

RICE REVIEW

R 2 | THE RICE REVIEW

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AN INTERVIEW WITH THE EDITORS OF R2

Traditionally, an editor's note is a place to set up the experience of reading the issue in your hands. But after a very untraditional year, the editors of R2 thought that it might be time to try a variation on this old form and give you, our Dear Reader, a more behind-the-scenes look at how this year's issue came together from a distance. Each senior section editor assigned themselves to one of the questions that follows to offer some insight into the making and considerations behind this year's magazine. We are so grateful that you are here to read it.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about this year's submissions and about the selection process?

This year we received 99 written submissions and 129 art pieces from 79 distinct submitters! We discussed all of this wonderful work over 9 section meetings and selected 20 written pieces and 38 art pieces for this one book. Every year we spend a huge amount of time reading and thinking (and arguing) about every piece we receive, looking at technical merit, personal voice, and how the collection will work together as a whole. We hope you enjoy this year's edition!

-Ella Hoyt, Senior Poetry Editor

Q: What is new or different about this year's issue of R2 compared to others?

In addition to being the first edition of R2 that was made completely virtually, there are some never-before-seen features of this issue that we are very excited about. We are publishing translated poetry for the first time. In an effort to grow beyond R2's focus on English-language works, we solicited submissions from Professor Tomás Morín's class on translation. We look forward to expanding this category and to accepting translated pieces from all students, even those working outside the context of the classroom. In

addition, R2's leadership structure changed somewhat: we currently have a cohort of ten section editors across fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. This meant that we could treat each piece with the fullest time, care, and thoughtfulness it deserved. Last but not least, we have invested in making this magazine as visually engaging as possible and we increased the number of accepted art pieces several-fold. Because of this, our amazingly talented layout editor, Katherine Chui, has been able to create some incredible spreads throughout the magazine. Overall, a nontraditional R2 for a nontraditional year!

-Sarah Swackhamer, Senior Fiction Editor

Q: What qualities does R2 look for in a piece?

We look for work that invites us to read it again, to cut it open and inspect its insides. We, of course, want work that is written artfully and elicits feeling and curiosity, and with Rice students, we receive ample work that meets these criteria. So how do we parse the good work from the work that's best for us? The decision often comes down to the details: does the story do something unexpected? Does the poem make you realize something new with each reread? What does the metaphor actually mean?

We receive a lot of work that is almost ready - work we feel could be its best with a few more drafts. This is why we encourage students to consider resubmitting to the magazine. We love pieces that offer clarity while leaving room for inquiry and ambiguity, writing that grows richer the more we probe, and that makes us think, "Wow, I wish I had written that." We spend lots of time and care with the submissions we receive. We want to give each the chance to resonate to its fullest potential. Ultimately, we look for work that, even with our poking and prodding, can still hold water.

-Rebecca Noel, Senior Poetry Editor

Q: What were some of the challenges about magazine-making in a pandemic?

Ian, our faculty advisor, wasn't able to figure out a way to ship bundles of candy to us, so we lacked the necessary energy required to make it through weekly R2 meetings. Side effects included Zoom fatigue, constantly interrupting each other, a wave of nodding heads whenever a question was asked, and awkward silences. But somehow, through sheer will and a drop of luck, we managed to pull through.

-Marcus Munshi, Senior Fiction Editor

Q: What are some of your takeaways from reviewing this year's poetry and creative nonfiction?

During our conversations, we addressed various poetic elements including voice, sound devices, and line break choices. We had a variety of interests and experiences among our team which allowed for in-depth conversations about submissions. Overall, I appreciate the variety of topics and styles of poetry that we received. Throughout the selection process I learned so much from my fellow section editors and staff about how to evaluate poetry, and we all became more familiar with different references, topics, and poetic forms.

-Karen Okoroafor, Senior Poetry Editor

One of the pleasant surprises in this year's submissions pool was the number of journalistic submissions. Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind when you hear creative nonfiction is a personal narrative, but the genre is diverse, and extends to long-form journalism and reportage as well. At a first glance, these forms may not seem to fit in with the word "creative." But that word is hard to define in clear-cut terms, and through weeks of thoughtful discussion, the seven staffers that comprise our section meetings addressed this question. There was no easy answer, but our hope is that we continue to receive more varied types of creative nonfiction to showcase the rich possibilities of the category.

-Kristie Lynn, Senior Creative Nonfiction Editor

Q: Did you sense any common themes or concerns or did similar ideas or feelings crop up across the pieces in the fiction section?

When I think of this year's fiction section as a whole, I can't help but think of the late-night section editor meetings where we joked about how our pieces are all so tragic. They all end in a break-up or a death, a struggling friendship or a trippy, abstract sequence of an unnamed protagonist drowning in a lake. We wondered: why couldn't we just publish something that didn't have such a sad ending? But, after taking a step back, I think we kind of missed the point at the time. I find that most of our pieces reflect on the small moments of life. They zoom in on the most human experiences and present them exactly as they are, taking in stride both moments of difficulty and moments of happiness. I think our pieces come together around a desire to present everyday human life as worthy of being fictionalized. Sometimes it seems like we reserve that honor for only the most dramatic narratives, but I'd like to think that this year's fiction section takes the possibly mundane and lifts it up so that the death of a frog can be a tragedy, and Texas-shaped waffles can be a victory of the greatest magnitude.

-Hannah Young, Senior Fiction Editor

Q: Can you talk to us a little bit about the cover art. Why did this piece stand out to the staff and does it represent something about your mood, or the work herein, or both?

Besides its obvious excellence of artistic quality, this picture stands out because it gives a timely spotlight to an often ignored "model minority." Over the past year, hate crimes against the Asian community have spiked sharply in America. The cover art portrays a girl covering her ears, as if she's trying to block out these hateful voices. The scarlet-colored background seems like a reminder of violence that is committed against her people. Around her head is a dark-red circle in the shape of a vortex - an accurate depiction of the turmoil she's going through. If I was able to have a conversation with her,

I would tell her, "Don't pretend that you cannot hear the racism. You have to speak out against it." Hopefully, R2 can be a platform for these courageous voices.

-Selena Shi, Senior Creative Nonfiction Editor

Q: Rice is well known as a S.T.E.M. school. What purpose can a literary magazine serve on a campus like ours?

In general, we believe that literature makes us more expansive, generous people. To facilitate that outcome, our fiction section wanted to let readers step into the shoes of characters with disparate, singular, beautiful experiences. "The Lake," for example, is an imaginative picture of addiction, sparkling with quiet melancholy. "Seltzer" examines two closeted individuals as they struggle in a college environment much like our own. Maybe you will identify personally with one of these—in content, character, or place. We hope so, because seeing a life explored in-depth is possible only in literature and it can feel like sitting with intimate company and like being with someone who knows you better than anyone else. We hope that after reading this edition of R2, you too feel unalone.

-Colton Alstatt, Senior Fiction Editor

Happy Reading,

Colton Alstatt, Ella Hoyt, Kristie Lynn, Marcus Munshi, Rebecca Noel, Karen Okoroafor, Selena Shi, Sarah Swackhamer, Hannah Young, & Yumeng Zhao

The 2021 R2 Senior Editors

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THE LAKE

BY HARISH KRISHNAMOORTHY

I.

“Just around here, you’ll be able to see it soon.” She gestured confidently with a slender finger out the window, the wind of a passing car blowing her long hair across my vision. I leaned over and looked outside: dancing, glistening whites; flashes of a marble-like surface behind the stream of trees in front. The lake.

We got out, parking between two cars. I rubbed my arms. I couldn’t see anyone close by, which suited me just fine. She began walking along a winding path, a thin, gravelly belt that looped around the body of water. I looked out into it, toward the small island at its center, a dense foliage blocking any view of its ground, as if shielding an entire world away from sight. The smell of salt wafted across my nose and I stared down at my shoes, the thought broken. I followed suit, crunching gravel under me as I walked.

The lake sat on the left. I watched her stretch her arms as she walked. The lake was certainly smaller than I had imagined. I could faintly see the other side, where an older-looking man had cast a fishing line into the lake, his posture frozen as he focused intently on the line. The water was clear enough to see a blur of fish, or was it seaweed of some kind? As I brushed my



hand against the prickly leaves on our right, she picked up a withered leaf off the ground and handed it to me. It was strangely asymmetrical, smooth like the water, without any veins. Are leaves normally like this? I put it in my jacket pocket. Perhaps I just hadn't seen enough leaves.

About halfway across, the path dipped lower with a series of steps, so that we were almost level with the surface of the water. She slipped off a sandal and dipped her foot in the water, and I had the urge to do the same, though with my heavy leather shoes it would have been too much effort to take off one. We passed by the old man, still as a weathered statue, hunched intently over his rod with his legs in the water. I saw now that he was sitting on tattered newspapers, with a small empty bucket next to him. The old man did not acknowledge our presence, though I noticed an almost imperceptible movement of his shoulders as we passed by. Looking at the old man in pity, she seemed almost melancholy. The island at the center didn't move, but the wind blowing through its leaves made an odd whistling tone, almost musical.

Toward the end of the path I looked back at the lake. The feeling was unexpected: I hadn't felt so comfortable in quite some time. My shoes were dredged up with gravel, my mind saturated with images of the still water. She promised we could come back the next day.

II.

"Now this is far better." It was considerably warmer the next day. The lake was blindingly white, the sun cracking its surface into a thousand crystal shards. She had no jacket on this time, but wore the same black shirt. It occurred to me that I didn't change my shoes and therefore couldn't touch the water. The thought filled me with a strange sadness, but the smell of salt hit me once again, and I immediately felt calmer, as if the lake was bringing back familiar memories that never existed. I smiled, and she smiled too, beginning to walk along the path.

I brought a camera, aiming at a small bird, a wader, perched on a low-hanging branch, just before the path began. I have never been one to appreciate nature and certainly not one to take photos of it, but something about the lake seemed to make everything around it more beautiful—the plants looked picturesque, the birds' chirps were perfectly musical. The

crunch of the gravel under me was soft enough to not disturb the bird, although once my camera clicked it screeched and flew off. The sun flickered on and off as I walked under the canopy of leaves from the right that hovered above me.

I didn't notice that the lake was higher until we reached the steps halfway across, where the water had flowed over the path, a few inches deep at least. The old man was still sitting on the edge of the path, half-floating on the water, the tip of the rod itself threatening to touch the lake surface. After staring at the old man for a while, she suggested that we go back the way we came and avoid the water. I lingered for a bit, staring at the path, longing to continue on. But I turned suit and followed. The heat of the sun was starting to get to me.

III.

"I can't make it this time, unfortunately," her voice crackled through my phone speaker. Not that there was much of a lake to speak of. The water had significantly lowered since yesterday, more than ten feet, if not more. The walls of the basin were blackened with moss and water stains, though the surface of the water itself was as clear as ever. The birds continued to chirp around me as I walked.

I reached the stairs down and looked at the old man, still sitting on his old newspapers, which had mostly dissolved from yesterday's water. The end of his line rested lifelessly on the surface of the basin, with no sign of fish anywhere. It certainly didn't seem to bother the man, and I felt compelled to sit next to him. The sun beat down on us. I'm not sure how much time passed, but eventually he turned to look at me and smiled. Perhaps he was thankful for the company.

On my way back, I decided to walk directly on the basin itself, cutting across the Lake slightly, my shoes pulling up wet soil as I trudged along. From this lower position, I could begin to make out the faint shape of roots and deep plants under the Island at the center. Somehow the thought of walking closer to the Island made me feel warm inside.

IV.

"You're going again?" This was perhaps the fifth or sixth time I had come to visit the Lake this week without her. Her surprise turned to concern turned to slight frustration as I continued to ask. But I liked it better this way. The old man and I sat at the edge of the Lake for

hours and stared at the Island with an unspoken, burning desire shared between us.

At night I dreamed of floating leaves and branches.

V.

The Lake had been tantalizingly low the past few days, to the point where I could almost walk to the Island in the middle, save for a small moat of water that still borders it. The old man stayed where he was but now looked beyond his rod at the Island, almost with a hunger in his eyes. I walked along the basin around the moat, sweating as I bent down occasionally and felt the damp soil. There was nothing more that I wanted than to jump in the coolness of the Lake's water.

VI.

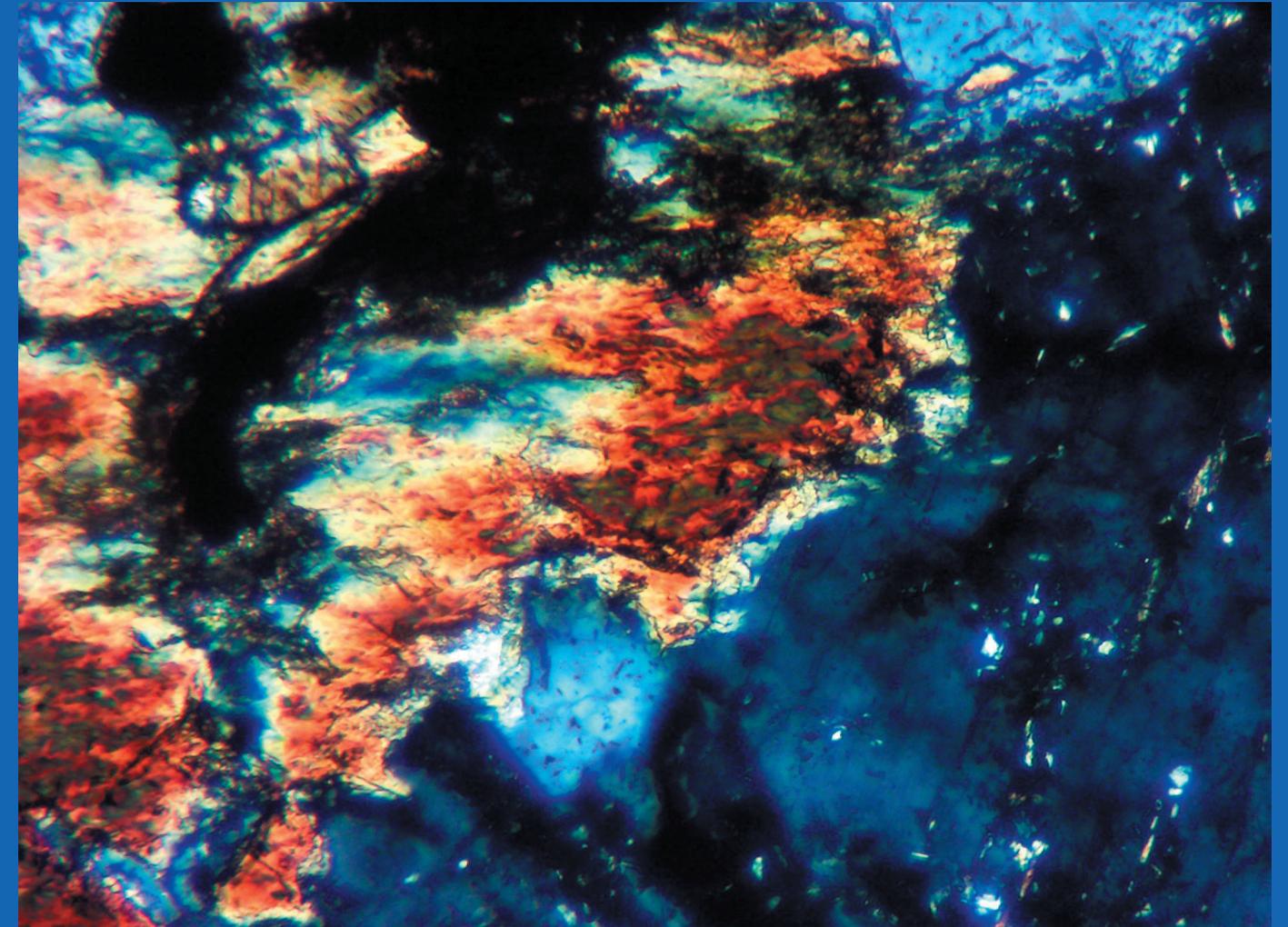
It was impossibly hot, too hot to go outside. I stayed at home though I longed for the cool water of the Lake to return, to leap in it and swim in endlessly.

VII.

"Wake up!" A voice rang in my mind, though perhaps it was the sound of dripping that woke me up. I wasn't sure whether my mind was still groggy from sleep and my eyes were deceiving me, but it seemed like the walls were melting, liquid streaming down the plaster, through the floor cracks, from under my bedroom door. I stared as water continued to flow into the room, filling the air with that smell of salt, and suddenly I knew what was happening, even if I didn't understand.

I threw the blankets off of me and sat up, they crumpled and convulsed as they dampened in the water. My heart was racing as I stared at the door, straining under the pressure of whatever torrent of water lay behind it. Had the Lake grown and taken over the entire city? Had it somehow come for my house, for me alone, having heard my wishes? Both seemed plausible. But it didn't matter. The picture frames on the wall trembled and fell. My mouth opened at the same time as the door, yelling because there was nothing more that I wanted than to dive headfirst and plunge myself into the wat-

freefalling, floating, tumbling, brushing against leaves, my body succumbs to an immense salve as I watch the walls of the room tear outward, destruction spiraling, glimpses of a city dissolving until there is only me and the coolness of the water, schools of catfish, eels, jellyfish, morays, wrasses flow-



MICRO-COSMIC
JAMES KARROUM
photography

ing between my arms and legs, flickering against my hands, my mind immensely still and euphoric all at once, as I stretch my arms out to swim forwa-

The phone rang. I gasped for air as I broke the surface of the water and the weight crashed down upon me. The fish were gone, the room dark. Why did I feel so hungry? I declined the call and pressed my face back into the Lake-

never have I seen light look like these soft, muted rays that refracted through the water, reflecting off the flora, bouncing everywhere, as I effortlessly moving my arms and legs, floating without force, kicking occasionally as I lower my eyes and observe the bottom of the Lake, where I can make out a mottled collection of branches, and even from above can recognize it as the Island freed from its exposure to the surface, finally at one with the Lake, which beckons me forward to brush pass the stems and see what's beyond as I swim downward toward the-

The phone rang. I heard the sounds of car horns and dogs barking as sunlight sharply cut across the room. My arms weakly trembling, I tossed the phone across the room and plunged back-

a faint green aura seems to emanate from the center of the Island, warm, inviting, as I swim deeper and deeper, breathing the water in with ease, relishing its coolness in my body, finding more and more fish as I get closer, an ensemble wrapping around me, passing by the steps that I had taken over and over, though in the sea of the Lake they appeared small and insignificant, as something floats out of my jacket pocket, small at first, the leaf once wrinkled and half-dust seems to regrow in my very eyes, reforming, extending, shooting out stems and branches that entwine my legs and arms, green tendrils everywhere, a leaf-filled armor that trails off my body to my absolute delight, bringing me closer to the beautiful nature I am surrounded by, as I pull the first layer of the dense fores-

The phone rang. I looked up, and then back down-

and I am almost overwhelmed by the sheer number of vines, leaves, branches, fauna that engulf my vision as I continue inward, towards that growing green light at the center, which I know holds something wonderful, something fascinating, as I push closer and closer in, beginning to make out the silhouettes of other people swimming around me, knowing their presences would usually make me uncomfortable but in this case feeling too content to do anything but sink further into the vegetation, my face becoming numb to the brushes of the branches, the greens and blues getting brighter

and brighter as I begin to make out parts of people's faces, one of them looking like the old man though surely too young, too happy, grinning as small fish and kelp scuttle around him, his skin half green with algae, pointing me further downward, and then following behind me as the light gets brighter and brighter, and I feel a thumping in the water that seems to match my heart, the water becoming warmer and warme-

The phone rang.

with more green, and more green, and more green, and more plants than I have ever seen in my life, a universe of wildlife, a panopticon of algae and Lake-water with myself at the center, keenly moving forward, my eyes intently focused on the light, my heart beginning to pound a little faster, because I have surely swam far enough to reach the center and those faces seem familiar, like I've definitely swam past them, but still urge myself forward, just around here, I'll be able to see it soon, if I just keep moving to the li-

The phone beeped. I could hear a faint, familiar voice.

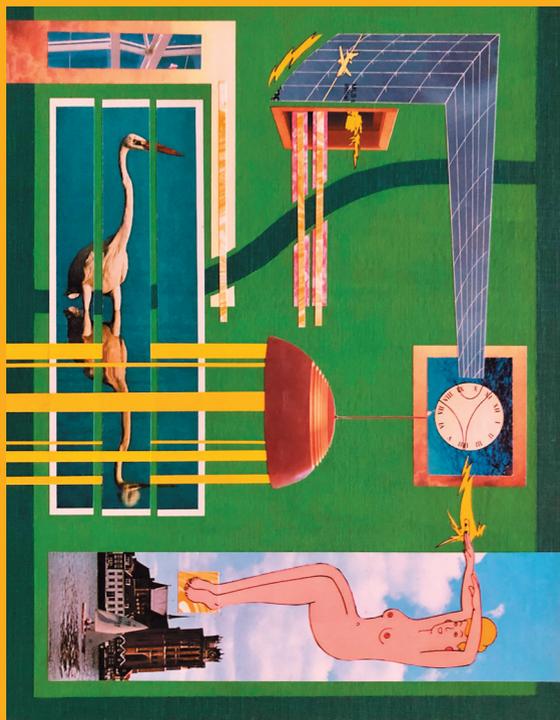
it's getting no closer, so a panic rises in my heart, the leaves on my chest suddenly feeling menacing, tightening against me, the fish leering at me as I continue forward, the smell of salt pungent in my nose and mouth as I desperately move forward, needing to leave, the beauty of the Lake fading away as I thrash toward the light, twisting myself in vines and branches, reaching out to the other floating people, longing for the coolness of the Lake to come back, as my skin begins to frost up and I reach out to anyone, anything-

The door opened.

V.

"I want to go back to the lake." They asked me a lot of questions and were unhappy with most of the answers I gave. I was in the house, staring at the room, at the objects strewn around it as if ripped apart by wind that would never enter the room's small, rusted windows. The phone was with them as evidence—evidence of what, I cannot be certain. They told me that they would reach out with more questions. I ran my fingers along the doorframe, picking up dust, half-hearing what they were saying.

It had been three days without getting a message from him before I started to call. After he didn't pick up his phone, I looked up his address at the office, ran to his house, and found him



ZAP!

NOAH JOHNSON

acrylic paint, mod
podge, paper scraps

soaking wet, a heap on his bed, his room a mess. He looked at me without a word, his eyes wide, his fingers twitching restlessly. He refused to answer my questions, and it was only after I couldn't reach any friends or family and decided to call the police that he uttered that phrase to me, with anger in his eyes. I can still hear the words ringing in my mind even now.

Did I know? they kept asking me. Know about what? I stepped outside and leaned on the walls of the hallway, the air damp, my stomach hollow. I listened to the rain outside. Was it my fault, somehow? I couldn't figure it out. His room was quite bare. There were a few pictures here and there of fish, a clean desk, plain bedsheets. Nothing that betrayed anything about him. He always seemed anxious at work, stressed and terse, refusing to talk to most people. I figured that it could do him some good, introducing him to this lake I had been to once or twice. The truth is that I hardly knew him. I felt bad for him.

They told me a few days later that he had been moved from a hospital to a rehabilitation center. What he was doing they never mentioned, only that he was suffering from intense withdrawals and that it would take

some time to recover. The paint on his living room walls was cracked, and there was a green note reminding him of an appointment for something on Tuesday. He refused to speak to me over the phone. Life moved on, but my thoughts lingered behind.

A couple of days later, I drove to the lake for the first time since that incident. Something in me was scared to return, as if it was the scene of some crime. I figured that given the cold weather, few people would be outside. But as I approached, I saw that the entrance was closed off. A tractor was inside and several workers were shoveling dirt around the edge of the water, roots ripped out of the ground with every dig. A new poster board at the gate showed a large building at the edge of the lake, with faux-sand beaches and concrete piers, declaring a two-year arrival. The trees closest to me trembled with every move of the tractor. The bird chirps were gone, replaced by grating machinery. I peered inside at the lake, which was as still as ever. A small part of me knew that he wouldn't be happy at all to see this.

As I got back into my car, I noticed an old man walking across the lot, the same one that I had seen fishing at the lake. A tin bucket swung in the air as he walked, lightly tapping against his legs. He met my eyes and smiled, pointing at the surface of the lake. I squinted and could just make out a pair of old, brown leather shoes bobbing up and down in the water. For a brief second, I imagined myself leaping over the fence and diving in to get them, engulfed in the cool, still water as I swim alongside fish of infinite colors, a sublime forest underwater that I swim around, free, weightless. The water fills me up, I am lost to the drifting currents, euphoric and perfectly still, wandering between branches that rise up in front of me, algae trembling in the water, the earth of the ground soft against my skin as I glide along to a faint green light at the center of the Lake.

The smell of salt filled my nose, and it began to rain. I got in the car and drove away.

