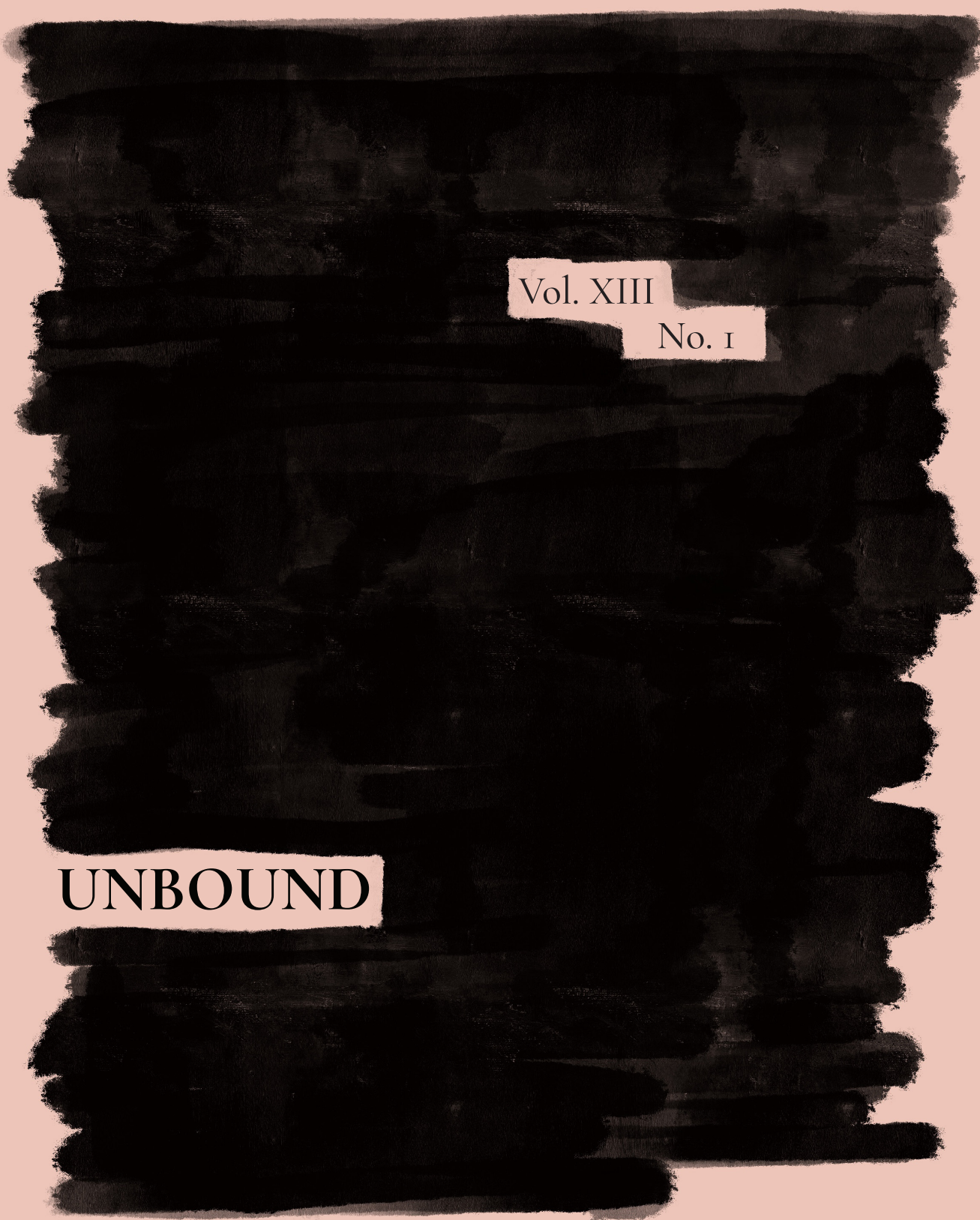




Vol. XIII

No. 1

UNBOUND

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

When I took the position in Fall 2021, I was arguably terrified. The Journal had just spent the last year and a half struggling to stay afloat among the pandemic, and there were only a handful of other people that I knew of still interested in reviving this club. School had just begun in-person again, and it was my final year of college. The pressure was on.

We recruited people in the first few months, and I was almost in tears during that very first meeting. I was nearly late, very professionally getting through the door a minute before the meeting was supposed to begin. I was expecting a handful of students, surely not enough to fill the large meeting room table. But every single seat had a person in it; ready and excited and looking to me to introduce them to The Unbound Journal.

I didn't feel qualified in the slightest. I still don't, to some degree. But seeing so many people that measly Fall Friday night gave me the boost I needed. I've done my best to create a club-like environment for our editors. I find great importance in ensuring people are comfortable to express their thoughts and opinions within the workshop room. Due to the pandemic, we had previously accepted pieces that were unable to be printed, so we've included them here. Each piece within this Issue was submitted during Spring and Fall of 2021, while the editing took place during Winter 2022. I'm filled with joy when I see everyone smiling and truly discussing our peer's work during our meetings. It's all I ever wanted for the Journal: community among literature.

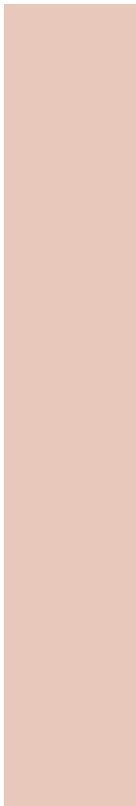
This book did not make it into your hands solely on my behalf; the team effort it took was inspiring. I can't express my gratitude for the confidence Corbett Upton had in me when he allowed me to take on this position. The Poetry and Prose Editing Teams, who have worked diligently to engage and understand every piece that cycles through our submissions, deserve every praise. Their editing, compromising, and communication skills are truly immaculate. Alyssa Leon, our lovely Social Media Coordinator saved our Journal's Instagram page. Casey Houpert and Victoria Colwell, our Senior Prose and Poetry Editors, led our editing teams effortlessly. Olivia Wilkinson, without whom, you would not be holding this Issue. Your work is beautiful, and your support is immensely appreciated. Lastly, I thank every single person who has submitted their work to The Unbound Journal. It's been a true honor reading your work. We would not be here if it weren't for you.

Thank you,

Molly



To foster the development of all students at the University of Oregon, regardless of major, by serving as a platform for outstanding creative expression. Unbound Journal is committed to the belief that publishing a community's literature is a crucial component to sustaining a vibrant culture. We publish prose, poetry and visual art that tests boundaries and comes from a place of passion, regardless of medium or approach. Our editorial process values quality as the paramount criterion. Each submission receives feedback and critique in a double-blind review from our staff of student editors.



Mission Statement

UNBOUND

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Molly Belfield

Creative Director

Olivia Wilkinson

Publicity Coordinators

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Prose Team

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Casey Houpert

Poetry Team

Senior Editor

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Jasmine Bartel

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Mia Fast

Megan Geiger

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Emma Kaisner

Taya Kendrick

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Brynn Lemons

Madisyn MacKay

Tran Marwicke

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Haley Willens

Camille Rowe

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Ava Blake

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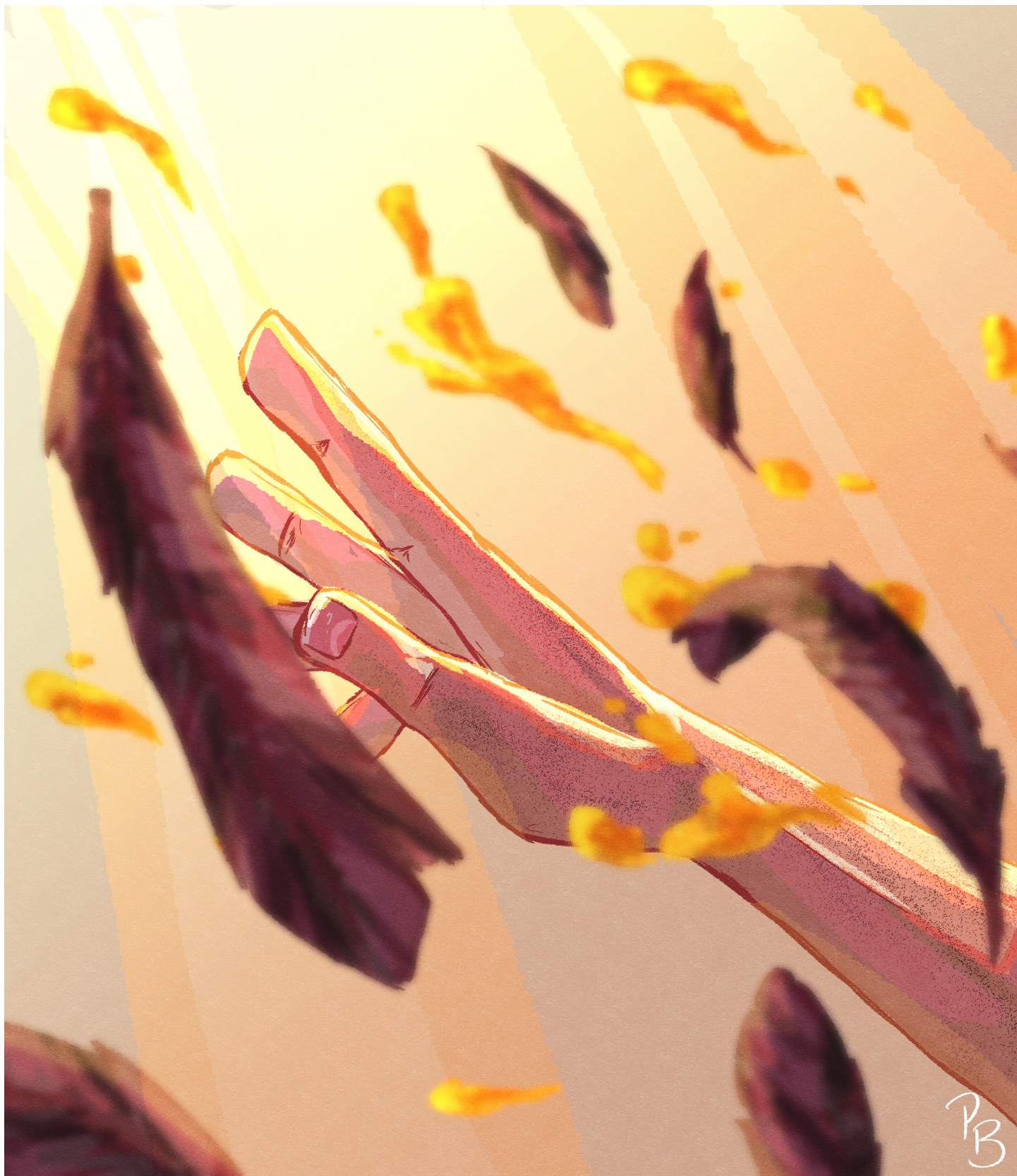
Mia Vance

Olivia Wilkinson

David Xu

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Prayerna Babu
call of the sun - the fall
Digital Painting

Marché

Elizabeth Wilkinson

I shimmy into a corner seat
Cold tugging at my coat.
My frozen fingers meet
a steaming mug,
And I settle into the hum of chatter.

