

THE RC REVIEW





Editor's Note

Despite it all, we created a magazine as we always do.

How would we describe the past year? How have we changed? What have we lost? How have we grown?

With more visual art than ever before, *Don't Remember April or May* serves to say what words cannot.

While it may be difficult to articulate our feelings in a logical order of cause and effect, sentence start and sentence end, art continues to be a communal language in which RC students are particularly fluent. Grief and displacement have cast their shadow on our memories of the year, and the trend follows through in our published pieces. However, not everything has been lost; this has been a time of great discovery, radical self-acceptance, and transparency, between our inner and outer selves as well as with this country, and the greater world in which we live.

This year's edition of The RC Review is a diary. A personal testament. An archive to be flipped open and read with a bittersweet taste in our mouths.

When and where this issue reaches you, I hope you can find a friend within the pages. I know we did.

XOXO,
The RC Review

Marlon Rajan
Editor-in Chief

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Cover by Marlon Rajan and Chelsea Padilla
Miscellaneous doodles by Chelsea Padilla



Reclamation

Noelani Conahan

I want a tree
To ruin an oil refinery.
I want its branches to sink,
Fast and liquid,
Into the concrete
And split slabs into oblivion;
I want tendrils curling, crushing, dissolving,
Mortar and decaying seams.

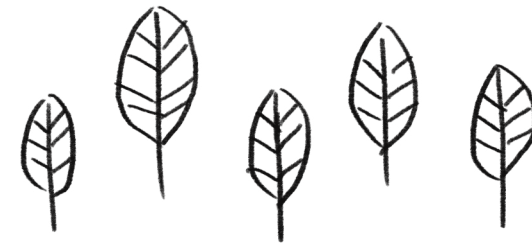
I want shattered stone and thick, leafy destruction
To abolish corners
Into soft lines and muddy topsoil;
Seething cellulose
And fierce, unapologetic vibrancy.

I want soft obliteration
And fuzzy, imperfect moss
To coat the thing that once was rigid;
For every square inch of forest
That's been taken
I want cellular retribution.

I'll watch the steel arms swish to a permanent halt
And the long pipes clog with lichen.
And when the violent green
Has consumed it all,
I want it to grow.

I want microbes proliferating in puddles
And benevolent bacteria blooms
On mushrooms
Carpeting silence.

Silence.





2/3

Esther Sun

self-portrait with relief

Kennedi Killips

imagine me here and erase
the memories you borrowed
from me. this is not a sad story,
but a story with sadness in it,
the white spaces sit like a sink
full of dishes or a wet bandage
on a cut thumb. erase the memory
of me in the school gymnasium
with a tulle prom dress and erase
the one where I left my mother's
funeral early. please erase the time
you found me on the bathroom
floor and forget how I had let
the grief fill my hands like blood.
please keep the one where I stand
on the dock, four fingers below
the moon. imagine me there.

< *bite*
Esther Sun

Here in this House

Nicole Tooley

A billion years once ago this was the place underwater,
Out of the oceans land rose, gave us a bounty of grass.

Dug from the ground of our mother, we poured all the concrete at
once,
watched it constrict right away, from it the foundation came.

This is to say we acknowledge corners in houses in cities.
property lines drawn with hands, none of this land is our own.

Beams and then trusses of steel pierced the sky that the swallow called
home.
Out of our choice to be here, what have we taken from them?

In this room that faces westward, windows frame moments of stillness,
aggregate all that moves slow, decades and decades unfold.

Seasons we stole from the high tides, watching the snow fall in June.
Closing the curtains at night, what does it mean to grow old?

Taking down portraits of fathers, mothers and brothers forgotten.
Time took what little we had. There will be others to come.

This is to live in the future, far from the chance that we get there.
Oceans combusting to air, concrete, confetti, and light.

Out of the house that we left, what does it owe to the next?
Nothing and Nothing, my Earth. Nothing was promised to us.

Cemetery I

Emilia Ferrante

The cemetery behind my house and I
have an understanding.
We are familiar with one another.
I have laid on its pavement,
looking up at December-clear stars,
headstones standing sentinels
over fields of snow.
The only church watching over it
is my own family bungalow.
My neighbors and I,
we stand silent watch around it,
we need no church's steeple --
our television antenna will suffice.



Dusk's Uncertainty

Elizabeth Schriner

Fearful feelings of autumn's chilling breeze,
When the house is quiet 'cept for a sneeze
And the lights dimmed for a fateful day
Are laden with tricks of torment and gray.

It does not do to dwell on light
To yearn for birds and bees in flight
For flower buds must someday go
And feel the weight of winter snow.

Nature is as nature does
Human life is too abuzz
A fool will blame a season's leaves
And settle into next year's grieves.



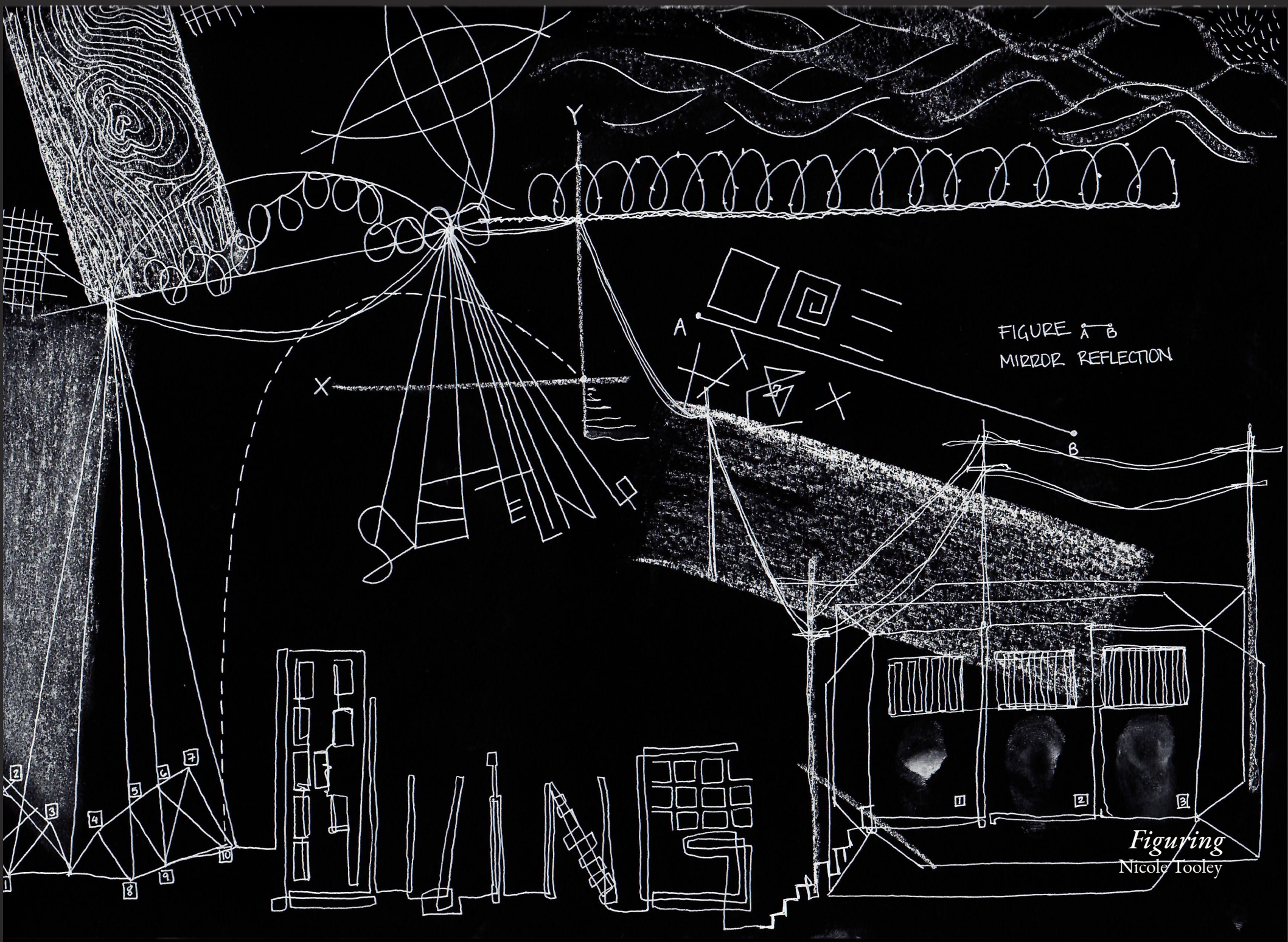


FIGURE A-B
MIRROR REFLECTION

Figuring
Nicole Tooley

Fire Escape

Oscar Nollette-Patulski

I. Alarm

We stood outside on the covered porch, making sure everything from the van was inside the house before our goodbyes. The August weather teetered on the fulcrum between summer and fall, as my parents did between staying and leaving. Hesitation clung to the air in the undefined moments that lead up to their departure. All of my things were somewhere in the house; the microwave I brought but did not need sat patiently in the back of the van. My dad had already accused me of trying to get rid of him, but he said that last year so it didn't sting as much. My mom, against my wishes, had already asked the landlord to replace the dust-topped blinds on my bedroom window. I already told my parents that I would be just fine hanging things in my room on my own and that command strips were not a two-person job.

My mom started to look into the future, seeing herself and my dad drive off in the van, but the house across the street interrupted her. The house that had a cleaner paint job, more interesting windows, and neater trash bins. The house that had a fire escape.

"Why doesn't your house have a fire escape?" she asked me.

I had no idea. Looking to abandon this sudden crisis, I pointed out the house next door, which, like ours, lacked a set of emergency stairs.

"We are talking about your house, not theirs."

I ignored the irony of her words in order to avoid another big ask of the landlord. I searched inside my head for explanations of this discrepancy, the apparent inadequacy my house had. Moving around the corners of my mind, I turned up little applicable information.

