

2019 THE RC REVIEW

# the *hot* list

of magic





# Editor's Note

If you're reading this, it means we made it out the other end of submissions, revisions, and publication alive—the RC Review will live to see another day. It seems everyone these days is trying to take things one day at a time, and who can blame them? We're all looking for a little hope, a little magic, to get through the unremitting realness of reality.

In this most recent edition of the RC Review—"The Hot List of Magic"—you'll find stories, poems, and artworks ranging from the plainly (but delightfully) absurd, to the strikingly honest, to the downright mystical.

I hope that our magazine, in its own small, special way, invites a little magic into your life. We all could use some.

**Shashank Rao**

Editor-in-Chief

# Table of Contents

## Poetry & Prose

<b>I scarpe the schit</b> - Ben Blythe	6
<b>taste me</b> - Camilla Lizundia	9
<b>Castigation</b> - Andrew Drumheller	10
<b>Baby's First Panic Attack</b> - Elena Ramirez-Gorski	19
<b>Nocturne in Black and Gold (The Falling Rocket) by James McNeil Whistler</b> - Hannah Brauer	20
<b>Intertwined</b> - Hannah Brauer	21
<b>I don't want you to have me</b> - Maya Simonte	22
<b>Serving Sizes</b> - Sofia Spencer	24
<b>Microchip</b> - Sofia Spencer	26
<b>This One Doesn't Deserve a Title</b> - Ben Blythe	28
<b>7-11 slurpees</b> - Nadia Mota	29
<b>Dental Fraternity</b> - Camilla Lizundia	29
<b>[POST-BREAKUP BUS RIDE]</b> - Hannah Brauer	30
<b>stained glass eyes</b> - Nadia Mota	32
<b>On Postmodernism</b> - Ben Blythe	33
<b>My Mother's Arms</b> - Hannah Brauer	34
<b>Some Girls Do</b> - Jena Vallina	36
<b>Buying a Mattress for My Future Husband</b> - Hannah Brauer	38
<b>Clockwork</b> - Jade Wurst	45
<b>Dirt Demons</b> - Emilia Prado	46
<b>Anti-Ode to Ska</b> - Elena Ramirez-Gorski	49
<b>Edge</b> - Grace Toll	50
<b>North Star</b> - Jade Wurst	52
<b>People</b> - Camilla Lizundia	53
<b>Sid &amp; Nancy &amp; Bonnie &amp; Clyde</b> - Jena Vallina	54
<b>What We Throw</b> - Adam Bowen	56

<b>Construction on East University Ave.</b> - Alexander Wagner	62
<b>Summer Solstice</b> - Camilla Lizundia	63
<b>Urn</b> - Ben Blythe	64
<b>The Russian Tenant</b> - Shashank Rao	65
<b>Could I hope for anything else?</b> - Jade Wurst	73
<b>December Night in Southeast Michigan</b> - Alexander Wagner	76
<b>Am I a Victim of Abuse?</b> - Hayla Alawi	77
<b>The dead animals I've seen this summer</b> - Elena Ramirez-Gorski	86
<b>a man on the street follows me</b> - Nadia Mota	88
<b>untitled</b> - Sofia Spencer	88
<b>To the best friend I always seem to be in the process of losing</b> - Sofia Spencer	89

## Artwork

<b>Mask Off</b> - Esther Sun	9
<b>Parts of a flower</b> - Kartikeya Sundaram	14
<b>Buckingham Palace, but it's just the statue</b> - Hannah Brauer	23
<b>Barn Quilt Trail</b> - Hayden Troup	25
<b>Self-portrait</b> - Amber Huo	31
<b>gender binary lie</b> - Marlon Rajan	35
<b>High School Is Fucked Up</b> - Hannah Brauer	41
<b>they/them vomit</b> - Marlon Rajan	52
<b>Miles</b> - Samantha Plouff	55
<b>Landscape</b> - Kartikeya Sundaram	59
<b>It was very crowded at Stonehenge</b> - Hannah Brauer	63
<b>River onto mountains, Himachal Pradesh, India</b> - Kartikeya Sundaram	69
<b>Snake and Starling</b> - Amber Huo	74
<b>Griff</b> - Samantha Plouff	81
<b>Nightingale</b> - Amber Huo	87

Collages by RC Review Staff

## I scarpe the schit

Ben Blythe

I scarpe the schit Off  
my windwheld of Off  
scarpe scarpe **Scarpe**  
**scarpe scarpe** schit  
schit schit **I like repat**  
**Repeat Repppppet**

Dull me in a river Dull me in the  
river Dull me dull me dull me Dull  
me to a pebble So finely wound  
That it bends on the edge of a  
blade Like the raindrop on the lotus  
leaf

Dull me like the car wash worker Whose high  
school's IB program Was as beautiful as its  
courtyard garden Where tulips emerged,  
pollinating each other With brilliance and  
reflection and extracurriculars The school didn't  
have a courtyard garden And the milk came in  
cartons, not canteens

Dull me like the soap bubbles Which emerge out of  
the buoyant blue flaps Whose righteous slap  
polishes and smears A rainbow of filth into perfect  
half-spheres As phosphorescent as a lagoon of  
jellyfish Bathing in the romance of cliff divers and  
risk takers Ready for another learning opportunity

Dull me like the sunlight at the end of the tunnel A  
conveyor belt so constant only perception's glare  
Can make a moment freeze into beauty A scent of  
lye and bleach morphed into majesty Greater than  
love and less expensive than love Dull me into  
your warrior when I enter your arms And scream  
for another still breath In your womb I am rough or  
I am nothing





**taste me**

Camilla Lizundia

i  
am  
ripe  
with

see me  
i  
am  
hungry  
for

stay  
with  
me  
awhile  
while  
i  
think  
about

< *Mask Off*  
Esther Sun

## Castigation

Andrew Drumheller

— Another idea being a world where everyone is a cane. The older canes, of course, have trouble moving around and need to use younger canes to do so. After a life of being leaned on so heavily, though, they themselves need help with motility and are required to use a still younger cane. The canes that were used to move are, of course, taken care of for their years of service, but because of this, there have to be enough canes...uh...made to replace the canes that are too old to help other canes with movement. There's a delicate balance there, though, because if too many canes are...made, there aren't enough older canes to walk around. This happens, of course-

— The allegory being obvious, interjected the critic.

— It could only be more so if I hadn't made all the citizens canes, replied the author. So I couldn't write it. Having an allegory with only one message-

— And a message so apparent at that, interrupted the critic, kicking the author's dead idea.

— -doesn't work too well for anyone involved with it. Especially for a short story. It would have to be an idea that someone in an overarching story has, just mentioned to show that the character is creative, said the author, happy to end one of his own sentences.

— Didn't Kilgore Trout do something like that? he asked, using the question more as a means to direct the conversation than as a means of receiving input from the author.

— In one of his brief appearances, yes. After I tossed that idea aside, I went looking for inspiration among some of the greats, "Kilgore Trout" being one of them.

— That's a terrible idea, he said. The greats should never be used for inspiration. You'll just end up mimicking them or-

— Or I'll end up depressed that I can't ever reach their own greatness, finished the author. Either way, I won't end up writing anything that I'm happy with, so I'll read some more, writing less until I end up "always reading, never to be read."

— The critic seemed taken aback at the fact that one of his clauses was interrupted and concluded with a logical fallacy.

— Or, I was going to say, corrected the critic, you could be one of the rare few that will find parts of yourself in another's work. It has happened. Take note of all of the books about people that wrote books. Walter Kaufmann was so inspired by Nietzsche that he translated everything he wrote. Don't be so hard on yourself.

There was a pause at the end of the last sentence where it sounded as if the critic were going to say the author's name but stopped before he began, either because he thought it would sound forced or because the author's name was of so little importance to him that he had forgotten the name of the person he was meeting with. The meeting, though it had only been going on for a few introductory sentences: "Hey, how are you?" "Oh, I'm well. Thank you for having me. How are you?" "Oh, well, well, the weather's great today." "Yes, it is," followed by a moment of hesitation as to whether the author, the scheduler of the meeting at the critic's office, had enough social capital with him to say something about wanting to have dressed down because of the weather. Would saying that impose something on the critic, who was also dressed in several formal layers, who was also welcoming enough to have this meeting to discuss the author's work, as sort of a, "Thanks for making me wear all these damn clothes, you asshole," or would the comment add a sense of needed familiarity to the conversation, causing the critic to say something like, "Oh, yes, me too, but thank the Gods for air conditioning and fans and this wonderful breeze we have. Without those things," the critic would then have stopped speaking, aired his shirt out by pulling the collar away from his neck several times, wiping his sweatless forehead with the back of his hand, and exhaling a loud "Whew!" The time it took to weigh the odds of one outcome over the other left a pause after the response of the author which the critic took as an indication that the author had wished to end the introductory pleasantries, which he did by asking the author to have a seat and explain where he was at with his work.

The author doubted that such a positive remark would have been the critic's original subordinate clause but didn't openly state this doubt due to the immense power that the critic still held over him. The critic had very little to gain from this meeting except, through its success, avoiding reading a bland or overdone topic. A positive statement about his work, either published or soon to be published, from the critic would

make further publication and experimentation as easy as the production of those hypothetical future works: with a work publicly praised by the critic, whom the National Book Critics Circle had invited to be a member several times over the past year- invitations which were denied because, “The NBCC seeks to place itself in the high-art literary tradition where it does not belong,” which made the critic reviled in the critical community and admired by the general public after the denial was publicly announced — the author could practically stroll into any publishing house, unzip his pants, tell the publisher to suck his cock, and still probably find his book in a nearby Barnes and Noble.

The author found himself pigeonholed. His previous books of essays had been published by a friend that had found them to be quite an entertaining, if short, read. The friend had remarked that the essays read like didactic stories, and asked the author to try his hand at something with a narrative pacing to see how adaptable his writing style was, if only as a means to extend the length of his books, which the author objected to as a reason to write, saying that writing has to be inspired rather than done out of obligation.

— There can even be a scene in your story where two people debate differing ideologies. That’s just like writing an essay! Just, like, take out some of the SAT words to make the speech sound like something someone would say. Unless you’re doing a period piece, or a story about professionals in a field, or the struggles of genius, then...

The friend went on a bit longer about how stories should be written, there being several caveats and exceptions for the components of a story, which made the author more nervous than excited.

Wanting to clarify that the books about people that wrote books were rarely novels, but not wanting to upset the critic, the author nodded his head and said several assenting words, waiting for the critic to say something to which the author felt able to respond while remaining within the bounds of the meeting.

— So, you do have other ideas for your work to be, correct? So far the cute-but-dangerous story sounds like the most promising, if only for a couple pages. It just needs an outline.

The “cute-but-dangerous” story was suggested second of his five ideas and proceeded the cane-people allegory. The pitch involved a cute

creature, perhaps similar to a small dog, that would, through no fault of its own, poison whatever tried to pet it. The creature would be so adorable that anyone that saw it would want to pet it, but perhaps that reaction was exacerbated by the creature putting its two front legs on whomever it encountered in hopes of receiving intention in the form of inadvertently lethal back scratches. The author kept any further possible progression from the critic so as to receive feedback on the idea before advancing any more details. However, after those details were given, the critic gave his approval of the idea, but, because of the author’s statement that prefaced the cute-but-dangerous story that, if he (the critic) didn’t like the idea, there were more where that came from, the critic followed the approval with a slightly tired, “And?”. The author’s enthusiasm for his cane-people story was run through and left to deflate with that flatly-affected reply.

— Yeah, there was this Joycean exploration of events in a boy’s life that he repressed. Joycean because his recollections seem to be coming to him at their will rather than his own. The diction would be erudite, of course- yes?

The critic winced when the author first said, “Joycean”. The second time, the critic began to take a deep breath that was loudly and forcefully pushed out of his mouth when the author finished the sentence. The author had raised his voice so that the critic could hear the end of the suggestion, which was drowned out by the critic blowing with lupine intensity.

— Where do I begin with that? Just by your saying “Joycean”, you’ve admitted that your idea won’t be your own. You’ll be trying to write a story within the confines of him instead of writing using your own voice.

The author agreed with this statement. Even implicitly, by comparing one’s own work to another’s before it has been created, the comparison would act as a Polaris of the direction of the work.

— Being taken through the life of a boy in reflection also sounds too much like one of Joyce’s novels. Heller might have made a reference to Joyce in his book’s title, but the goal of the book is in the opposite direction of Joyce.

The critic whispered: He’s also more established than you are. The author inferred a variety of threatening endings to that statement.





*Parts of a flower*  
Kartikeya Sundaram

— But your goal is nearly the same as Joyce's. Arguably your sections set in the past would contain neologisms that would fit well within the age of the character at that time, too, yes?

The author nodded, thinking of moocows and some of the events about which he was going to write, mentally balling up the list of any portmanteaus he had thought of sharing with the critic to sell him on the idea.

— You mentioned erudition?

The critic didn't wait for a response before he began his next sentence.

— Joyce did that too, as a means of confuddling Dedalus's past. It's what he's famous for. Rather than hiding your story behind a few ten cent words, you should try to present it to your audience. That is why they're reading it. There are times where hiding parts of the story is okay. But that's when there is something else to keep the reader paying attention. It sounds like this reflection using a few big words to signify the protagonist not coming to terms with everything is your only gimmick. If the reader can't understand your story, what's even the point of writing it?

Everything the critic said was a reasonable way to represent what the author was going to do, he thought, in spite of the personal significance of the story to the author. Maybe if he defended his story with science, with an aesthetic theory, the critic would change his mind, relent.

"But isn't art supposed to involve sublimation?" he began.

"It's good that you took Intro to Psych, but sublimation only applies to actions that express trauma in a way that allows some sort of coping in an accepted way. That would only apply here if—" the critic audibly blew some air out of his nose. "Don't tell me that you were going to write about some of your past experiences using some fancy language to try to get over them. That's, that's..."

Some of the experiences about which the author had planned to write were based on, if not recreations of, his experiences as a child. Because the age of the protagonist had yet to be established, he was unsure of how much of his own experience he could incorporate into the story if it was decided that that prompt was one of the ideas that had received the go-ahead indicating that one fewer aspect of the story, when it was published, would be mentioned as a negative moment. *A posteriori* experiences, the



author knew, provided a means to approximate tangential experiences. He could read as much as he liked about Tralfamadore or the means by which one runs an agarose gel, but without experiencing these things first hand, he might as well build the basis of those scenes at the base of Mt. Vesuvius and wait for those that can see through the thin visage of intelligence he would have to erect to attempt to write a scene based on purely theoretical knowledge. He knew that there was also merit to theoretical knowledge- what he knew of math and chemistry was largely based on theory- but theory was to him only the explanation behind his experiences. What value does an explanation of beauty have if one hasn't experienced it? Theory was only good for writing about his opinions, which was why there were so many books of opinions with his name on them; experience had given sway to his opinions, and with that sway, he had researched the theory behind it to give his experiences more validity. A story, though, a story requires a life behind it and an author to bleed on paper to let that life flow through the story. But the author found himself denying that he was ever going to use some of his own experiences to fuel the story, out of fear of being laughed out of the office like the feckless scribe of effete opinions he was. The author suggested that writing about past sorrows was something that a man should reserve for a journal or — here the author tried to make a joke to distance himself from the critic's disapproval — the bottle. The critic was nonplussed, leaving a few seconds of silence between the joke and his reply.