Someone's laughter cuts through the buzz,
Reaching every corner with a vibrant boom.
A voice robust, like the smell of coffee,
Wafts around the room.

Nearby a couple debate
About silly things, nothing coarse.
Their words bounce, jump, and flutter
Over dewy grapes with no remorse.

I see a smile flash amongst the crowd;
One so warm it stings my cheeks.
The grin is quite contagious and loud.
The two sitting across from them look pleased.

The squeak of my leather seat calls me back
After these conversations have thawed my soul.
I begin to notice meek etches on the table
And feel myself reclining into my own company.



Olivia Wilkinson
rays
Analog Photography

An intangible dream

Lucy Murrell

Your supple skin reaches relentlessly
for my lips. The ripples in your flesh
tempt and test as you
twist in breath. Salty and sweet.
I shiver as we meet.

Flesh in flux, a body ballet.

Encased in the heat of defeat
at the hand of love.
A tightrope walk
in a humidity that hugs us.

Resting

Elizabeth Wilkinson

Sheltered by a small oak,
Though the breeze chills and bites my cheeks.
My book in hand is warmed
By soft stanzas
As I read to icy air.

No fainter than a whisper,
still I worry about passersby
Hearing my reciting of sonnets
To the ones left cold.

I figure they'd like to listen,
So I sit on old green stones.
Reading poems to whom I imagine
Are the attentive dead.
Who have lain there for years,
Craving a verse.



Olivia Wilkinson
duality
Analog Photography

Innerworkings

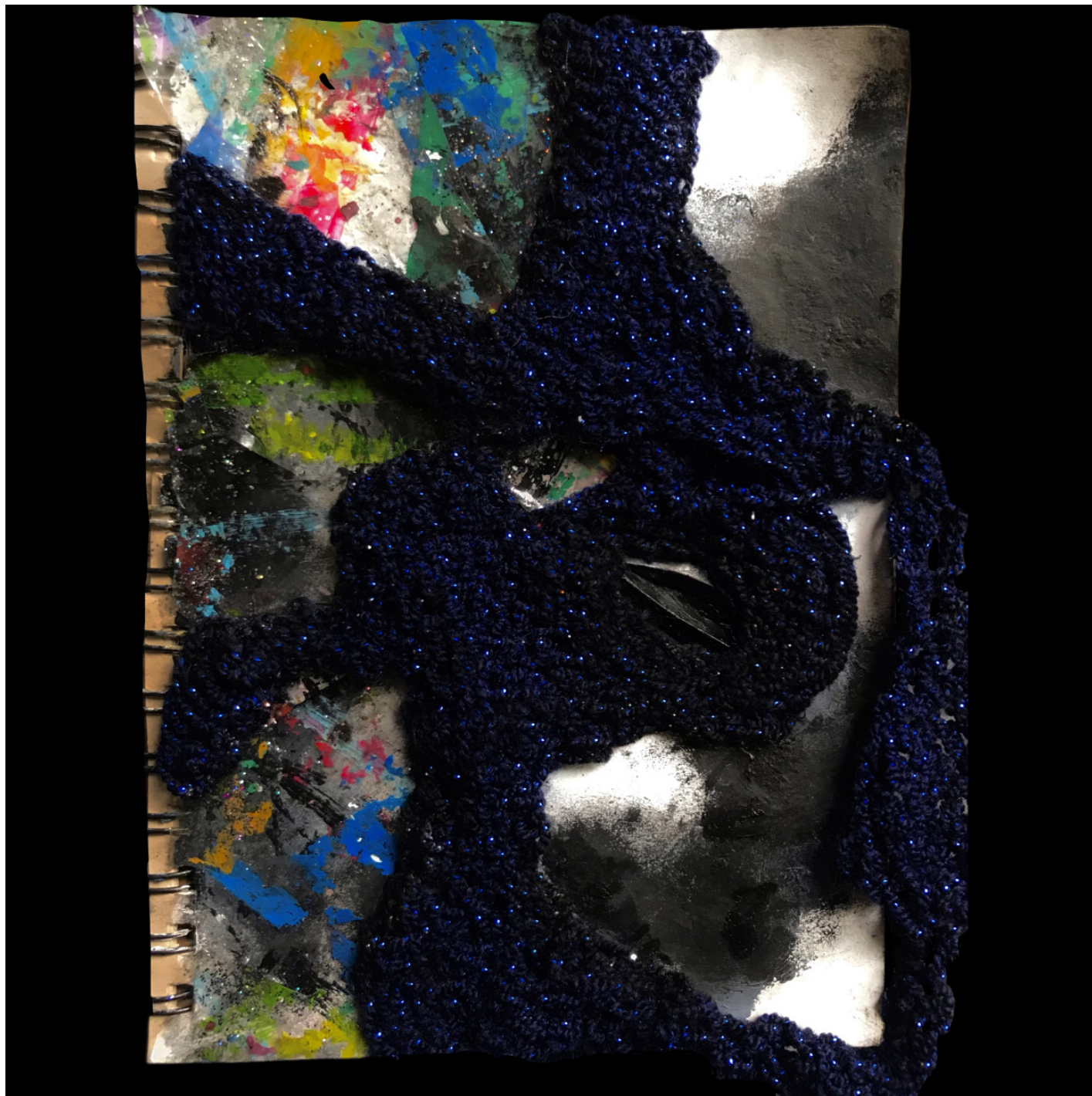
Molly Belfield

I used to believe the blood that pumped through me was blue.
Reaching air, it would turn red, moments before my eyes could see it.
I used to think if I plucked a hair out, one would never grow in that spot again.
The grass below my blanket begs to return to the underbelly of the earth.
I don't greet the sun enough when they make occasional visits to Eugene.

Nothing consumes me anymore. I used to think my dog had it out to get me.
The trees' heart beats in unison, as if an orchestra binds their bodies together.
Burying my hands in the soil, I am early to a party I was not invited to.
I used to tell people these things. I used to think I could talk to ants yet curiosity
brought a magnifying glass to my palm and willed me to burn them too.

I am guilty of living while being so under-lived.
I fight tooth and nail to reclaim the body I reside in.
A mosaic of all the stories my mind has digested.
If blood was blue would it be cold as well?
I used to wear shorts but I stopped in high school.

The chatter in my head never ceases, I am always alone but never lonely.
I used to think peace was a birthright.
Papercuts make me cringe but the iron taste is addicting.
I used to want to place myself on a bookshelf.
Why is it when I close my eyes and face the sun, I see red?



Simone Badaruddin
Naomi
Multimedia collage



Olivia Wilkinson
fences
Analog Photography

1316 Alder Street

Kyra Lauersdorf

November 8, 2019, 3:04am

Click clack click clack. You really love that sound. You love the purpose it conveys, and the power. You feel as though, with every step, you pull more eyes in your direction and more envy, desire, and respect along with them. *Click clack click clack.* You really love these shoes—sturdy, stylish, dependable. You once walked across Manhattan in these chunky, suede heels, and why not? You feel amazing when you wear them—like no one can touch you.

You cross the quiet campus, and the noise fills the air. You love that, too. You imagine the sound waves bouncing off the sidewalk and out, into the world beyond. *There she goes!* they shout, *Look at her!* But the audience has emptied for the evening; no one will hear the noise tonight. This early in the morning, little else remains awake besides yourself, the flickering street lamps, and the frogs chirping quietly as you make your way back home.

October 21, 2020, 10:48pm

As you make your way back home, the boys kick ideas back and forth for their history papers. The one says something smart to the other—apparently something funny because the other laughs and nods his assent. You stopped following their conversation a while ago, so you just smile and refocus on the road. You find it difficult to focus on much else when you walk, now—even when you walk with the boys.

A hand on your shoulder pulls you from your thoughts, and you flinch involuntarily at its close-

ness. Its owner, your friend, immediately retracts it and apologizes, though you doubt he understands what for. You apologize, too; you have no reason to feel afraid. This time, the boys will walk you home. This time, you will get there safely. *Buh-bump, buh-bump.* You have no reason to feel afraid because this time, you are not alone.

November 8, 2019, 3:07am

You are not alone. *Buh-bump, buh-bump.* He started following you when you rounded the corner from 13th onto Alder Street. You noticed him as you passed, sitting at 7-Eleven, but you did not see him leave the parking lot, and you did not detect him behind you 'til now.

He closes the distance between you very quickly, more quickly than you might have expected. His hands come first. The right one snatches your wrist from the air and yanks you backward, hard. The left one grabs at your hip, then encircles your waist and buries itself in your ribcage. He holds you like this, pinned between his forearm and chest, and lowers his head to your shoulder where you can smell his teeth rotting, hear the skin on his lips cracking into a smile. You feel the laughter rumbling in his chest long before it spills into the air.

Your limbs turn feral, your mind, thoughtless. Maybe you black out; maybe you enter some primal state where nothing exists beyond the screaming, shapeless impulse to flee. You do not know. You feel nothing but the oxygen roiling through your bloodstream, the pulse raging across your body. *Buh-bump, buh-bump.* You slam your skull sideways into his, and he cries out, but he does not let go. Instead, he tightens his grip on your wrist and jerks your arm backward, spinning you around to face him. The movement pulls him off balance—*slip!*—and you rip yourself from his grasp. Then his arm shoots out to reclaim your waist, but not before your foot cracks into his leg, once, twice, and again twice more. When his hands leave your body to cradle his shin, you run. *Click clack click clack.* You run.

April 15, 2020, 9:23am

You run five kilometers every morning to start your day. It feels good, running; you like the way it makes your lungs burn and your muscles ache and your

mind shuts out every thought not relevant to keeping your body moving. You drive your legs into the ground, past the cemetery, past campus, past the rhododendron garden, just weeks from full bloom. You can feel the pressure building in your hips and your knees, but you don't stop. *Buh-bump, buh-bump.* You run because when you run, every impact with the ground sends your anger, shame, and fear deeper into the earth. So long as they stay buried, you imagine, they cannot hurt you.