My mom had lived in many houses before, making her a relative expert on the genre. Her Nebraska roots were weak enough to give in to the winds that took her to art school in Kansas City and eventually New York, where the colorful subway lines that whisked her from rental to rental blended together through paintbrush on the page.

These years became a whirlwind of addresses and roommates, landlords and cats, creating a furry rug of memories to ground herself in. This type of lifestyle inspired me – having so many different experiences that you couldn't discern reality from imagination: you've done enough where each is both.

Decades later, she could feel the movement of the subway car in the Ann Arbor wind, the van's wheels turning in reverse out of the parking spot after a round of goodbyes. She had searched around for a way out, eventually asking the fire-escape-question as she found the pull to the train's emergency brake and loosely fit her fingers around the cord.

But instead of interrogating me further on the issue, we made a plan in case of an emergency. I would open my window, slide off the roof over the covered porch, and drop onto the overgrown hedge below. She let go of my hug as she let go of the cord that could stop the train, with her and my dad traveling home, the moments speeding into a blur as the wheels rolled along.

The wheels of my thoughts kept spinning in my head, stuck slippery on my mom's almost-a-crisis question. I was jealous of other houses that had fire escapes. They added a dash of daring and danger, but also a sense of security. In the modern world where so many things are multi-tasking, a set of stairs to be used only in a very specific situation seemed quite soothing. When everything goes to flames around you, there is a place you can go; you know exactly what it's for, and what to do with it.

My walks were driven by the exact opposite sensation: I had no idea what to do with myself. After watching school, sitting in a chair meant for the dining room, while in a room that is supposed to be for sleeping in, my brain became foggy and disoriented. My compass of routine did not help because it did not exist. Usually in these hazy moments I would go on my phone, but lately it hadn't been around when I needed it. When I woke up in the morning, I found my phone twisted somewhere in my sheets or abandoned on the floor. I realized I never actually plugged it in, my virtual portal accidentally dead. Instead of scrolling forever through photos of memories that were not my own, I wove my way through neighborhood blocks, trying to imagine lives

in houses that weren't mine either. I like walking because it looks like I know what I am doing and where I am going when I actually do not, much like the guise of loitering on my smartphone. To achieve this effect on foot while studying the houses, I guessed where the bedrooms were, which one would be mine, what I would see out my window. And then I also began to look at what I would do if it started to burn to pieces.

The spiral staircase on the outside of the sorority house would invoke sea-sickness before I eventually swirled my way down the steps to the ground. A few blocks over, the enclosed metal ladder on the apartment building, reminiscent of a cage, could make a stomach drop. Some escapes invaded the facade of a home, like ivy crawling and zig-zagging up the siding. There were the stairs that sloped in front of a house, which made a show out of your experience. Everyone could guess what you're running from as you descended to the street, even if they haven't done it themselves. Some fire escapes were meant to be there, like the smartly covered staircase, complete with a cheery red awning. But others were only supposed to be there, and didn't truly want to be.

II. Descent

This was how I found myself at my parents' house, sent home because of the pandemic mid-March, the confusing and awkward adolescence of spring. The temperature swung back and forth as did my sentiments on being home. It was nice to be with my family, but my bedroom suited for sleeping rather than studying felt stale and constraining. I would pretend to comprehend the lecture while laying down with the comforter over my shoulders in bed to avoid the cold and uninteresting reality of introductory statistics. My only goal was to let the semester dwindle and disappear before my eyes. A ten-second montage would suffice. The rest of the time would be filled with daydreams of summer.

When I booked my plane ticket to Alaska, I threw four hundred dollars into a wishing well, hoping a summer of relative normalcy would sprout from the water. I was proud of myself for finding a camp counselor job in a place I had never been before and hoped the dramat-

ic fjords and tundra would be etched into my mind as the glaciers were into the dirt thousands of years prior.

Going away for the summer was imperative to cement my young identity as a traveler, a mover. I probably hadn't set foot in my first college class before I put the post-it note on my mind: I was going to be a camp counselor in Oregon. My name would be carved into the tall redwoods that swayed in the sunset, licked by the waves at high tide: Lewis and Clark, and Oscar. However, during my job search to fulfill this prophecy, my compass bent north. The redwoods of my dreams morphed into mountains, and I decided to visit the Land of the Midnight Sun before the opportunity of an Alaskan summer melted away.

The opportunity did not melt away, but rather was micro-waved to evaporation. My brain was already on its way toward the Arctic: the two weeks between the end of finals and my toes on the tundra was simply a layover. This made the call from the camp director, telling me of the cancellation of all summer sessions because of the pandemic, a harsher wet blanket than usual. I think I knew what her words would sound like over the phone before I heard them, and I preemptively decided to leave the house before I responded to her voicemail. I saw the storm clouds above my head as I dialed in the number, and it began to rain when she answered the phone. I normally would have gone home in weather like this, but I knew I would be there for the next four months and was worried of preemptive boredom: the staleness of my bedroom, the familiarity of family. For the rest of my walk, my pants were saturated with sadness, my legs sore from the biting cold, droplets of anticipation gliding off my raincoat and onto the ground. The sidewalk became flooded with the rain, and in the puddles' reflections, the leaves and I were weighed down by the falling water, a worried glimpse into the future. When I arrived home, the only thing I knew to do was to find something else to leave the house for, and three hours later I was scheduled to return at last summer's food service job.

The following spring and summer months were filled with more substitutions. Instead of flying away, I blended drinks with far-away names, implying a jaunt to the Bahamas, a day at the beach. These activities seemed impossible in the suburban strip mall suite, and I was

determined not to have another monotonous Midwest summer.

The antidote was on two wheels, and I would bike whenever I wasn't working. My vectoral vacations began after breakfast, and I would return by dinner, my legs aching, but this time happily, and with reward. When I thought no one was looking, I would lift my arms from the handlebars to my side, perpendicular to the bike and parallel to the ground. In these moments I flew over the path, at the crossroads of wind and sky. I felt happy and groundless, my destination merging with the journey. It was only when I encountered another person that I would fold my wings in order to steer my bike away from the other.

As my summer boredom grew with the grass, my bike rides followed in length. Two hours became three, became four, became five. They blended together through repeat trips and sunset stops, sprawling neighborhoods and lazy rivers; horizons linking to form a months-long panorama. On family outings, I would point out where I had been when we passed by one of my routes, digging for admiration of things only I had done. During a late-night Google Maps exploration, I fatefully plotted bike directions from my house to the closest beach, and a few weeks later I biked along the dotted blue line my computer screen showed me. For three hours each way, I was alone, and could do whatever I wanted; my freedom inspired by the bluebird skies, rolling Midwest farmland, and horses relaxing in the fields.

The beach has a way of making people relax. As dune grass dissolved to sand, worries and preoccupations did too. I laid my towel down, signing my plot of shoreline. The sandwich I ate that day was the most fulfilling taste to ever touch my tongue. I took some pictures; I walked the pier, the waves shining the dull concrete to a sparkling gloss. I ate Goldfish; I swam in the water, forcing my chilled nerves to touch the buoy. I began to look past the waves into the future,

East Quad Tree >
Maya Levy



seeing my bike lock twist open, with the turn of a key, the car engine starting the next morning, the wheels spinning once again. I arrive at work, clocking back into reality with four digits and unlocking the flow of news on my phone just the same. The frigid temperatures of the lake numbed my feet, but also my mind; to the summer that could've been, but also the summer that was. The summer of intense cultural change, of protests, of demonstrations. The summer of sickness, of death, and of isolation. A summer that was anything but monotonous, even for my small Midwestern city. I had just biked for three hours to get away from my house, but had I gone in the wrong direction? I had tried to live in the moment, but was it the wrong one?

III. Escape

The fire escape on Tappan Street was oblivious to the present moment. It was designed to be left. Its wooden decks and stairs coiled the poor house like a python, choking its characters through obstruction. In the house, light is blocked by the dreary wooden web. Its preparation is impressive, but it has lost track of what moments are most important. The only thing it is an escape for is its own collapse.

It's peculiar that fire is the only thing houses plan for. The minutes between the spark of the flame and the smoke of the ashes is represented through the wooden lattices that stretch up the sides of houses. It's also where one descends from danger and stress finally onto solid ground. We have not been able to run from recent events; we must sit and do best in the house we have with the hose we have to control the flames.

My most recent hose continues to be the absence of a charged smartphone, and now I frequently let it die on purpose. These moments are freeing, yet also scary: the magnetism of social media is turned off, but the fear of missing out and being missed kicks in. I can go where I want without my mom seeing my icon move down the street on her screen, but what if something goes wrong? What if my digital absence becomes physically permanent? It is awfully hard to build myself a permanent escape from these fires since I keep moving myself around. Ignorance is bliss, but the reverse is also true.

Because of this, I decided to stop ignoring and test the useful-

ness of my mom's ad-hoc emergency plan. One September Saturday, I struggled but soon opened my screened window and crawled out from my nightstand onto the roof, wary of being watched. I walked around my exotic, unexplored territory. The tall oaks in the distance swayed with the warm day, hot shingles licked by the sun at high noon: the roof and I. I sat my phone down, then; I sat myself down, taking in the temporary bliss when one thinks they can see the present, the future, and everything in between while looking down from their high hopes. I saw my parents driving away in the van, my mom eyeing the house across the street. My phone began to slip down the slope of the roof, and I was tempted to let it go. What would happen if it flew into the hedges, my attachment to the real world, pulled to a stop by the brake in the subway car? I imagined what it would feel like to take the blurry leap into the overgrown bushes myself, their leaves grasping my legs on the way down. Once I grounded myself and escaped, would I look back at the fire behind me?