STANZAS ABOUT MARLOW, OKLAHOMA

BY MORGAN GAGE

heat hangs around the
cracked balcony door,
fan whirring to carry
tendrils of smoke away
from his fingers.

i sit across from my father,
back pressing into the
springs of the pullout couch that
consumes his apartment's living room.

he tips his head back and grins
and passes off his joint to me,
trades it for a cigarette.

we exhale in time.

the rest of the apartment is nearly bare,
empty bedrooms and
a sparse bathroom
where the water
only runs cold.

pressing the burning end of his
cigarette into a bottle cap.
my lungs fill with smoke,
eyes drooping.
my laptop remains open by my side,
a final paper abandoned,
still unfinished.

my sisters have each been
high with our father.
i get my turn in his
abandoned apartment
in the center of the
bareness that is marlow, oklahoma.

this is a coming-of-age.

if cheap calzones and
overpriced weed
paid for with daddy's card
make an adult,
i am one now.

i laugh when he asks if i
want another hit
and shake my head
and ignore the
gauntness of his cheeks.

in the morning,
we will eat greasy eggs and toast,
limp with butter in its center,
and we'll slip a backpack filled with
syringes of cannabis oil into my trunk.

this will be our last long drive,
one of our last efforts to
make his time here stretch longer.

he moves slowly, hands shaking—
i assure him that i'm not worried
when he struggles up the stairs.
i lie.

that lie,
not the joint
is my coming-of-age.

A SUNDAY AFTERNOON ON THE ISLAND OF LA GRANDE DE BULLE

TIM THOMAS II *photography*



BLOOMING OCOTILLO

JAMES KARROUM *photography*

VIDA DE HOTEL / HOTEL LIFE

BY LAURA WITTNER

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY ELLA MALENA FELDMAN

Fruta pelada en platos blancos:
toronja rosa, naranja sosa,
melón ardiente, guayaba moza.
Plátano verde para tostones,
banana blanca, arrodajada,
deshecha a fuerza de cuchillo y tenedor.
Furioso chorro del café negro
que inunda la taza, mezcla
el sarro multilingüe,
la brisa tempranera,
marina punteada de nada, lisa.
De prisa, de prisa:
iremos corriendo al agua.
Líneas de sol en la guacaleta
que se vuelven redondeles y espirales
por andar confundidas con las hojas.
Quiero hablar, quiero cantar,
quiero cantar hablando
y hablar cantando pero no puedo:
me sale este runrún sureño,
asoberbiado. Soy sobria, soy tonta,
me enrolló el corpiño en una mano y nado.
Escucho mi respiración, él escucha la suya,
pero vamos juntos a ver peces.
Inspirar, exhalar, inspirar, exhalar,
me mira desde el visor y entre nosotros

Peeled fruit on white plates:
pink grapefruit, boring orange,
fierce melon, naive guava.
Green plantain for frying,
white banana, sliced,
undone by force of fork and knife.
Furious splash of black coffee
that floods the cup, mixes
the multilingual tartar,
the morning breeze,
marina dotted with nothing, smooth.
Hurry, hurry:
we'll run to the water.
Rays of sun on the guacaleta
that become rounded and spiraled
as they intermingle with its leaves.
I want to speak, I want to sing,
I want to sing speaking
and speak singing but I can't:
when I try, this southern murmur comes out,
swaggering. I am sober, I am stupid,
I roll my bra up in one hand and swim.
I listen to my breath, he listens to his,
but we go together to see fish.
Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale,
he looks at me through the viewfinder and between us

se pasea el negro y amarillo pez a rayas.
Tras el pez, el pez viene tras nosotros,
frutas, pez y nadadores
enamorados: una disposición ikebanesca,
naturaleza viva, retrato a la acuarela,
modelos para una abigarrada
versión del origami vegetal.

wanders the striped black and yellow fish.
Trailing the fish, the fish trails us,
fruits, fish and swimmers
in love: an ikebanesque disposition,
a still life in motion, a portrait in watercolor,
models for a motley
version of vegetal origami.



ABOUT THE POET

Laura Wittner is a poet, writer, editor and translator based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She has published a number of poetry books, including *Los Cosacos* (1998), *La Tomadora de Café* (2005), *Lluvias* (2005) and *Balbucesos en una Misma Dirección* (2011). She also writes children's books, including *Cumpleañeros* (2007) and *Gatos con Guantes* (2009).

◀ **PARACHUTE**
MALLORY NEWBERN

acrylic paint, acrylic resin on canvas

**MONUMENT
TO GENERAL
MILLS**

LING DEBELLIS
photography



LANDING ZONE

LING DEBELLIS
photography



SMILE
CELESTE WANG
charcoal



LITTLE AMERICA

BY SHREYAS KARKI

In the city, the rivers swell with the rain, and discarded history bubbles to the surface. You smell generations of poor who lived and died by the waterside, their river-washed clothes, their urine, sweat, and shit. You smell the phantom bodies of knuckle-bloodied revolutionaries floating dead during the civil war at the century's start. On the riverbanks, during a festival for the dead, they burned a dead man by the Bagmati River. A son lit a body encased in wooden tinder and watched his father disappear into smoke, which reminded you of the delicious corn sold by dusty women squatting over fires wayside. Your father expects you to carry his torch. Once, he told you about a king who'd climb the tallest temple at Bhaktapur to watch smoke billow from fires in huts because it meant his people were eating. Sometimes, when the scent of Kathmandu's becomes unbearable, you dream about stepping off a Houston tarmac and wrinkling your nose at fresh, sterile

air. And sometimes, when you're biking a Schwinn down American asphalt on a cloudy day, you catch a whiff of something familiar and you ride down that way and find yourself staring at a skinny creek you imagine connects, somehow, to your little landlocked birthplace.

Where are you right now, son? Riverside in a little Nepali district whose real name is lost on your tongue. You call it "Little America." At night, when the city grows dark, Little America's shop kiosks burn bright enough to singe your skin like your Nepali family who had grown up in the radiation of bulky cathode-ray televisions. You walk down Little America's streets, the edifices of art-shops, "American-style" burger stands, and replica clothing stores smothered in the river's all-pervasive stench. *It's in your clothes now, son.* In the enchanted glow, young brown bodies surround you in replica Nike and Holister and take pictures of their blue-jean smiles, their singing in the rain. They sway to the music. Music? Yes, music—tiny staircases on the side of cracked buildings lead up to color-suffused clubs where you hear thumping bass and no voices except Katy Perry's. You spoke a few words of English earlier, and now it feels like eyes are on you. Half-hidden behind cigarette smoke, merchants watch you with wiry smiles. Where the light doesn't touch, alley-dogs of mottled fur suck on discarded bone, and dark silhouettes of jagged buildings pierce the sky. Where the light touches, white people walk through the streets, their gait staggered by the too-heavy euros or dollars in their pockets. You walk besides cousins who tug at your sleeves and point at their pale skin and hairless bodies. Their brown palms ache to touch the heads of trapped sunlight. Your cousins say, "*Dai, hera. Timro khadyaharu.*" *Brother, look. White people. Your people.* Although you scrunch your face in disapproval, you're speaking English loudly, hoping the *khadya* glance back, and find yourself disappointed when they walk right past you. Groggy and fatigued by the hazy Kathmandu pollution, the *khadya* slowly approach the bright fluorescent shop windows. Enamored by the sterile colors that reminded them so much of outlets back home, and warmed by the well-practiced smiles of the merchants, the *khadya* step into the store—just for a moment, just to look. They step out five minutes later holding rubbish. Your cousins laugh, your dad cracks a rare smile, and you tousle your rain-slick hair, dress down, and whis-

per broken Nepali. *Not too tousled, not too dressed down, son.* Not like that teenager over there digging through the trash. He unwraps paper covering a half-eaten American style burger. He has a lazy eye, skin darkened by soot, and a frame so emaciated his twig calves look like they'd snap in a harsh wind. Your mind instantly moves to your wallet, but you stop yourself.

“***BROTHER, LOOK.
WHITE PEOPLE.
YOUR PEOPLE.***

Your father's watching, and you know what he'd say: yes, you give him money. Will it save him? Will *you*?

In Little America, most of the kiosks have windows, which means most floors and merchandise are wet and smell the same. You're not sure why you chose the windowless art shop over the windowed shop down the street, considering the art was the same everywhere:

landscape paintings of places you've never visited. As you step out of the rain and into the store, the soles of your shoes splash across puddles of water, drenching the wood. The merchant's younger than most with a thick, bushy mustache that might've been cool in the eighties. He has a skinny face, lanky arms, and a strange tension in his fluttering eyes. He glances nervously at your father standing in the doorway. *You know he crushed a possum's skull once?*

"*Bai,*" the merchant says, moving around a desk with twenty or thirty art pieces. His Nepali was like bubbles rising to a water's surface to pop into syllables. "*Namaste. Hajur ke cahanubuncha?*"

"*Ma heriraheko chu,*" you say. *I'm looking.* Your flat, Coca-Cola-stained tongue had none of his cadence. His ears perk up and a grin widens on his face.

"I see," he says, switching to English. "You coming from America, yes?"

"*Ma yaham janmaeko thi,*" you say. Born here.

"But American?"

“Ho,” you say, after a second of silence. “American.”

“We have pieces for American,” he says. “Very high quality.” He spins around, bumps into a stand, checks to make sure it’s upright, chuckles nervously, and reaches for a few pieces on his desk. The first thing he shows you is an acrylic: two men walking through the rain with an umbrella over their head, gray buildings surrounding them. “This one nice,” he says. “Very good paint. Never fade.” When you look at the painting, you can feel the weight of his stare on you, heavy like the rain. *There’s enough to drown, son.* He sees your grimace and changes the painting.

Charcoal. A woman drinking tea on top of her three-story concrete slab of a house. “This one very good,” he says. He looks like he wants to say more, but bites his tongue. All you think about is that story of a woman drying her laundry on a clothesline when the 2015 Earthquake hit. What were her last thoughts before she splattered on hard concrete? Did she fall blissfully or scream and thrash like a brick in a washing machine? He changes the painting.

A portrait of Krishna. In the temple back home, you poured milk on statues, handed fruits and nuts to old pictures of gods, and you worry you’ll have to feed this painting too. An oil painting of Everest. He sees your expression of boredom, and you see the sweat on his brow and fingers. He shows you a watercolor of a river.

“Stop,” you say. “*Malai pheri dekhannuos.*” *Show me that again.* The merchant’s wide grin returns. A man skinny like your chain-smoking grandfather carries a bucket of water by the riverside. He was alone, surrounded by mountains. In the distance, there was a small village of no more than five or so straw buildings. You remember seeing many of these little homesteads descending the mountains to your father’s birthplace.

“Ah,” he says. “This one very special. Very good. The artist... *u maryo.*”

“The artist died?” you ask.

“*Ho, bai,*” he says, leaning closer. “He was old. Tired hands. American, his name *Aajay.* Like you. But he returned home. Made this. He missing mountains. He missing *chai.* He



FINDING
BLISS IN
BRUSHSTROKES

KHONDKER SALIM
oil paint on pastel

drawing country-side for thirty years.”

“How’d he die?”

The merchant sighs. “Flood,” he says. “Very sad. Very sad.”

It’s a beautiful story. You think about the day before the flood. Aajay glides the brush delicately across a white canvas. He sees the storm clouds floating in but continues drawing what he knows, or what he relearned: a simple life. You want to believe it. *It would be perfect, son.*

“*Khati?*” a voice says behind you. *How much?* Your father, who had been watching quietly until now, steps into the store.

The merchant’s smile drops, but his beady eyes never leave your face. For a moment, he’s quiet, and then starts speaking in Nepali. You struggle to translate. *For you since you’re a Nepali brother and your son is kind and you are kin and these are priceless artifacts...* he takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and says a price. It fills the room with silence, mixing with the pungent air, and your father laughs. He shakes his head at you and walks away.

“Wait,” he says, leaping to grab his hand. “*Dai*, please. Wait. Wait.” He brings out a comically large calculator and starts punching in numbers and discounts. He speaks quickly, throwing in Nepali words he knows you don’t understand. There’s a quiver in his pale, cracked lips; sorrow in his beady, black eyes. Some of his words sound like a hiss or a chitter. And, because your father is kind, he stops to listen. The merchant, finally, says the new price. Your father steps out into a film of thin smoke. The rain’s more of a light mist now. In the distance, you hear thunder. It’s a low, meek rumble from beyond the mountains, hollow and tinny like hunger in a child’s belly. You notice how weird it was that, in your entire time in Nepal, you’ve heard thunder twice but seen no lightning. There’s a driver there that’ll take your father back home. His home is a card tower cobbled together from Earthquake ash. Your home is your father’s halfway house. The merchant continues reciting prices you can’t

understand, and you follow your father into the mist. The merchant calls out after you. Your fists are clenched in anger, and you don’t know why. When you’re far enough away, you glance back, and wish you hadn’t. The merchant sits on the steps of the store, fiddling a thumb through a hole in his wet shirt. The rain’s heavier now. He sits in an ugly light, the strands of his drenched hair covering his eyes, and watches a white girl eat ice-cream across the street. She stands under an umbrella, Little America’s brightest lamps shining on her Buddha tattoo, which reminds you of how bare your dark, brown skin is. It pours, pours, pours. When you’re in the car, you wonder why your father shook his head at you. For some reason, you think about that moment when, in your home gym, you saw a possum eating the grapes you left behind, and, because they were *your* grapes, you asked your father to help you get rid of it. At the time, you didn’t know a possum was harmless. You just knew it was eating your grapes. Your father knew what had to happen from his days growing up in a Nepali village, but he was kind. He let you open the garage door, knowing it wouldn’t just leave. He let you place a box in front of it knowing it wouldn’t just walk in. Eventually, he cornered the possum with a bat. He hit it once and it went limp but your father knew it wasn’t dead. So, he crushed its skull. The pieces of cracked drywall, or perhaps bone, scattered across the floor. The almost-purple brain matter painted little angel-wing arcs on the stucco. “Where are you going to put it?” you asked your father as he put what was left of the possum in a black bag. He said he knew a good place. You walked with him, following the shadow of his silhouette cast by street lamps. You watched him swing the black trash bag onto lake-front grass. A dozen lit suburban windows reflected across tumultuous waters. “*That’s* your good place?” you said, and your father walked back home, expecting you to follow.

THE PATH, THE CROSS

BY AMIR KADAMANI GONZÁLEZ

“for the love of [their] neighbor was as deeply
in [them] as the hatred of [themselves]”
(Steppenwolf, Hermann Hesse)

they say
one carries the weight
of sin
like a cross

my cross lives
in my living room
not far from the door

sometimes
when visitors stop by
they nod
and smile
just a little,
enough

looking
at that corner
the candle which
burns only for some
hours each day
how more intensely
when visitors stop by.

he once told me
they carry
their cross
on the forehead

how
when they look
at that corner
clean
well-lit
not far from the door

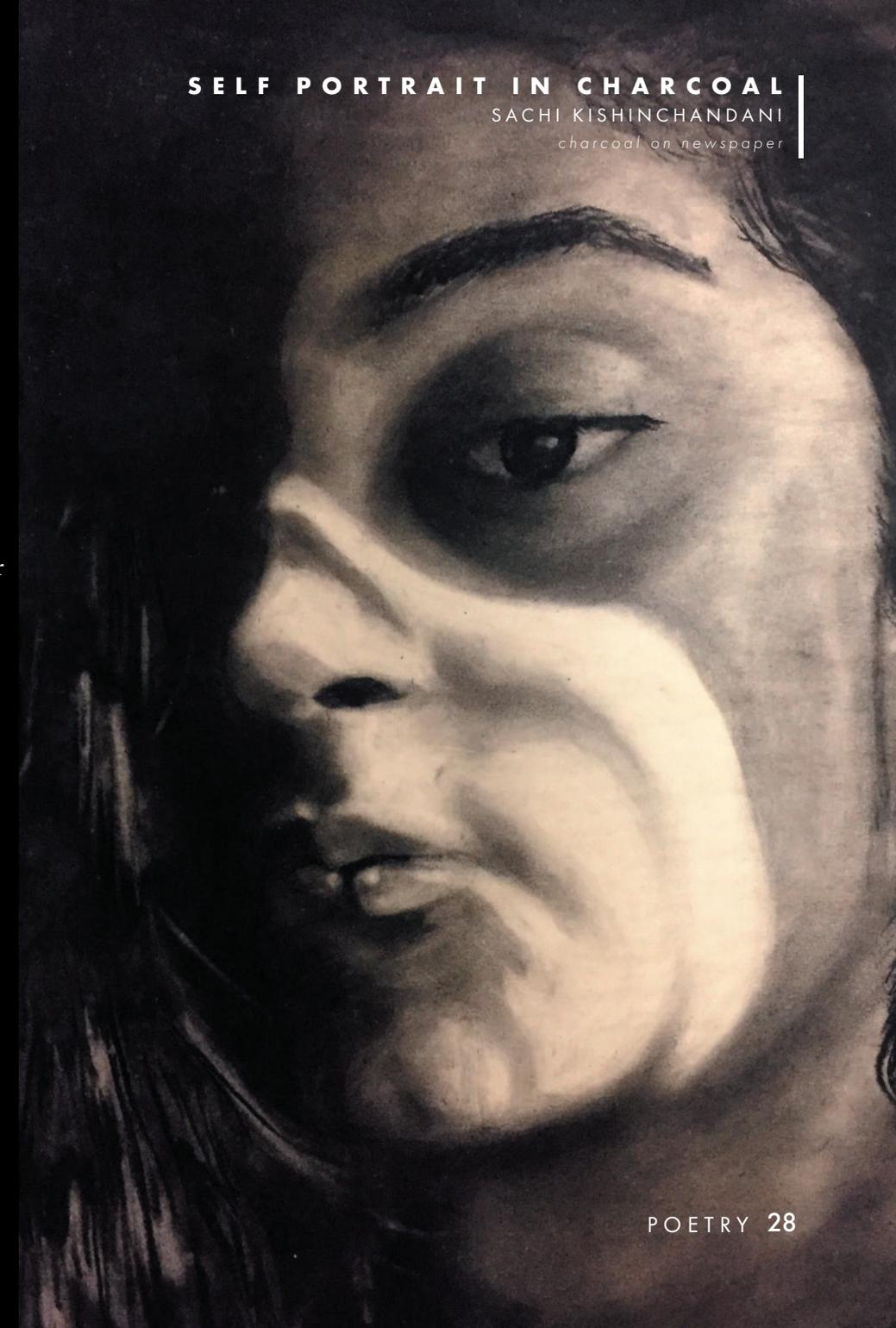
they are reminded
of
the
weight

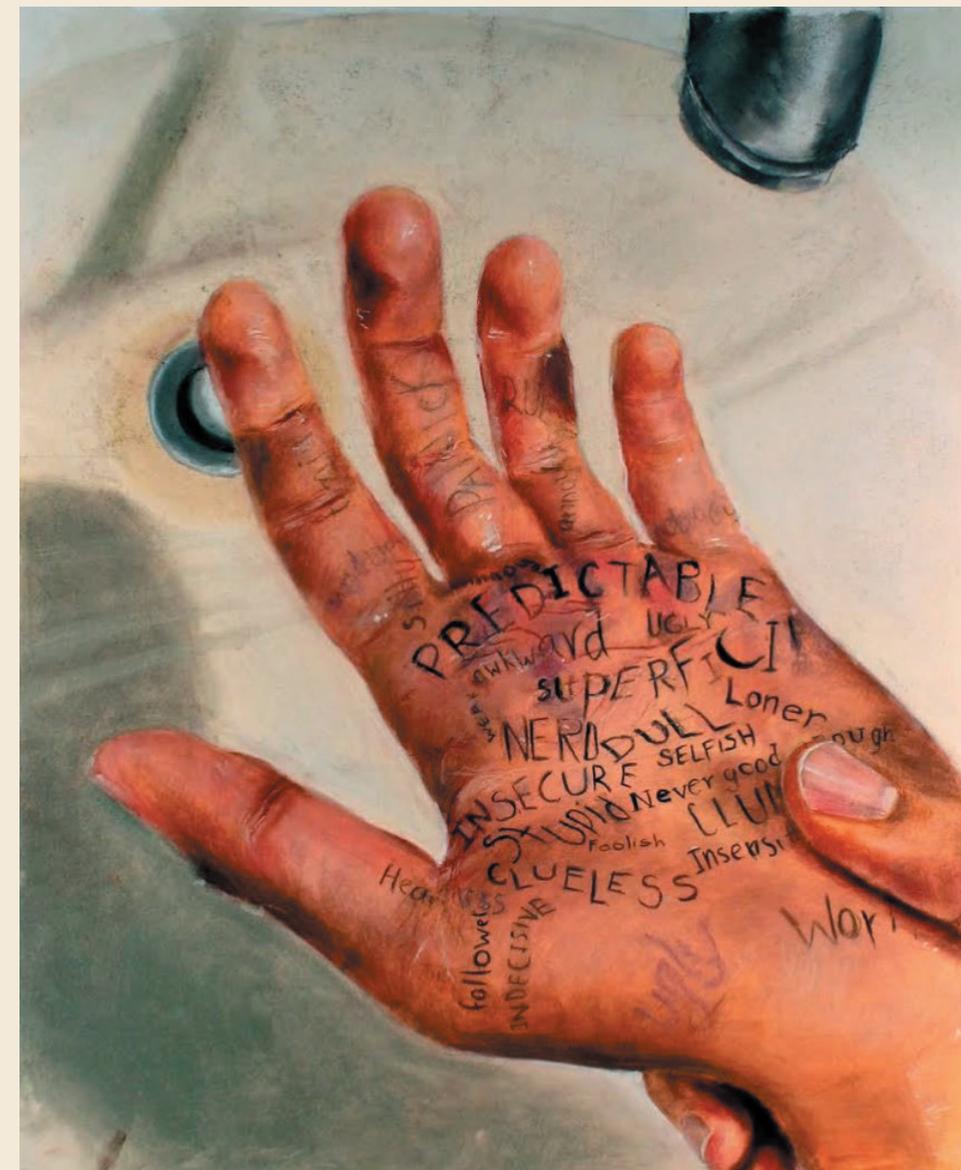
they smile

SELF PORTRAIT IN CHARCOAL

SACHI KISHINCHANDANI

charcoal on newspaper





WASHING AWAY TOXINS
PIYUSHA KUNDU *chalk pastel*

I DARE YOU TO LOVE ME

ARIANA WANG

encaustic, colored
pencil, and photoshop



SELTZER

BY NEHA TALLAPRAGADA

I knew the night was going to go to shit when I saw the blood.

I stared at the toilet bowl and a thready red mass stared back at me mockingly. Dark clots of my uterine tissue danced in the water. I squatted, my jeans still pulled down to my ankles, and waddled over to the cabinet underneath the sink before I realized that we were in a frat house and there was no chance of even a singular tampon emerging from anywhere in this place. I swore quietly and rested my head against the cool cabinet door, feeling the erratic bass of some Youtube Top 50 EDM playlist pound against my skull.

An aggressive knock on the door. Eliza's voice, wailing. "Hurry up!" I bit my lip, then proceeded to fold and wrap wads of toilet paper around my underwear, a humiliating ritual that every menstruating person has been subjected to at least once in their lives. I scrubbed my hands with the bottle of dish soap by the faucet and checked out my rear in the mirror before stepping outside. Eliza was engaged in animated conversation with the girl waiting in line after me. She was pressing her hands to the other girl's face and saying intently, "No, nothing is *ever* your fault," before I dragged her away.

"Do you have a pad or something," I whispered in her ear. She looked at me weirdly, then burst into giggles, her high, wheeling laugh unfurling and snapping my ears.

"It's not funny," I said.

"Don't you track these things? And no, sorry."

"Okay. Great." I tapped my foot. "I need a drink."

I went into the kitchen and found a pockmarked pewter cup and a can of Perrier. Eliza hung around, draping her long arms and elbows over every available surface.

"I don't think you're a seltzer person," she remarked. "Those people have a certain air about them, like...they're always older, you know? You don't really make that sort of impression. I don't know how you can drink that stuff."

"Good thing you're not the recovering alcoholic, then," I said, squeezing in between her and the kitchen island with my drink in hand. She rose and followed me.

“Do you really think you’re an alcoholic? I don’t really think you are one, functionally.”

“What do you think an alcoholic is supposed to look like?”

“I don’t know. I mean, you just kind of stopped one day, didn’t you? It wasn’t very dramatic. You never hit rock bottom or anything. I always hear stories of people pawing off their wedding rings.”

“How do you know what my rock bottom is?”

She cocked her head to the side, as if silently chastising me not to ask silly questions. If anyone knew what my rock bottom looked like, it would be her.

“Do you wish it had been more dramatic?” I asked. “That way you could have a thrilling story for everyone, how you pulled me from the brink and nursed me back to health again?”

“Don’t be such a party pooper,” she said, her eyes twinkling. “Come on, let’s go dance.”

Eliza was right. I wasn’t an alcoholic. Not yet, anyway. Alcohol peeled back a layer of myself that I previously thought was slickly varnished to my exterior, immobilizing me in all social respects. When I was drunk, I was incredibly attention-seeking and talkative, and people would entertain me because it was amusing to watch me, especially because I would wake the next morning, tight-lipped again, having only the barest recollection of what new secrets I had divulged. They would stop me in the laundry room, in the hallway—“Do you remember what you *did* last night?” “Do you remember what you *said* to him?”—all eager foxy faces and sallow, hungover eyes. Eventually I got scared of how much I liked it, the sensation of emptying myself of everything I struggled to articulate while sober, the icky feeling of inuring myself to other people by making a pitiful spectacle of myself, and began to hate it. I wondered how many secrets I exposed in my drunken stupors, but what was worse was that sometimes I didn’t care. And at some point I decided that if I was that drawn to it, it probably was going to become an issue, so best to stop now. But nobody wanted to hear any of this from me. It was just easier to say that I had “a problem.”