But you cannot run forever. Eventually, your lungs give out, and your fragile kneecaps yield to the pavement. Anger, shame, and fear repossess your body, like water beneath a sponge: the first zips up your shins, pierces your joints, and lingers, blazing, at the back of your throat; the second slides into your chest and squeezes your heart before burrowing into the pit in your stomach; the last crawls up your spine, slowly and deliberately, until it reaches your skull and settles, a noxious haze over your thoughts. It clouds your vision and dulls your perception; it converts every noise into his footsteps, every shadow into his form, every breeze into his corrosive, decaying breath. *You should probably talk to someone about this, you think. Yeah, you should probably talk to someone.*

November 8, 2019, 3:10am

"You should probably talk to someone," she says. Her voice sounds deeper and less dynamic through iPhone speakers. "You should call the police, or you should call your parents." She sounds tired, you decide; you must have woken her. "At the very least, you should tell your roommate," she says, "maybe he can help?" Her suggestions flit through your ears and back out before your mind can fully grasp them. Three blocks remain between you and home. *Click clack click clack.* "What will you do?" she asks. *I don't know, you think, I don't know.*

"Hey, are you there? Are you okay? Are you safe?" You exhale into the microphone and forget how to draw air back in. "I need to go," she says, "can I hang up?" *Okay, you think: click.* Her voice cuts out, but her questions persist as you scale your front steps, enter your apartment, lock your door and collapse in a shuddering heap on your wine-stained shag carpet. *Are you okay? Are you safe? You still*

feel his fingers digging into your ribs, hear his teeth grinding in your ear. *Buh-bump, buh-bump.* You do not have an answer.

May 9, 2021, 4:55pm

You do not have an answer for her when she asks why she can't walk to Scholls Park alone. She stamps her foot in anger, sending her wispy, brown curls swinging back and forth across her neck. You can see that those curls have begun to turn straight; yours did too at about the same age. You look into her piercing, almond-brown eyes and see your own dark irises reflected within them. Those eyes demand an answer from you, but you have none to give.

How do you tell a child that the world seeks to hurt her? How do you teach her that she shares it with some who yearn to possess her, contain her, grasp her, restrain her, use her, reduce her, exploit her, rape her? How do you warn her that you cannot protect her, and she cannot escape them—that they will hunt her all through her life with their thoughts and their eyes and their bodies, just as they hunt you and the woman who raised you and her sisters and their mother, too? No, you cannot tell her these things, not yet; you will scare her. But you must find a way to tell her, soon. You must find a way to tell her, or they will find her and teach her in their own way—the way they taught you and every girl who came before you.

November 8, 2019, 8:32pm

Before you crawl into bed, you check the front door one more time. You check the window again, too; you check its lock and the wooden rod that holds it shut. You draw the blinds, then the curtains, then the heavy, cloth drapes. You close the air vent, for good measure. Confident in your security, if not in your safety, you retreat to your room, lock the door, and turn off the lights. *Buh-bump, buh-bump.* You take no comfort in the darkness.

Tenderly, you prod the swollen tissue at your side. You trace the bandages you wrapped around your forearms, after you washed and dried and disinfected them. You place your palms, one above the other, over your belly, the way your counselor showed you. You breathe in, and you breathe out, just as you always have. *Buh-bump, buh-bump.*

You tell yourself you will forget this. You will climb into bed, and you will sleep, and you will forget this. And you will, almost—not right away, but with time. With time, the bruises on your chest will yellow and fade, and the gashes in your wrist will scab, heal and disappear. With time, you will leave your apartment; you will walk across campus; you will even go back to 1316 Alder. But one thing will persist, irrespective of time: the laughter, ugly and violent, that rumbled through his chest into yours in the moment he knew he could ruin you. You will try to forget it, to bury it with the rest. You will do everything imaginable to will that memory away. But I will tell you now and spare you the wondering: you will never forget the laughter.

Minutes pass. As they do, your breathing settles. You cross the room toward your bed but stumble over something in the darkness—something hard and suede. You reach down and lift the short, chunky heel from its place on the carpet. From your left, you retrieve its partner, just as carelessly discarded. *Click clack click clack*. You loved these shoes; they once carried you all across Manhattan. You loved the sound they made when they struck the pavement; you loved the purpose they conveyed, and the power. You wonder whether that sound will ever make you smile again—whether it will fill you with confidence and pride, as it once did, or rattle through your bones with every step, inseparable from the violence it inspired. *Click clack—buh-bump, buh-bump—click clack*. You place the shoes on the floor in your closet and climb into bed.

September

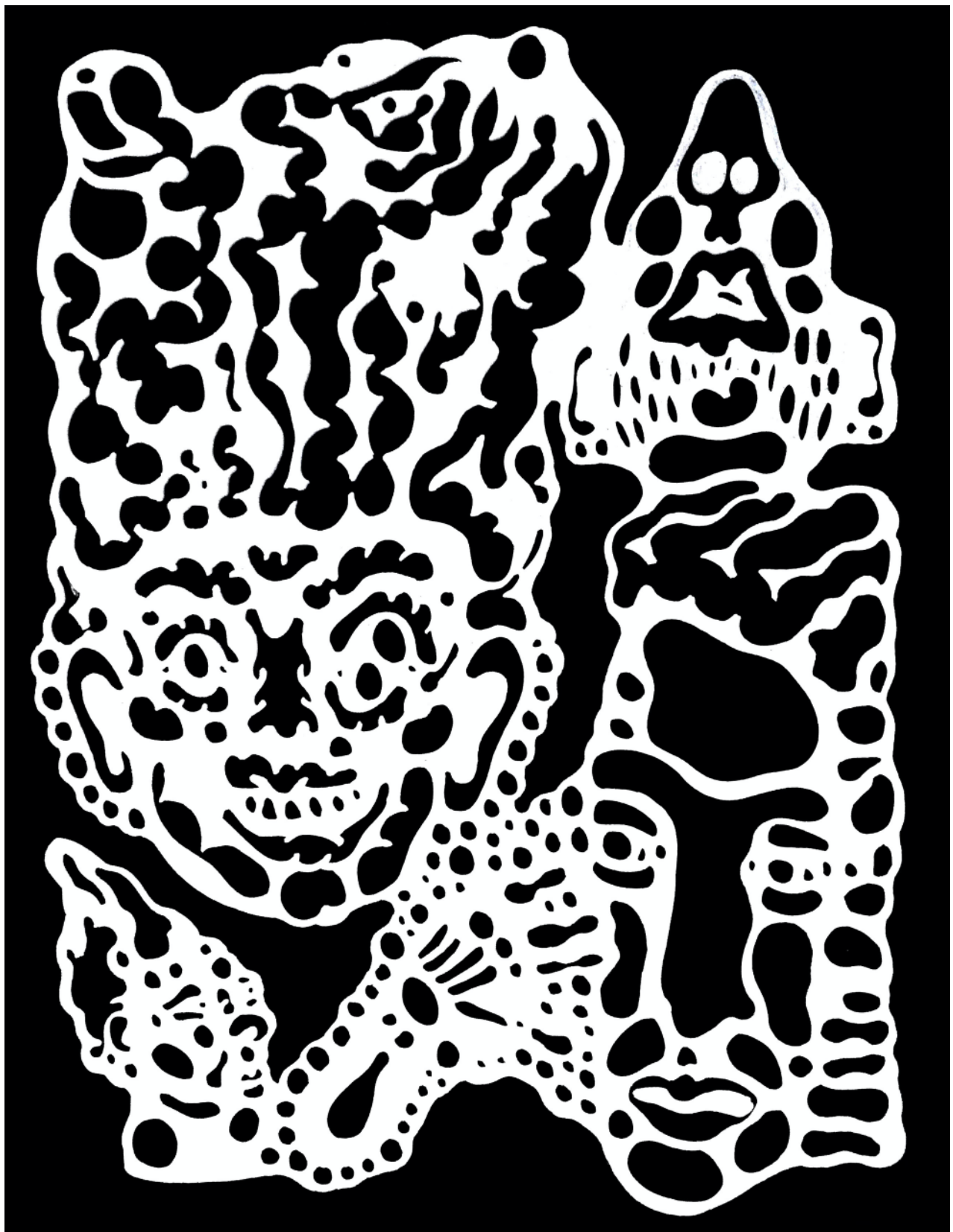
Lucy Murrell

september september september
i remember
when you were christmas morning anticipation
fun cakes for the special occasion
each with our own

max max max september
me me me september
september is coronation
the masses come to bestow gifts and kneel
before the royal twins

burgers and beer make happy adults
they like me in september
i don't remember
their faces but every september
they flock to my castle like moths to light
for bratwurst and bud-light

september is our kingdom
our rule demands water balloon fights
and busy birthday nights
of gifts and giggles
we own september
i remember
september september september



Simone Badaruddin
Heard their voice
Sharpie on paper

Sinking

Olivia Wilkinson

The river grasps my ankle; I slip,
Unwittingly, into its
Cream coffee bosom --
I drink; I'm a sinking ship.

Under meniscus under sky,
Reflecting swirls of clouds; I bob,
Silently, like a white-eyed fish
the fisherman left behind.
There are bigger things to catch
And fatter fish to fry.

The current's drawl
Moving seconds into hours
Weeps between my fingers and
Dangles me closer to its gaping
mouth -- An invitation to a gathering of one
Among the bodies of many.

Caught in its boggy trawl,
Brown mucky tendrils swaddle me;
Sunlight seems
Centuries-old --
A fever dream -- So many colors it
Makes me sick.

I'm reeled in by a slimy shore; the air
Is trying,
Trying, trying, trying --
Failing
To revive the body I no longer
Need.



Simone Badaruddin
woman
Multimedia painting

Worry Dolls

Sydney Severn

Through the threshold of my bedroom door
I am welcoming bare footsteps dry
like she's been walking in the sand,
then across to the dreams
knocking at the foyer of my vision.

My little toes are tucked beneath the sheets
and squirming
in search of warmth.

My mother's hand grasps mine
and with it a rough small box
climbs into my fingers,
but it wishes to stay closed. Yellow and scratchy.
The aroma of inside reveals
small woven faces of friends she wishes for me
to confide in.
First desperation.
She whispers to them, wishing on my behalf,
and my vocal chords strain
to imitate my creator, to tell them what worries me
incessantly --
with more youth than a worrier should have;
 to notice the strain in my jaw
 and grated down fingernails.
They join hands within and do the worrying for me.
Thus I feel the relief
(enemy of desperation)
like sinking into a raincloud
rather than being repelled from it.

That deep breath.

I wonder
where it's been hiding.

The Girl on the Roof

Megan Geiger

“911, what’s your emergency?” There is a brief moment of silence. A slow and eerie crescendo of humming follows, and if one were to listen with the utmost care, the scratching of a needle on vinyl. And then:

“The car is on fire.”

“Can you tell me where y-” The operator is cut off by the deep melodious voice.

“And there’s no driver at the wheel.”

“Sir?” The voice emanating faintly from a phone resting screen down on the floor could be worlds away. In the room, there is only a girl.

bang.

~

Indefinitely torn. I’m teetering on the ridge of my roof, having to step off the imaginary tight rope that runs across the center now and then to catch my balance. Every couple steps I stumble to the side, my bare feet holding the weight of my body on slippery, tilted tiles. I imagine I’m on a high-line, balancing up in the clouds with the wind and the birds rushing around me, whipping my hair in my eyes and mouth. I’m on the roof and soaked from the rain that’s falling from where my imagination has taken me. A damp cigarette rests aimlessly between my pointer and middle fingers.