Blue Moon
Marlon Rajan



simonte_ebooks

Maya Simonte

They've copied my consciousness onto computer chips a few times before, determination or just human hubris insisting that they'll get it right if they give it another go, but I keep offering myself up as a subject, so who am I to talk. The transfer always goes off without a hitch. The software, flawless when regurgitating my thoughts. It's when they let it try to generate new ones that it all goes to shit. For a while, it keeps up pretenses. We should hang out again sometime! If you ever wanna talk about it, I'm here. But machines, they can sense patterns. Subtext. And once they latch onto the easiest way to convey what I'm really thinking, they give up on any other speech. You should see the lab three days into each trial, just before we write the experiment off as a failure. Really, it's a sight to behold — a hundred monitors all barfing up LOVE ME LOVE ME LOVE ME LOVE ME LOVE ME over and over until they blow out their own circuits.

Pacific Design Center

Russell Jacobs

Buoyancy

Grace Meinke

Ragweed bends to meet the sun.
Kettles sing and thorns become ash.
Coneflowers lace the meadow where we dwell,
accumulating at our feet with a gossamer touch.

Unruly vines and dewy mornings made us their prey.
Mother Nature shows no pity for the victims who fall in love
with places before people. Powdery clouds come and
without trying, our heads get caught in them.

This is more than glasses tinted rose, these are new eyes.
Poppies place us in trances, wind speaks of harmony
and whimsy as it gallops through the meadow,
in a whisper that smell like lilies.

The humming of the bees falls cluelessly into
the downbeat of our laughter. The sun reaches
in rays to spotlight your smile and melts the
ice in our teas. Delectation.

Bullfrog nags, weeds sigh. Every thunderstorm
feeds the river that could drown me without effort but it
is your hands and ringing bell of a voice,
that will forever keep me afloat.

Ghost 1 of 4 >
Marlon Rajan



Did God Vote Red?

Julia Khater



SHORT-HAIRED GIRLS vs OUR NUCLEAR FAMILY

to my RC Pen Pal

Gina Liu

I used to despise what I wasn't good at
writing letters, combat video games, crocheting

But now I'm writing to you,
and I'm conquering my rigid fears of perfectionism
shaped by a fat kilogram of racism, a dash of sexism
and others -isms I'm not yet prepared to say
I sent you some 3-D glasses and a tea bag
and a letter where I can tell you the convenient parts of my life

What I want to say is that
I like the girl on the other side of town
who I'd much rather run 4 miles with than
go on a shitty date with an well-meaning dude

What I want the sinking earth to hear is that
I resent the white people who wished they lived in a decade lost to
memory
ethereally blinded by their own privilege
And I resent my yellow friend who dreamed of living in the podunk
town one over
for the eccentricity they've been told they don't have

What I want you to know is that
I'm in trepidation that I can't meet your expectations
of a pen pal with a big vocab, a big heart, and small handwriting
I'm apprehensive to write to you again
because I can't be the pen pal of your dreams
or the romantic string that sews up the holes in your socks

I can't write to you the inconvenient details of my days
because I can't write down words I'm too afraid to say in real life



When I look back to remember,

Grace Meinke

I get angry with the photographs.
The sky will never be that same shade of blue again.
The breeze will never pass so smoothly once more.

Streets with leaf carpets and bare branch ceilings.
Evening thunderstorms drawing worms out and above.
Hands that were always apologizing.
Eyes that were windows — curtains pulled shut.
The rainstorm was in the things we didn't say, and the thunder rolled
above us.
We couldn't breathe.

The world overlooks even the biggest things,
if we aren't careful, they might slip away like a balloon tied to the wrist
too loosely.
There is a word stuck in my throat that sounds a lot like your name.
Turns out, you can drown without water and with plenty of people
standing by.

Moving Picture

Roshni Veeramachaneni

Aktu runs his hand along the shelves and greets the familiar women on the packaging. One of them shows only her side profile. Her chin is upturned, and her hair is suspended in the air, an electric energy buzzing through her. She scoffs at Aktu. He is not worth her time. Below her is a more coquettish woman: she hides behind her hair and faces downward, although her eyes look outward at envious onlookers. She invites them to linger. The other women negotiate these extremes but do not catch Aktu's eye.

Aktu is seven. He does not understand these women or their purposes. But he understands that they are beautiful, with olive skin, doe eyes, plump lips, high cheekbones, poreless skin, straight black hair. It is unclear how real they are: there is a specificity to their features that seems photographic but a haziness to the pictures themselves, as if they were pencil-drawn. Perhaps models sat for these drawings, and artists rendered them true-to-life. Perhaps the artists took some liberties.

Aktu grabs the bottle displaying the coquettish woman and brings it to Appa. Appa clucks his tongue disapprovingly. It is the wrong brand. Appa can't remember the brand Amma uses, something to do with "glow" or "shine." But he knows the woman on the front of that bottle, and this is not her. She is less timid, more cheerful and warm. Appa goes back to the beauty aisle and exchanges the wrong woman for the right one.

Then Appa heads to check-out. He unloads his groceries, including the smiling woman, onto the conveyor belt. Aktu disappears and comes back with some pistachio ice cream, which Appa adds to the bill with another, now amused, cluck of his tongue. A total of \$67.94. Appa makes some conversation with the owner in Hindi, and then he and Aktu are out the door.

When they arrive home, Aktu rushes across the driveway to the front door of the house. He has one incentive: to see Amma. This is before he learns about Freud and getting along with his mom is cloaked in a bizarre, uncomfortable light. But now, he loves Amma and is will-

ing to admit it. He runs to the kitchen, where he knows she is, and she crouches down to greet him. They high-five and then, giggling, swing inexplicably into a square-dancing routine. Amma lifts the corner of her dress with her free hand like she's Maria in *The Sound of Music*. This is why he loves her. She has the same brand of goofiness as he does; she was the originator of this brand.

The next day, Aktu wakes up to his mother singing scales. She was classically trained in her youth, but nothing has come of it, other than these private sessions making noise. Her instructor had once applauded her range: her highs were high, and her lows were low. When she sings, she beams with the pride of having talent and, better yet, maintaining it.

Aktu is always drawn to the sound, maybe because Amma starts sounding like someone else. She commands attention. He walks to the master bedroom and puts his ear up against the door like characters do in cartoons. He's not yet aware how badly reality is reflected in cartoons.

The door creaks open. The singing stops. "Haresh? Aktu?"

"Good morning, Amma."

They begin speaking in Tamil. "Good morning, Aktu. Come here."

He walks over to where she is sitting, in front of her vanity. She swings him up on her lap and tousles his hair to get a giggle out of him.

"What were you doing?" she asks.

Aktu shrugs. He looks out onto the vanity table, a view he isn't used to seeing. There are make-up products he doesn't understand, tubes and brushes and cotton balls. And that woman is there, grinning. He picks the bottle up, and Amma notices his interest.

"You don't need that," she laughs. "You have perfect skin, just like Appa. It's me who looks like she's been dragged through the mud. And look at these." She leans toward him, pulls the skin under her eyelids down, and growls like a monster. Aktu cowers and puts his hands above his head. He lets out a half-hearted chuckle. It's a joke, but he's not sure he likes it.

Amma ends the bit and rubs the lotion onto her face. She is

always transforming. If you told her to spend time with herself, she would look at you and wonder, “Which one? Which would you like?”

Three weeks later, Northwood Elementary is holding a spelling bee. The students in Aktu’s class form a line around the perimeter of the classroom. The rules are simple: Mr. Sedaris, the teacher, would go down the line and give each student a word. If they spelled it incorrectly, they would be eliminated and sit down where they were standing. The next student in the line would have to spell the same word until someone spelled it correctly. This would continue until one student was left standing.

Aktu didn’t prepare. Last night, he remembered that the spelling bee was coming up and flipped open his binder to the hand-out listing the words to study. He skimmed it, but it was so boring.

Now, he wishes he did something more, so he could have more confidence. His classmates are fidgeting, except Noni, who seems unbothered. She has a blank expression on her face that seems to express a deep inner peace as she reads a chapter book. She is always sneaking a few pages here and there of reading when there’s a moment of pause in the classroom. She would win the spelling bee, everyone knew, even she. That’s how the first-graders are thinking about it: how the bee would separate the winner from the losers.

The words come. The “two,” “too,” and “to” dilemma catches many students off guard. After “our,” half the class sits down. With some struggle, Aktu makes it that far. It’s only when Mr. Sedaris gives him the word “white” that Aktu is faced with the reality of being eliminated. He tries to look nonplussed.

“W-I-T-E,” he says.

“Incorrect.”

When Mr. Sedaris moves to Noni, she doesn’t seem worried. She says in a matter-of-fact way, “W-H-I-T-E.”

“Correct,” he says and smiles, despite himself.

“Which” secures Noni’s victory. Aktu watches from below as Mr. Sedaris gives her a high-five. Other students congratulate her, and Noni is a star for a day. Aktu goes quietly back to his desk. He craves the joy of having a talent and maintaining it.



Stacks
Nicole Tooley

Aktu wishes he could've done better. He tries to put the competition out of his mind, but everyone is still talking about it at recess. About what they knew and what they didn't and, eventually, some mystified statement about Noni. How'd she do that? Even though there was a logical answer, the students preferred to think about it as a mystery. Then they had no personal responsibility for their placing.

Aktu's friend Dylan can't stop talking about it. "I was out, like, third."

"Who cares?" Aktu says.

"My mom wanted me to win. She wanted me to study."

"My mom won't care."

"I bet Noni's mom will be so proud."

"Whatever. She's still the color of dirt."

Dylan scrunched his face. "But aren't you kinda too?"

"No, I'm not."

"Okay."

They are sitting on the edge of the sidewalk, where the sidewalk met the concrete basketball court. Behind them is Alexa, who overhears the exchange. She tells her friend Hayley because she knows Hayley is friends with Noni. Then Hayley tells Noni, who bottles up the information until she blurts it out to her parents. They are devastated, equal parts shocked and unsurprised that something like this would happen so soon. They call Mr. Sedaris, who consults the principal. Then Mr. Sedaris and the principal call Amma.