Well, I did have another problem. But it was easier to say I had *this* problem because no one asked me questions about being a drinker—in fact, once I mentioned it, they’d do their best to avoid the subject altogether. All this aside, I liked holding a glass of cold, sweating seltzer in my hand instead of a red Solo cup. It made me feel cultured and urbane, the two things no undergrad ever is.

The cramped first floor of the house crushed us into a mass of sweating, pulsating bodies. I asked Eliza to check me and she hovered behind me for a minute, her fingers gripping my shoulders and digging into my clavicle as she inspected the dubiously-dark denim of my jeans. The pressure of her hands felt good. I sighed and closed my eyes. “You’re fine,” she said, smacking my ass for good measure. “Come on, dance with me.”

She wound and unwound her taut body like a yo-yo. Eliza was one of those people whose natural movements resemble a more graceful animal, like a snake or a long-necked crane. Despite her many forceful attempts to get me to join, I was content to just stand there and watch her, though I was aware that this was just one more example of a behavior that people used as a cudgel against me to talk behind my back about how I was maybe obsessed with Eliza, how I was almost too overprotective of her as the perennially designated sober friend, how maybe there was something more suspicious to it. This was my real problem. But they were factually wrong, I thought. There wasn’t anything to it at all, if you didn’t think about it too hard. Actually, I resented this performance that I’d been pushed into of being her caretaker—with me around, she felt emboldened to act out in even louder and more outrageous ways, which was exhausting for me. I didn’t even really care about the rumors themselves; what worried me more was that Eliza never bothered to correct them. Bitterness about this swirled around in my mind until a sharp stabbing pain cut through my gut and lower back, as if I’d been impaled.

I stumbled back into the kitchen for some Advil, but found only a jug of orange juice and a gallon of what was either lighter fluid or Everclear—practically speaking, the difference is trivial. How do men live like this, I wondered. I braced myself over the sink and let the counter dig into my stomach until I felt like I could be properly human again, then wandered out into the backyard for some air, where I saw Eliza leaning against a tree trunk and talking to Wyatt.

At that point I decided that I was going to leave because there was a huge, heaving rage building inside my stomach, or maybe I was just bloated, but then there was a moral conundrum about leaving Eliza alone. But wouldn’t she leave me without a thought if it had been the other way around? But anyway, when would that opportunity ever even arise, since when we were together I was practically led around on a leash—not a thing I was proud of, just a

thing that was true. I stood there, rooted to the ground, trapped by my own loop of thought for so long that by the time I had even reached anything close to a course of action, Eliza looked over and noticed me and waved enthusiastically.

“Hi,” I said to Wyatt without looking at him. Wyatt looked like that comic book character, Tintin—he had the same blonde quiff and beady little eyes that he hid behind round tortoiseshell glasses. Oh, and he hated me. Well, he didn’t actively hate me, but if men don’t consider you fuckable, you’re immediately either invisible to them or an object to be ridiculed in order to elevate themselves. I saw this in Wyatt now, in his lip curling as he acknowledged my presence with the barest of nods. Waiting for me to fall on my face or trip over my own foot. His vape pen jutted out of his back pocket. I involuntarily scrunched my nose at the thought of how his saliva must taste, rancid and sweet.

“You’re both so fucking boring,” Eliza was saying. “No one wants to dance.”

“You’re just so much better at it than me,” Wyatt said, the two of them sharing a secret smile that made me want to climb up to the roof and hurl myself over it.

“What’s her excuse?” he asked, pointing at me.

“She’s on her period,” Eliza said, before I could interject with literally anything else. My face grew hot, and I stared at my shoes. Wyatt laughed nervously.

“It hurts, you wouldn’t know what that’s like,” Eliza continued, even as I tried to catch her eye with what I hoped was a murderous glare. “She has cramps and stuff, it’s, like, *really* bad—”

“Okay,” I interrupted, “yeah, okay. You should go dance before this party gets shut down again.”

“Well, since neither of you want to, *I’m* going to go do that now,” she said. “And you both can *watch* me.”

“Great,” I said, as Wyatt said, “Perfect,” and we glanced at each other as Eliza waded back into the fray. That left me and Wyatt standing there together, which was another indicator of how garbage this night was becoming. Then he walked away. I exhaled. I didn’t know if I should feel insulted or relieved. But after a minute or so, he was back again.

“Here,” he said. I found a sunset-pink Smirnoff Ice in my hand, one seltzer exchanged for another.



**PORTRAIT OF
WRECKAGE**
MAGGIE YUAN
collage

“For the pain?” Wyatt prompted.

I looked at him and he looked at me.

“I don’t drink,” I said.

He shrugged.

I looked around for Eliza. She was making elliptical circles around the men desperately trying to make eye contact with her. Totally oblivious to me.

I took the bottle and cracked it open.

Wyatt sipped at the dregs of my abandoned cup, which felt both extremely violating and incredibly flattering. “This White Claw flavor is shit,” he said. I didn’t know if he was joking or not, but then the moment passed and it was too late to respond. He leaned closer to me and shouted into my ear above the music, his hot breath making me wince.

“Eliza told me it’s hard for you to talk to anyone who’s not her,” he yelled. “Because you’re so introverted.”

My drink made my throat hot and achy, and already I could feel my senses melting into the background.

“Actually, I’m not that introverted,” I said, “I just don’t want to talk to *you*.”

I thought maybe he would say something flippant like “Ouch,” or laugh again, or dismiss my personhood in another inventive way that men always have up their sleeves. But instead his back straightened and his lips thinned into a line.

“I kind of thought so,” he said. “But, like, okay, I mean. You hating on other people doesn’t hide the fact that you also hate yourself. Just so you know.”

“Okay, thank you, Freud.”

“Wow, so witty,” he said. That stung me. He didn’t know how badly I wanted to be thought of as having a “sparkling wit.” But wit was a quality wholly determined by interaction with others and therefore contingent upon a performance in front of people, which I had never been very good at. In person, I lost all the personality I had when I was alone, or with Eliza. I was stuttering, and insecure, and had the type of face that made people assume I was intense and serious. I was like a repulsive magnet to conversation. I would try, of course, pathetic grasps at dialogue with little to no reciprocation. I would say and do things to ingratiate myself that made me hate myself when I thought about them later. That’s why I started

drinking in the first place, so I wouldn’t have to deal with that feeling. Among other things. At any rate, it was surprising that Wyatt was talking to me now. Maybe because we were both unlikely to remember anything the next morning.

I let the rest of the bottle drain down into my gullet and stifled a gasp at the burning sensation in my chest.

“I’m not a super huge fan of you, if you couldn’t tell,” I said. Even as I said it, I immediately wanted to snatch the words back from the air and stuff them down into some dark pit in my stomach. Barely a bottle in, and already I was hurling my innermost thoughts at anyone in my eyeline. I pressed the cold glass bottle to my abdomen in hopes of numbing out the feeling of my endometrium ripping itself to shreds.

Wyatt grinned. “I don’t really think that’s true,” he said.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, I don’t really think you care about me one way or another. I think it’s more that you’re just hostile to anyone who disrupts your idea of yourself.”

“Okay, yeah, please tell *me* more about *me*. I obviously don’t know anything about myself,” I said. He ignored the jab and forged ahead, that self-satisfied half-smile fixed to his face.

“You’re not this fucking ice princess character that you’re showing me right now,” he said, “and you know that I know that you’re faking it, and that makes you uncomfortable. I only know that about you, by the way, because last semester you got blackout drunk and started wailing in the stairwell for three hours about how you were never gonna find love. That’s who you actually are, and you’re afraid to admit it to yourself.”

I picked at the dry skin between my fingers.

“You think I don’t know that you hate yourself, too?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Doesn’t everyone, a little bit?”

“Well, I’m glad you found my abject misery so entertaining at the time.”

A quick laugh flew out of his mouth. “That’s funny. You’re kinda funny for someone with a ten-foot pole up her ass.”

I wanted to choke him out then. For Wyatt, the type of guy who unironically referred to himself as either a “boobs” or an “ass” man, who lived as loudly as possible, to try to tell me about myself? What did he know about my life? What did he know about shame and guilt

ENGAGEMENT SHOOT INTERRUPTED

LING DEBELLIS

photography



and fear?

“Why are you still talking to me, anyway? Where’s your little boy band?”

His face hollowed out as he bit on the inside of his cheek.

“I’m flying solo tonight.”

“So, you got ditched by them?”

“She’s pretty good at this,” he said.

We both cast our gazes over to the wasted, gyrating students spilling out of the back door into the yard. I watched Eliza move. She was beautiful. Eliza, I mean—her face was open and bright, and her hair was dark and wavy and trailed all the way down her back. I coveted something about her, or of her—I wished I could crawl inside her skin and live there forever, maybe take over her body entirely and eventually marionette her into oncoming traffic. This desire was ever-present and shocked me sometimes with how much it overwhelmed me. She made me feel things I didn’t want to feel.

“She’s been hanging onto me since I got here,” said Wyatt. “I think she expects things from me, and if I don’t give them to her, she won’t be quiet about it. Big mouth on that one, but you’d know that already.” He paused. “I kind of hate her.”

“Me too,” I blurted. “I hate her.” The sheer ardor in my voice surprised me.

Wyatt took a long drag off his vape pen. When he responded, his words hung in a cloud of

smoke, shrouding both of us.

“Yeah,” he said. “I figured.” We were silent after that.

“I’ve heard what people say about you and her, you know,” he said after a minute. He watched my face. Then, “Don’t bother.”

“No,” I said immediately. “No, I’m not like that. I don’t, I’m not, I mean, it’s fine to be, I’m just not—”

“You’re a bad liar,” he said. “I’m surprised Eliza hasn’t exiled you yet.” He paused. “That’s why you don’t drink around her, right? Because you’re afraid of what secret will come out of your mouth when you’re blackout again? Because—”

“You seem really interested in me, all of a sudden,” I said. “What’s that about?”

“I didn’t know you were coming to this party,” he said. “That’s what it’s about.”

“You’re not here for me, though, you’re here for Eliza.” Despite professing to loathe her, I thought, though since when did hating a woman ever stop a straight man from wanting to fuck her? “You’re going to sleep with her tonight,” I said.

He nodded and blew out another trail of smoke. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess.”

“You don’t seem too excited.”

“I’m going to tell you something,” he said. “It’s probably a bad idea. But, okay. I think I’m going to do it.” His voice dropped to almost a whisper. “I’m like you. Okay?”

“What?”

“I think that maybe I’m like you.”

The sounds of the party faded out for a moment as I considered what he meant.

“If that’s a joke, it’s a pretty cruel one,” I said.

“I wish,” he said. “I wish I was joking so bad it hurts.”

I looked at him hard. The grin had been wiped clean from his face. I stared into his eyes and found my own reflection flashing back at me in the lens of his glasses. Then I knew we were the same.

“What now?” I asked. I didn’t mention the fact that his obsession with sex seemed like it bordered on an addiction to the activity, or the fact that he was seen with his arms around a new girl’s waist every other business day. “Is that why your friends aren’t with you?”

He kicked at the trunk of the tree we were under. “They found out I lied about sleeping

with Emily Fisher,” he said miserably. “Among other things.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You wouldn’t. Actually,” he laughed, “I don’t really even know why I told you anything. But, look, don’t say anything to Eliza, okay? Seeing as how this is a last resort type of thing.”

“So you are going to sleep with her? I thought... you made it seem like... so, what was the plan in the first place?”

“I think you know.”

It came to me like a flash of lightning. “What are you trying to say? That you think you can turn yourself into something else if you—”

“You say that as if you’ve tried it already. Have you? Tried it?”

I hesitated. He laughed, a single caustic bark.

“Then you don’t get to say anything.”

“Not with her, then,” I said quickly. Anyone but her. “With me, instead. And I’ll tell everyone for you, too.”

“I was going to ask you,” he said, “when I saw you. I thought, hey, maybe we can kill two birds with one stone. But then—I mean, you’re bleeding, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. “Would a guy like you care about that?”

We stood in front of a door. It was ajar, and Wyatt pressed his hand to it gently to reveal a dusty room containing nothing but a dirty air mattress and the stench of marijuana. The door was on the second floor of the frat house. I had never been to the second floor before. I never had a reason. I was breathing hard. We had left Eliza downstairs. The swinging arm of guilt socked me in the pit of my stomach, and I braced myself against the doorframe. Wyatt cautioned a glance at me.

“Okay,” he said, “okay, I’m ready.”

“Okay,” I said, “okay, great.”

We stepped slowly into the room and watched our shadows loom by the door, which I drew to a careful close. Wyatt sat down gingerly on the mattress. I sat down next to him. I still couldn’t seem to look directly at him.

“I thought it would be a relief,” he said. “To tell somebody. That it would stop me from

feeling like my insides were rotting up. But I just feel sicker.”

He shifted closer to me, and suddenly his mouth was on my mouth. I would have liked a warning. His lips were somehow both sloppily wet and cracked dry, as if I was kissing the corpse of a snail. I wondered what I should do with my hands. I felt myself separate from my body, like I was looking down on us, watching everything happen to me. I felt something warm and wet on my cheek, then on my lips. Tears. Not mine. Then Wyatt moved his hand from my waist to under my shirt and I jerked away as if he had branded me with a hot poker. When I finally found it in me to look at him, I saw only his blurry, red-rimmed eyes.

“Shit. Sorry,” he said. “Sorry. Fuck, sorry,” he continued, burying his head between his knees. “You’re not gonna—you know, are you—”

“No,” I said. “I just—I don’t—I can’t...” I swallowed. The acidic taste of bile crept up my throat.

“Anyway,” I said, “like, are you—I mean, are you okay?”

His whole body shuddered as soon as I asked. He stood up abruptly, his hands in his hair, panting, and turned away from me, as if he couldn’t bear to be reminded of what we had just done. He didn’t ask if I was okay, that didn’t escape me.

“I can’t,” he said. “I can’t do it. Go ahead, call me a pussy.”

“You’re not a pussy,” I said. “But, I mean, Jesus. You can’t go on being like that forever.”

“Being like what?”

“Like an obnoxious, lightly misogynistic fuck. At best, it’s hypocritical.”

“Yeah, and you can’t be a repressed, imposter alcoholic forever, but here we are. Two of the worst performers I’ve ever seen.”

“You always know the best way to hurt people,” I said after a minute.

“Yeah,” he said, “I feel like that’s something we have in common.”

I was going to ask him why he felt like he had to save the organization of his life so badly—for people who would drop him over something like this, why struggle for them? But then I remembered the change in the air whenever a friend of Eliza’s opined on “lifestyles,” or, whenever the lone lesbian student on our floor stepped into the common bathroom, the conspiratorial look Eliza gave me every time before she drew her shower curtain shut. Those little moments were like shards of glass. And then I hated myself for knowing where Wyatt’s

desperation came from and I hated myself for feeling it, too.

“Great job, everyone,” I said. “Good game. Fabulous night had by all.”

Wyatt turned to me with his mouth open, but whatever he was about to say evaporated along with all the blood in his face. He pointed wordlessly to my legs. I glanced down and saw a thin line of red running down the inseam of my jeans.

“Shit.” I pressed my nails into my palms. “Okay, can you go to the bathroom for me? There should be some toilet paper, or something.”

“Uh—okay. And—sorry, why can’t you do it?”

“Because I can’t go out like this,” I hissed. I was suddenly very angry with myself, for reasons beyond what I could explain. He must have noticed this anger, because he relented and left the bedroom. He returned with a paper towel roll on his wrist, eyes wide.

“Eliza’s outside,” he said.

For a moment we seemed to be trapped in the space between those words, gazing at the other person with a stricken face.

“Does she know—”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

I grabbed the air with my hands and he tossed the roll toward me. I scratched at the blood on my jeans with a sheaf of paper, to no avail.

“I probably will need a ride back to campus,” I said offhandedly. Wyatt groaned. He stripped off his bomber jacket and threw it at me.

“Here, so you can cover up... you know. I don’t want my seats to look like a murder scene.”

“Thanks. Have you decided what you’re gonna do about...” I inclined my head toward the door.

“Oh. Well, I kind of thought that you would, like, deal with that,” he said.

“Fuck you, Wyatt.”

I turned the knob and slipped outside. When Eliza saw me her nostrils flared so dramatically that I could see every individual hair within. She hugged herself and sucked in her cheeks. Her skin was pale and glistening and made her look a little ghostly, in a glamorous kind of way. Her mouth was a bruised-apple red. I licked my lips. My mouth had suddenly become very dry.

“You left me,” she said finally. “I was by myself.”

I ignored the tug of guilt. Oh, now she wanted to acknowledge me and the fucking babysitting service I provided? Enough. Let her tremble.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

She paused. “No,” she said emphatically. Then, “I mean, I didn’t think so.” A pointed look at the room I’d just left.

“Okay,” I said, “so if nothing happened, then—”

“I would never do that to you,” she said. Something hitched in her voice. I realized that I wasn’t entirely sure what we were talking about.

“Stop speaking in hypotheticals,” I said. “You know that irritates me.”

“If I’m so irritating to you, then maybe you can find your own way back,” she said.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I’m capable of that.”

“Maybe Wyatt will give you a ride. You seem to have ridden him all night,” she said. When she said that, I felt some kind of immense pain in my chest, I don’t know why.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think he will,” I said coolly. “I think we’ve gotten pretty close, actually.”

She raised her eyebrows. I watched the back of her neck as she tossed her head and sauntered away, as if nothing had happened. Maybe nothing had. Maybe what it was, was that we were both drunk and needed to sleep it off. I thought I would be thrilled at the fact that she’d found me, me and Wyatt, that she had witnessed undeniable proof and that her witnessing it somehow made it more real for me, that this would solve my problem. But I didn’t feel triumphant. I felt crumpled up and sore. I wanted to call her back, whisper in her ear, lay my head in the crook of her neck, or something else stupid, but I didn’t know how to say any of that, and then she turned the corner and vanished into thin air.

**LET ME TELL
YOU A STORY**

CELESTE WANG

charcoal





MARGINS

BY VINCENT ZHANG

It was a quarter past midnight when Yang set out from *Shekou*, pushing off of the dock with a piece of blunt plastic. His canoe bobbed in the water and a putrid puddle of scum lapped at his feet, but the watercraft remained afloat. A light drizzle was falling from the sky. Yang ducked as a shower drifted over him and landed against his rain guards. Yards of waterproofed canvas took the worst of the bite off of the rain, diverting a torrent that would've melted skin. Yang cringed as a pair of droplets landed on his hand, wisps of steam rising up into the air as acid sizzled. He reached over to the side of the canoe and pulled out a squirt bottle to wash himself off.

The night view of the Sham Chung river was an assault on the retinas, a scorching desert of half-submerged neon signs which had gone out decades ago, only to be spiritually reborn as new breeds of fluorescent algae crept over them. Tendrils brushed against and reached over the sides of Yang's canoe, soft fingers of cellulose that tickled his hands and lingered on his cheeks before drifting past. When Yang was younger the river had been tended to by a fleet of migrant workers every spring and fall. He would lean out of his apartment and watch as an army of hands and feet treaded the river banks to prune and sweep. Lilies

would gird the embankment but refrain from touching the center of the river, where schools of koi and drifting turtles could be spotted each morning. Trees would flower on the sidewalks, pink petals floating down to land on the water before being gulped down by voracious fish.

Such domestication had been lost with the decades. A carpeting of leather-like stems and leaves now spread across the river, making Yang's journey a perilous one as he tried to shove his way through the thinner sections of the foliage. Fungal growths covered large swaths of half-dead trees, sheltering them from the worst of the acid rain even as they drained the nutrients out of the bark. The spring humidity had induced an organic orgy over the river with clouds of spores clumping up on the surface of the water. Yang found himself issuing a staccato of sneezes from time to time, bobbing his head forward with each convulsion. It was as if he was a boy once more, nodding along every morning within his classroom as he faced the flag. Listening to his teacher clear his throat and spit out the last of the morning's smog before he began lecturing. What a world that had been. A young boy, marching onward with his nation towards the drumbeat of progress.

A pantyhosed leg jutted out from the foliage, reaching out towards the sky while a dozen different varieties of kudzu battled for dominion over the silicon thigh. Yang batted at the structure with his oar, leaving a dent in the flesh. The sidewalks on either side of the river had been similarly reclaimed by the weeds. Yang spied a pair of mutts loping through the vines, layers of dead skin and calluses hanging off of their bodies as they hunted the vermin that lived within the fauna. Squirrels and rats still thrived in what had once been shopping outlets and cafes.

The occasional mannequin stood out of the greenery, heads tilted and hands raised to hail him as he rowed past. They were oddly defiant in the face of their nudity. Whatever clothing or jewelry that had once hung off of their bodies had been looted long ago, leaving nothing but bare plastic to greet Yang's gaze. Yang found a certain sense of irony in that. These figures had once been little more than canvases for their merchandising, but now that the product was gone all one had to marvel at was their humanness, the steps that had been made to

bring them closer and further away from what a person could be. The proportions were right, imitating that designer beauty which screamed inaccessible and relatable all at once, but an absurdity pervaded the smoothness of the figure and its rounded extremities. The curved edges that suggested breasts and genitalia looked as if they were taunting those that passed. Look at me, they said. I bear what you desire. I hint at what you should want. The edge of perfection can be found at your local retailer, and I am the herald that announces your ascendance.

Yang jolted as a pair of lights flashed from the coastline. One of the beams caught him in his eye, blinking off and on with a steady insistence. He lifted his oar and began paddling towards the embankment, jostling his way past islands of garbage and flora. He'd lost track of time. Another handful of minutes daydreaming and he would've missed the signal. Yang shuddered as he imagined himself sailing straight past his rendezvous point, disappearing into the progressively murkier and more abandoned sections of the city's waterfront. God help him if he actually paddled over a sewage line. Five seconds in that waste and he'd be bleeding out of his eyes from the toxins. Yang squinted and waved back at the lights, pulling closer to the shore.

A trio of killbots was clustered together on the gravel, muttering to each other in a dialect of binary. They were a perverse mirroring of the mannequins Yang had just seen, a modulation of the human form drawn up at the hands of engineers and focus groups. Fingers and limbs were branded with the insignia of conglomerates and soft drinks, bright logos clashing with the minimalist aesthetic of their weapons. Endless chains of joints clacked within each bot as they walked towards him, energy-efficient movement routines trapping their gait within a constant cycle of falling and propelling. The leader of the group had a language processor bulging out from underneath its throat, a complex mess of wiring that cycled through half a dozen languages before landing on Mandarin.

"Our package?"

Yang nodded. The droids moved forward and dragged his boat onto shore, beaching it onto the gravel. The sizzle of acid announced Yang's arrival onto dry land. He dismounted

with an umbrella held over his head and waved his thanks before reaching into his jacket and bringing out a packet of wax paper. Steel-tipped fingers received the square with all the tenderness of a courtesan, peeling it open to reveal pale silk. The killbot reached in and pulled the patch out.

“Careful-”

The top of the droid’s head branched open into an umbrella, shielding the silk. Yang let a breath out. “It’s delicate. You don’t want to keep it in the humidity too long.”

“I know,” the killbot said. It held the calligraphy up to its lenses, clicks reverberating through its throat. “Do you know what this says? Where it’s from?”

“I do,” Yang nodded. “It’s from a Tang writer. Eighth century.”

“What’s it about?”

Yang shivered, pulling the collars of his shirt up. A pair of howls were issued out in the distance, echoes reverberating off of concrete apartment blocks. He reached out towards the droid. “Hey, you said I’d get paid-”

“The story,” the droid cocked its head. It set the patch down into a compartment in its chest. “What’s it about?”

Yang bit his lip. “It’s about a Confucian scholar and his student.”

The droids moved in on either side. “And?”

“The scholar goes to his student’s house one day and notices it’s in disarray.” The words tumbled out of Yang’s lips like shattered teeth, hard-edged prose ingrained into his backside as a child with the palm of his father’s hand. He struggled to stand up straight as he recited, steel bolts in his knees aching as he strained to reach that same diligence he had once embodied as a child, looking up to the works of scholars who had lived before him, would continue to live after him. “He asks his student why he chooses to live in such rubbish, why he keeps such a disreputable crowd around his house. And the student replies-”

The faint puff of coolant around him. Yang swallowed.

“The student replies-”



The bullet made its way through his ribcage without a sound. It passed between the third and fifth costal cartilages, skating into the right atrium of his heart with a force that pulverized the myocardium. Blood and pulp erupted inside of his thoracic cavity, a rose blossoming against that skin which remained unpunctured over his heart. The man's lips continued working for another half a dozen seconds. He spent the time in shock, barely recognizing the words that came out of his mouth.

"The student replies that it does not matter how tall the mountain he lives on is, granted that God lives on it. It does not matter how large his house is, granted that a scholar lives in it."

He was falling, pitching backward into the river. The words were no more than a whisper now, heard only in the sanctum of his mind.

"It does not matter how shallow the stream before my house is, given that a dragon lives in it."

The crown of his head entered the water, carcinogens soaking their way into his hair.

"My life may not be a beautiful one, but it is a worthy one."

And Yang was sinking, sinking towards the sediment of the riverbed, his mind still reciting the words penned a millennium and a half ago, penned in the court of some emperor, back when China was still the center of the world, the true Middle Kingdom. Back when the world still turned green every summer, red every autumn, and white every winter. Back when the sky would still be blue, when the sun would still be visible. When the nation's bumper crop of students would gather together each year in their testing centers, eyes bleary and minds crammed to the brink with Confucian classics, ready to be sealed in for three days and three nights worth of testing. Tears crowding their eyes, ink staining their fingers, they would spend their days and nights reciting, reciting, and remembering the stories of those who had passed before them.