“Mommy look!” A little girl points at me from the graveled alleyway behind my house, walking hand in hand with her mother as I spread my arms like a ballerina or a bird. I place one foot in front of the other as I watch the little girl’s mom pull her along with an absent glance in my direction.

I hear a car door slam shut and someone yell “Fuck!” from what I can only imagine to be the street in front of my house. The cigarette finds its way to my lips, but all that reaches my lungs is sour air, as I pull it through a tunnel of wet tobacco. I pivot and face the window that’s become a portal to my room, just a roof’s length away. And I leave the little girl and her mother to be shuffled, stacked, and filed away in some obscure cabinet deep in my mind, as I’m sure I’m filed hastily into theirs. All of us quick and irrelevant memories to one other. It’s suffocating, being trapped in a fixed state in the mind of someone else. I’m sure that if I ever happen to pop into the little girl’s mind again, it won’t be me, it’ll be that girl on the roof.

And that man that cursed and slammed the car door shut did not know he would be heard by the little girl and the girl on the roof. And that bird in the oak tree, staring straight at me, if I threw my head back and howled like a coyote, what would it think? What would it see?

Looking out at my hand, I study the fingers that the cigarette rests between. I think I am stuck somewhere between perception and perceiving. Somewhere between my pointer and the middle; noticed by the little girl, a witness to the four-letter-word, a cigarette that’s too wet to smoke.

I’m drenched, and the thick fabric of my sweatpants has become all too eager to work its way down my thighs. One... two... three... four... I count the steps I take towards my window while I bring my right heel foreword to kiss the toes of my left. They barely peek out from under the black fabric that seems to be melting off my legs. As if my sweats had somehow gained sentience, becoming heavy with the weight of existence.

They are my favorite sweats, so I imagine if they were capable of feeling, they would first of all be shocked and potentially traumatized by their water-logged state (not unlike a newborn child being violently pushed into this world), and then after seeing the power-lines that slice the sky up into a fragmentary blue, the shimmering, rainbow pools of oil in the grocery store parking lot after rain, the raccoons and possums confined to shuffling through trash in city dumpsters, the tents lining the road as parents driving cars glue their eyes strictly to the

street, and the children in the back seat- cannot seem to look away, the metal shrapnel that has permanently embedded itself into the arms and chest of a Palestinian, the arms and chest of an Israeli, and the abstract but equally threatening shrapnel that colonization and the imposition of the Eurocentric model and coloniality of power and gender has embedded into-

Nope, nope, this is definitely me and not the black pair of pants I'm wearing, soaked from the rain, and that I have somehow managed to personify. I feel heavy I suppose, but really who doesn't from time to time? I let my mind take off again. If I allow it a break, if I sit in silence and darkness, if I am still for too long... no, I will focus on the rain pelting my face and the weight of the external world.

It has, after all, only been a couple months.

*There is a man with hands covered in ash,
Lighting fires for the tired souls that pass.*

I watch her walk heel to toe along the roof, just as I have watched from the chests and stomachs and livers and lungs of them all. I feel myself crash like waves through the cold, cobalt minds of those who share what the girl on the roof is experiencing. I feel myself build up inside some, and subside in others, but I have felt them all. I am not an easy presence to embody in this state, as this was most definitely not something I had signed up for. I am rather something that seems to have always been, maybe something that will always be.

The waves receding over sand, falling away from the land as the ocean pulls itself away from something that it was and is and will be inextricably tied to, without any control over its own motion. It is the moon after all, that dictates how much of the shoreline the waves are allowed to touch. Thinking back to my earliest memory, this is all that comes to mind: the ocean being drawn slowly, down and away from the shore; back into itself.

It is an intimate and, more often than not, melancholy existence, taking up residence in someone's being as they walk hand in hand with me. I would offer you some notable figures whom I have known, as I have known some very well, and some just briefly, but it would be a waste of time to list off

names that you may or may not recognize. It is all the better if I am able to say that right now, I am in every country, every state, county, city, and, I don't have the statistics in front of me currently, but potentially you. If we have not yet shaken hands, I'm sorry to say that we eventually? will, as everyone does, whether they recognize the feel of me or not.

Regardless, the girl on the roof..

*He wakes up at dusk,
Igniting flames every night.
They snuff out the cold,
darkened wood burning bright.*

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly as I stare up at the sky, taking a seat on the ridge of the roof and letting my legs straighten themselves out to rest parallel on the slant. My hair is plastered to my cheeks and neck. It's a bit chilly out here, and no, stop, don't- but it's too late.

*This is his purpose,
to make clear the way,
so that these weary travelers
will not wander astray.*

... was remembering.

*They can find their way easier,
the ones grieving above,
when met with this dim breath of hope;
a labor of love.*

The memory of him will not let itself be blocked out or ignored, and I have no choice but to let it run its course. It was raining that day too, but not this harsh and cloudy rain where the clouds rest so low that I feel claustrophobic. It was the gentle, clean rain that lifts the scent of the earth into the air, and the clouds are so dark and high that they light up everything below them in a wild and saturated contrast.

This is how I remember him. We were sitting in someone else's room in someone else's house, because we had both traveled here to meet each other for the first time. Because I was in love with you, and I think you were with me, but we hadn't really talked

about it all that much yet. Outwardly at least. Your pupils were huge, and I think mine were too, and you really couldn't even tell that both our eyes were blue, and we just sat there on a bed that wasn't ours and-

I'm able to make it stop here, finally, and I feel a couple tears escape down my cheeks out of relief as I snap myself back to the present. The rain has slowed.

What do I even feel these days?

*The flickering shadows,
they dance in the air
as a soul passing by
stops briefly to stare.*

I feel the weight of myself in the girl on the roof, but she holds me back with alarming ferocity, like she is Atlas and I am the sky, and if she falls or slips- I can feel her fear of being crushed. I reside in double, in this world of course, and in that immaterial world that can't really describe or explain except through feel. Here it seems, I am the burden. I am not always so. I am the journey. I am also the guide.

Imagine if you can, me.

*He spends his days in darkness
with curtains drawn tight.
Buried under heavy blankets of exhaustion
and a thick sheet of ice.*

What do I even feel these days? I look down my legs, down the roof, all the way down to the ground.

I feel the weight of being woman. I feel the weight of being able to feel at all. I feel the viscosity of my blood. I feel the weight of reason. I feel the weight of that one stone you found when I hold it in my palm. The stone you found and I carry around for comfort, but... more as a paper weight for these fragile sheets of shaky, nervous words that rest teetering on my lips. Like I teeter, off balance and tipsy- from your absence or this bottle- walking the narrow ridge of my roof.

The stone weighs heavy in my hand. Not nearly as heavy as I imagine my own heart would weigh if I dropped it on a scale. My heart hitting metal with the thud of a baby bird hitting the ground after a failed first flight. Heartbreakingly heavy. It would bleed all over the scale I'm sure. How ironic it would be to see my heart being weighed. All mountains and glories

and tragedies and loves and prayers and tender thoughts, tender shots from this barrel I can't seem to stop staring down... It would not matter much if my heart were placed on that scale. It would sink quicker than grief in your stomach. And blood would stain the marble floor.

*A bottle in hand, I watch him stand
at the edge of dawn, looking out at the land*

In this place, this space I reside in, this abstract land and state of being, I can half see her. She wavers from solid to transparent as she walks slowly along the narrow road in the distance. Her eyes are on her feet, and her hair and clothes are soaked through, sticking to her pale skin. I watch her place one foot directly in front of the other, taking her left heel, and bringing it to the ground so that it brushes the toes of her right foot. The girl on the roof did not bring any shoes. I look down at my own feet. A drop of water appears on one of them while I fill my lungs with air and-

*A deep sigh flows
from the depths of his throat.
The sky is on fire,
and The Doubler pulls.*

I appreciate the stimulation of the storm. My mind is occupied and intrigued by the sensation of raindrops landing on my face when I close my eyes and put my chin to the sky. The leaves on the oak fall off one by one, five by five when the wind picks up. The sound of the wind rushing over my ears- and I'm hurled back into a different memory this time.

The wind was deafening. It threatened to tear me off my feet and throw me over the side of this massive cliff, straight into the roaring ocean. Tossed around and battered by that feeling. I felt so small! Staring out at a rough and feral sea, and with your presence next to me. My mind doubled over, careening from being that brutally present.

"What a beautiful moment," I looked at you and laughed and yelled with joy. We stood at the edge of a peninsula; both our mouths open so we could taste the fog rolling in. How sweet, the sea rolling its vapor in paper, her breath on my face.

We walked along the edge on a thin little trail kissing the edge of the cliff. Barefoot and hands locked together. And then we were sitting, squeezed together in a little grassy alcove, the coastal trees a blockade against the roaring wind.

"Look!" I heard you yell over all the noise, pointing to some stalky white flowers a few feet in front of us, just out of protection from the wind. They whipped around in some sort of dance I'd never seen. And then the wind slowed, and the dancing flowers did too, just enough for us to make out dozens of sleepy bumble bees clinging to the petals, somehow still dozing as the flowers whirled. .

"Can I play you a song?" He asked, and I nodded. I didn't know what to expect, or even why music would be necessary in a moment like this, but this was not a song as much as it was a poem. It was a serious song, which I guess was fitting because it was a serious moment. Maybe the most serious moment. Serious in that I had never felt joy like that. Like weight. Like presence.

It played on, the melody in the fog and the waves and the wind tearing at the flowers- and the final words of the man in the song:

"I said kiss me you're beautiful, these are truly the last days. You grabbed my hand, and we fell into it. Like a daydream, or a fever." And, really, we did just that.

*The fires all dead
and the warmth has all fled,
from this well-traveled road
that the grieving souls tread.*

She no longer flickers in and out of my vision. I can see her full presence in both places. The one where she sits on the roof shivering, her face buried in her arms, and here. In this cold, barren land that she walks through alone, but does not really walk through alone. And Atlas finally lets the weight of the world fall. I stand here, stationed by myself on this tower I built alone. I can see further down the road from this height. I can watch more carefully, more attentively, and the fire I light up here every night can be seen from a further distance. I've begun to think of it as my lighthouse, and this place an ocean. It's a personal ocean though, it's relative. It might be shallow or deep,

calm or a swell; no one's ocean is the same here. Traveling this road at night is much more difficult than it would seem. Though the wood here is brittle and scarce, and it is tiresome to pile up and break, tiresome to spark when I drag this flint across steel night after night, the alternative is a dreary, hopeless, and unimaginable voyage.

*The road is so narrow
that some would depart.
They would lose their way
and often fall apart.*

That was the first time I'd ever heard "The Dead Flag Blues." I stand up slowly, my body stiff from the cold. I climb back through my window, strip my clothes off, and fall in a heap on the floor.

I imagine I would too,
if I were battered by the world.
If I were stunned by this loss
with my life now unfurled.

