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RICE REVIEW



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A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the 2022-2023 edition of *R2: The Rice Review*! It's been a hectic year here at R2 (as, I'm sure, it's been for everyone). In addition to putting on our annual Open Mic Night, and getting a whopping 378 written and visual submissions to the magazine, the R2 staff hosted a reading by Wayétu Moore and interviewed three Houston-area authors and artists in the fall. Additionally, this is the first time in my three years here that the magazine has been designed by the editors-in-chief. Us three have worked into the summer in order to put together all 180 pages of this book—a process that involved late-night design sessions, extended discussions about text wrapping, and, for me, about a season and a half of the Great British Baking Show. But it's been a labor of love: we were so impressed with all of the thoughtful, creative, and dynamic prose, poetry, and art pieces we received this year. We worked hard to make sure that every reader would find a piece in this issue that speaks to them, and we encourage you to check out genres you wouldn't normally read. Whether it's the absurd workplace satire in "Human Capital" or the multifaceted examination on how we define beauty in "Beauty and Roses," find some new writing or artwork to love, and then make your own and submit it to us this winter. Our staff can't wait to see it. And if you have any criticisms, please note that all complaints can be submitted to any of Rice's squirrels—please deliver by hand for best results.* Happy reading!

—McKenna

It's hard to define this edition of R2 by one central theme, which I think reflects the uniquely explorative year we have had in our magazine. In addition to our Open Mic Night and reading events, for the first time in three years, we were able to return to Texas Book Festival in Austin to represent R2 at one of the largest book festivals in the U.S. There, R2ers had the opportunity to sit in on author panels about a wide (wide, wide) array of themes, learn more about the writing and publication process, and meet a host of Texas-based writers. It was leaping off from such a diverse array of influences that staffers, section editors, and EICs went into section meetings to determine the content of this year's magazine. Even in the magazine's design, we have been

endlessly trying things out, experimenting with everything from abstracted threads of fate to failed Photoshop cloud backdrops. We started on the layout only knowing for certain that we wanted some art that goes over! the! crease! And boy, did we deliver on that. As you read the magazine, we hope that you are able to feel the excitement that these pieces have inspired in us throughout the publication process. And above all, we hope that the magazine has good vibes.

—Lily

I've been part of R2 for all four years of my undergrad, so I get to say with authority that this is one of the best editions yet. What's the secret to creating an amazing literary magazine? It's not all the late night meetings debating which pieces to publish and what art to pick for the cover, it's not hauling chairs and rocks around to create the perfect Open Mic or launch event, and it's not wandering around on a hot Houston Saturday close to finals to find an open room to finish layout, but it's the staff we had that was willing to do all of these things. The best part of R2 has always been the people involved in making the magazine, and this year, the people were exceptional. From the dozens of talented contributors who submitted to our magazine, to our hardworking, hilarious, and brilliant staff that tolerated (and maybe even enjoyed) the chaotic energy of this year's EIC team, I am deeply grateful for each and every one of you. R2 has been one of the best parts of my undergraduate experience, and the people involved made that experience into what it was. To our readers, I hope that all of the hard work and love poured into this magazine is apparent. To our writers, thank you for giving me the privilege of reading your work. And to our staff, thank you for all your jokes, hot takes, and singing me happy birthday even when I "didn't want you to." I hope you all enjoy the 2022-2023 edition of *The Rice Review*!

—Hannah

*Disclaimer: please do not actually give the squirrels your complaints; they have enough on their plate.

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I am attempting to construct a person from memories and shadows

EMELIA GAUCH

I. Groundhog Day

11 a.m. My Gido wakes up. He eats a bowl of Cheerios, blueberries, and whole milk. The cereal is soggy by the time he finishes. He drinks a cup of coffee, black, while reading the newspaper. He goes to his office across from the kitchen and plays Hearts on his old Microsoft computer from 2008. The screen is so pixelated it hurts my eyes.

He used to win every single Hearts game he played.

He started losing four months ago.

At three or so, he takes a nap. At five or so, he wakes up.

It is now time to watch the news on television. He watches whatever is on. Sometimes, it's Fox. More often, it's NBC or CBS. I'm not sure if he knows the difference.

He drinks a beer and eats pretzels. A cookie. Maybe two.

He reads the paper again.

The sun has begun to set over the identical houses lining the streets of my Teta and Gido's living community. They eat dinner together. He does not eat much if anything at all, but he drinks at least one glass of wine. He has a bowl of chocolate ice cream for dessert.

He goes to sleep by nine, preparing to relive the same day again without even knowing it.

This is a life spent more asleep than awake.

If you cannot remember your days, do you still dream?

II. A question: is to name to know

I do not have a paternal grandfather, but I do have a Gido and my Gido is card games, beer, Oreos, and football. He is ice cream dripping onto already stained plaid shirts and thin fingers, veins blue and bold against

MAR DEL RECUERDO

JOSELYN LWIGALE



aging prune-like skin.

My Grandfather's name is Ronald Gauch, Gauch meaning "cuckoo madman." The surname was given to those deemed strange or unusual, the witches or the left-handed, the crazy or mad. No one in my family is left-handed, but madness may be inscribed in our bloodline. To us, Ronald is more commonly known as "Gido," Grandfather in Arabic.

When I was smaller, under five feet to his over six, he pretended to steal my nose and I stole his hat in retaliation in an ever-long never-ending game of hide-and-seek, take-and-hide, giggle-and-find. Now that I'm bigger, 5'6" to his hunched 5'11", my Gido sometimes makes me uncomfortable with his compliments, telling us, his granddaughters, that we are "such pretty girls." Sometimes, I cringe at his jokes that get more and more explicitly sexual as he de-ages every year that passes.

I don't introduce him to my friends anymore.

His filter is long gone. He isn't conscious of the space he occupies in real life, but in his head, I'm not sure if he occupies a space at all. He doesn't mean anything by it. I know that.

(I have trouble remembering my Gido before the Forgetting.)

I often wonder what it means to know and be known. You can know someone in the way that you can read the way their face shifts when they are upset. Their eyebrows might raise. Their lips might curl a bit or purse. Maybe, the muscles around their eyes flatten and they seem to sink back into their face like they are being pulled in by a string. You watch them shrink or grow. You can know someone in the way that you see a stone on the road and want to give it to them (the color and shape somehow match their soul, but really you just look for them in everything). They are a body, a bag of chemicals, a collection of atoms and electrons, but to you, they are an entire person, a universe contained in fragile mortal form. They are so much bigger than the body they inhabit.

The other option is that you know someone relationally. They are less person and more role, a character. You are aware that they have all the depths that you have, that their mind is a cave with hidden secrets you haven't swum to, but you don't fully understand that. You know them logically, but not intimately.

I know my Gido in the way that he is my Gido. I do not know him as a stone.

III. Years you might carry in bones

My Gido was born in Chicago, but grew up in Brookfield, Illinois, just down the street from the Brookfield Zoo. His house was the only one on the block. Brookfield was a working-class town with two railroads running through the center. Trains crossed paths nonstop, and all night long, you could hear whistles blowing. Every weekday, Ronald would walk one mile past prairies to school. He'd come home at noon, but would have trouble making the round trip in time because he'd get interested in the snakes that lurked in the prairie's tall grass. Lampropeltis triangulum, Lampropeltis calligaster, milk snake, kingsnake, copper snakes and speckled snakes, sliding through the greenery.

So, he'd rush home, get a bowl of soup from his mother, and hope that there weren't too many interesting snakes as he headed back for classes.

He had a brother named Dick. Dick was three years older than him and three inches taller.

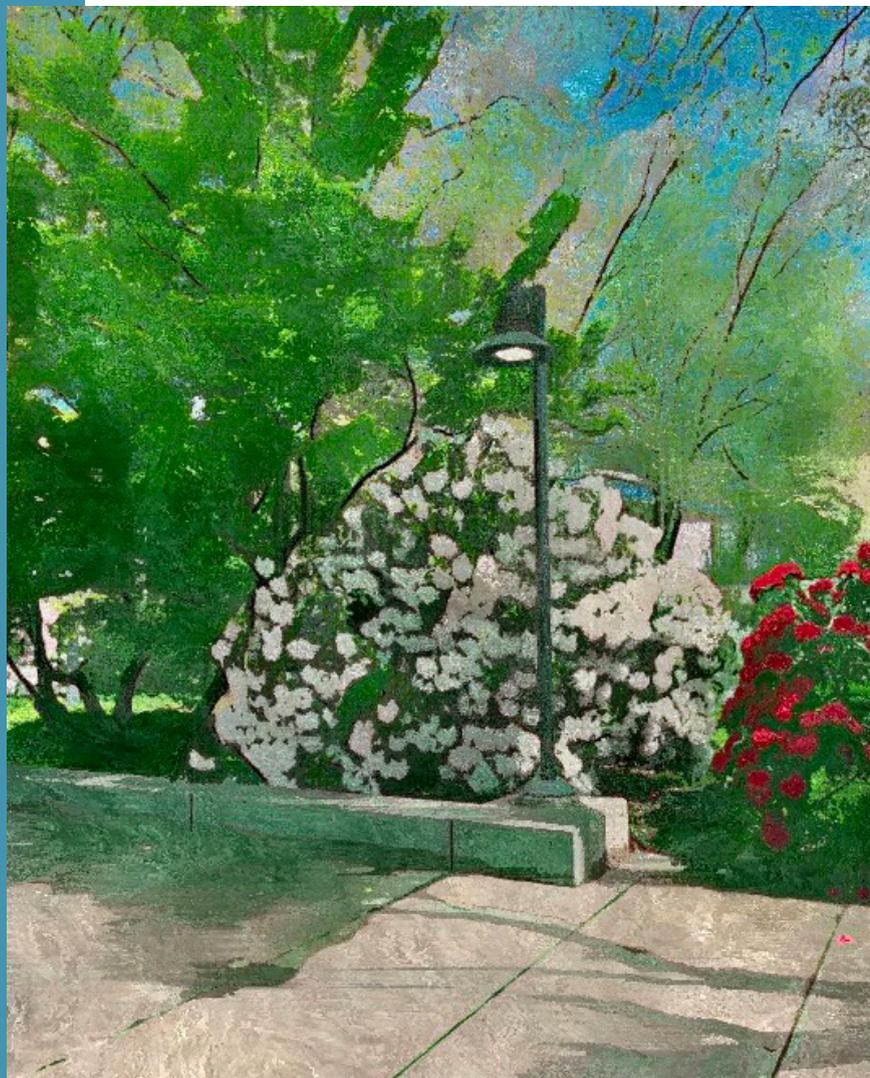
My Grandmother, my Teta, says, "I don't think they were ever close, but Dick was the kind of big brother who was always there. He was tall, and he was chunky. If anyone threatened his little brother, they would have to deal with Dick."

My Gido's father Fred was the kind of man that all of the kids in the neighborhood liked. On football weekends, they'd pack into the Gauch family car, and Fred would take them all to the local game. My Gido's mother Helen was the president of an organization called the Eastern Star. She was the leader. She was very strong. She was an excellent cook, which was good given that my Gido is an extremely picky eater to this day.

"I think in a funny way, what's important is that their home was a really happy home. I don't think there was any stress in it. Helen made good food. She treated them well," Teta tells me, her face taking up my phone screen as we talk on Facetime.

From the beginning, Ronald was always a popular but sensitive kid. He was athletic, six feet in seventh grade, which made him a basketball star that year. His classmates voted him "Most Popular" in the high school yearbook, but his popularity at school did not translate to popularity at home.

You see, Fred Gauch had been a great father to Dick. They would go to Wisconsin to fish together, leaving the house at 6:30 am, but my Gido was always left behind. On those weekend days when Fred and Dick would



RESPLENDENCE
VY LUU

head north, Helen and Ronald waited for their return.

Ronald would ask Helen, when will I get to go?

Helen would tell him, be patient, one of these days it will be your turn.

But Fred Gauch had rheumatic fever when he was a child. At 39, the damage to his heart began to show. At 42, Fred Gauch died, leaving Helen, Dick, and Ronald alone.

Ronald would never get to go fishing with his father.

“Ron’s time never came and Ron knows that. This is one of his stories. I think Ron feels a certain loss like something never happened that could have happened.”

My Gido was the first of his family to go to college. His parents were not there to support him through the process. His dad was gone while his mom was busy surviving.

One day, an advisor came to talk to the students at his school, so Ronald went in and asked how he might go about applying to a university.

The advisor said, go to the library. Go to the ninth stack. On the fourth shelf, there is a row of catalogs. Pick the catalog you like and choose the college you want to go to.

He took her advice and walked straight there, finding the ninth stack and the fourth shelf. He thumbed through the pamphlets, opening them up and skimming through the text, glancing at the images. With each catalog, a future is conjured.

One catalog had a map that jumped out at him. He liked, no, loved, the map a lot, colorful with winding lines.

This, he thought, this is where I want to go.

He wrote the admissions office, applied, and got into Miami University in Ohio.

“I love the way he chose his college,” my Teta tells me. I watch her lips curve into a slight smile as if she is hiding a lovely little secret.

My Teta and Gido met when my Teta was 19.

It was a sweet meeting, a good story, one that I’ve played out in my head many times.

The sky was dark, the moon full. My Teta had been on a group date with a boy whose name she cannot remember. In my mind, the two of them went to a diner, ordered milkshakes and burgers, but I know this is probably not true.

What is true is that my Teta and her date were driving back to campus and pulled up to a stoplight. Her date was in the driver's seat, slightly drunk. Teta did not approve of this.

As they sat, waiting for the red to turn green, she turned her head and saw her friend in the car next to them. In a split-second decision, she stepped out of the car. She walked over to the back door of her friend's vehicle,

HER PERSONALITY IS SUMMARIZED IN A SENTENCE SHE ONCE UTTERED, "I CHOOSE NOT TO REMEMBER IT THAT WAY."

opened it, and climbed into the backseat.

She turned her head, and there he was.

"We always had a feeling," she said to me, but "We" is such a big word.

I wonder what that moment must have been

like for my Teta, what it must have been like to meet someone and just recognize them immediately.

Can you ever stop recognizing them?

Did my Gido recognize my Teta too?

Teta continues to hold on to the version of my Gido she recognized that night in her friend's car. Reality fluctuates and memories change; her personality is summarized in a sentence she once uttered, "I choose not to remember it that way."

My Teta says, "Gido has memory problems," not dementia. (He cannot tell you what happened yesterday.)

My Teta says, "He will get better," not die. (We are all watching him fade.)

But the other day, someone said to me, "The idea of not being friends with you makes me physically ill." I said that I felt the same, affection bubbling up in my throat and choking me, and I think I understand my Teta a bit more now.

The night they met, my Teta and Gido climbed a lifeguard stand.

"It was like, 'Oh, my goodness who is this person? Who is this kind, sweet, good person?' We talked about everything," my Teta told me.

"I don't think it was one of those situations where I saw stars. I just liked him immensely and I thought he was a good human being. I still do."

IV. Please forgive me for this shattering, the illusion was never meant to stay whole.

Ronald Gauch was always generous with his time.

When my father was young, Gido and he would regularly play board games together in the evening. "I remember we played this aircraft carrier game that was super fun. For years and years and years, we had this regular date when we played games," my dad says.

Ronald was a calm father, not one for yelling. He was the expert finder of the house (tomorrow, he might forget his glasses when they are sitting on his head).

I ask my father, "What were his shortcomings as a parent?"

My father says, "He's not super emotional, but neither is Teta. But I don't know that I am" (Lie). "I don't know that I'm looking for a lot of physical affection and emotion, so I don't know that I missed that" (Also a lie). "That could've been bad for someone that was looking for that" (It was).

My father says, "He is the least flawed member of the family." I'm not sure that's the compliment my father thinks it is.

Ronald signed up for a drawing class in his 50s. He took ballroom dancing lessons with my Teta at 65. He never went easy on anyone when you played a game. He played to win, even if his competitor was only five years old. You had to beat him fair and square.

With my Teta, my Gido smoothed out her scattered edges. They made (make?) a very nice pair. Their chemistry created calm.

"Your mom would say that this was a false reality. They didn't demonstrate and practice resolving complicated problems. It was a fake calm because they had a lot of what I'm sure were complicated conversations, but they had them behind closed doors quietly. We were not aware of the inevitable conflict in their marriage," my father says.

My mom does tell me this and she also tells me a secret. To ignore it feels like a lie, to write it into existence seems to give it mass. I appreciate that she told me, but I wonder why she did. (My mother contains thousands

of essays worth of substance within her fingernails alone.)

I choose to write this secret, not because I love this truth or any truth at all, but because I know that people are complicated and I know that my Gido will die soon and I do not know how my Teta will go on because, unlike everyone else, she will not see it coming. But because it will break her heart because he is perfect (and I don't mean that he is perfect to her, faults and all and I do not mean that she accepts and sees the full him. I mean that in her mind he is fundamentally flawless and it is impossible to truly completely process the death of someone who doesn't exist). But, mostly, I choose to write this secret because the most reliable thing about people is that they will disappoint you.

The older I get, the more love feels like an ache, a sharp cramp in my side from running too hard after just eating a seven-course meal. The older I get, the more I swallow this prickly love like it's water, letting it scar the insides of my throat as I force it down while trying to keep a straight face. I'm starting to think all love is a little prickly. It all draws blood because people will disappoint you.

I could be like my Teta, denying truths like this, or I could simply accept it. I will disappoint you, you will disappoint me. We will draw one another's blood by accident.

I choose to write this secret because I want to give my Gido full personhood. I want to allow him to make mistakes. I want him to have depth. I don't want to love him because I do not know him. I want to love him because he is a person and people disappoint you and you can still love them anyways.

(My mom tells me that during Teta and Gido's marriage my Gido had a very very very close female friend, but close could mean so much and my mother does not know.)

(From what limited understanding I have of love, I doubt my Gido knows either.)

V. Here is how you grieve someone who is not gone

It is Friday and we are in the park outside the Marina in Lexington, sitting in colorful folded beach chairs. Our neighbor Mary is on stage with her Fleetwood Mac cover band. She gives us horseback riding lessons, drawing lessons, and guitar lessons on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

We are eating fried Lake Huron Lake Perch that costs eight dollars from the golf course food truck. I will get

a stomach ache later.

My cousins and I go up to the ordering window ourselves with the folded bills from Gido. We feel big, and we are drinking lemonade. Each large cup has an entire bucket of sugar in it, and I can feel the granules rubbing between my teeth.

My Gido is eating a hamburger from Wimpy's, the only burger place on Main Street, wrapped in red and white striped paper. He drinks a coke.

They begin to play "Landslide" and my Gido stands up slowly. He takes my Teta's hand and they trek from where we are sitting in the back of the field to the empty area in front of the stage. They are almost always the first up to start the dancing, but all the other elderly and middle-aged couples would follow. My grandparents never care that they are the first.

My sister runs up and joins them, grabbing my large hand in her small one, and pulling me towards the stage with her.

My Teta, my Gido, my cousins, and I are holding hands and spinning, growing older, but younger at this moment. The music asks "Have you any dreams you'd like to sell, dreams of loneliness?"

Maybe, but, right now I cannot remember.

(I have been saying goodbye to you for years, and my confession is that sometimes I wonder if it would be easier if you were already dead.)

VI. When the land goes on forever

I fear:

the day you stop remembering who you are more than I fear the day you stop remembering who I am.
how much longer you will live, hollowing.

**I FEAR THE DAY YOU STOP
REMEMBERING WHO YOU ARE
MORE THAN I FEAR THE DAY YOU
STOP REMEMBERING WHO I AM.**

I want:

to ask, do you fear death? If death is to disappear, to lose yourself, have you already died?

to ask, how much of you is left and how much of you is just subconscious human responses? Breathing, digestion, a body doing what it's meant to, but nothing else.

I hope:

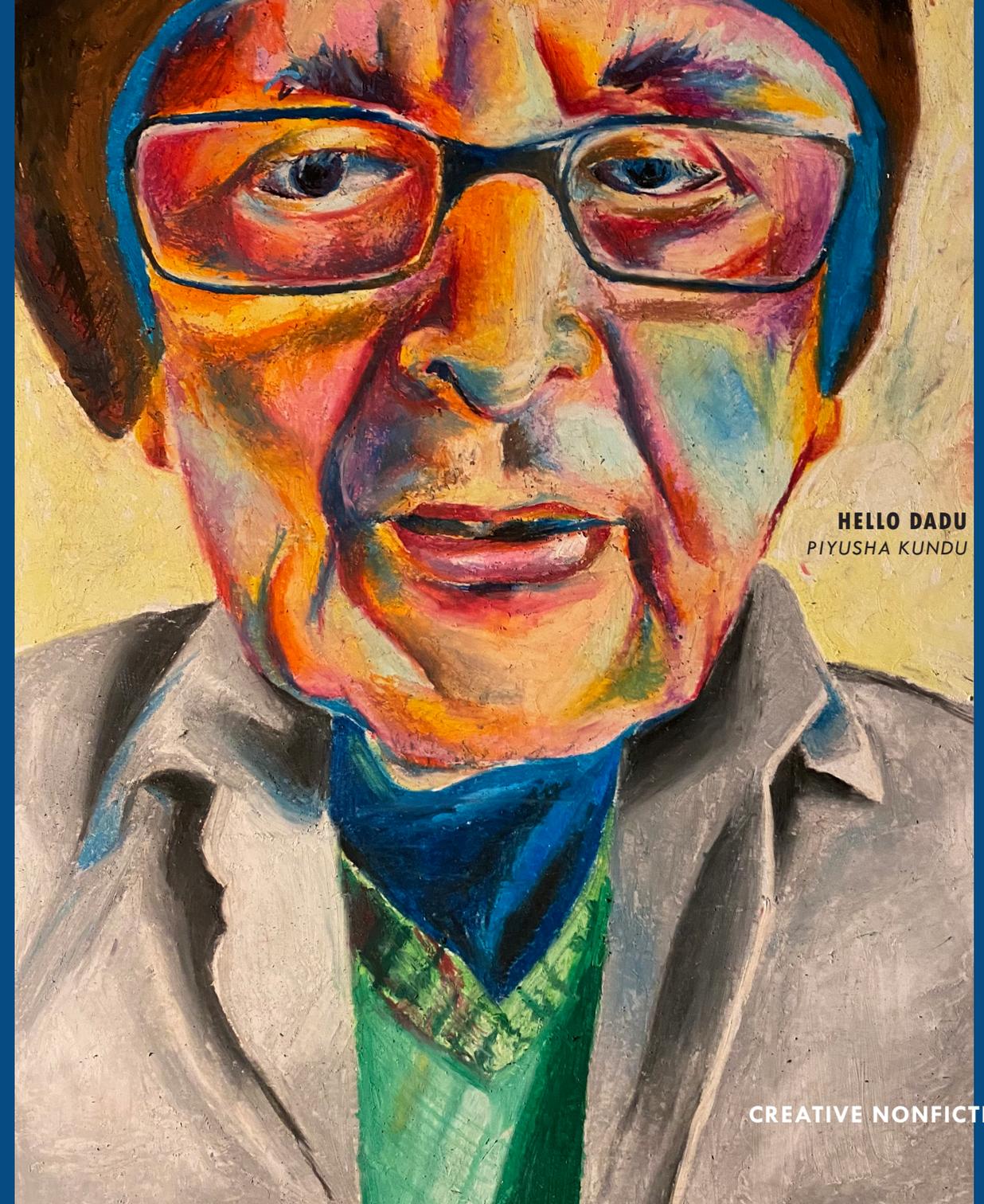
When the end arrives, you are walking to school. You see a snake in the grass.

You choose to follow it into the prairie, tips of plant stems kissing your knees.

You choose the detour.

You can be late for class.

You have all the time in the world.