Remembrance. Surely that was still worth something, here at the bottom of the river. Here where homes still jutted out of the mud, tiled roofs still gathered mud and litter and anything else that sank and did not seek to remerge into the world, the world of Pepsi and

Coca-Cola, of Tencent and Samsung, of Walmart and Disney, each corporation gathered together around the next slice of the past to consume and shit out into a consumer-friendly blurb. Surely remembering was still worth something down here, where nothing glowed and nothing waited, where nothing hurried and nothing traded. Where the schools of koi had been poisoned and the turtles had been hunted and eaten. Where shoals of plastic and aluminum tumbled under his head, clamoring to consume and subsume Yang's body. Surely there was enough time down here to pass a few seconds, whatever modicum of time was left to this world, in peace.

And if the world would not give that peace, would not grant that silence, then surely someone would remember. If they would drain this river, excavate and plunder this waste for corpses and space to make more housing condos, more mini-malls and shopping marts and nightclubs, then surely the people within this tomb would bear witness. Those who awoke to find themselves in a world that did not grant them the dignity of life could at least be granted shelter in death among those who had passed before them. Surely the canon would remain secure, the classics rooted within their minds, for the passage of time would make them all sacrosanct. And if the world persisted in its consumption, then let it consume it all, let the lights and the colors and the products eat each other. Let the world eat itself hollow until nothing is left but the faintest outline of what once was, what would be. That which had been together would come apart and that which had been apart would come together.

Yang knew this, knew it even as the walls of his heart fell apart into so much pulp and muscle. It was the statement that would hold the world together, the lynchpin which history itself would hang off of. Each dynasty would eat itself hollow, only to shed skin and be reborn anew, reformed in a spectacular display of violence and destruction. The ugliness present would not last, could not last, and would pass as surely as the process of Yang's own death, now measured in fractions of a second. And if that was too short, then let us take refuge in the sanctity of that brevity, the purity of that loss.

The Sham Chung river glowed.



INDUSTRIAL EYE
SACHI KISHINCHANDANI
acrylic on canvas

LOUISA AND THE FROG

BY ELLA HOYT

Louisa's shoes are all wrong. They're the white ones with Velcro and little butterflies on the sides and they're too tight. Her favourite yellow socks are bunched up and spiky around the toes and the backs got eaten up by the heel, which is rubbing against her skin. She starts to cry.

"What's wrong, Lou?" says Mum. Louisa wants to explain but it's hard to find a breath. "Is it your joggers?" she asks. Louisa manages a nod. "That's okay, gorgeous," Mum says, "let me have a look." She crouches down and Louisa offers a foot. Mum puts it up on her knee which is brown like a bread roll, but hard. Louisa's left heel has started to bleed and there's a little tea-coloured patch on the back of her sock. "Oh, I'm sorry, Lou, that must have been hurting, huh?" Louisa nods again, feeling a little braver.

Mum scoops her up and places her down on a mossy rock to the side of the trail. She slips off Louisa's sneakers, then socks, folding them at the ankle so they don't tug on the blister, and then tucks everything into her backpack. She takes both of Louisa's little feet in her hands and presses them to her lips, making a silly kissing noise. "All better?" she asks.

"Betta," says Louisa.

Mum stands and takes off her own boots, stepping on the heels, then peels off her green socks which are so big that Louisa could probably fit her whole arm in one of them like an evil doctor glove. Mum puts on her sunnies and ties up her hair with the elastic from her wrist. With her hands in her hair, Louisa can see Mum's arm muscles move slightly and feels strong too. The sun is shining out from behind Mum's head and the little curly bits of hair by her ears are glowing. Louisa's never seen anyone or anything more beautiful ever, not even in a book.

Louisa's heel still stings for a while, but she pretends it doesn't until she forgets about it. The trail mostly goes down and is covered in big, fuzzy leaves that Mum says must have been here a long time because they're starting to smell and squish like jam under Louisa's feet. Her toes have speckles of baby blue from when they painted them on Tuesday when it rained, and they look like little shells against all the mush. The green gets thicker and thicker, so Mum hands Louisa a whacking stick and she fights her way through. Then she swings at a branch and there's nothing behind it and they're on the edge of a sandstone clearing. The platform is empty except for a few cracks with bits of mean-looking grass and a small pool of water in the middle. It looks like soup or maybe a potion. Louisa grabs for Mum's hand.

"It's a witch house?" she asks.

"Maybe!" says Mum. She squeezes tight and Louisa feels the cold of her rings against her palm. When they reach the pool, Louisa drops to her hands and knees and stares as hard as she can. The water is murky and could be bottomless or go to the other side of the world. It makes Louisa's reflection wobbly and she can already feel her neck getting hot from the sun. Mum sticks her finger in and there's a flurry of little black globs. Louisa gasps.

"They're babies," says Mum, making the dots ripple around again. They don't look like babies, Louisa thinks. They look like papaya seeds or tiny olives, the black kind she doesn't like, but with tails. And they're wiggly. The only baby she'd seen was Cousin Alex and he was mostly still and warm when he wasn't screaming. These weren't any of those things. "Can you guess what kind of baby it is?" Louisa purses her lips, thinking very hard. "They're baby frogs," Mum says, "they're called tadpoles."

"*Tappoles*," Louisa breathes.



“They come from tiny little eggs,” Mum says. She squeezes her pointer finger with her thumb and holds it up to the sun so only a dot of light comes through. “The parent frogs lay them in the rivers. They’re soft and sticky so they all stay together and don’t get washed away.” Alex was sticky too. “Then, they hatch as tadpoles like these guys, and they eat lots of green stuff to get fatter and fatter, and then they grow legs and lungs, and then they crawl out onto the land and become frogs!” Louisa takes big breaths.

“But sometimes,” says Mum, “the parent frogs get confused and they have their babies in puddles that form after it rains. Then, when it gets hot, all the water dries up and the babies die because they haven’t had time to grow their legs yet.” Louisa thinks about Cousin Alex, hot and screaming, in a dried-up pool. She doesn’t like it.

Mum shrugs off her backpack, unzipping and rummaging until she presents a plastic box, turned white from the scratches all over it. It has a tomato red lid and a handle that squeaks when Mum opens it. “We want to make them a nice house,” she says, “so we need to put things in it that you’d find in a river.” Louisa scrambles for a very mossy stick, raising it high above her head. Next is a rock, and Louisa finds the perfect one, pudgy and grey like a beanbag, by the edge of the clearing. Mum grabs her water bottle and upends what’s left of it into the box, then uses it to add some sludge from the pool until it comes halfway up the side. It’s perfect. “Are you ready for our guests, Lou?” she asks, holding out a little strainer.

“Out of the water?”

“Yeah, it’s like when you hold your breath at swimming. They’ll be uncomfortable, but only for a second.” Louisa nods and holds her breath as she dips the scoop into the water, herding them into a corner the way Mum shows her, then lifting them up and out, both arms extended as they writhe. She lowers the scoop down into the water of the tank and watches them swim away to hide under the rock. She’s never seen anything so alive. Mum takes over to get the last few jellies, and Louisa stops holding her breath when they wiggle.

Louisa presses her cheek against the warm rock and looks into the tank. She loses count at about nine and thinks that’s probably all of them. She feels like a firefighter, or Mina from the market who always helps carry the veggies to the car. Mum kneels and gently holds out the box, water lapping slightly. Louisa’s eyes grow. She reaches out, cradling the box like a little planet. The walk back is slow, Louisa testing every step against the strength of the

ground and the slick of the leaves to make sure she doesn’t fall. She makes Mum go first and steps in the marks from her boots where she knows it’s safe, all the way home.

They get back at lunchtime. Louisa sits high up at the bench and nibbles at little sticks of carrot and triangles of egg sandwich, her eyes never straying far from the babies. Mum shows her how to feed them too, with iceberg lettuce that she boiled then froze until it was dark and crumbly enough to dissolve, sprinkling it over the water and watching them flock to the surface. A bit of cucumber falls out of Louisa’s open mouth and onto her plastic plate.

“Lou needs food too!” says Mum. Louisa closes her mouth and keeps watching.

After lunch, Mum has to go into the office to go on the computer and Louisa does crafts. She lays on the shaggy rug that they got from Nan and colours gently so her Texta doesn’t break through the paper. She draws black dots all over the page and little beds for each one with bedside tables. She gives them walls and a roof, and a big Narnia wardrobe like in Mum’s room. She can hear Mum talking to someone on the phone that stays in the office, too quiet to understand through the door. Louisa starts adding a games room for the tadpoles and is humming a song she heard on the radio when there’s a knock at the door.

Mum goes to answer it and Louisa follows. It’s Mr. Walker from across the road. She doesn’t like the way he stands in the doorway, blocking out all the light, and the way he always smells like the weird, thin meat Auntie Mish keeps putting in her sandwiches. Behind his leg is Tom who goes to school already, with messy hair and eyes like coins.

“Hi Jim,” Mum says, then touches Louisa’s head. “Say ‘hi’ to Tom, sweetheart.” Louisa waves and Tom doesn’t wave back. “How are you guys?”

“Yeah, look,” says Mr. Walker, “we’ve had a bit of an emergency this morning with Carole.” He has big dark patches under his armpits. “Sue’s taken her up to hospital in the middle of

“ SHE REACHES
OUT, CRADLING THE
BOX LIKE A LITTLE
PLANET.



COUSIN LOST A TOOTH

MALLORY NEWBERN *colored pencil, acrylic paint on paper*

soccer. We've just come home." He puts his hand on Tom's head, too. As he stares at her, Louisa stares back and wonders if they look the same.

"Gosh I'm so sorry," says Mum, "is she alright?"

"Yeah, nah, just a slip and fall. Broken wrist. You know how easy it is when you're getting on. She'll be right but someone's gotta get up there and sort the paperwork and all that." Mr. Walker brings Tom forward by the shoulder. "Tommy here was wondering if he could stay with youse for an hour or so while I get up there. Everyone else is busy and I figured you'd

be home anyways, so..." Tom didn't look like he was wondering that at all.

"Of course!" says Mum. "Whatever you guys need. You can hang out with Lou and I, Tom, it'll be fun!" He doesn't return Mum's smile and Louisa's ears tingle. Mr. Walker pats Tom on the back, sending him through the door. Chunks of dirt and grass thump out from the spikes of his neon green soccer boots and onto the rug.

"He'll be good, but. Right mate?" says Mr. Walker. Tom nods.

Tom doesn't have anything he likes to do. He doesn't want to colour or read or play Hungry Hungry Hippos. He doesn't even want to play soccer, even though he already has his uniform on. Mum asks if he's eaten and he says no, so she makes him apple slices with peanut butter. He says the peanut butter is lumpy and tastes funny and that he only likes the yellow kind. He says my dad says your house probably smells like weeds. Mum gets him a packet of sour cream and onion chips from the party box up the top of the pantry and puts on Cartoon Network. When Mum gets an important phone call and has to duck into the office for just a second, Louisa follows her.

"C'mon Lou," she says, "just because you're different doesn't mean you can't be friends. He's had a scary morning and it's our job to be kind to him."

Louisa sits on the far edge of the couch. The show must be meant for bigger kids because she doesn't get any of the jokes. Tom munches really loud and is sitting in a pile of crumbs, but Louisa doesn't mind at all.

"D'you like school?" she asks.

"Yeah."

"I get to do school next year," she says.

Tom looks at the TV.

"D'you know tappoles?" she asks. Tom looks at her.

"What's tappoles," he says. Louisa grabs Tom's hand and takes him to the bench, and they climb up on the big stools to see better.

"Tappoles," she says, "it's frogs." Tom squints and leans forward. "They eat green and get fat and they're frogs."

“I can’t see anything,” he says. He taps on the tank and the tadpoles wiggle everywhere, but not in a good way. Louisa wants to scream. “Those aren’t frogs,” he says. He picks up the tank and shakes. Louisa yells and grabs it, shoving Tom away, and he falls hard onto the kitchen tiles. He screams. He doesn’t stop screaming when Mum comes in saying what happened, or when she tries to give him a hug, or when she calls Mr. Walker to come pick him up. Mum looks at Louisa with a face she’s never seen before. Louisa wants to tell her he was hurting the babies, but Tom is so loud and so red, and she gets sent to her room.

Under the covers, Louisa can hear huge bangs on the door and Tom goes quiet. Then Mr. Walker’s yelling and screaming and Mum’s talking like she does in her office when it’s a Big Day. Mr. Walker’s saying Louisa’s a little monster and if you can’t stop her from attacking other kids you’re a terrible mother and someone needs to step in. Mum’s louder now and she’s saying I’m sorry Jim I know it was my fault I should have been watching them and I’m so sorry. She gets quiet again and Mr. Walker stops yelling and leaves. Louisa’s tummy is made of cement and rocks and stale bread. It feels like when Aunty Mish cut her hair wrong but so much worse.

Louisa comes into the living room and Mum’s bent over on the couch, pressing on her eyes with her fingers. She stands up and turns away, but Louisa can see how pink her face is and hears her sniff.

“Give me a minute, Lou,” she says, and goes into the office and closes the door. Louisa thinks of the movie with the orange fish and wonders if frog parents get sad too. Mum said that if someone caught her up in a net then she would be very sad, like the fish, but that no one would ever scoop her up if she had anything to do with it. She wonders if Mum would still be sad if she got scooped up.

She thinks of the shade under the big tree where the grass is always damp enough to soak through to her knees and the little wildflowers that Mum says are *in danger* spring up after it rains. Louisa makes for the kitchen where she pries out an old ice cream tub which will probably be big enough. She fills it under the tap until she struggles with the weight of it and stumbles down into the garden, both arms wrapped around the tub as it sloshes. She thunks the container onto the grass and hears a croak from the compost and whips around. It comes again, this time with a wet thump.

The tub looks uncomfortable, so she throws in a handful of grass. She gets on all fours and creeps forward like Nan’s cat does sometimes and follows the croaking until she sees a little brown body sitting still through the grass. She lunges forward, closing her hands around it as gently as she can. It wiggles like its babies and she holds her breath, arms outstretched, until she reaches the tub, where she plops it gently into the water. It swims against the edges for a while, skin reflecting the blue of the plastic and the sky, then just sits there, nostrils flaring. Louisa powers back up to the house with Mum’s surprise. “Wait here,” she says.

Mum’s back in the living room.

“Will you come sit with me, Lou?” she asks. Louisa does. “I’m sorry I was upset before,” she says, “I didn’t want Tom to have a bad time at our house.” Louisa doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t want to see Mum’s face the way it looked before ever again, so she stares at her toes which are all muddy now. Mum pulls her into a big hug. “It’s okay, sweetheart, I know you didn’t mean to hurt him. But I need you to tell me what happened.”

Louisa tells Mum everything. About Tom shaking the babies and his loud munching and his stupid shoes. When she’s done, Mum gives Louisa the biggest hug and says I understand. She says I know you just wanted to protect the tadpoles, but you can’t ever hurt people. She says we can sort everything out with Tom tomorrow but why don’t we have a bath and watch a movie and do a reset tonight.

It’s getting dark and they’re sitting on the couch in towels and eating Neapolitan ice-cream when Louisa remembers. She grabs Mum and pulls her outside to see her surprise. The frog’s floating upside-down, its pale belly glowing yellow under the porchlight. Its legs are splayed and tangled up in little wilted blades of grass. The water’s turned slightly and there’s a smell, and when Louisa picks up the tub to see, the plastic is hot beneath her hands.

“Oh, Lou...” says Mum. Louisa starts to cry.



SURELY THERE ARE ENOUGH POEMS ABOUT THE OCEAN

BY ELLA MALENA FELDMAN

I just think if you had been there—



if it had been your white jeans caking
in dirt as she pressed you against the
filthy wall but you couldn't care less
about the stains because she was doing
that thing with your neck and oh god
you would hurl those jeans into a
puddle of mud if it meant she would keep
doing that thing with your neck and
you could keep curling your toes into
sand while breath crescendoed and
the ocean threw its fits of fury against
rocks like palms slapping drums and you
thought to yourself maybe this is how
beethoven felt when he composed that
fifth symphony because damn if this isn't
the most beautiful song I've ever heard—

I just think you'd also be compelled
to write another poem about the ocean.



STORIES OF MY FATHER

BY JACKIE WU

Even though I'm an identical twin, I see myself more in my father than anyone else. I've inherited his sharp nose, his habit of letting rage simmer in his throat before exploding into shouts an hour later, and his fear of heights.

My father has always refused to let my sisters and me ride roller coasters because of this fear. From biceps too large for me to hang on to lips taut like he's never worn a smile, he is the strongest man I've ever known. He shouldn't tremble from anything, much less something that can't be seen. I imagine an invisible demon looming over him, wrapping his body so tightly that he gasps for breath, cursing him to never enjoy amusement parks. But I am seven years old and afraid of nothing yet. I long to climb to the top of the tallest roller coaster and stare at the rest of the world below me, to brush my hand over the horizon as the weight of my body pulls me back down to the center of the Earth.

One day, my father and I stand in front of a railing in the middle of the local mall's second floor, waiting for my mother and sisters to finish shopping. While they sip free

samples of tea, I look through the glass railing to the first floor. Hordes of aggressive shoppers shove past each other, somehow believing that if they arrive at their destinations earlier, they will magically reap 50% off discounts.

“I’m not afraid of heights,” my father suddenly admits, facing away from the railing. “I’m afraid of seeing myself on the ground, dead.”

When I look back through the glass barrier, I see a body on the ground. I see limbs separated from the torso, scattered across the floor like abandoned toys; shoppers who don’t pause, even as they step in puddles of crimson; and my own reflection staring back at me from hollow, unblinking eyes. I clutch my father’s hand and turn around, knowing that I will never complain about roller coasters again.

I like to think that if he hadn’t told me that day, I would have one less fear. But the truth is that I’m glad, grateful even, to share one more trait with him. Besides his fear of heights, I know little about Dad.

There is a thin film of darkness painted over memories of my youth, as if I’m stumbling blindly through the labyrinth of my cerebral cortex; as I write this piece, I struggle to recall moments that have long been buried in dreams or the back of my mind. Much of my childhood is spent in literal darkness too—either we were saving on electricity, lost power frequently, or just because we had spare candles, I don’t remember—and candles would often be our only source of light during the night.

My sisters and I eat Smucker’s peanut butter sandwiches in the comfort of the dining room’s shadows. Within the tenuous glow of cheap one-inch tall candles, we race to finish our meals before the wicks disappear in a sea of melting wax. My father leans over the kitchen counter, three feet away from us, pretending to study for his exams. In reality, I know he keeps a vigilant eye on us. Just a few days ago, fascinated by the creation of light from nothingness, I had put my finger in candlelight and watched the skin blacken.

Before third grade, peanut butter, candles, and my father feel like home to me. Since my mother spends most days working in the hospital, my father stays at home and greets us as soon as he hears the school bus screech at the corner of our neighborhood. Tired of unwrap-

ping store-bought sandwiches and opening the front door to three hungry and ungrateful daughters, he enters community college right after I graduate kindergarten, studying for a two-year degree in respiratory care. He sees his life as beyond that of a wife who keeps her maiden name and adds “Dr.” in front of it, of her paychecks that he exchanges for Smucker’s sandwiches and fifty-cent candles, of the kids that drive him to throw plates on the floor. It is his dreams of bigger that make me want to hold onto his hand tighter and drag him down back to me.

I hate the first month of first grade, proven when I crumble into tears in front of Mrs. Benson. Unable to alleviate my screams, she sends me to the school nurse, where I continue my crusade of sadness.

“What hurts?” the nurse demands impatiently. Her office must be constantly filled with squabbling kids who sob at nothing.

“Everything,” I wail. I don’t understand what pain is—all I feel is an unbearable weight that coaxes salt out of my eyes. I am six years old, not yet experienced in fake smiles.

Defeated, the nurse calls my father. “There’s nothing wrong with her,” she says, “Just take her home for the day.”

My father buckles me into the passenger seat of his 2005 Honda minivan, which surprises me because I’ve never sat in the front before. Rather than take me home, he buys me a Happy Meal from McDonald’s and drives in circles on Route 46. He opens his mouth halfway, almost asking, *are you feeling better* or *are you okay* or *what’s wrong*, but he hesitates. We both realize that the oppressive silence hanging between us comforts more than any word he could offer. As I tear the plastic from the Happy Meal toy, my father keeps his eyes on the road, his knuckles white on the steering wheel, as if his slightest movement might disturb the infinity that separates us.

When I decide to write about Dad, I wonder how I should portray him. My father, a man too stoic and proud to reveal anything about himself except for a fear of heights. A man who doesn’t understand his daughters but gives them everything anyway. There are questions I have in mind, but the answers are forever lost in the Pacific, drowned in the past when he left



MY FATHERS JOURNEY

TAYLOR ZHANG

chalk pastel, graphite,
colored pencil, watercolor,
and newspaper

Indonesia for a new life on another continent. *Who are you?* I want to ask, *tell me everything.*

“What did you like most about your childhood?” I ask instead.

“Soccer.”

“Like... watching it?”

“Playing it.”

I was not a journalist in my past life, I think, because I don’t know how to prompt him to go further. Giving up, I turn to Mom, who always shares more scraps about Dad (before inevitably turning it to herself) than he is willing.

“Your daddy used to work in a Japanese restaurant,” she says, tapping her index finger to her chin in rumination, “that’s where he learned to cook Asian food. Before that, he was just a spoiled brat. Hm... I worked more than him though, you know, I was a waitress seven days a week.” Mom laughs and shakes her head, transported back to a time when she and Dad were poor, foolish college students who needed money for groceries and secondhand sports cars.

My father was born in Medan, the capital of North Sumatra in Indonesia. Most of his childhood was spent on a field of faded yellow-green grass, surrounded by kids who played in the sun all day but somehow never got burned. Their tanned skin, marred by the occasional abrasion from a half-deflated soccer ball, was stained for years with the perspiration that only comes when you are happy and carefree, not thinking about the person you will be in four decades. His love of soccer would persist for the next forty years, and in that time he has never missed a Liverpool game.

After turning eighteen, my father left his mother and sister in Medan for a fresh start, a used Nissan sports car, and a grade point average of 2.2 in Toledo, Ohio. My father, perhaps so starved for the familiar burn of *rendang* on his tongue, took the first job he could find—a restaurant that did not serve Indonesian meat dishes, but Chinese imitations of Japanese sushi. A stranger in an even stranger land, he traded his native language of Bahasa for English and Cantonese: English to converse with real Americans who scoffed at his tanned yellow skin and Cantonese to blend in with my mother and her Chinese friends. He was

engulfed in culture—American, Chinese, Japanese—at the cost of his own.

Thirty-four years later, Dad's life is bigger. Bigger than a father who peels plastic from processed peanut butter sandwiches, bigger than a teenager fresh-faced in the Buckeye State.

I thought that death would smell foul, but it reeks of sweet lavender.

My father comes home barefoot. He takes off his socks in the basement and strips the scrubs from his tired body in the laundry room. He walks out clad in his bare skin and underwear, the faint scent of detergent clinging to his matted hair.

I want to caress the lines on his stone face, carved from the cacophony of 5 AM alarms and silence where there should be breath, but the tenderness feels too foreign to us. Instead, he falls asleep to the lull of the forgotten TV, and I pick up the empty wrappers he leaves on the coffee table.

Some nights, at the cusp of dawn, my father trudges downstairs to the computer. I'm always awake when he comes down. Drunk with insomnia, he devours CNN pages that remember those who died from the virus.

"Look, this one, he was from New Jersey. He was only fifty years old," my father says, pausing his scrolling to glance at me.

I sense something changing, or that something has already changed, something past the point of making right again. Something that can't be fixed by kissing on the cheek and ruffling hair and laughing *good night* before vanishing back into the shadows. I look at his eyes, hardened from years of fatherhood, of foreignness, of death, and I see us back in that 2005 Honda minivan. This time, however, he sits in the passenger seat. My left hand clutches the steering wheel, my right one above my thigh. I should probably grab his hand, give it a comforting squeeze, but I stare straight ahead at the imaginary road. I am my father who can't console his six-year-old daughter; although we sit side by side, he is too far away from me and I from him.

Writing this piece now, I realize that this has become as fiction as it is nonfiction. I steal seconds from Dad's past and stitch them to my mother's anecdotes. What's left are stories glued together into ill-fitting jigsaw pieces—some stories part imagination, others half-lies,

composed from counterfeit memories. I don't know if Dad actually sacrificed everything—his family, culture, language—to come to America. After all, the truth is that he returned to Indonesia once he finished his undergraduate degree in Ohio. Can you leave everything behind if it's only for four years? He's proud, but I don't know if his idea of bigger was twelve-hour shifts and hissing ventilators. How do you dream for more when you'll be tortured by blue lips and quivering inhales and strangers' ghosts?

"I'm writing a story about you," I say to Dad.

"Don't," he replies softly. Almost a plea.

I am his teenage daughter, so I feel bound to disobey him. I wonder what he wants to hide from me. Or if he believes that I will distort his image, that I will concoct a man more haunted than he actually is, in order to shape some narrative of an exhausted father, a poor immigrant, a sad respiratory therapist.

These are stories of my father, stories from a past rarely invoked and stories that might exist nowhere but in my mind. But this is also a story about his daughter who is afraid of heights yet even more afraid that one day, she will wake up and stand at the edge of a cliff and feel nothing.