I sometimes think of my relationship with love in terms of hot and cold. How there's really no such entity as cold, only the absence of heat, yet we have a word for what that absence feels like regardless. That yes, I feel cold, I feel grief, I feel your absence, I feel that your hand is not laced through mine, that your coffee cup sits there empty collecting dust, that I cannot see, smell, hear, taste, or touch you; Of course I feel your absence, it would be silly to deny such a thing! But it is only because I was able to feel your presence in the first place that I know you are not here now. It is because of you that my hand knows when it is being held. In an external world, I only know what cold is because I have felt, to some degree, warmth. I only know grief because I have known love. Ahhh and how good we remember the warmth of the sun to be when the clouds cover the sky and do nothing but pour rain! Internally though, you are far too present, there is far too much of you here, in fact, you are most of what's here. All this love that sits waiting to be given to you is left just like that: waiting. And the waiting weighs heavy sometimes.

But from his small station,

*The Doubler can see,
these footprints and tracks
in places they aren't meant to be.*

I did not realize how cold I was, but my fingers are swollen and white and I can't make a full fist. I'm horizontal and this bottle that seems to weigh less and less by the minute, if I stand it up on my stomach, is my vertical axis. Maybe this is all a twisted dream, and when I wake up, you'll be downstairs making coffee.

I laugh to myself and the bottle shakes with my stomach. Ah hope, my gentle friend, my gentle end. I see you in the tall grass on the far side of the river, waiting to pull me out when I disappear under the current, only to take me over slowly once I reach your bank. I know you'll dry me off and wrap me in clothes, build me a fire to sit by, you'll even sit with me! And together we'll watch the river rushing by like mayflies, flowing onward while we wait on a sandy bank for nothing in particular.

I've sat with you one too many times. We talk of places further down the river, beautiful, chilling, exquisite places that we do nothing together to move towards, we make no effort to get there. I'll sit with you here awhile more I think, until I feel ready...

*And on restless days
when he would flinch from his dreams,
He'd follow these tracks
off the trail to this scene:*

She wrestles with me awhile, on the floor of her room I can see her mind spinning, hoping, wondering if there is something she can do to avoid me. I can see her run through possibilities, choices, paths, refusals. She steps off the trail into the brush and fog, and I begin the climb down from my tower.

*A fermented soul
in complete disarray,
laying cold and confused
on the ground in dismay.*

I've grown old on this riverbank. The sand and rocks and river grass grow tired of me pacing over them, waiting for death. You sit idly by my side, but at least I'm not alone- and then I take my last breath. I hear your deep sigh as I inhale for the last time, and

fall forward into the current once more. You were, in fact, denial all along.

I left my heart on the scale, and now I watch my inanimate limbs tumble over themselves as I float down the river, causing an ironic ruckus, and I can't help but laugh. What's left of me?

*With bottle in hand
he lifts them gently by the arm,
he whispers something in their ear
so they know there's no harm.*

I find her in the brambles, head hanging low over scraped up knees. I drop heavily to mine, and sit down beside the girl that is no longer on the roof. She looks up at me with eyes I've seen a million times, a red stone resting in one of her hands. It's difficult to find stillness in a world of motion, but we sit here quietly. We sit in stillness. And then, with her voice or her eyes, I'm not quite sure which, she speaks.

"The world is rushing by me, and all I am is a spectator in the stands. It's like a dream. One of those dreams where you know you need to get somewhere, you need to run as fast as you can because it feels like your life depends on it, but you're stuck in slow motion." Her eyes hold the weight of the world, the weight of her world I guess. If you saw them you'd know.

"And here I sit, inert and cross-legged in a land leached of life." She looks around at the cold landscape and I can see what she means.

"But the world chugs on, operating on borrowed bones, and not planning on returning them to the library once two weeks have passed." She throws her head back and takes in all the air in the world. This time, we walk hand and hand through not just one memory, but a slew of them.

I watch with the girl on the roof, though in this memory, she's sitting on someone else's bed. She's sitting with the reason I'm here. I feel like an intruder, sitting in on her memories with her, but she holds my hand and we watch her fall in love with the boy.

His pupils are huge, and hers are too, and you can barely even tell that both their eyes are blue, and they're sitting on a bed that isn't theirs while they stare at each other with some sort of amazement that is characteristic of people in love or on drugs. And one

of her hands reaches up to touch his face, to check if he is indeed real.

And then the girl on the roof pulls me along. We watch them sway back and forth to music in a little apartment, foreheads pressed together, laughing. It's dusk, and the dim, dim light pouring in from the window turns them into soft silhouettes. Two dark puzzle pieces in motion.

And we move on, she pulls me forward. In the same apartment, she's curled up on a chair crying, and the boy sits with his head in his hands. She looks like a child, and so does he. I recognize this memory. I remember sitting there with the both of them that day, and just as I remember it, the little white stick with the little red plus sign on it sits face up on the table. I squeeze the hand of the girl on the roof as we leave the apartment.

Hand in hand, we watch the two of them watching hummingbirds flit through the air. Sitting in a little clearing, her fingers pluck at the strings of a ukulele. The boy reaches for a strawberry in the bright red pile that rests between them. Hummingbird wings, gentle acoustic vibrations and fruit.

We fly through memories like these, thousands of them. Lips touching, a basket full of blackberries, a black eye, floating in saltwater, soft blue light, ivy growing in an abandoned house, hands squeezing hands, silence, flowers behind ears, long car drives, slacklines, art, little notes, tears on tears, lips colliding, buzzed heads, some sort of urgency, confusion, joy, guilt, love, grief.

And we return to the brambles.

"I guess I just got a little overwhelmed, sorry about it, not much else I have to say but," she looks at her hands, the little stone resting in one of them, "yeah, I guess I just forgot to water that plant in the corner of my room one too many days in a row, but maybe tomorrow I'll remember and..." she trails off as tears well up in her eyes.

"I think that yellow painting of him I tried at looks pretty damn nice on my wall, but it just reminds me a little too much of..." she chokes on the air. She looks at me, clearly bewildered at why she sits under brambles with grief in the fading light of a place she is not completely unfamiliar with. I ask for the rock with my hand, and she drops it in my palm-

"I guess this little stone is a cold, hard relief

from the sweat dripping down my neck and back and sticking my skin to itself when I wake up from one bad dream after another so," and my hand drops quickly to the floor with the weight of this little stone. I take a sharp breath, wondering how something so small can possibly weigh so much.

I absentmindedly hand the stone back to her, and her hand doesn't move an inch when it returns to her palm. I get to my feet and help the girl on the roof up to hers. It's getting dark out, and there are fires to be lit. Taking her hand in mine, I lead her back to the trail. We stare down the gravel road together, watching as darkness sets in. I let go of her hand, and send her on her way, still recovering from the lifetime of her memories.

*They wander away in a daze,
as the cold blue light dulls.
They continue their journey,
and The Doubler pulls.*

I push myself up from the floor and shiver. It's dark outside, and I have three missed calls from Mom. I flip the switch on the dusty record player that sits in the corner of my room, and it spins; needle on thin vinyl. There is only one song left.

*The nights here are dangerous
not thanks to creatures or people,
but because a seemingly well-traveled road
looks different for each of us.*

All I can do is watch. My stomach churns at the sight of the barrel, and all I can think about is that stone in her hand. I should have the stone, why did I hand it back? I was astonished at the weight, she cannot carry it like this.

*And so, darkness returns
to a land still frozen.
The fires begin to burn,
as The Doubler lights them.*

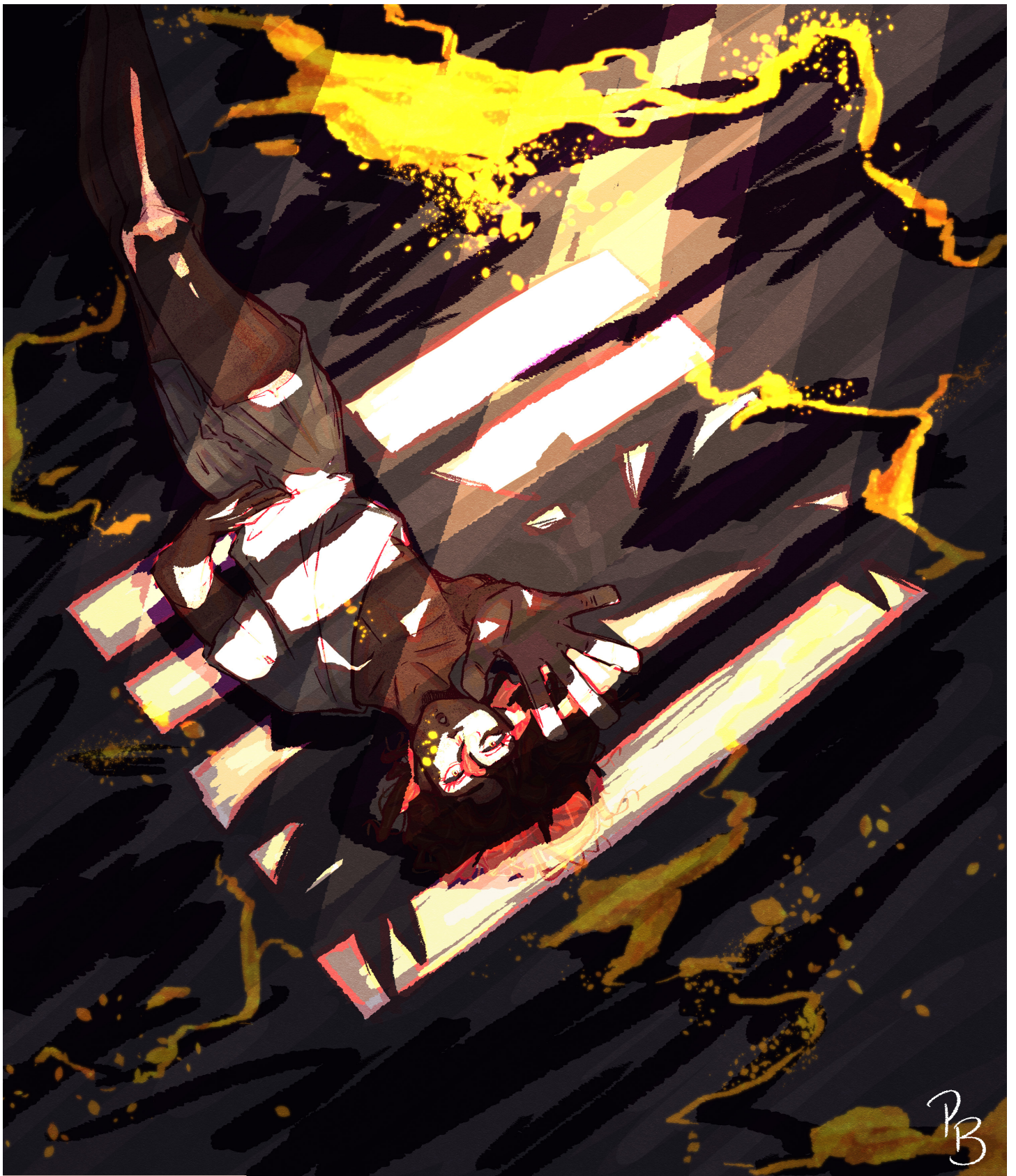
I let the record spin a few seconds more.