“Even if you did sprinkle in some of your past, and the previous criticisms didn't offend the reader, that still sounds too much like an introduction to a story than one on its own. Your last idea?”

Perhaps this was the critic deciding to relent for a moment, even if the contempt in his voice could upset a monk. The author may have oversold himself when he told the critic that he had five ideas to present. He was hoping that one of the things that he had suggested before this point would have impressed him enough that the amount of stories would be forgotten. The critic seemed as though listening to the suggestions was more of a chore than part of his occupation. That impression of the critic's bored inflection may have been exaggerated by the speed and frankness with which he had swept the author's ideas that begged for so much of his attention and time aside like they were street urchins importuning for spare change. Only one of the stories that had exhausted him in thinking up, those brief synopses which required him to think in ways he hadn't in years, to not only pan

for excellence in mundanity's rivers but to comb through that excellence in hopes of finding an undiscovered, universal nugget of excellence that was at the same time not reducible to platitude, and to do so continuously, until an arbitrary amount of nuggets had been collected for appraisal, had yielded anything resembling a satisfactory reaction.

The author's face felt heavy. Keeping his head in line with his spine was impossible; he found his forehead pointing towards the floor. He felt most of his weight in his stomach, pulling him deeper into his seat. He had stopped moving his hands when he spoke, and he could barely keep eye contact with the critic or display any other signs of him listening. He realized that he probably hadn't said anything to respond to the command. He pushed his shoulders down and his head back and said, “The narrator relates the story of someone close to him developing an allergy to something that that person loved. Maybe he even relates the moment the allergy becomes noticeably harmful, as opposed to an inconvenience.”

He had to force syllables out of his throat. The author wondered if he should state the moral that he had intended for the story, about losing something that the character loved related to losing oneself. How that person becomes different after she's unable to enjoy something that she was once able to. The slow corrections in mannerisms, asking if certain things have been in contact with the substance, learning whether related substances are as pernicious, and becoming a different person, not more paranoid or necessarily morose, but older, more careful. He felt like he gave as much information as he could be forced to, enough so that the critic wouldn't become more upset by his (the author) lack of ideas. He hoped that he had enough energy to respond if the critic were to ask any questions. The author fell back into his chair.

“What do you mean maybe? This sounds like your shakiest idea yet. At least your plagiaristic story was slightly buttressed, if only by your influences. You have to have more: an event that you have planned, a direction, anything. It might not have any details, but it still sounds too premeditated to have been improvised. Give me more.”

The author didn't know that he could. There were ideas, but when he thought of letting another person hear them, even the ideas that seemed to be capable of becoming a masterwork lost their appeal. Speaking with such a wrathful interlocutor required more scrutiny than he would normally apply to his own thoughts. He couldn't bring himself to give the critic more

of a reason to laugh at him.

"I would have thought that with as many ideas as you've published you would be ready to present a small amount of them. It hasn't been beyond you to recycle your ideas and structure and..."

The critic kept talking. He was tiring himself out with all of the authorial sins he believed the author had committed. The meeting wasn't even about the things he had put out in the past, thought the author. Why would he bring them up? They're irrelevant here. Were they really that appalling? Surely they had some merit. Or had at least improved over time? Sure, not all of them were nuanced. Some of them might have even been one-sided. But Orwell, Thoreau... And everyone uses cinnamon phrases. Common turns of phrase. Idioms. Yeah, the structure is similar. Everything needs an introduction. Refutation. Support. Conclusions.

It needs to be better. What he's saying is harsh, but that doesn't make it false. If all I've done is within the same genus- no, the same species- I might as well have only changed the thesis. But that's the same too, isn't it? To think that writing those things made me proud not too long ago. I actually thought these things were acceptable, that another person might enjoy reading it. Stupid.

Why am I here? Because I sat down for a bit and made my thoughts sound pretty with a few flowery words? Because I was able to express something "human" in my thoughts? If I wrote what I thought more than half the time, I would be detained against my will. Is it because I put my thoughts in to grammatically correct statements? Is that the criteria for writing? Sentences? Putting words into a format so that other people can understand their meaning? Not even meaning is a requirement- the meaning hasn't been agreed upon for stories that have been around for two millennia. Professionals disagree as to the definitions of several ground-level terms in their own fields.

"That's true," said the author.

The critic's list ended. "Then what are you doing here?"

"I hadn't known about the awful things that I'd done."

"How could you have forgotten? You were so proud of them."

"I didn't realize... I didn't... I..."

"Get out."

The author blinked a few times. The weight lifted from his stomach to his throat. He swallowed, and the weight went away for a moment. He gingerly rose from his chair, maintaining fearful eye contact with the critic, as though he expected to be flagellated, and slowly walked to the door, opened it enough to sidestep outside, and quietly shut it. The author stood outside the office and took a few heavy breaths.



### **Baby's First Panic Attack**

Elena Ramirez-Gorski

I was 15 when I first said goodbye to this  
world then found myself lying naked  
on the cardiologist's table

15 when my mother saw my breasts  
slathered in ultrasound blue goo  
and mourned my innocence

when I was high for the first time:  
my stepfather's painkillers  
dusty in a ziplock baggie

I cried, *please my heart is stuck  
in the garbage disposal, deep,  
rattling around, caught with a fork*

(the cardiologist says I'm  
a-okay, asks  
if I've tried meditation)

it took me two months to wrestle it out  
shredded, moldy, and  
entangled with ramen



## Nocturne in Black and Gold (The Falling Rocket) by James McNeill Whistler

Hannah Brauer

The rocket  
falls,  
sparks breaking into crumbs  
hitting the earth  
as softly as fire can.  
It fades,  
dissolving to dark green  
as the night air  
quiets the flame.  
The water  
stills, feeding the sky  
its own reflection,  
showing the town  
the fire is above  
not below.

But if fire does not burn  
beneath our darkened feet,  
if it rests above our heads  
like a dissolved sun,  
then maybe this nocturne  
is early day  
And maybe  
the sparks fall to the sky  
as a rocket  
reaches through night  
towards a new life.

## Intertwined

Hannah Brauer

I knitted you a  
scarf for  
Christmas,  
needles moving  
like lovers  
with a knotted past

I imagined their long,  
matching figures  
ardent to pass stitches  
between them  
Once, you and I  
had seen ourselves  
the same

The pointed ends  
indented my fingertips  
and dropped loops  
like empty  
promises;  
I saw through  
the holes



And as my yarn  
became thinner,  
tangled in itself,  
I realized that  
one needle  
will always  
hold more stitches  
than the other

The snow fell outside my  
window like it was the  
last time  
and I saw you  
standing in the cold  
I felt you shiver  
and pulled the stitches  
together, faster  
than you could  
drift away.

## I don't want you to have me

Maya Simonte

I don't know who I am yet but I am finally three steps into my journey of finding out.

Identity has always been police tape and blinking lights  
because I learned to hold tight a set of rules  
published only in my head.

*Alarm* is looking in the mirror and realizing *that's me*,  
that's who I am and who I'll always be,  
and the polar opposite of its aftermath.

I find myself alarmed too much.  
The realization that I don't have to be this kind of person  
washed over me as effectively as a light drizzle,  
but it still soaked me through eventually.

It appears you were the one holding the umbrella.

The person you think I am is a bridge  
miles over who I am figuring out to be  
and you have a fear of heights,  
telling yourself *don't look down*. You're a painter  
who loves the ocean and if I have to be turquoise for one more minute I will  
implode. Maybe the reason you boast how much  
I love to swim is because you don't see me scrub the sand from my feet.

I ache when I am reminded how little you know me,  
but I don't want you to have me.  
You claim you always knew the person my good encounters tell you I am  
but you don't,  
I'm just meeting her now and I don't want you to hold her hand,  
I don't want you to hear my laugh because if you join in I will throw up,  
I will see the image you have of me  
superimposed

over the version I was hoping I could finally accept,  
Three steps isn't a lot but it means I could finally stand up  
and I don't think I will get back on my feet if you sit me down again.

I am not the person you think I am,  
not who you thought I was,  
no longer fitting the conclusions you made about me  
but were they ever my size in the first place.

I will not be turquoise just because it is your favorite color.  
I will not coat my skin to hide what has dyed me because you don't like  
the stains,  
I am sick of fearing police tape and breaking rules  
and I am done with giving you my hand to guide me away from it.



*Buckingham  
Palace, but it's  
just the statue*  
Hannah Brauer



## Serving Sizes

Sofia Spencer

For my Italian family, serving sizes are not satisfying.  
We don't believe in portion control,  
rather, in happiness helpings.  
In piling a plate of pasta until your Nana's frown uncrinkles  
like the creases she irons out of your school uniforms.  
Devouring a soggy éclair even though you stopped  
liking them at age ten, your eyes darting  
upwards to see one of Nana's rare smiles.  
"You need to eat more," your Nana says,  
sprinkling lasagna noodles with parmesan cheese.  
"You're too skinny," your Nana murmurs,  
buttering bakery bread over the kitchen sink.  
And you eat because of the hope in her fingers,  
because of the blue eyes still reflecting the sea she sailed  
across at 17, because she knows this is all she can give you.  
And when Nana whimpers, "Do we have to eat again?,"  
glaring at the half eaten crab cake on her plate,  
You say yes. Even though it's hard to swallow  
how much Nana looks like you.

For my Italian family, food is the fuel of familiarity.  
Picking pistachios out of spumoni on the 30-year old couch,  
still covered in its original plastic wrapping  
in a tradition no one, not even your grandparents, understands.  
Roasts cooked to perfection in the basement kitchen.  
Plain bagels with Colby jack cheese melted on top,  
the New World side dish for you:  
the Italian-American granddaughter  
who doesn't know what it means to be either.

For my Italian family, love lingers  
in illusions. You feel your waistband  
expanding, the scale tipping  
after Easter dinner.

It's impossible to stop,  
to take a half-full  
plate or to simply refuse.  
You don't stop  
when the woman across the table  
is full of wrinkles and despair,  
You don't stop  
when the clinking of your fork  
is stronger than any pain medication.  
You don't stop  
because there will be a day  
when the flavor of tomato paste  
sticks in your throat,  
when pasta becomes pungent  
with despair and sour memories,  
when Nana's voice fades into silence.  
So, you keep on eating.

*Barn Quilt Trail*  
Hayden Troup



## Microchip

Sofia Spencer

When I am two years old, my mother says that I have a microchip where my heart is supposed to be. I'm already reciting facts about dead presidents and cartoon characters, but when my mother falls down on the street the edges of my lips curl up into a smile and when Bambi's mother dies I cannot summon a single tear. Because, according to my mom, feelings are a mystery for me.

I am a therapist's daughter, so emotions should be in my DNA. At least that's what she tells me. But I never feel the way I'm supposed to. And when I grin at the wrong time, she slaps my chest and says, "I can feel your heartbeat! You have a heart! Use it!" But my microchip must run on Internet Explorer because it's taking a long time to download feelings.

I don't remember when I began to define happiness and emotions as a combined definition; maybe it was when I realized it's easier to feign happiness than any other emotion. It takes 17 muscles to smile and 43 to frown and when it comes to my mother I take the path of least resistance. And so when my mother tells me that if I didn't have my father's eyes she would think she brought home the wrong baby from the hospital because how could the daughter of a therapist not understand feelings, I do not cry. I do not flinch. I say, "Well at least we know I'm yours." When she tells me that no one will ever love me if I don't learn to express myself, I push past the lump in my throat and tell her I'll get a software update. When the doctors tell her that my emotional ranges are normal and my mother doesn't believe them, I keep on smiling. I check my 1s and 0s for coding errors and I remember that she doesn't deserve my secrets.

I don't tell her that every time I see a baby duck or a humane society commercial I feel like I have something to prove. That when a girl in my math class said I was



the happiest person she knew my first thought was "I finally learned how to fake it." That the lead ball in my something is invisible to everyone but me, and thank god for that because no one could ever love me if my hard drive was too heavy.

When I tell my mother I love her it comes out flat as a floppy disk; after all, love is an emotion I can't possibly understand. When I tell her my heart is breaking, she thinks I'm lying. When I click the box that says, "I'm not a robot," it feels like a lie. Because I am so desperate to prove my mother wrong that I keep proving her right.

When I was two years old, my mother told me that people aren't against you, they're for themselves. And whenever she said it, with a mechanical glint in her eye, all I could think was, "Mom, aren't you supposed to be for me?" But I guess that only applies to flesh and blood daughters, not ones that could be mistaken for a machine.



## This One Doesn't Deserve a Title

Ben Blythe

Eggs are the most relatable content We are all  
half egg But we're also all half sperm And I  
don't see many articles about eating cum And  
its numerous health benefits



## 7-11 slurpees

Nadia Mota

blue raspberry + mountain dew  
melts down to electric slush at the  
bottom of a plastic cup, all sea-  
foam and sweet. we show off  
jack-o-lantern grins and the candle  
flames behind our chipped teeth  
to anyone willing to watch us flicker.  
it's february. ice sloshes down  
storm drains and sore throats.  
we wandered across a rusted park  
bridge on the fringed edge  
of town. we pried at the peel  
of an overripe moon with bitten  
down fingernails. a police officer  
waited in the parking lot,  
expecting old vagrants or  
lost addicts. we emerged  
from the other end of the bridge  
with our half-frozen smiles  
and our ears still static with  
car-crash screeching guitars.  
the officer spoke into his radio:  
*it's just a bunch of kids.*

## Dental Fraternity

Camilla Lizundia

You kissed me on the bench  
Donated by the dental fraternity  
It was weird

## [POST-BREAKUP BUS RIDE]

Hannah Brauer

the camera pans left  
and zooms past the  
window's grime and ice  
i have forced my lips  
to curve up at the edges  
so it might look as  
if i am smiling

i have never felt  
more like an actress  
in my own life

i hear the director yell "cut"  
and see my eyes being wiped  
with a shaky hand  
(although maybe it's just  
the bus)  
my chin is tipped  
towards the glass  
to hide any breaks  
in character

on cue, the crew  
pulls a sunset backdrop  
behind the sharp veil of ice  
on the window  
and flash stage  
lights that redden my eyes  
i squint and squeeze  
a tear down my cheek  
it feels like the word  
"swollen" sounds

"how does she do it?"  
the audience asks  
i think my smile might burst

"how does she do it?"  
i follow my script and  
produce one tear at a time,  
acting as if i am  
just another passenger  
on this bus.