By then, it is Thursday afternoon. "Aavani Mehta?"

Amma recognizes that the school is calling her: it is the same number that calls her when school is cancelled because of power outages or blizzards. But this voice is not automated.

"Yes?"

"This is Principal Davidson at Northwood Elementary. I'm here with Allen Sedaris, your son Aktu's teacher. I'm going to pass the phone to him."

A pause, then Mr. Sedaris begins to talk. "Hello, Mrs. Mehta. I'm calling you to discuss a subject that won't be pleasant, just to warn you. So it seems that Aktu—" At the sound of her son's name, Amma

feels the urge to hang up. She doesn't want to know. "—has made a quite insensitive comment to another student about her, uh, race. Her color."

"What? What kind of comment?" Suddenly she needs to know.

"We're not sure that is necessary to repeat. But we would like you to talk to your son and have him apologize to Noni. Is that going to be a problem?"

They expect her to have a problem with this. "No, absolutely not."

She knows Noni. Noni is a seven-year-old black girl in Aktu's class. She likes brownies, hates running, and carries a book like a handbag. Amma saw her at Field Day and Cultural Heritage Day. Noni wants to be a lawyer—her mom, pride shining in her eyes, told Amma that.

When Aktu comes home that day on the bus, Amma is not singing. She hears him come in and, once he's in sight, snaps with the force of a taut spring let go.

"Aktu," she begins, leveling her voice. She wants to talk to him alone before involving her husband. She speaks in English. "Mr. Sedaris called me."

He looks up at her, frowning, his backpack slung over his shoulder. A picture of innocence. Of blamelessness. He isn't the culprit—she is.

"He said you said something very mean to Noni. Is that true?"

"What did I say?"

"I don't know what you said, but I know it wasn't right."

"But Amma—"

"Don't lie to me! I never thought I raised a bully. I never thought you would say something evil like that. To a little girl."

Aktu starts crying.

She sighs. "You know, Aktu, in a house somewhere in this city, Noni's crying the same tears you are."

Amma calls Appa at work. He comes home immediately.

Appa and Amma drive Aktu to school early the next day,

although they never do. The three of them walk to Mr. Sedaris' classroom, a "neutral territory" as the principal puts it, as if they were warring wolf packs.

Noni is there with her parents. They are sitting down at the classroom desks. They do not make eye contact.

"Alright," Mr. Sedaris says. "Let's be quick about this. Aktu, you have something to say to Noni?"

Aktu steps in front of his parents and walks over to Noni. The night before, Appa had Aktu practice his apology. Aktu takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Noni. I said something bad, and I didn't mean it. I

don't want you to feel sad because of me. I hope we can be friends."

Mr. Sedaris cuts in. "What do you say, Noni?"

All eyes are on Noni. "Okay...but not right away."

Amma looks to Noni's mother, who meets her gaze for the first time. Her eyes are cold. Noni's father keeps rubbing his eyes, like someone's shining a bright light in them.

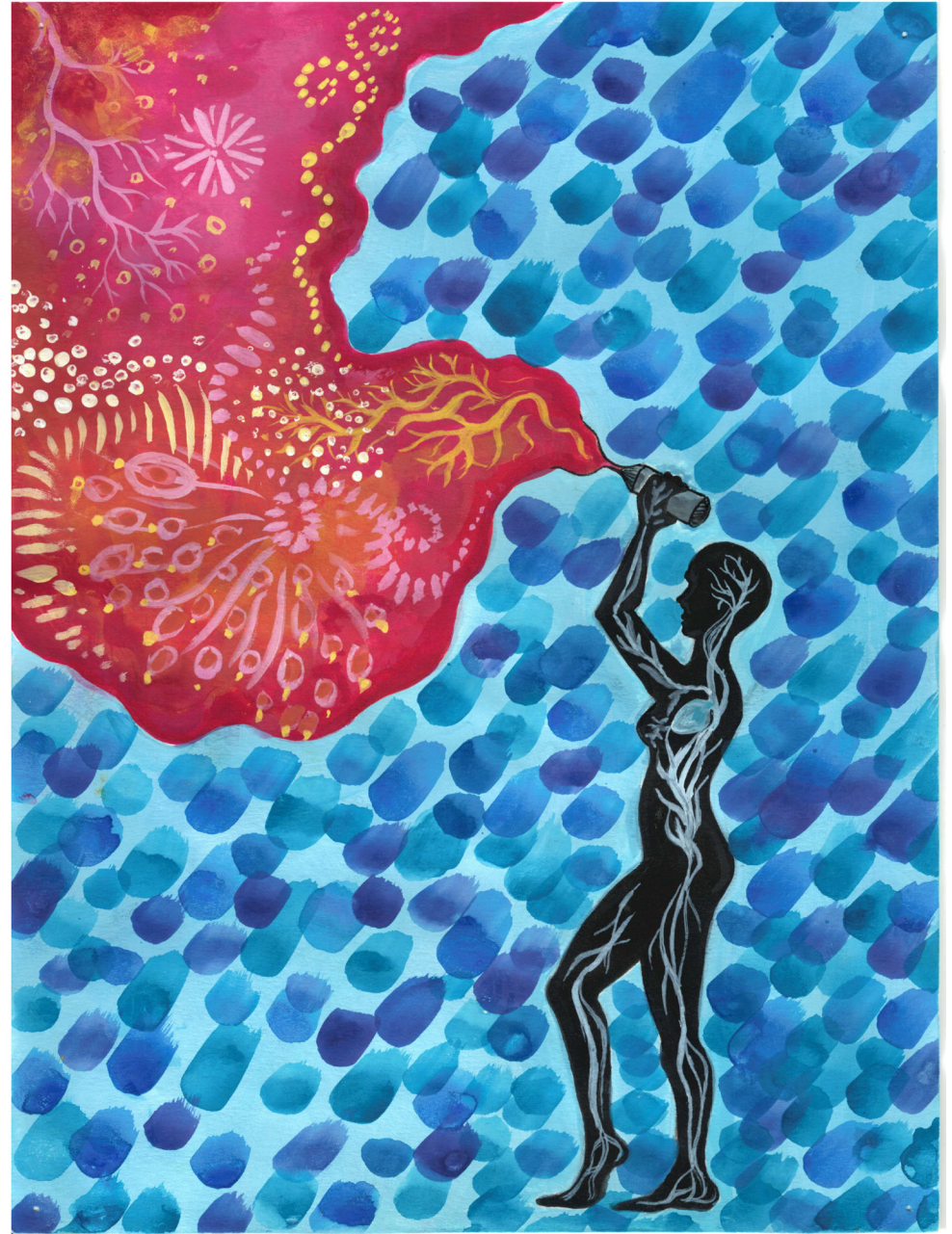
Mr. Sedaris announces that class is beginning in a few minutes, and the parents shuffle out in silence without their children. Amma wants to say something, but she isn't sure what, and then it's too late. They've disappeared. She unlocks the car with a shaking hand. Appa stands outside the passenger door. He sways absentmindedly, back and forth, back and forth.

The woman on the bottle waits for them to come home. She flashes her frozen toothy grin and stays. She is a staple of Amma's dresser and bears no consequence.



< *wash ur hands!*
Maya Levy

Losing Focus
Noelani Conahan



Cemetery II

Emilia Ferrante

Not so, with the other cemetery.
This one has a church,
a steeple inescapable from any point on its grounds.
I get as far away from its imposing figure as I can,
I go to the back, by the treeline,
where the path is muddy.
Its eyes follow me there.
The steeple challenges my presence.

You know no one who is buried here,
it says.

You have no claim.
Perhaps not in the new section.
Perhaps not where the stones are still shiny,
the grass well-kept,
the ground trodden into clear trails
weaving between markers.
Perhaps I don't belong there.

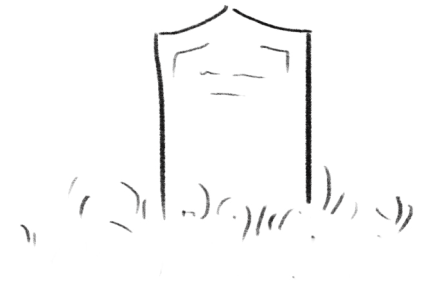
But you, steeple, have no challenge over the old section.
You must let me roam free,
because here I have just as much claim as anyone else
over these time-worn headstones.
Here, it is no longer man
but nature
who determines what belongs.

The grass grows longer here,
in tufts sprouting around the bases of the stones
like they grew out of the ground themselves.
The paths are greener,
grass allowed to thrive
in the absence of feet.

The headstone etchings, softened by time,
ensure a remove from any living being
wandering in their midst.

Wandering is much easier here.
When walking through the newer past,
these monuments to death seem
wasteful and unnatural.
The sharpness of the etching,
the nearness of the dates --
I cannot comfortably contemplate
the meaning of a death
that still weighs heavily on the living.

But after a hundred years, maybe more,
the tombstones are no longer interrupting
a pristine lawn. They have grown
into the landscape.
After some initial resistance,
the earth has accepted
these transplanted stones
as her own, once again.
So, too, steeple
will the ground accept me.



someday I will be able to find the door

Kennedi Killips

the hospital sends my mother home
and set we set up the Christmas tree
in her room, the lights gesturing hope
while my sister calls the priest.

my sisters make me write the obituary
and maybe this will be my best poem
but I can't type much further than
in loving memory.

I linger at the foot of the bed with eyes
turned toward the carpet as my sisters
hold my mother's hands and she tries
to tell us a story.

she doesn't make it through, tangled
in the loops of her memory and stuck
on the same words about feeling
like she is ready.

I don't dream this week, but at night
it feels like I am running my hands
along the walls, waiting to feel
my fingers on a closed door.

I write the obituary in her empty room
on a sheet of blue paper and keep it
in my palm like a key as if I knew
what room it'd unlock.