I catch his face as I pass by,

*dripping with... sweat or tears?
He sparks a new flame,
and the darkness swiftly clears.*

I can do nothing. I feel myself swell up in the coldest body I have felt in some time, and I watch as she dials three numbers into her phone. The girl on the roof pauses for a second when she catches herself in the mirror hanging quietly on the wall. She stares me directly in the eyes, and I feel her squeeze the stone in her hand briefly before it hits the floor. Her thumb presses the call button.

*The fires burn hotter as he shovels in coals,
our eyes briefly meet,
and The Doubler pulls*



Prayerna Babu
call of the sun - the reach
Digital Painting

Clean Slate

Bitā Habāshi

i remember myself at 5 years old.
there is nail polish, a hair straightener, and a first aid kit under mom's sink.
i sit at the side of the bed, she sleeps unaware of me beneath her.
toes curling against the wall, head pressing against the bedframe, and
with the sun barely risen i listen to the geese fly further from her window.
i whisper,
maman joon.
her eyes opening swollen, she hands me the book on the moss-colored rocking chair,
she walks across the carpet so delicately that it appeared nobody had stepped on it since it left Iran.
head high in the early haze of seven a.m.
she holds all her stories heavy in her spine and still steps so softly.
our home cleans itself.
how could anyone know otherwise?

i remember myself a year ago.
there is nail polish, a hair straightener, and a first aid kit under my sink.
there are geese flying somewhere in another state.
a symptom of my heavy head, i hold out my hands and herd the silence to listen to me.
somewhere in the apartment a door slams.
i feel a weight press in my stomach, i carefully hush my heart to sleep.
it remembers the last time i wasn't afraid.
what do i do with a heart that's only trying to keep things green?
it just never knew what to do about the south-facing window.
i say i would like to hear the geese and the train honk when it is too early.
i say if i learned bravery, it was from maman's left foot carrying more weight than her bookshelves.
her right foot- more weight than the kitchen, and still there was no dust to be found in the house.
i say my heart couldn't make a fly flinch, i say i am exactly my mother's daughter.

every morning i learn to forgive the world.
the dew clings to the spider's web on my car's side mirror,
she spells 'staying' as gratitude for a story becoming beautiful in the disappearance of fear.
i leave my socks sprawled out across the floor,
i never guessed i could stay in one place and make it lived in.
somewhere upstairs, there are footsteps i wake up with.
there is a candle on my desk, there is the sun peeking out.
i call my mother and she tells me i was born to write myself back into life.



Yao Liu

Bullton - The Fourth - Dimensional Monster

Sculpture

ABS plastic (internal frame), Sculpey Polymer Clay (outer casing),
Milliput Putty (details), polystyrene (antennae attachments), steel
(wires).

Execution of a Traitor

Jace Elson

my executioner stands before me,
sword in hand-- not raised, not yet--
the flames warping the tarmac they stand on.

heaven was not supposed to reach me,
not in a dead-end town a dead-end state a
runaway country. but

my wife requested the apples
in the plastic bags
my trembling hands clutch.

am I shaking from
fear or age?
my therapist would say that

they're the same thing.
signs of survival.
signs of strength.

(she tells me saving myself is enough.
I don't know how to say
my name meant God's wrath, once.)

"what is it like to be human?" they ask,
sword in hand-- raised, now,
shielding their face.

this I know how to say.

"when I can't sleep,
I trace constellations over the freckles
on my wife's spine.

I taste hymns in her--
her too-strong coffee,
her too-weak bones.

she needs a cane, now,
and she still believes
I don't remember you.

not everything needs
to be something
god can understand."

my death stands before me,
sword in hand-- swinging, now--
and I keep my eyes open.

Yao Liu
Vakishim - The One-Horned Terrible-Monster
Digital Art
Proprietary painted statue, proprietary photo, Adobe Photoshop



A Burning in the Valley

Clayton Rodgers

A scrub-jay flits to a branch nearby, forgets why it came, or perhaps thinks better of it, and hurtles through the thicket again. His pine-colored eyes follow the bird as it weaves between empty trees. At the edge of the plateau, it bursts from the dead foliage and into the open air above the valley. Far below, the unfurling foothills fade to steeper rises of muted tones; deeper, the land climbs to a caldera, its round cauldron appearing nearly mauve in the distance. Between there and where he sits yawns the continuous, frozen ripple of gray sky cresting above the barren canopy. In the dell, the treetops creak, black and fingered, a thousand skeletal hands cracking as they reach from the nether. Here, in this forested glen, it is winter's end.

Alekhine squats under a sleeping copse of larches, next to him a small tongue of flame carves shadows into the grooves of his gaunt face and illuminates his matted hair. He is too young for his skin to be so furrowed, but mud and sun and mistakes have aged him more than his years. He shifts on his haunches to poke the fire while his eyes parse the lichen-encrusted larches around him. He stares at them and wonders *why?* Of all the conifers, they are one of the few that shed all their needles in the winter. Against the absence of evergreen, the light seafoam of the lichen imposes. The bearded trees feel primordial and—in their inhuman antiquity—sinister. Branches loom overhead, their rows of lichen trailing down like ghosts from innumerable bygone summers. The sighing between them moans *I was here before the gods, and I will be here after you.* Alekhine sighs, “And yet, in our aspirations of perpetuity,” he feeds the fire wilted needles, “we both have lost something.”

He turns his head from the conversation. Over the landscape, the clouds still hold light from the receding day. In a ridge where two slopes meet, Alekhine spots the speckled gleam of black water sluicing through the hillside like a strip of twilight. Brown needles swirl in the stream's eddies. *All things end up in the river*, he thinks. Not only needles, but the husks of boxelders and the brittle bones of robins and the rotted boles of fallen giants. He realizes then why the ancient Greeks used to believe the crossing to the afterlife had to be a river. His eyes study the slow and nearly imperceptible movement of the forest. Each piece of the sprawling green puzzle inexorably sliding into the river. And the river dumping it all into the vastness of the sea. At that last thought, he is reminded that the Styx was not the only river in Hades.

There was another. For those whose lives were rife with sorrow and regret, who sought the world below as refuge from the one above, who were disappointed to find their memories stayed with them, even in death—there was the Lethe. In Greek, the word translates to *oblivion*, an erasure. Its waters drowned out the memories of a blackened past and instead offered solace in nothing. It is in this way Alekhine knows the rill is not the Styx, but Lethe. And at its end, under the enormity of the sea, all is consoled in the tides.

His fingers begin to loosen the string on the top of his rucksack. Alekhine rummages through it and pulls out a pewter fork. He thinks of the Lethe and the fire in front of him. Silently he rolls up his right sleeve. Spiraling around his forearm are the words: “Between past and present there can be no compromise.” He wanted to write more, but you only have so much skin. And Alekhine has come here for precisely this. Skin. And fire. Underneath the words, the images of three small knives are scrawled into his flesh. He wishes he had one of them now. But he has always made do with what he had. He crams a bit of willow bark into his mouth to numb what is to come.

It does not take as long as he had imagined. The sanguine coat the prongs had moments ago has bubbled off in the flame. His once tan knuckles dull to the pale white of slush as he presses the fork to the wound. In short intervals, he listens to the sizzle of the fork as it sears his riven flesh. The three knives are

gone. Alekhine stares at the dark traces running down his arm. To him, it seems the knives have torn open tissue once more in their final parting throes.

Three knives cast into the void, three names following. He could remember each of them, their comings and goings, their anniversaries, what they ate before. How awful for them? To have blood and bone reduced to a small commemorative etching of their end in something as temporary as flesh. It burns. The smoke vanishing into the low hanging vault of gray above. Another sea. Another Lethe. He hopes in oblivion, they will have their own eternity. Alekhine supposes, then, this is what it has always been about: the ephemeral and the ethereal.

His hands go back to his bag, somewhere under the pemmican and canteen lies a name far heavier than the ones now gone; a name so large to him, he whispers it to himself when he sleeps, but never awake; a name he would forget only after he has forgotten his own. At the cinch of the pack, his hands pause. On a bough just above his head, the western scrub-jay returns. It tilts its head to the side, proffering the profile of a single black and endless eye. A stalwart bird, loyal to its hills, it never migrates. In the middle of winter, the bright cerulean of its feathers is sustained with nothing more than chill and insects. *You do not have to leave either*; it bows its head before gliding away.

A few seconds slowly trickle away; Alekhine decides to undo the cinch. He rummages inside with one hand, there are clinks-and-clanks of metal, followed by his fingers brushing over coarse, dried meat, then, something soft. His hand shuts, and he pulls out a long, forest-green, velvet dress. Wetness gathers in the corners of his eyes. The urge to bury it in the pack bubbles up. *It looks nothing like her*. The wind flutters the ends of the dress, giving it momentary curves, unrecognizable from the ones that used to fill it—*they are cruel mockeries*, he thinks. His bleary eyes desperately crave to look elsewhere.

Staring at the dress as it sways is both too much, and not nearly enough.

Alekhine averts his gaze to a root poking from the cold, solid earth, and coils his hand around it. “I wish you could have seen her” he says, unrolling a sleeve to wipe his rheumy eyes. “I feel so inadequate in my memories of her.” He clutches the fabric tightly in

his hands and buries his face between the folds. “You can remember the colors of a sunrise, the confusion of pinks and purples—but you can’t remember the warmth of the coming morning. This is the absence I have lived with. Like something of her will return, but then she is smoke in my hands, thought and air. And I flounder about trying to grip the edges of her shadow—” Alekhine knows he is at an impasse with the protruding root. There is no meaning in our words when we have no shared past, and in trying to recapture her, he is swallowed in the ineffable. *How can you know what she was when you never saw her?* Alekhine’s words turn to sawdust in his mouth; he feels contempt rising in him towards this entire valley and its inability to understand his longing.

Somewhere inside, he breaks. His voice and mounting anguish shatter against the hard wall of her memories. “I could tell you that she smelled like draughts of ambrosia and that her eyes were the moon to wolves. But these words have no hook to hang meaning from for you.” His knuckles loosen around the root. “She taught me how to smile. A furtive grin shared across a dinner table with company could carry me for months. Our interwoven fingers suspended between our chairs at town meetings, her thumb tracing circles over mine. Everything she did told me, ‘this—this is for you, and you alone.’” His lips scrunch into a rictus of sorrow. The dress turns splotchy with darkness as tears patter it. Alekhine looks to the fire and knows it wants to lift what he has carried for so long. He inhales the larch and cedar and winter air.