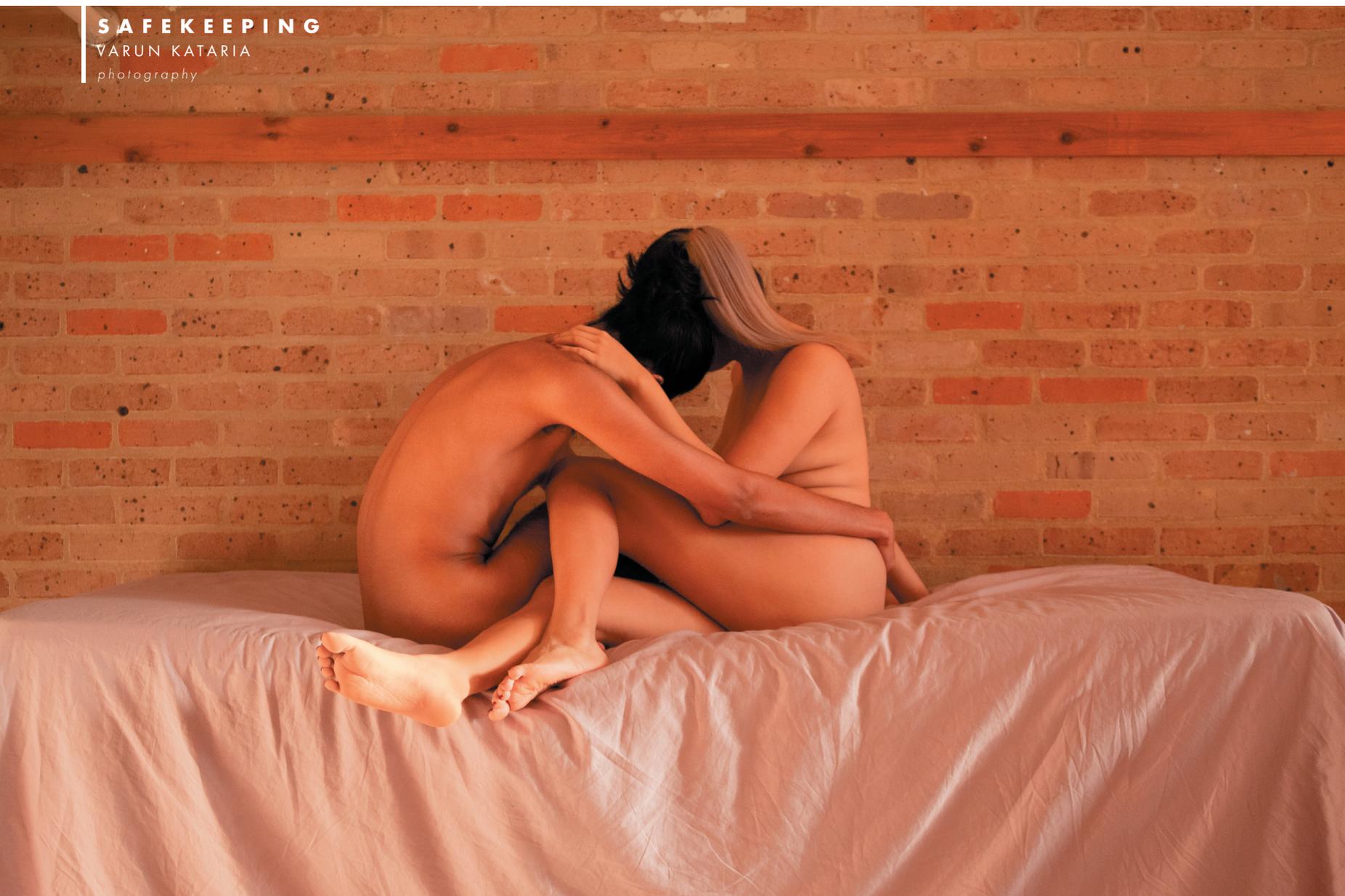
Dad calls me in the middle of his shift, and his mask seems to whittle deeper gashes into his cheekbones.

"Tell me about your day," I say. I want to reach through the phone, unravel his brain, pore over each of his memories and push them into the puzzle. "Tell me everything."

SAFEKEEPING

VARUN KATARIA

photography



GONE

BY MCKENNA TANNER

Charlie had been staring at the inch of milkshake remaining in his glass for a quarter of an hour, but he didn't want to finish it. Helen had agreed not to bring *it* up until the end of the meal, and dinner wasn't over yet. Emptying the glass would nullify his last excuse for lingering in this diner booth with the woman he'd been married to for two years, loved for longer, and from whom he would, in a few minutes, be divorced.

It wasn't his choice—of course not; Helen had always been the decisive one—but what could he do? He'd run through it in his head over and over, nights when he flopped back and forth on his parents' creaking guest bed, unable to sleep—and that was every night, of late. Helen had made up her mind, and that, as they say, had always been that. Three years of law school couldn't teach him the negotiation skills it would take to convince her otherwise.

So instead, Charlie was sitting in a diner booth under a painting of a woman riding a camel down a city street, sucking the salt from a French fry and waiting for the end of things. Helen glared at him across the table and twirled a napkin ring in her fingers. Her patience was wearing thin—she'd already pulled on her coat and had her silk scarf hanging around her neck—and so he made another attempt at small talk.

"How are your parents?" he asked.

"They're fine," she said, biting off each word as she spoke it.

"Good." They looked down at their plates. "So are mine," he said after a while.

Helen didn't say anything, but, with a teenager's sigh, reached into her briefcase and pulled out a manila folder. "Look, Charles"—*Charlie*, he thought, irritated—"I want to get home before it gets too late, so can we just get this done?" She opened the folder, revealing pages tagged with "Sign here" flags, and slid it across the table to him.

There was no point in stalling anymore, Charlie decided. He took his Cross pen—a present from Helen after his graduation from law school—from his shirt pocket and found the first signature line.

In two minutes, it was done.

He let the folder fall closed, then shoved it back to her. After a moment's hesitation, he rolled the pen across the table too. Helen accepted both items silently, stowing them in her briefcase before finding her wallet. Her lips set in a perfectly straight line, she counted out enough bills to cover both of their meals, smoothed them out, then planted them on the table and stood up in one fluid motion. "Goodbye—" She stopped herself, seeming to get caught on a word. She cleared her throat. "Goodbye."

Charlie resisted the urge to say, *Pleasure doing business with you*, and instead kept his mouth pressed shut as Helen walked out of the diner. He watched her go, a small, foolish part of him expecting her to cast a glance over her shoulder so they could share one last meaningful look, like two emotionally repressed love interests in a Jane Austen novel. And when she did pause, that idiotic part of his mind leapt to its feet in excitement. But she was only stopping to pick up something she'd dropped—a creased piece of pink stationery—and then she was gone. She was gone.

Charlie downed the rest of his milkshake in a single gulp. There was another thing gone. He looked at the stack of bills on the table, noticing she'd barely left a tip, then added a few ones. Those were gone, too. He stood and shrugged on his overcoat. And now he would be gone. He nodded to the teenager wiping tables and headed for the door.

"Hey, mister!" The boy caught Charlie at the door and handed him a small piece of paper. "I think you dropped this?"

It was a slip from a fortune cookie, but it wasn't Charlie's. The crisp fold down the middle

made it unmistakably Helen's; he thanked the boy anyway. *What did Helen want with an old fortune?* he wondered as he walked away. Curious, and with a slight sense of voyeurism, he examined the slip. *An exciting new person enters your life*, it read. Below the message, a phone number was scribbled, along with the name Frank. Quietly, Charlie crumpled the paper into a ball and threw it back on the floor.

Turning his collar against the chill, Charlie walked out of the diner. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his ash grey overcoat and curled his fingers around their contents: a 1962 Delaware-minted quarter in his left, a lopsided pink eraser in his right—he liked the feel of an opposite in each hand. His thumbs rubbed small circles on the objects as he walked and watched his loafers crush the newborn snowflakes piled on the sidewalk. Strolling through his hometown in wintertime should be idyllic, or so the holiday specials he'd once loved had taught him. Instead, it gave him a sickly saccharine feeling in his stomach, like he'd just drank an over-sweetened coffee.

A woman ducking into a taxi across the way noticed him and waved. Charlie walked faster. People saw the way problems weighed on your face; people asked questions, and he didn't like to give them the answers. Helen had never been able to stand that. *"How are we going to solve this if you never say anything?"* she'd asked during one exasperating counseling session. She'd been right. He'd stayed silent then, and look where they were now.

The taxi glided away, leaving Charlie alone on the street. He took his left hand out of his pocket and slid the golden band from his finger, examining it, feeling over the inscription on the inside: *To the moon and back*. He shouldn't wear it anymore, he knew, but it was a kind of life preserver, drifting further and further from the ship, but still attached, still retrievable if the captain would have him. And the water was feeling very deep just now.

A hidden gash in the street caught his foot as he stepped forward, and Charlie crashed onto the concrete, his jaw snapping shut painfully when it hit the ground. His hands smacked into the road, the impact knocking the ring from his fingers. He threw out his hand to catch it, but he was too late. The ring soared toward a nearby storm drain and plummeted down through the pipes, where the currents swept it far away. He crawled towards the drain to

RYND MORGAN
photography

peer down it, and saw what he already knew.

“It’s gone.”

Charlie collapsed back into the snow with a low moan. His life preserver had sunk into the sea, its rope snapped, its buoyancy shot, and now he was drowning, without even its false comfort. His nose burned with cold, his eyelashes felt frosty, but still he lay there, tears freezing on his cheeks. Helen would hate him making a scene like this. She glossed over life, never understanding how the smallest things could matter so much to him. “*Get up,*” she’d say if she was there. “*You’re not dying. It’s a lousy ring.*” Helen wasn’t here, though, so he kept his face planted in the snow. There was something paradoxically grounding in the numbness spreading across his cheeks.

He didn’t notice the man approaching him until he heard the sound of boots in the snow beside him. “You alright there, chief?” The man leaned over, the damp stench of fish guts thick in the air around him, and shook Charlie’s shoulder. “This is no place to be sleeping it off.” Charlie looked up as the man turned him over and saw the face of August Michaels, a bit worse for wear since high school—the nose a little crooked, one eyebrow bisected by a shiny scar—but still unmistakable. Augie’s eyes lit up with recognition. “Chuck!” he said, lifting the brim of his faded blue ball cap and grinning. “I’d heard you were back in town!”

I’d heard you were back in town. What he meant was, I’d heard you’d made a wreck of your life and had to move back in with your parents, but Charlie—not “Chuck”—supposed that didn’t make for pleasant conversation.

“What’re you doing on the ground, pal?” Augie asked, interrupting Charlie’s thoughts with his loud, upbeat voice.

“It’s gone,” Charlie said finally, sinking back into the snow. “It’s gone it’s gone she’s gone it’s gone.”

Augie looked Charlie over for a moment—cheeks flushed, chin darkening with a nasty bruise—then offered his hand, the nails dirty with worm gore. “C’mon, Chuck,” he said, “lemme give you a lift.”

Charlie stared at the hand, hesitant. In school, he’d known Augie through talk in the hallway more than actual interactions. In the few classes they’d shared, Augie had always

sat in the back of the room, and Charlie had never sought him out. While Charlie's circle of friends ran for student council and organized school picnics, Augie's crowd held street races and stayed out late every night. He hadn't trusted Augie much then and wasn't sure if he wanted to now. But it was late, and the night was cold, so he took the callused hand and pulled himself up. He followed Augie to an old grey pickup truck, its bumper rusted by several years' exposure to salted roads, and opened the door.

Before Charlie could get in, Augie had to reach across the cabin to move his rifle from where it sat in front of the passenger seat—"Sorry about Rosebud, chief!"—and to scoop up the soda cans cluttering the area around it. With a wary glance around the cabin, Charlie climbed in.

The truck grumbled and coughed into motion, and they began jittering down the street. Charlie leaned against the window, hoping to ride back to his parents' house in silence, but Augie had other plans.

"So, how've you been, Chuck?" he asked.

In Charlie's view, how he had been didn't concern his old classmate. It was no more Augie's business than it was the business of Mrs. Everly down the street, who kept rapping on his door with cheesecakes, asking if he and Helen had made up yet; or that of Scott, his one-time best man, who'd called him up late last night and said it was time Charlie had some fun again, offering to fix him up with this swell little brunette—Charlie hadn't waited to hear the rest. He was sick of everyone thinking they understood everyone else's problems; no one really could. That was one good thing about Helen: she never bothered trying to understand him. There was little chance of her trying now, he supposed.

Augie looked over and saw Charlie rubbing his eye and sniffing. "Chuck? What's the matter?"

Charlie shook his head. What would be the point in trying to explain what was the matter with him? Augie, who had lived in Rockport all his life, following in his father's footsteps to become a fisherman, wouldn't understand. He couldn't know what it was like to graduate Harvard second in your class, to go to New York as a promising young employee at a powerful law firm, to marry a lovely and sought-after socialite, and then for it all to blow up in

your face, irreversibly destroyed. He'd never felt the deadly stress that followed you every day in law school, pressure so powerful you felt every cell revolt against you, only bearable when you reminded yourself of the bright future it all guaranteed. He'd never found out, later, that your shiny future was a lie, that, in the end, you were only working toward more work: first, a draining internship, sacrificing sleep and leisure time to prove yourself worthy of a spot on the payroll, then dragging yourself up the professional ladder, the expectations for you growing higher and more demanding with each rung you climbed. He'd never spent—wasted—a ridiculous amount of money on a beautiful wedding, promising to love each other for better or for worse in front of a couple hundred "close friends," only to later find out you'd been wrong: you couldn't love each other forever—at least, she couldn't, and no amount of marriage counseling would change that. He hadn't wound up fired from his job, shattered by a nervous breakdown; hadn't been forced to live with his parents again like a helpless child; hadn't sat in a diner that very night and signed himself out of what was to be the truest and greatest relationship of his life. Augie would never understand what any of these things were like, but Charlie did, and the weight of it all was killing him.

Charlie swiped his hand across his eyes again and inhaled. "It's nothing," he muttered, keeping his gaze on the scenery passing by. Augie was silent at first, and Charlie braced himself for the questions that had followed him like hungry vultures ever since his return home: *What happened to Helen? What do you mean divorced? Didn't you try talking it out? You're just giving up? How bad was it? Tell me everything! Everyone feigned concern only because they wanted gossip.* Charlie didn't have the energy to deal with their prowling anymore.

"Alright," Augie said.

Charlie's head shot up, and he stared at the man next to him. "Sorry?"

Augie shrugged. "Alright. You don't wanna talk; I won't pry. Just turn on the radio, would-ja? I'm not too much for quiet."

Charlie gaped. Had he really just gotten the response he'd been hoping for? Was there really someone who understood what he wanted? And was that person really August Michaels? *What a crazy world it is,* he thought as he reached for the radio dial.

He paused. *Someone who understood.* He let his hand fall to his lap.

“I miss Helen,” Charlie blurted.

Augie’s mouth bent in a sad smile. He eased the truck over to the side of the road and parked. Turning to face Charlie, Augie saw his companion’s uncertain frown and inclined his head. *Go on.* Then Augie sat perfectly still and listened as all of the pains of the past few years poured out of Charlie in a rush.

“I don’t know why, though; I’m sure she’s not missing me—when did she ever? Oh, she claimed to—she was always complaining that I was never around—but she didn’t understand. That job! I kept at it for her, but the way it was there, God! Up with the sun, work all day, then go home, drink, and work some more—of course I wasn’t around! And it’s not like she was any better! Parties, luncheons, galas; staying out ‘til one, two in the morning—it was ridiculous. She couldn’t see that, though; oh, no, it was all about *her* dinner party, *her* friends—well, sometimes, I felt useless, Augie. Downright useless. I mean, what’s a husband supposed to do? Earn money? Make decisions? She didn’t need me for any of that. All I had was being her—companion, I guess, and I couldn’t even be that! God, I hate her, Augie, I really hate her!”

Fists clenched tight, Charlie looked up at his confidante, fearing a negative reaction, but Augie didn’t speak, just nodded again, as if to say, *Keep talking.* Charlie suddenly became aware of the little half-moons his nails were pressing into his palms. Exhaling slowly, he released his fists and slouched into the seat.

“No, I don’t,” he said. “That’s a lie. I can’t hate her, Augie. How can you hate the greatest part of your life? Helen and I—we were good together. Better than good! We could wander around the Met, or walk through Central Park, or just do nothing at all, and somehow she’d make it the best afternoon I’d ever had. The way she saw the world, the way she’d smile, her laugh—God, I miss her laugh!” Charlie raked his hands through his hair, spiking it until he looked like Andy Warhol. “Is that nuts?”

Augie shook his head. “I know that’s what I’d miss if Delia ever left me.”

Charlie’s eyebrows jumped up in surprise. “You’re married?”

“Four years this April,” Augie said. “Best thing that ever happened to me. But sometimes—when it’s been poor fishing, and the baby’s been keeping us up—she’s someone else

entirely. And I’m sure she feels the same about me some days. We’re lucky, though—our good times beat out the bad.”

“Not ours,” Charlie said. “Not anymore, anyway.” He smacked the dashboard, his face suddenly contorted in anger. “I married Helen for better or for worse, but I didn’t expect there to be so much of the worse. And now that’s all I’m left with! That’s sure not what I signed up for, Augie. Why’s that what I got?”

Augie took off his ball cap and smoothed down his hair, considering. “People will never be as simple as we want them to be,” he said finally. “And the way I see it, we can either accept that and find someone whose complications suit ours, or we can let it beat us into living a mean little half life. You’ve gotta ask yourself which way you’ll choose.”

You’ve gotta ask yourself which way you’ll choose. Augie made it sound so easy, and Charlie started to scoff; but what if it really could be? If Helen were here, she’d—*But she’s not here.* And, for the first time, Charlie let himself feel freed by that thought. He smiled ruefully at Augie as more tears raced each other down his cheeks. “Yeah,” he whispered. “Okay. Okay.”

Augie grinned, then clapped Charlie on the shoulder. “C’mon, let’s get you home, Chuck.” He shifted the truck into drive, and the pair started down the street.

- - -

The ring floated through the drain system, under houses and roads, floated miles away, until it finally reached the entrance to the ocean. At the end of the pipe, it teetered for a moment before toppling into the waves, where it sank to the seabed. Sand washed over the band, covering its sheen with a million tiny grains.

SATURDAY CHURCH

BY EV DELAFOSE

Jesus loves me:

the way my wrist contorts and my mothers' feet crack.

On a moonrise night, blue light bounces off black skin
cracked by sundried skin and slender, leather tips.

An arch tortured foot carrying the weight of my growing body,
until my mother walks down hardwood floors and every step
cracks, crack, crack, crack.

An arch tortured foot carrying the weight of my grown body,
until my motha walks down damp, stage floors and every step
clacks, clack, clack, clack.

Black girl femme in red lipstick—
redbone sister, red latex boots, red nails
voguing under platinum white light.
Contoured muscles flex in the light,
but the night can only save us from time to time.



AN INTERVIEW WITH KIESE LAYMON

BY SARAH SWACKHAMER, NEHA TALLAPRAGADA, PAMELA MCINTURFF,
COLTON ALSTATT, KATIMAH HARPER, SELENA SHI, AND RYAN CHOW

Kiese Laymon is a Black southern writer from Jackson, Mississippi. Laymon's bestselling memoir, *Heavy: An American Memoir*, won the 2019 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction and was named a best book of 2018 by the *New York Times*. He is also the author of the novel *Long Division* and the collection of essays, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*. A graduate of Oberlin College, he holds an MFA in creative writing from Indiana University. He is the Hubert H. McAlexander Chair of English at the University of Mississippi, and recipient of the 2020-2021 Radcliffe Fellowship at Harvard. Laymon is currently at work on several new projects, including the long poem, *Good God*, the horror novel, *And So On*, the children's book, *City Summer*, *Country Summer* and the film *Heavy: An American Memoir*. *The Rice Review* connected with Professor Laymon this past spring as the pandemic entered its one-year anniversary. The following interview took place over email.

R2: *Heavy* has a unique approach to point of view. For example, the use of "you" throughout the piece is particularly effective at personalizing the story and pointing at the reader. How do you think the second person allows a reader to feel or understand the text versus another point of view? Was this point of view stance just a natural discovery in the writing process or something you worked on more consciously?

Kiese Laymon: I wish the use of the second was natural in *Heavy*. I had to try four different direct addresses and finally realized that writing to my mother could create the book I always wanted to read. I also just wanted to see if I could maintain it for an entire book.

R2: *Heavy* is autobiographical, but it also attempts to enter the hearts and minds of other characters. What was it like inhabiting friends and family and to write in their words? What considerations did you keep in mind? Did you ever have reservations in certain cases?

KL: I talked extensively and interviewed all the folks in that book who are close to me. That process of really comparing truths was *Heavy*. I generally think of books as projects and this project was talking and listening with my friends and family.

R2: Your writing deals with a lot of trauma and suffering, often in extremely intimate and vulnerable ways. How did you reach a point in life where you could write about these events? Was there some sort of external influence or realization that helped you, or was writing itself a part of that processing?

KL: It's hard to confront or explore that which we don't want to be true. It's super hard if you don't have the tools or skills. So we have to have will, but I had to write my two previous books in order to even imagine writing *Heavy*. I needed to practice writing scenes. I got that in *Long Division*. I needed to practice writing compelling exposition. I practiced that in *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*. We need will, but that will needs skill to help it out.

R2: Academia plays a large and often antagonistic role in your works. Do you see ways that academia can become more accepting of minority students and educators going forward? What seems hard for the academy to grasp or change when it comes to systemic inequalities? What should we be trying to do as students?

KL: Great question. Academia is a scary, wonderful, scary place. The scariest part of academia is that we have convinced ourselves we are better or smarter or more innocent than folks who aren't in these spaces. Academia should be a place where everyone involved really considers what love means and what lies mean and how do we, in all of our disciplines, explore our actual relationships to harm and inequity, not just what we want those relationships to be. We have to find new words to help understand where we are. And we can never ever hide behind those words.

R2: How does your profession as a writer and a professor compare to one another? Are there moments where you feel like you receive something from one that you do not receive from the other? What has teaching taught you about writing, or vice versa?

KL: I'm a student and writing and teaching help me learn. That's the truth. Teaching really informs my writing more than my writing informs my teaching. But they're both just ways to learn and connect and get better at love.

R2: In your essay collection *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, "You are the Second Person" reveals a discussion with your editor, Brandon Farley, in which he introduces the tension that black writers face when appealing to both white and black audiences. In your process, is there one audience that you find yourself speaking to more? Or how do you define your audience for yourself?

KL: I always center Black southern audiences. Those audiences are incredibly varied. But that's who is responsible for me, and that is whom I'm most responsible. Now, the problem is that white people and audiences dictate whether you get a book deal. So there's a paradox there. But Black southern audiences are always the primary place that I write to and from.

R2: In *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, you go into detail about how music, particularly black music, plays a significant role in shaping your cultural and racial identity. We were wondering if you might be willing to share some songs or albums that capture your feelings about where we all are in life at the moment. What would be some of your top tracks for yourself?

KL: Surprisingly, Billie Eilish and King Von got me through this part of the pandemic. Two extremely different writers, but I love how both mess with the listener in ways that are both meta and soulful. It's hard to pull off the meta and soulful. But we have to try. I'm also really feeling Tobe's BOZOS.

R2: We are so grateful for you taking the time to correspond with us. We feel we have a lot to learn about writing and life, so we were hoping to ask for a final piece of advice: what is something you would want to go back and tell a younger version of yourself - about writing or life or anything else?

KL: I'd tell myself that art begins long before we start making it, and you don't have to be hard on yourself because it's all made in revision. I'd also tell myself that words are there to connect and explore, so when we learn big ideas, we have to really think about our relationship to the idea and not simply use the idea as proof of our intellect. This work is messy and it's okay if we are too.

WHEN THE SKY GROWS HEAVY

BY SANVITTI SAHDEV

each year the monsoon arrived in delhi,
pelts of water made the roads swell.

when I talk about home, I talk about
the way my mama looks in a blue sari,

with folds that flow like rivers,
mapless eyes, rimmed with kajal.

or that's how I imagine them from far away,
when I ask her if growing up for her was also

accumulating more of the world in her body
than she felt she had space for.

I know she carries weight for I know
of the time they slid mehendi on her wrist,

dabbed her forehead with turmeric and lime,
only for the rainwater to wash it away, uncurl

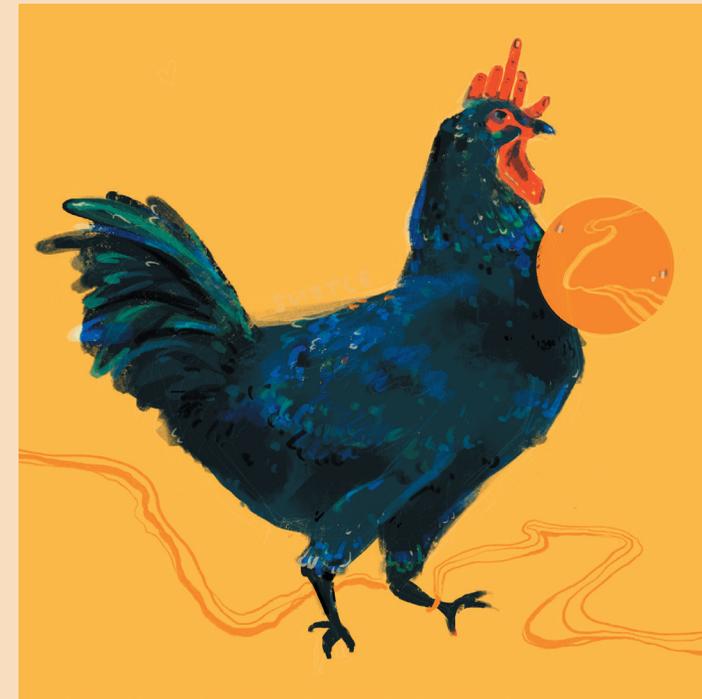
the knots in her hair. I spend time
thinking about what I can tell her

without feeling all the oceans between us
in the crests of my palm. the clouds grow heavy

with all that we don't believe anymore
and fall from the sky until I go home.