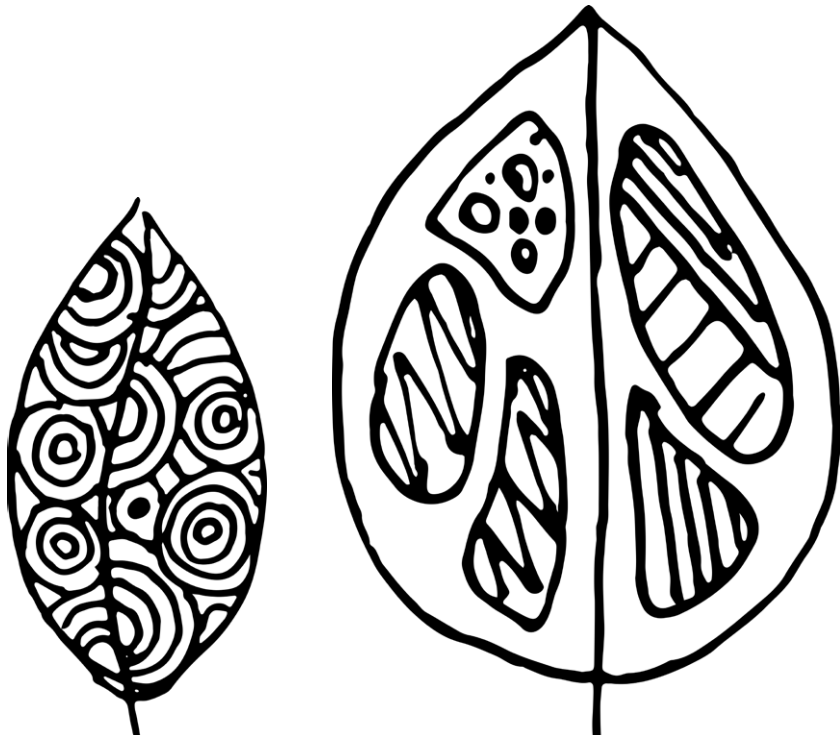
Self-portrait  
Amber Huo

October 24, 2018  
Amber Huo

## stained glass eyes

Nadia Mota

i call the trees beautiful and you call me  
sappy, saying the pun is unintentional.  
it floats up into the tree to nest with the birds,  
with which everything is intentional.  
as if they don't live among the yellowed  
leaves and bathe their tiny wings in the  
filtered light. i tell you that i'd like to be one  
of those birds and you call me flighty.  
i go to church only to admire the stained glass  
windows and the way they catch the sun,  
but not in the same way eyes do. beauty is  
subjective in the eyes, as some sort  
of love exists there – in the specificity.  
in the way your eyes gaze up at the trees,  
seeking the beauty i promised you.



## On Postmodernism

Ben Blythe

I love this hill Every time I return  
its emptiness Greets me like a  
solemn breeze

The springs and summers are charming and whimsical  
And their plains roll with the tall grass Of natural  
uniformity

And in the autumn the grey skies and brown decay  
Complement in a graceful harmony Worthy of a  
lone piano orchestra

But winter peace rules in  
domain Nothing but smooth,  
ivory snow Every disturbance is  
temporary And regenerated  
within minutes

Usually I enjoy my Eden But one winter day I decided to  
test it I scooped a handful of the white marble And packed  
an oblong circle Wound back And let it roll And roll And roll  
Until it was charging down the hill like a bull ridden by  
terror White dust kicking everywhere Growing into an  
enraged monstrous beast Leaving a jagged imprint in its  
wake Until the incline met the ground And the boulder  
burst, chunks spewing randomly forward

For a split second The  
perfection was challenged But  
the drift came And within  
minutes Every enthalpy  
dissolved Into the blank slate

I love this hill, but I'm not sure I  
ever want to live here

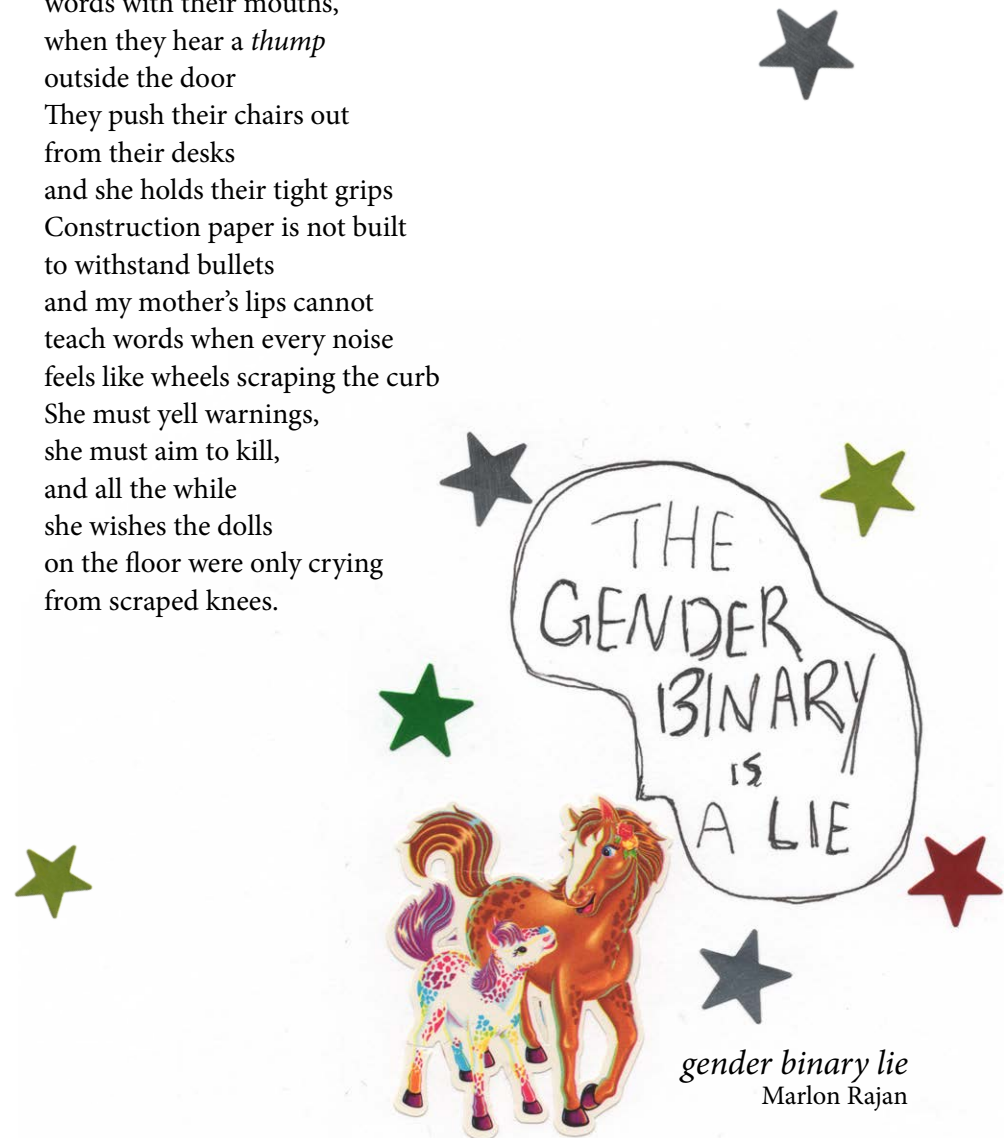


## My Mother's Arms

Hannah Brauer

My mother holds me in her arms,  
freckled and bare under  
a construction paper hospital gown  
She stands as if a yardstick  
is tied to her back  
and hands me my spoon,  
my bottle,  
teaches me how to hold out  
my hands for more  
My mother sits me on my bicycle  
after I fall sideways off the seat,  
scraping my knee and seeing  
flecks of blood  
She picks me up as if I am a doll  
escaping from its box at recess  
and soaks up my tears with her blouse  
My mother holds open a book,  
points to the words I must  
match with my mouth,  
and I focus on her lips as  
she forms the sounds  
She pushes my brother  
and me in a stroller  
We feel each curb under  
our thighs with a thump  
and she sighs when we push  
the blanket from our laps  
My mother holds my hand  
on my way to school,  
holds out her arm before  
I cross the street,  
and waves goodbye before  
unlocking the door to her classroom

I watch as men in suits on television  
declare that her freckled arms  
should not just be for teaching  
I imagine my mother  
holding the door open  
for her eighteen second-graders  
They sit in neat rows  
and she holds open their books,  
watching them match the  
words with their mouths,  
when they hear a *thump*  
outside the door  
They push their chairs out  
from their desks  
and she holds their tight grips  
Construction paper is not built  
to withstand bullets  
and my mother's lips cannot  
teach words when every noise  
feels like wheels scraping the curb  
She must yell warnings,  
she must aim to kill,  
and all the while  
she wishes the dolls  
on the floor were only crying  
from scraped knees.



*gender binary lie*  
Marlon Rajan

## Some Girls Do

Jena Vallina

so here you are.

standing at last in this shallow water. truly a sorrowful conclusion to what was indeed a perpetual battle, one you must have been sure you would be fighting forever. but take a breath. it is all over now and you have lost. you have risen against all your better instincts and taken that first forbidden gulp of oxygen. you drink air like champagne and the vermin of the sea disappears off of you. almost like they were never really there.

weren't they?

oh, but few could have lasted as long as you. that deep dark abyss under the sea, where sunlight was scant and your voice was scatter still. the deafening roar of your own silence is not a friend to you anymore. you hear now and you speak now and you do not need to crane your neck to listen to the sounds of laughter in the distance. it grows closer with each breath, beckoning you to shore.



they'll tell you it was a prison you climbed out of, but sink a little deeper now (and sinking is what you do best) and you will know the truth. there is a certain comfort in your own captivity, where the only future is the present. holding your breath was almost like kissing, and you held it so well, because didn't you have to if you wanted to stay where it was safe in your grave, where the darkness shielded you and all your wrongs? and so you grew blue in the face and black splotches danced in front of yours eyes and the gossamer algae draped your casket like a blanket. all that exists is this strange murky darkness, and it loves you by suffocating you and drowning you and never letting you go. you find that sinking into what loves you is easier than fighting for that which eludes. so you hold onto nothing and nothing holds you back.

but look there:

a lighthouse.

her eyes speak years, and you wish again to drown in her surface, except this time you pray to let go because there is no deeper level left to travel.

Love has been a closed door for so long you no longer know how to open it, if it can indeed be opened. but she places your hand on the knob and she twists and pulls you up, wiping the brine from your eyes. saltwater empties from your lungs and breathing tastes sweet enough to live.

all lovers know

and all lovers do

the lifesaver saved the drowning man

and some girls do too.

some touch you first on the lips. others, the backs of hands.

come a little closer

now, move a little slower,

beautiful,

stranger.

## Buying a Mattress for My Future Husband

Hannah Brauer

The Art Van Furniture Store in Canton, MI smells like a middle-aged mother's dream. The automatic sliding doors open to reveal a large showroom, where customers meander through the fake living rooms while employees watch from the walls. The shoppers, who are almost all women, move with a sense of urgency. It's as if each curated model will bring them closer to finding The Perfect Home, and therefore, The Perfect Life.

As I walk in with my mother, I feel her lean into the room to take in the alluring scent of Future Home Potential. The escalators are skillfully located on the other side of the store, so I lead us through the perfectly-decorated rooms as her eyes linger over the pieces that would match our house. There's a living room with navy leather chairs and a rustic coffee table, ready to hold a conversation that never develops past small talk. We pass a burgundy loveseat where a couple may share a glass of wine after work. A kitchen table for a family of four. Customers filter in between rooms, slowing their steps to check the price tags, while men with Art Van badges appear at their sides and guide them towards the cash registers.

My mother and I finally reach the bottom of the escalator and are greeted by one of the employees. He's dressed in a full suit and about the age of my parents. "What are you looking for today?" he asks.

"A mattress," my mother responds before I can start. She gestures to me with her best smile. "My daughter is moving into her first college house and we figured she needs a new bed. She's had the same one since she was four years old." They share an obligatory laugh even though she did not make a joke. The employee continues to ask about me, but in third-person so I know I am not welcome to chime in. I feel as if I'm at one of my parents' parties, knowing I should contribute to the small talk but not caring enough to do so.

I'm not dressed for the occasion. I just woke up an hour ago and haven't cared to put on makeup, exposing the acne scars etched into my cheeks like branding. My hair is so knotted that I decided to condense it into two buns on either side of my head.

The man finally acknowledges me. "I like your hair," he comments as he leads us up the escalator. "Like Princess Leia, yeah?" I nod and hunch my shoulders over to become smaller. I hate that I do that.

We rise to the top of the escalator and are met with The Mattress Section of the store. It looks like some sort of upscale prison camp, with long rows of stripped beds and designated strips of plastic to place your feet. An older white man approaches us, sweat already dripping into the pocket of his Art Van button-down, and extends his hand.

"My name is Jeffery," he says to us. He shakes my hand firmly. I grip back. "She's got quite an arm," he quips to my mother. I laugh politely. "I'm sure she scares all of the boys." He winks to me and leads us to the first row of beds.

"Here we have a few of our foam and spring-coil mattresses," Jeffrey begins. "My wife and I have a foam mattress and we've loved it for the past 10 years. Now, I'm almost 300 pounds, so that really shows how well those mattresses hold up," he laughs. His face lights up as if he sincerely enjoys spending every day in The Mattress Section of this Art Van store. "The difference between the foam mattress and the spring mattress is that that foam actually melds with your body, so it's good if you have a bad back. Surprisingly, it'll also last longer than a spring coil mattress because it holds its shape without sagging." He continues to detail the intricacies of each type of mattress as my mom politely nods along. I look out the large window facing Ford Road, which is the most spectacular road in Michigan if you enjoy ten miles of department stores.

"Let's try out this foam mattress first," Jeffrey says. I sit on the first mattress and my weight barely makes a dent. "Lie down on it," he commands. "On your side." I comply and make the mistake of facing towards him and my mother. He doesn't break eye contact as he says, "Look at how her body is curved on the foam. That's the beauty of it, there's no hard coils beating into her. She becomes one with the mattress."

His eyes have drifted down to my torso. I prop my head up on my arm to see if the pose would be less provocative. It isn't. I might as well be wearing Leia's gold bikini.

I quickly sit up and adjust my shorts. Jeffrey is still sweating, maybe more so now, and the beads now reach the bottom of his shirt. He tells me to lie down the same way on another mattress. I oblige, more cautiously now, this time facing away from him. I quickly regret this pose as he can stare at my back side. I sit up again.