It is all wrong, he thinks. *Time cannot heal all. It cannot restore what I have lost; memory has held what is left for the fire*. And here it is. Unraveling the dress, Alekhine lays it over the flame. He is surprised by the banality of what comes next.

For some inexplicable reason he had imagined the flames would turn green as they licked the verdant curves off the velvet. Where is the color and recognition of her effervescence? The fire levels all. The dress turns the same black and gray smoke as all else. It does not care what it was in life—in the flames, it burns, and burns. *Lethe*.

The fire dances upwards inches from him, the dress forgotten, the tongues reaching to distant, unseen stars. This is how physics used to be divined.

People observed that fire always burned towards the heavens and concluded there must be a threshold between the stars and sky which served as home to all the faded infernos. *They are returning.* It was the same with rain, the droplets fell from the firmament to the earth in search of their natural place, the seas. Small bits trying to become whole in the infinitudes of sky and ocean.

And there is one more small bit left for him to lose. It seems so insignificant and impossible to him that the name has almost slipped his memory. A name given to him, but one he had never claimed. He reaches into the bag one last time and pulls out a mud splattered polaroid of himself at a chess tournament when he was twelve. In the photo he stands with a medal around his neck and a scoresheet in his hand. His hair was longer than it is now, cut into a bob, with a sheen unlike his current mangled mess. At the top of the sheet, he can make out his faint signature. *Alexandra.* He hardly recognizes the name as once belonging to him. However, it is not what most interests him about the photo. If he squints hard enough, he can see the first move he made in the final game on the scoresheet. His opponent played pawn to e4 and he responded with knight to f6—*Alekhine's Defense*. No pawns in the center, just a lonely knight wandering over the board. Alekhine stares at the scoresheet, reading the notations and remembering the way the piece arched to the other side. *It too did not like where it started,* he supposes.

Unlike the others, Alekhine feels nothing when the blaze reduces the photo to inky cinders. The name had never been more than a misnomer. When the photo was taken, he had already started to burn the name. By the time he finished high school, not even its ashes could be seen trailing him. Still, it seemed fitting for it to drift to the sky, like the rest.

Why should Alekhine be any different? With his pack empty of all sentimentality, he feels burdenless, then, a gentle warmth spreads over him like a sunrise. His eyes reflect the trees as he passes by, and when Alekhine crosses over minor-mirror lakes, they reflect each other, endlessly. There is a new awareness in his lightness. A feeling like he has just strolled into a forest and only now recognizes Vivaldi playing in the background. It all makes so much sense. Each footfall seeming so natural to him that he forgets the last

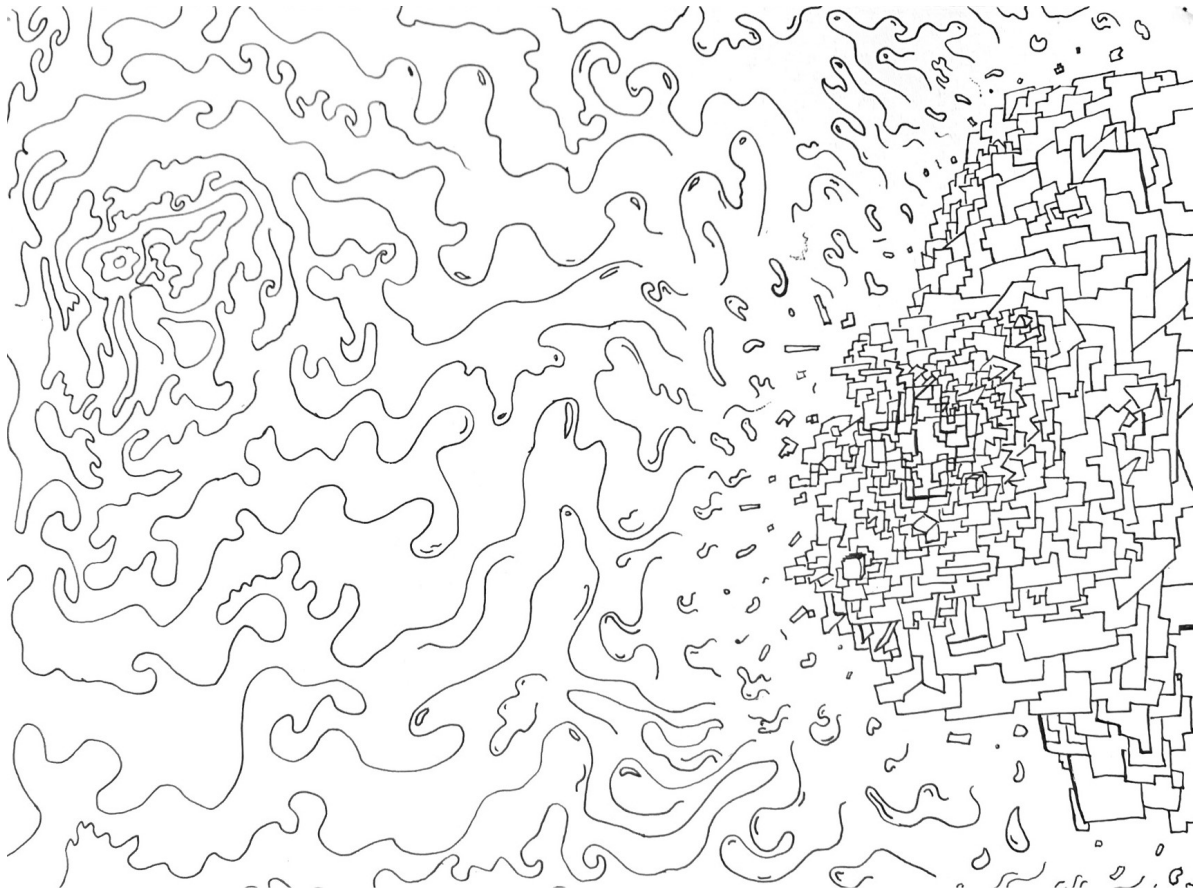
one in the brilliance of the current one.

La ruta nos aportó otro paso natural, Alekhine tells himself. *The path provided us the natural next step.* A Spanish palindrome, the same forward as backward, an ouroboros of letters.

Each stride brings a mounting, inexplicable sense of familiarity. *A returning.* A cosmic pull, almost a skid, an unyielding sliding sensation.

Alekhine sees himself as a piece in the green puzzle of trees. Everything appears to be moving towards a point between two slopes. *Lead me to the river, he hums.* Below, Alekhine hears the splatter of water slapping rocks. He runs. The wind curling through his hair. At the end of the valley, the sun is bisected by a tree on a ridge, plum-colored rays spill from the split. Water droplets collect on the tips of branches, each one trapping the light and turning the forest into a glimmer of color. Alekhine's eyes swell as he walks through a sea of sunsets. All is offered to him in this moment, but he desires the opposite. *The ocean is miles away,* he thinks, *but the sky is right here.* He is velvet smoke, he is water purling down to the earth, he is fire piercing the firmament.

The precipice comes quick; the fall is eternal.



Warren Berg
Entropy of Creation
Ink

“Despite the poor reputation among students, mathematics is actually an extremely creative discipline that takes intuition and imagination to solve logical problems. In a basic sense, Mathematicians create models that explain phenomena using logic. Viewing the world through this lens, gives a unique perspective of the logical relationships between people and objects that exist in the world. This abstract perspective inspired the piece that I am submitting today. The ink drawing, titled "Entropy of Creation," was inspired by my conceptualization of humans' relationship with our creations and how they diminish over time. Whatever we create, will inevitably dissipate with time. This is the law of entropy that defines our universe. Everything proceeds from order to disorder. This idea is explored in the drawing, where we view a person who is composed of layered fragments that slowly dissolve into the chaos of everything.”



Kelli Yamada
Untitled
Photography

A Visit

Sofia Garner

I shivered as I walked up to the door, glancing at my mom for reassurance. But her normally expressive eyes look blank to me--cold. The lawn outside of Golden Oaks Nursing home was a fake fluorescent green, the flowers freshly planted. It seemed wrong for my grandmother to live in a place this manicured when her own garden had been a beautiful disarray. She'd never planned anything, just planted where she wanted. She would come in afterhours outside, and I'd laugh at her dirty garden gloves and frizzy grey hair. But almost as soon as the sound had escaped my mouth, she'd be dragging me by the arm to help her outside--talking about "obligacion primero." But that was before the dementia diagnosis, before she'd changed and before the nursing home.

We were finally at the door and, and inside the lobby--all fluorescent lights and air that smelled like Antiseptic. I saw a woman, partially hidden by a huge desk.

"Do you have an appointment?" she said, not looking up from her computer. I glanced at my mom, hoping she would say something. When she didn't, I spoke up.

"Yes we're here to see my grandmother, Maria Veracruz?"

"One quick second." The sound of typing filled the empty space. Soon, name tags in hand, she was leading us down an empty hallway that seemed to stretch for miles. One room after another, I saw blank walls and cafeteria food trays. Even after everything, I was ashamed that we'd put her here. There was something sad about living out your final years surrounded by strangers.

I wondered if my grandmother had anyone to speak Spanish with. My stomach turned as I realized our family hadn't even thought about that when we were deciding on a nursing home.

We'd failed her, on even the most basic level--allowing her the opportunity to speak her language. Suddenly I felt sick, maybe it was the smell of rubbing alcohol that seemed to get stronger by the second, or the bright yellow lights that stung my eyes.

Either way I felt like I was going to throw up when we finally stopped and the beige door was opened and I heard as if from very far away "Look Maria, you have visitors!"

The lights in the room flickered one by one to reveal a mess of long grey hair, gaunt cheeks and two blue eyes that stared at me blankly. The woman from the front desk paused at the door way and then after a beat:

"Well...I guess I'll leave you to it." The door fell shut.

"Hi Abuela," I said, tentatively. "How're you doing?" She turned away toward the window, as if bored already. But I heard her whisper "En español, Marina, es español." She hadn't said that to me since I was a child. I used to hate it, because I wanted to speak in English--I could express myself better. Her Spanish reminded me of flowing water. There was never a disruption in the current, each sound a part of a whole.

I started learning to speak Spanish late, much too late. And my throat wouldn't cooperate with me. While my grandmother's voice was a stream of sound, my words sounded separate, disjointed and awkward. My Spanish wasn't melodic, it had the rhythm of English in it. A rhythm I knew I couldn't shake.

My grandmother always blamed my mother for not teaching Spanish to me when I was a baby.

"A waste!" she said. "It's a waste." She then took it upon herself to teach me, despite my unwillingness to cooperate. From elementary school, onward it was always "En español, Marina, en español." And eventually I gave up on complaining, because she pretended like she didn't hear me when I spoke English. But her Spanish had lost the otherworldly magic it had when I was a child. My envy had grown into resentment.