SUNRISE IN UDAIPUR
SACHI KISHINCHANDANI
acrylic on canvas



SUBTLE SHREYA JINDAL
digital artwork



ALONE

GRACE ANDREWS

brush marker on paper

我爱你

余秀华

巴巴地活着，每天打水，煮饭，按时吃药
阳光好的时候就把自己放进去，像放一块陈皮
茶叶轮换着喝：菊花，茉莉，玫瑰，柠檬
这些美好的事物仿佛把我往春天的路上带
所以我一次次按住内心的雪
它们过于洁白过于接近春天

在干净的院子里读你的诗歌。这人间情事
恍惚如突然飞过的麻雀儿
而光阴皎洁。我不适宜肝肠寸断
如果给你寄一本书，我不会寄给你诗歌
我要给你一本关于植物，关于庄稼的
告诉你稻子和稗子的区别

告诉你一棵稗子提心吊胆的
春天

余秀华 (Yu Xiuhua) is a Chinese poet. Born in 1976 in a small village in Hubei, China, she has speech and mobility difficulties due to cerebral palsy. After graduating from high school, Yu worked as a subsistence farmer. She started writing poems in 2009, and published her first poem in China's "Poetry Journal" in 2014. Her first poetry collection "The Moonlight Rests on My Left Hand" was published in 2015 and became an immediate best-seller in China.



JEALOUSY

GRACE ANDREWS

brush marker on paper

I LOVE YOU

TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE BY SELENA SHI

I live a mundane life: fetch water, cook, and take pills on time
When the sun is good I put myself in it, like a dried orange peel
I rotate my teas: chrysanthemum, jasmine, rose, and lemon
These lovely things seem to lead me on a path toward Spring
So I try again and again to repress the snow in my heart
Their pureness resembles Spring

reading your poems in a clean yard. This love story
is like a sparrow that swoops across the sky
And time is glistening. I'm not fit for such deep affliction
If I were to send you a book, I wouldn't send you poems
I would give you a book about plants, about crops, and
tell you the difference between rice and weeds

tell you the anxious heart of a weed during
Spring

低 矮

余秀华

麦子是低矮的，黄透的油菜也是
如果风不把草吹低
端着饭碗坐在田边的父亲是看不见的
麻雀打了几个旋，又落了回来
父亲说，不管哪个季节的蚂蚱都是蹦不高的

且别说一些野草野花，一些戴草帽的人
云都是低矮的，然后是白杨树
其实白杨树有几人高呢
但是被视而不见

低矮的东西风是吹不走的
父亲的六十年，我的三十八年

LOW

TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE BY SELENA SHI

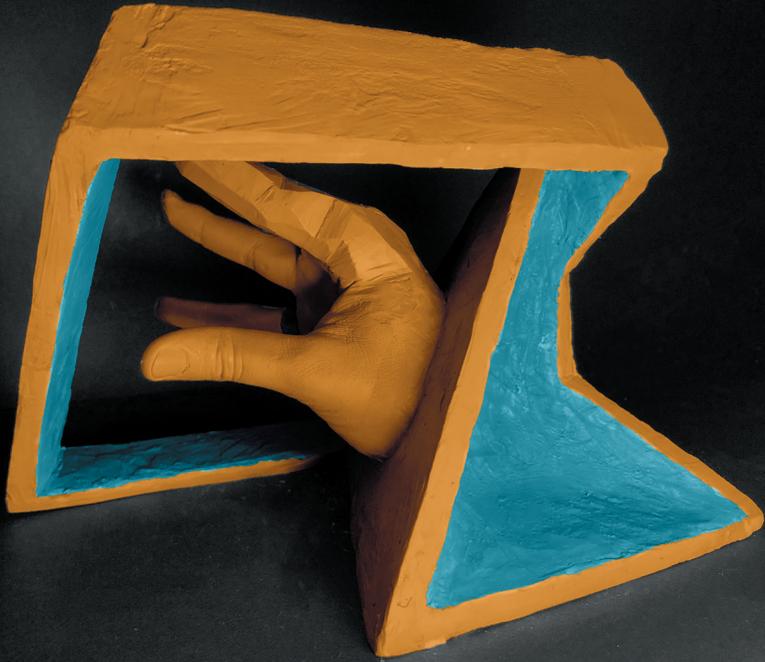
The wheat is low, so are the bright yellow rapeseed plants
If the wind does not bend the grass
my father sitting by the field with a bowl in hand, cannot be seen
Sparrows swirl a few circles in the sky, then settle back down
Father says grasshoppers cannot leap high, regardless of the season

Not just wild flowers and grass, and people wearing straw hats
Even clouds are low; then there are poplar trees
They are the height of several men
but are still overlooked

The wind cannot blow away things that are low
Father's sixty years; my thirty-eight years

—
G
R
A
S
P

NOAH JOHNSON
sculpture



99 GARGI SAMARTH

HANDS

BY GARGI SAMARTH

I wonder if we ever microchipped ourselves with homing signals and forgot

Because no matter what we're doing I find my fingers skating circles on your palms

Two binary stars, caught in limbo, in an everlasting dance

It's funny how well they fit together
(we fit together)

The Law of Universal Gravitational Attraction: we inch closer and closer and closer arms melded
it's tactile immersion

My fingers are braided into yours, palms brushing it's a back and forth you squeeze and I
squeeze, two of us, three pulses and I let my thumb wander across your knuckles

Soft, soft strokes

Our fingers wind and unwind with each caress like we were wired for it a fire crackles in the
hearth of my chest I'm

Home.



THE COLOR OF CAUTION

ASHLEY TSANG

*caution tape, watercolor,
colored pencil, and acrylic
paint*

THE WELL PATIENT

BY CALVIN CARROLL

Before clawing his way into a communications lectureship, my father twiddled his thumbs for a year as a high school English teacher. He taught seniors: a nasty, bored, and plagiarizing strain of them which infested one of the most segregated districts in San Antonio. Most were white and played a varsity sport, so their parents bought them loud signs emblazoned with their names and jersey numbers. These signs leered out at traffic from planters, devil strips, and thirsty lawns. On the first day of school, these seniors rolled into my father's classroom ready to kick back and cause trouble, only to find a teacher about as excited for high school as they were. My father knew his British literature, but freely admitted that he couldn't care less about Chaucer. Faced with a burdensome set of Texas education standards, teacher and students forged an unlikely pact to find something interesting to do with romanticism. This tenuous agreement, involving Shakespearian remixes of "California Love" and classroom sword fights between Hamlet and Laertes, saved my diminutive father from becoming his greatest fear: a hard ass. It seemed my father had finally found his calling after the trying cross-country grad-school road trip towards his teaching certificate. His students agreed.

My father and some Shiners had a celebratory Friday night the last day of school; he had just completed his first year of real teaching. He could put down roots, enjoy his summer, read what he wanted again. On Saturday morning, my father awoke to the glow of freedom from grading, departmental idiocy, and cell phones twinkling furtively under desks. My mother snored next to him, the picture of calm. He blinked and remembered he had come home with sunflower seeds and a potted Turk's cap—better get a good start on that gardening. But the first step of a good Saturday was to fetch the paper, so my father slipped into his maroon bathrobe and squeaked down the hall on sleepy, bare feet. He opened the door and blinked away the exuberant Texas sunlight. Then his face fell. The St. Augustine grass of his immaculate, albeit sun-seared, front lawn prickled with blue and yellow signs.

My father rubbed his eyes, sure he needed to just get the paper and ignore whatever misguided hallucination was visiting him. My father counted to five and then slowly opened his

eyes. Then he just stared. The fact was that my father had been yard-signed. Twenty-five of his students' yards were bereft of signs, but my father had them, and he was not happy about it. Cinching his bathrobe, he marched forward like an angry monk to survey the damage. When he saw his new plants, he stopped. From the innocent Turk's cap, smearing its once beaming red smiles, sprouted the wooden stake of "Cayden, Varsity Golf."

"You! Oh...fuck!" my father managed to spit out, dropping the few signs he had eased out of the lawn with a clatter. Bleary eyed and bath-robed, his rampage began. Cayden my father broke over his knee, Jaylen he jumped on, and Mimi he twisted until she snapped. Seeking a more efficient means of evisceration, my father scanned our yard, wild-eyed. His wood maul buttressed the side of our house, and he lugged it over, pushing aside the thought of his bright orange chainsaw huddled in its case in the garage. Forgoing shoes, a decision which could have forever altered his lecturing career, my father slammed the maul through Jennifer, Women's Soccer.

Emboldened, my father hurried over to his rusting Honda. With the key halfway in the ignition, my father started to have second thoughts. Then he saw the enormous penis spray-painted on our peeling garage door. The car screamed to the right, shooting into our freshly mown lawn. Grass seed flew as he ripped through the yard towards the most concentrated cluster of signs, scarring the browning stalks. My mother, roused by what she assumed to be a car accident, ran out of the house clutching me in her arms. She found my father backing over a six-foot-tall print of the grinning Class of 2002. Together, they bagged the splintered signs, my father still in his ridiculous bathrobe. He dumped the trash bags at the foot of the high school, a shrine to what would become his sole year as a high school English teacher. Later that day, a concerned mother called the house wondering, had my father seen Alison's Cross Country sign? "Alison," my father deadpanned, "is in the parking lot."

My father's long fuse meant a devastating explosion, terminating in a litany of expertly chosen curses. I had personally received the bristly end of my father's profane paintbrush many times, and I appreciated both his detailed style and deeply personal subject matter. Now, these outbursts were few and far between. Age had quieted my father. His notoriously long silences had lengthened, burying flashes of personality and anger beneath a topsoil of contemplation.

In return for successfully reaching puberty, some of us are permitted to transition to an adults' doctor. I enjoyed no such rite of passage at the Spring Oaks Pediatric Clinic. To this sweet-and-sickly scented establishment my father carted me off each year. Waiting in the well patient area, I towered over my fellow patients, mostly three-year-olds with whom I found a certain camaraderie. I sat on a sticky wooden bench next to a plastic truck set and watched parents coax, and then finally haul, their shrieking toddlers towards a smiling nurse. These kids were afraid of needles, a sentiment which I shared almost convulsively. But where toddlers could look forward to a popsicle after a session of extensive vaccination, I expected only thorough emasculation.

I came by my fear honestly; at the tender age of seven, I was informed I would receive a pair of shots, one in each butt cheek. The rationale for this cruel procedure is that the muscles of the butt can receive a larger volume of serum. To accommodate these half-liter injections, a much larger needle is required. One hour, three nurses, a muscular doctor, and my less muscular but mortified father later, Dr. Harper introduced her chicken pox vaccine to my sensitive buttocks. Later, my mother discovered me sobbing as I watched an episode of *The Muppet Show*, holding my throbbing rear and terrified by Ms. Piggy. Since those early days of medicine, circa 2007, researchers discovered through what I can only imagine was a noisy and entertaining study that injecting the buttocks causes nerve damage. Taken loosely, those findings explained why I lost my nerve at the sight of a needle. I was fifteen now and still Spring Oaks brought a Pavlovian soreness to each butt cheek.

Grinning cartoon characters populated the exam room where the standoff with my father began. A full size Teletubby smiled out at the two of us from each wall. I swung my legs back and forth over the yaw of my tissue paper perch, chewing my cheek. I hardly inconvenienced the blue vinyl with my weight. My father's smile twitched in and out of existence, blinking at me across the stained linoleum. Silent but wholly attentive, I waited for my father to arrive at a topic of conversation. That he almost never did was a reminder that, despite a decade as a communications professor, my father remained a criminally awful conversationalist.

I figured that talking to his son was a skill my father needed to learn sooner or later, so I routinely tortured him. Safe on the examination table, I watched my father launch himself

into finding some tidbit, some question, anything, for our mutual consideration. His eyebrows bobbed and flapped under the strain, a bedraggled fledgling hungry for lift. It would take several minutes for him to gain height. While my father thought, he murmured. It was a low rumble, soft and tentative, rising and falling as he abseiled towards decision. His lips twitched as half-baked questions stuck in his throat and thrummed in crescendo. Each lip twitch pushed some thought onto the tip of his tongue where it, terrified, clawed its way back down his throat and leapt into the abyss of his stomach. My father's thoughts preferred a fiery death astride his latest BLT to risking the journey past his lips.

Looking at my father, I noticed, as I frequently did, that he had grown old. His hair had whitened since I'd last looked, pale tones brushed carefully into a peppery black. As a young man, he had sported innocent, tight, blond curls. A picture on our fridge of my father as a teenager showed shoulder length hair and a goofy grin at a new fishing pole. In college, his hair mysteriously darkened to jet, the timeless charm of blondness stealing away into the night. With age, scraggly strands bleached of pigment climbed hand over hand up his temples, returning them to their former color.

The most inoffensive person I knew, my father remained perpetually on high alert for his potential to insult. The machines and people in my father's life he saw as delicate, demanding study and precaution before handling. He shaved his personality down, hid it away, watched his words. My father ordered food and drove with a timidity I felt only when talking to girls. Our bulky Dell my father approached with caution, peering over the rim of his cheaters with gritted teeth, as if defusing a bomb. It hurt me to see that my teenage years wore heavily on my father. I fought with him only in the presence of my mother, saving face.

An apologetic smile played across my father's face like a familiar dirge, signifying his empty-handed return from a longer-than-usual dumpster dive for conversational material. I watched gloomily; my apathy afforded me cruel inaction. It would be easy to spark a conversation, but I feared risking an onset of my father's murmuring, sure that it was the sound of his mind disintegrating. Often, driving to basketball practice and birthday parties, I would draw out our conversational droughts over fifteen excruciating minutes. On the off chance my father broke the ice, I turned to unflinching teenage dismissiveness. "Fine" worked invariably but "good" invited further questions. My father learned to let my grunted affirmations



**UNCLE MIKE AT
THE PAYPHONE**

MALLORY NEWBERN

*colored pencil, acrylic paint,
and chalk pastel on paper*

scare him back into silence.

Beneath my father's attempts at pleasantry lay a mental notecard etched with a black ball-point into his head by my mother. My father traditionally took forty minutes after dinner to study and then decide against the *Times* crossword. When my mother sensed my father's despair, he received his marching orders. Shouted reminders through darkened rooms and memos in my mother's jarring scribble scratched her concerns about me into his memory. Cued by five minutes of silence, it was to these carefully prepared speaking points that my father returned. My father watched the square tiles on the floor with intrigue. He wrinkled his nose as he warmed up to the pitch. I knew if I stared at him I could scare him into balking, but I didn't want to hurt his feelings.

"There were two things mom wanted us to ask Dr. Harper," he ventured, wiggling his two most peaceful fingers like a jazzy Richard Nixon. Translated, my father meant that failure to complete my mother's agenda threatened an appearance of his unparalleled conversational reticence. I could not submit Dr. Harper to this.

My father desperately needed to unload my mother's laundry list, so he had my attention for the moment. This in hand, he enumerated my two most pressing medical shortcomings. Number one was simple, and I was not ashamed of it.

"We've got to ask about your posture?"

"I know, Dad," I said, instinctively sitting up straighter. I had grown to be a serial sloucher. I drew my shoulders into a snarled hunch nearly every time I was afforded the opportunity. In *Ripley's 1001 Cool Facts* I read that a man loses three centimeters in height in the course of his day. The cartilage in the hips and spine contracts as uncompromising bone pulls the vertebrae into a barely visible slouch. Determined to outdo the entire male sex at the ripe age of fifteen, I achieved the requisite three centimeter reduction as soon as I got out of bed.

My second health problem was of a more intimate and painful nature. Tightening the thumbscrews, my father seemed to have forgotten it.

"Was it your weight?" he tried. I stared at the red Teletubby.

"My nipples. They're...they're puffy, Dad." With alarming synchronicity, our eyes slid to stare at my chest. From my too-tight white undershirt poked two mounds of puffy flesh. Months of panicked inspection and aggravation had left each truffle of skin red and angry.

Each cheerily broadcasted its precise large size and odd shape to the public. It was as though, in lieu of expensive breast implants, two cherry pits had been subcutaneously inserted.

For six months I had bravely endured the constant pain shifting cotton shirts brought, not to mention the social castration of the locker room and the public pool. I attributed my mediocrity as a basketball player entirely to rebellious nipples; each post-up brought a stinging pang. Close examination revealed not only the unique shade of pink each nipple featured but that size, shape, and hue fluctuated on a weekly cycle. Handed a towering laundry basket by my mother, I involuntarily revealed the state of my sensitive chest. News of my nipples traveled through the marital grapevine into my father's lap, where it lay, ashamed of itself. I expected a rousing nipple debate to come, and already I could see my father tacking towards the topic.

Dr. Harper fluttered into the room, adding a third to the coming exploration of my dermatology. Loud and severely Texan, she had a notorious mean-streak that played against her gracefulness, like a songbird set to the tune of efficiency.

"Dad, you stay over there, I know you and Mom have questions for me," Dr. Harper said with a wary glance at my father. "Howdy, Mr. Jones!" I shook her hand. "Let's take a look at how you're coming along," she continued, sizing me up impatiently. There was not much to size up. Despite attaining a respectable six-foot-three, my overactive metabolism had steadfastly maintained my weight at 120 pounds since age twelve. Slinging side-eyes at my father, Dr. Harper proclaimed me dangerously underweight. Then, with the condition that "only me and your parents can touch you here," she informed me upon inspection that I remained a human male. I tried to ignore my father's tense grin as Dr. Harper performed her biopsy. My nipples she poked one by one and then simultaneously. The doctor stepped back and tilted her head appraisingly, then declared my puffy nipples strictly the collateral damage of puberty.

"The swelling will drain in a few months," she assured me, "Or, they'll become cancerous." She flitted to my left abdomen with her stethoscope as I avoided my father's bemused gaze. He recorded Dr. Harper's wisdom in a journal I had made for art class when I was six. A red eyed clown glowered from its mug shot on the cover, more the result of artistic ineptitude than childhood depravity.

LOST AND FOUND

NIDA FATIMA

gouache, water, and polycolors on watercolor sheet



“What’s happening is actually fascinating!” Dr. Harper put her hand on my shoulder. “Your hormones are fluctuating, and your circulatory system gets really excited. So, your brain,” she pointed to her head educationally, “starts telling your breast tissue to grow, grow, grow.” Each stage of growth translated as a larger concentric circle, Dr. Harper’s nitrile gloves tracking white hoops through the air.

“Okay, go ahead and stand up, and we’ll see how your back is doing. I’m sure it’s not too...” she trailed off. While I preoccupied myself with the prospect of growing miniscule breasts, Dr. Harper was witnessing the slouching performance of a lifetime. She clucked around me, diagramming, measuring, plotting.

“You’re a pretty tall guy, Arty, but your little muscles haven’t caught up to your big bones. Your body is doing a lot of extra work to keep you upright.” Dr. Harper narrowed her eyes. “If I had to guess, it’d be a lack of core strength. That’s what we call ‘abs’, and yours are a little...Well, you haven’t got any,” she said. “Make a muscle.” While I debated telling her I had been trying to do just that for years, Dr. Harper poked around my hips. She tutted and looked conspiratorially at my father. My abs quivered and shrank from her touch, the unwilling guilty party in my gangly unshapeliness.

I wished I could be alone. My body betrayed me at every turn, trading off comfort for strange angles and blocky knees. Apparently, I was doing my best to grow potentially cancerous breasts. And I was already well on my way to becoming a hunchback. The female Quasimodo, I thought. Quasimoda.

“Hm?” Dr. Harper asked, stethoscope against my back. I realized I had been muttering. “Let’s see you roll your shoulders back, sweetie,” she said. I obliged, pushing my shoulders back

and wincing as two soldiers stood at attention through my t-shirt.

“Now,” Dr. Harper said, immensely pleased with herself, “eat your shorts!” She waited.

“What—does that mean?” I fumbled out.

“Eat your—” Dr. Harper energetically scooped her hands forward. She appeared to be juicing two large grapefruits, hardly comparable in shape to my nearly concave buttocks. I relented and tried out her method, feeling my back jump a few inches. My shorts scrunched reflexively backwards, and I leaned to see my new, straighter posture in the window. I wondered what other tricks Dr. Harper had learned at the University of Missouri: Kansas City School of Medicine.

“So much better,” Dr. Harper purred. “Whenever you feel your back slouching, eat your shorts!” My father’s pen scratched in his clown journal. I could hardly believe my luck at being attended by such a surreal pair, one demanding I clench up and the other reporting for Barnum & Bailey.

“Now, Dad.” My father blinked up at Dr. Harper. “It’s time for me and Arty to have a little talk. You can wait outside.” She smiled at me knowingly. My father began by dropping his pen, then tried to negotiate his way out the door with a full stack of ungraded essays. Doctor and patient watched the door ease shut behind him, latch bumping against the metal frame and clicking in. Dr. Harper stared at me appraisingly and I wished my father had resisted being shooed.

“Arty. I looked over your survey.” She hesitated, smiling at me with the same detective’s suspicion my mother practiced. “Everything is looking good. You seem to be doing very well.” I had clicked through an iPad which asked me how much meth I smoked, on average, per week, in the last six months and, for the sexual partners I had encountered, had I used protection? I always felt I had disappointed Dr. Harper since she supplemented my “never” answers with tales of chlamydia-ridden teenage weed addicts.

“But you did mark that you have been having some violent thoughts. For suicidal thoughts you marked ‘somewhat agree,’ and when we asked about whether you ever thought about killing someone else, you marked ‘neutral.’” She laughed. “Neutral, huh. Sometimes I wouldn’t mind killing some of those I-10 drivers.” Dr. Harper cleared her throat while I watched this joke flounder on the linoleum. “But what I see here is that you’re maybe having some suicidal



**SLEEPING
BEAUTY**
CELESTE WANG
charcoal

thoughts?” Dr. Harper leaned against the door, arms crossed.

“Oh. No, I don’t. I didn’t.” My fingers twisted furiously in my lap, popping and stretching and breaking into song. I wouldn’t take no for an answer; if I couldn’t pop a joint I’d work at it until it relented at some unnatural angle. I pondered this as my thumbnail found a new home ninety degrees to the left of its normal position.

“Arty, for ‘do you have a plan’ you pushed ‘somewhat agree.’” She watched for a reaction to this news. I fought the urge to glance up and when I did, I had to look at the yellow Teletubby instead and pretend Dr. Harper wasn’t studying me.

“I’m not worried. Well I am. Not about you. About what that could mean, you know, for your future.”

I nodded. “I know. It would definitely affect my future.”

“Right, exactly. You might, you know, have to cancel some plans. And it would be really hard for everyone who loves you.” Again, she waited for me to respond, but I couldn’t say anything, and now the yellow Teletubby looked disappointed, so there was that to deal with on top of everything.

Dr. Harper switched course. “Okay, look, Arty, I can’t tell your dad any of this, and I don’t want to. But if you’re feeling hopeless, or really unhappy, or just feel like something is going wrong at home, I need to know right now.” She tapped her nails on the clipboard. I massaged my left index finger, hoping to coax out a pop. I knew that the popping noise came from bubbles formed in interstitial fluid between the joint and the bone, so I needed to get the pressure just right.

“I’m okay.” My pinkie clicked as I pushed on the knuckle. “It’s just school. School is...hard. You know? A lot of stress. And, extracurriculars. Lots of extracurriculars.”

“Arty, I can either recommend you see a counselor, or not. Which is it?”

“I’ll be okay. I promise. I just need to get through the year. School.” Dr. Harper squinted at my survey results, looking for corroborating evidence. Nothing—I didn’t seem to have any problems in school, at home, with drugs, and no family history of suicide.

“Good. That’s just fine,” she said, checking boxes, wrapping things up. “You can put your shoes on now, you’re done.”

Outside, my father started, and his glasses slid down his nose. He shook her hand, then

watched Dr. Harper retreat. I waited.

“Hey, sport,” it came, cozy and firm, removed but friendly. It called up bad days: black eyes, bad grades, dead pets. Déjà vu scratched at the back of my head and I seized it, squirming, and remembered a brisk December afternoon in sixth grade. Middle schoolers were released at four each day, either to ride the bus or to wait across the street for our parents. My father turned onto the street where I sat, nose red from tears and cold, two hours late. The chain of command had malfunctioned and the message that I should ride the bus home had slipped through the cracks. Unaware of these parental dealings, I sat on the curb as the after-school carpool crowd thinned. I shrunk from the chill into my enormous, puffy, orange coat. “Mountain Climber” had been stitched into its breast pocket above a smiling bear, yet I had never even been camping.