"Did you like either of those more than the other?" he asks. His sweat



makes him shine like a slug. I shrug and realize I am also sweating now. The temperature quickly climbs and I wonder why the large window isn't able to open.

Jeffrey gestures for me to sit next to him on another mattress. I make a point to sit on the far corner, but I sink into the foam and am reeled in closer to him.

"You know, your body type is very similar to my wife's," he says in a soft tone, as if sharing a secret. I stare at my feet and hunch my spine to make myself smaller again, though I'm already one-third the size of him.

When Jeffrey realizes I won't respond, he continues. "My wife was a cheerleader in high school. 5'2", 100 pounds, I'm guessing about the same as you. People would pick her up and throw her, twirl her in the air. She was so light." He pauses. I don't acknowledge him but feel like I can't move from the bed.

"I'd always dated very large women in the past. I was the biggest guy in school, so no one thought to set me up with the cheerleader. But it turns out, smaller women are definitely my type." I picture Jeffrey lifting a small woman into the air, her body helpless against the wind, and congratulating himself for his catch when he had been the one to throw her.

My mother chimes in, sitting on the mattress across from us. I forgot she was there. "Both my husband and I come from very tall families," she says. "But we're both pretty short. And Hannah's younger brother is over a foot taller than her, so people always confuse him for the older one. Funny how that happened." She and Jeffrey share a quick laugh. The buns I've twisted into my ponytail holders are quickly falling out in the heat.

There's a moment of silence before I feel Jeffrey's hot breath next to me again. "Can I ask you a personal question?" he asks, leaning in. He's definitely staring at me but I don't lift my gaze. I don't respond. I make myself smaller.

It seems to be a rhetorical question, because he asks his question anyways. "What type of men are you interested in?"

I'm now sweating through my shirt, making circles around my neck like a chain. I look him in the eye and ask, "Why?" then turn to my mother to see if she'll divert the subject. Like the Good Suburban Woman she is, she says nothing.

Apparently not realizing my answer was more of a refusal than a question, Jeffrey continues, "Well, I know this might be hard to think about now, but you'll probably have this mattress for another 20 years. Foam mattresses are built to live that long." He flashes an *I-studied-sales-at-business-school* smile. "If you don't have a personal preference, you might want to decide which mattress will work for your future partner's body type, if you know what that'll be. I know it's hard to think about now, but you'll probably have a husband by the time you need a new mattress."

As he continues to talk about his own bed, how he can get up in the morning without disturbing his wife despite their Massive Weight Difference, how great The Fabulous Foam Mattress really is, I think about Ethan.

## High School Is Fucked Up Hannah Brauer



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Ethan is the only boy I've ever shared a bed with. We dated for three years, nearly half of high school and half of college, which might automatically define him as "my type" of man. He's six feet tall and only weighs a couple dozen more pounds than I do, so we fit into a twin-sized bed as comfortably as one person would.

When we started dating during our junior year of high school, we used to joke that we were the same person. We loved running, writing, listened to the same music, and our houses were only streets away from each other on the same spot of the block. We loved each other's quirks; I couldn't fall asleep unless I was facing away from the door, and Ethan would always sign both copies of the receipt when we went out to eat.

The first time he did this was on one of our first dates at the Pancake House. He had been waiting nervously for the bill to come, one hand on his pocket and one hand on the table. When the waitress placed it on the table, he quickly reached for it and put his card down.

"Do you want to split it?" I asked.

"Nope, I got it," he said hastily. When the waitress brought the receipt back, he instinctively signed both copies.

"Why do you sign the one you're supposed to keep?" I asked, laughing.

He smiled up at me and shrugged. "I don't know, I've just always done it."

Ethan hated change. He hinted that he wanted me to go to the same college as him throughout our senior year of high school, and when I decided to go to a rival school, he insisted on seeing each other every weekend. I would take the hour-long bus ride to see him and he would drive to visit me. We figured it was a short-term sacrifice for a long-term investment.

One night during his weekly visits, we were lying in my dorm room twin bed. He whispered, "I can't wait until we're married." His arms were squeezed around me, hands clasped over my wrists in loving shackles.

I whispered, "Why?"

He whispered back, "Because then we'll have a bed all to ourselves."

I thought about it. He had a twin bed an hour away, and I had a twin

bed here. Our lives would not be two beds, but one. I had always gone along with the idea, until the space between us grew larger than the distance between our beds.

We broke up a few months ago. I had taken the bus to see him over a long weekend and sat under his loft bed while I explained, "I don't know if I want to have my future planned for me."

"But I thought you said you wanted to marry me?" he responded. He didn't cry. Maybe he felt like he shouldn't.

"I don't know if I want to marry anyone anymore," I said. He looked confused.

"Why not?"

"Because maybe I like sleeping alone."

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Jeffrey has since inched closer next to me, waiting for my response. I feel the glare of his sweat on my face.

I reply, "I don't know." I make a point to get up and walk over to another mattress.

"Can I at least interest you in a queen-sized mattress, then?" Jeffrey asks. "Just so there'll be enough room for another person, eventually."

I shook my head, freeing my hair from their ponytail holders. "No, thanks." I pat the full-size mattress beside me and declare it mine. "I like this one."

Jeffrey hesitates, then nods and takes us to the register. "Well, if you change your mind or meet someone in the next 60 days..." He stops to wink at me and my skin again feels like it's separating from my muscles, "Could I interest you in our Pure Sleep Bedding Comfort Protection Policy? You can give us a deposit and we'll upgrade your bed after sleeping on it for a few months."

I shake my head once again. He admits defeat and prints out the receipt. "*Full Blue 100xt Mattress Set/Full*," it says. "*Customer understands bedding cannot be returned, exchanged or refunded for Comfort reasons. See reverse side for details.*" After signing the receipt, he shakes my hand again and I grip hard.

My mother and I take the escalator back down to the showroom. I

lead us through the Future Home Potential once more, eyes fixed on the sliding doors, and walk out onto spectacular Ford Road.

\*\*\*

The Art Van truck has a hard time pulling into my new Ann Arbor driveway. The tiny one-way street doesn't allow for much room to gain speed before turning, so it gets stuck on a tree root that's freed itself from the pavement. I watch from my window as the delivery men work to haul their truck over it, the giant tires struggling to conquer the tiniest root, then give up and park on the street. I hide a smirk as they block traffic trying to pull it closer to the curb.

I open the door to let the two men in, then watch as one measures the bed frame to size. Another delivery man brings in the mattress and fits it in, finding the first delivery man had set up the frame to be a queen size.

"This is a double bed, yes?" he asks me. I point at the receipt to confirm. He fixes the bed frame and gives me the delivery receipt and a pen.

"Do you want to test it out?" he asks me after I've signed my name.

I shake my head. "No, I'm all set." I lead both men out the door and watch them carefully navigate back onto the main road.

I walk back inside my empty house and step over my boxes of cheap furniture. Hand-me-down decorations and old pillows are piled on the floor.

I head into my room and finally throw myself onto my new mattress, sinking into it. I stretch out my body so my fingertips touch the edges and my toes reach towards the corners. I lie flat on my back and close my eyes. This is my double for a single.

This is all mine.

## Clockwork

Jade Wurst

Twenty-four hours  
and the day will be over.  
I will be here again,  
blanket-cloud bound again,  
and I will count  
the hours.  
Twenty-four, fewer  
than the days in a month.  
Twenty-four, fewer  
than the bones  
in one hand.  
Twenty-four, more  
than the years  
this body knows.

And I will count  
the times I have counted  
and lose track.  
More than the months  
in a year, years  
in a body, bones  
in both hands.  
The wasp-swarm  
numbers hum white noise,  
crowd and spread,  
sting and dull  
until twenty-four  
means nothing — means  
everything — and everything  
passes.



## Dirt Demons

Emilia Prado

I remember when I saw my first dirt demon. All my life I'd been raised on stories about the dirt demons that hide in fields of corn, rye, hay — anything tall enough to cover their dusty backs. Everybody's *mamá* and *abuela* had tales to tell about those devils. Never go into the field without your dad or your brother or *tu primo* there with you. I always thought it was a crock of shit. Every summer I'd always be the one that'd dare to go the furthest into the feathery sea of overgrown asparagus behind Abuelo's house. Each summer, Tía Tomasa would threaten us with *la chancla* for our stupid game. I never understood until the summer of my twelfth year, the day of my half birthday, the Fourth of July.

Back in those days, we used to invite the farmer who lived across the field to our barbeque. Papí said we had to, something about showing our respect to the man that helped us. He was a nice man, the farmer, gave us work gathering apples and pumpkins in the fall and cutting Christmas trees in the winter. He always came with his wife and son — back then he was already an *hombre*, learning to take over the business. I'd never seen his son do much work, unlike the farmer who never hesitated to give us a hand. Me and the *primos* liked that he gave us pop and Rice Krispie treats whenever he came by. The farmer and his wife came because they liked us... I think the son only came because he liked how Tío Nuno grilled fajitas.

It was dark by then, and to pass the time until the fireworks started, we played our game. Asparagus season had ended by mid-June that year, and Papí had yet to mow the old field to make way for green beans. Chachi kept whining, saying she was going to tell Tía and then we would be in for a *pow-pow*. Victor told Chachi she was a snotty little *pendeja* and said she would keep quiet if she knew what was good for her. So far Victor had the record, he'd gone so far that we were no longer able to see his curly head. The lights from the back porch could not reach us at the edge of the field, making it harder to spot the difference between vegetation and Mexico football jersey.

That's when I decided to run in after him. I could hear the sounds of him rustling about back there, and followed them in the hopes I could push Victor down as I ran past him and further into the field. The ends of the asparagus swayed in the stiff breeze, tickling my cheeks and gently

clawing at my braids. I stopped to look around to see if I could spot Victor, but there was nothing but the endless crowns beckoning me in every direction. Finally, I heard the crunching sounds of someone stepping over the dead stalks that littered the ground. I smirked and ran after the sound, determined to rub it in that little *cabrón's* face that I was going to beat him. After only a few strides my toe caught on a rock half-buried in the earth, and my heart leapt to my throat as I pitched forward and landed face-first in the dirt.

All the air left me, and my mouth was full of dry, sandy grains that tasted bitter from the chemicals we used to keep the pests away. I rolled over onto my back to catch my breath, and that's when I heard someone rushing towards me. I quickly sat up to look around for any sign of Victor, but I couldn't see anything.

"*Ya basta*, Victor!" I snapped. "This isn't fun anymore."

My braids smacked around my head like whips when I heard something behind me, but there was still nothing but the bending asparagus. Something turned in my belly, and I knew I shouldn't turn around, but I did anyway. A few yards ahead of me, were two large red lights.

They glittered like Abuelita's precious ruby earrings that she only wore on special occasions — but never for church, you never wear *el color del diablo* in church. These were the devil's color.

These were the eyes of a demon.

I stood still, praying to God to keep me safe like Abuelita taught me. If I didn't move, maybe it wouldn't notice me. My hand shot to my mouth to stifle the heavy breaths, I wanted to cry so bad. A white-hot pain shot down my spine, and my vision blurred, but I could still see those eyes. The scream ripped through me just as the first fireworks began to go off in the heavens above.

There was no time to look back to see if it was close, I just scrambled to my feet and ran for my life. I didn't know where I was going, only hoping that I could get as far from the dirt demon as I possibly could. Fire burned through my legs and chest, each breath was a labor greater than I had ever known — and I carried bushels of fruits and vegetables across acres for a living. I would've run forever to get away from the demon if I hadn't run into the farmer's son.

For the second time that night the air was knocked out of me. A thick and heavy hand gripped my shoulder and pulled me back. The plants barely went past his waist, he was like the old maples that lined the edge of the fields.

“What are you doing way out here?”

“I- we were playing- I saw-”

He patted the top of my head. “Shush, catch your breath.”

I nodded, glad to be near someone to scare off the dirt demon.

He tilted my head up. “You’re a real cutie, ain’t ya?”

No matter how many times they ask me, I still can’t remember anything but those red eyes. I don’t remember seeing Victor in the asparagus. I don’t remember what happened after I ran into the farmer’s son. They tell me that I didn’t show up until I came crawling out of the green sea behind the house shortly after the last firework had faded away in inky wisps across the deep blue night. My clothes were in shreds and sweat cut tamale-colored tracks through the ashen dirt that coated me from head to toe. One of my braids had come undone. It wasn’t until I was eighteen that Tía Tomasa told me about the blood.

At least, they told me, I came back. All we had left of Victor was a scrap from his football jersey. I don’t think we ever played the game ever again. *Nunca*. I know I couldn’t. Not after the dirt demon. Even in the peak of the day, I wouldn’t go out into those fields without someone else beside me. Abuelo got fed up with that quick.

When I was fifteen, we were planting asparagus crowns for a new crop next to a neighboring rye field. He told me to keep laying out the crowns while he and Chachi went to get more. I really did try, but *los susurros* in the rye were the farmer’s son’s heavy breathing, the fireworks, and Victor’s shouting. The truck was barely fifty yards away by the time I caught up to them. I don’t know what made Abuelo think that would work. Not after Abuelita had to permanently lock away her ruby earrings—she couldn’t bear to see me run away from her.

The farmer moved away soon after that Fourth of July. There were no more Rice Krispies to make our mouths sticky with the sweet goop, just chapped lips split by the warm winds. No more fizzy Cola to send us scurrying across the fields with sugar highs, only bitter iced tea that never

failed to get mixed with some dirt that stuck in your teeth. No more Victor to push on my way to get the first *concha* from Abuelita’s shopping haul. There were so many *primos*, but even just one less of us was too much to bear.

Everybody’s *mamá* and *abuela* has tales to tell about dirt devils. Never go into the field without your dad or brother or primo there with you. They hide in fields of corn, rye, hay — anything tall enough to cover their dusty backs. I always thought it was a crock of shit. *Ahora, yo no soy pendeja*.



## Anti-Ode to Ska

Elena Ramirez-Gorski

ska music sounds

the way razor burn feels

the soundtrack to punching walls

commenting on softcore facebook porn

unwanted back rubs after marching band practice

Streetlight Manifesto makes music for

EVERYONE’S HIGH SCHOOL BOYFRIEND

and guys who say that words are powerless

unless we give them meaning

but will swing at

anyone who calls them f\*gs

fuck ska





## Edge

Grace Toll

On the edge of the top of an old thirty-story parking garage at two in the morning, the air feels thinner. No matter how hard I try to draw the pollution-plagued oxygen into my lungs, my mind still feels like it's balancing on a thin rope, swaying in a taunting breeze.

She'd stood at this exact same spot at this exact same time just one week ago. She'd seen what I see, heard what I hear, maybe even smelled what I smell.

The only difference: I'm sure I'll never feel what she felt that night, even as much as everything stings now.