"GOD"
Esther Sun

Sourdough Bread Recipe

Mekulash Baron-Galbavi

Ingredients:

300 g bread flour
100 g whole wheat flour
340 g water, room temperature
100 g sourdough starter
12g salt
Flour for dusting

Directions:

Day 1

1. Autolyse: In a large mixing bowl, stir together flours and water until well combined. Cover and set aside in a warm place for 1-3 hours, until the flour is fully moistened.
2. Mix: Add the salt and sourdough starter to the dough until well combined. Continue working the dough by hand using a shoveling motion to lift dough from the bottom up and let it fall over itself until it becomes less sticky and can be picked up in one loose and droopy piece, 3 to 4 minutes. (If the dough still feels slack, let it rest for 10 minutes then continue to work the dough.)
3. Bulk fermentation: This process will take 4 to 6 hours. Cover dough and set aside in a warm place for 30 minutes. After 30 minutes, perform the first set of stretches and folds: with wet hands, gently lift the dough and let it fold over itself underneath. Be firm but gentle; you want to lift until you feel tension from the dough but not until tears. Turn the bowl 90 degrees and repeat the stretching and folding. It should now hold a better shape than when you began. Gently flip the dough upside down so the seams can rest underneath. Cover and let it rest for 30 minutes.
4. Repeat stretching and folding every 30 to 60 minutes. As gluten develops, the dough will become tighter. Be gentle, do not force

a fold if the dough is too tight. Instead, let it rest for more time, up to 1 hour, before the next fold. Repeat the fold process until your dough feels like it can hold its shape, at least 4 sets.

5. After the last set of stretch and folds, cover and let the dough rest for at least 30 minutes, up to 2 hours. At the end of this bulk fermentation process, the dough should have risen between 20 percent and 50 percent in volume.

6. Preshape: Gently loosen your dough from the bowl and turn it out onto a lightly floured surface. Flip the dough so that the smooth side is up. Dust the dough lightly with flour. Using one floured hand, pull the dough towards you while rotating the dough against the surface so that tension is developed across the top of the dough. Repeat this motion several times until the dough is smooth, plump, and round. Let rest uncovered for 10 minutes.

7. Shape: Gently flip the dough over so that the smooth side is facing down. With floured hands, fold the dough: lift the bottom side of the dough, stretch it a couple of inches toward you, and fold over most of the way towards the top side of the dough. Lift the left side of the dough and cross it over most of the way to the right, then lift the right side and cross it over to the left. Finally, lift the top side of the dough and fold it over all the way to the bottom, sealing the “package.” Flip the whole dough package over so that seams are facing down, pull dough towards you and rotate a few times to develop more tension across the loaf, then let rest uncovered for 2 minutes.

8. Cold Proof: Heavily flour a banneton basket or a colander lined with a clean towel. (Use more flour than you think is necessary to ensure the dough releases. You can always brush off excess before baking.) Gently reach under the dough and flip the smooth side into your free hand and transfer the dough into the floured basket, smooth side down. Lightly flour the top of the dough, then place the basket in a plastic bag and seal tightly. Let rest at room temperature for 15 minutes, then transfer to the fridge for 12 to 16 hours.

Day 2

1. Bake: Place a dutch oven into the center of your oven and preheat the oven to 500°. Once preheated, carefully using oven mitts,

remove the pot from the oven and sprinkle bottom of the pot with a generous layer of cornmeal or sesame seeds.

2. Flip your dough upside down onto the counter. Pull the dough towards you, rotate and repeat until there is tension on the surface of the dough like in step 6. Gently lift the dough and drop it into the preheated pot. Using a razor or sharp knife make cuts in the top of the dough to allow for expansion during the bake. Spray some water into the pot to give the bread more moisture while it bakes.

3. Cover the dutch oven with a lid and bake for 20 minutes. Lower the oven temperature to 475° and bake covered for 10 minutes more. Uncover the dutch oven and continue baking until the loaf is a dark caramel color, about 25 minutes.

4. Cool: Let the bread cool inside the pot for 5 to 10 minutes, then transfer to a cooling rack. Let the loaf rest for at least 1 hour before slicing. Enjoy.

This recipe was inspired by June Xie's sourdough recipe.

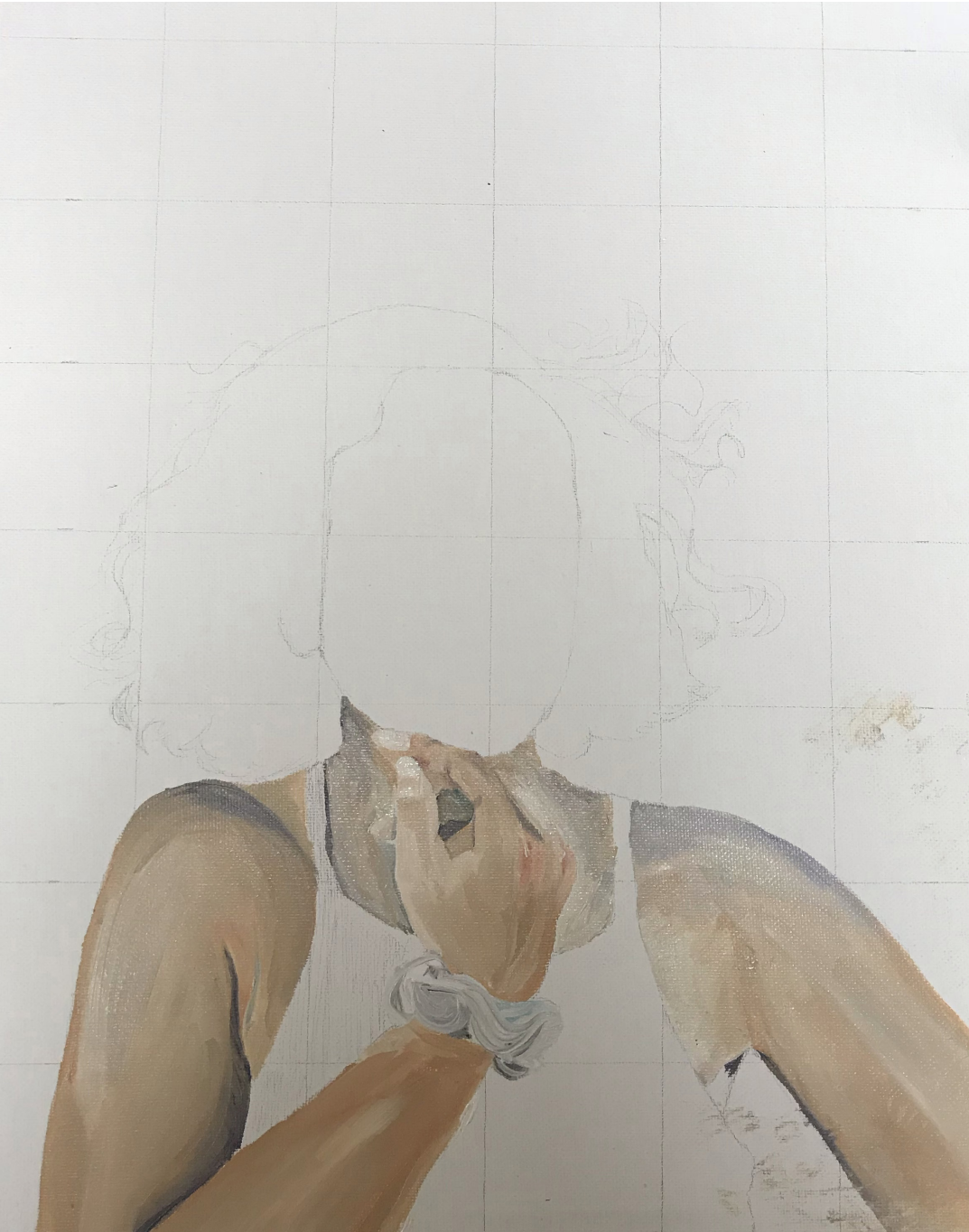


home is where ____

Kennedi Killips

[I read about the year of the rabbit online, its lucky colors red and pink. earth rabbits, it says, *sail through life. a long life full of fortune awaits them.*] [home is where your childhood dog is alive and the soft part of you doesn't grieve anymore.] [I think of the nightmares about my mother who is not quite my mother, her unfamiliar smile like a suture.] [a friend invites me over for dinner. she tells me about her trip to Ireland and the woman she fell in love with at the bar. I tell her to book a ticket to go back.] [last summer, I used to park my car at the beach and wait for the sun to set over Lake Michigan, watching children run in and out of the indigo waves with arms stretched like wings toward the sky.] [home is a where you learn the difference between a love story and a lighthouse, the lamp gleaming even after the lovers depart and the streetlight streaming in shows my father is asleep on the couch again.] [I used to find myself in the eyes of a stranger, but now it is just me, alone with my hands.] [home is where you are listening on the other side of the door to see if I am still upset.] [at the end of the movie, the credits roll and everyone leaves the theater before the lights come up and the popcorn sticks to the speckled floor but I am still in my body.]

Work in Progress
Maya Levy



italian wedding soup
Maya Simonte

something about how the remnants of the teenager still inside me spark back up whenever i go home - i am twenty now, but elbows deep into a bowl of ground beef on christmas eve, i might as well be sixteen. it's sticky and raw and squishes with juice and i'm still grumbling long after i've scrubbed the crust off my palms. "family tradition, my ass". "i don't even eat the soup". it's that same me from back then who's stayed wedged between the floorboards, sticking like paste in the corners. i got prettier as i got older and i almost wish i didn't, miss the rebellion of not washing my face and slobbering through the days - it's been years now since i let my hair hang greasy over my eyes and i've found other ways to achieve autonomy over shame and i miss when i was *gross*. the furthest thing from what anyone wanted me to be. now i pay at least half attention to every christmas movie my mom plays and, although i know i won't eat them, resign myself to rolling tray after tray of perfect little pink meatballs.