For an hour I patiently watched the main road in front of the school, sniffing on stray snot liberated by the cold wind. Suddenly, I saw my mother’s silver minivan. My mother flew by the school, heading North on Loyola, sending me running after her, backpack flopping. It smacked against fresh bruises on my back, a painful pendulum, as I sprinted towards the busy street. “Mom!” I shouted, waving my arms. A scowling soccer mom ushered her third grader inside a screen door. My mother sped past, bowed deferentially towards the windshield as she glared at the rush hour crowd.

I stopped, caught in a moment of realization; my invisibility could only be explained by my passage to the next life. I could hardly believe it. My father had shown me Sixth Sense that Saturday. Admittedly, my apparent demise was hard to accept at first. But as my second hour on the sidewalk approached its end, M. Night Shyamalan and Bruce Willis seemed more and more believable. My father’s Honda civic sputtered up just as I began to appreciate the poetry of haunting the junior school for eternity. I glared at my father. Tears threaded their warm stitching down my cheeks. My dad extricated himself from the rusting driver’s door, worried and sheepish. “Hey, sport,” he began.

VISITORS

BY ELLA MALENA FELDMAN

I can't remember where I put my keys
or the name of that movie we saw two weeks ago
but the other day I was chopping an onion
when I remembered the bend in the road in Berkeley
foggy twilight on my tongue as
my body lurched forward, all sweat and bliss
toward the playground that sat at the edge of the world.

I started to laugh, and across the counter you
fingered a cherry tomato. Maybe in ten years
the memory of you tossing the crimson fruit into the air and
catching it between your teeth
will pay me an unexpected visit, too.

DIVING
WOMAN

MAGGIE YUAN

colored
pencil





HOLLOW SPACES
ELIZA GAVIRIA
photography

IN BED

BY EMILY CHANG

She falls asleep wearing her contacts.

When she wakes the next morning, there's a distinct feeling of something wrong. Claudia struggles to open her eyes, the feeling of something solid, something dry rubbing against her retina. They burn as she squints at the lines of sunlight projected onto the plaster wall opposite her. Her eyelids shut, protesting the jarring pain. A weight of shame accompanies—the same shame she feels when she neglects to recycle a plastic cup or when she forgets to wear her retainer at night.

She also forgot to wear her retainer last night.

Eventually, she stumbles into the bathroom, one hand massaging her eyelids while the other trails the wall, feeling for the light switch. When the blackness surrounding her becomes tinged orange-red, she pulls back her right eyelid and removes the offending contact. She repeats this with the left eye. Immediately after, her eyes still sting, so she wanders back to the bed blind.

By now, Wes has started to stir. She hears

the cheap hotel sheets rustle, and it grates against ears accustomed to silent, loved-by-time blankets. Still—she tumbles back into bed, burrowing close to the mass of warmth. She nudges her nose into the expanse between his shoulders and matches her breathing to his. She could stay like this forever, in those stolen moments of the morning when the day hasn't started—not yet, not really—and time feels stationary.

“We should get breakfast,” Wes says. It comes out raspy, shrouded by sleep and sticky from a passing cold. He coughs to clear his throat.

Wes rolls around to face Claudia. Claudia can see now; she can't read the red lines of the digital clock on the night stand behind Wes, but she can read his face. She can map the slope of his browbone, count his lengthy eyelashes, draw the shape of his lips. This is enough.

“Let's go.”

•

Claudia and Wes don't find the elevator so much as stumble upon it. The hotel hallways seem a maze, especially in the morning, when eyes, brains are adjusting.

They share the elevator with an older couple who look nothing like the typical patrons for a hotel of this caliber. The husband wears a white dress shirt, a gaudy belt holding up his pressed black slacks. His patent-leather shoes fade through different shades of brown, and a fat, regal watch rests on his wrist. The wife dons a cashmere sweater, with a gold chain ending with a large green jewel that trails down to her navel. She wears white pants and nude pumps that glisten despite the dimly lit elevator.

Claudia, meanwhile, sports an old high school t-shirt, so large that it covers her shorts. Her hair knots on the top of her head, an after-thought of a bun. Smudged glasses shoved onto the bridge of her nose after the mishap of this morning. And Wes wears a college sweatshirt, the letters across the chest crackle and the sleeves have holes.

The elevator labors from the fourth floor to the lobby, and the longer Claudia spends in the elevator, the more she wonders why this affluent couple chose this hotel. Perhaps the appearance is merely a façade; perhaps this was mistakenly booked by a now-fired assistant, perhaps they own the hotel company and are surveying the location. Only in the morning could Claudia have the imagination to wonder such things.

When the elevator jolts into position and the doors slide open, Wes and Claudia allow the elusive couple to exit first. All four of them head towards the complimentary breakfast, located in what appears to be a sitting lounge that could double as a dining room. Along the

walls are swathes of multi-colored fruit, steaming eggs, potatoes, and juicy sausages. A small cereal bar and an assortment of muffins, scones, and bagels. Even a small window opens into a kitchen, where a chef dressed in white serves omelets and a waffle maker drizzled with batter makes waffles the shape of Texas.

Here is where the two couples part—the older tend toward the fruit, while the younger heap their plates with crispy potatoes. Claudia slathers her potatoes with ketchup, grabs a small carton of 1% milk, and wanders into the dining area. It's early, but people occupy most of the space. Dull conversation hangs in the room, a light buzz to accompany the commentary of the local morning news playing from a TV suspended over the bar.

Claudia sidles up to two empty barstools. She perches on one, her feet dangling over the floor as she digs into the potatoes. She places her napkins next to her in a way that doesn't quite imply that she is saving the seat beside her, but might dissuade anyone looking for a place to eat.

When Wes finally joins her, it's with two plates in hand, one with potatoes and eggs, and the other a stack of two waffles. The one on the bottom is a sad thing—edges singed and resembling the outline of a paint splatter that a first grader would draw—that appears nothing like Texas. The other is significantly better—with graceful edges and a nice golden-brown tone throughout. It is the latter waffle that Wes transfers to Claudia's plate.

“What happened to that one?” Claudia says, around a mouth of hot eggs.

“There was a learning curve,” Wes says.

Claudia laughs.

•

Wes and Claudia return to their room: 421.

When they'd received their room keys—carefully tucked into a colorful envelope, the number 421 written across the top in blue ball-point pen—they'd shared a glance and then later a laugh in the protection of the elevator.

They are both adults, but sometimes the humor of a pre-pubescent teen prevails, and sometimes that is okay.

Claudia goes for a shower. The showerhead spits out water at a depressing velocity—even worse than communal college showers. Claudia doesn't spite the hotel for it, but she does spend five extra minutes washing out her shampoo.

She steps out of the shower, wrapping a soft towel around her torso. The towels are per-

haps one of the redeeming qualities of this hotel, Claudia thinks. The towels and the waffles shaped like Texas. The air in the cramped bathroom is sticky with moisture, and Claudia can't tell if the droplets trailing down her forehead are sweat or shower water. The mirror has fogged. Claudia almost swipes at it to see her reflection, but then she extends her right index finger and writes a looping message while her other hand clutches to keep the towel up.

I love you.

Claudia steps back out into the room. Wes sits on the couch, tapping away at his laptop. The TV hums in the background, turned to some history channel.

With hair sticking to the slope of her neck and nothing on under the towel, Claudia sandwiches herself between Wes and the arm of the couch. Wes shifts his laptop to avoid any water damage from Claudia's dripping. Claudia reads his work from over his shoulder, folding her feet underneath her.

It's his debut novel—or at least, what they both hope will be his debut novel. Whenever Claudia asks what the story is about, Wes responds with vague declarations: it's about youth; hope; nothing happens and yet everything happens; love; lost time. From the excerpts that Claudia reads—late at night when Wes has gone to sleep and left his laptop open, the cursor in his text editor blinking despondently—she's surmised that it's about two young boys, childhood friends, who fall in and out of love over a summer. It's heart wrenching.

Wes finishes a sentence and closes his laptop. It makes a satisfying slapping sound, and Wes shoves it over to another cushion on the couch before standing up and stretching.

"I'm gonna shower?" Wes says, the end of sentence tilting up in question. Like he's still pondering the action himself.

"Yes, *please*," Claudia says. "You smell like sweat."

"You don't like it?" Wes says, boxing her head with his arms, so that either way she turns she comes face to face with his underarms.

Claudia pushes him away; her damp hands leave dark marks on his sweatshirt.

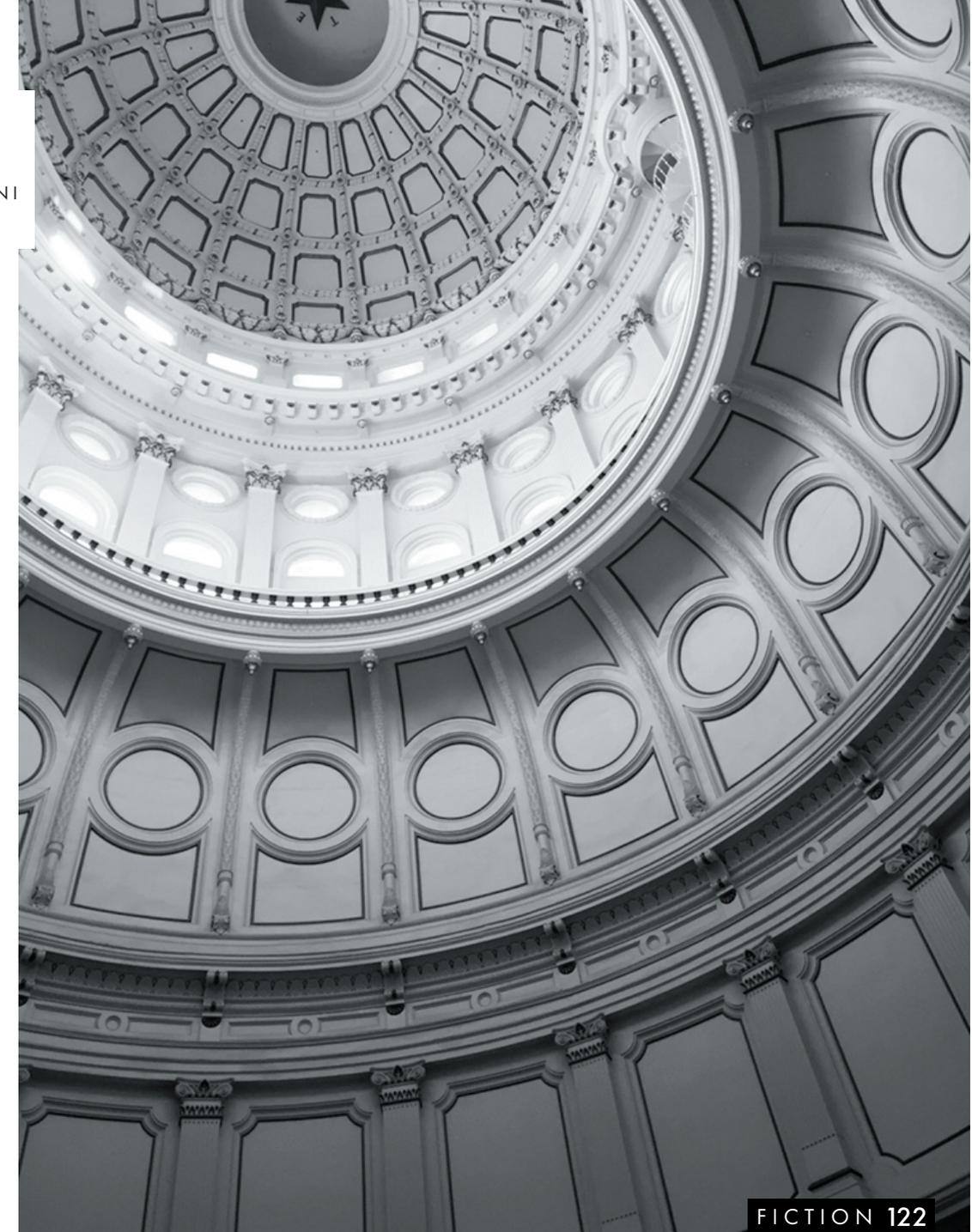
"Go!"

Wes leads them to the hotel's parking garage, to their bright blue Honda Civic rental car. He presses on the keys, and the car squawks to life. Claudia settles into the passenger seat, plugging her phone into the AUX cord and scrolling through her playlists for one that matches the tone of the day. She adjusts the AC so that the vents fill the car with a light, dutiful breeze.

**CAPITOL
AT 9 AM**

SACHI
KISHINCHANDANI

photography



Wes backs out of the spot, wrapping his arm around the back of Claudia's headrest. His head swivels back and forth as he checks for any surprise cars turning the corners. There's something undeniably attractive about the way Wes drives—something about the duality between his attention when making a complete stop at a four-way, hands stiff at 10 and 2, and his nonchalance while cruising down a highway at 80 miles per hour, left elbow leaning against the driver door and fingers resting near his temple as his right hand cradles the bottom of the steering wheel. Perhaps this is why Claudia always insists that Wes drive: so she can watch him ebb and flow from tense to relaxed.

"Make a left," Claudia says when Wes reaches the threshold of the parking garage. "Then turn right onto Richmond."

•

Claudia guides them to an art museum. The building is a sprawling celebration of Roman architecture—tall pillars, intricate carvings, and pockets of holes weathered away. They take their time climbing the steps, intertwined hands swinging between them. It's a Tuesday afternoon—not many people populate the destination, which is perfect in Claudia's opinion. She wants the time.

They spend plenty of time alone—just the two of them. But there's a difference between occupying a small studio apartment together and commanding an entire museum. It's the scale, and the feeling of sharing the moments with the world at large—like an affirmation of existence, that someone else cares whether you smile or cry or laugh in the vastness of the universe.

Claudia and Wes buy two overpriced general admission tickets. The receptionist hands them a receipt, a pamphlet of the featured exhibit (*Edgar Degas*), a map, and then two red stickers embossed with the museum's emblem.

"Wear these while you're in the museum," the receptionist intones. "Somewhere visible."

She hovers as they both press the stickers into their chests and then returns to staring at her monitor, seemingly satisfied with the location of their stickers.

"Enjoy," she says, without looking up.

They travel over another set of stairs to enter the main gallery. Formidable granite walls, tall ceilings decorated like the frescoes in Italy. Paintings hang from the walls, swathed in gilded, swooping frames and protected by velvet ropes. Sculptures with missing limbs but otherwise smooth surfaces sit in the corners, contemplating the museum patrons just as

keenly as the patrons observe them.

"Should we just walk around? Or should we make a game plan—?" Claudia says. Her voice is soft, a proper library-museum-approved volume.

"Nah," Wes says, something like a grin ghosts his face. "Let's just go with the flow, yeah?"

Claudia folds the map into a half and then a quarter and slips the paper into her purse. She reaches out for Wes's hand, lets him lead her to the first painting.

They wander the museum for hours. Wes makes the hard decisions—left or right, Art of Asia or Art of the Islamic World—and Claudia reads the small white cards beside each display out loud. Somewhere between Prints & Drawings and the Edgar Degas exhibit, Wes directs them towards a garden painting reminiscent of Monet, when—

Claudia halts, tugging Wes back. She's suspended in front of a painting of a man and woman in bed facing each other, covers and red blanket pulled up to their chins. Their pillows are upright, like they began the night sitting up in conversation and slowly sank into sleep. The man's eyes could be closed, could be the slightest bit open—just enough to watch his lover slumber. Claudia runs over every contour of the painting, the brush strokes that hint at impressionism, the red blanket that so resembles the quilt she and Wes share when they watch movies late at night.

Wes pulls Claudia into an embrace, wrapping his arms around her stomach. His lips and hot breath ghost her temple.

"That looks like our blanket," he says.

She feels him smile. She closes her eyes and nods.

"*In Bed*," Wes reads. "By Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Post-impressionism."

"Can you—" Claudia starts. "Shh."

Wes stays silent, hugging Claudia close.

"I love you."

•

They eat late lunch/early dinner from the museum cafeteria. Sandwiches that come in plastic boxes with a bag of chips and a small cup of fruit and a bottle of water. They sit outside, in chairs of black iron swirls, on a patio that overlooks an endless green lawn. The sky is a watercolor of blues—cobalt fading into periwinkle into cerulean, with wisps of white dotted in between. A dainty yellow umbrella, outlined in white, shades them from the sunlight, its edges wafting to the light breeze.



THE
ORIGAMI
TATO

VALERIE SWE
origami paper

“Do you have a title yet?” Claudia says.

“I don’t even have a story.”

“Don’t,” Claudia says. “You’re not a self-pitying writer.”

“Yet,” Wes says. “It’s depressing, isn’t it?” He stabs at a square of pineapple. His plastic spork barely responds, and he resorts to using his fingers.

“Life? Yes.”

“I meant being a writer for a living, but sure—life, too.”

“There’s the little things, though,” Claudia says, watching Wes toss a grape and catch it in his mouth. He holds his arms out in triumph, eyes wide. Claudia laughs and applauds.

There’s no one else there, save a museum worker wiping at a window. Claudia rotates her wrist, just enough that she can’t see the sliver of a second hand, ticking away the time.

When they return to the hotel, the sun has retreated to the horizon, disrupting the blues with hues of crimson and orange. It reminds Claudia of the painting, of the red blanket, of their quilt. Wes parks. He shuts off the car, removes the key and pockets it.

They linger in a car for a moment as it decompresses—as *they* decompress. The car has an artificial *new car smell*. Claudia wonders if there’s some car freshener company out there that has capitalized on the public’s love of new car smell. She wonders.

Wes rests his hand on Claudia’s thigh, his thumb rubbing absentminded arches across her jeans. She places her hand on top of his, mimicking the action with her own thumb.

“That was fun,” Wes says.

“Yeah,” Claudia says. “I’m really glad we did this.”

It could be minutes, hours, even weeks later—cars can do that sometimes: suspend time. In the morning perhaps, on a commute to work, cars only waste time. But on the weekends when there’s less to do and more to see, or late at night when everything is darkness except for the glowing AC buttons—

Minutes later, they leave the car.

They find the elevator with ease. When it arrives and the doors slide open, Claudia sees the couple from the morning. They too look like they just returned from a day out. The woman’s hair has lost some of its life, lying flat against her scalp. The man’s pants are creased near the knees. They look older, worn out.

Claudia and Wes enter the elevator, turn around with their backs to the couple. Claudia continues to watch them in the muted, distorted reflection of the elevator doors. The couple stands a few inches apart, just close enough to imply a relationship but far enough that Claudia feels a wave of sadness. Maybe they are at the hotel because they have to be. Because they made vows—*to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part*.

The elevator reaches the fourth floor.

Claudia and Wes step out. Wes walks towards 421. Claudia hesitates. Before the doors

close, she looks back.

“Have a good night,” she says.

“You too,” says the woman. Polite. Perfunctory. A societal impulse. But her voice is softer than Claudia expects, less assertive.

The doors close, and Claudia follows Wes.

The drive to the airport is silent. There is no playlist for the tone of this day. Wes drives with two hands on the steering wheel, 10 and 2. Claudia clasps her own hands in her lap. Wes doesn’t ask her to guide him. He looked over the route during breakfast this morning: Texas-shaped waffles and warm eggs.

He exits the highway and navigates to short-term parking using the airport signs. He parks—the blue Honda Civic rental—and they get out. He helps Claudia take her suitcase out of the trunk. It’s a large suitcase, heavier than 50 pounds. She’ll have to pay extra to check it.

Claudia moves to grab the handle of the suitcase, but Wes keeps his hand grasped around it. He begins walking towards the airport entrance.

Claudia trails behind. She checks her watch. Her flight is at 4:00 in the afternoon. They arrived two and a half hours early.

Time matters at an airport.

Wes waits near the monitors for Arrivals and Departures. Leans against the wall and crouches over his phone. Claudia stands in line to get her boarding pass and to check her bag. When she reaches the desk, the attendant smiles kindly at her. Rows of pristine white teeth surrounded by fiery red lipstick.

“I like your watch!” she exclaims, nodding down at the ornament on Claudia’s wrist.

“Thank you,” Claudia says. Polite. Perfunctory.

It had been a gift—from Wes. Two Christmases ago.

“Enjoy your flight!”

Claudia returns to Wes with more than her backpack weighing on her shoulders. Her eyes burn, and she is reminded of yesterday morning. She wears glasses today—it’ll be a while before she risks contacts again. Her throat feels sticky, small. When Wes looks up at her, really looks at her, the first tear spills down her cheek. She feels it in her chest now—tight and raw.

“Hey, hey,” Wes says, and in the years of knowing him, she has never heard him try so hard

to sound OK.

He wraps her in his arms, in the musky scent of his body wash, in memories that brim with bliss. She remembers the first time they shared a hug, back when the slightest touch ignited a flame within her stomach. Now—the flame is everywhere, from the tips of her ears to her toes.

Eventually—

She lets go.

“I just—I just wanted you to know—” she chokes on the words.

Wes looks—devastated. Claudia can’t do this. They shouldn’t have come here. This stolen trip. She should’ve just left. She shouldn’t have dragged it out.

“I know,” Wes says. “I know.”

But does he? Does he know that last night, after they began the night with their pillows propped up and just before they fell asleep, when Wes got up to go the bathroom, Claudia took the batteries out of her watch? The hour hand poised just after 1, the minute hand suspended at 6, and the second hand wavering between 1 and 2? Does he know?

“You’re going to miss your flight,” he says.

“Next summer,” Claudia says. “Next summer, I’ll walk into the bookstore, and your book will be the first thing I see. On the table they put at the front for best-sellers.”

“I don’t even have a title,” Wes says.

“I wish we had more time,” Claudia says.

“You’re going to miss your flight.”

Claudia turns around, and she walks away.

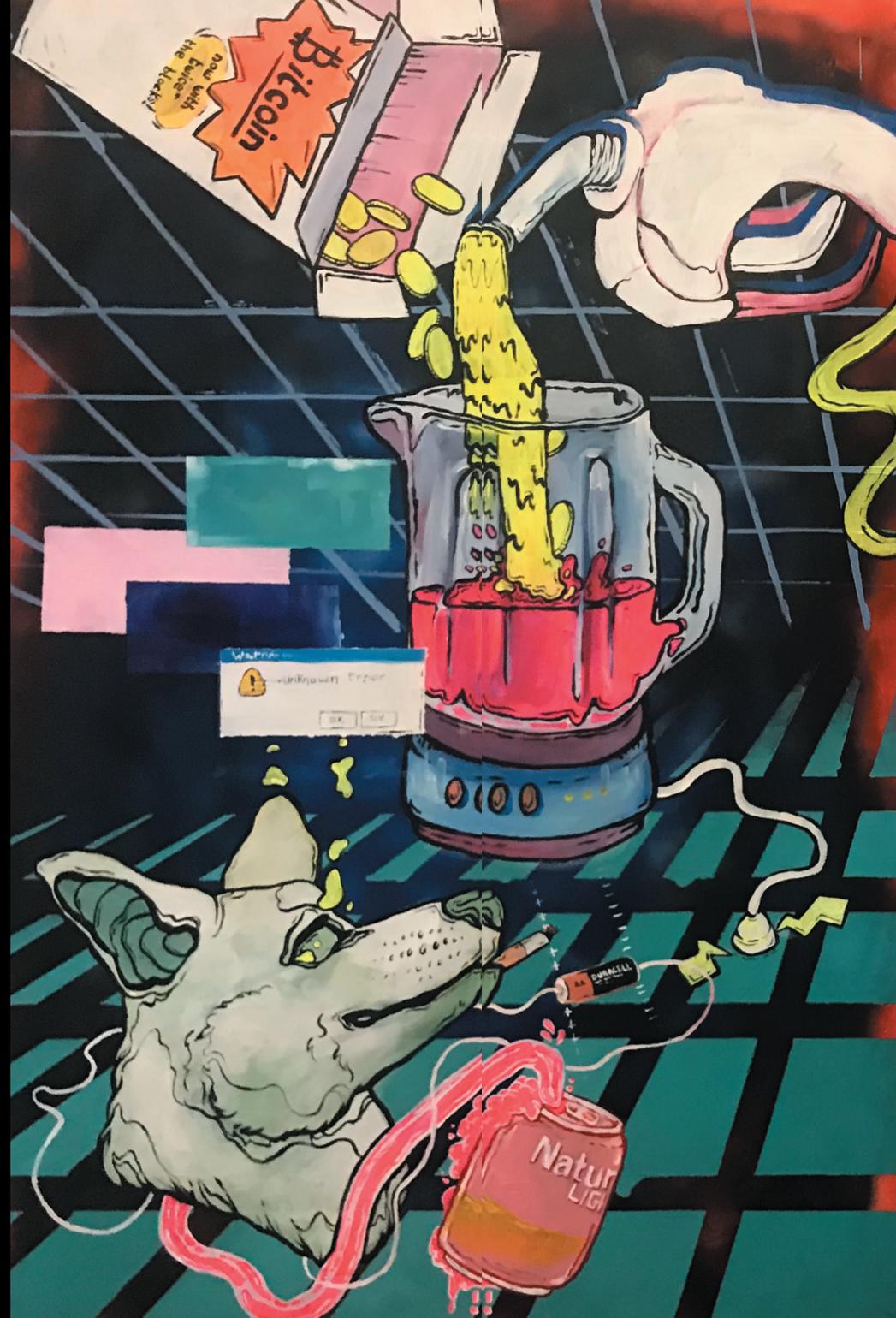
SWEET VICES

BY SEAN MCCORMICK

Sweet smell of cigarettes swellin within
Smells like Christmas and kickin with friends
Weed, seeds, leaves, and stems
Comes second to my main Marlboro Man