It's a clear night, the air just above fifty. I let the wind ruffle my jacket, embracing the shiver it sends down my back. She'd told me once that she didn't mind the cold because it made her feel. I'd laughed. *Laughed*. Now, I understand.

She was so reckless, the harsh contradiction of me. She'd drive twice the speed limit in the midst of a blizzard and never looked both ways before crossing the street. Again, I'd never understood. I'd yell at her to slow down and grab her arm before she stepped off the curb. If only I'd been around to stop her last week.

My eyes find the flashing crimson of an airplane streaming by overhead. She'd believed in God and Heaven. One time, sprawled on our backs on a

humid summer day, she'd ran the tips of her chipped blue fingernails over the uneven grass and said *How can you not believe in God when something as miniscule and underappreciated as grass is as alive as us?* I'd only rolled my eyes. *It's just cells*. She was quiet for a minute. Then, *So are we*.

I look down at my toes perched just an inch from the right-angle drop. A few fingers-length of cement, then thirty stories of pure air. It'd be so easy. An unexpected gust of wind from behind, a tiny shift in momentum, half a step, and I could be gone. Falling for a few seconds, suspended like a weightless doll in a silent dream of dizzying momentum, until gravity claims another victim.

I want to believe it was an accident. But I'd known her better than that.

A few years ago, she'd asked me what I'd wish for if I found a genie in a bottle. I don't really remember what I said, but probably the template answer: world peace, money, a lot of friends. I don't remember her answer, either, but I'll never be able to shake what happened after. *You wouldn't wish for happiness?* She'd shook her head. *No way. Life would be so boring if we were all happy all the time.*

Was she still thinking the same a week ago, at this very moment?

I lean forward, just the tiniest bit, daring the universe to take my life.

Just last week, the day before she'd stood here, she'd told me she loved me more than life. Even then, I knew it didn't really mean much.

I could jump. I could even make it look like an accident.

But I won't.

After a suicide, everyone always jumps to be the first to blame themselves. It becomes a sick game of Who Can Feel the Guiltiest? And it's true - I should have known. Without a doubt, I win the gold medal. But both she and I knew there was no way to save her from herself, dead or alive.

So, I turn and step off the other side of the edge, onto the soft pavement of the old parking garage.

## North Star

Jade Wurst

As charcoal night  
descends to paint the sky,  
time becomes vertigo  
beneath stars. Lead me  
through treetops,  
beyond the reach  
of canary suns  
whose ultraviolet shade  
reigns supreme.

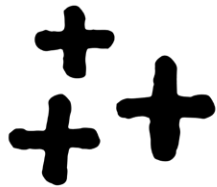
Show me land where artificial stars  
cluster, jostle, dance  
in constellations that shift with the breeze,  
flickering on and off with un-circadian rhythms.

Steep my soul in cricket song  
and air that whispers of frost  
through fallen leaves.

Carry me through rifts in constellations  
and teach me to play the threads  
that bind their stars.

Suspended in seas of fire  
where magic meets combustion,  
return me to the forge where time began.

Ghost at sunrise,  
wait for me.

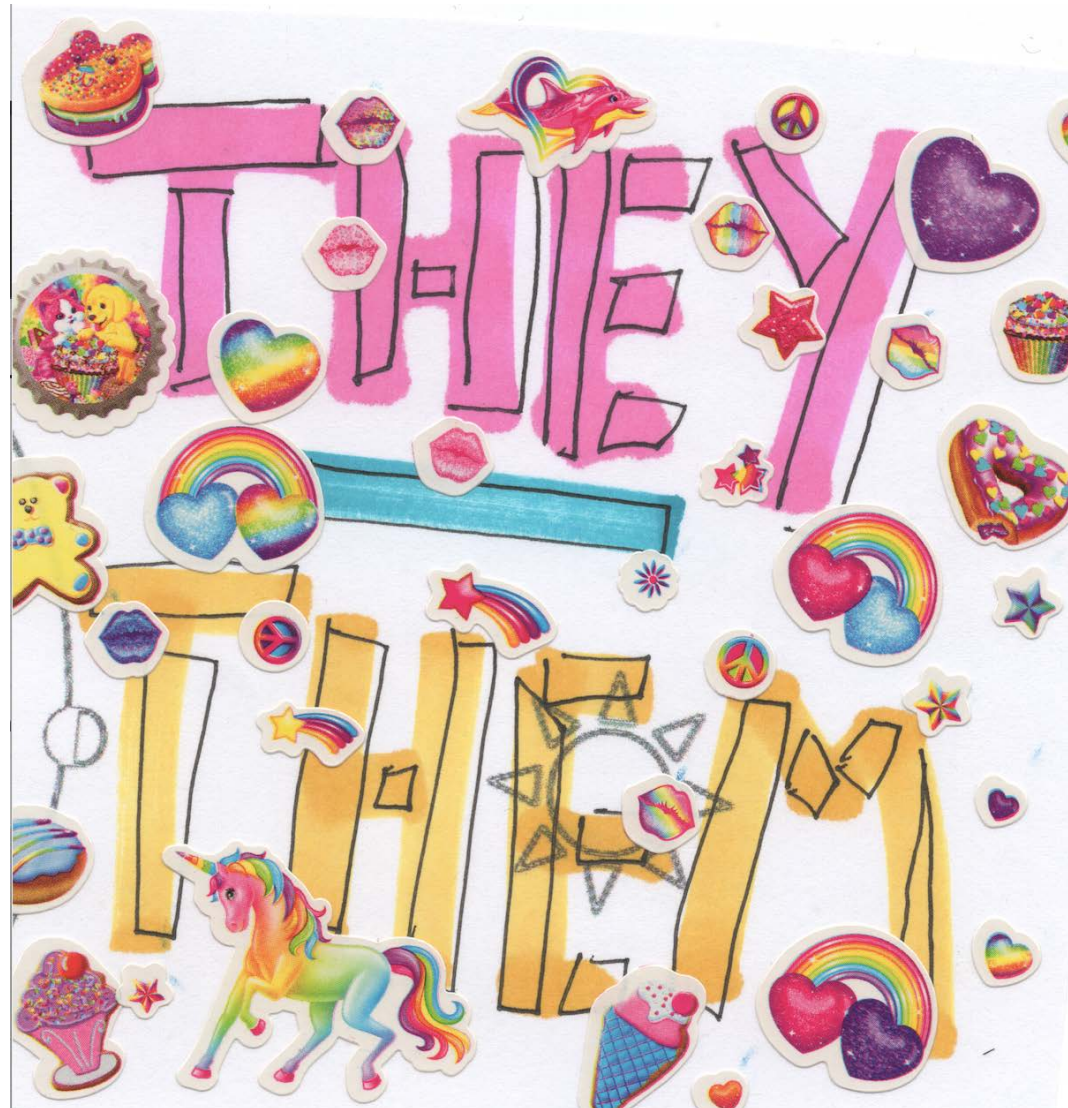


*they/them vomit* >  
Marlon Rajan

## People

Camilla Lizundia

They look  
I feel them  
Looking  
I look  
With closed eyes  
Stop seeing  
Their stares  
I try





## Sid & Nancy & Bonnie & Clyde

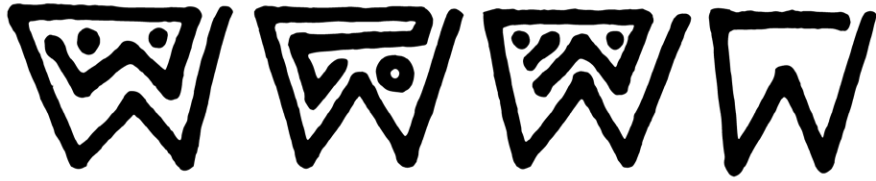
Jena Vallina

Our love has teeth. It spits and growls in tongues and with tongues, jaw-breaking the pearly white wedding china laid straight on the dining room table. Hold out your arm. See that? Like ribbons, embroidering doilies beneath your skin. We love like I haven't painted you with bruises. We love like I kiss you, and we love like I hold you, and we love like I love you hard, so hard, hard enough that you break. Broken pieces of china, scattered on the wooden floor. Grab a broom, my dear. The wreckage will pierce your delicate feet, tender red imprints straying across silk sheets. We lost something in a fire once, ash staining our cheeks, and the sky rained with our precious memories. A tattered scrapbook dissolves in feather-lumps on our shaking shoulders. Pieces of the chandelier we danced under dust your hair like snowflakes. Recall arms on waists and lips on necks and teeth on ears. Our love is a game, or at least it started that way, and we do not know when the delirium transferred from flasks and bottles to guns and knives. We make promises on the winds blowing from the window, which leave a trail of goosebumps on your skin in their wake. We say a prayer: let us take the night by storm and send all the broken pieces adrift. We dream not of the flames but the ashes which remain to see daylight, forming a foundation for the sweet-bitten world of our own creation. Our love is a train hurtling to the light at the end of the tunnel, and we clutch at each other and dig nails in skin and each breath is heaved with the sorrowful relief of the very last. But in the morning, we tangle in each other's arms and eat breakfast like any other pair of lovers, storm-caught or otherwise. And our love is not porcelain, nor is it silk. Our love is what shatters, what breaks away, the silence after the burning. Our love is the ending of things, and we began it knowing that our arms will be the last arms we can ever hold. Close your eyes now, darling. Do you smell that? Left on the pan a second too long, once a promise but now charred stickiness screaming *too late too late gotta move quicker than that*. Breathe it in. We kiss. Your lips taste burnt.



*Miles*  
Samantha Plouff





## What We Throw

Adam Bowen

### *The Last Day Mother Was Alive:*

What we lose in the fire. What we throw.

Your life is thrown away the day you come home to find a fire. Mother is gone. You watch the house collapse, helpless. The firemen keep you back, though the smoke still poisons your eyes. The summer storm is ceaseless; so is the fire, they say.

It's all a pile of ashes by morning. A corner of the rubble still smolders, and you see one of Mother's photos, half destroyed. It's of Mother when she was pregnant with you. Mother stands alone, abandoned by her lover, but strong, posing in front of the house she had just bought. The house that is now gone. You throw the photo into the smoldering, in the still pounding rain. You are now the abandoned woman at the house.

They tell you that Mother is gone, but there's no body, no bones, no evidence. You still hear her footsteps in the harsh rain. As if just coming back from the beach. You run past the dunes to the beach. Lightning meanders the crowded sky.

You step into frigid Lake Huron. The great waters push and shove in all directions. You're up to your waist. You desperately search; Mother must be nearby. You should've just dunked your head when you first got in, then you wouldn't be so cold.

Your vision flashes pink. Mother's memory cracks like the thunder. You fully submerge, if only to gratify the memory, the voice that's no longer real. Or is it?

Where are you, Mother? Why do I hear you even though they say you're gone?

### *But Fall Eventually Comes:*

It's past Labor Day. A day that sneaks up on you, brings a heavy heat. The meager breeze coming through the windows of your rebuilt house is just as hot as the staid interior air. Mother loves this sort of weather. You put down your knife and fork.

It's been long enough that you should say loved.

*Veronica, it's time to wake up, sweetie. Breakfast is already on the table.*

I'm already eating, though, Mother.

She can't answer. She isn't here. You can't bring yourself to say loved. You can't bring yourself to stop hallucinating her voice. You return to your breakfast. Sunlit sky catches on the neighbor's window across the way. The real heat is yet to come, though there is sweat on your brow. The plate clatters in the sink against the others. You throw the silverware in after. Bones rattle. Bones are usually left behind, you think.

You close the back door and smell smoke. The memory of smoke is only supposed to emerge after dinnertime. You send a single guarded glance to the great waters. Why do you linger so?

You cross into the sun towards the car. You have to get to work. Mother doesn't follow you there. The thought of staying away, of escaping her comes to you. You can't handle such a thought right now, though. Haze hangs over the lake. Still glowing porch lights burn an orb behind linens hung out to dry. The sun dares the air to heat even further. You forgot sunscreen this morning. Your pale skin will burn. Mother clicks her tongue in time with your heels on the cement.

### *An Early Spring Day:*

Cold wind rushes in, and you hurry to close the door, but jump. The knob sears at you with the fire. You remember the day the house burned. You suck on your fingertips so they won't scar. You curse as softly as you can so the guests inside don't hear. The frigid wet abounds. You make your burning fingers as a hearth to your chest. You light your cigarette to the pain and plop down on the dune at the yard's end. Take a puff.

You hope the party inside doesn't notice. You hope they stop worrying about you.

The sky in front is dark. But not above. The sun somewhere behind. The lake simmers, mist and scattered rain melting it into the sky. Premature

flower petals start falling from Mother's garden trees. White-yellow-pink flows, swims around you before drowning among the dune grasses. They're no longer Mother's trees, you think.

A tendril of rain teases overhead, but only briefly. The cell brews with the great waters. Thunder cracks and pink flashes from within the dark mass. You look to the land and see smoke. Mother's cackle roars above the guests' polite din. It's about the normal time to start hallucinating. Your grief sighs for you. The light recedes, but still no storm approaches. The blue-grey giant's arms dare not past the dunes. Another light spurt leaps in your way and you feel futile. You throw your cigarette into the damp sand and scurry up to the door. But the storm still holds back. The party pushes on inside. They all moan how their fresh-planted flowers will die in the night frost.