My grandmother continued to stare in silence out the window. I tried to meet my mom's eyes, and raise my eyebrows, hoping she would know what to say. But her brown eyes had followed my grandmother's, to some fixed point outside the window.

I glanced at my mother's profile, her dark skin and sharp nose. Her eyelashes straight and coal-colored. With my grandmother sitting in bed right in

front of us, it was more apparent than ever how different they looked. I remember seeing photographs of my grandmother when she was young. Even in black and white, her eyes seemed to shine. She seemed so happy in those old photos--nothing like the somber woman I saw today. Her hair bouncy and coiled, her eyes, pale blue. She always wore blue, because of those eyes. I remember stumbling through her closet as a child and finding racks and racks of blue. She had turquoise dresses with white trim, coats the color of the night and more sky blue shirts than I could count. She would sit down and tell me how she met my grandfather when she was out dancing. She would glow when she said the first thing he noticed about her were her eyes. She no longer looked like the woman in those black and white photos. That dancing girl was someone else I would never know. But I knew my grandmother, or at least I thought I did. I tried to reconcile the spirited person I remembered with who she was today. All my life she had always been happy to see me. She'd walk out to greet us when my mom pulled up her car to her house. And she would hug each of us, laughing, as we stumbled onto the driveway.

Finally my mom broke the silence, ignoring my grandmother's request that we speak Spanish. "So are they treating you okay here, mom? We tried to pick the best home we could." The word "home" sounded so out of place in this context--this place felt more like a hospital than anything. My grandmother muttered something to herself in Spanish. I noticed how she looked skinnier than when I last saw her.

Sometimes I thought my mother chose not to teach me Spanish as a way to rebel against my grandmother--who emphasized it any chance she got. Maybe her insistence made her want to reject it even more--throw it away all together. Maybe she gave up, knowing her words would never fall into place like my grandmother's did. Maybe she looked in the mirror and wished her eyes were the color of her mother's dresses.

My mom turned to focus on me. "Do you know when your brother's meeting us here?"

"No I don't, he never texted me back." That was just like Matt, he was careless. Always had been. He was probably off with his friends somewhere, doing something dangerous. As children we would race across the dew soaked grass of our backyard. I would

count down but he would leave before I'd said go. Already sprinting forward, kicking up burgundy leaves, his blond hair a glint in the distance.

"That's not fair!" I would gasp, leaning against the fence for support.

He would just grin, "I can't help that you're too slow," wearing that same grin he always had on when he won. And he won often.

"Oh god," my mom said, "I hope he's not coming on that thing."

"Oh no, he's definitely not," I said, knowing full well that was a lie. That "thing" was a motorcycle Matt had bought, even with my mom begging him not to. He'd finally saved up enough money and then it was his--shiny and new in our driveway.

"If you get on that death machine you are not coming back in this house" my mom had said.

But Matt saw through her bluff, "I can make my own decisions" he replied, putting his helmet on. He climbed onto the seat and smiled, his eyes wide, stroking the newness of it, unable to believe it was his. My mom slammed the door and went back inside but I watched him take off into the brightness of the streetlamps. I heard him laugh out loud as he drove down the street, unable to contain his joy. I knew it was dangerous, but watching him ride--I also knew I had never seen anything so natural in my life.

My phone buzzed. "He finally texted back," I said, "he says he's going to be late."

"Figures" my mom said, "well as long as he gets there safe, that's all I care about." I never worried about Matt crashing because I knew something tragic would never happen to him. He had an ease about him, an assuredness that always convinced me he was going to be okay.

But I think the Matt my mom remembers, is the old Matt. Because before he was Matt, he was Mateo. She remembers Mateo, the third grader who came home crying because the other kids had made fun of him and told him he looked like a girl, with his shoulder length blond curls. He begged to get a haircut that very same day and he did. His eyes puffy and red, the tracks where his tears had fallen still shining on his cheeks.

She remembers how the faceless barber had held up the razor and asked "You want it gone? All of it?" She remembers raising her eyebrows at Marco and

him nodding, closing his eyes, tears still caught in his lashes. How the curls fell to the floor one by one. How something that had been a part of him for so long could be eliminated so quickly and suddenly.

My phone screen brightened, waking me up from my daydreams.

“He’s outside.” I told my mom, looking down at the text he’d sent.

“Can you go meet him? I’ll stay here” she said, her eyes never leaving my grandmother. I knew my mom was more anxious than she was letting on. She’d hardly moved since we got here, her neck and shoulders unnaturally stiff.

“No problem.” I left the room hurriedly. Breathing hard, as I rushed down the empty hallways and onto the courtyard, the cold air was a welcome relief.

And there he was, all long limbs and sandy hair, wearing that sheepish grin I knew all too well. He looked taller now than he’d been before and I realized it had been months since I’d last seen him. He only lived a few hours away at Oregon State but it felt like he was on another planet.

I’d visited him at the dorms a few weeks in and I remember how surprised I’d been when I heard all his friends calling him Matt.

How casually he’d responded when I asked why.

“Oh I go by Matt now” he’d said with a shrug, like it was nothing. Like shedding a name was as easy as putting on new clothes.

When I raised my eyebrows at him he’d gotten defensive. “It’s just easier to say, Marina. That’s all.”

But something told me that wasn’t the whole truth. Something about how he’d introduced me to his friends as Marina, not his sister. Maybe someone named Mateo could have a sister that looked like me, but not Matt, with his clear eyes and cleancut smile.

I hugged Matt, grateful to be outside, I’d take the harshness of the cold air anyday over the pain I felt at my grandmother’s blank stare. Over his shoulder I noticed the gardener’s wrapping lights around the hedges--and I remembered that Christmas was coming. I’d forgotten.

One year, on Christmas Eve my mom spent hours getting ready, which she never does. I could smell the burnt odor of a straightening iron coming out of the bathroom, the gardenia perfume she sprayed. She’d had that little pink bottle that looked

like it was dipped in shiny gold glitter for years and only used one drop at a time--careful never to waste it. She was wearing a red sweater that my grandmother had got her, and shiny black boots that matched her hair. Her face was filled with genuine joy, which was rare for her. And most astonishingly I could tell she was proud of the way she looked that night. She walked into Christmas dinner and sat down, all gleaming hair and vibrant red and looked at my grandmother expectantly. Maybe she was waiting for her to complement her hair, which my grandmother always liked better straight.

But instead my grandmother’s eyes focused on Matt, “You look so handsome!” she exclaimed. And my mom’s face hardened, the glimpse of genuineness I had seen earlier was gone. Matt simply shook his head at the ground--he’d never known how to take compliments from her.

Sometimes I wondered if he had always known. And just pretended he didn’t. Maybe he had convinced himself he was deserving of the praise he received.

Matt’s voice startled me, interrupting my thoughts.

“So..are you going to show me inside?,” he said.

“Yes, yes of course.” I tried to focus. To forget. To be present, for the family, for Abuela. But as I heard the distinct muffled voices of my mom and grandmother in the room ahead of us, I was reminded of a phone conversation I’d overheard a few weeks ago.

My mom had been explaining her idea for a new lesson plan for her middle school students.

And seemingly out of nowhere my grandmother said “I never wanted you to be a teacher you know. I always thought you could do better. Be a doctor or a lawyer or a professor. I had high hopes for you. Too bad, morenita, too bad.”

And I watched my mom’s eyes cloud for a second, the mask was chipped at a bit. Pieces were crumbling and falling off--they shattered as they hit the floor, until only dust remained.

“Okay,” is all my mom said, her voice hoarse.

But my grandmother continued, “You were always the smart one, not the pretty one like your sister. Why could you not make this family proud, why could you not do the one thing I asked of you? Was that so difficult?”

"No it wasn't." my mom replied. I didn't need to walk into the other room to know she was crying--I could tell by the sound of her voice. I knew she would be mortified if she knew I had heard. So I slowly walked back up the stairs, the sound of my feet muffled by the carpet.

As we stood outside Abuela's nursing room door, I found myself unwilling to open it. Matt, seeing my hesitation, shook his head and grabbed the door handle.

As Matt and I walked inside, I heard Abuela's reaction as soon as she saw him. "Beautiful!" she said. "Beautiful!" She practically yelled it, screamed it as if nothing had ever been more clear. Suddenly her personality shifted, color returned to her face and she looked human again. Nothing like the blank shell, I had interacted with earlier. Mateo looked at the ground and muttered thanks, the way he always did. "Blue eyes," she kept repeating, "I have four grandchildren with blue eyes." She said it with so much pride. But I couldn't share in it.

I felt invisible again, as I often did standing next to Matt. And he seemed as oblivious as always. Suddenly I felt more angry, than anything. I didn't want to cry--I wanted to punch something.

"And what about us?" I said, I could hear my voice, rising, but I didn't care. "We've been here, Matt didn't even have the decency to get here on time." Her smile fell as I spoke--she could tell the energy in the room had shifted.

"Hey" I heard Matt murmur from beside me, but I continued on.

"Please look at me, Abuela," I pleaded. She shook her head, and turned away but I went to the other side of the bed.

"What's my name Abuela," I said, "please look at me and tell me my name." She'd said it earlier, unprompted, but now I only saw confusion when her eyes met mine.

"Morenita" she said finally, and I wanted to cry, but instead I watched as the foggiest of her stare permeated the room, not an inch untouched. Morenita, morena, her nickname for my mom. It means brown like the earth, like the roots of the old pine tree that lived in Abuela's backyard. It had been my mother's to bear--now it was mine to claim.



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Hymn

Bitā Habāshi

i worry that God looks at me in confusion.
i know She often cannot decide whether or not I need Her hand to cradle me again.
She knows i am a gentle-but-not-fragile thing.
She knows i am too slowly walking the line between two paths.
i press my neck on the cusp of the bathtub and angle my chin towards the tiles.
i think
i want to feel more art than woman-

wear loose clothes, become less body and more shape i can control.
yet still i stand beneath the clouds, letting Her tears press the fabric into my bones, molding
me like warm clay, craving approval.
when my skin is transparent, i think i am how She wants me to be.
two creations all in one, a body sick and a mind longing for more.
i put myself in the kiln and cracked within the hollows of my ribcage but still i remained a
whole piece.

i slip into my father's shirt stained with paint and childhood walks by wild-berry bushes.
Her cold deep breaths brush my growing pains and i want to stretch my own canvas and my
own body
and cover them with brightness even when the brushes are coated in residues of murky water-
but i am lopsided in the bath.
left foot curved on the faucet as a dancer's broken wing, and right knee leaning on the shower
wall,
hair covered in bursting bubbles.
with mouth cloudy i watch the smoke sing from my elbow-resting on the precipice of the tub
and two fingers holding the fire-
i pray God knows i am a delicate-but-not-easily-breakable thing.

the water, lukewarm, filled with falling ash, parts at my prayer-
god i swear i'm not breakable.
how could i be.

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