, the ones they lost, the ones with the brown hair. They will stomp, vape, hand job each other on this old dying ground. Spilled drops of Miller Lite and lukewarm wine will seep into the soil, and the buried souls will drink them. The tour guide would want me to note: they are not buried there of course, but elsewhere. Carried home on trains, or else sent to the afterlife in mass graves, stacked sometimes when there was no room.

Upstream, a group of boys isn't paying attention. One of their Camelbak water bottles tips and rolls down the slope of the rock—at first slowly, and then gathering speed. It

bounces off one of the jagged edges and launches into the air. One of them sees it happen out of the corner of his eye; he shouts, and the others look, but by then the current has carried it far out of reach. I watch it as it goes. It dips sometimes under the surface but always bobs back up. There is one harrowing moment when it looks like it may be waylaid by a large log, trapped with the rest of the trash that has collected there, but it tips over the wood and moves on. Just when I am about to let it go into the horizon, wish it good luck and godspeed, one of the dogs downstream leaps into action. She is a ball of exploding muscle and then, in water, reduced to a small head jerking forward, forward, until the jaws open—impossibly—at the exact right moment, and clamp onto the water bottle as it floats by. She turns and jerks back to land where someone in a muumuu is poised to receive her. Where did she learn her dog geometry? How did she know exactly where to be?

Beyond her, across the river to its other shore, I see him, the boy with the frisbee. He walks through the shade of the trees with his entourage in a world I have left behind.

After so much wavering, the certainty feels strange, like an old acquaintance with whom you have fallen out of touch. But it is insistent. It must be acknowledged.

I rise to my feet. I take two steps back. I rock on my toes. And I jump.

As I watch the blank surface of the river come closer, rushing up as if it were spring-loaded, I know the multitudes within it. The hundreds of blue catfish, the trout with desperate, gulping mouths, the sturgeon, the spotted bass. The water snakes with tiny, delicate tongues. The rusty old bottles and bits of train track spiking from the riverbed like sharks' teeth. I know, also, the Civil War muskets and the children's shoes. The muddy grocery bags and the rotting apple cores. Something is giving birth in there. Something else is dying.

When I pierce the water, the cold bursts through me violently, up from my toes to the crown of my skull. I know it could try to drown me if it wanted to. But my cup runneth over and I am not afraid. The weight presses heavily on my eyelids. All I see—all I feel—is a velvety blackness. The current pulls my lower half one way and my upper half the other. The water holds me tight around the middle.

I hear them calling, shouting, the din echoing in my submerged ears. Aaron wants to know what the hell I'm thinking. There is Ella, gently prodding for me to come back up and have some Crystal Light. Meanwhile Nick is foundering for my nickname, landing on the wrong one, and shouting it as if he knows me. Everyone looking on and expecting something.

Well, here I come. Surfacing. Blowing bubbles all the while.

Contributor Bios

Alice Liu refuses to let poetry quell her revolutionary anger. She believes the world needs both.

Ana Paula Pinto-Diaz is an English and Photography major who is bad at writing titles and always forgets her camera. She thrives off of black coffee and sitting by large (preferably open) windows.

Ashley Tsang is struggling in quarantine and is hoping to pick up a paintbrush again.

Caleb Dukes is a sophomore at Lovett College studying English and Visual and Dramatic Arts. He thinks you should watch Greta Gerwig's "Lady Bird" and call your mom, in that order.

Eliza Gaviria recently became obsessed with foraging wild foods but only trusts herself to correctly identify dandelions. The flowers' taste reminds her of honey.

Elizabeth Rasich refuses to change any of her weird food opinions. She loves her quaranteam.

Gordan Liu's artistic abilities peaked in high school. But he never looks back in life.

Hannah Young is addicted to Animal Crossing.

Jennifer Fu is currently debating whether red or orange is a better color. If you have any opinions, she would greatly appreciate it if you sent a detailed explanation her way.

Jenny Li-Wang is majoring in not-STEM with a minor in self-deprecation. She would still love you if you were a worm.