And though my vices hold me in vice grips
I still light up when
Reminisce

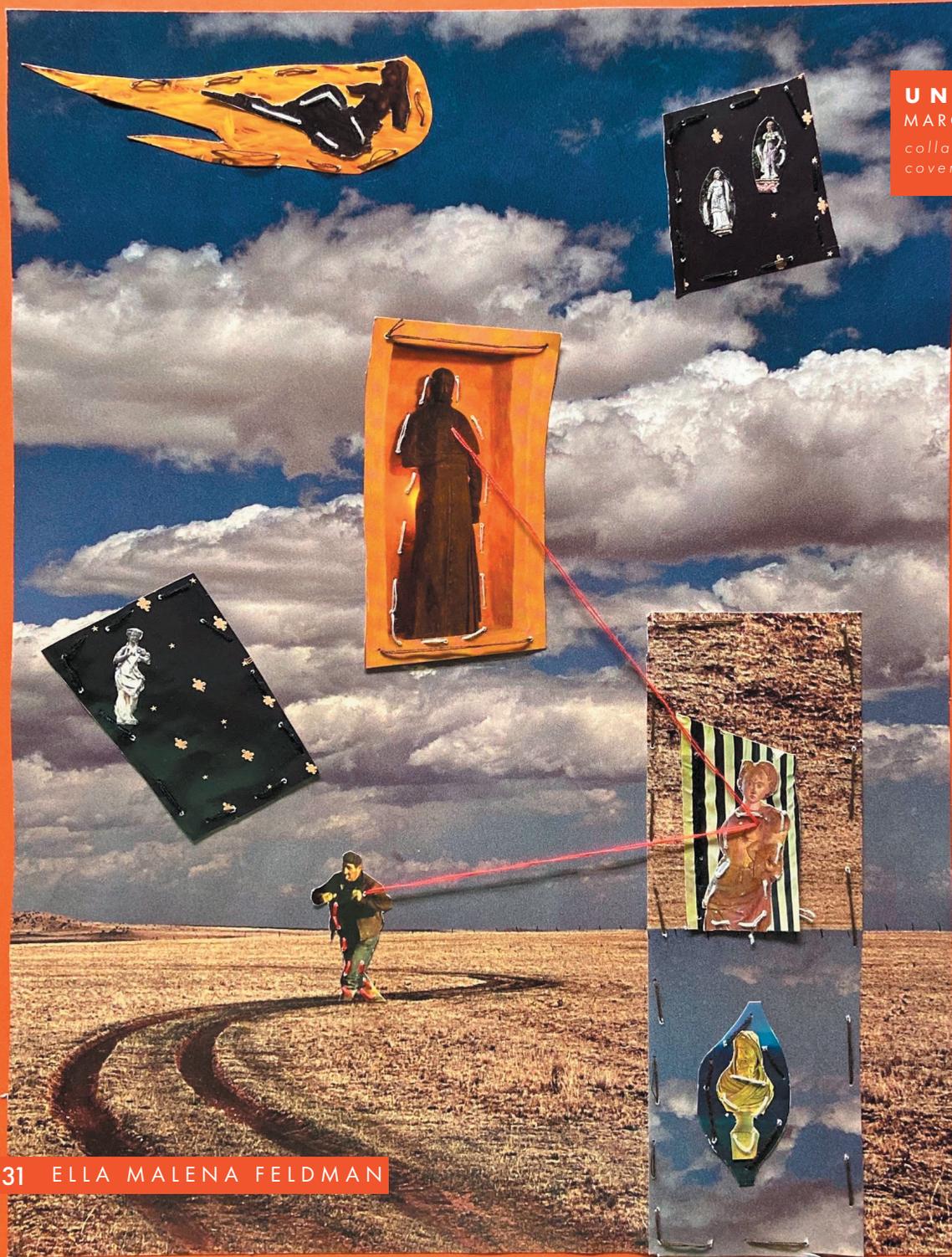
2am, LED's dimmin
Waxin poetic while we flicked embers
Can't help but remember
What fizzed out, smoldered, and cindered



CAPITALISM BREAKFAST SMOOTHIE

ABIGAIL KING acrylic and spray paint





UNTETHERED
MARCUS TIERRABLANCA
collage, paper on book
cover, glue, and string

THE RED NOTEBOOK

BY ELLA MALENA FELDMAN

The American writer Paul Auster is best known for his postmodernist novels, but I was introduced to him with a book called *The Red Notebook*, which my friend Sophie gifted me one Christmas in high school. Unlike most of Auster's work, the book is thin and light, the kind of thing you could imagine picking up and thumbing through while waiting to check out at a bookstore.

The Red Notebook is filled with true stories—events which have either happened to Auster himself or have been recounted to him by friends and acquaintances. The stories feature all sorts of people and situations, but are connected by one theme: the magic of coincidence.

In one story, a friend of Auster's has spent several months trying to track down a fairly rare book, when he sees a woman reading it at a subway station. He tells her how long he's been looking for it, and she tells him that as a matter of fact, she just finished reading it seconds ago. She gives it to him to keep. In one of my favorite anecdotes, Auster describes how obsessed he was with the New York Giants legend Willie Mays as an eight-year-old. When he miraculously got the chance to meet Mays after a game, Auster wasn't able to get his autograph because nobody had a writing utensil on them. He sobbed, and swearing that he would never be caught empty-handed again, started carrying a pencil on him everywhere he went. Auster concludes:

If nothing else, the years have taught me this: if there's a pencil in your pocket, there's a good chance that one day you'll feel tempted to start using it. As I like to tell my children, that's how I became a writer.

The Red Notebook is short, and the plots that fill it are nothing incredible, but it instantly became one of my most cherished books. It's my go-to gift for birthdays and holidays,

and I take a copy with me everywhere I go, returning to dog-eared stories whenever I seek comfort. The coincidences Auster narrates feel like a warm hug from the world. They're an assurance that some things still make sense, that joy continues to hum beneath the noise.

I see things a lot like Auster does, keeping my own red notebook of remarkable, meaningful coincidences as I go through life. It's fitting that my friend Sophie gave me the book, because she sees the world through the same shade of rose that Auster and I do. And in many of the stories I've stored in the folds of my mind, she's the protagonist.

•

I met Sophie in history class on the first day of high school. We were randomly assigned to sit next to each other in the back row, and within five minutes of conversation, we learned that we shared mutual friends, another class, and a deep love of horror movies and (now-retired) Rookie Mag. We marveled over these coincidences, and made plans to have lunch together the next day.

Within weeks, Sophie was my best friend. It was our strikingly similar sense of humor and the dozens of movies, TV shows, musicians and viral YouTube videos we treasured in common, but it was also the coincidences. They were relentless, and over the years, they seemed increasingly meaningful.

A few months into our friendship, I lost one of my contact lenses at Sophie's house before a sleepover. Sophie wore contacts too, and she suggested in jest that instead of heading home for a replacement, I could just borrow one of hers. Out of curiosity, we checked her box of contacts and discovered that we wore the exact same brand and prescription of lenses. We drew the logical conclusion that our identical prescription meant our friendship had been written in the stars.

The signs kept coming. A year later, Sophie and I were at different gatherings on the same day when we each decided to smoke weed for the first time. Hours later, a little stoned and texting about our nights, we couldn't believe we'd made the same spontaneous decision at the same time. On a Saturday afternoon the next summer, I finally decided I was ready to have sex with my boyfriend. When I called Sophie later that day to tell her, she scoffed. "No way," she said—she had also just slept with her boyfriend for the first time.

Every coincidence I had with Sophie sent goosebumps down my arms, but only one moved me to tears. It was a Friday night and we were sitting on her bedroom floor, combing through boxes that had gathered dust under her bed for years, giggling at polaroids from middle school and old diary entries. Sophie stumbled upon a smaller box and stopped laughing. "Oh my god," she said, opening it. She started pulling out folded up pieces of paper with writing scrawled on them, her mouth gaping open. She handed me one, and I was confused to find my name on the page, because we didn't know each other until high school. She handed me more—my name was on all of them.

Sophie explained a memory that had just wriggled itself out of her past. In the seventh grade, after a particularly bad falling out with friends, she invented an imaginary best friend named Ella, whom she described in letters to her future self for months. In one letter, Sophie described Ella as a petite girl with curly hair, like me. When things got better for Sophie at school, she put the letters in a box under her bed and totally forgot about her imaginary friend until that very moment.

Her eyes were wet by the time she finished talking, as were mine. Of all the coincidences that had marked our relationship over the years, this was the one that seemed to proclaim without a doubt that our friendship was meant to be. There were so many signs—how could we possibly ignore them?

We cried, and hugged, and promised each other that we'd be best friends forever. Although a promise didn't seem necessary. It was fate.

•

In a two-star review for *The Red Notebook* on Goodreads, one user sums up the book in a couple sentences:

A famous writer writes bullshit about coincidences that happened to him and gets it published, while hundreds of others struggle to have their own fascinating, excellent work taken seriously. What a coincidence!!!

Another user, who also gave Auster's book two-stars, has similar qualms:

I think what I found to be problematic is that each of the coincidences found within the novel (which the book is essentially entirely about, minus a few chapters) has no actual meaning to them. That's not to say that it has to ever, but I was hoping to actually get something out of it.

The Goodreads users have a point. Mathematically speaking, there is nothing special or meaningful about the coincidences Auster records in his book. In fact, according to people who study coincidences, most of the events that humans perceive as unique or divine are actually pretty normal.

Experts have come up with a myriad of explanations for this. There's the Law of Truly Large Numbers, which says that when you have a large enough sample (7.8 billion in this case) any number of unbelievable events have a good chance of happening. As statistician David Hand put it in his book *The Improbability Principle*, "extremely improbable events are commonplace."

Then there's the theory that sometimes, humans subconsciously create our own coincidences. Realizing at the door to a play you were dreading attending that you forgot your ticket might seem like a sign from above that you were never meant to go, but you probably just sabotaged yourself by subconsciously choosing to leave the ticket on your kitchen counter.

And Bernard Beitman, author of *Connecting with Coincidence*, has found that coincidences are far more likely to happen to people who describe themselves as religious or spiritual, or who are going through a difficult time in their lives. In other words, people who find signs in the world are often already looking for them.

Here's how a coincidence expert might see the events that Sophie and I thought were nothing other than destiny at work. The odds of two freshmen at the same high school being in two out of seven classes together and having mutual friends are pretty high. We may have thought we were quirky for liking things like horror movies and *Rookie Mag*, but our interests were perfectly common given our age and gender. Speaking of age, it isn't all that unlikely for two fourteen-year-olds to have identical contact prescriptions, or to both use one of the most popular contact brands in the country. And given that we had spent months deliberating with each other over smoking and having sex for months before actually choosing to do either, and that our social calendars were almost identical, it's not unfathomable that we each thing on the same day.

To this day, the coincidence that has felt most charged with meaning in my life was the night that Sophie suddenly remembered that years before, she'd had an imaginary friend

named Ella who got her through tough times. But an expert might suggest that when I introduced myself to Sophie, something stirred in her subconscious that made her want to befriend me. Maybe if my name had been Julia or Annie, she wouldn't have asked me to lunch.

There's a part of my story with Sophie that I often leave out of the narrative. The falling out she had with friends that prompted her to invent Ella was one of many she went through in middle school, which was a time in her life overshadowed with depression. A few miles over, depression also eclipsed my view. At the same time, but in different worlds, Sophie and I became disillusioned with our lives and desperately craved something better. When we showed up to history class that day, we had bruises in the same shape, and they were still tender.

If things had gone differently for us in middle school, maybe we wouldn't have paid attention to every little coincidence that happened over the course of our friendship. If we hadn't lost friends, maybe we wouldn't have been so eager to make new ones. If there hadn't been chaos, maybe we wouldn't have been trying so hard to make sense of it, straining to hear joy's hum beneath all the noise. But we were, and the coincidences we kept running into made it easier to hear that hum, to hold out hope that we finally had a place in the world and a person we could trust, after feeling for so many years like we didn't.

Statistically, nothing that happened to Sophie and me was all that out of the ordinary. Neither were all the things that Auster wrote about. That Goodreads user was well within their right to call the coincidences in *The Red Notebook* bullshit.

But I think bullshit can be beautiful. Meaningful coincidence might be nothing more than an illusion, but it's an illusion that can bring hope. Sometimes, a red notebook filled with bullshit is all we need to have courage, to soften, to keep a friendship alive for seven years and counting. And after all, who's to say that anything is likely? The mere existence of anything is improbable—it has stumped scientists and philosophers for millenia. The fact that we get to live, and love, and try to find beauty in all the bullshit, is an extraordinary coincidence in and of itself.



ACID RAIN

ABIGAIL KING
acrylic and oils on mortar board

I - 4 5

BY SEAN MCCORMICK

Glidin in straight line down the I-forty-five
Wind bashes on the dash & the seat of my drive
Seein sides of city with fresh set of eyes
Nostalgia fuckin with me, past feels glorified

I'm feelin stressed, muscles flexed, shit now I'm shakin
Yellow lights, bleed and strike, against the cold pavement
Cold wind, mixin in, got a special fragrance
Heart thumps, brain bangs, I'm just findin cadence

And as I'm glidin in my ride to the beat,
Wooly wind hugs my skin like the fur of a sheep,
whisperin in somethin in and it's sick-uh-ly sweet
And I'm just tryin find a cadence, but can't seem to find the beat

I'm just findin cadence / A glaring misdirection in reflection of my rear-view mirror
Reminisce on adolescence and its lingerin near
Opacity of the nighttime seems to make shit clear
Soul searchin, can't seem to see shit when I don't hold shit dear



**GREEN
LIGHT**

ELIZA GAVIRIA

*gouache &
colored pencil*

IN REMEMBRANCE OF HAZEL MCQUEEN

BY LAUREN HAMPTON

Friends, family, nurse, lend her your ears,
But with an eye closed she can tell time.
“Hold my hands,” they have held many tears,
Now dried, sunken and purple like raisins,
Rub her head, brow wrinkled in discomfort,
“I love when you wrinkle your nose at me.”
One day ready to die, the next pleading,
Awake and asleep in a one-lamp world,
Many faces at her elbow, and forever
“My Bonnie lies right next to me.”
Welcome to Dinner, Church, thanks for the food,
But her throat is full instead of her stomach.
Dozy doats and liddle lambs leave zucchini on the porch,
The kids’ll eat banana salad too, wouldn’t you?
Half-dozen kids with a wealth of greats and grands,
Her mother’s name, his after preacher not apostle.
Too many letters to return after 67 years together,
But write a few, and bring communion,
Then ice cream, Vernors, Scrabble,
Which she wins, but before the end she asks,
“The score, tell me the score.”
You’re welcome. Thank you.
I love you too.

THE 2021 GEORGE G. WILLIAMS AWARDS

R2's annual writing contests are sponsored by the George G. Williams Fund. The contests are juried by professional, non-Rice-affiliated judges. This year's judge was the poet and editor, Dr. Melissa Crowe. 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



Dr. Melissa Crowe is the author of *Dear Terror*, *Dear Splendor* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2019). She's the editor of *Beloit Poetry Journal* and coordinator of the MFA program in creative writing at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, where she teaches courses in poetry and publishing. Dr. Crowe provided the following citations for the prize-winning poetry and prose pieces.

POETRY

WINNER | "In Remembrance of Hazel McQueen" by Lauren Hampton

From the first read, this vivid elegy moved me, but every time I returned to it, it got richer because there's so much to notice about how it's working formally. Through linguistic and conceptual leaps—in scene, in time—it manages to give readers the experience of abiding a matriarch during her final days, days revealed to be painful but also lively, loving, even joyful. Perspective shifts frequently, from Hazel herself waking to a "one-lamp world" to the faces at her elbow who so clearly appreciate her warmth and sass. This kind of poem makes it easier for us to bear the thought of losing our mothers and grandmothers, despite its insistence on making us know just how hard that loss will be.

RUNNER-UP | "When the Sky Grows Heavy" by Sanvitti Shadav

FICTION

WINNER | "Margins" by Vincent Zhang

I was immediately transported to the strangely lush and gorgeously rendered world of this politically urgent story, which conveys a philosophy of being just as vividly as it portrays its post-apocalyptic landscape. The story's tone—at once dreamy and terrifying, searching and desperate—serves its aims perfectly, winding us up in the consciousness of a dying man. How surprising it was to find myself, as a reader, quite willing to occupy that space, those truly final moments.

RUNNER-UP | "Gone" by McKenna Tanner

CREATIVE NONFICTION

WINNER | “Little America” by Shreyas Karki

As a poet, I certainly admired this essay—which somehow manages to fulfill the nonfiction contract for allegiance to what’s real and to be speculative—on the level of language, image. Though beautiful, its language isn’t merely decorative but gives us the opportunity to fully occupy its setting, to move through its landscape in the body of its speaker, who is both (or neither?) insider and outsider in “Little America.” Perhaps best of all, we get to experience that speaker’s shifting sense of what’s real. In what sense, for instance, is he accompanied by his father, whose dialogue, always in italics, feels both omnipresent and ghostly? What results is a kind of vivid blur, a taut mystery that doesn’t ever—for this reader—get solved. I’m awfully glad.

RUNNER-UP | “The Red Notebooks” by Ella Malena Feldman

COVER ART WINNER

“HEARSAY” BY SHREYA JINDAL

“Besides its obvious excellence of artistic quality, this picture stands out because it gives a timely spotlight to an often ignored “model minority.” Over the past year, hate crimes against the Asian community have spiked sharply in America. The cover art portrays an Asian girl covering her ears as if she’s trying to block out voices. The scarlet-colored background seems a reminder of the violence that is committed against her people. Around her head is a dark-red circle in the shape of a vortex - an accurate depiction of the turmoil she’s going through. If I was allowed to have a conversation with her, I wish I could tell her, “Don’t pretend you cannot hear the racism. You have to speak out against it.” Hopefully, R2 can be a platform for these courageous voices.” - Selena Shi, Senior R2 Editor

STAFF BIOS

Ivanka Perez needs coffee.

Rebecca Noel drank an iced coffee today.

Colton Alstatt wanted to go to your Bar Mitzvah but couldn't find their invitation. Maybe it got lost in the mail?

Katimah Harper has not gone outside in an entire week (nor has she had enough water or gotten enough sleep). Though she tends to fail at taking care of herself, she tries to be good at taking care of others.

Andreea Calin is a junior English major, concentrating in creative writing, and minoring in a bunch of other stuff. She spends most of her time thinking about what she is going to eat/drink later.

Isabelle Clark wanted to do a matching lobotomy bio with Lily but she said no.

Lily Weeks is afraid of offending lobotomy recipients.

Caleb Dukes cannot be reached at the moment. He got himself locked in his dorm somehow.

Sarah Swackhamer thinks that beetles are pretty cool. Her take on The Beatles is slightly more nuanced.

If **Doyin Aderele** could, she would stay in her room, watch anime, read, and write all day. Since she can't, she's chosen to read other people's writing and write about that all day instead

Moses Glickman isn't sure what happened, or how to get out of this cornfield, or why those sounds started when the sun went down.

Kristie Lynn was once a glass-half-empty kind of person, but now she doesn't think about the glass at all. She doesn't think about oceans, either. If you want to know what she thinks about, go ask her yourself.

Cg Marinelli says pellow instead of pillow.

The best ways to make friends with **Selena Shi** are 1. Talk about Wuthering Heights. 2. Buy her boba tea.

Kelsey Evans: probably, but not certainly.

If **McKenna Tanner** were a piece of cutlery, she'd want to be one of those pretty collectible spoons your grandparents have. But, most likely, she'd be a spork.

Marcus Munshi has learned to be wary of automatic umbrellas.

Cooper Valentine is very bad with automatic umbrellas

Jennifer Wang is trying her best.

Karen Okoroafor is confident in what she hopes for, and certain of what she can't see.

Emma Korsmo tries to shift realities at night to go to Hogwarts. She hasn't succeeded yet, but will continue to try until she dates one of the Weasley twins.

Yumeng Zhao hoards books only so that she can sleep soundly next to them.

Suzanne Harms believes that pajamas should be considered acceptable attire for any occasion, but even when they're not, she wears them anyway.

Ella Hoyt's Social Security number is [REDACTED].

Hannah Young can't get sleep because every night she's consumed with guilt over abandoning her Animal Crossing island for over a year.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Harish Krishnamoorthy is trying really hard to be an optimist, but admits that the market for that kind of thinking isn't great right now.

McKenna Tanner is a dish best served between library shelves with a side of pen and paper in case of sudden story ideas or unusual similes. She pairs well with classic rock music and a windowsill full of plants.

Jackie Wu does not believe in microwaves, central air conditioning, or pain. But she does believe in the New Jersey devil.

Shreyas Karki's greatest trait is his humility. No, wait. It's his limitless sex appeal.

Calvin Carroll is a junior at Rice who has been trapped in these pages for the past year. All you have to do is say his name three times and read every poem in this issue backwards. And now it is you who is trapped for eternity! I am free!

Ella Hoyt DOESN'T want you to ask about her dark and mysterious secret...

Vincent Zhang is a Wiess senior majoring in English, with parents who would have preferred he picked a study that was more applicable to med school. He spends his time writing voraciously and fending off a variety of insecurities.

Lauren Hampton always has a messy desk, but if she squints really hard maybe she'll find a short, funny bio. Or a puppy. More likely, she'll find that book she meant to read before this semester hit her like a truck.

Amir Kadamani González is to be found sipping tea served in the finest Royal Doulton china with hand-painted periwinkles, as he rings members of substance within the community from his private slimline pearl-white telephone with last number redial. He abhors, above all, snobbery and one-upmanship.

Morgan Gage is probably reading *The Bell Jar* and crying to Taylor Swift again. She's sorry for tweeting about it.

Gargi Samarth will love you forever if you buy them boba or ice cream, preferably both (:

Ev Delafose is a Leo, so this limited bio length might be a bit constraining to describe how iconic, legendary, talented, brilliant, incredible, amazing, show-stopping, spectacular, never the same, totally unique, completely not ever been done before, and humble they are.

Ella Malena Feldman isn't looking for anything serious. 5'3 because apparently it matters.

Sean "McCormick" spelled like the spice company.

Selena Shi gets her inspiration for writing by doing nothing on a rainy day, then staying up late to make up for her guilty conscience.

Neha Tallapragada is a sophomore studying genetics and cell biology. Her current literary influences include Susan Choi, Mieko Kawakami, and the Rice Missed Encounters Facebook page.

Valerie Swe writes snippets of philosophy, poetry, and fantasy as inspiration strikes her, and she is also fond of old-fashioned letter writing. She is a little dramatic about Hunter x Hunter and believes cardio is the solution to everything.

Khondker Salim spontaneously picks up new hobbies, but they rarely last for more than a few weeks; something was different about art. In an ideal world, he would like to spend his days living on a big ranch somewhere in Texas hill country and paint the landscapes!

Marcus Tierrablanca has been told he makes great oat milk cortados, but it is unconfirmed (please contact him if you'd like to find out yourself).

Grace Andrews is hitting snooze.

You can always spot **Nida Fatima** around Chaus, furiously sipping her Cold Brew and scribbling away. Although she would insist that she's studying, the various doodles on her notes state otherwise. The opinions she has about money, privilege, and the 'hustle' are not for the weak of heart.

Varun Kataria has way too much pride over the fact that he flosses twice a day.

Piyusha Kundu could be on *My Strange Addiction* for collecting too many unusual socks. Her luckiest pair depicts Boston's Fenway Park.

Rynd Morgan is a Taurus. Her most listened to genre on Spotify is funk, followed by dance pop.

Celeste Wang will cry over any anime movie or kdrama so please give her recommendations.

Carl Sagan once said, "If you wish to make **Ariana Wang**, you must first invent the universe." Thankfully, the universe was invented, and the computer science and cognitive science major was thus born in Georgia.

Eliza Gaviria crash landed on Earth more than twenty years ago and still has no idea what to do here. Suggestions welcome.

Sachi Kishinchandani lives in between the states of "Hi, I'm Jared, 19, and never f***** learned how to read" and "Oh my f***** god she f***** dead". She also has way too many succulents for someone who can barely wake up in the mornings.

Noah Johnson started making collages when he accidentally ripped a page out of a *National Geographic* magazine; things have really spiraled since then... He enjoys exploring different mediums, and is currently experimenting with digital software like Photoshop and Blender.

Ashley Tsang has senioritis.

Ling DeBellis is known to the U.S Government under a similar, but incorrectly spelled other name. But she's too lazy to go to court and change it. Maybe if she gets married, she'll consider sorting it out then.

Maggie Yuan is a junior at Rice University, where she double majors in English and Visual Arts. She is happiest when reading new poetry, wandering around thrift shops in Houston, or re-watching Conan remotes on Youtube.

Mallory Newbern paints her nails as an excuse to procrastinate anything.

James Karroum would really appreciate knowing how some people have so many pictures of themselves. Should one just ask friends for photographs at every opportunity?

Abigail King is a halfway-feral scavenger of four-leaf clovers and purveyor of the sunset. She aspires to one day be fully feral.

Tim Thomas II spends his free time learning new skills from friends, as long as minor injury is on the table. His addiction to online peer-to-peer shopping continues despite being burned on occasion.

Taylor Zhang can be found wearing athletic shorts regardless of the weather, temperature, or occasion.

Shreya Jindal simply can't.