HELLO DADU
PIYUSHA KUNDU

DAY IN THE LIFE OF A VAMPIRE

TAMAZ YOUNG

CW: n-word usage, racist violence

He be twelve

The year be 2014

And I swear that nigga's a vampire

I ain't never seen a kid look the same age for so long

Like he gone live forever

Yet we ain't gone never

Let this boy live to see his last day

We done seen his last day time and time again

But he ain't gone never see it come

He be twelve

But he only lives two seconds at a time

That's how long it took for his blood to be sucked

Sucked from the insides of his chest by the fangs of

Count Bulletcula

I swear I ain't never seen his baby pictures

Like he was born this way

At least that's how the story is told

Told and retold 'til you can't tell it anymore

So you just switch his name for another vampire

His story told through the words of mine

But his clock itching to get to high school graduation
History class frozen in time

Yet his mother's tears flowed like running water
To the deepest valleys of sorrows
Deep enough for his young wings to be stretched wide
But not wide enough to shield him from infanticide
Yea, Count Bulletcula be killing babies

He be twelve
The day be November 22nd
And I swear that nigga's a vampire
Because he was hiding from the sunlight
It was three in the afternoon
And he was laying under the hood . . . breathless
Because Count Bulletcula drained his blood from less than three
feet away in just two seconds
And he been the one living ever since
Through our tears, our fears, and our ears

He spends most of his time on Google Images
Occasionally you'll find him in a couple news articles
But he sleeps in a closed police report
As he lays his head on his pillowc-, I mean court case
It's hard to believe, I know it is
But I swear that nigga a vampire
It's so easy to see his fangs

Because he's always smiling when you see him
I swear he don't feel pain no more
But he be biting me to my core
Making me feel what he felt—nothing

Because lethal shots is nothing
Being twelve is nothing
Holding a toy for your friend is nothing
Tackling his sister to the ground is nothing
Trying to arrest his mother is nothing
Being a good kid is nothing

But if you don't learn nothing
I want you to know something
Just this one thing

He be twelve
The year be 2014
The day be November 22nd

It was three in the afternoon
He be Tamir Rice
He be Tamir Rice
He be Tamir Rice
And I swear that nigga a vampire
Because I'll never let his story die

GOSPEL IN AN UNWASHED FORK

RIYA MISRA

half-freckled girls, turned out. air-dried leotards. tabby cats. slick orange peels. thumbs settle into pulp and wrestle with the rind. roaring twenties. unsweetened mango slices. cinnamon camphor muscle rub. brendon's 2000s howls. dirty plates piled high. upper lip cuts. a tongue's trip down the palate to tap on the letter t:

cur-tain, cot-ton, for-got-ten.

makeshift laundry lines in the furnace room. soft farro, sweet pepper. bitter skin-like grapefruits. and scarlet lips to match. the deadliest roger ackroyd. heat-stale rice crackers. silk hammocks. translucent flesh. soggy new york. half-freckled girls, half-freckled, half-freckled. i'll count until i fall asleep.

HERITAGE
BEN HAO





NEVER WHOLE
PIYUSHA KUNDU

THE ASYMPTOTE OF YOU AND HER

MOLLY KYLES

CW: homophobia

You will eat the cinnamon rolls she brings you after she gets off work. She brings you the ones that didn't sell, sticky and slightly stale, but just as sugary on your lips. She stands on your front porch and watches you finish each one.

She will monologue. She ran into the baseball boys on her shift today, and not a single one of them tipped. She'll promise that after graduation, she'll never make another sandwich again. You will stay silent but for the occasional nod. This is an understood and unspoken transaction: She will unload her burdens at your doorstep, and you will lick every bit of icing from the box.

You will sit in her beat-up Toyota for no less than six hours, enduring an insufferable musical theater playlist, just to reach a scrawny shore with water the color of concrete. You will wonder what else you expected from a Texas beach. But then she will bounce out of the car with Moon-gravity, and suddenly you will feel like a fool for your doubt. You will grab her hand, and you will run into the water like a pair of baby sea turtles going home.

It is hard for you to pin down how you met her.

You will buy her a coffee on the day that you tell her. You will believe, honestly, that this conversation will be quick, easy, then over. You will find yourself tearing at the cardboard sleeve of the cup. You will notice that before you even get to the punchline, she will start to cry. Immediate, hot-wet tears will roll down her apple shaped cheeks. You will realize this is the first time you've ever seen her cry.

You will watch her double shot almond milk mocha go cold on the table, untouched. You will evaporate with it. You won't let her see you flinch when she tells you it's a sin. You will pretend not to notice as she shifts just a millimeter away from you in her seat. It is hard for you to comprehend

distance between you and her.

You will know her small mangy mutt of a dog better than any of your own pets. The two of you will invent increasingly ridiculous voices for him, imagining what TV shows he would hate and if he'd rip his pants at the school dance. You will fold yourself in half from laughing at this stupid dog's imaginary human life. You will absolutely miss him the most in the end.

LATER, MUCH LATER, YOU WILL REALIZE HOW STRANGE IT IS TO AGREE TO DISAGREE ABOUT YOUR EXISTENCE.

You will—often—talk about your plans for the future. The studio apartment in ParisLondonBrooklyn that the two of you will cram your Goodwill closets and plastic houseplants and selves into. You will agree to kill the spiders if she takes the roaches. After particularly evil pre-calculus tests, or underwhelming homecoming dates, you will remind each other that the studio is waiting, just past the horizon. You will both laugh when you realize that even in your wildest fantasies, you couldn't imagine wanting a little more square footage to breathe.

You will think, but never tell her, that her hugs suck. They are tight, rigid, and bony. The first hug she ever gives you feels like she is wringing out a dirty dish towel. You watch her limbs fumble awkwardly and notice that she may just be out of practice. Her physical affections are closely guarded, and scarcely offered. You will accept every single vice-grip hug after that.

It is hard for you to get closer and closer just to pass right through.

You will return your gaze to the mocha. She has not said a word since you dropped the atomic bomb on ParisLondonBrooklyn. You will feel your jaw calcify until it is solid stone. When she finally speaks again, you will know by the waver in her voice she is afraid.

She will not say it, but you know she has convinced herself at this moment that you are in love with her. That this unfathomably huge moment is somehow hinged upon something as inconsequential as a crush. You will swallow back your own tears and feel your teeth being crushed to gravel in your mouth.

It is hard for you to breathe through the dust.

You will remember a sleepover on a sweaty June night in 2015. Eviscerated candy wrappers litter her

bedroom floor, and the two of you are fiddling with cheap plastic beads and string, making bracelets. Your hands are tugging compulsively on the bottom of your Doctor Who t-shirt. You ask her what she thinks of the news lately. You've only seen it in the sneak peeks of FOX that incessantly drones in the living room. A strange flood of colors and bare skin swarming the Capitol with feather boas. You don't know why, but you feel embarrassed to read the headlines. She says that she doesn't know a lot about politics, but that her parents say this law is the end of the world. You lose your breath for a second; she notices. You wonder why you even asked the question in the first place. She begins to regurgitate filler words and cliches about treasuring your friendship, and agreeing to disagree.

Later, much later, you will realize how strange it is to agree to disagree about your existence. You know I love you, she says. This comes out of nowhere, and also everywhere. You just nod. You will not speak about it again for six years.

You will not speak about it until six years and one double shot almond milk mocha later. She is still crying; hasn't stopped since you said the words. And then, jagged pebbles scratching your throat, you will begin to cry with her. You will not be sure if this is the right thing. In fact, you will be pretty sure this is the exact wrong thing. But for a moment, you will be selfish. For a moment, you will need your killer to also be your comfort.

You will melt into her arms. You will feel baby sea turtles and a studio apartment and a stale cinnamon roll in her vice grip. The racking sobs will synchronize the two of you, for the last time. You will know that when this hug is over, you will never speak to her again, not really. You will know that the *her* you are thinking of might not have ever existed, not really.

It is hard for you to accept it. Maybe there were signs, maybe you could've known.

It is hard for you to spare yourself from the blame. You said the words, and you made her cry.

It is hard for you to pull away from the hug. To be the first to pull away, from the very last hug.

It is hard for you, but you do.

SUGAR RUSH!

DOYIN ADERELE

i took my first bite and
my hair puffed up, pink cotton
my brown skin burned, sweet bar melting under my fingertips

you were holding the moon in your hands and
your throw up looked like you'd eaten
aluminum foil

i couldn't look away from your chrome-colored eyes
i let you lead me
let you show me what outer space looks like

we hid from our moms and
locked ourselves in your room
and played a game

but you beat me to the end of the gumdrop lane

suddenly sour lemon juice oozed from your eyes your brain
frosted, flaked over and
me

i was holding the moon in my hands
and my throw up
wasn't nearly as pretty



MIRRORBALL
TESSA DOMSKY

EUPHORIC
JAZMINE CASTILLO



LILIAN
HANNAH USADI



TINKERING WITH TIME

SPENCER POWERS

There once was a tinker who made clocks. Grandfather clocks, watches, atomic clocks, clocks made of quartz, clocks filled with diamonds, clocks covered in vines and rust, musical clocks, clocks of gears and wood and metal. But the most special kind of clock, the one whose secret had been passed down from generation to generation, was the clock that could *give* time. Just unwind it, and whomever used it would get time, whether they wanted to use it to spend more time drawing, to study for an exam, to see a dying family member, anything.

The tinker was thirteen years old when he learned about the special clock. He had wondered why his father looked so much older than he had when the tinker was a child—as if he had aged three decades in only one. His beard, once lush and full of life, now bunched in worn strands, grayer than the moon on a cloudy night. His previous gait, jaunting around the workshop like a bee in a field of flowers, was now only a slow hobbling between stations. And his voice, which had once called his name with a lively love, now barely croaked out words.

When the tinker asked his father about his aging, he took him to a secret room in the back of the shop, guarded by three locks. The walls inside the room were covered with gears, rusting conduits and hoses climbing all around, crisscrossing without a comprehensible rhythm. In the center of the room, the tinker saw a strange device, pipes and funnels and tubes all shooting off at oblique angles from a central stand holding a lightbulb.

The tinker's father took one of the pipes and stuck his hand in, and the lightbulb began to warm up. Next, he took a funnel, and spat in it. Finally, he pulled at a tube and drew it into his ear, pushing it into his head until the tube stayed without holding it. The lightbulb glowed brightly, and the tinker had to shield his eyes, lest it blind him. The spark, however, was short-lived, and the bulb quickly died down. His father returned the pipe and tube to their position and removed a small brick from a small slot at the

bottom of the device.

“This is the fuel for the special clocks,” he said. “The more you give, the more others get.”

The tinker studied the brick of time held in his father’s hand. When he looked at it directly, it was almost impossible to understand what he was seeing. Shapes folded in on themselves, space seemed to warp around itself as his eyes attempted to make sense of what was right in front of his face. When he looked at it indirectly out of the corner of his eye, however...

HIS BEARD, ONCE LUSH AND FULL OF LIFE, NOW BUNCHED IN WORN STRANDS, GRAYER THAN THE MOON ON A CLOUDY NIGHT.

A baby, cooing in the arms of its parent.

A pair of elderly lovers, snuggling underneath the moonlight.

A parent, cleaning a bloody scrape on a child.

A group of young adults, singing around a fire.

A teenager, plucking at a guitar on their bed.

Before he became too lost in the images, the tinker’s father took away the brick with a snort.

“Careful. Look at it too closely and you’ll use it all up,” he said. Then, he picked up a nearby clock and turned it over. On the other side was a small slot that he set the brick inside.

Later that day, a woman came by, raving about her boss. She spoke of tight deadlines, assignments piling up, and on top of that friends she had not seen in weeks. The tinker’s father nodded, retrieved the clock he had earlier slotted the brick of time into, and brought it to the front of the store.

“Unwind it when you need more time,” he said.

The woman smiled and took the clock. She came by two more times in the following weeks, each time requesting more and more time. Whenever she asked for more, the tinker’s father fulfilled the need, making more and more fuel for her.

The tinker prodded his father as she left.

“Why?” he asked.

“Why what?” the older man replied.

The tinker gathered his thoughts, trying to express what he had noticed.

“You’ve been getting older. That’s the machine’s fault, right? Why are you giving yourself away for them? Don’t you deserve your own time?”

“I asked my mother the same question, when I was your age,” he said.

His father knelt down, slowly lowering himself to his son’s height, and placed his hands on the boy’s shoulders.

“There are more important things in life than your own desires, son. I know that I’m losing time, but it’s a worthy trade to ensure others can live their lives to the fullest.”

The tinker’s eyes teared up. “Then why can’t someone else do it? Why does it have to be you?”

His father shook his head. “We’ve had this machine for generations. If we don’t decide what’s worth using it for, someone else will. And it’s not guaranteed that they’ll use it responsibly. No, it has to be us.”

Several more people came by that day. A man, trying to extend the last moments of his mother’s life. A child that needed an extra hour to study for an upcoming test that would determine whether he got into a good high school. A family wanting a day to fit a vacation into an already busy schedule, on the last day they’d see each other before the daughter moved away. The orders seemed endless as the years passed, and with every one the tinker could see his father weakening and shrinking. The few wisps of hair left on his head faded away, only wrinkles remaining. His walk slowed even further, and he began to use a cane. Whenever the tinker tried to get his father’s attention, it would always take multiple tries, as if waking him from a deep fog. As time progressed, his father simply failed to respond. The tinker’s soul hurt every time.

Eventually, his father passed away.

The tinker resolved that now that he had control over the time-giving machine, he would use it much more sparingly. His father had wasted himself away by giving so much of his time to others and had left his son alone, barely out of childhood. The tinker would not do the same.

More customers came by, and the tinker was much harsher. An athlete, wanting extra practice time before



MOM PAINTED
JOSELYN LWIGALE

the championship game? No, they weren't worthy of his time. They should have made a schedule that worked. An actor, slotted into the leading role of *Macbeth* at the last second, asking for an extra hour to learn their lines? No, their director should have been smarter. He wasn't going to die like his father, not for requests as small and stupid as these.

One morning, a familiar face entered his shop. That child, the one who needed to study for their entrance exam all those years ago, was now a full-grown man, applying for medical school. The test to get in was tomorrow, and he needed just a little more time to study.

HIS FATHER HAD WASTED HIMSELF AWAY BY GIVING SO MUCH OF HIS TIME TO OTHERS AND LEFT HIM ALONE BARELY OUT OF CHILDHOOD. THE TINKER WOULD NOT DO THE SAME.

The tinker prepared himself to say no, but nostalgia pulled on his heartstrings. He remembered the gratitude that kid had shown those years ago and saw the desperation in his eyes now.

"Okay, I can help you."

He went into the back room and plugged himself into the machine. He fit tubes into his body, put his hands and arms in pipes, and spat into the funnels. The lightbulb lit up so brightly that a spot remained in his eyes for minutes afterwards. He took the brick of time and slotted it into a wooden clock to bring out to the hopeful doctor. The customer took the clock, shook his hand, thanked him, and left.

And so, the tinker fell into the same groove his father had. He may have denied slightly more requests, may have been a little more sparing with his assistance, but he provided time all the same. There was always a sob story to tug at his heartstrings. And as the memory of his father faded, so too did his willingness to deny people the time that they needed.

One day, the tinker had a daughter. She was a precocious child, already making watches of her own at the age of five. The tinker knew right then that she would one day follow in his footsteps and manage the store herself. With every machine she made, every wound-up spring, every gear set, his pride in her grew. He wondered if this was how his own father had felt, watching him grow up and learn how to make clocks.

Together, they continued running the shop. He constructed the clocks and she watched and assisted, providing tools when he asked and taking care of the easier steps. It helped especially when he was attempting to build the smaller devices – he found his hands increasingly uncooperative as he used the finer tools.

Despite everything, he somehow didn't anticipate her asking the same question he had asked his father. He had never noticed his own aging. Every piece of gray hair, every crick in his back, they had all added up slowly enough that he had never perceived it. But she saw the parents of her peers. She knew that this rate couldn't be kept up for long before he passed.

And so, he showed her why, as his father had. Together, they went into the back room, dust and metal carpeting the floor, rusted gears fallen from their place on the wall, conduits snapped and broken. There, he demonstrated the power of the device. Plugging in the tubes, he placed his arms inside the pipes and created a brick just as his father once had. He saw the wonder in her eyes as she looked into it, the reflections of shapes and space and memories all floating together. He saw a child playing in a field, teenagers laughing together, two parents caring for a baby. He saw grandparents holding their grandchildren. He saw a massive family all gathered together to celebrate.

“Dad?” she asked.

He saw–

“Will you still be here when I have kids?”

His own father, standing there next to the machine. He saw the age on his face, more wrinkles than skin. His hair simply gone, barely even dust. And he remembered the anger he felt, the pain in his heart, knowing that his father was not long for the world. That there was so much that they didn't get to do together. That his father had never even met his own granddaughter.

He took the tubes in his hands, and he pulled and yanked and ripped them from their sockets. He filled the funnel with oil and stuffed the pipes with paper and straw and the little love he had left to give. He took his wrench and smashed the lightbulb, and the memories that the machine had stored for so long filled the room. He wept, for his life, for his father, and for his daughter.

With the time he had left, he continued to make clocks, but no longer did he use his own life as fuel for others. Their problems mattered, of course. But he did not have to burn his own time for them; he should not be expected to chop himself into pieces for every person who needed help. And neither should his children, or their children, or anyone else. Before he passed, he saw his daughter grow older, graduate from school, find her own love, have her own children. He died younger than he should have but held on to enough time to be happy when he did.

There once was a tinker, and she lived a full life.



RODEO NIGHT
SOPHIA ROHLFSEN

IMPRINT

ELI JOHNS-KRULL

i want to love you like
i am an orange and
you are my rind
when time peels us apart
i want you to leave pith
lingering
on my skin
my bones
my soul

i want to let myself be changed by you

i have been lead for so long
dull and dense
oh alchemist
transmute me to gold
or at least phosphorus
something glowing
something that burns bright

if you could craft unfueled flame
it would grow no remnants
i want to be an oak flame
shedding ash and smoke
evidence of my burning

i am obsessed with
memory
the physicality of haunting
ridged imprints and unfaded stains

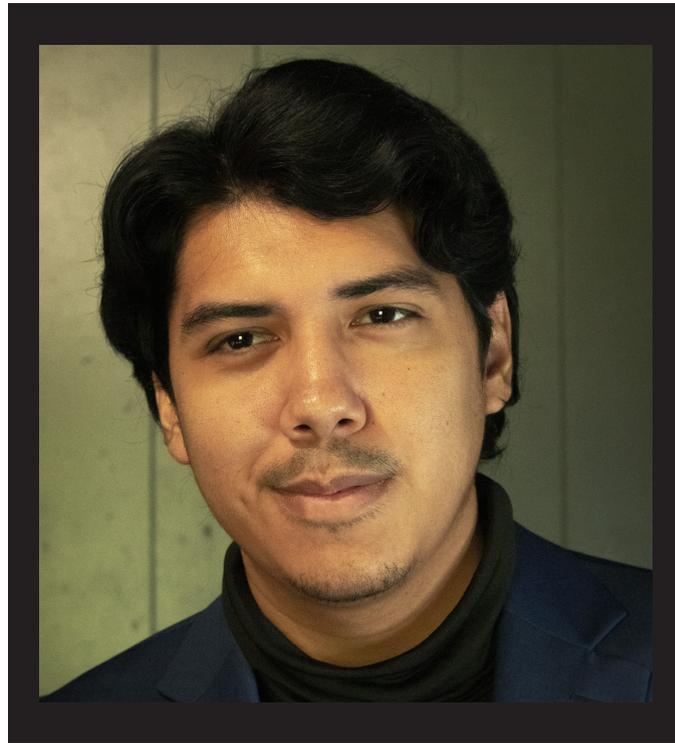
i want to become
a handprint on your arm
a warm ghost in your bed
a voicemail you play
until time distorts it

i want to linger

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL CORTEZ

EDITED BY MCKENNA TANNER

In an effort to better engage with the Houston arts and literature scene, R2 staff conducted three interviews with local authors and artists. The first of these interviews was with Michael Cortez, a native Houstonian who used his background in painting and tattooing to create his striking and personal graphic novel, *A Violent New World*. We sat down with Michael to discuss his inspirations, his advice for writers and artists, and how *Hereditary* helped get him in the right mood for working on the book. This interview was edited for brevity and clarity.



Q: You told us before this interview that you intended for *A Violent New World* to be an “outlaw comic.” Could you speak more about your goals for this book?

MC: The book wasn't really meant for a massive audience. This was really for somebody who had that kind of upbringing and kind of environment that I had, because I didn't see any of that stuff when I went to the comic book shop. The comic book industry, especially, is very sci-fi heavy and superheroes heavy. They tried to give me like a luchador comic or something, and that's not really what I was looking for. So I was like, “OK, well, I'm going to do this and it's going to be for people like me who can really relate to that transition into getting out of the neighborhood. And that anxiety of not knowing the rest of the world exists and really being behind from everybody else.” And that's scary in itself. Hopefully someone who's from that can get that. Not to say that anybody else can't enjoy it but I think especially for that person, I wanted to make a book.

Q: Who would you say are your stylistic inspirations?

MC: Well, I think Raymond Pettibon. He was really a punk rock inspiration. I really dug all that ink work. That was just lines, black and white. I dug that. The tattoo artist Freddy Negretti. He does all black and gray. They call it the Chicano prison art, and it's all black and gray because they don't have color in prison, and that's where it originated. So using all of that stuff was kind of what got me. I wish I had more writers. I don't come from looking at too many writers; it's more artists-based than writing.

Q: Are there any comic books that were especially influential for you?

MC: Well, actually, I really didn't have comic book stores growing up over here. But the comic that I looked at the most was this *Gears of War* comic. I got it from Blockbuster when I was a kid. It still has the Blockbuster tag on it. It's the only comic I saw there, and I picked it up, and that was always my reference for comic books. As a kid, that one little *Gears of War* comic book was my biggest thing. And now, I get inspired reading some manga called *Geobreeders*, which is very different. I have Wally Wood's *Spawn of Mars*. So I read a lot of

different things. And of course I love movies, always watching movies.

Q: What were some of the obstacles you ran into as you worked on this project?

MC: One of the weirdest things that happens is you get somewhere in the middle, and there's a moment where you're trying to figure out how to end it and put it all together. It happened twice where I'm just like, "I have no clue, there's just so much stuff here." You feel like maybe you should give up and just scrap this whole thing. And so that was definitely a problem. The artwork is easier, but trying to put a story to that is hard, and I always go through that phase—I was in that just recently with the other book. Just being like, "Oh, we should just scrap this, forget this." And I'm like, no, no. You figure it out and keep going.

Q: Always nice to know that we're not the only ones who get stuck in the middle sometimes. How do you like to handle it when you're feeling stuck?

MC: I mean, in a way, you kind of have to power through a little bit. Sometimes it's just taking a break from it. When I went to HSPVA, which is an art school, I did some classical painting, and in classical painting they teach you to walk away from your art. Over time, specifically for art, you'll start to slouch your head or you start to move your body, and your whole painting may be tilted. It's little things like that, so they always say walk and then go back. And so that's something that you've got to do with your book, too. I mean, just getting away from it sometimes.

Q: Was that especially true for *A Violent New World*?

MC: This book is nothing but dark imagery and dark themes. And that can get kind of annoying in your personal life and it's like, "Alright, I want enough of this." You're talking about just trashing it because you don't want to look at it anymore. Cause, yeah, people will read a page in a second, and you have to sit there

and draw it. To stay in that, I'm constantly playing music. I think music is a big help, listening to movie soundtracks. Because they've already done the work in setting tone and what you'll get from this emotion-wise. Like *Hereditary*, that soundtrack is very good. It's very dark. And listening to movie soundtracks is really good, but when you've been listening to the *Hereditary* soundtrack over and over for five hours on one page, you get tired of that. You're like, "I want to take a break from this." That's why I really like putting music to your work: I think it can help when you do take that break. Coming back, it reminds you what the tone is, who your characters are. For each of the characters, I made up a playlist for them that was like, "OK, I'm writing for this person, this is what they're listening to." It gets you back in that mindset. So you don't have to worry when you take that break, you can come back and go, "OK, I know where everything's at."

Q: I love the idea of making playlists; that's great advice.

MC: You gotta be careful it doesn't ruin your song choice though. You get tired of hearing it after a while.

Q: Do you have any other advice you'd like to share, from a writing or an art perspective?

MC: I mean, I think the biggest thing is being consistent, doing it every day. It's easy to get distracted. So I think you've really got to just hold yourself accountable and just do it every day, even if it's a little bit. Because if not, it's easy to throw it away. You've just got to stick through it and try to figure it out. I think that's probably one of the biggest things, and that goes for art and writing. Because if you stop drawing, you'll easily lose a lot of the skills you just learned, and you'll have to relearn them all again, which is annoying. So if you do it every day, you've got less to learn. But you're still always learning.

i left a dream in the walmart parking lot

MARIAM KHAN

and watched it grow on alabaster receipts,
munching price tags from camo t-shirts

went home with the dream's teeth clamped around my wrist

leading my weary bones to the scuttled corner
where lay angry, taut strings and a hollow wooden heart

i let it consume me until i was left empty

a strum, a wistful whistle, a coloured horizon—and
my dream settled into my then hollow chest

my manager's yells were a dull symphony

the rattle of shopping carts was all background
to her screeching solo in the employee break room

her shrivelled pigtails twisted themselves into question marks

a pudgy finger tapping a staccato rhythm
on the pallid face of her watch

our torsos swayed in our blue vests

as she shifted her watch and bracelets,
i caught a glimpse of bite marks on her wrist.



THE UNCANNY TOOTH

ANNE RUBSAMEN

There is, I think, a place of certain objects in the mind. Objects that seem to come out of our brains, off of our lips and into the world. Or maybe they begin in the world and the ego envelops them into memory so fully that it seems as if they were found in the mind in the first place. A sense of recognition, of suspense, of taboo. An “inside” object taken out of us like a secret stolen; you worry not so much for exactly what knowledge or embarrassment has been exposed but instead with a sense of disbelief in how your secret has come to be known in the visible world. You have a desperate bewilderment at who could have broken into the locked recesses of memory and planted the object here in the corporeal world like a sign or symbol positioned by an author in a plot, left there by providence for you specifically to find. You are keenly aware that no one else can tell the true significance of that object. There must be a higher power playing jokes that only you and providence are in on. The object calls you out, you see the object and know it before anyone else senses danger, maybe this is because it is only dangerous to your psyche and it is just an object to them. A threat which is only dangerous insofar as you have seen its proximity to destruction and know that with it, destruction may come to pass again. Like smoke which seems the very same as fire itself.