Katimah Harper is a rising junior from Las Vegas, NV majoring in English and Psychology. She loves crying over sappy romance movies, defending the Oxford comma, and finding any excuse to order UberEats.

Kristen Hickey is a fervent defender of the virtues of possums, mistypes "monastery" every time, and has yet to figure out how to properly sit on a chair.

Lavina Kalwani has an affinity for plants, hindered only by her inability to keep them alive.

Lily Wulfemeyer: Lily, known to friends as "Lilith," is a black cat whisperer who still listens to early 2000's rock and metal music. Their ring tone has been "Welcome to the Black Parade" since middle school—embarrassing when it goes off in class, but this is simply a fact of life and can't be changed.

Mallory Newbern never escaped from her childhood mermaid phase. She would live with the sharks if she could.

Neha Tallapragada is a biochem major and avid reader. Right now, her favorite writers are Ocean Vuong, Tommy Orange, and Flannery O'Connor. In her free time, she likes to bike, swim, and spend time outdoors.

Nasha Wanichwecharungruang has the longest last name on campus. A total of 20 characters.

Rachel Wang is a cactus farmer at heart who prefers to spend her free time in the desert

Sunee Kate Quirante could not be reached.

Staff Bios

Colton Alstatt aspires to be a hierophant. He'd also like to tell you that a hierophant is "A person who understands and explains obscure or mysterious knowledge."

Ella Hoyt is.

Hannah Young isn't.

If Julia Fisher is ever lost, you should check to find her under her heated blanket.

Katimah Harper might be from Sin City, but the only sin she knows is her addiction to french fries, The Voice, and making people worry about her lack of hydration.

Kierstin Wilkins does not know many many things, including most things about herself. However, she knows that she's a good trier and that she likes to read.

Kristie Lynn is an English undergraduate who fended off naps for nearly a month this spring 2020 semester. She loves attending plays, discovering new comics and books, and not napping (nor sleeping for that matter).

Marcus Munshi's hobbies include yelling at his jungler to gank bot lane, doing the Gainax pose whenever possible, and buying large amounts of Kit Kats whenever he realizes that he's an English major.

Neha Tallapragada often thinks she was born in the wrong era. Clearly, she belongs to the 24th century.

Pamela McInturff is a Pisces, an ENFJ, and a 2 on the enneagram test.

Rebecca Noel loves cats and podcasts. She drinks copious amounts of coffee when her life becomes unmanageable.

Ryan Chow is a junior at Baker studying English. He enjoys soccer, basketball, and a good book.

Rynd Morgan is a Taurus sun, Capricorn moon, Leo rising from Dallas, Texas.

Sarah Swackhamer is best observed from a distance, where it's harder to notice that she isn't actually real (this is a secret now shared between us that you should never speak of again).

The best ways to make friends with Selena Shi are 1. Talk about *Wuthering Heights*. 2. Buy her boba tea.

Theresa Vanderventer loves baking so she has tasty treats to eat while binge watching Netflix.

Yumeng Zhao hoards books so that she can sleep soundly next to them.

The 2020 George G. Williams Awards

FIRST PLACE:
POETRY: Analysis of the Rose as Sentimental Despair
FICTION: Nose Job
CNF: Second Son

SECOND PLACE:
POETRY: I Killed the Hindus
FICTION: Sunny Day
CNF: Poor Man's Soup

About the Awards

R2's annual writing contests are sponsored by the George G. Williams Fund. The contests are juried by professional, non-Rice-afliated judges. This year's judge was Mark Haber. 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

Mark Haber is the Operations Manager and a bookseller at Brazos Bookstore. He has taught both middle and high school English. His first book of short stories, *Deathbed Conversions*, was published in 2008 by Summerfolk Press. These stories were translated into Spanish and published in a bilingual edition in 2017 as Melville's Beard by Editorial Argonáutica. His first novel, *Reinhardt's Garden*, will be published by Coffee House Press in October 2019 and was longlisted for the 2020 PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Novel. Mark's criticism has been published in *The Rumpus, LitHub* and *Music & Literature*. He has served as a juror for the National Endowment for the Arts translation grant as well as the Best Translated Book Award.