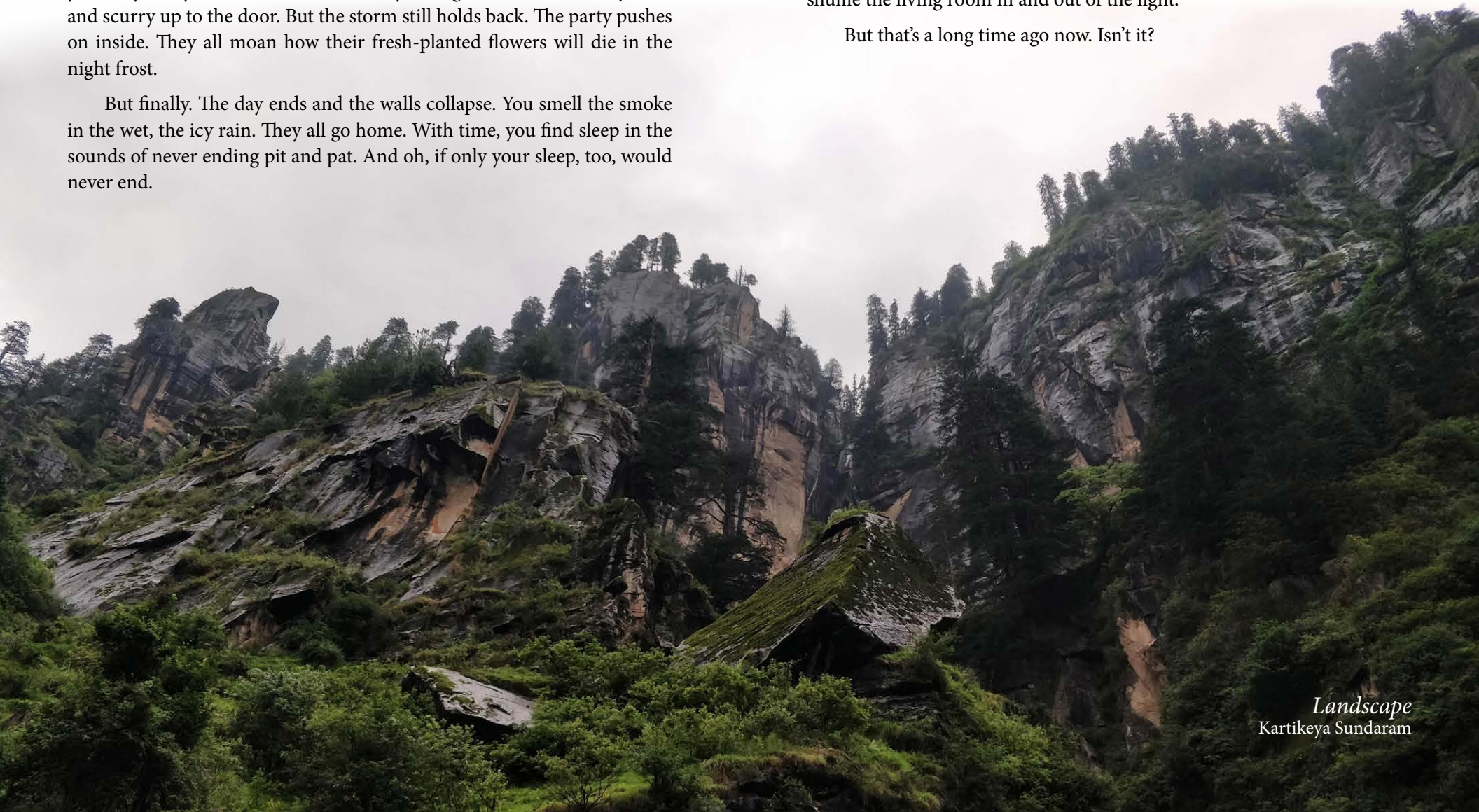
But finally. The day ends and the walls collapse. You smell the smoke in the wet, the icy rain. They all go home. With time, you find sleep in the sounds of never ending pit and pat. And oh, if only your sleep, too, would never end.

*A Memory Manifested In The Snow:*

As Mother walks towards you, you are still forced to walk away. Though the wind batters the grey, dim coasts. Though Huron is a sleeping giant. Though you will share Mother's fate. Though you wish you already did. The frigid coastal wind cuts into you.

Mother follows you in the weak, intermittent sunlight. Michigan sun is only watery and dim during the cold half of the year. Stripes of shade roam between the soft glow of a lamp and the beach. Mother runs her fingers past the sun, and you giggle as the clouds throw their shadows, shuffle the living room in and out of the light.

But that's a long time ago now. Isn't it?



Mother is dead, you tell yourself. The memories are over. They no longer exist. They do not, cannot exist manifested. They are hallucinations. Mental illness.

The lonely lapping of Huron's icy tendrils. Lapping against the hard sand, they cover Mother's shoes. Half her steps audible, half swallowed. Last night's dusting crunches under your Tim boots. And the water pulls back. And again. And over. The saturated ground clings to you. You turn; your breath materializes in an arc like when you exhale with a cigarette. You only started smoking after the fire. You continue walking once Mother catches up. Together on Huron's flux edge. She says things she never said, but you remain silent. It's because she isn't real. But you can't stop it.

You look back at where the column of smoke once billowed above the ash of your home, the panels of your mother's rebuilt pyre that still reek daily of smoke. The silent expanse laps. It tugs you towards the great waters. But never hard enough.

*You Hope It Never Stops Raining:*

It's warmer than it should be for how rainy it is. It has been. You come home from the bar in the deep of night, in the fog. You go to sleep wet, hoping it will turn to rain by morning. Heavy and muggy. But you wake up and it's only indecisive grey. The only rain that falls yet is from the tree branches above. Leaves still barely green in the fall chill, holding desperately onto what scraps of fog they can. They slip their grasp. The fog shatters on your head and you pray eagerly for the onslaught. But once you pass out away from the trees the open sky is silent. A wide mass of unbroken grey, lips sealed.

You go inside, and only then does the sky tear itself apart as you had hoped. It pours. Thunder comes and roars deep and near. And the sky is black. You sigh, wonder why the rain never falls on your head like it did that day the house burned down. You smell the smoke like usual. It's dinnertime. It's dark inside like a bedroom illuminated only by light from the hall. Or light from the candles.

The pink flash.

Mother I'm scared.

Mother wraps you in a blanket and squeezes tightly. *The power will come back soon, Veronica. We'll be alright. I'm going to be right here by your side.* Even so young, you were terrified of the end. But even still, your mind

refuses to accept that the end has already passed. Mother is gone. Stop thinking of her. Stop hearing her voice. Stop hiding in the dark, mumbling to a dead woman. Stop it Veronica. Stop it.

You wish the pink flash would finally come and end it all.

*The Last Summer Storm:*

A bolt crashes like a bomb into the yard, opposite the kitchen window. Your hairs stand up and you exhale a shiver. You hear Mother in the thundercrack. She laughs as gregarious as ever. Why still must you hear her voice, you ask yourself in terror.

A tear rolls down your cheek. Rain comes in through the open windows. But then it all stops, despite your need to keep crying. Dare the sun out? You need the rain. You need to be rid of her voice. You need water to engulf you. A chasm opens up in the sky. A white-blue gash on grey canvas.

Mother I'm afraid again.

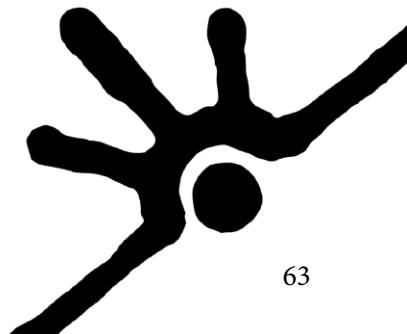
You shout. MOTHER I'M AFRAID AGAIN.

Mother isn't coming, Veronica. Mother can't come. Mother is dead, Veronica.

GREAT WATERS, PINK FLASH, PLEASE. PLEASE COME.

You tell yourself it'll turn grey again. Black again. Someday. The torrents and the lightning will return someday. And you'll stop hearing Mother's voice if the rain is loud enough, stop seeing Mother's image if the pink flash is close enough. You'll finally stop.

Thunder cracks, the power fails, the torrent floods back. It isn't dinnertime, but you smell smoke. It's too early. But you stop hearing Mother for just a moment. Pink.





## Construction on East University Ave.

Alexander Wagner

On the ground there is a walkway,  
boxed up on the sidewalk to funnel  
pedestrians across the almost-a-building.  
It's been almost-a-building forever now;  
the thick levels of concrete holding it up  
have that new, powdery grayness to them,  
the sloppiness of bricks that weren't made  
to be seen, but covered  
with drywall and the like. Thin steel towers  
climb up the side, strain against the buckling knees  
of the building until it might stand  
alone. The crane reaches higher still, stretching  
itself to plop metal somethings where, I suppose,  
they should be, at least for now.  
There's an awkwardness to the way  
buildings go up, how everything doesn't make  
much sense until it's almost finished, how a haircut  
looks wretched until she fixes your bangs,  
how the plastic rainbow billows out of large  
square holes where the windows ought to be,  
how this whole haphazard labyrinth will all be brown,  
eventually.

## Summer Solstice

Camilla Lizundia

I yearn for love  
Making it impossible to imagine anything else  
But the romanticized versions of me and you  
That dance amidst my dreams  
Because fantasy is what I know best

I watch the lawn twinkle below my second story bedroom  
Drunk with spontaneous night swims  
And pink skies just before dark  
Soaking my damp eyelids with rose-colored matches  
Igniting cookout flames onto empty glass bottles

My skin is hot  
And yet my anxiety nips at a familiar form of seasonal regret  
Running a cool breeze down my spine  
Perpetual nostalgia can often be my greatest enemy

I run my fingers across my exposed neck  
Sweeping a few stray hairs to one side  
Why must we drift from place to place  
Without ever truly seeing  
That the summer solstice brings us fireflies

*It was very crowded  
at Stonehenge*  
Hannah Brauer



## Urn

Ben Blythe

My last letter to you was from a different man.  
Looking to numbers to salve and bathe And  
the current of incandescent for comfort.

Descending to your ash-laced ankles I  
would steep to the lowest coffee shop,  
Peeking up your turtle neck I would  
pierce bullets through my journal.

Every agency would agree Statistics  
hold no wisdom beyond That  
frowned face sneering Into a  
grinning phosphorescent blue.

Another digit confirming your worth.  
Another inhale taking it all away. A  
fire burnt into the winter night  
Granting a null void to the day's toil.

And your red eyes gave release  
To tears like snowflakes. Only to  
be blown to the surface Dead skin  
peels back perfect pink.

I'd like to  
think.

But my heart was buried  
Inside your ashes.  
Upturn the urn So I can  
see my scars.

## The Russian Tenant (excerpt)

Shashank Rao

The summer of 1976 begins with a series of misfortunes. First: the not so terrible news of the death of our tenant downstairs, the old man Pillai, upon being struck by a public bus. Second: my father's announcement that he is to be laid off from his municipal job at the Madras Corporation. Third and what I consider chief among tragedies: the sterilization of Lalitha, our cleaning lady.

The bearer of bad news: her young husband, Baghu.

"She was told she would get enough money for a plot of land if she agreed to it," Baghu sobs. He is seated on my father's favorite armchair. A cup of tea wobbles in his hands. "For two days she has been crying in pain!"

Baghu, too, begins to cry. My father puts an arm around him. My mother straightens a crease in her sari.

"We're very sad to hear it," she says.

"Please, *please*, Baghu," says Appa, "if there's anything you need: medical expenses, food, clothes, don't hesitate to ask."

Appa pauses, waiting for the whistle of a faraway train to pass, then adds: "Lalitha has done good work for us. It's not fair what they have done to her."

Amma delivers Appa a pursed-lip-iron-jawed glare, but he does not catch it. Instead, he sends Baghu back home with two weeks of Lalitha's wages.

I am very fond of Lalitha. In fact, I think I am maybe a little bit in love with her. I sometimes keep her company while she sweeps the front steps, and together we make silent fun of passersby. Lalitha is still young, though she doesn't know exactly how old she is ("Maybe I'm nineteen, maybe I'm twenty-two. Who knows? My mother lost my birth certificate the day after I was born."). I liked watching her thick hair bob up and down as she swept. I especially liked seeing her smile, because it was the most radiant one in the world. Once, I told Lalitha she smiled like the sun, which only made her smile brighter.

There was only one person who knew of my affection for Lalitha: the old man Pillai. He would watch us from his bedroom window after a long

day of doing nothing in particular, shaking his head disapprovingly.

“You shouldn’t be talking to such folk,” he warned me from time to time. “You’re a good Brahmin boy. She is a Dalit. It is a miracle I have lived here as long as I have with an untouchable running around the house. My friends all make fun of me, you know. And if they find out, your friends will make fun of you, too.”

Ancient prick, I think now. What do you know? You’re dead.

“This Sanjay Gandhi, who the bloody hell does he think he is?” Appa fumes after Baghu leaves. “He calls himself a socialist, but that word means nothing in his mouth. Who is suffering the most under this Emergency? The poor!”

My father gets very passionate about politics. My mother doesn’t indulge him, but I listen. From his tirades I have learned that, in our State of Emergency, political dissenters are being jailed, the truth is being censored, and Indira Gandhi has dissolved the Tamil Nadu State Government, putting Appa out of a job. And now I am learning that the poor are being sterilized, sometimes at will, sometimes not.

“Enough,” Amma says sternly, grabbing me by the shoulder. “You’ll give him nightmares.”

“Poor Baghu...Poor Lalitha,” Appa continues. “We must help them. A sterilization is a very painful thing.”

I do not know what sterilization is, but it sounds awful. (“Our world has ended!” Baghu had moaned. “How will we ever have children?”) But if I can learn about politics during Appa’s outbursts, perhaps I can learn about sterilization as well. Amma, however, ends the conversation there.

“Cheh!” she spits. “Thirteen year-old boys shouldn’t be listening to such things. Go, go finish your schoolwork.”

That night, as I write an essay about Ibrahim Lodi, the last Sultan of Delhi, and how he lost the first battle of Panipat to Babur, the first Mughal emperor, I hear angry whispers through my bedroom’s back wall. Our house is old and peeling. Years of monsoon rain have softened its walls. If one wishes to keep private conversation, one must speak in hushed tones. Still, the wispy outlines of speech waft through the rooms. For as long as I can remember, my days have been rife with susurrations. I put down my pen and hold my ear to the wall, but the sound of pots and pans clanking

in the kitchen sink make it difficult to listen. I discern only a few snatches of the argument.

*You would sign away the deed to this house if you could*

*Is it so wrong I felt for him and Lalitha?*

*Never once have you consoled me like that*

*I have to find a way to make some more money*

*We need a new tenant*

The whispers stop and are replaced by the sound of footsteps. I scurry back to my desk and pinch my temples, pretending I am thinking intently about the essay. Of all the teachers in school, History Teacher Miss is the toughest. She does not see any value in rote memorization. She tells us that any monkey can remember dates. It’s what those dates mean in the context of all that came before and all that will come after that really matters. Right now, I am wishing I were a monkey. I have only written two of the required five pages, but what more is there to say about gunpowder and Babur’s tactical prowess? What has happened has happened and there is nothing anyone can do to change it. My father enters the room. I turn around and am greeted by crossed eyes and a protruding tongue. I laugh and do the same. Appa is the funniest person I know, and when it comes to history and politics, he is by far the smartest. He places his hands on my shoulders and peers over my head to read the opening sentences of the essay.

“Need help?” he whispers.

“Yes, please,” I reply. Amma doesn’t like it when Appa helps me with my homework. She says I’ll never learn how to think for myself if I always count on my father giving me answers to complicated questions. Appa says Amma is smarter than him and me combined, even though she never attended college. She just knows things, and even though I do not like to admit it, she is right about everything. However, I am flagging and exhaustion is weighing heavy on my eyes, so I put her out of my mind and let Appa work his magic. Though Appa knows concise and effective language, having written press releases for the city government for close to ten years, he loves beautiful sentences that briefly withhold their meaning before giving way to the reader’s comprehension. He brings me books, hoping they will help me see the world the way he does. My shelf is populated by names he tells me are “illustrious”: Shelley, Eliot, Dostoyevsky, Ambai, Tagore, Akutagawa—these and more are all lined up in neat rows. I have



started, however, with the tales of Henry James. I don't entirely understand them, but I like the way the words fall on my ears when I read them out loud to myself. I can see why Appa enjoys James. I wonder sometimes if events had taken a different path and the world had been more forgiving, if Appa might have become a famous writer. But he was his parents' only child, and his father decided someone had to take care of their ancestral house, which has been in the family for seven generations. A government job was a safe bet and provided enough income to keep the lights shining and the water running.