Wolfgang Paalen calls them ‘time-bombs of the conscience.’ Salvador Dalí describes them as ‘absolutely useless from a practical and rational point of view and created wholly for the purpose of materializing in a fetishistic way, with maximum tangible reality, ideas and fantasies of a delirious character.’ In any case, those objects which cause resurfacings of the uncanny: the past which seems still yet to be.

CHAPTER ONE: THE DENTIST STANDING OVER ME. 4PM. MARCH.

Above me the blue gloved hands of the dentist move as if by their own accord. I can't see her face in my supine position, laying exactly parallel to the ground with the table lowered to the waists of the dentist and her assistant. It is a terrible sensation for so many reasons. First of all, I think my mind mistakes dentists for undertakers or coroners. I feel the uncanniness of being a corpse and having the undertaker dress my



BROKEN
BEN HAO

bloodless skin with blush and fix my mouth to be not quite smiling, not quite frowning, a kind of emotionlessness only reserved for death. Or I imagine I am in the morgue and my soul hasn't left my body quite yet, so I watch the team of coroners move around me as if by choreography, handing tools across my rectangular field of vision, the sharp metal catching the overhead light as scissors and knives pass over my face. Possibly, they are cutting into me, although I have no way of telling without pain or sensation at all.

The tools at the dentist are all motorized now. They all spin and buff and shave, the archaic ripping out of rotten teeth and patients moaning made into the sterile noise of various instruments with various buttons, all with the settings high, medium or low. The noise of whirring is set to the low volume of algorithmic streaming playlists, always the same tone, always the same range. Dentists' offices sound the same across the country. It's dull in the waiting room and creepy when you are in the chair, under the fluorescent beam of light, laid out flat with your arms prone, the spinning and buffing and shaving noises happening in your mouth such that you are unable to speak. The dentist puts more tools in, takes more tools out. She shaves and shapes as if you are not even there. The dentist and her assistant talk to each other over your body, their eyes meeting feet above your nose, call out your teeth by number as if they are identifying a disfigured burn victim by the dental records alone. You are an extra in a television show, your entire job is being silent and anonymous, a body or a mouth alone, speech repressed and shunned. You'll only get in the way if you try to speak up. The dentist and her assistant will look down at you with the surprise of hearing a dog suddenly talk or the toes on a disembodied leg wiggle.

The dentist comes down with her neck at an impressive angle. From our introduction fifteen minutes ago, I remember her piercing blue eyes and wondering if she is slightly awkward now because she had been outcasted as a kid, or if she is just condescending in a pleasant, doctor-ly way. Those blue eyes made her personality seem more strange and slightly contrived, something about the way my eyes met hers was vaguely wrong, as if she wasn't quite nailing the social cues of eye contact. Now, her blue eyes are covered up by a large and expensive looking pair of dental loupes, like a set of binoculars fixed to a thick plastic headband. The loupes are black with two blue lenses which catch the all-exposing light of the overhanging LED lamp. For a second, I see her as

an insect. With black lenses, she's a fly landing and examining some rotten thing, my decaying toothbed, her blue gloved hands like the fly's rubbery legs. Again, I hear the buzzing of her sanding tool as she hovers above me with some difficulty. It is as if she is a jeweler and I the inert stone which she polishes and examines under a magnifying glass.

In my mouth, I have the taste of my own tooth shredded up. She is shaving down my tooth for a crown molding. The tool hitting my calcium tooth is hot with friction, and the shavings of the tooth taste like sawdust on the lining of my gums. It is a ghastly taste only because it seems unnatural to know what that material, not quite flesh and yet a piece of your body, tastes like in particle form. It produces a somewhat cannibalistic derision. Maybe, at least for me, it is one of those experiences that fits in Julia Kristeva's category of the abject.

MONTHS BEFORE, I HAD SAT IN THE FRONT ROWS OF A FUNERAL PROCESSION FOR A FRIEND OF MINE. THE WHOLE TIME, I THOUGHT ABOUT HER TEETH.

I remember this taste as it has cropped up intermittently since early childhood. The pediatric dentist when I was very young told my mother that my frequent fevers as an infant had heated up and denatured the proteins in my teeth when they just as they had begun to take shape. My teeth sprouted out of my jaw weak and strangely formed. I was prone to cavities and decay. I spent many hours under the white light, under the mild and strange anesthesia of dentistry. It would cause anxiety every time I waited with my mother as she gave my father's credit card at the front desk. I would try not to listen when they said how much it cost. I came to dread the dentist as I was to blame for the teeth which had to be filled in with enamel or drilled into to remove brown spots. Cavity, cavity, cavity. Over time, those baby teeth fell out and it seemed so ironic to me that all the money was just falling out of my mouth, each tooth like a worthless coin. Maybe, I mused, I ought to string them on twine like repurposed decorative beads from my mouth's broken necklace.

I remember the taste of my ground-up teeth from recent years too. The summer after my senior year of high

school, the dentist did three fillings on my bottom teeth, and I sat in the chair for three hours as they ground down molars and a canine. Unlike others, this dentist kept asking questions that I tried to answer with head shakes or gurgling through the tools in my mouth. He asked me about where I was going to school in the fall and where I wanted to end up in life and I had wanted to say, “I’m having an existential crisis over here, I don’t need you sniffing around my personal life with that weapon in your hand.”

Instead, I made some offhand, inappropriate comment about how dentists had the highest suicide rate of any profession (which by the way was true). I was a bit defensive when it came to my teeth at the time.

Months before, I had sat in the front rows of a funeral procession for a friend of mine. The whole time, I thought about her teeth. She used to brag that her dentist told her she had the most beautiful smile of any patient he had ever had. I knew she was telling the truth because they really might have been the most beautiful teeth I myself had ever seen.

**CHAPTER TWO: WRITTEN DECEMBER, 2020. FROM A SINCE ABANDONED JOURNAL.
THE ENTRY TITLED ‘FICTION SCENE #5.’**

It must have been the teeth that Eleanor thought about the most during Sasha’s funeral. They were the teeth now. Teeth that did not require pronouns because they no longer belonged to anybody, only to the nitrous soil. Ash to ash, they said in chapel every year. But the teeth would remain longer than anything else. Eleanor had googled it.

The night before she had read off the dirty screen of her laptop about each stage of the decomposition process. “Teeth decay easily in life, but once death occurs the decay stops” The website was government-funded, just pure text and pictures of yellow teeth with dark holes and cracks. The dental records were how they identified the skeletons of dead hookers and arson victims. Some dentists, she read, compared teeth to fingerprints in their uniqueness.

The funeral had happened faster than Eleanor had expected, although she hadn’t realized she harbored the expectation until they announced Sasha’s funeral would be that Wednesday.

Eleanor thought about coming in her school uniform, considering that it was right after seventh period. Instead, she put on a black dress from Ann Taylor in the history wing bathroom. It fit, besides the arm holes which cut into her armpits in a way that was impossible to forget about. There was no time to get a new dress.

The funeral was quick, she realized, only because death worked a fast magic. The membranes around cells start to rupture, split like overripe oranges. Leaky enzymes start to unify tissue into one final soup. Somehow, it’s not a destruction. It’s the one thing you mustn’t worry about. In death, the body will take care of the rest.

Eleanor heard about a mushroom suit you could wear to help you decompose naturally. There were only so many plots of earth that could be taken before people’s primordial liquids started to drip into the drinking water. Sasha was in a casket. She wouldn’t have gone for the mushroom idea anyways. At the front of the room, the stained cedar was reflecting the ceiling lights. Down the aisle, Sasha’s mom was being escorted to their pew, her heels barely touching the ground as the younger brothers Jack and Peter held her by the elbows. There was no telling how much tramadol she was on.

The family passed by Eleanor’s pew and Peter made a grimacing expression as his eyes met hers. It was a face she had seen before from between burning candles at the King’s big maple table. Sasha’s dad went up to speak. The bible verses fell off his diplomat’s tongue easily, unrehearsed. He was a handsome man who always did his syllables justice. His mouth was like Sasha’s in the ways that it parted for verbs and echoed around pauses.

Her teeth. She had always bragged about her teeth, which her dentist had told her were the best set of teeth he had ever encountered. A glint of sharp canines. Room for the wisdoms to grow in. White, especially in the morning. It didn’t even bother Eleanor when she had talked about it because it was true. She had the most perfect smile. Eleanor imagined the teeth falling out of Sasha’s jaw bone, collecting at the bottom of the coffin like baby teeth in a silver jar.

“Stage Four: Skeletonization. Because the skeleton has a decomposition rate based on the loss of organic (collagen) and inorganic components, there is no set time frame when skeletonization occurs.”

IN UTERO
JOSELYN LWIGALE



Standing over Eleanor’s kneeling body, the priest bowed to give her a wafer that tasted like paper. She ate it before realizing people were dipping it in the trailing wine chalice. The clergyman smiled when he got to her, held it to her lips, and let her sip from the rim. “The blood of Christ, poured out for you.”

Would there ever be any explanation for why Sasha had decided to climb into the coffin herself?

“According to Dr. Arpad A. Vass, adjunct professor of forensic anthropology, human decomposition begins around four minutes after a person dies.”

Four minutes was a lifetime. It was purgatory, it was Nirvana, it was wherever the Jews went after Shiva. It seemed like enough time to take it back. Infinity existed in four minutes, Sasha lying there, her skin turgid with youth, the whites of her eyes blinding. Her blood pulsing with something between life, something between death. One of those “thin places” the Scots talked about. Somewhere briefly immortal.

“Several weeks after death — nails and teeth fall out.”

It had not yet been several weeks. But it was only a matter of time.

CHAPTER THREE: BEFORE LONDON. MARCH, AGAIN.

I went to the dentist to get a new tooth the day before I flew to London. The tooth had fallen out in the middle of conversation the night before. I was halfway through saying:

“You don’t understand what it does to the people around you. You just don’t have the data. You don’t know how it affects everyone, even the people you didn’t know that well. They all feel it. And it ripples, it ripples out and out and out. Your siblings, your siblings’ children. You think it won’t hurt people for long but it changes people, it changed me on an elemental level, I’ll never be the —”

And I felt it in my mouth.

“What is that?”

My tongue, as if by reflex, pushed it out onto my waiting hand. There it was in my palm, a piece of my molar so large it looked like almost an entire tooth. In horror, I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw the empty place where my tooth was supposed to be. Now it was in my hand and momentarily I thought it might go back to normal if I just pressed it back into place, like you would with a stray puzzle piece. It had come out right as I had been talking about her, trying to explain what it was like after she died. My tooth came out with no warning, as if she had wanted to shut me up or had intended to remind me of her.

Sitting next to me in the car, Lawrence took the tooth out of my hand. He put it in his mouth until I asked for it back. I could never figure out what possessed him to do so.

**YOU MIGHT FIND, TO YOUR
DISPLEASURE, THAT YOU ARE A
SUPERSITIOUS PERSON EVEN IF YOU
DO NOT WISH TO BE.**

CHAPTER FOUR: LONDON.
STILL MARCH.

Laura, my childhood friend living abroad for the year, is still asleep when I land. It is very early in the morning. I take the tube to the Tate Modern to pass the time until she wakes up. There is an exhibit on the uncanny, although everyone is just calling it the surrealism exhibit. Around me, paintings and objects, a lobster telephone, booklets of snail mail art projects, booklets full of penises and vaginas, a Miro, a Samudio avant-garde Colombian short film called “The Blue Lobster” with a script written by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the famous Magritte of the train coming out of the hearth.

Hanging in the first room:

An oil painting of two little girls in a hallway of numbered doors. The fourth door is cracked at an acute angle. Incandescent light leaks out from the room’s golden interior. A crack runs down the wall and makes a strange seam between two doors. At the edge of a flight of stairs, a giant sunflower lies like a disfigured corpse. The sunflower head is painted with perfect naturalism, and yet, it reads intuitively as anthropomorphic. The

face of the flower leers with the eye of a cyclops, transmitting a certain sinister sentience. Two of its massive petals have been ripped off, one landing on the steep steps. A strange Victorian child, gossamer blonde hair down to her waist, stands with her eyes closed, clutching the other dismembered petal in her hand. The second girl’s black hair is held totally vertical above her scalp by an invisible vortex. She stands over the sunflower like a survivor over a defeated assailant—in that hallway, it was kill or be killed.

From a QR code next to the painting:

With regard to the 1943 painting, Dorothea Tanning wrote that “it’s about confrontation. Everyone believes he/she is his/her drama. While they don’t always have giant sunflowers (most aggressive of flowers) to contend with, there are always stairways, hallways, even very private theatres where the suffocations and the finalities are being played out, the blood red carpet or cruel yellows, the attacker, the delighted victim...”

In the next room, written on the wall:

“Doubts about whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate” —Jentsch

Also on another wall:

“We do feel this to be uncanny. And unless a man is utterly hardened and proof against the lure of superstition, he will be tempted to ascribe a secret meaning to this obstinate recurrence...” —Freud.

All that strangeness, all those minds turned inside out for me to see in the Tate. Was the tooth animate or inanimate? Had it ever been alive or was it just calcium covering a nerve root? By pure neurosis, I had brought the tooth with me to London like a talisman I couldn’t leave behind.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE PLANE LEAVING LONDON, MARCH, NOW SEVERAL DAYS OLDER.

Without being too specific, a fear of death was recurring simultaneously with the sudden instantiation of teeth in my life, like the unconscious was at work in orchestrating the coincidence of my tooth falling out just as I was met again with the possibility of losing someone by their own hand. You try to find some magic in old pain, even if it is dark magic. The mind plays make believe with threats which reappear with the same physical signs that have come to represent the past, those handful of envisaged memories so sharp and distinct that they will not leave you alone, so hyper-real to you that they produce their own symbols and stay alive in your imagination that way. It is such an effective tactic that sometimes, when situations do repeat themselves, it feels as if you were destined to find yourself in the same spot, with the same fate. You can never really leave the past behind. It springs up, at random in your day, triggered by something familiar and yet something you would like to repress. I thought burials were a good thing for the most part. You need to “lay things to rest,” as we sometimes say. But small parts survive above the soil. Small parts, like a handful of teeth that stay in the back pocket of your jeans or in some back crevice of your mind. I could not explain to my friend, who was distraught and needed to explain his thoughts to me, how his situation was the past repeating itself for me. Or how the tooth had chipped off with such ironic timing that I truly became afraid that something awful would happen to him too. Maybe it was his bad luck to meet me.

The uncanny is what we will not accept. Andre Breton blames it on an overly logical society, but it could be any number of things, in my opinion, that make it difficult to admit yourself as a superstitious person. You might find, to your displeasure, that you are a superstitious person even if you do not wish to be. I realized that to tell him what I was thinking, the associations of his confessed situation and my memory of the past, would be to place a grave weight on him. I knew of course that I could never tell him what I was really thinking or what the tooth meant. I was in a mixed world of now and then, returning to places which, all things considered, I had successfully learned to avoid. I had to tell myself that I was not making up all the terrifying things that had happened to me. They had seemed unreal for most of life, as if I had dreamed them up or as if they were from a story my mother had told me about the life of a relative who was dead before I had been born.

The idea is to one day lay it all to rest. But by putting it away, storing it under soil in my mind, I also made it an unreal past. An unreal past, and yet, a past which irrefutably happened. It becomes all the stranger when those past memories resurface.

CHAPTER SIX: IN SOME DIRT. LATE MARCH.

I bury my piece of tooth in some dirt. That is all I can do for now.

FANA THE BRILLIANT

ASHLEY DUONG



I AM SO OLD TO MYSELF

JOSELYN LWIGALE

When you finally taste the bitter toxicity—caught in your mouth like yogurt and kiwi, like yogurt and pineapple

It is powerful to rise through this

It is powerful to rescind your loving, giving heart. A Holy act

And when your presence isn't cared for. And
When you are paid no mind trying
To hiccup Laughter

O, Mask, the Black in the Angelou laugh
As the clay of your sisterly love began to crack, smashed before, but
This time in multiple blows. One time. Two times
Three

And you are kept on the side.

The body keeps a score; body language
Flows with physical scorn

In that moment you grew silent
Recoiled up so your height felt proud(er). And
You knew

The love was transformed into something else
As it does when given and taken it Transforms.

You walked away, flicking your heels like a dancer Swaying
Your dark brown stretchmark hips like Katherine
Symmetrical lines and centered action

Creating
altar'd space

You were matured once more. On
The dawn of December you have finally aligned.



BONU
PIYUSHA KUNDU

AN INTERVIEW WITH OUTSPOKEN BEAN

EDITED BY HANNAH YOUNG

Emanuelee Bean, better known as “Outspoken Bean,” was the first poet to perform on Houston Ballet’s main stage with their production “Play.” He has been commissioned to write and perform a national campaign on diversity for Pabst Blue Ribbon and VICE, while creating and producing his own festival, Plus Fest: The Everything Plus Poetry Festival. Born in New Jersey and raised in San Antonio, Texas, Outspoken Bean serves as Houston’s poet laureate through 2023. In 2022, Bean received an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellowship.

R2 conducted this interview in person during the fall semester of 2022. It has been edited for brevity and clarity.



Q: What draws you to spoken word poetry instead of written poetry?

OB: It’s what calls me more. I really enjoy talking. I really enjoy being in front of people. But in order to be a performance poet, or even if you go into acting, right, in order to go into there, you need a source, right? You need a source material.

But I like the idea of creating my source material beforehand and then presenting it to audiences. Whether that be in settings like this or intimate settings or even my one man shows when I do those, or when I used to compete and I used to slam, I love that process.

I’ve fallen in love with the process of creating something that I dictate, and will become something else on stage as it becomes alive. I write out loud essentially. I wish I really put more energy into like the publishing world, and I’m doing that now.

I’m doing that now, but it just didn’t call me like that. And even like when I was in high school, I would freestyle rap and battle rap and stuff like that. And even though I wasn’t physically writing it, I still had to have sourced material.

I’m just coming up with it in the moment, you know? But I love the things that I can pull together to create something as an experience. I think of myself as a producer of experiences. It’s something that you can’t touch, but it’s something that you feel and want, and that’s what calls me a lot of times.

Q: What do you see spoken word poetry as able to do that written poetry can’t?

OB: They do the same thing in a lot of ways, I think. It’s the presenter, you know what I’m saying? Even if you have a book and it’s widely successful, you still gotta get in front of people, you still gotta talk, you still gotta sell that book. Like spoken word is still relatively new as a concept to the main media, and people are uncomfortable with it, you know what I’m saying? And I don’t think poetry spoken word has done a great job at harnessing its power for people to follow it. Poetry has not done a great job of marketing itself to be viable for audiences when I think people really fuck with it.

I was on TikTok and there was this guy talking and he was basically saying the reason why poetry is

important. Like in your day to day, you're probably not thinking about it, so on and so forth, until you lose a loved one. Until something happens to you. But like, let's say you lose a loved one and then you hear a poem that speaks exactly to this feeling that helps you cope.

I find poetry to be extremely comforting in the times when you're up against spikes.

I think it's the presenter, to get back to you. I think it's the presenter. I tell my students Meta-Four Houston, I tell 'em like, yo, don't be the bathroom break when you get on stage. It's a crime, a very, very, very, very small crime. But the impact is dire when you think about it. It's wasting people's time. That's the only resource we can't get back. So if you are going to be in front of people, mean it. If you are going to be in front of people to say things, be prepared. You have to honor people's time when they allow you to be in front of them.

Q: How does performance factor into the process of writing spoken word poetry? Does performance come first, or writing?

OB: Writing always comes first. There's this guy, Stephen King, he has a really great book called *On Writing*, and he has this quote in there that is the best writing advice: Write with the door open, edit with the door closed. The process is writing, creating, revising, editing, building, all of that. That's countless hours that y'all may not see for a 30 minute show, you know what I'm saying? An hour long show or whatever that may be.

Honestly, concept is before that, and living is before that.

I think one of the hardest forms of public speaking is comedy. Because they only have one emotion to operate off of. What I'm getting at is there is a sense of like, you have to live the experience and then manipulate words to get to whatever the joke, the punchline was. So on and so forth. And with me, it's kind of the same thing. But I don't operate in just one emotion from the audience. I have the privilege of pulling multiple kinds of emotions from audiences.

Q: Poetry is perceived as difficult or academic, as sophisticated. How do you think slam poetry is perceived by the public in general?

OB: Oh, as a joke. As a joke.

Q: Why do you think that is?

OB: I think it's seen as a joke to the public. *21 Jump Street*, anyone seen that movie? You know what part I'm talking about? Beat poets haven't been around since the sixties, but that's what they were making fun of, right? Like, the bongos, dark room. Beret, incense. But they called it slam poetry. Tom Hanks did a slam poem, that's what they called it. But that's not what it was.

There haven't been poets who have a big enough megaphone to defend it, pretty much. We live in Texas, right? Football is mocked all over the world. Our American football is mocked all over the world, but it's defended because it's a massive thing. I really think they should change the name, but they're not. Why? Because, fuck it. We don't care about the rest of the world. But they're able to do that because there's a huge fan base and there's so many defenders of it.

Spoken word really doesn't have that. Who's the most famous? I don't know. Actually Amanda Gorman would be the biggest. And that's like recent. And people still don't call her a performance poet. They just call her a poet.

Q: What is your writing process like?

OB: I try to write every day a little bit. I wrote something today. Like a line. I wrote like three lines yesterday. I write a little bit every day. Lately my writing process has been for commission work. It's fun, it's great. I'm happy that it's happening. But it's like, you know, it's more of a corporate side of things.

I don't really believe in writer's block. I think writer's block is kind of bullshit, right? Because you always have a block there. The block is always there. If you think of block like marble, like the statue of David? That statue is marble, and it's like 10 feet tall. One slab of marble. And it's all intact. If you look at most of those statues during that time the arms are off because they were built in pieces. And Rome hired him, doing like what I'm doing right, commission work. They hired him to build it. And they were pissed. They were like, you want marble? Because marble is so hard. It's so hard to sculpt. It's really fine. And if you mess up, you mess up.

You gotta start over, essentially. And so he's working on it, chiseling away. He's chiseling, chiseling, chiseling, chiseling away.

And people started asking him like, why are you doing it this way? It takes longer. It's more expensive. And he was like, because my David is in there, I gotta pull him out. That's how I see writing. Your block is there every single day. It's your job to chisel, and you can do that day by day, day by day, just a little bit at a time. As long as I'm constantly chiseling, my David will come out. I'm chasing that inspiration, rather than just waiting for it.

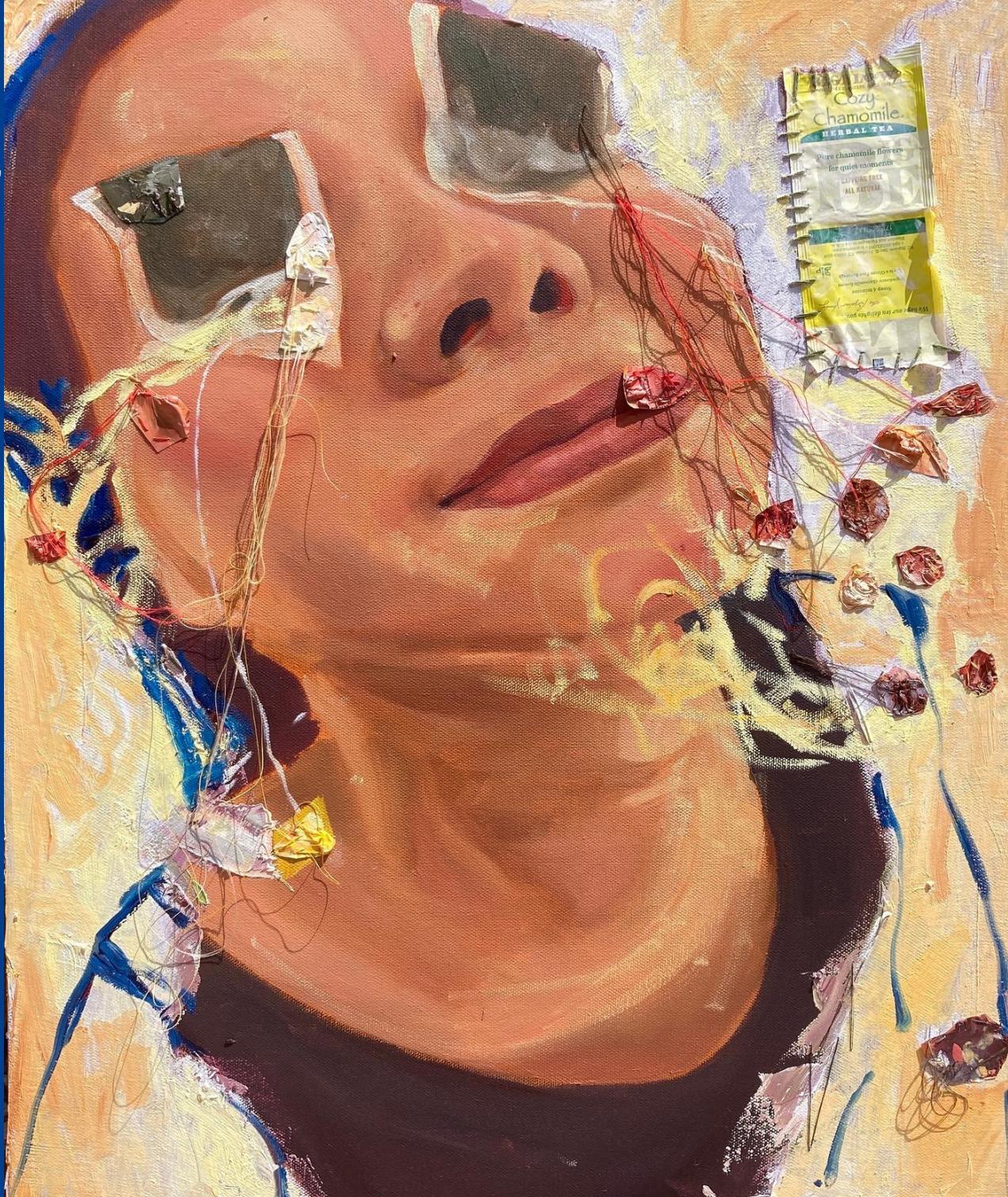
Q: What is the place of grief in spoken word poetry? How do you navigate writing about your own or community's grief?