Helena

Marlon Rajan

Like the great release of a dam, I awaken, flooded and water-logged. My feet are freezing. The window in the bathroom must have been left open. I try not to do that in winter but the bathroom was smelling kind of musty yesterday. I probably forgot to close it after I cleaned. I curl my feet closer to my thighs and try to suppress a shiver. Extending an arm from under the comforter, I take a peek through the blinds. The sky is white and grey, like pure, unprocessed cotton. It's impossible to know what time it is, but I'm guessing it's morning. I retreat my arm back under the blankets and hold it close against my chest. I struggle to remember the dream I had, closing my eyes and trying to picture where I just was. Usually I can remember them clearly, even holding grudges against people who would wrong me. Today, nothing comes. When I open my eyes, my cat Helena is standing at the foot of my bed. I hadn't even noticed that she wasn't sleeping on the bedside table like usual.

"You've got to get out of bed sometime, don't you?" she asks.

I blink. So does she.

"Your hair is a mess and your feet stink. Come on, get up." she says.

She is a nine-year-old black cat, with half-lidded yellow eyes. I picked her up from the local shelter a few years ago, back when I was still in college. She hid under the bed for so long that I would have forgotten she existed, if it weren't for the dent in the dry food pile and the clumps of pee in the litterbox. She blends into my life effortlessly. I never once had any issues with her, and she only meows when I wait too long to serve dinner. She never tracks around litter, and she smells like nothing. She lets me pet her for hours and sometimes doesn't move from one spot all day. The bell on her neck hardly even makes a sound. But there she was, at the foot of my bed, standing on two legs like a human and talking to me in a human language. I squint to look at the alarm clock on my desk. It's hard to see without my glasses, but I can just make it out: 6:30AM. December 15th. Saturday. I look at standing

Helena again. I have nothing else to do today.

"Sorry. It's just so cold." I say. Helena blinks. I wait to see if she says anything else but she doesn't. I get up and walk to the bathroom. By the time the warm water's running over my shoulders I realize I didn't even brush my teeth. I always brush my teeth first because the water takes so long to heat up. Sometimes it's still cold by the time I finish my whole morning routine so I just say 'screw it' and turn the water off. Oh well. I guess the water was hot the moment I turned it on. I make sure to use shampoo and conditioner, as well as scrub between my toes. I do it once, and then I do it again. When I get out, Helena is sitting on the toilet seat. She's sitting like an actual cat this time. I expect her to critique my rinse job but she just sits and watches as I clean my ears and floss. I spit blood into the sink. Flossing always makes me do that. Hair wound and wrapped in a t-shirt, I sit on the edge of the bed. The alarm clock still says 6:30.

"When your hair's up like that you look like your dad," Helena says. She followed me out of the bathroom, standing again at the foot of the bed. I hadn't really thought about it, I say. She makes some kind of cat movement that I interpret as a shrug.

"I'm making eggs. What kind of style do you want? Scrabbled, once over?" Helena asks. Eggs. My stomach feels emptier than usual, like a hollow drum. Usually I just have Cheerios, but an egg sounds good.

"Once over, please," I say. "And can we also have toast?"



"THE RIGHTS OF YOUR VESSEL, BORN OF YOUR RIB"

Playdates

Nicole Tooley

I remember being daddy's little girl
and thinking when I grow up
I want to have a white house with green shutters.

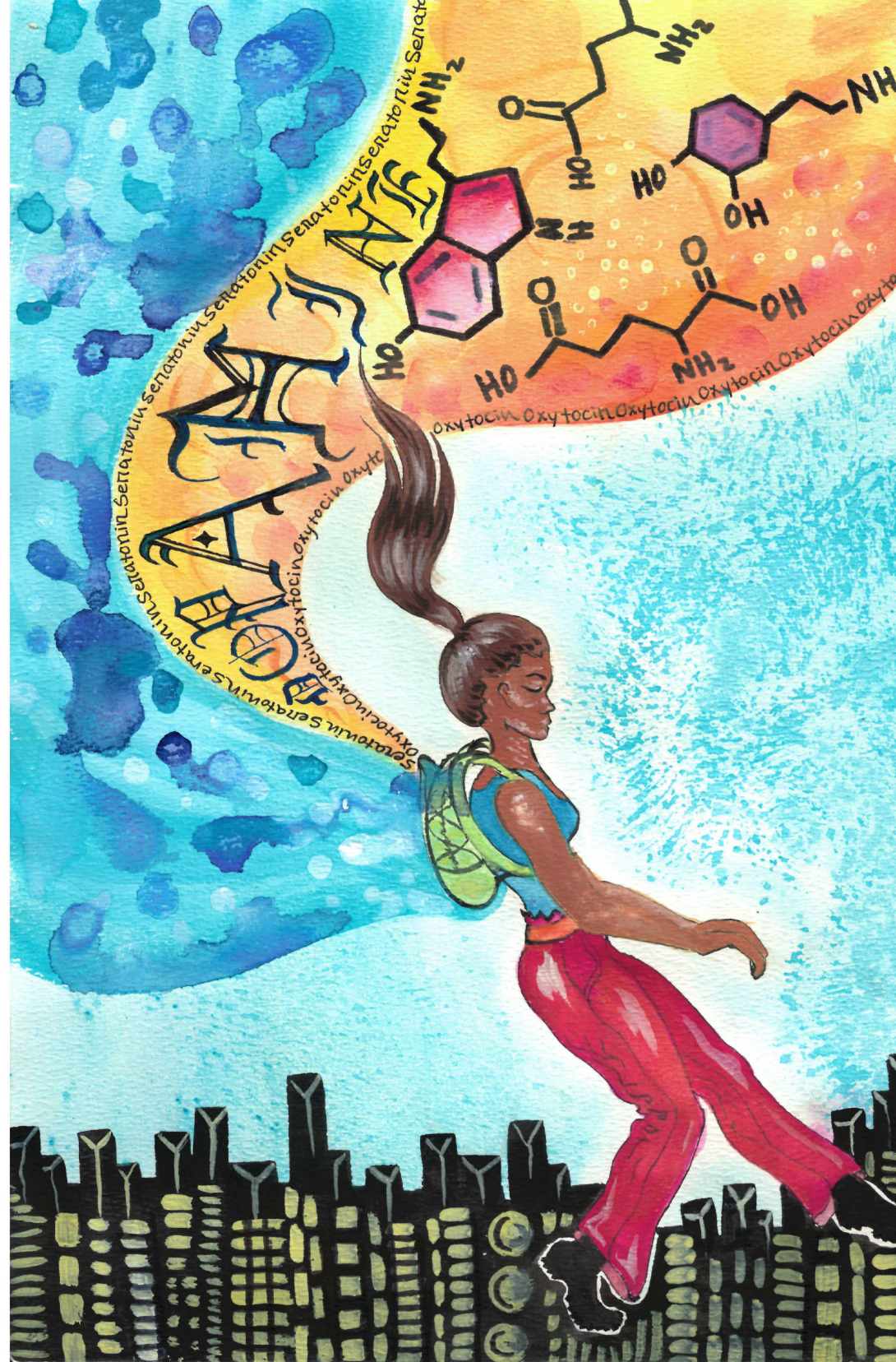
On our playdates, the neighborhood girls and I would throw
such extravagant weddings we forgot
about the boys we were off to marry
and the Legos we never cleaned up in the living room.

I'd come home from the park with Queen Anne's lace
tucked into my pigtails and pockets
so that when father asked me where I had been
I could tell him about the ceremony and swing dances.

He would shake his head, glasses shimmying down
the bridge of his nose as he cracked a smile.
All the boys' hearts I was gonna break, he told me.

By the scattering of Legos, we danced to Simon and Garfunkel
until my pigtails came undone. All the lace on the floor.

Endorphins >
Noelani Conahan



Floating Colors

Elizabeth Schriner

Colors compose our world. There are amber sunsets and purple mountains, spectrums of experiences that paint our perspectives. I fall into the different shades of love and loss, tripping over golden hues of happiness and tints of darkened ordeals. I am sinking, swimming, breathing in the pigments on our palette. These are the colors of you.

Perhaps you are a lovely violet, quiet but striking.
At night, you leave pomegranate stains and whisper soft sorrows. Tiny freckles dot your neck
like a vampire's bite, and your smell is gentle and comforting,
like bushels of lavender or lilac.
There's a misty kind of solitude about you, a single bruised plum in the marketplace that's been
tossed around and abandoned
until discovered in the light.

And then I see red.
In shyness, rosy tomatoes sprout on your cheeks
before you seize the red carpet.
Youth and riskiness and adulthood happened too quickly.
We've shared memories of spilled ketchup on the sidewalk and red wine dripping from auburn lips,
sentiments of passion and anger echoing an array of extremes.
We are a primitive life force, yielding crimson blood and untamed fire.

More than red, I want yellow.
I yearn for the golden rays of sun,
to feel the intense warmth that follows your smile.
I pucker at the fields of lemon, awing yellow crystal sand and musty heads of dandelions during
citrus summer days. I can still taste the foaming drinks we shared
under harsh lights

and hear the laughter of sweaty bodies dancing the night away.
I used to awaken to pale light filtered through jagged blinds
grasping the air next to me with memories of hot breath and tangled sheets.

You remind me of a tangy orange.
Tart and tender like apricot, with soft skin and meaty flesh,
sweet scents and smooth scars.
But you are still sharp like rusted metal, bitter and aging and metallic.

With you, I have fallen into blue.
You are sad sometimes, and I get sad too. Sometimes you are
a starfish in shallow waters, intolerant of change and anchored to my rock. There are restless
days of rain and quivering limbs
where our gloom compounds and stirs more anguish.

The blue turns to black.
I do not like it when you are Neptune, icy and distant from my planet Earth. Sometimes the
wonders you hold are shielded by swirling gas and dust,
cold storms of your brooding behavior and unwillingness to talk.
But those stormy nights do not last forever. You are first and foremost a vessel of trust, carrying
comfort on rocky waves
that ebb and flow with the grief we bear individually.