"Appa," I whisper, stretching out one of his curly strands of hair. Appa has the thickest, curliest hair I have ever seen. He says I used to play with it when I was a baby.

"Hmm?" he murmurs. It is hard to grab his attention once he gets into reviewing my papers.

"Appa," I whisper again, "why do we need a new tenant? Don't you think it's nice without the old man Pillai around to bother us anymore? We finally have the house to ourselves."

"Oi! How many times have I told you: you must respect elders. He is Venkataraman uncle to you." Appa is trying to make a strict face, but I can see the laughter bubbling up. None of us liked the old man. Even Appa, who liked everybody, struggled to find his merits. The old man was intensely acrimonious. Never had I heard a kind word issue from his crinkled tongue. He commented very loudly on the quality of Amma's cooking when she brought him food on festival days; he was not afraid to express his distaste about my family's dark complexion (though he himself shared our shade); and, worst of all, he sang. Amma and Appa slept with cotton in their ears to keep the noise at bay, but I could not. My room is directly above the old man's. Even if I shoved cotton in my ears, his hobbled voice clawed its way up out of the floor every morning at the break of dawn. I wonder if the gods had offed the old man just so they would no longer have to hear him mangle the bhajans which sang their praise. And now that he is gone, I will admit that part of the reason I accompanied Amma to temple every Sunday was to pray for the old man's speedy demise.

"Why do we need a new tenant, Appa?" I ask again.

Amma hides things from me because she doesn't think I am old enough, but Appa is honest. Whenever my mother shies away from my

*River onto mountains*  
*Himachal Pradesh, India*  
Kartikeya Sundaram



curiosity, my father pesters her with one of his original quotes: 'honest parents breed honest children.' This makes Amma very angry.

"We need some more money. Plain and simple," he says. "But I promise I'll find an interesting tenant this time. Or at least one with enough good sense not step in front of an oncoming bus."

He falls over and sprawls out splat on the floor with his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth. I fall on top of him and we laugh. Appa is a funny, funny fellow.

Within a week, we have a replacement for the old man Pillai. A Russian by the name of Stanislav Vassilyev responds to Appa's newspaper advertisement. He is a graduate student taking a year's leave from the University of Saint Petersburg to conduct research on Tamil poetry. He told Appa over the telephone that he hoped one day to translate the great Sangam texts into Russian.

"Interesting, no?" Appa asks after recounting his conversation with the prospective tenant. I nod enthusiastically. Amma, however, is not so easily swayed.

"A college boy? And a foreigner at that? Whatever happened to the good Tamil Brahmins of Madras? Oh God, what will the neighbors think when they see a foreigner walking in and out of *our* home?"

"He is not a college boy, janum, he is more mature than that, I'm sure," Appa replies, a bit peeved. "And no one else has responded to the advertisement. Besides, I've already invited him for coffee tomorrow afternoon."

I am the first to lay eyes on Mr. Vassilyev. He knocks on our door on an oppressively hot day sweat trailing down his face, dotting his shirt collar. I am taken first with his size. He is not a large man, but he is tall and lean and his shoulders are very broad. The way they gently stretch the fabric of his shirtsleeves makes me want nothing more than to grasp them as tightly as my arms will allow. No, I want more than that—I cannot say what exactly I want, but is a forceful feeling, a beautiful feeling, an alien feeling that sits in the pit of my stomach like a rich and creamy dal.

"Hello. And what might your name be?" he asks. I lower my gaze. Never before have I contended with such a reaction. It frightens me. But before I can dwell on it any longer, Amma emerges from the kitchen carrying her best ceramic platter on which she has arranged biscuits, murruku, and kola

vadai in three neat, appetizing rows.

"Let him in now," she says softly and kindly, very much unlike her usual self. Amma knows better than anyone else how to divide her many faces. To Appa and me, she is strict. To the vendors in the bazaar, she is stubborn. To the neighbors, she is queenly. To guests and new tenants, she is demure, a shadow passing along the wall.

"Mr. Vassilyev! Please, have a seat," Appa says, striding out of the bedroom. He has coiffed his hair and donned one of the more expensive items in his closet: a teal dress shirt he ordered from a British fashion catalogue after getting his first and only raise. He almost never wears it. He didn't like the way it clung to his body at first, said it made him feel naked. But when both a rickshaw driver and a bank clerk admired the shirt's make on the same day, Appa came around to liking it.

"Thank you for inviting me, Mr. and Mrs. Iyer. You most certainly didn't have to go through all this trouble."

"It was nothing, really. We only wanted to get to know you better," Appa smiles.

We are all of us enraptured by the Russian tenant. Appa and Mr. Vassilyev unravel minutes into hours discussing the Emergency and the end of the American campaign in Vietnam. Amma sits beside me, bunching her sari between her fingers. Something worries her. She has not taken her eyes off Stanislav. Good. She does not see me battling these strange new private thoughts. She does not see my fingertips twitch as they imagine the feel of Mr. Vassilyev's skin under their touch. She does not see me squirm as a gentle tickle slithers down my back and settles between my legs. And she does not catch me looking at the mound rising between Mr. Vassilyev's own legs before he crosses them to hide it as Appa and he laugh about this, that, and the other.

For the next three days, Mr. Vassilyev and his shoulders plague my every waking thought and every midnight dream. Soon, I find myself thinking about more than his shoulders—his hair, his hands, his legs crowd my mind's eye. Mr. Vassilyev—who insists we all call him Stanislav for he would rather not be on such dreadfully formal terms with us—moves in on the fourth day. I decide it is best to stay up that night. It is already a difficult enough task keeping custody of my mind when he was not here. I do not know what new feelings and visions will inch their way into my skull now

that he lives just one floor down. I pinch myself, slap myself, hang my head off the side of the bed, flutter my eyes a hundred times. That should do it, I think. But time moves more slowly after dark. My little tricks are not enough to stay the encroaching tides of sleep.

I only remember snatches of my dream: an open window. A lace curtain blowing in the wind. A silhouetted figure in the night. A sigh, a breath, another sigh. And then an urge, a sensation I attribute to urination. But it is richer, deeper than a routine bodily movement. It is tender and warm, like a candle's flame. It hums, building up to a crescendo until I can't keep it in any longer. It exits my body singing and laughing as it goes. I wake up and jump out of bed and feel my pajamas for wetness; sure enough, I find it.

I hurry to the bathroom and remove my garments. What have I done? Have I reverted to a bad old childhood habit and soiled myself in my sleep? A viscous liquid sticks to the insides of my thighs. Urine would have run down to my ankles—I don't know what my body has discharged. Suddenly, there under the harsh bathroom light, meeting my own gaze in the mirror, I feel small and ashamed. A sob builds in my throat, but I clamp a hand on my mouth and hold it back. I do not want Amma and Appa to hear. If they see me now, they will ask questions. What are you doing up? Why are your pajamas wet? What is this that sticks to the insides of your thighs? I would not have any answers. I don a fresh pair of underwear and hide the dirty drawers under the mattress, where I will keep them until I can figure out what is wrong with me, and creep back into bed.

The cuckoo clock in the living room chirps three times and just when I nestle my head into my pillow, I hear the gentle thumps for the first time. One two, one two pulsating in the middle of the floor, coming from somewhere underneath, in Stanislav's bedroom. The floor is cool and hard against my ear as I strain to listen for other sounds down there. Is that a breath syncopating the one-two sequence? He must be having a very bad nightmare, I think, he must be tossing and turning in bed like no other. And though I do not want it to, a different thought crosses my mind: what if he is having a dream like mine? What if he is dreaming so violently that the hum he feels is more of a shout that shakes his entire bed? I do not want to imagine it. I bury myself under the covers, but still I hear the thumping. Just my luck: melodies used to wake me in the morning; now, rhythms keep me up at night.

## Could I hope for anything else?

Jade Wurst

The bee lies on its back,  
alone in the brick-bound  
stairwell.

It cries for kin unwelcome  
in the fluorescent-lit  
maze.

Electric whine of wind-up  
wings, it strains, fights  
invisible

rivals. Bone saw buzz is  
fear turned fearful,  
desperate.

I pass twice. It dies  
alone in the brick-bound  
stairwell.





*Snake and Starling*  
Amber Huo





## December Night in Southeast Michigan

Alexander Wagner

The season is young  
and new, cheeks of fresh snow  
bathed in the red blush  
of Christmas lights.  
Heavy it lies on the world,  
the fog oozing through street corners  
envelops the stars, caresses  
the hard brick faces of buildings.  
This electric hush of the sky  
buries itself in the crest,  
the swell, the arch of the hills curling  
their way along the winter, into the dark  
unknown. It's quiet out there,  
the slow breath of the wind running through  
fingered trees that grasp at nothing,  
the frigid gasp of silence that follows.  
The emptiness just might be  
the best part, the fabric of everything  
pulled tight, every imperfect crease stripped  
away, the contraction, the release  
from all you used to know, the kind of  
white nothing that holds you as if  
it will never, never let you go.

## Am I a Victim of Abuse?

Hayla Alawi

The first and last thing on my mind every day is my ex-girlfriend.

I wonder if she's okay. I wonder if years of crippling depression and anxiety have finally gotten to her and she's gone and offed herself. Or maybe she started taking her medication again. Maybe she sees her psychiatrist and is turning her life around.

I wonder if she went back to work. She promised she would, as a desperate attempt to keep me in her grip. As if a job would fix everything. Maybe she instead focused on her studies and finally transferred out of the community college she loathed, the one I should've attended so that she wouldn't have to hear me talk about my life on campus at a Big Ten school. Better yet, since I learned quick that talking about the University of Michigan was unacceptable, I should've gone to community college so she wouldn't have to drive anywhere near Michigan's campus to see me. My mistake, and boy, did I hear about it.

I wonder if she has any friends. She didn't when we were dating. I took too much of her time for her to make friends, and even if I didn't, she was failing math because I wasn't helping her enough on her homework, so she had to use all her time working on that. Maybe without my distractions, though, she'd found other people to spend time with. I wonder what she tells them about me. I wonder if she talks about me at all, to anyone.

I wonder what she would say to me now if she could. I wonder what she would say if she knew how I talk about her to my friends and family, rarely though her name comes up in conversation. The thought that most often crosses my mind, though, isn't about her, but about me. I wonder if I'm correct in claiming, if only to myself, that I am a victim of abuse. Each morning and night I think these thoughts.

\*\*\*

Her name was Megan.

Or maybe her name is Megan?

In the grand scheme of the world, she's not dead (or at least, it seems most likely that she's not), but in my own mind, I killed Megan off as soon as I broke up with her. That way, I wouldn't have to deal with her continued

existence. As such, I almost always think of her in the past tense. Her name was Megan. How strange, then, to wonder constantly about what she's doing or thinking, as if animating a corpse.

She's real, though. She's alive but not well. As much as I let myself wonder, I'm fairly certain of that. Her name is Megan.

\*\*\*

I joined an a cappella group when I came to college. I hated Michigan and I'd never wanted to go there, so at first, I was miserable on campus. But I'd known since high school that I would join an a cappella group no matter where I went, and if the school I chose didn't have any groups, I'd start the first one. In those first weeks of school, when I was despondent about everything else about college, Michigan's only redeeming quality was its massive a cappella scene.

All of the friends I made that year were from the a cappella group I joined (the only exception being my roommate). I was amazed at how much I loved those people; if not impossible, it seemed highly unlikely to have such a close bond with so many people at once. We spent a lot of time together outside of rehearsal. Well, they did. I spent a fraction of that time with them. If I did anything more than the bare minimum, I would be neglecting Megan. It would prove that I didn't care about her.

The rehearsal before my first concert, at the end of my first semester of college, I showed the group a picture I'd taken of Megan at a restaurant over the past weekend. She'd done her hair special and was smiling for the camera. A rarity. According to Megan, I couldn't share pictures of her online anywhere for whatever reason, so I just gushed about the photo to my a cappella friends in. They oohed and ahed over the picture, maybe only for my benefit. But several of them insisted I bring Megan to the party we were having after the concert. She is coming to the concert, right? They asked. Yes, I said, and I agreed to bring her to the party, thinking it would be nice to finally be able to introduce my girlfriend to people.

The concert came. I found Megan in the audience halfway through the third song. She was in the back of the auditorium, separated from the rest of the audience by a few rows of empty seats. A ridiculous amount of joy bubbled up in my chest. Not that I'd mentioned it to anyone, but I hadn't even been sure that she would make it. Her anxiety made it too difficult to be surrounded by so many people, after all. Why couldn't I understand

that? Megan always demanded to know why I couldn't empathize with her mental state and insisted I expected too much of her. On top of her anxiety, when she found out my mom was coming, she panicked and texted me in a rage hours before the concert for allowing that to happen, because didn't I know she hated seeing my mom? I was confused. My parents came to every concert I ever did, and they dragged along my siblings, too. Besides that, I didn't know she hated seeing my mom. I wondered if maybe she meant she just hated my mom. More than confused, though, I was afraid. I desperately wanted Megan to see this concert, so that she might be proud of me for something, so that she might, for once, praise me. I almost asked my mom not to come. Instead, I just told Megan I couldn't seem to get ahold of her, so I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, it won't happen again, you don't have to come if you don't want to, I didn't know it was that big a deal. Don't worry, I won't be upset if you don't come, because it's my fault anyway.

All of those troubles melted away during that third song when I spotted Megan in the back row. She sat in shadow, so I couldn't make out the expression on her face, but I sang a bit more emphatically. Well, as emphatically as you can sing "doh-doh-ba-doh-ba."

I couldn't find Megan after the concert, but she texted me to meet her at her car outside. I barely spoke to my family and dashed out. I climbed in her car, grinning, so ridiculously glad that she'd come after all. She didn't smile back. She was shaking slightly and her eyes were wet, the way they always were when she was on the brink of an anxiety attack. "Good job," she said mechanically.

"Are you okay?" I asked, concerned, instinctually reaching one hand toward her.

She leaned away. "No." A pause. "Can we get something to eat?"

I nodded.

We ate. I tried to keep up a conversation, but I was mostly just mindlessly chattering to myself while Megan ignored me. When someone from my a cappella group shared the group photo they'd taken in the group chat, I tried not to think about how I'd missed being in my first concert photo in my rush to meet Megan.

In the car, I asked for a ride to the house with the afterparty. Megan turned off the radio and drove. She stopped outside the house and said nothing.