OB: It's hard. It's hard. Community, I don't know, but for me, I have a hard time writing in grief. It tends to like stop my creative juices. All that shit I was talking about like, keep going? I stopped. I'm human. I guess I've also learned this year, unfortunately, that death is not just of people, death is of moments and situations and relationships, and those can be as sudden as a car crash. It can halt your sense of worth. And I don't know if this is advice for everyone, but for me, grief is a beast that eats time. And I have to give it time cause it's going to be there.

I don't want to feed myself to the grief, is what I'm getting at. I do try to write. I do try to create from it. Grief can be used. Grief can be used, anger can be used, but bitterness cannot. So I'm trying not to be bitter. It's hard not to be bitter, but I try not to.



MAJESTIC
JAZMINE CASTILLO



GOD-FEARING

RITA AJIT

I slept in my parents' bed until I was twelve years old. It was not only the safest place in the house but the safest corner of the world. A complex entanglement of the existential fears of growing up, of losing my parents, of God's wrath itself, of the end of times (2012 was particularly hard), and occasionally a spider that had disappeared plagued my young mind and made my room unbearable. I shouldered the weight of the world on little shoulders. If I lived with as much anxiety as I carried then, I imagine I'd be a wildly different person, probably at a school within a car ride from home, always equipped with the option to snake into that queen-sized bed under the faded and pillowed comforter when my mind became too hostile to call home. I was never more aware of the passage of time than those nights when I tucked myself into my own bed and played an endless waiting game with the sleep that I could only find outside my door and across the hall in the master bedroom.

Knock-knock, quietly at first at my parents' door. But there is no response, and the darkness of the hallway is threatening to swallow me whole. The urgency grows. *Knock knock-knock knock*: fear takes on a rhythm, like my heart beating as though to be let out as I waited to be let in. I think my parents could hear it too because no matter whether we'd argued that day, the night wiped the slate clean. Or they were too tired to put up a fight. "Mnnh." The door would open, my dad behind it, his eyes squinting with sleep. "How many times..." he'd trail off. The scenarios all ended the same way. I'd say I'm sorry, sorry, I'll do better tomorrow, knowing that I wouldn't. I was let in like a lost dog, relief flooding every limb in my body. I curled up in the warmth of my mom and buried my face close to hers.

I still owe my parents an explanation. I could use one myself. I realized I held the misconception that some unexpected sense of understanding through epiphany would eventually equip me to explain and not the other way around. I was clinging fiercely to a

childhood I could already feel slipping away at twelve. I already missed being younger, a time when my mom would hand-feed me her home cooked meals. It was the purest form of love and nourishment in every sense. She formed little balls of rice and curry: a delicious, nostalgic conglomerate rolled between her fingers. It always tasted better that way; I don't think metal or plastic were ever meant to be the intermediaries of our meals. The bigger rolls she would call "elephant eggs." It only occurs to me now that elephants don't lay eggs. I missed the elephant eggs and the bedtime stories already—the ones I told myself were far less soothing.

A nighttime in my own room was a cycle of rehearsed compulsions. It all started with prayer. I had a list that I had to go through or else myself, my mom, dad, sister, brother, friends, teachers, and the sweet old couple in front of me in the Target checkout line that day were all at risk. I prayed for banalities and I prayed for miracles. I prayed so much that I would grow scared that I had grown so close with God that he would whisk me up to Heaven right then and there so we could be even closer. It was a strangely narcissistic yet wildly terrifying thought. So I would have to also pray that wouldn't happen. If prayer was a private conversation between me and God, I had no way of knowing if the little voice in my head was me or him. I never knew the gravity I should give to the intrusive thoughts that came floating through my head. If they were faxed down by an omnipotent being, I'd better treat them as real.

When the prayer part was done, more unique compulsions emerged. I could hold my breath and count to 20 to bestow good fortune on myself while I slept. Turn to the side away from the door so the potential intruder can't see that I'm awake and have been hatching an escape plan since nine o'clock.

They were even more nonsensical at times.

"Don't look now but there's someone outside your window and they might have a gun that they might shoot so roll off your bed at precisely 10:00:00 and remember to flip them off so they know you're onto them but you're not scared and then dip out of view because you are a little scared," said my contrived mind. Or God. Maybe it was a tip called in from heaven—I couldn't be sure. I complied with the possibly celestial instruction and a minute passed. Safe. The top of the hours were inexplicably dangerous. Another close call in suburbia where some of my neighbors leave their doors unlocked because we're fortunate enough not to give it a second thought. It was all a ridiculous performance where I was the director, performer, and sole audience. The conflict

was never real.

The habits would manage to work their way into well-lit, perfectly recreational activities too. Like what I'd call life-or-death basketball, which is just shooting hoops. Except that every shot is attached to an incredibly momentous consequence.

Make this shot and your parents won't die before you do, said God or I or something in between. The ball gave an unenthused dull thump against the backboard and fell unceremoniously to the ground, missing the net. *Shit*. No one said it can't be a best of three, actually. *Damn*. No, best of five. The game never ends and I can't go inside until I end on three consecutive successes or whatever arbitrary regulation I had chosen that day.

I WOULD GROW SCARED THAT I HAD GROWN SO CLOSE WITH GOD THAT HE WOULD WHISK ME UP TO HEAVEN RIGHT THEN AND THERE.

My mind was riddled with anxieties attached to problems beyond my control. I felt the need to take the ball into my court, literally, to exert whatever agency I could, even if it was entirely founded on pretense. Prayer offered me a similar sense of stability. I could always reassure myself after a bout of compulsive thinking that I was trying to play God, and the only solution was to ask directly for his guidance rather than try to fix things myself. For me, religion became the sole remedy to my anxieties and yet the cause of new ones. It offered me both the relief and the apprehension attached to knowing that someone was in control and it wasn't me.

Still, the traditional practice of religion always made me feel like an outsider. It reminds me of how my family would always sit in the cry room because my sister made a fuss, feeling like observers behind the glass rather than participants. When I looked around our parish, I found a sea of white families and felt like we didn't belong. My mom would laugh at the couples caressing each other's backs during mass, scoffing at the public display of gentle affection she didn't find as tasteful. Her standard of comparison was the churches in Kerala where men and women sit on opposite sides of the building.

Once or twice, our family has been asked when and why we converted to Christians. We didn't. My parents have only ever switched between two radio stations in our minivan: 91.9 Christian Music and 102.9

Bollywood Hits. Only two percent of the Indian population is Christian, and my family falls into this category. I can often spot Kerala Christians by their biblically-derived names that often sound so white that no white person could ever possibly have them, like my cousin “Joseph Joe.” It felt like a contradiction to be so Indian and Christian.

At the same time that my experience feels disconnected, I think of how religion serves as the link between disparate places and identities. Christianity was introduced to India when St. Thomas arrived in Kerala, my parents’ home state. This fact has always served as a source of pride for them, as though the religion belongs to them more than others in India. After immigrating to America, it helped my parents establish roots when a church was always within a five mile radius, one of the few parts of their home routine that they didn’t have to do away with after immigrating. It connects us as a family with our relatives abroad, knowing that one God plays a game of telephone, receiving and delivering all of our prayers to one another.

When my family couldn’t be there for my grandfather as his health deteriorated, it felt like God served as the proxy to sit by his bedside, just like we used to do when we visited. The thing about a progressive disease like Parkinson’s is that it fundamentally went against my conceptions about prayer. The amount of prayers for him was not directly correlated with his recovery trajectory. In fact, there was no correlation at all, I came to learn. I didn’t stop praying. I feared that if I couldn’t make it better, my inaction still had the potential to make things worse.

My mom often told me that God sees children’s tears first, and these prayers mean the most to him. At night, I would dwell on the worst case scenarios, forcing my eyes to well until the tears formed themselves and rolled off my cheek and onto the pillow. At the very least, I had hoped this meant my dedications skipped the queue on God’s priority list. I was exploiting my own emotions and my grandfather’s sickness for a compulsion to cry.

The Christian radio station advertised their online prayer request service, “When We Pray,” which is kind of like a watered-down, devotional Twitter where anyone can air out their deepest sorrows. I felt it necessary to scroll extensively through others’ troubles in hopes that I could somehow control those too. You could sort by “Recent Without Prayers” and there was no better feeling than claiming the “I Prayed for This” button, like I was checking their problems off my neverending list.



I found myself in the business of excavating sorrows wherever I could find them, in my mind or the world around me. It was more for myself than anyone else, so I could feel like I had partaken in the crowdsourcing of a miracle.

Somehow, when Parkinson's claimed my grandfather's life, most of my compulsions went with him. It signaled to me at last that my mind had no power. A chasm grew in my relationship to God too, who was

**SOMETIMES I WONDER IF
IMMIGRANT PARENTS WROTE
THE BIBLE. SUFFER SILENTLY,
WORK HARD, EXPECT
NOTHING.**

closely entangled with my misconstrued obsessions. It felt impossible to reconcile the fact that there were so many people who prayed for my grandpa every single day, and still he didn't improve. He never once complained, so we pretended not to see his symptoms worsening and his abilities declining. I tried not to

notice how our voices wavered when we talked to him. My mom always said we should be more like him and accept the challenges God gives us without feigning self-pity or sadness. I just wanted to know how he was really doing. Every time I asked him, his answer was "I'm getting better, Rita."

Recently, I came across a Christian group offering free boba at a campus party. All you had to do to get it was ask them a question about what religion means. I was thirsty, curious, and maybe a little overzealous. I bit. "What's so holy about suffering?"

I wish I had listened more closely, but Kesha's "TiK ToK" drowned out his answer. Still, I can't blame the music as much as the callus my mind had built up over time from unresolved bitterness with the gods that once presided over me.

Sometimes I wonder if immigrant parents wrote the Bible. Suffer silently, work hard, expect nothing. Live for others. On top of that, leave it to them to find space for "listen to your parents" sandwiched between honoring the Sabbath and not killing others.

My entire family has gotten very good at suffering silently. I don't know if it's a strength or a weakness. I can't help but think it's partially an immigrant mentality. It's built by those who carry their crosses from one place to another, whose mothers weep when they must depart for a new, promised land. I hope it has delivered on its

promise, but I am beginning to learn that it is less about the land than it is about the children who embody its promises. I wished my parents were a little more selfish sometimes so I could carry less guilt about everything I get to enjoy at their expense. My mom likes to remind me it's the Catholic way: to give all that you can. I don't want my parents to crucify themselves for my sins. To question religion is to reject the everlasting God-given future in their eyes. In mine, the unbounded future is really my parents' gift to me, and I already live in it. My parents' love for me *is* divine. Be the president, my mom tells me. Be anything you want. And even if I failed, I know that their bed, in a new house, would still welcome me openly with the same refuge. And that is divine too.

They still ask me every Sunday when I call home if I've gone to church. And despite all of the uncertainty, time after time, I find myself at St. Anne's Chapel across campus for the 4 pm mass. It's almost déjà vu. It's escaping the darkness of a lonely bedroom for the comfort of something to cling to.

SHOW YOUR WORK

RIYA MISRA

If I set out from my home at 4:17 am and walk in a straight line at an 83° angle from my starting point, and if I hit the Atlantic Ocean—

If I swim so far that the lactic acid leadens my muscles until my density exceeds 997 kg/m^3 and I begin to sink—

If I pull myself onto the shore and find myself in India, in a mango tree grove with 271 trees, given that there is 1 tree per square foot and the grove is a trapezoid with the area $12(b_1+b_2)$ —

If I bite into a mango, even as the juice makes it hard for my lips to part, and I wonder about the cosine of the pit's angle that's pointing skywards—

If I run out of the grove and hop onto a rickshaw that's traveling at 17 km/hr for 43 minutes southwest until I reach my nani's village—

If my nani, who died at 2:47 pm on the third tuesday of the third month, cooks me roti as I lay on my stomach in the shimmering heat—

And if my baby cousin walks over to me with 3,723,484 stars in his almond eyes and 3 sticky ladoos in his mouth and strokes my forehead with his soft boy fingers,

And if my nana hollers at a level of 67 decibels for chai with one spoonful of sugar, the servant boy walking in a parabola of x^2-6x+9 to fetch his chai, a parabola so as to avoid the stray cats lounging in the sun,

I will be there, laying on my stomach, counting the dust and tickling my cousin, eating my nani's roti, and watching the boy drop my nana's chai as the cats lick it up and the sun begins to set, so ripe it made the mango in my stomach bite and choke on its own rays.

And so, if I have 2.7 billion seconds to live, how long can time stand still here before I need to return? Show your work.



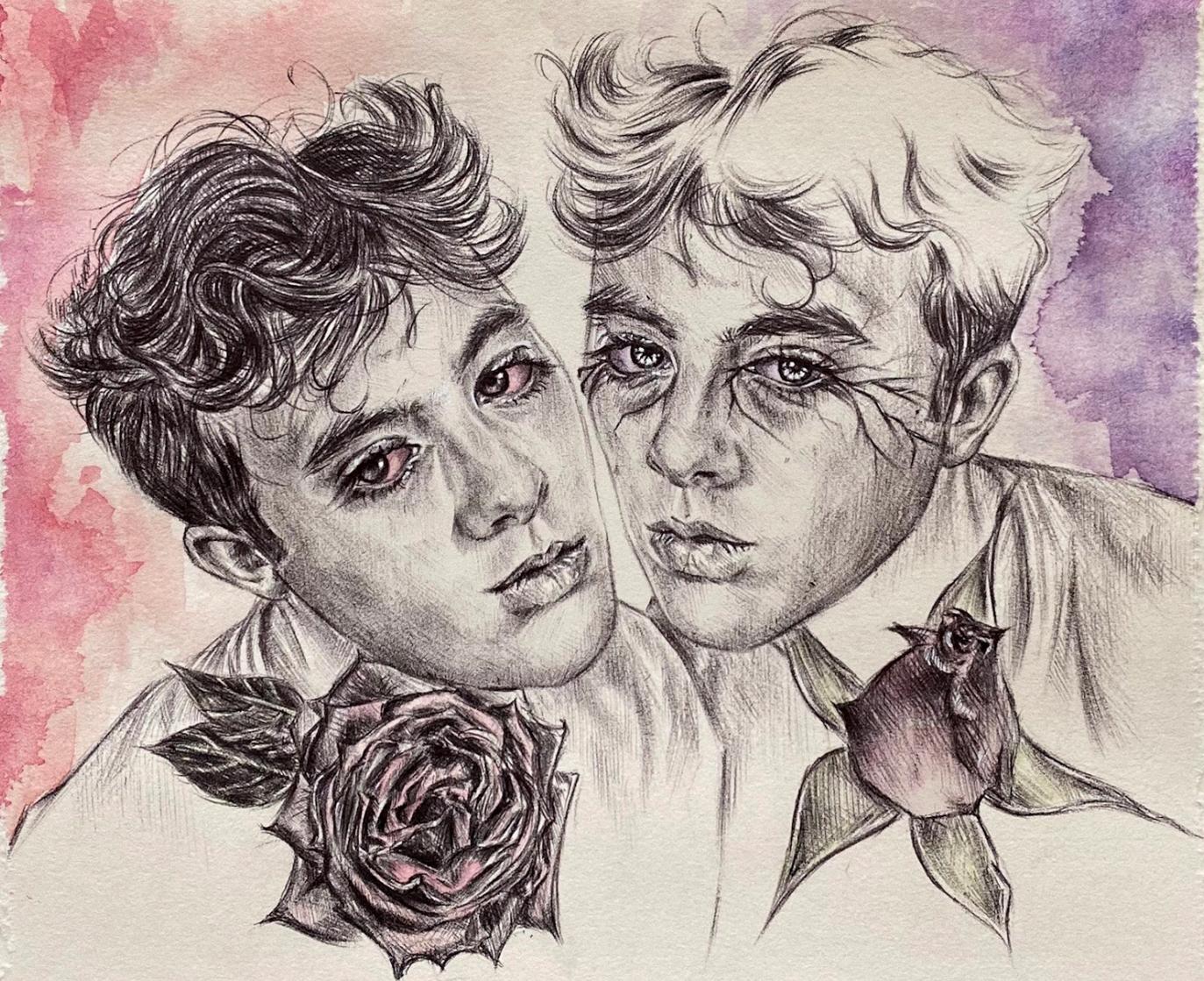
BLOOD ORANGE

CAMELLIA AN

CW: sexual coercion/assault

my mouth sinks into the blood orange it
is the taste of the biting cold air on a
winter evening and i tilt my head to keep
the juice from spilling onto my white
dress “eat more” you say quiet like the
hum of old VCR machines when they
don’t quite work anymore
so i pause before letting my tongue run
against its fleshy inside it is cold and wet
like frost melting in the spring
i enjoy it well the spring i mean not the
orange but you don’t understand that so i
stay silent and dig my tongue deeper into
the fruit letting my teeth nibble nervously
like i am chewing on the strings of fate
and not a supermarket special that is
slowly starting to drip onto my hands and
fall down my arm my brows furrow at the
stickiness i wonder how long it would
take to wash the color off my white
clothes if the drops reach and i give
myself a moment of respite
looking up at you hoping for a smile but
all i receive is a napkin that rubs harshly
at my skin leaving red around me like the
tip of a hermit crab’s shell “eat the rind”
you insist

the other girls enjoy the rind they
swallow it and let the juice coat their lips
in rouge a beautiful shade but not on me i
think my lips are glued shut in a clear
coat of disappointment
i just don’t understand the pleasure of
bitterness sliding between my tongue the
sour tang of raw flesh reminds me of
running my fingers through knotted hair i
don’t get it and i purse my lips as you
push the orange towards me “it’s normal”
you are louder now
it is metal grating in my ears the sound of
a wounded animal and i realize it was
never you saying anything at all
my mouth is open and i move the fruit
closer i bite and i feel nothing it is empty
like chewing through a wax candle my
hands are trembling and i am suddenly a
small child
nervous i swallow and it is akin to
opening your eyes in the dark so i look
down and there is the color of wasted
sunsets on my white clothes and i think to
myself i never liked oranges in the first
place



BEAUTY AND ROSES

HUIJUN MAO

Bid

One, two, three... He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not... My hand moves in circles around the shrinking rose. Is counting flower petals a logical and effective way for making important decisions?

Ecology

The sudden slumping of rain has painted the afternoon sky a greyish-white. Escaping from a green pond with a half-dead water lily floating upon it, the whole ecology class squeezes into the damp classroom, ready to implement the atrocity; our victims lie obediently on the table, arms and legs spreading out in complete quietness. Among them is a pink rose.

Anatomy

Rose. What is a rose? One of the many matters in the world that reflects the electromagnetic waves captured and transmitted by optical nerves and interpreted by the brain into certain patterns and colors.

Unity

Falling like a patter of pink snowflakes, the softest part of the flower disintegrates under a thoughtless hand. The rose really contains much more petals than I expected as I soon lose track of my count. Clearly, I'm not a very good decision-maker.

Truth

As the last covering falls off the body, the private part of the organism is revealed. Despite being the most unattractive part of almost every living matter, the reproductive organs always have the ability to trigger unreasonable excitement from the perpetrator. Yellowish sticks crouch close to one another at the core of the rose, tiny, inconspicuous, and delicate.

You
Upholding a neutral and objective attitude as a professional plant executioner, I undoubtedly treat the reproductive organs with the same respect and carefulness as of their showy counterpart by cutting them down mercilessly with a scissor.

What is beauty?

Aesthetic value equals order and complexity.

Now that the dismemberment of a live body is completed, with no blood, no fingers, and no screaming, each part of the victim is scattered on the table: the stem, slim and long, resembling an elegant leg of a ballet dancer, but not without blemish and twists; the sepals, of a dark green that indicates overlong soaking in water; the petals, slightly curved upon the table, like the fallen wing of a butterfly, lifeless and useless.

I reach out my hand and start to rearrange everything in an artificial circle with larger pieces on the outer rim and small reproductive organ enclosed at the center. They form a giant eye through which the power of nature is radiating outward. Nature is staring at you.

Order. But not without complexity.

It's only a matter of reconstruction.

Physiological and emotional arousal

Nerve impulses and rushes of endorphins coming from the three-pound combination of fat, water, protein, carbohydrates, and salts.

Tendency of natural selection

We perceive beauty in things that can enhance the chance of survival. A beautiful natural landscape often indicates abundant food resources, as philosopher Danis Dutton says in a TED Talk.

I turn back to the remnants on the table. The pink, the green, the yellow; the soft, the hard, the thorny.

Are roses edible?

Female choice

“Stay with us, stay with us, our little beauty queen,” Tungara Frog the Seven Dwarves whine from the forest in Panama. “We will have the best bed in our cabin for you and we promise to cook good meals every day.”

“Come with me and we will get married, my bride. Your beautiful white feather looks like a wedding dress,” Peacock Romeo Montague says as he holds out his hand from the window.

“I’m grateful for your deep affection,” says Peacock Juliet Capulet. “But I will only go with white peacocks, and why are you all in dark?” she continues as she refrains from the window.

This is sexual selection, says Darwin. It explains the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet.

The Pleistocene savannas

As if green umbrellas blossoming on a furry carpet, corpses of low trees disperse over the vast grassland. The earth, dry and endless; the sun, round and fiery; the shrubs, slender and swaying, with water trailing through, wildlife bouncing about

and Homo sapiens scrambling under. There should be an intrinsic appreciation in every human being towards this kind of natural scenery—the land of our origins, says philosopher Denis Dutton.

PLEASE REMIND ME TO SHED BITTER TEARS TOWARDS A PIECE OF BED SHEET IN THE YANLING HOSPITAL BECAUSE THAT’S WHERE I WAS BORN.

My eyes stop their silent confrontations with the eye of nature, as each of us doesn’t know what the other is trying to convey. Instead, I avert my attention to a small piece of window flickering on the other side of the table. The rain has stopped. The sky a light blue, the grass a fresh green with mud-colored crops mixing in between and restless rustlings underneath.

I look at the scene, hard, with wide eyes, as if a forensic doctor examining a crime scene. If I’m not awestruck, if my eyes are not filled with divine tears and my heart not blowing up with joy, then it probably means that the rural Midwest is not, in the end, the land of my origin.

Please remind me to shed bitter tears towards a piece of bed sheet in the Yanling Hospital because that's where I was born.

A sign of a good soul, says Kant, is anyone who has an interest in natural beauty.¹

No, Hegel says, art is higher than nature.

Let's worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness, says the Judaist.²

We behold the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, says the Christian.³

Buddha shines in his glory, says the Buddhist.

"How about filling out a questionnaire and getting free candy bars?" say Diessner et al. as the researchers hand out flyers with the title, "Engagement With Beauty Scale." "And no worries about the categories, as we include all three."

"Everything is just a score," they add.

Excerpted from the "Engagement With Beauty Scale"

Statements 1–4 below refer to experiences with nature and the physical world, including mountains, rocks, rivers, lakes, oceans, deserts, plants, flowers, trees, animals, etc. (but NOT the human body).

_____ 1. **I notice beauty** in one or more aspects of nature.

_____ 2. When **perceiving beauty** in nature, **I feel** changes in my body, such as a lump in my throat, an expansion in my chest, a faster heartbeat, or other bodily responses.

_____ 3. When **perceiving beauty** in nature, **I feel** emotional. It "moves me," such as feeling a sense of awe, or wonder or excitement or admiration or upliftment.

_____ 4. When **perceiving beauty** in nature, **I feel** something like a spiritual experience, perhaps a sense of oneness, or being united with the universe, or a love of the entire world.⁴

Now tell me, is the rose beautiful?

"Say yes," Zhang et al. respond, "because our research shows that engagement with beauty predicts psychological well-being".⁵

It doesn't matter, the clock says, class is over.