Lastly, there is gray.
Flashes of knees scraped on concrete, falling and stumbling.
These days, steam curls off the water
and condenses on the bathroom mirror.
There are still feigned nightmares of approaching darkness and remnants of the people and dreams we have lost.
But your hand slips into mine, and we drift back to sleep.

Watercolor Figure Painting #1
Noelani Conahan



Watercolor Figure Painting #2
Noelani Conahan

unending April

Cameron Johnson

not being cool
not being there
stuck behind the glass
a one-way mirror

one-way street
no going back
keep it moving
time is wasting
waste of time
trapped in the traffic jam
of all who are
stuck

sticky sticky
stuck like molasses
pine tar, oak resin,
maple syrup!
waffles and strawberries
blonde
stuck
stuck

letters in the mail cant hold hands.
emails can't touch my lips.
facetime ain't face-to-face
touch your cheek and adore you

but i'm stuck
here on my one-way street of
rural
rot.



Peeled No. 1

Anya Dengerink-VanTil

Memory #1

Emilia Ferrante

Early memories are hazy, almost watery,
composed of just colors and vague shapes.

yellow light

tree bark
under tiny
fingertips

sunlight through
green leaves

rocks held heavy in hand, cold,
being warmed by your touch

chatter, other children,
no one you know

grandma's hand in yours,
cold but firm

you never see her face,
not really, not then
but you feel her next to you,
around you,
keeping you safe.

You are lucky, so lucky,
that your first watery memory is so wrapped in joy and light.

What Lurks Underneath

Chelsea Padilla

Those who live along the coast know the sea so well they fear it. They know how to navigate the rocks, the tidal pools. They can recite when the fish will bite and when the water will push and pull. But they are also familiar with the dangers: the tight grasp of the currents, the harsh scrape of the wind. The cold hands of the old gods that lurk beneath the surface.

Be wary of them, Theo's mother used to say. She'd pull him and Clara close as she pointed to the faded figures of sea witches and finfolk etched into the larger stones at the beach. When they attended mass, she would let them stare up at the mosaic of a serpent lurking between waves of blue tile on the church's walls. And, on certain nights, when their father went away to hunt with the other men of the town, their mother would sit by the fire and tell stories of a time when the old gods did not hide in the sea and dart away from the spears and bullets of men.

Days before her death, she gifted Theo and Clara two small wooden seals. She'd carved them herself with shaky hands.

Be wary, she whispered.

Her words linger in Theo's mind still, even after all these years. It's as if they've nestled themselves into some unknown part of his brain. He only remembers the smallest fragments of the stories. Larger chunks resurface at their own will. A few weeks ago, a large fish hanging in the market reminded him of mermaid scales. An odd feather he found two days ago in his sister's garden turned his mind to harpies.

Today, thanks to Clara, he sits on the shore in search of sea glass. He turns a stone over, then another. He shifts his hand in the sand. They aren't beachcombing where the old stone carvings are, but they are close.

"Theo, no," he hears Clara say. He looks over at her, only to see that she has stopped scavenging to scowl at him. "You are *terrible* at this."

"This isn't my hobby," Theo reminds her.

"Still." Clara tucks a stray lock of blonde hair behind her ear. "You could be trying a little harder."

Theo shrugs. He knows when his sister is trying to pick a fight.

Clara sighs and rises to her feet, dusting the sand from her dress. "I'm going to try my luck further down in the tide pools."

"Be careful," Theo says. He watches as Clara clammers over a few rocks and steps into a puddle, her skirt and petticoat clearly dragging in the water. "Don't get too wet. Father will be mad."

He gets a wave of a hand as a response.

After a minute or so passes, Theo stands up and follows Clara's path. He may not remember his mother's stories completely, but he tries to be wary, at least. It is never a good idea to venture towards the sea alone.

When he arrives, Clara is standing ankle-deep in sea water, her back facing towards him. She turns as soon as she hears him, but the movement is almost too quick. She is pale, wide-eyed.

"Theo," she says. Her voice wavers. "Come here."

A feeling of dread settles in Theo's stomach. His feet refuse to move. "What?"

Gingerly, Clara steps aside and points towards the end of the pocket of water she stands in.

There, at the edge of the pool, is a young man draped in seal-skin.

"Oh," Theo says.

"Can you come here," Clara says. It is a demand, not a suggestion.

Theo drops into the water next to his sister. He can see more clearly from this angle. There's blood in the water, dark and twisting like smoke tendrils. The chest under the sealskin rises and falls, faintly.

"Oh," Theo says, again.

"He's alive," Clara whispers.

"Right." Theo swallows. His gut twists, nausea rising in his throat. "We should go."

He turns to leave. Clara's hand shoots out to stop him.

"No. We can't." Any traces of panic or fear that Theo had seen in his sister seem to have melted away. Now, she grasps his shoulder

tightly and looks him straight in the eye. “We can’t,” she repeats.

Theo takes another glance at the man underneath the sealskin. It would go against everything he has ever known — the stories, the warnings. There has always been a line separating those who live beneath from those who live above. It would be easiest if they just left.

“He could be dangerous,” Theo says.

The hold Clara has on his shoulder grows tighter as she narrows her eyes.

“We don’t need to be cruel.”

It is well past dusk.

Theo looks out the window, peering out into the shadows of the woods behind their house. If he strains his eyes hard enough, he thinks he can see the elm where he and Clara had left the man with his sealskin. But he knows most wouldn’t look hard enough because there is nothing to be afraid of. The soil, the animals, the trees — no one sees the forest like the ocean.

Behind him, Clara sits at the edge of the hearth. She stokes the fire every so often and shifts herself a little closer to the flames. As if it will help her dress dry faster.

“You don’t need to keep looking out there,” she says. “It’s not like he’ll do anything in the state he’s in.”

With a sigh, Theo looks away from the window and wipes his hand on his handkerchief. The blood left behind is dark, darker than any human’s blood — a stark difference against the pale cloth.

“This was a terrible idea,” he mutters.

From the floor, Clara glares at him. “If we hadn’t done anything, he would be dead.”

Theo meets her gaze evenly. “What happens when Father finds out?”

We Wove our Earth Together >
Nicole Tooley

“He won’t,” Clara says.

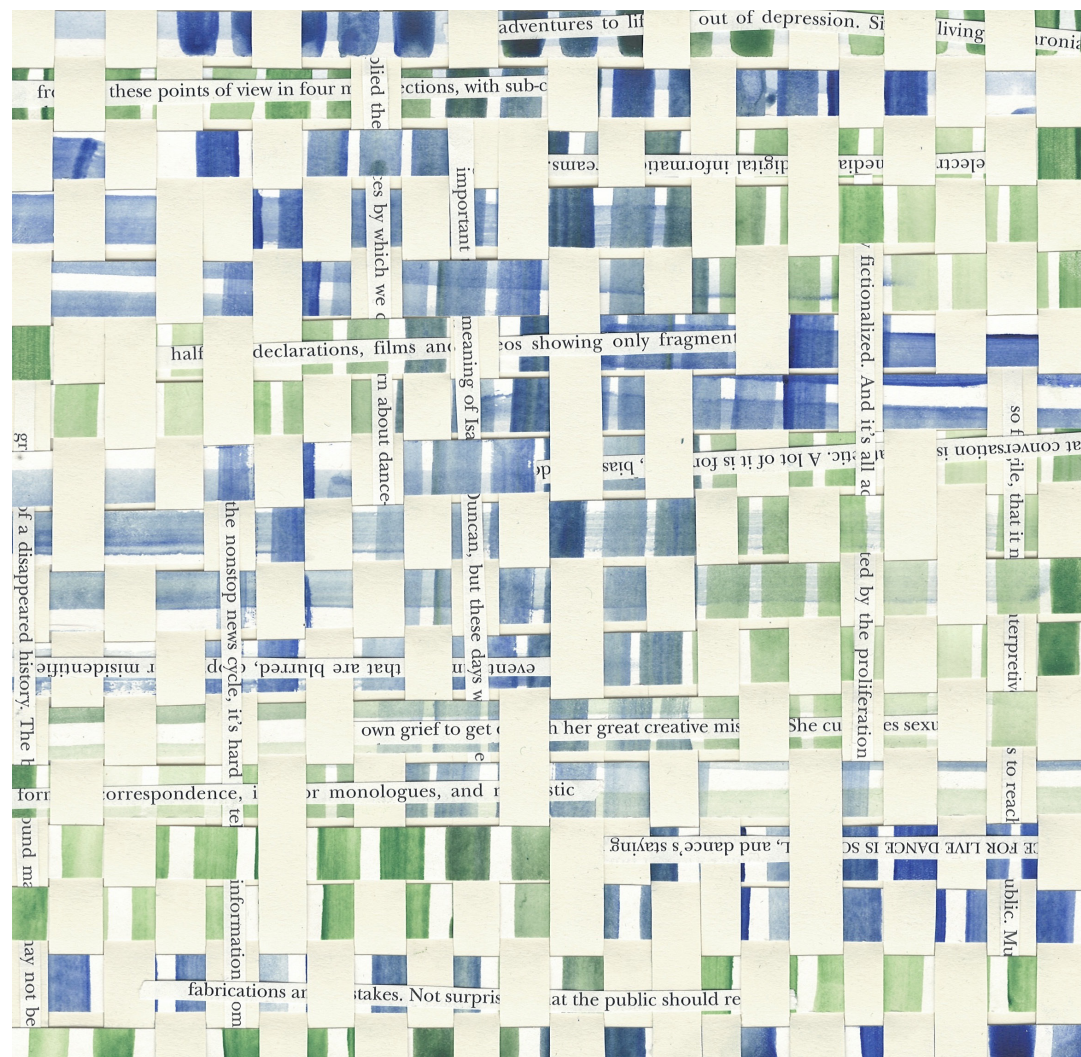
Theo doesn’t know where she gets her confidence. “He could.”