“Why don’t you come in with me?” I asked. “All my friends are dying to meet you. I talk about you all the time.”

“You talk about me to your...to them?” Megan said.

“Well, yeah,” I replied.

She didn’t say anything for a moment and I took my hand off the door handle. Then, “I don’t think you should talk about me to your friends. That makes me uncomfortable.”

“Oh.”

“You shouldn’t be talking about me behind my back.” I looked at Megan, surprised. “It’s not like I’m gossiping about you, that’s not what I meant. I’m just – I mean, you’re my girlfr–”

“And I’m not going in there.”

“Are you sure? Everyone wants to meet you...”

“Then it’s too bad I don’t want to meet them,” Megan snapped. I didn’t speak after that.

After a while, Megan sighed. “Are you going in or what?”

“Oh, I guess I should,” I said. “Is that okay? You’re not going to be mad?”

“Why would I be mad? I’m not in control of you.” But Megan glared at the street in front of us.

I opened the door, got halfway out, and looked back. Megan continued to sear holes into the wet pavement with her eyes. “You’re sure you don’t



*Griff*  
Samantha Plouff

want to come?" I asked.

"I'm not coming!" she screamed. "Go hang out with your friends! Isn't it enough that I came to your fucking concert, even though I was so anxious? Isn't it enough that you didn't bother to tell me your mom would be there? Just go!"

As Megan drove away, a weight settled onto my chest and I bowed my head toward it. I wasn't angry. I wasn't even disappointed. Just tired. Megan's anxiety was truly too immobilizing for her to entertain my hopes that she'd meet my friends, and honestly, how could I blame her for that? I thought about how she couldn't help it. I'd been so happy to see her in that back row while I was singing, and that should've been enough. I shouldn't have gotten overzealous with my expectations.

At least nobody at the party asked where my girlfriend was.

\*\*\*

Megan and I dated for thirteen months. Before that, I had a painfully huge crush on her for exactly a year, and it made me feel light and heavy at the same time. Light because I'd finally found someone who, in the throes of high school emotions and fantasy, I felt like I truly loved. Heavy because that was during our last year of high school and I was too afraid to come out to anyone, let alone tell someone I had a crush on a girl. Before that, we were distantly related friends for three years. After I broke up with her, she sent me an incessant stream of messages online, first calling me all manner of names and then begging for forgiveness until she gave up four months later. During that time, I couldn't bring myself to block her. Thus was the history of the five and a half years we knew each other.

Four months before I broke up with Megan, I started to recognize that something might not be quite right between us. Though I'd never before talked to anyone about my relationship except to make Megan sound like the picture-perfect dream girlfriend, I explained my feelings of unease to my oldest brother and asked what he thought about my relationship with Megan.

"It's like this," he said. "You want her to be happy. But you can't make her. If she wanted to do something about her situation, she'd go see a professional, or at least she'd start taking her meds again. Here's the problem: you won't do anything until she makes the decision herself to get better, and she knows that. So as long as she doesn't take medicine, you

won't leave."

So, what, I should just leave and hope she doesn't kill herself when she's left without even a single friend? I was the only thing Megan had, and we both knew it. I couldn't just ditch her.

"That's the point," my other older brother murmured when I asked him the same question hours later. We were sitting on oversized armchairs in the family room of our childhood home. He wouldn't look at me when he spoke. "Maybe you leaving is necessary for her to realize she needs to get better on her own."

My younger sister's advice was a little more pointed. "Look, nobody should feel constantly under attack in a relationship. You need to get out. Unless you want to keep crying every other night. Um, yeah, I've noticed."

I spoke to my mom about Megan last.

"You're being emotionally and mentally abused," she said, her voice quiet but heavy.

That was a lot to hear. Abused? No way. I was familiar with several different forms of abuse, so of course I knew behavior didn't have to be physical or sexual to be abusive. But there was no way Megan, tiny, struggling Megan, was being abusive toward me, even in an emotional or mental capacity. She just had some issues she needed to get through, and I liked to think I was helping her do just that.

I mean, weren't all relationships like this? Somehow, hearing all of this from the people closest to me made me want to bury my unease and pretend I'd never asked anyone anything.

I learned that, in fact, no, not all relationships were like ours, and I could no longer ignore it. Once, while having tea with my friend Leah, I complained about how Megan still called me a bitch (among other names) when she was mad even though I'd asked her not to several times. This was a rarity considering I made it a point not to bring up Megan to other people lest she find out and berate me yet again for talking about her behind her back.

"Wait, what? She calls you a bitch? Like, regularly?" Leah asked. She'd froze with her cup halfway to her lips, and she set it down and leaned forward.

"Only when we were fighting," I said. "You know. Like when you and

Evan fight, it probably gets a little out of hand.”

“No,” she said slowly. “Not that out of hand. Not ever.”

I frowned.

“No, really,” she continued. “Even when we’re arguing, we stay respectful toward each other. I mean, you have to. Especially if you’ve told her that bothers you.” I mean, I had told her it bothered me to be called variations of a bitch every other day, but when you’re mad, sometimes the words just come out. Even though I never hurled petty insults, never tried to hurt Megan when I was mad...

“Oh, come on,” I said, and pulled out my phone, looking into my messages for an example. I didn’t have to scroll back far, and my stomach twisted when I found one, though I didn’t let it show on my face. Truth be told, Leah’s reaction was making me feel a little sick. I waved my phone desperately in her face. “This is normal. It’s just, like, an argument.”

Leah took the phone and read the conversation carefully. She looked up at me, her eyebrows raised in concern. “This is anything but normal, Hayla,” she said. “This is...I mean...this sounds kind of abusive.”

And there it was, that word again.

I’ve since come to terms with the fact that my relationship with Megan was unhealthy, and I acknowledge that it was the right thing for me to leave when I did. The terminology still feels dishonest, though. The word abuser feels so wrong in my mouth, like the letters form a shape too cumbersome to escape through my lips. I can’t even bring myself to say it out loud. The one time I did suggest that something Megan was doing to me could be perceived, by some, not me, obviously, but by someone, as abusive, she made me feel so guilty for proposing such a preposterous idea that I never again used the word throughout the rest of our relationship, to her or otherwise.

Why would I broadcast that, anyway? As if anyone needs to know. It’s not just that it’s personal, though. I’ve read articles. My friends share pieces online about healthy relationships and abuse and spotting the signs all the time. And I’ve read them. Sure, I recognize some of the red flags as things I’ve experienced with Megan, and yeah, I now know that it really is inappropriate to repeatedly call your girlfriend a bitch just because you’re fighting, especially if she has asked you not to. But there’s not enough

evidence there to make me recognize that I was...that I was...well...a victim of abuse.

To say such a thing makes me feel like a fraud, like I’m claiming recognition for something I don’t deserve. There are those who’ve been through much worse than me. Many more of those, actually. And what about the fact that in months of therapy, my therapist never used the word abuse to describe my relationship with Megan?

Worse, do I use my experience as a victim as leverage against other people, to put myself on a pedestal of pain higher than others’? It’s been done to me. I hate the idea that I could be doing the same to others.

Or maybe we’re all just now realizing what we truly deserve in love. We’re just now determining what’s okay in a relationship and how little we’ve both expected and accepted for too long. Though that’s a nice thought, it still doesn’t make the word abuse with respect to myself sit right on my tongue. Besides, if we’re all experiencing some form of abuse, what’s the point?

Then there’s the fear that I’ll become what slowly eroded away my own existence for thirteen months. I recently read that victims of abuse (me?) have to unlearn the toxic behaviors they’ve grown used to while they were in an unhealthy relationship. I wonder how many people have thought about me what I think about Megan. Hopefully nobody, of course, but I can’t be sure. I haven’t yet caught myself falling into the old patterns that came with being with Megan, neither from the side I experienced it on nor the one Megan came from. I wonder if anybody would tell me even if they did notice. They might just cut me out of their lives as I did to Megan, though without any notice. I at least had that going for me; I didn’t just disappear from Megan’s life, never to be seen or heard from again.

Maybe I did experience abuse. Maybe I could even go as far as to say that Megan was an abuser, and be correct about it. Maybe I was the toxic one and never realized it. These are the questions that I think about every single day. When I open my eyes in the morning and just as I’m about to fall asleep, Megan returns to me in the haze of almost-consciousness, ethereal and unspeaking, as intangible as an idea. I hope I never see her again, and yet I can’t forget her.

And though today’s not that day, maybe someday I’ll finally have all the answers.



## The dead animals I've seen this summer

Elena Ramirez-Gorski

1.

The frog in the middle of Ian's street –  
eyes closed softly and outstretched tongue  
dried to the asphalt,  
mummified in dry heat and  
splayed under soft peach glow of street lamps:

we sat around it and spoke of nothing, we held  
a seance for it, for nobody, for all  
the versions of ourselves we couldn't recognize.  
All the ugly we can't show.

2.

The turtle washed up on the shore of Devils  
Lake, shell cracked and intestines  
swaying  
serenely in rising tide, like  
a reanimated  
ballerina, one  
with sunset water:

I tried to dislodge it from  
the shoreline before any children  
saw, but it floated right  
back. The show must go on.

3.

The bird fetus on my front porch –  
still wet, fleshy, and pink, a puddle  
of potential:

this baby was spilt for me  
to see, for all children to see. Eyes  
bulging under glowing tissue,  
veins dark and  
boiling in the sun. A younger  
me would have held  
a flowery Catholic  
funeral. A woman cried next  
door and I slammed mine shut.  
The show must go on.  
The show

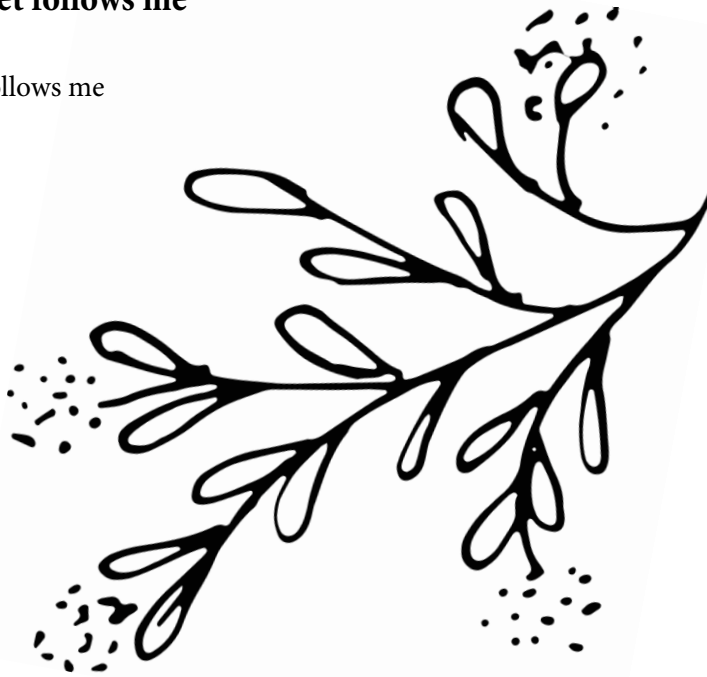
*Nightingale*  
Amber Huo



## a man on the street follows me

Nadia Mota

a man on the street follows me  
for two blocks  
before he finds  
the nerve to  
match my pace.  
he looks over  
at me like a  
sixth grader  
with a scalpel,  
peeling away  
the skin  
of a dead frog.  
he asks  
where i'm from  
with artificial  
sugar sincerity;  
ambiguity means  
you can be  
both anything,  
and nothing at all.



## untitled

Sofia Spencer

Today, a boy dissects a frog  
and I slice the story with a scalpel

a surgeon of words  
who throws pens instead of swords  
and cuts apart the pages  
to find the heart underneath.  
But tomorrow, the frog dissects the boy  
and the story will read me,  
quills etching into my skin

the first scratches appear

my blood writes these words



## To the best friend I always seem to be in the process of losing

Sofia Spencer

You told me once that I wasn't a person before I met you because a body does not mean a soul because I didn't suffer from insomnia and I never drank or danced or dreamed that meant I was an empty shell and before I knew you I definitely wasn't crazy but you taught me that craziness is addictive and that you were addictive and now I am a junkie hooked on a person but there is no twelve step program for this compulsion because now it seems like I'm always in the process of trying to quit you for good but the first step for that is admitting that the drug destroyed your life and you didn't destroy mine you made me cry at all the wrong movies and my toes tap when there wasn't music to dance to and you made me realize that breathing is only a side effect of being alive and so I can't say you destroyed me until you do because I may have never massaged my toes with heroin needles or snorted coke until my eyes were bloodshot or hidden pot brownies under my dresser, but I drunk up every one of your words from a too-full wine glass and I keep waking up with a hangover of epithets and I keep cashing out my pockets to stop my hands from shaking and I keep hoping you'll say we should get clean from each other and you've used up this junkie girl and I should quit once and for all even though my brain is wired for the high of your hearsay and my fingers are twitching and texting for relief and I don't remember who I used to be anyways because before you I was normal and I can't go back to restful nights and a slow heartbeat and forget the twinge of a flame called desire so maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing if this drug called you broke my brain for good because then at least I would be anything but ordinary.



# The hot List of Magical Creatures



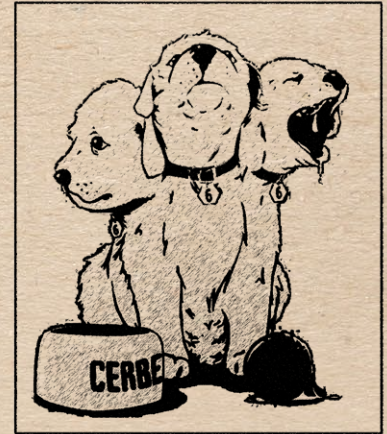
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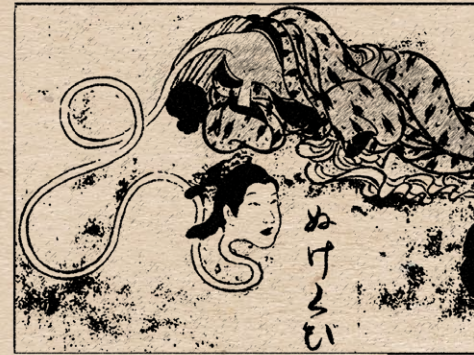
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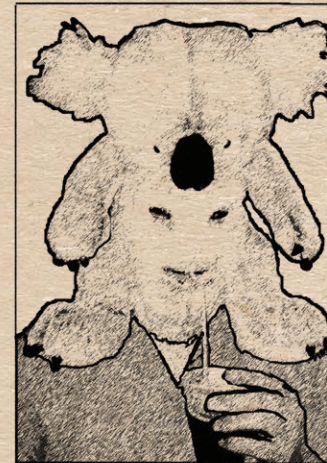
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