1 In Western philosophy, there are three domains of beauty—the artistic beauty, the natural beauty and the moral beauty. The anecdotes here are representations of the three kinds of beauty.

2 All the religious content are revised from the sacred text of each religion: Psalms for Judaism; Holy Bible for Christianity and Dhammapada for Buddhism.

3 In sacred text, the word glory often means beauty. According to Merriam-Webster's Third New International Dictionary, "glory: 4a(1): great beauty or splendor".

4 The complete Engagement With Beauty Scale can be found in the Appendix of the essay "Engagement With Beauty: Appreciating Natural, Artistic, and Moral Beauty" <https://doi.org/10.3200/JRLP.142.3.303-332>

5 In the essay "Engagement with natural beauty moderates the positive relation between connectedness with nature and psychological well-being," Zhang et al. find that a person's tendency to connect with nature is positively correlated with psychological well-being only when the person can perceive natural beauty.



ALMOST
PIYUSHA KUNDU

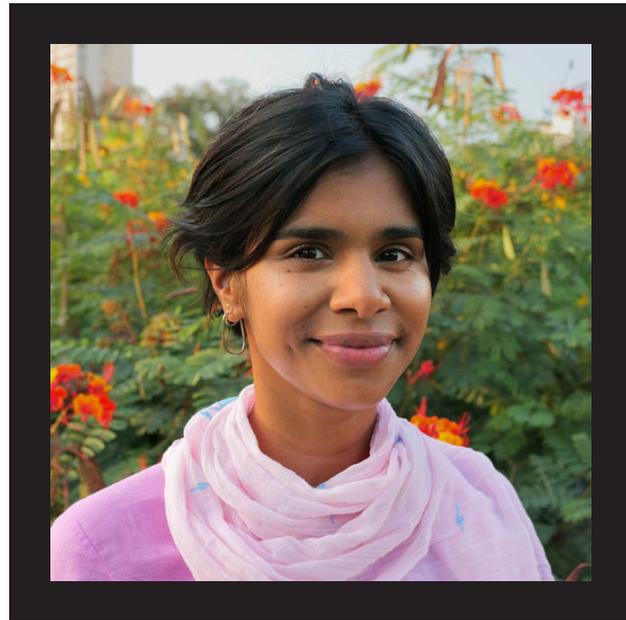


PARENTHOOD
HANNAH USADI

AN INTERVIEW WITH SINDHU THIRUMALAISAMY

EDITED BY LILY WEEKS

We had a conversation with artist and Visual and Dramatic Arts professor Sindhu Thirumalaisamy to discuss her process as a video artist in Houston. We focused specifically on her video piece, “oon,” following its appearance in the group exhibition “Lo que me queda de tu amor” (“What’s Left of Your Love for Me”). The exhibition ran from September 17 - December 10, 2022 at Lawndale Art Center, and was curated by Francis Almendárez and Mary Montegro with the goal of highlighting how artists use, contest, and rework traditional notions of an archive. The interview has been edited for brevity.



Q: How did the group exhibit, “Lo que me queda de tue amor,” come about? What did you enjoy about being a part of a group exhibit, and what did you learn from it?

ST: I love being part of group exhibitions. I think that in the institutional art world, there’s a kind of hierarchy of exhibition types where the solo exhibition is considered the pinnacle of an artist’s success. And there are some amazing solo exhibitions for sure. But I think group exhibitions that are curated with a particular conversation in mind are very stimulating for me when I go to see art because they make connections between the works. I think this is also the editor in me, like, montage is a big part of what I do and how I make meaning.

The show is also really exciting to be a part of as someone who’s a queer immigrant and who is navigating a process of living here that can feel disorienting as it refuses normative assimilation. Politics of assimilation incentivize immigrant communities to conform to the dominant larger cultures that we come to, sometimes to the detriment of our own sense of self and against our own embodied, ancestral wisdom. It’s great to be in a community with people who understand this discomfort and who are finding unique ways to connect with their histories and cultural practices against the grain. What is really exciting for me about that show is the ways that other artists who, through looking to their communities, to their past, and to different languages, can put a kind of joyful, resistive pressure on narratives of assimilation.

Q: You describe “oon” as a video poem. How would you define a video poem, and how do you think the spoken word interacts with the written pieces in the Lawndale exhibit?

ST: As a filmmaker, I’m working on projects in two veins: essayistic works and poetic works. And the essayistic pieces are longer; they tend to take a longer time to manifest and they tend to require more resources to come together. And the video poems are a way for me to sort of bracket and say, “Okay, this is something that’s playing with language, whether that is audio, visual language or spoken language.” It has a kind of brevity to it that I associate with poems.

I think all the pieces in this exhibition have a strong commitment to narrative. All of the works are trying

in some way to record memories and histories. I think there's a way in which oral histories become really important to create a worldview that makes sense to us as immigrants and children of immigrants. We're all interested in what we can carry forward that may be intangible, that is still an archive, that can orient us to life both here and "back home."

Q: Watching your video "oon" on its own, we were struck by the smaller sounds that were often obscured when the piece appeared in the group exhibit. Our group had a lot of discussion about the Skype sound in particular, and the xylophone sounds that seemed to mimic it. What inspired your sound design?

ST: So this is from the time before Zoom was a thing. And Skype was the main player, let's say, in these types of video conferencing calls. As someone who lived away from India, where my parents live, I was often calling and conferencing people on Skype to keep in touch. So the sound of the Skype call was a constant in my life, and I wanted to work with that as the musical part of the sound design. Other sounds that are in that piece are the conversation with my mother, which was kind of choppy. There's also the noise and the glitch that comes with trying to connect through Skype with a not-so-great internet connection. And there are some sounds of eating and handling cutlery and handling things in the kitchen. So those are the three elements of the sound design.

The Skype call, I'm really glad that you could actually identify it. I wanted it to be somewhat familiar, but also somewhat deconstructed. I stretched some pieces and picked up some of the notes, but not all of them, and moved the notes around.

Q: You have said that your work is influenced by queer and feminist media practices. How exactly does this shape your experience, and what other creators or pieces inspire you?

ST: Queer and feminist art and media practices have been very influential to me in that they help me make sense of the world. Similar to how I learned from the artists in the show in terms of thinking about place and belonging or un-belonging, I think that feminist media practices and queer media practices often take on a

kind of disidentification with the dominant forms of power. They offer joyful ways of un-belonging. They make space for ways of moving through the world that might feel uncomfortable to some people.

I've been very influenced by the work of Trinh T. Min-ha, for example, who is of Vietnamese heritage. Her films, many of which I think would be considered essayistic films, are trying to use film and video to recompose a very orientalist view of Vietnam. She's so good at playing with the balance between image, sound, and text. They're always in a dynamic movement with each other. And it's really hard to be like, "This is what this film is about." It's very hard to reduce it in that way. It's an experience.

There's a whole range of video practices that come out of activist media, from Paper Tiger TV to CAMP's work. These media artists are not trying to establish a genre-based identity for themselves. They're working in ways that feel like, you know, maybe they'll make one kind of piece today, but then next year when the world has changed, they're gonna be making something else. Their commitments are not to discipline or genre necessarily but to respond to what is happening around them in the world. I find that very exciting as well.

Q: As staff and editors of Rice's literary magazine, we have learned a lot about the literary community in Houston. We were curious about how you would describe the artistic community here, especially in relation to other places you have been, like New York?

ST: I still feel like I'm new, but I can give you my impression from having been here for a year. I think it's really exciting. I feel like people show up to things not because it's their job. New York is such a cultural capital that I feel like a big chunk of audiences at art events are other art professionals for whom it's a part of their job. But I feel like in Houston, I meet people who attend things, not because it's going to advance their career necessarily, but because they like it or because they want to hang out. And that feels good.

There is also a focus on the specificity of Houston as a place that shows up in the work people make here. Cities like New York or Los Angeles or Mumbai, which are centers of cultural production, can start to feel like everywhere and nowhere at once. But I think when you're in Houston, it feels like, "Okay, we're in Houston and we want to talk about things that are relevant to here." And I like that because I'm a filmmaker with a place-based practice.

THREE PHOTOS OF SOMME IN SPRING

ELENA HOYT

A French girl, surrounded by soldiers. She is wearing a white dress and sits with the skirt twisted to her legs like a closed flower. The soldiers stand around her against the tarp. The soldiers are holding hands, and the girl, Jeanne, is holding a gun, pointing it at the camera. She is wearing one of their hats.

The soldiers were boys. Their hats were silly. They were the Australian boys, the ones the British had building the trenches and landing on beaches and getting slaughtered. But these ones lived and came to the village to wait for the next battle and to make Antoinette laugh. They played with the children and flirted with all the women, but they loved Antoinette the best.

Antoinette took their photos in the barn. We lived together during the war. She was always brilliant at photos. She blew kisses to them so they would smile. She made money in the city and used it to buy the glass plates.

When Antoinette made me point the gun at the camera, I had to point it at her too and prayed it wouldn't fire. The boys all flirted with her and did as she said and that night came to the barn one by one. They lined the halls and all tipped their hats at me when I came to drink water in the kitchen, and one of them touched my white skirt with his hand.

I went to the barn and told Antoinette that God was going to kill her. And she wiped her lip and told me that God was dead and that those men watched him die.

Then why were they always laughing? And touching each other? And dressing up as girls for her? They were the most horrible boys I had ever met. They were skinny like Jesus and laughed so big you could see the backs of their tongues. They didn't even speak French. The only thing they could say was *M'aidez*, Help me, and they said it wrong. Said it *mayday*, like a joke. I used to wonder if they heard it from Marcel, or Frédéric, or Claude, who Antoinette had lived with in her old village, Lille, before it was taken, and had loved. But now I know Claude didn't have

SWEPT UP

EMILY WU



time to yell when he died. The new machines killed him too quick. The French boys marched slow in columns through the green countryside in blue jackets and red pants.

William was Antoinette's new favorite. He didn't speak French either but knew our songs and sang better than the others. He did a crude impression of a British general and Antoinette laughed and loved him. He had furry thighs. I know because Antoinette was always making him be a girl, wearing her dresses. And he loved it and let her.

I saw them in the barn at night, when the other boys were gone. Pulling on her floppy hats and dresses like a large girl. It was horrible. The squealing and the cinching. On a boy. A boy with a burned red nose and so many freckles and such horrid teeth and dirt and blood still in his hair. She wiped rouge on his lips and they touched each other, with their hands, laying down and looking into each other's eyes. They didn't make any noise, like a film.

In the morning I made Antoinette tea with honey. When I was a girl, Maman said that honey is what connects us with the souls of the dead. I told Antoinette I was sorry for what I had said. That even if she was a whore, saying that God would kill her was an awful lot like wishing it.

Antoinette told me that she felt like she was knowing the boys. The ones who died. She read about the battle

SHE WIPED HER LIP AND TOLD ME THAT GOD WAS DEAD AND THAT THOSE MEN WATCHED HIM DIE.

in the paper. She would not tell me what happened and I could not read. Antoinette said each alive boy carried another dead boy inside of him and she was letting them out. That when they died they fell into each other. Into their tears. Into their souls like deep pools.

Antoinette said some of them cried with her. Or hit her. She said that night one of the boys asked her to piss over his mouth. That was how she knew about the dead boys. She said that one of the alive boys loved one of the dead boys and he had loved him back, and now he carried his soul in secret. She would not confess who, but I knew it was William. Antoinette made me promise not to tell anyone, especially not the other alive boys, because they would kill him for it. And even though it was a sin, I promised not to tell.

In three days they would be called back to battle. God would kill him soon enough.

When Antoinette left for the city I poured the rest of her tea into the garden. Maman said that if you leave water open around the dead, their souls fall in. There are so many souls flying around. All the bees humming. They are the souls of the departed. It is why we go to tell the bees when there is news.

The boys had set up a camp outside, and I had to step over their boots and socks and empty pots of beans and between their tents to get to the hive. They hung their jackets from saplings like curtains and hid their photos under their pillows.

In the field, they were throwing things at each other and hitting them back and cheering. I had never seen cricket before. Their torsos were wet and I could see the shine of them in the sun in the side of my eye, even though I was not looking. If they were our French boys, I would have looked, even if I had to pray after. But I couldn't bear to look at the alive boys then because of the scars, and the wounds that had not yet scarred and were glistening purple and red on their backs in the sun in the field. I saw the dirt fly up like a bomb going off.

The hive was by the orchard. The bottom of my skirt got wet on the grass. It felt cold on my ankles. I pretended the hive was the church and I prayed with the bees. Kneeled down and whispered to them. When I opened my eyes I saw William watching me. I wondered if he'd heard me pray for him to die. He was holding a ball in his hand and I was afraid. But he was beautiful then in the sun even though he was burned and scarred and dirty. He had a fluffy yellow head and dark eyes. Antoinette called him her little duckling. He had not finished growing yet.

He said something to me in English and took me to the other boys and taught me to play with them. I took my shoes and socks off and I scored three innings and lifted my skirt and let them see my ankles as I ran and they cheered and laughed and let me win.

After the game the boys gorged themselves on apples from the orchard and fell asleep in the sun. Even though the apples were not yet ripe and they were Maman's Apples.

Later, after the war ended, William wrote me that our apples were the first new fruit they had eaten in many weeks. Their first rations had been boiled beef, bacon, vegetables, and bread, like the British. Some of the bread took eight days to arrive and was already stale, so they boiled it with potatoes and onions and raisins in the sand bags in the trenches. But William wrote that by the winter they had been eating bread made from turnips and pea soup with lumps of horse meat, and I was glad they got to taste our apples before they died.

But I was not glad then, I was angry. When Antoinette went to the city she left her pamphlets on the table. I could not read them and Antoinette would not tell me what they said. She told me I wouldn't like it. Maman had said they were venom and filth written by the revolutionaries and atheists in the hotels in the city. I burned the pamphlets in my oven.

When Antoinette got home, she washed and I boiled and counted the coins. She sat at the table with her wet hair tied up and her chin on her leg, a kitten that could not keep its head up. She had worked enough for two more glass plates for photos. And for bread from Étienne for dinner. I never asked her how many men.

Antoinette asked after the pamphlets and I told her one of the boys had taken them, but I did not know who. She yelled and got red and did not sleep with any of them that night, not even William. Some of the boys came to me instead and I turned them away. But I took their coins and taught them to flirt in French and sent them off towards town.

For that night's photo, Antoinette made two of the boys dress up in her silks and fight. It was foul. Some of the boys walked out of the barn. They could not bear to watch it.

Antoinette showed me the plate after. The negative was dark and twisted. I was sitting on a stool behind the boys. She made me be naked and I let her because I was sorry. My body was blocking William's tarp. He had painted a flower on it in white and yellow like an egg. It was the kind of flower that still grows in the garden by the hive. It only has five petals, not six. Will painted it right. It does not have a name in English. I am covering the flower and I am ruining it. I am naked and the scarf is covering my eyes.

Two boys, fighting in a barn. One has just punched the other and a pink silk scarf has come free from his neck and shimmers in the air between them. One of the boys is bleeding and purple in the face and the other is hard. A simple white daisy is freshly painted on a tarp behind them, like a flag, with a woman, Jeanne, sitting naked on a stool in front of it. The daisy's yellow center circles her head like a halo. Her eyes are hidden by the scarf. Her lips are plum from wine.

That night I went to the church. The boys were starting to get nervous and were drinking and pushing each other. I took the horse and rode until he sweated and I stopped by a creek for him to drink. The forest was horrid and carved from the shells. A cart of British boys came past and when I waved they did not wave back or smile. One of them was missing an arm, and another was missing an eye and an ear. I could smell them even when they had passed.

I went to the church. It was a ruin. It was stone brick and had two walls and grass in cracks in the floor. I lit a candle that smelt like gasoline and prayed for the war to end. I walked the horse back slow because he was hungry. When I untacked and watered him I saw them asleep with each other in the hay. Antoinette's mouth was open and her cheeks were pink. William had a scar on his chest like a red star and freckles on his shoulders.

Antoinette's town was taken in the third month of the first year of the war after ten days of siege. When I asked her of Lille all she would say was that she missed her apartment above the bar with the green wallpaper with gold in it, and her neighbor who would leave crimson pansies in her keyhole when they bloomed. Once when she had been drinking, she whispered that the German soldiers killed every animal in the zoo, even the pigeons. She never spoke of it again.

When Antoinette arrived in the village she did not look like a refugee. She wore a long blue dress and carried a wide leather chest with a brass clasp full of her silks and fabrics. They were the first wave to come to our village. The others found homes to stay easily, but Antoinette did not. The women and the clergy did not want her in their homes because she was beautiful. But the soldiers wanted her. For a while she stayed at the hotel and paid her way with their coins.



UNVEIL

RUCHI TIWARI

One night, I found them circling her in the square. Even in her long clean dress, I thought only suffering and desperation could make such a woman whore herself that way. I thought she was a fallen angel. I told her she did not have to sin to live. I told her she could stay at the house if she helped with the chores and she cried with joy and kissed my cheek.

At home she told me she had a secret. When she unwrapped the camera from the silks in the suitcase I could not look away from it. I had never seen a camera before. I thought it was a gun.

She had stolen it when she fled. She was taking nude photographs of herself in the hotel and selling them to the men to take with them into the trenches. She told me she would stop if I posed for her instead. But I would not undress, and they did not sell, and within weeks she was taking the horse into town again and I was letting her go and still come back home because by then I loved her like the rest of them.

She slept in my bed like a sister and made us meals and tart soups from nothing and her feet were like velvet on the wood floor. I did not ask her where she got the lemons or the eggs or the herbs or the salt or the wine. And when the Australian boys came to her and made her laugh and she brought them home, I let her. It is what Maman would have done.

The morning before Antoinette left was quiet. The sky was pink and green with mist. I woke on my own and came to the kitchen without dressing. It was full of them. Sleepy and drinking milk and all heads down writing letters. I told Antoinette that we did not have enough milk for even us and she told me they were writing letters to their wives and children and families before they went to die for us.

I ate water and tea and honey. Antoinette boiled tarragon and chervil and parsley with chicken bones she stole from the garbage of Geneviève who lived over the hill. The boys came to Antoinette with their papers like school boys and she helped with their spelling. She learned English from the men in the city, and letters when she went to school.

She asked me to take the boys into the city to mail their letters. I said yes but I hated the smell

of them so I went into the garden to wait and to cry. William was there and he was crying too. He was looking at his photo. But it wasn't a girl, or a boy in a dress, it was an old man and a dog. It was faded grey and wavy like the sea. And he pointed to the old man and said it was his Pop. But I didn't know English then and thought the man's name was Pop.

I took the boys to the post office. I rode and they were a pack running behind me. Their letters were fluttering loud. They held them so lightly, so they wouldn't crease or warp with sweat. They lined up outside the post office in the square and I bought a small sausage and cheese and two bottles of wine with the last of the week's money. I hid them in my skirt so the boys wouldn't see. I bought another plate for Antoinette for photos and traded my blue scarf for it. One of the boys bought a newspaper and I saw the photos from Verdun. Antoinette never let me see the photos in the papers. There were photos of the machines. Even the trees were gone. At home the boys went straight to their tents and were quiet.

The night she left, Antoinette and William and I ate and drank in the kitchen. We were so hungry and the wine was strong. The sausage was from Spain and it was spicy. Antoinette was sitting on William's lap and I didn't mind. I was laying with my head on my arms on the table. And Antoinette cupped William's cheek and said, *How beautiful is it to live?* Then she kissed him. Then she stood and came to me and held my face and kissed me. Antoinette took our hands and took us to the barn.

William had painted the tarp again. The flowers were many and they were the red poppies. The ones that grew from the bodies in Gallipoli. Antoinette said she wanted the last photo to be of us. She wanted to save the two she loved the most. She said, *Let's make them remember us.* She told me to kiss him, and when I didn't she put his hands on my face and mine on his. Kissing him was like kissing a brick. His breath was rotten. We all stank. I started to cry. I didn't want to be in the photo. I told Antoinette I wanted to take it instead.

I messed up the photo. I took it by accident because I was scared. Antoinette turned and was saying, *Why shouldn't we leave?* She didn't want William to die. She asked him first and when he did not answer she turned to me and asked again. I shook my head no. Antoinette had already lost her home. She did not understand. This house was where Maman was born and died and made life and apples and me from soil and nothing. This

was Maman's house and her apples and he was my horse.

Then she begged William. He turned stiff and told her on his honor he would fight and die with his men for his country. He wanted to make his Pop proud and then he wanted to go home. She cried and whimpered and grabbed at my white cotton skirt and ripped it and ruined it. I shrieked and yelled vile things. I told her this was not her home. That she could leave herself whenever she liked. Antoinette told William they were going but he would not go with her and she left alone. She took the horse and the silks and went to Paris and stayed there. She would have taken the camera too, and the plates, if they weren't too heavy to ride with.

**I TOLD THEM NOT TO BLINK.
TO LOOK STRAIGHT DOWN
THE LENS LIKE IT WAS A
GERMAN AT THE END OF
THEIR BAYONET.**

That night I prayed for Antoinette to forgive me. It was the last time I ever prayed. She wrote me a letter at the end of the war. It began, *My Dear Jeanne.* She wrote that she did not forgive me but she still loved me. I didn't read the rest of the letter because I burned it.

In the morning, when she was gone, I woke the boy with the trumpet and told him to play. I emptied the cupboards for them and fed them everything, even the apples and the wine and the chicken broth, so they would be strong. Then I took them to the barn and made them wear their uniforms right and stand in a good proud line like men. They didn't even have helmets.

The Australian soldiers left and fought at Fromelles and some of them came back. When they came back, I took their photographs again. I took portraits. I took photos of every gash and lesion and ruined face and ravaged limb. The wounds purple and yellow and rotten with pus. Even William's. I didn't flinch at his broken body. I told them not to blink. To look straight down the lens like it was a German at the end of their bayonet.

I printed the photos and made my own pamphlets. The only words were their names. I wrote their names on their photos on the pamphlets and left them in the bars and hotels and slid them under doors. Then more Australians came from Cairo and Gallipoli and fought and died at Péronne and Pozières and Armentières. And more soldiers came from Belgium and Africa and India and West India and Scotland and New Zealand and

Canada and America until we won the war. I took their photos too. Now I send the pamphlets to the Germans. I learn their soldiers' names and homes and send the photos to their families to show them what they have done to us.

Before she left, Antoinette climbed into my bed and whispered what the boys had told her from the trenches. She confessed that she had lied when she read me the news so I wouldn't be afraid. But they were saying the great German push had come at last, and she thought I must know.

She told me what the boys told her about the mud and the machines and the bodies and the rats, eating their toes before they had even died. And the gas. A sizzling, awful cloud. Greenish-yellow. She said nobody knew what to think. And then when it got there they knew what it was. It was heavy stuff. It went down. They did not talk about it with each other, only with her. Gave her the weight of all of it.

Last Antoinette wrote, she was in Petrograd dancing for the Bolsheviks. She has an act where she rolls naked in glass and bleeds and they watch her. I don't know if she has not written or if the Germans have lost her letter again. Or burned it.

I am doing well. I have my bees and my orchard and my pamphlets and a new red horse named Dusty. I read the paper every morning and Will's letters every Monday. He sends drawings of strange trees and tall mammals with long tails half their length. The dog was dead when he got home from the war but Pop was still alive and William sent me a photo of them together on a beach. Now he has a wife and two daughters who wear their hair in braids.

In my first letter to Antoinette I sent the photo of her and William. It was the first photo I ever took. She writes that she loves it best, but I hate it. When I look at it I feel as if I have killed her. The poppies are out of focus. They're both so skinny. William was still unbuttoning her shirt and she was moving. I ruined it. You can't see her face. Only her nose. All scrunched up from the smell. From the stench of all of us.

A French girl and an Australian boy, floating in lush red. He is helping her with her shirt and is struggling with a button. He is trying not to laugh. He is squinting at it and his lip is curled up and bending the gash on his cheek. She is moving. She is a blur of hair and a crinkled nose. You can tell she is smiling. It was taken during the Great War. They did not take photos like this yet. In it she is alive.



AMORPHOUS
SYDNEY LAGARD



**WONDERING IF YOU LOOK
BOTH WAYS BEFORE YOU
CROSS MY MIND**
JULIANA MULLER

POWER
JULIANA MULLER



you know i love an arc

ASHLEY WANG

a small crevice opens in the skin of my finger
from some unknown source (probably just paper),
& my obsessive sanitizing stings like music. now this is a time
i think i can't romanticize.

please, someone put on some tinashe & save me
from the curse of not living life loose enough.

- a writer is like a lone photographer in the dust,
trying desperately to see which filter
colors reality the prettiest.

i am tired of crystallizing my sadness
simply because it has a rhythm to it.

- things that are transcendent: autumn leaves,
sun-laden skin. the setting moon, birds chirping
to announce you've stayed up far too late yet again,
but it's summer & all you have is time.

- unexpected affection is overrated. i'll take
requested embraces any day—ones i can
be present in—over a single, lonely blown kiss
that flutters away in the wind, or with a turn
of the head.

- there isn't an ending. since i've turned twenty,
all i've learned is limitation. the country is on fire
& it's possible i might never fall in love, or be allowed to fall in love
the way i want to.

i can't read through an entire bookstore,
won't ever have enough memories with friends,
won't ever witness enough sunsets, & most (& worst) of all,
language bows before life—this beautiful blaze
of a life.

MEET ME IN THE SHADOWS

ALEJANDRA WAGNON

The first time I met Vandie, I thought he was gay.

During the summer of 2022, I took a trip to Greece for a month. I was an “apprentice” to a New York theatre company, alongside twenty or so other college students, each of us prepared to eat, breathe, and bleed theatre for four weeks. On our first full day together, we toured the Acropolis. I can’t remember who I was talking with when Vandie first came up to me. I can’t even remember what he said. All I remember was that he was wearing white linen pants, a black t-shirt, and reflective sunglasses, the lenses silver and blue like the rocky white Parthenon that jutted into the clear Greek sky. I remember that his smile was too wide, top lip too thin, revealing more gum and mouth than teeth. I remember that he told me his name. I remember that I couldn’t remember it for a long time after.

He walked away and I thought nothing of it.

I didn’t know what being gay was until I was in seventh grade.

I have been in a relationship with the internet since elementary school. It started out innocently enough. After classes, I would get on my parents’ Gateway laptop and play Flash games (rest in peace) on sites like CoolMathGames or, if I was feeling brave, Newgrounds. I would sit side by side with my brother at the upstairs computer watching Naruto animations that I didn’t understand. I would browse the online catalog of my city’s public library,

bookmarking every single young adult novel I saw. But then, in 2013, I got a smartphone. Gone were the days of dipping my toes into the waters of Web 2.0. Now I was able to dive into the cesspools of the internet that I would call home. My cesspools of choice were Tumblr and Wattpad.

My time on Tumblr and Wattpad, much like my relationship with the internet, started out innocent. Both sites were saturated with content about *Percy Jackson*, my favorite book series at the time. I would spend hours looking through fanart and fanfiction, creative reinterpretations of the “canon” that placed Percy and Annabeth in alternate universes (or “AUs”): ones where they meet in a coffee shop instead of Camp Half-

IT NEVER CROSSED MY MIND THAT “GAY” WAS SOMETHING THAT COULD DESCRIBE GIRLS, SOMETHING THAT COULD DESCRIBE ME.

Blood, or ones where Percy is the bad boy that sweet and snarky valedictorian Annabeth can’t stay away from. These AUs were my introduction into the world of “shipping,” or putting two characters into a relationship. At first, I stuck to the ships that were already in Riordan’s books (which all

happened to be straight at the time), but then my friends introduced me to the world of Percy/Nico fanfiction. From there, I found myself surrounded by fanart, fanfiction, and mangas that depicted men being in love.

That was how I learned what being gay was. Even then, I didn’t actually know what it was or what it meant. To me, it was just two boys kissing, something you read in made up stories online. It never crossed my mind that it was something real, that there was a community of gay people who had a deep history and even deeper love. It never crossed my mind that “gay” was something that could describe girls, something that could describe me.

On my second night in Greece, I set my sights on Vandie.

After our tour of the Acropolis and the nearby museum, the company took our big purple Barney bus to a beachside hotel in Corinth. My roommate for the night, Evan, coyly asked, “Do you think any apprentice-cest is going to happen?” I answered confidently that it would, that I would be the one making it happen. (I had come into this trip ready to have a summer fling. After all, how many chances does a girl have to spend a month in Greece, feeling free of the consequences to her own actions?) Of course, they wanted to know with

who. Of course, I panicked. Closing my eyes, I imagined the group of apprentices swimming along the shores of the rocky beach outside our room. The first thing I saw was a pair of swim trunks, lemons all over them, and reflective sunglasses, the lenses silver and blue. Him.

The next day we left Corinth for the mountain village of Papigo, where we would be staying for the rest of our trip. My first week there was spent trying to get Vandie’s attention, and it was working. We would walk next to each other on the hikes back to our village, so close that the hair on our arms became static and tangled together. We would swim at the rock pools, his hand resting on the small of my back for a fleeting moment as we clambered up the slippery stones. We would sit side by side at dinner, our legs slowly inching together until they touched. I would turn my body and pull away, then feel his knee press into my thigh, pleading. *Don’t leave. Not yet.*

Despite all this, I knew he didn’t like me. Not enough. I knew that his eyes wandered away from me when we talked, especially if he saw a girl wearing a low-cut top. I knew that when he did talk with me, with anyone, he wanted something, expected something. I knew that it wasn’t special when he held my hand on the first night of the village festival, pulling me to dance. I knew that after we danced together, he pulled another girl aside and told her she was beautiful, asked if he could kiss her. She said no.

Despite all this, I still talked with him. Let him hold my hand, pull me into another dance, and another, and another. I still walked back to the village with him on the second night of the festival. Alone. I still walked too close to him, sliding my fingers between his when he gave me the chance. I leaned against his shoulder and let him lay his head on mine. I let him pull me into a dance, pull my body flush against his, and buried my face into the crook of his neck. I let him push me against a car and grind on my leg like it wasn’t even attached to my body. I let him sour my mouth with the taste of *tsiporou* and shame. When the footsteps of a fellow apprentice closed in on us, I followed Vandie into the shadows of the village forest where he fell to his knees. I crouched on the dirty ground next to him and tried to pick up the pieces of his shattered ego. “Nobody can know about this,” he asserted. “I have a really good shot at being a part of this company, so you can’t start throwing yourself at me. Nobody can know.” I thought about laughing so hard that my sides split open, guts spilling out, forbidden candy. I thought about walking straight off the side of the mountain. I thought about wringing the words right out of his throat until his skin turned the same purple as the night sky, until he never spoke another word again.

Instead, I let him kiss me.

I came out to my friends as asexual at the end of seventh grade.

Learning the word “gay” marked the beginning of my own journey with sexuality. I didn’t know anything about being queer or how to figure out if I was, so, naturally, I turned to Tumblr to figure it out. I tried on labels like they were discount band T-Shirts at Hot Topic: demisexual, acoisexual, cupiosexual. Each of these identities resonated with my very specific experiences of being a seventh grader with self-image issues and no game. Eventually, though, I settled for the umbrella term of asexuality.

Not everyone I met was understanding when it came to my sexuality. Throughout middle school and early high school, when I was feeling brave enough, I would bring up my asexuality in conversation. People met my confession with confused stares and incredulous laughter. “So, you’re telling me you’re like a plant,” they would joke. “You’re like a cell that can split in two?” If I could’ve split in two, I would have, letting one half of me explain how plants are actually sexual creatures while the other half of me beat them silly. But there was just one me, a small, weak me, so I laughed. I didn’t try to explain. I didn’t try to fight. I took a spade, dug a hole into my solar plexus, and buried that part of me, covered it up with soil and blood and sex.

The internet became my refuge. For hours upon hours, I would browse asexuality forums, Tumblr blogs, and Twitter threads. Through these escapades, I eventually fell into stan Twitter for YouTubers. On my Twitter page, I was free to talk about my asexuality while concurrently hyper-fixating on (and, problematically, hyper-sexualizing) my favorite internet idols. Sometimes I would struggle reconciling these two things, what felt like two sides of me. How could I really be asexual if I’m attracted to celebrities, have inappropriate thoughts about them, constantly talk about them? Then I would remind myself that it didn’t matter that I was having crushes or reading porn or masturbating. (I mean, what else is a bored teenager with no car and no bitches supposed to do?) I was on a journey. I was exploring myself, and that included exploring my body, my mind, my heart. I was just trying to find me, and if she was hiding somewhere in the shadows, not fully in the dark or in the light, that was okay. I would try to meet her there.

For a week after we kissed, Vandie ghosted me.



He wasn't ignoring me, per se. He was just ignoring everything that happened between us. We talked and joked as though he hadn't stuck his tongue down my throat. During every rehearsal, I was nervous that I would do something wrong, either get too close to him or say too much, that he would push me even further away. I could handle being confined to the space a few inches away from him, never able to get closer. But anything further than that would make me crumble.

Even though I had to keep my distance, Vandie didn't. He would sit right next to me, walk right next to me, tease me and touch me and twist me around until I got dizzy, so dizzy that I forgot to keep my distance. I ended up pulling him away from dinner and into my room. *Here*, I thought, *is where I will make myself clear*. Shirts and sheets had been stripped to the floor before I had the chance to. My hand on his cheek, I whispered my worries about getting sick, about getting hurt. I asked if it was only me, if it could be. I could see Vandie's brow furrow. I felt my skin wrinkling as all my organs turned to mush, not the good kind. *Why would I ever ask something like that?*

He paused. "I haven't made out with anyone else yet, but the opportunity hasn't presented itself."

I think I said something. I must have, but all I remember were his next words: "You brought me here. What do you want to do?"

I bit down on my tongue, hard, as I reached out for his face, trying to keep myself from ripping it clean off. "This is fine."

I wondered if he could taste the blood.

I forgot about my asexuality until I had to fuck my first boyfriend.

We met at Barnes and Noble. He was my cashier, a cute boy with mischievous eyes and a head full of fluffy brown curls. It was like my life was turning into one of the AUs I read on Wattpad. Desperate not to let it slip away, I tweeted about this mysterious cashier, and by some luck, I found him. What ensued was months of talking, followed by months of me ghosting him, followed by months of talking, followed by months of me ghosting him, until we finally got together a year after we first met.

It happened at his Christmas party. His parents were out of town, and he invited me over to hang out with a bunch of his friends. I remember pulling up to his house in my dad's minivan (I told him I was going to hang

out with my best friend). I remember feeling like my heart was stuck in my throat. I remember gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles turned concrete white. I remember almost turning around. I didn't.

At the party, we hugged, and talked, and laughed. We got made fun of for not paying attention to the card games, for holding hands under the table like middle schoolers. He squeezed my hand, took me up to his parents' room to see his cat. And we were looking at his cat, but then he was looking at me, differently. (I used to think that the eyes being the windows to the soul was a bunch of bullshit. But when I looked him in his eyes, hazy from the beer he'd been sipping all night, there was something more than mischief, and I could see it. I could see his soul. It was begging. *You. You. You. I want you.*)

It took me three tries to kiss him. Every time he got close, I buried my fists in his shirt and my head in his chest. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm scared," half laughter, half confession. His words were soft and comforting, but his eyes were burning. And I was cold, colder than I was scared, so I let him warm me up. First his eyes, then his lips. And it was so warm, his open mouth and heavy tongue, a yeasty sweetness filling up my lungs. I remember resting my hands on his hips, keeping them still, and thinking to myself, *Am I supposed to be enjoying this?*

I REMEMBER RESTING MY HANDS ON HIS HIPS, KEEPING THEM STILL, AND THINKING TO MYSELF, AM I SUPPOSED TO BE ENJOYING THIS?

Then I stopped thinking. No thoughts. Just follow. Respond. Question with a lick, fight back with a bite. Let go with a sit or a push or a pull. Pretend that you want it, and eventually you will. You do.

We were sitting together on a chair, me on his lap, my face directly over his. I put my hand on his chest and told him that I wouldn't date him. *Just this*. "Okay," he said. "Okay."

Five days later, he was my boyfriend. It was, is, confusing. The rush of someone wanting you, the heat of their skin, was so new to me and I craved it, I think. I would steal away moments with him in the dark, under sheets, illuminated by the blue light of a TV or the soft glow of a shuttered window. I would kiss, touch, pull, all with my eyes open, trying to make sense of the way my hands moved, trying not to be disgusted by it. But in the end, I was. I stopped kissing, touching, pulling. He noticed. He questioned. I thought it was because of my dormant

KISS OF SELF
MEGHNA YENNU



asexuality, and I tried to explain that to him. “But we’ve done all these things before. Why not now? What happened to you?”

I ended up breaking up with him after three months. I couldn’t tell him why. How could I tell him that I kissed him with my eyes open because I felt dirty when they were closed? How could I tell him that the feeling never went away, no matter how many times I pulled my skin away from my muscle, rearranged the sinewy strands, an attempt to recode whatever was living inside me? How could I tell him that the first night we kissed, after we went downstairs, I could see the way all of his friends looked at us, knowing? How could I tell him that I saw into their souls, that I found my reflection in them, that I was disgusted by it? I couldn’t. I just put on my shoes and left.

I wish I could say that I didn’t go back to him, but we all know that’d be a lie.

I stuck with Vandie, even when he didn’t stick with me. I stuck with him, even when he was exploring “opportunities” with other girls. Opportunities that never arose, of course, because of me. Because I was the only one who would take him. Because I was the only one who liked him enough to keep going back (or the only one who hated myself enough to stay).

One night, things changed for Vandie. I didn’t know why. All I knew was that he became different. Everyone was hanging out in my room. I was curled up on the corner of my bed, back pressed against Vandie’s legs, pretending to be asleep. He started playing with my hair, my cheek, the skin on the back of my neck, even when everyone could see. He started to come back to me.

And I let him. I let him pull me up onto his lap, slide me under the covers, throw my legs over my head like I was a rag doll. I let him look me in the eyes and whisper, “It’s just you. Just you.”

For the rest of my time in Greece, I did whatever I could to make him (me) believe it. I woke up early to see him. I drank the tea he gave me, despite how bitter it tasted. I scrounged up my last few euros to buy him a lemonade, my favorite drink (he didn’t ask if I wanted a sip). I let him sleep in my lap before a show when all I wanted was to lay down myself. I let him twist me around and around, even after I told him I didn’t like it. I let him make promises that I knew he wouldn’t keep. *Just you. Just you.*

The first time a man ate me out, I discovered that I was probably a lesbian.

If we're being honest, I knew that I might've been gay long before that. I exhibited many symptoms of queerness throughout my life that included, but were not limited to: reading almost exclusively gay fanfiction, an impressive distaste for men, pointing out lesbians on TV with too much enthusiasm, having a pixie cut, going to multiple pride parades with said pixie cut, breaking up with my boyfriend for very ambiguous reasons, finding girls cute (really cute), and being told I'm probably queer by every single friend I've ever had. Somehow, though, I was able to ignore it all. That was, until Rowan.

Rowan and I had been messing around for a couple of months. I had let him do a lot with me, more than I had with anyone else, but I still hadn't let him give me head. Every time he asked, I respectfully declined. Eventually, though, I let him do it. *He knows where the clit is*, I thought, *so why the hell not?* I laid down and slipped my underwear off. A few minutes in, I found myself thinking, completely heterosexually, *I wonder what this would be like if he were a woman*. His hair was long enough that if I ran my hands through it, I could pretend. I didn't.

That night I had a two hour long panic attack. It reminded me of elementary school, when I couldn't sleep over at a friend's house without freaking out. I would call my parents to pick me up or rewatch *High School Musical* until I no longer felt like ripping the skin clean off my bones. This time, though, there was no calling my parents. There was no *High School Musical*. There was just Rowan, with too much heat from his chest and weight from his arms and breath from his mouth. Too much *him*.

In the morning, Rowan and I hopped onto Zoom for class, the one we met in. I sat on his bed, legs dangling helplessly, while he sat at his desk. Before class started, I opened the syllabus and let my eyes settle on the bold words at the top of the page: What is Death? I looked at Rowan's back and felt like I knew the answer.

I have not talked with Vandie since I left Greece.

We parted ways at the airport. I went around giving all the apprentices hugs, laughing through my goodbyes so I wouldn't cry. I waited to hug him until last because I was nervous that he wouldn't want to say goodbye when I did. When I finally went to hug him, he stopped me, asking if he could walk me to the exit. I let him.

The walk was short, and we weren't alone (maybe he would've said something different, something more, if

we were). He gave me a quick, but strong, hug and whispered into my ear, "Thank you for everything." With my arms wrapped around him for the last time, I couldn't help but want to pull him close, so close that I could step inside of him and rip him to shreds. I just gave him a quick squeeze and said, "Of course." Not you're welcome. Of course.

He walked away and I thought nothing of it.

At the ripe age of 21, I decided to retire from sexuality.

People still assume things about me: that I'm straight because I've never dated a woman, that I'm bi because I wear Converse, that I'm gay because I do theatre. People still ask me what I am and still wonder when I don't tell them. I'll just tell them that I've got my dating apps set to everyone. That I want to take in everyone, enjoy everyone, love everyone until something finally clicks (and maybe it won't, and maybe that's okay).

I thought that with time and experience I would discover my true identity, that one day I would wake up and feel comfortable walking through the world as gay, straight, something. That hasn't happened and, honestly, I don't want it to. Not yet. Right now, I am free to be so many things: a straight person who is so queer that it's confusing, a lesbian who is really good at sucking dick, a bi girl with commitment issues, a woman who is growing, changing, even when she doesn't know it.



JELLYFISH

TESSA DOMSKY

CONFESSION

MADISON BARENDSE

CW: sexual coercion/assault

“I stole it.”

Hard to say, you know?

A lot of things feel stolen.

That time you walked alone at night –
walked home, the air a different place,
the cocoa warm between your palms
and it was done, that moment
when you shut away the stars
and fell asleep.

You didn't feel afraid that night.

(I know you feel afraid most nights.

I know the man that follows you
is there / not really there.

He wants to grab your faded jeans
and fistfuls of your hair.)

That night, the resurrection ferns
breathed silence, full of sky.

And large enough to touch one
on the lower hanging branches,
you stole it.

DEAR DEATH, WANT A PECAN PIE?

SHREYAS KARKI

i read about a man on death row
whose last meal was a pecan pie
he never ate.
i'm saving it for later,
he said. perhaps
a pharaoh
buried in riches
carries riches
into the afterlife like
a pecan pie sarcophagi?
or perhaps an oracle
writes pecan pie
prophecy:

*i will have my pie
despite
organ-melting
electricity*

or
maybe

he saved it for you.
i hope you eat it &
it's a nuclear bomb
shattering every fragile
little taste bud clinging to
your wasteland tongue.

i hope a tiny universe
expands from an infinitesimally small
point & a million little sensations
spark to life & die before you can
swallow a single
bite.
then,
you'd know.
yes,
you'd know

what it meant

to be alive

& eat

a pecan pie.

ODE TO WOOD EAR MUSHROOM

EMMA TING





GREAT EXPECTATIONS
RUCHI TIWARI

HOPE IS THE THING WITH (UNFORTUNATE) FEATHERS

ASHLEY WANG

On the day that her mother seemingly vanished into the night, Gigi was beginning to lose her neutrality to life. It was a neutrality so thick, she was frequently mistaken for her grandmother—who had emitted a similarly bland beige aura ever since her own youth.

Gigi's grandmother was born a world-weary woman, fated to marry a prideful man who would fall out of love with her and her unshakability. He grew tired at the way her hands never stopped moving; her wrists made the same steady motions over and over, thinning after years in the kitchen but remaining firm even as she wielded the heaviest of knives and pots. It was a wonder her legs did not collapse beneath her either, as she had been accustomed to taking the same path to the market each day to seek out the same type of lettuce leaves and beef and rice for dinner to bring to the same old slow-burning stove that she refused to replace out of sentimentality. Her predictable meals were impossible to complain about because monotony was a blessing for a family as emotionally volatile as the Zhus. In fact, Gigi developed an addiction to rice from the summers she spent with her grandmother. She savored how the entirely flavorless food gave her the freedom to exist without thoughts, even if only for a moment.

That summer, Shanghai was a city plagued by too many feelings, the weather made infinitely more burdensome by the citizens' sensitivity. Fear, optimism, and a common restlessness all emanated into heat waves as soon as they departed the body. The pale-skinned locals carried umbrellas when they stepped outside to protect themselves, not wanting to faint in the unforgiving hot streets where motorbikes stopped for no one—not even those who appeared to be devoid of life. The Americans who visited Shanghai misunderstood these umbrellas as a way for locals to shut out the sun and to keep their skin as white as that of their favorite Hollywood celebrities. This assumption, which was not entirely untrue, went uncorrected by tour guides.

In private, locals speculated that the Americans saw a different version of Shanghai—one procured by endless mirages from the few heat waves that went undeflected by umbrellas.

Gigi was one of these Americans who visited Shanghai from time to time. She did not carry an umbrella because she never stepped outside, wishing to avoid any unnecessary contact with emotions. She believed she was content indoors, in the solace of modernity, where TVs, computers, and air conditioners could keep her company and prevent her from interrupting the static silence of her own mind. Given that Gigi's mother possessed an aura that was far from beige, she went out each night in search of entertainment, eating fancy dinners in restaurants which happily served all the animals that Americans feared people of the East consumed.

After two months in Shanghai, Gigi had yet to find a fulfilling use of her time beyond playing mind-numbing mobile games, memorizing television commercials in Mandarin, and photographing the soon-to-wilt flowers in her grandparents' apartment. On one occasion, Gigi dressed with such an unchildlike formality out of boredom that her grandparents panicked about losing track of the years before understanding her practical joke. At this point, Gigi was reluctant to admit to herself that she had exhausted all options for keeping herself occupied, but this was an inescapable truth—evidenced by her many upswells of emotion. They were sudden and uncontrollable, emerging in waves of discomfort and sadness and a need to seek affection that terrified her.

After a while of leaving these sensations unaddressed, Gigi found herself reacting disproportionately to life's everyday events. She was distressed at how many strands of hair fell from her head daily and became obsessed with cleaning the floor to a pristine shine, working for hours before realizing she was applying cleaning products to an unyielding carpet that could not shine even if it wished to. She went to sleep each night restless and afraid of what emotions might come next, once noticing a large insect on the wall and becoming frozen, not with her fear of the insect, but with the prospect of fear of the insect, then with how she could become frozen so quickly with the prospect of fear. She slept with a blanket over her head so that whether she snored or cried in her sleep, both sounds could be muffled by the wool's forgiving softness. Such was the emotional volatility of the Zhus, an inheritance Gigi saw as a curse. She understood the feelings of the outside world as a

danger, one that could only harm people as they became closer to each other, more emotional, more likely to burn—especially if they went out without umbrellas.

The worst of Gigi's overreactions arose on the night when her mother vanished. She usually lingered out for just over two hours; it was enough time for Gigi's mother to feel satisfied with her distantly cordial dinner conversations. It was also enough time for Gigi to watch several episodes of an animated show about talking sheep and wonder how they could exist in such bright pastel colors while she, a girl born in the Year of the Sheep, lived only in beige.

GIGI WAS FORGETTING HER OWN FORGETFULNESS. THE ONLY SOLUTION WAS TO LOOK TO THE FRIGHTENING, UNSTABLE FUTURE.

On that night, Gigi's mother was gone for a total of two hours and thirty minutes. It was at the two-hour, ten-minute mark that Gigi's mind was invaded by unwanted thoughts: visions of her mother's taxi cab fragmenting into six million pieces, creating a beautiful explosion in the night. But when Gigi peered out the window, Shanghai was starless, the sky as black as sesame seeds. The darkness soothed her. It was time for dinner, so Gigi sat and ate her rice thoughtlessly.

It was at the two-hour, twenty-nine minute mark that she began to panic. She feared that her mother had gotten lost on her way home or truly ended up in a taxi cab accident or fainted in one of Shanghai's unforgiving hot streets, left there to be flattened by the motorbikes which stopped for no one, not even the freshly dead. It was then that Gigi prayed to a god she had never believed in before—first praying for endless hope that her mother was alive and then praying for her mother's aliveness and then praying that if her mother was not alive that she could be revived from those unforgiving hot streets. Gigi did not know exactly how to pray, and after she closed her eyes and thought these thoughts, she looked to the ceiling and smiled as wide as she could, hoping whichever almighty being watching from above had the compassion to help.

When Gigi's mother opened the door to the apartment, she saw her daughter smiling up at the ceiling in a daze. She instructed her to go to sleep immediately so that her delirium would not carry on into the next morning. For once, going to sleep was not a simple task for Gigi; in her relief, she shifted her soft wool blanket down from over her head to just below her eyes, resting on the bridge of her nose.

This was one of the memories Gigi clung onto desperately when she returned to America years later and witnessed her mother falling into a deep state of unreality. Gigi's mother was trapped in a state of unreality so deep, in fact, that she considered everything outside the bounds of her own mind "the deep state". She claimed the vice president of the United States was a clone—his chin had gained a few years in a very inhuman way, according to her. She also declared a fair national election fraudulent, simply because an orange man was spewing lies on people's TVs, computers, and fortunately not yet on their air conditioners.

It was then that Gigi cursed her family's fatal volatility once again and banished her mother from her room. Her mother, a long-treasured guardian who had slept in a bed near Gigi's against the wall so that her daughter would no longer suffer from the paralyzing fear of the prospect of fear of an insect, left the room willingly.

Gigi's fiery emotions, acquired from her summers in Shanghai, faltered for an extended period after the banishing. Her emotions had already threatened to disappear because of several compounding American plagues that year, ones which held the unique quality of eliciting shudders when mentioned even when they went unnamed. They had left such an indelible stain on history that anyone who did not remember was choosing not to. The news of these compounding crises each day had drained Gigi's optimism and fear; it left behind her restless neutrality, leaving her to contemplate her mother's second vanishing alone in her room.

When Gigi looked out the window, Springfield was starless. The night was as black as crow feathers, and the darkness did not soothe her. She did not want to leave her mother behind simply because her mother's logical mind had vanished, as there was the possibility of her heart remaining. There was also the potential for new memories—ones where Gigi would see her mother's wrists thin to the size of her grandmother's and would step in to help with kitchen duties, before both their auras turned silvery-beige with frailty. And maybe there were memories where Gigi would dress with an unchildlike formality without inciting panic in her mother because she was old and accomplished enough to do so naturally. And maybe there were memories where she traveled the world happily with her mother, to places which served food that was either feared or lauded by the Americans, but sparked no reaction in between.

During her time in Shanghai, Gigi had eventually learned to cry silently, not wanting to worry her grandparents with frivolous fears that her stuffed animals would be stolen in the dark of the night or that she would never find a palm soft enough to hold her coarse, unprocessed emotions. Gigi did not need this skill of



VOIDS
SYDNEY LAGARD

silence now, as she had become so numb that her thoughts flipped from page to page in her mind like flashing tabs on a screen. She needed to force herself to focus on her mother—to remember what she had been contemplating with such paradoxically neutral warmth, rather than wondering what type of rice she should eat for dinner.

The more Gigi dwelled on past memories of herself and her mother, the more she found herself becoming distanced from their potency. She realized that she could not remember her own life, with only cruelly fragmented snapshots of it left behind. Over half of those snapshots were moments of panic resembling the present, those sparks of fear which emerged whenever she rediscovered her inability to recall the past. Gigi was forgetting her own forgetfulness. The only solution was to look to the frightening, unstable future.

After a few weeks of contemplation, distraction, concern, and inaction from Gigi, there was something dangerously normal about the way that her mother heard fireworks as gunshots. She remarked to Gigi that a

civil war was arriving soon, as though she were talking about a new neighbor. At this point, the only remembrance that could salvage Gigi's optimism was that of an emotion, not an event. She

SHE PROCEEDED TO HOLD HER OWN HAND, CURLING UP IN THE FETAL POSITION TO COUNTER THE NIGHTTIME COLD.

was a child once more, a child who feared the outside world almost as much as she loved her mother. Yes, she was a child, an innocent one who could not help but experience a giddy happiness at her mother being saved from Shanghai's unforgiving hot streets.

In that moment, young Gigi had been consumed by a fear no child should ever bear: she feared that her mother would not live long enough to spout strings of harmless nonsense, to spill tea over the edge of her cup with trembling fingers, or even to complain about the unforgiving cold while the rest of the family sweated through their shirts. The older Gigi yearned for that type of unreality from her mother, the charmingly senile one rather than the volatile conspiratorial one, but she could not choose in this situation. All that she knew was that she wanted to be there when her mother's skin sagged past her sturdy bones like a knitted sweater that was a size too large. But Gigi could not be there if her mother shunned her for arguing with endless,

irrefutable lies.

Gigi went to bed that night without inviting her mother back into the room. To calm her mind, she gently shook her thoughts out from her ears and sorted them into two clusters, holding one in each hand. The left held the idea of her mother aging alone, and the right held the prospect of her mother being permanently lost to conspiracies. Shuddering, Gigi wrapped herself fully in the wool blanket atop her bed. She proceeded to hold her own hand, curling up in a fetal position to counter the nighttime cold. After laying there for a while, her body was overcome with heat; she felt the sudden, indescribable urge to faint and fell asleep with her hope enveloping her.



HUMAN CAPITAL

SAVANNAH CARREN

“We’re like a family here,” said Victoria, before giving Norah a smile that bared the strong line of her gums. There was something interesting about that smile; one of her teeth on the right side was turned out, just a fraction, and it struck Norah as the only imperfect thing about Victoria. Every other aspect of her seemed curated to give off a professional-yet-conventional vibe, from the crisp line of her navy blazer to the sleekness of her bob hairstyle. Even her voice was the optimal blend of friendly and authoritative. And so Norah lingered on the tooth and the way it glinted in the fluorescent lights, even as she nodded to agree.

Whereas Victoria was perfectly put together, her office decor

was, in one word, scant. Despite the fact that she conducted interviews here, it was clear that it had only been furnished for one person. Norah was sitting in a folding chair, the same kind that they set up for dance recitals in elementary school cafeterias.

“Right. So, contingent on your ability to pass a background check and a drug test, we would like to offer you a position. The pay is as listed and firm. We look forward to having you on our team,” said Victoria.

Norah nodded again. She had probably said ten words over the duration of the entire conversation.

“We’ll send over the onboarding documents to... Is it Roblox lover four-twenty sixty-nine? At Gmail dot com?” asked Victoria.

“Yes,” said Norah, “but lover is spelled with a U.”

“Of course. We’ll make a note of that,” said Victoria.

Norah got up to leave. They were obviously done here. The legs of the folding chair grated against the hardwood floor.

“Oh, miss. One more thing,” said Victoria. Norah obediently stopped.

There was a silence that stretched for eons. It was as if Victoria were pausing for effect. Norah felt a coolness spread over her shoulders and pool in her chest. After figurative years, Victoria finally spoke.

“Have a nice day. We’ll see you on the twenty-first for your first day of training.”

The turnover in this role was atrocious. Norah realized this quickly from inconspicuous Slack messages that carried just the right amount of plausible deniability. Things like, “You have to wear many hats in your position,” and “Not many people have what it takes to be the right fit.” It was easy to assume that the bullshit-to-pay ratio was bad enough to be a pretty strong deterrent for staying.

The reviews from past employees on various job boards were a lot more matter-of-fact. “It’s alright. Don’t expect much,” and “Management sucks but the pay is average.” Somehow, that was more comforting than if every response were a glowing, gushing recommendation. Norah appreciated the candor. She had expected it to be bad yet bearable.

Outside of the office, she didn't maintain a relationship with any of her coworkers—to Norah, work was work, and not work was not work. After a few weeks, her decision to not get too attached proved to be the right idea. The people around her were as ephemeral as breath. Nearly every morning when Norah walked in, ten minutes late and sipping a gas station coffee, the cubicle next to her was either empty or already furnished with a hasty replacement for Norah's previous neighbor.

Once, near the beginning, someone from her training cohort had struck up a conversation. His name was Paulie, and he inexplicably made the decision to gel his hair into a single spike every morning. He also smelled strongly of patchouli and liked to do crosswords. He quit before the end of that day. Afterwards, Norah kept to herself.

Norah stayed because she knew that they needed her more than she needed them, and she recognized the power in that. Also, she had a passion for activities such as eating, showering, and sleeping with a roof over her head. There was nothing like the feeling of setting your bills to autopay after many months of scrounging. Anything to avoid another night spent hyperventilating over a budget sheet, pencil clutched in a dripping palm, wondering how the gaps would close.

The wage was barely survivable for the city. She had just enough to fill up her car and drive herself to work every day. But Norah didn't need much else. She had been playing the same free video game on a dying laptop for years, and it was how she preferred to spend her off-time.

When she was at work, Norah typically did her work, or as much work as she needed to do. Mercifully, her job wasn't customer facing. She found the tasks tolerable, but nonetheless held the opinion that minimum pay deserved minimum effort. Occasionally, a supervisor would come out of the woodwork to say, "Hey, maybe we could strive to meet this goal this week," and then Norah would agree and do absolutely nothing to try to meet that goal. After a couple weeks of that, they stopped sending people over, content with what she was willing to provide.

An excruciatingly long yet almost instantaneous three months passed and still Norah persisted. Every day was so similar to the last that they all seemed to merge together; the only differences were the people around

her and the temperature outside.

Then, on one sunny day in late fall, Victoria approached Norah's desk. Norah exited the Tetris she had been playing and gave her supervisor her largely-divided attention.

"We are pleased with your quality of work, Norah," said Victoria, still dressed in that navy blazer, her flawless appearance perpetually unaltered. "We would like to reward your performance."

"I'm getting a raise?" asked Norah.

"Not quite," replied Victoria. "We're increasing your responsibilities. Isn't that exciting?"

Norah deflated. That was not exciting.

"We believe that you're ready for access to the BRD folder," said Victoria. This gave Norah pause. The BRD folder had been locked on the company portal since Norah had first been hired. She had assumed that it contained things that didn't pertain to her job but did still vaguely matter. While she hadn't asked, someone had told her once that it was full of "privileged client information," whatever that meant.

Frankly, Norah didn't really care.

"I would like to make it very clear that under no circumstances should you open it," said Victoria. "Most of the PII is still out of your jurisdiction. However, your new role necessitates that you have access to it. Think of it as a token of our appreciation. Something to show our trust in you as an employee."

That made no sense. Norah gazed longingly at her halted Tetris game, only partially hidden behind her Excel window.

Victoria stood in front of Norah, placid and unblinking, for a few beats. She did not deign to describe what Norah's "new role" entailed. Norah didn't ask.

Sometimes, Norah wondered about Victoria. On some level, as Norah's superior, she was "The Man," a nebulous authority who Norah was meant to naturally despise. But in these still moments, the moments in which Victoria displayed that lightless smile and conciliatory tone, Norah found herself asking who Victoria was performing for. Was there ever a time in which the watcher was not watched?

Even from her low position, Norah couldn't help but look down on her.

“Oh! And,” Victoria continued, “on Friday there will be a pizza party.”

“Great,” said Norah.

The pizza party was good, at least. They bought four medium cheese pizzas for three dozen people. Norah took two slices and tried to slip out before anyone could hold her hostage with small talk.

Before she could escape, however, the looming presence of a five foot three woman halted her.

Technically on the clock, Norah succumbed to the horror that was office socialization. She bit a slice of pepperoni to the midpoint as an excuse to not have to speak.

Victoria spoke for her, as she always did. She thanked Norah for her attendance, as if she had had a choice, and asked a few skin-deep questions for politeness’s sake. Norah answered noncommittally, her attention drawn away by the glow of the exit sign.

“Now, I wasn’t supposed to tell you this,” said Victoria, “but we’re considering you for a management position. What are your feelings on that?”

It had been a long time since Norah had feelings about anything.

“I’ll think about it,” said Norah.

“Lovely,” said Victoria.

The next Monday, when Norah showed up to work, she discovered that everyone who had attended the party had quit.

Everything imploded just one week later. Norah was in the middle of the twenty minutes of real work she did per day, and she was actually getting into it when her cursor stopped responding and a popup took over her entire screen.

Upon seeing just the barest glimpse of it, Norah sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. IT was a nightmare at this company. Usually, she relished the fact that she had a great excuse to do nothing for a few

hours, but her phone had just run out of battery and now the desktop was out of commission. Looked like she had a long while of making origami stars out of printer paper ahead of her before she could finally go home.

Another popup appeared, overlapping the first one. Had everyone in IT quit? Norah wasn’t sure. While immediate cubicle neighbors occasionally received a grudging “Good morning,” from her, she had zero object permanence for those in different departments.

The popups were void of text, but colored bright #FF0000 red, and they burned Norah’s eyes when she looked at them.

Another one. And another. The accompanying Windows error sound *dinked* twice in disapproval. Norah, now piping mad, sat back and folded her arms over her chest. As she glared at her screen, she noticed it.

The popup titles were letters. Not typical English characters, but obviously letters. They were just oriented backwards and upside down. However, “H” was still very clear. It wasn’t difficult to distinguish E, L, and P from there.

Norah perked up a bit. This was the most excitement she had ever felt about software malfunctions.

One last popup and one last error sound. This time, it was different from the rest – white Arial text over a black background, spelling out a message. A message addressed to Norah.

“*Norah Christensen,*” it began. “*Listen to me. Open the folder. Please.*”

And Norah, who had nothing better to do, clicked out of all five popups and obeyed.

There were hundreds of subfolders within the BRD folder. Each one was labeled with a last name comma first name. Norah clicked through them one by one.

When she scrolled past the thirty-fifth folder in the list, she was struck by a pang of familiarity. Paulie Fitzgerald, the man she had talked with once in the first week. It was odd, because Norah hadn’t thought about him in months. She had assumed that he had left like the rest of them, but apparently he was still in the system.

**TECHNICALLY ON THE
CLOCK, NORAH SUCCUMBED
TO THE HORROR THAT WAS
OFFICE SOCIALIZATION.**

She supposed it made sense to keep an employee file like that, just in case they wanted to rehire him or something. Norah didn't really know much about recruiting.

Figuring that she had already made it this far, she clicked on Paulie's folder. Immediately, the monitor screen cut to black.

"OH, THANK GOD."

Norah squinted at the tiny subtitles forming under an even tinier video of a man. Paulie looked exactly as he had six months ago, except smaller. He was three inches tall, the proportions of his body taking up not even a fraction of the monitor. Norah could see the top of his head to the tips of his dapper work shoes. The black background suggested that he was floating in a void, but he was firmly affixed to an imaginary floor. Norah wondered how they had gotten him to record this.

Norah clicked on him. He screamed, a grating sound at chipmunk pitch.

"SCARED THE SHIT OUT OF ME. DON'T."

Norah was baffled by the scope of human ingenuity. She went to click out of this weird little game (wait, when she quit, would they put in the effort to make a game of her?) and maybe pull up Solitaire—

"STOP. STOP. PLEASE, NORAH."

Norah stopped.

"YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY'RE DOING."

That was correct.

"I CAN GIVE YOU AN EXPLANATION BUT YOU NEED TO PROMISE NOT TO X-OUT OF THIS WINDOW."

Her attention was sufficiently captured.

"THEY'RE KEEPING US HERE."

"In the folder?" Norah asked.

"WHAT? TYPE IT."

Norah typed it.

"IT'S IN YOUR ONBOARDING PAPERS," subtitled Paulie. "IF YOU OPEN THE FOLDER, LEGALLY YOU'RE OBLIGATED TO COMPLETE THE REST OF YOUR CONTRACT VIRTUALLY."

"oh," Norah typed. "like straight up you have to live in there?"

"YES."

"do you still get paid, or...?" Norah typed.

"YEAH. I MEAN, WE STILL GET PAID, BUT WE ARE TRAPPED HERE AGAINST OUR WILL."

"no rent tho?"

"CAN YOU PLEASE HELP US?"

"k. how?"

"DELETE BRD."

Norah paused for a moment. The suggestion made her stomach twist.

"wouldn't that kill you?" she asked.

"I DON'T KNOW. PROBABLY NOT."

That was good enough for Norah. She right clicked the BRD folder (which, incidentally, stood for Business Retention Database) and selected "Move to recycle bin." Immediately, an error appeared, claiming that she didn't have administrative permission.

Before she could relay this to Paulie, she felt a tepid breath on the back of her neck. As Norah turned, she came face-to-face with Victoria.

She was as put-together as always, navy blazer crisp, but her crooked teeth were exposed from incisors to molars in a broad, placating grin.

"Miss Christensen," said Victoria. "What do you think?"

And for a strange moment, there was stillness. They gazed at each other in silence for entirely too long. A fundamental rule had been broken, and with that, everything shifted. Norah could physically feel it all melting around her: office mores, professionalism, the labels of “superior” and “inferior.” If it hadn’t been horrifying, it would have been sacred.

Norah erupted from her desk chair and twisted to run, her Mary Janes squeaking against the dusty linoleum floor. Victoria gave chase, her acrylic nails clawing for a handhold on Norah’s smart-yet-affordable Ross blouse. Recalling a month of jiu-jitsu training from when she was twelve, Norah ducked and tumbled forward, just out of her reach.

THIS WAS THE FIRST TIME SHE HAD FELT ALIVE IN A VERY LONG TIME.

“Please, Norah,” said Victoria, gasping for breath. “You’re poised and utterly indifferent! You’re like no one we have ever had before.”

Norah hadn’t sprinted like this since high school. Victoria kept up, even in sensible heels.

“Can’t you see it? You are perfectly suited for this role.”

As they passed by empty desks (and one or two remaining employees who tried their best to pretend nothing was happening), Norah scattered reams of paper and novelty mugs of pens and even a desktop monitor into Victoria’s path in a last-ditch effort to slow her down.

“Don’t you think you deserve more?”

If Norah had had the wherewithal to assess her emotions in that moment, she would have realized that this was the first time she had felt alive in a very long time.

“Look, sometimes things like this happen. We are doing everything we can to resolve the issue. You won’t need to interact with her again in the future,” said Linda, the most mediocre of the HR ladies.

Norah shrugged. “I mean, I don’t feel like this was a normal mistake.”

“We can assure you that similar incidents happen all the time in companies everywhere. People slip through the cracks. Sometimes supervisors might skim money off the top, and sometimes they might allegedly go rogue

and convert hundreds of living, breathing human beings into a computerized facsimile of their physical forms, thus condemning them to a hellish existence in a virtual landscape,” said Linda. “If that was the case, then it wasn’t cleared with Legal, and it shouldn’t have happened.”

“Okay,” said Norah.

“Now, have we done everything we can to ease your concern?” asked Linda. “Could I offer you a butterscotch, perhaps?”

Norah eyed the bowl of butterscotches and debated for a moment before taking one.

“What’s going to happen to all those people?” asked Norah.

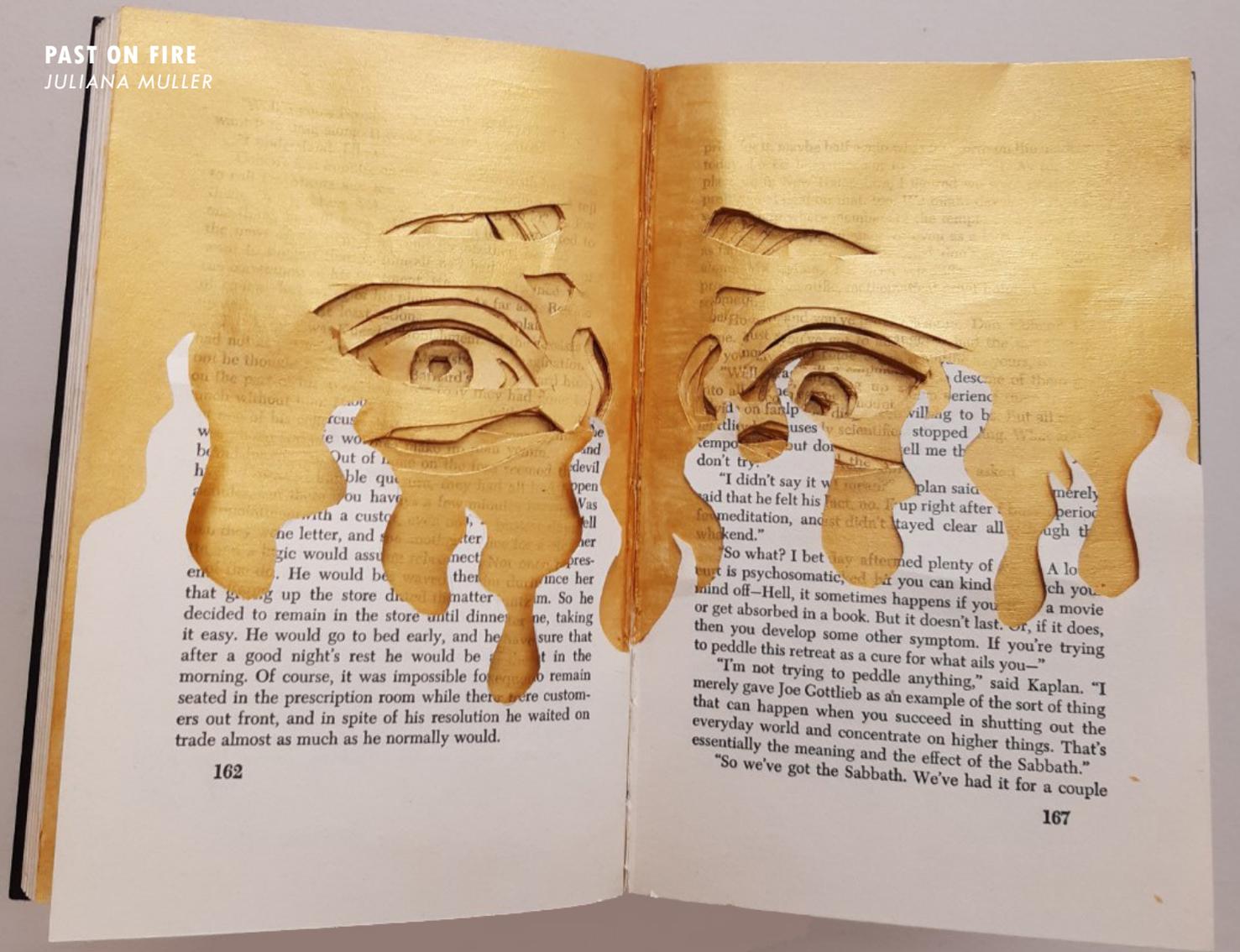
“They’re being converted back as we speak,” said Linda. “Though, and I do want to make this clear, if you had deleted the folder then they would have all been essentially murdered. That being said, we are confident that this incident will not reoccur.”

Norah thought she deserved more.

“Okay,” said Norah. “I think I’d like to quit now.”

“Without even putting in a two weeks’ notice?” said Linda. “That’s a little unprofessional.”

PAST ON FIRE
JULIANA MULLER



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IVORY TOWER

SHREYAS KARKI

i'm surrounded by white faces
in white spaces—

my migrant home, a blown daffodil
the word they used was “diaspora.”

white faces in white spaces
make up words to define what they
don't know
and then teach it to us like

my mom hadn't rolled
the dough
of my melanin

under her brown hands
and breathed the air
of a brown village
into my lungs
saying
timi mero ma'ia ho
which meant brown love
so strong that it parted seas

now mom is
a diaspora
away from me

i'm surrounded by white faces
in white spaces—
where black and brown are
bruises, not people,

alluded to in the margins
of essays, written on

the paper of aspen trees,
white bark rising to form
canopies—

run—

underbrush tears
at my feet

run—

the euphemism “diaspora”
means:

*no matter how far
the seed flies, the
sun's blocked
by ivory trees*

in darkness my

melanin flakes,
the soil for
these

ivory
trees

i can't run with—

white feet

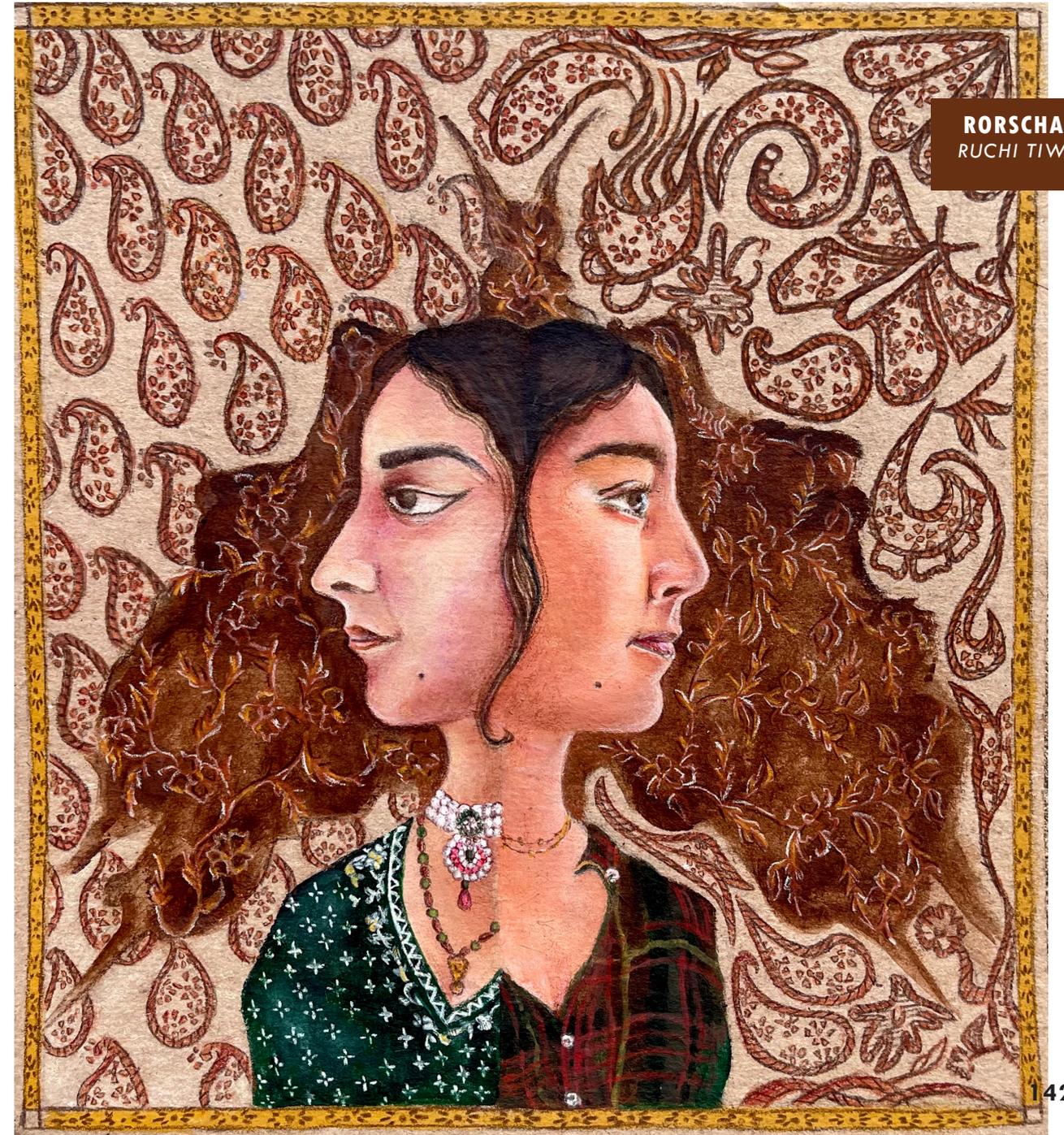
i can't scream without—

white tongue

i can't see you in my—

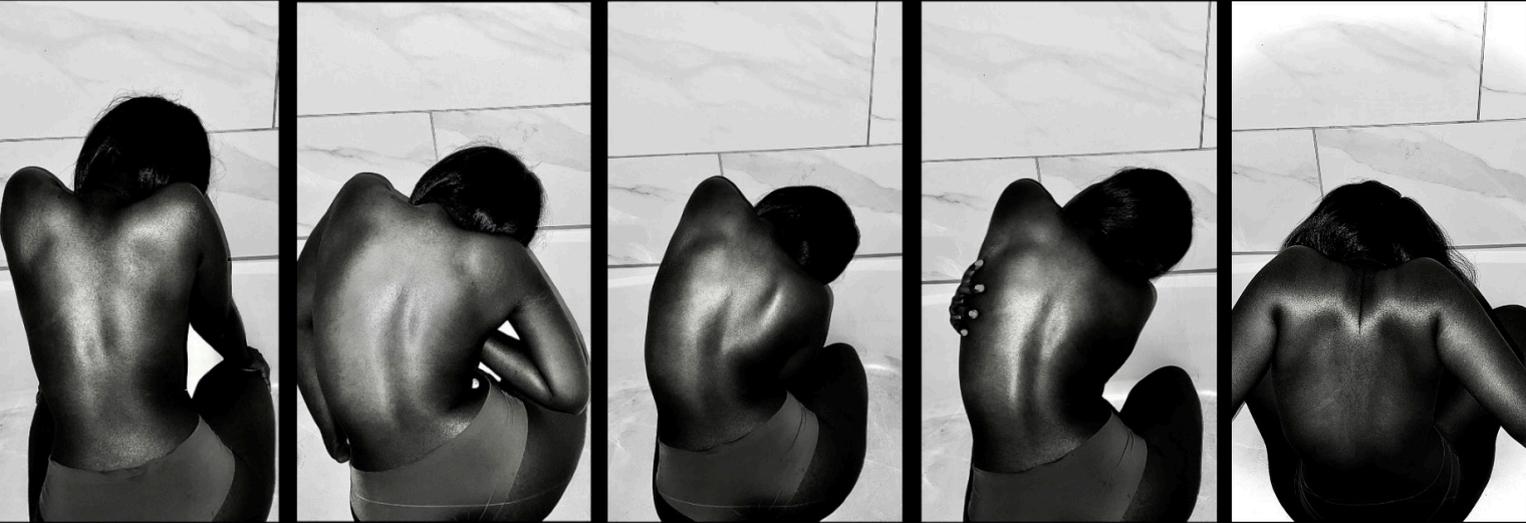
white face

i can't live outside this—



WORDLE

NAOMI SAHLE



SEDIMENTATIONS

ETHAN PERRYMAN



**EXISTENTIAL CRISIS
OF A LEAF**

EMMA TING

EXCISION

JINA PARK

CW: domestic abuse

Flew a red-eye
pushing past plastic chairs, on the dilapidated subway
my footsteps carrying me, against all odds, to my father's
dying body. Marionette limbs tangled in dripping wires
a cradling so gentle it summoned the prayer
I could not give. My breaths became his breaths, a rattling
fear, and when I leaned over and said, "Father," his eyes were my eyes
unseeing.

Someone ought to cut this love from me.

Take, then
the moment our shoulders slammed together
warm wetness in pouring rain, a sprinting
so fierce we never made it to the car
without laughing. Gone. His hand, callous with age
clenching my throat, a brutal ripping, the scent of his aftershave
a bookmark of what went wrong. Gone. Afterwards, we sat
at the dining table and pretended that my brother's black eye,
still crying hurt, was nothing more
than an inevitability. Do you remember? His embrace was a burning
all daughters endure to get here, and now it's
gone. Just say something. Like the way I couldn't lie, so I walked

down the wrecked road where the Honda in flames tried
to run, its wheels spinning this memory to yarn, and it could have
been a tapestry but She, with her old fingers,
took up her shears and cleaved time to
flatline.

Tears on my cheek. When I look up
God stares down at me
the eyes of an aberration. Clutching
gray skin, I say, have you had enough?
and God, with all her witnesses,
says nothing.

RAPTURE
SOPHIA ROHFLESEN

The summer the butterflies died

EMELIA GAUCH

I received my first dick pic at the age of 12.

I was sitting in my bedroom when it happened. I had opened my window earlier that day to enjoy the late afternoon summer light that filtered through the window panes, casting warm shadows on the wall. I was totally unsuspecting, surrounded by illuminated dust floating in the air and the calming blue-gray of my room.

I heard the sound of my Hotline Bling ringtone and reached over to grab my phone. A message from a boy I hardly knew, not that anyone truly knows anyone else at 12, but we were basically strangers. We had never even snapped before.

I didn't think much of it.

I slid my finger across the screen, typed in my password (the word "fuck," a not-allowed word, but with numbers so my parents wouldn't suspect my act of rebellion), and opened the app.

I opened the image.

Oh.

One click. It immediately disappeared.

I tried to process the picture, although I wasn't sure I wanted to. Had I just seen what I thought I'd seen? Was that really... a penis?

My brain screamed. Bile rose in my throat. I wanted to rip my skin from my body, crawl into a little hole, and die. I immediately texted my closest friends.

You would not believe what happened, I wrote frantically. They responded, confused. I explained to them that I had been sent a picture, like a *picture* picture. Like a dick picture.

The shocked emoji was my response. The not-seeing monkey. A barfing one too. Disgusting.

My friends and I lamented about how horrible the male species was. Boys were gross! Why did they



CEMENT CASTLE

TESSA DOMSKY

think this was okay? How DARE they? We made ourselves sick with anger. Unable to put it anywhere, we let it fester in our stomachs. My face turned red. Heat rose in my cheeks.

Restless frustration crawled in my veins, humiliation bubbled within me, and although I would never have admitted it then some tiny part of me deep, deep, deep, down was really happy.

Yes, the sight filled me with nausea. Yes, my skin itched.

But, when you have only ever been asked out as a joke, you grow to believe that someone desiring you is laughable. At 12, my mouth was more metal than teeth. I looked like a stretched-out five-year-old, some fucked-up version of a cartoon character. I was ugly, and I knew this because people told me so. (Can you hear the way self-hatred drips bitter from my fingers and onto the page still?)

Receiving this photo felt like a prize, a symbol that I had achieved some passage into girlhood. The feminist within me revolted while the ugly girl within me was simply relieved.

It has been ten days since the butterfly laid an egg. 240 hours of waiting.

Now her child, the caterpillar, must free herself, biting through the walls of her translucent egg. The caterpillar (but you can call her larva) eats her way out of her prison. A self-motivated birth.

The size of a baby's pinky, her appetite runs deep. She fills the emptiness in her stomach with as many leaves as she can inch to. But her hunger remains unsatisfied. She plumps and lengthens. Her exoskeleton grows upward and out. Now, her outsides can no longer hold her insides. Ecdysone rushes through her system.

Time to be unmade and made again,

unmade and made again,

unmade and made again,

unmade,

unmade five times through.

Does she remember the skin she once wore?

Does she realize that she left a trail of her own bodies behind?

The caterpillar searches for a place comfortable enough to rest. This sleep will not be eternal, but she will

emerge having killed the being she once was.

Certain hormones rise. Others fade and trigger the metamorphosis. So the caterpillar spins her bed.

Programmed for self-destruction, she begins to digest herself.

Matter cannot be destroyed or created, but it can be eaten.

She lives to break and breaks to live.

The enzyme caspase rips the caterpillar apart. She disintegrates. Proteins floating in a cocoon.

Suspended in an electric soup of sugars and amino acids. The now-not-caterpillar-but-not-butterfly exists in limbo—not quite anything, but not nothing at all.

Cells in the larva's muscles, gut, salivary glands become antennae, eyes, wings. Little bits of caterpillar recycle to build something new.

Matter cannot be destroyed or created, but it can be transformed.

The caterpillar will reemerge. She unwinds the blankets around her. Rehatches, wings dripping.

Her old body liquidized.

This process, in some ways, is a death. In more ways, a rebirth.

We tell ourselves tales of transformation, caterpillar to butterfly, ugly duckling to swan. Here is how it goes: we are nothing, and then we are beautiful. We become beautiful, and then we are wanted. Suddenly, we are worth something.

But this beauty, this ideal of womanhood, is narrow. We shrink ourselves to fit. If we cannot shrink small enough, destruction is the only path.

Caterpillars are supposed to destroy themselves. Young girls are not.

For much of my later elementary school and entire middle school experience, all I could think about was being kissed. The phrase “want me” pounded in my head like a never-ending headache. Want me, want me, want me. My fingers shook with my desire to be desired. I wanted my boobs to grow so large that they made my

BUT THIS BEAUTY, THIS IDEAL OF WOMANHOOD, IS NARROW. WE SHRINK OURSELVES TO FIT. IF WE CANNOT SHRINK SMALL ENOUGH, DESTRUCTION IS THE ONLY PATH.

back ache. I wanted to bleed so much that I stained the inside of my thighs red. I wanted my hair to become thick like fur along my calves just so I could cut away all semblances of the animal.

Let me become a woman so I can make myself into the child I currently am. Tell me I'm pretty. Tell me I'm beautiful. Even if it hurts, I'd rather be hurt than be ignored. If they're harassing you, at least that means they're looking.

I hated myself so much that I drowned in it. I was a sinking ship that took all the other girls down with me. My want made me vicious. Jealousy made its home on the inside of my mouth. It tumbled out of the door every time I spoke.

I rolled my eyes at girls who were complimented for their looks. I thought of girls who wore nice clothing as vapid. To do your makeup was an affront to my feminist sensibilities. I criticized those who were unabashedly

I LOST THE PART OF ME I LOVED MOST BEFORE SOMEONE TOLD ME THAT TO BE ME WAS TO BE INNATELY FLAWED.

all the things I wanted to be. To me, unlike every other girl, I was in a state of arrested development, constantly waiting to be picked. I was (am) ashamed of myself for daring to have a body, for having the audacity to exist.

I told myself that if I could choose to be the

smartest person in the world or the most beautiful, I'd choose smarts.

This was a lie.

I wish I could say that I digested my larva-self and became pretty. That I digested myself and grew. Instead, I ate myself from the inside out, and it hurt. I swallowed what I had wanted and who I had been before I understood that I did girlhood wrong. I became quiet. I stopped dressing in what made me comfortable. I pretended I liked songs like Hotline Bling. I laughed less. I talked less. I learned to take up less space. I lost the part of me I loved most before someone told me that to be me was to be innately flawed.

By 13, I had decided that if I couldn't be beautiful at least I could be validated.

In many ways, the dick pic told me in some twisted way that I could be an object of desire. So I wore the violation like a shiny blue ribbon.

The summer I received the picture was also the summer the butterflies died. Late August arrived with a burst of hot, wet air, rotting the bones of my Grandparents' home in Michigan.

The house fell apart a bit more every summer. My cousin and I had found dead raccoons in the attic and mouse poop in drawers. I cut my feet on shards of glass and nails sticking up from the hardwood floors. Most years, we would wear our swimsuits all day, flirting with the possibility of yeast infections. Hours would drift away during our time on the swing set. We would sing nonstop as we pumped our legs to go higher, higher, higher before jumping off, our feet aching as we hit the grass with heavy thumps.

I stopped singing when I turned 11, the same year the way my body filled out my swimsuit started to make my stomach twist.

When the glass got stuck in my feet, I promised myself I would not tell anyone, so I would go to my grandmother's medicine cabinet on the second floor and take her tweezers. I'd sit on the lid of the toilet, picking out the shards of glass. Sometimes, if it hurt too much to pull the pieces out, or if I couldn't get the right angle to plunge the tweezers into the meat of my foot, I would just give up. At some point, I figured, the glass will fall out. At some point, I will stop wincing when I walk.

I wonder how much glass is still buried next to bone. I wonder why I savored the hurt. The best part of living on Lake Huron in August is watching the storms stir on the lake. When I sit on the screened-in porch overlooking the water, I can see clouds coming together, hurricanes forming and threatening to rush toward us. When it thunders, the ground quakes so hard the house threatens to collapse.

August is also when monarch butterflies make their journey from the north down to the warm south. Sometimes, they fly right over us. Sometimes, they make it. This summer, they did not.

One evening, the sky separated. The day after, I ran down to the beach to see the indents of raindrops on the moist ground and take note of the legacy the storm had left on the shore. What color had the water become? Was it warm? Was today a good day to swim? Instead, I found a massacre of broken bodies.

They lay in the waves and on the sand. Wings ripped off the night before stained the landscape orange and black. Monarch butterflies.

I need you to know, and by you I mean me, that transformation does not promise survival. Even in death, the butterflies with their glossy bent wings seemed beautiful, but they were dead all the same.



JUDGEMENT DAY

RUCHI TIWARI

OUR MOTHERS WILL SUFFER NO MORE

RIYA MISRA

Tell me, do you bleed for your mothers?
I bleed like musa fibers
stripped bare from banana trees. I bleed like a child
with scarlet fever. I bleed like the rot inside a womb.

My mother's palms are mottled with ink blossoms under veins,
like overgrown blackberries dotting skin, a topography of bush scatterings. Bushes with thorns so
keen they draw thickened wine and winter bile.
Since my brothers left nine years ago, the splatter of blood on my bedroom wall has begun to
look like a young blackberry.

There's a port in my mother's body. A small port, nondescript and monosyllabic, just ashore of
a coastal village. Where fishermen return to their daughters after sundown and seagulls nest on
wooden dinghies and factories specialize in turmeric production. Where sailors sweeten my
brothers' water with coriander beer and honey with a heartbeat. These men, they keep their
shoes on while in bed.

Call the contour of my mother's neck the prime meridian. Her collarbone, the equator. For the
sake of this poem, our port is just west of Angola and women beckon to their sons with fistfuls of
diamonds and petroleum-slicked curls.

Tell me, who is a mother? Like cells dividing, I speak about her in plurals now.

My hands kohl-black, bruised.
An infestation of tongues and dead birds under knuckles,
thrush-white. I'll bite.

The fishermen go back to sea. August runs sour and the blackberries ripen. Banana trees regrow.
Tell my brothers to return.

Tell them that our mothers will suffer no more.

COWBOY COUNTRY

ELI JOHNS-KRULL

transmuter
change to viper slithering
to ragged coyote
with lonesome cries
to silent scorpion
poised to strike
abandon yourself to the desert

sifting sand and hard pan dirt
cracked along the stitches of the world
a sun that'll steal
your first layer of skin
and burn you to the bone if you
take your eye off it

a welcome thief
midnight hat on thundercloud horse
uneven tilt of a smile
under your fingerprints
the rough burn of stubble
and puckered
proof of survival

the taste of smoke on his lips
on his tongue
clinging to the edges of his shirt
you are its twin in this
desperate
stitching yourself into him

a lonesome building
and a white cross stained rawhide
white peaks
on a river that buoys and breaks
baptizes with thin mist
that smashes
against the rocks
an endless shattering

bring yourself to believe in
the dust that blows
footsteps away
that erases the earth's memory
until even the breathing
turn to ghosts

long-branched tree
shallow grave
crows circling
cut outs from the white-blue sky
caws turned eerie
hungry in the gnawing heat
a thumb-sized skull tucked
into your pocket
something like a spell or
morbid charm

sun-warmed grips
pressed into your palms and
rust under your nails
last lingerings of
those who stole him

sagebrush and cactus
and lit cigarette
imagine tossing it
flame bringer
the hanging tree
ablaze
this unworld turned to char
crumbling under your fingers

it is easy out here
becoming
don't you agree
become love
become faith
become death
become destruction
become anything other than
what you are
a boy who can't go back



HEARTSTRINGS
WILL MARSDEN

COW

MARLO WILCOX



THE 2023 GEORGE G. WILLIAMS AWARDS

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

OUR JUDGE | ALLEGRA HYDE



Allegra Hyde is the author of *Eleutheria*, which was named a “Best Book of 2022” by *The New Yorker*. A recipient of three Pushcart Prizes, Hyde's writing has also been anthologized in *Best American Travel Writing*, *Best of the Net*, and *Best Small Fictions*. Her stories, essays, and humor pieces have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *American Short Fiction*, *BOMB*, and many other venues. Hyde has received fellowships and grants from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Sewanee Writers' Conference, The Elizabeth George Foundation, the Lucas Artist Residency Program, the Jentel Foundation, the U.S. Fulbright Commission, and elsewhere. She currently teaches at Oberlin College.

FICTION

WINNER | *“Three Photos of Somme In The Spring” by Elena Hoyt*

This story took my breath away. Stark and surprising, every sentence is spring-loaded with emotion that lingers with the reader long after the story has ended. Though historical, this fiction feels exquisitely alive and freshly contemporary. I look forward to reading what this author writes next.

RUNNER-UP | *“Hope is the Thing With [Unfortunate] Feathers” by Ashley Wang*

CREATIVE NONFICTION

WINNER | *“I am attempting to construct a person from memories and shadows” by Emelia Gauch*

In this essay, the speaker explores the intimacy and unknowability of family, asking what it means to “grieve someone who is not gone.” I appreciate the author's rigor in their search for an answer, as well as their commitment to compassion. Most of all, I admire the hard-won wisdom of the essay—which is at once painful and profound.

RUNNER-UP | *“The Uncanny Tooth” by Anne Rubsamen*

POETRY

WINNER | *“Show Your Work” by Riya Misra*

This poem borrows from the form of a math problem to speak to the ineffable. How do we solve for loneliness, distance, the passing of time? The answer remains just out of reach, and yet the poem reaches for an answer anyway with a series of “ifs” that elegantly blend both humor and heartache. As a poem, “Show Your Work” offers readers a puzzle in the most pleasurable way.

RUNNER-UP | *“Blood Orange” by Camellia An*

COVER ART

WINNER | *“Lovebird Corset” by Joselyn Lwigale*

The R2 EIC team: R2’s cover art is selected by the editorial team. We look for a piece that fits well with the look of the R2 book and that will make a striking cover, and this year selected “Lovebird Corset” for its vibrant colors and fragile detail.

2023 CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Emelia Gauch is a lover of video essays and random facts. She is a strong believer that chartreuse should refer to a red-purple color instead of a light lime green.

Anne Rubsamen is frequently spotted with books and steno pads, but how do we know she’s really reading or writing? I guess we’ll have to take her word for it.

Huijun Mao considers two problems daily; 1) how do we know if the universe is made up of reality, 2) what to eat for lunch.

Rita Ajit suffers from a debilitating fear of writing, and the only cure is exposure therapy.

Alejandra Wagnon may be cringe, but she is free.

Riya Misra is sorry for not texting you back. She was eating (drinking?) soup.

Camellia An has the strongest immune system out of all her friends. To counteract that, she also has the weakest digestive system of all her friends.

Mariam Khan woke up at 11:15 AM the day this bio was due. She lost a sock while doing laundry and can’t get over it.

Doyin Aderele is powered by Lemonade™. The sourer (is that a word) the better.

Jina Park is living proof that overconsumption of tapioca pearls will not kill you but only make you stronger.

Tamaz Young is an art enthusiast.

Madison Barendse is a Biosciences major with a love for literature. She enjoys science fiction and fantasy in any form and will discuss entirely fictional worlds for hours on end.

Cowboys and hippies, be on the lookout. **Joselyn Lwigale** has her yoga mat and cowboy boots in tow, and she isn't looking to waste any time.

Eli Johns-Krull is still considering changing their name to Bones and f***ing off into the woods.

Shreyas Karki fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed.

Molly Kyles was once dubbed “the king of living” in an original song written by her younger sisters. She hopes to live up to the title.

Spencer Powers insists that he is not a superhero, and that you really need to stop trying to investigate the panel behind that painting.

In middle school, **Savannah Carren** used to LARP as a Warrior Cat named Silverpaw during lunch.

Ashley Wang is technically an Aries but acts like the opposite of one in real life. She spends an unhealthy amount of time listening to Tinashe.

Will Marsden enjoys visiting museums and viewing art. In his spare time, he makes some artwork of his own.

Ethan Perryman likes making stuff and wants to keep making stuff.

Meghna Yennu is afraid of fig trees. Please do not forget to feed sunlight and cookies.

Jazmine Castillo is a proud cat mom and will talk about nothing else but. Her cat is a tuxedo named Winnie.

Vy Luu loves to do anything and everything, to the point she does nothing and achieves nil.

Naomi Sahle's favorite English word is lollygag and least favorite word is moist.

Emily Yang's go-to boba order: a cheese foam strawberry tea slush with 70% sugar. No boba.

Ben Hao has a somewhat poor sleep schedule and a caffeine intolerance but makes up for it with copious amounts of naps.

saba feleke glitters in the sun, and is humming in the dark. their love for engineering—and their love, generally—haunts them in a cool, fun, sexy, or more realistically, Kafka-esque way.

Ruchi Tiwari is also Gucci with an R.

Conversation fragments are unique in their fleeting and seemingly ordinary nature, yet have the profound ability to alter how we think, oftentimes subconsciously. I aim to illustrate these small moments in conversation in a way that reveals both the distinction and unification of how we collectively view the world.
—**Hannah Usadi**

Ashley Duong once spent two hours finding a specific Instagram audio, unsaving it, and re-saving it to put it at the top. Her thumb was too fat and actually missed the re-save button, thus losing the audio into the void for all eternity.

Sydney Lagard is incredibly drawn to art.

Emily Wu enjoys spending her time playing an online multiplayer social deduction game created by the American game studio Innersloth. She also enjoys stocking up on the peanut butter cups South Servery supplies.

Marlo Claire is a STEM major with dreams of doing anything but, making for a fascinating (gut wrenching) college experience.

Piyusha Kundu hopes to live out her traveling dreams by backpacking in Southeast Asia.

Juliana Pinho is Brazilian, but she finds home in people who are spread all over the world. She spends her money on cheap flight tickets with way too many stopovers.

Sophia Rohlfen is a Photography and Electrical Engineering student at Rice University.

Tessa Domsy doesn't know how she does it, but she does does it.

Emma Ting stop saying slay challenge.

2023 STAFF BIOS

McKenna Tanner tried to be bold, but so far has only succeeded in being italic.

Hannah Young gets gender euphoria from being called a male manipulator.

Lily Weeks has a framed Lucy Dacus setlist and needs everyone to know about it.

Katherine Jeng is probably making a list, and checking it twice. No one has ever seen her on December 24...

Hannah Son needs you to go sit over there.

Basma Bedawi doesn't actually think you're that tall.

Emelia Gauch is that tall.

Ashley Wang is busy getting her nails done, again. (She broke one after an unfortunate tuna can incident.)

Dasseny Arreola is fighting for her life.

Grace Kwon is fighting for Dasseny's life.

Riley Combes is not fighting for anyone's life but hopes Grace sells her soul for big money!

Ariana Wang isn't a pre-med so she can't fight for anyone's life yet she seems to be saving the animals in BIOS 202.

Amelia Tsai is a pre-med so she has no life.

Suzanne Harms is probably the most comfortable person to eat at a three-dollar-sign Google Maps restaurant wearing pajamas. Good thing she can only afford the two-dollar-sign restaurants for now.

Grace Yetter is a student at William Marsh Rice University.

Kayla Peden is thankful that Grace V. Yetter is in R2.

Joanna Coram is Twitter mutuals with John Cena.

Shreya Challa would like to thank R2 for all the candy. She is workshopping this bio.

Cat Tran is telling her suitemate's dog that he's a good boy because isn't he such a good boy yes he is yes he is.

Hoang Nguyen's bio was written by ChatGPT.

Kenna Dixon has a passionate hatred for green apple Skittles. The day they changed them back to lime was the best day of her life.

Janai Kameka will assault someone with an 800 page book.

Kaitlyn Keyes trains in the art of catching grapes in her mouth like it is an Olympic sport.

Kyra McKauffley almost fell off the Peter Pan ride at Disney World as a child.

It took **Jaclynn Schwander** four years to name her pet ball python.

In an ideal world, **Ziana Ukani** would spend her life as the protagonist of a Jane Austen novel.

Izabella Natchev wanted to reuse the same bio from last year. Then decided against it.

Hadley Medlock was horribly sick and watching "Gossip Girl" in bed the night everyone else wrote their bios.