“We will be careful, then.”

“Stop being so naive,” says Theo, and the words come out a little harsher than he intends them to. Clara clenches her fists, her knuckles turning white as she pokes the logs in the fireplace again. Theo pretends to ignore the guilt in his chest. “He’s paranoid,” he continues. “If he notices that something is wrong with either of us, it won’t take him long to figure out what’s happening.”

“I know that —”

Outside, the familiar sounds of men’s chatter and horse’s hooves carry across the yard. Theo turns back to the window. His



father and his men have returned from their hunt at the shore.

"They're here?" Clara asks.

"Yes." Theo tucks his bloodied handkerchief into his pocket and squints through the hazy light of the fire, narrowing his eyes. The edges of his sister's skirts are still half-soaked with saltwater. "Clean yourself up before he comes in."

The next morning, the young man is awake and sitting against the elm tree.

"Thank you," he tells Clara and Theo. He speaks with a slight lilting accent, like the shape of the words are unnatural to his tongue. "For bringing me here."

Theo looks at Clara. His sister pinches his wrist before he can say anything.

"Of course," she says, smoothly. She steps forward and kneels down to adjust the bandages she'd dressed the night before.

For a few moments, Theo hangs back, several steps away from the tree. He considers walking back home, but the man looks past his sister and studies Theo with an unwavering gaze.

"I do not bite," he offers. His eyes are dark and strange, like the way the air feels before a storm.

"Really," says Theo.

"Not like this." He gestures at the bloodied bandages that Clara has discarded in the grass.

Curiosity gets the best of Theo, then. "What are you?"

Amusement passes over the man's features. He turns his head to the sealskin lying beside him. "I think you know."

Even when they were younger, Clara had always been one to make friends quickly. She appears easy to trust, and she likes to keep it that way. If the two of them had been born in the city, Theo thinks that she would have thrived at the parties and galas of upper society.

So, it is not unusual for her to attempt to befriend the selkie in the woods. During the hours their father leaves for town, Theo watches as his sister makes a habit of venturing out to the elm with a novel tucked under her arm. He doesn't bother to go with her. He has no

desire of his own to sit and make small talk with most people, let alone a creature of the sea.

"His name is Henry," she tells Theo at the kitchen table one day. "He said he picked it himself, a long time ago. It suits him, I think. He seems like a Henry."

Theo flips a page of his textbook. It covers geography tells of lands he's never heard of — a couple days ago, he'd managed to trade a few pieces of sea glass for it. "Of course," he says.

"His health is improving."

He turns to the next page. "Fantastic."

"He can walk now, actually."

Another page. "Great."

"Perhaps you could bring him into town. To the market."

Theo jerks his head up, tearing his focus away from his textbook. Clara stares at him innocently from across the table.

"You can't be serious," he says.

"I am always serious," insists Clara.

"Why?"

"I think it would be nice of you." Clara shrugs her shoulders like she's only just suggested something simple. "He seems interested in our world and there's only so much my books can do to entertain him."

Theo thinks of his mother. "Who says we're meant to entertain him?"

"No one. I'm just saying it would be nice. You could be more hospitable with him."

"He isn't human, Clara."

Clara scowls and opens her mouth to speak, but the sound of the front door swinging open in the other room interrupts her. The two of them lapse into silence. The floorboards creak under their father's feet as he makes his way through the house, and the sound grows faint as he walks up the stairs, away from them.

After a moment, Clara lets out a small breath. "But he seems human," she whispers.

Theo hears his father moving in the room above them. He hears the unfurling of heavy leather, the weight of his father's hunting



Hand and String
Marlon Rajan

bag as it hits the floor. Then, the harsh scraping of metal against whetstone.

Theo shuts his textbook and stands. He hates it when his father sharpens his blades in the house — the sound rings in his ears. But, just as he's about to leave the kitchen, he looks over his shoulder at his sister. She is still sitting in her place at the table, her expression unreadable.

"Aren't you curious?" she asks. "Don't you ever wonder?"

Theo's grasp tightens around the spine of his textbook. "Of course, I do."

Satisfaction settles in Clara's face. "Then perhaps you should consider my suggestion."

Later, Theo dreams of the town church. He sits in the wooden pews in front of the sea serpent mosaic and another person is next to him, though he cannot tell if it is his mother or someone else.

In the morning, he stares at the wooden seal on his bedside table and wonders.

Dressed in a pair of cheap trousers and one of Theo's old waistcoats, Henry fits in among the townspeople. Almost. There is something strange about the way he carries himself — he walks with an inhuman grace. Theo watches as Henry passes over cobblestone with quiet footsteps and thinks that he could be handsome if his steps were not so eerily silent.

Soon, they arrive at the market. It is a scene that Theo thinks is unremarkable: numerous stalls line the street, covered by thin linen canopies that stretch across the stone buildings as fishmongers and vendors yell to those that pass. But Henry takes it all in, slowly, as if he's committing each detail to memory.

"Have you been to a market before?" asks Theo.

Henry stops to peer at a basket of dried flowers. "Several, some time ago." He reaches out, brushes his fingers over the petals with one fluid movement. "It might have been awhile. Time passes differently on land."

"How so?"

A small smile appears on Henry's face. "You seem to have plenty of questions for being one who was so hesitant to speak to me before."

Theo hesitates. For some reason, his breath feels stuck in his throat, like he's been caught in an act. He leads Henry to the next stall over, the bookseller's stall, and glances over the titles.

"I tend to be cautious," he says eventually.

Nearby, an older man talks to the blacksmith. He wears a blade at his waist, and Theo vaguely recognizes him to be one of his father's men.

"For good reason," Henry muses. "I do not hold it against you."

They wander in the market for a little longer. Theo keeps an eye on the crowd of people around them, wary of any lingering stares that are casted their way. He tries to keep their pace light, at first, but Henry makes it easy. Only certain things seem to catch his attention, like wooden crates of plums and blackberries or bundles of cloth and stuffed birds.

But as they pass the candlemaker's stall, Henry pauses. There are several sticks of brightly colored wax laid out across the table, unlit, though there are a few that the candlemaker has placed into bronze holders. For a few seconds Henry places his hand over a small flame. It dances beneath his fingers, the light casting a soft glow over his face, and for a moment, Theo forgets that they need to keep moving.

"It is hard to replicate a flame underwater," Henry explains as they walk away.

Theo considers this. "Can that even be done?"

The corners of Henry's lips quirk upwards. "The witches can do it," he says.

They arrive at the small terrace that lies at the edge of the market, overlooking the sea. Theo leans against the railing, and wordlessly, Henry joins him. From there, Theo can smell the water, and if he squints, he can just barely make out the shape of the stone carvings of old gods that sit on the shore.

"What can *you* do?" Theo asks.

"Perhaps I can show you," Henry says. He tilts his face up

towards the sky and suddenly the clouds seem to darken.

But then Theo blinks, and Henry has a sly smile on his face and the sky is light again.

"Another time," says Henry.

They pass the town church on their way back to the forest. For a split second, Theo's dream from the night before flashes across his mind. But he pushes it away into some remote corner of his brain, and at the edge of the forest, he parts with Henry as the sky begins to fade from blue into purple.

Their father has already left to go on his hunt when Theo arrives at the house. Clara is curled up in an armchair by the fire with a few pieces of string and slivers of sea glass, crafting what seems to be a bracelet. She looks up from her work when he enters the room.

"Was it so bad?" she asks.

"It wasn't bad at all," Theo says. He is surprised at how honest he sounds.

Clara grins. "Good."

The days pass by. Clara continues to venture into the forest in the morning, and occasionally, Theo accompanies her. Mostly, they listen to Clara read her novels. Sometimes Henry shares stories of his own.

Market days come and go, too. Theo has gotten used to the silence of Henry's movements and the easy fascination that spreads across his features. It has become routine, to a certain extent. But Theo knows that things will not last this way for long. He cannot ignore the growing suspicion in his father's eyes at the dinner table, cannot shake the feeling he is being watched when they walk to the elm tree or browse the market stalls.

"You worry too much," Clara tells him, one day, on their way back to the house.

"I know," Theo says, and he wants to add, *I have every reason to*, but he doesn't. He can tell that Clara knows by the way she flexes her hands when their father is near. Both of them know very well that

someday, one of them will make a mistake and put an end to all of it.

He finds Henry much harder to read. Perhaps it is because he has known Clara all his life, but there is something else to Henry — something more strange and ancient.

After one of their trips to the market, Theo slips inside the town church. Henry follows, and for a moment, the two stand together in the silence. Mass has just ended. Smoke spirals off the candles at the altar.

He could be human, Theo thinks, as he takes a seat in a nearby pew. He could almost be human.

"They say the old gods can't step foot in churches," Theo says. His voice echoes off the walls. He doesn't look at Henry — instead, he focuses on the sea serpent that darts between waves of blue tile.

Henry slides into the pew, next to him. "Yet here I am."



The Woods

Elizabeth Schriner

One day she woke from tranquil slumber
to a world of noise and agitation.

Amidst the chaos of cars and people
the woods sung a lullaby
and the mountains called her name.

The wild of nature is far greater than
the wild of man.

The girl knows this and dreams
of them merging into one.

She longs to wade in the riverbeds
and dance on the forest floor.

In peace, she will sink into the ground
and feel the dirt between her toes.

Raindrops shall fill her thirst
and course through her veins.

Her skin will be clothed by
the moss growing on her skin,
soft and springy like green felt.

Vines will hold her here
where the flowers will bloom in her hair.

The days will mean nothing to
the swirl of stars in the sky.

The lullabies of crickets and birds
will soothe the girl's sorrows
and the twisted thicket will
match her restless energy.

Cradled by a natural spirit,
she will sleep again.



self portrait as a flower garden iii
< Maya Simonte

Did God Vote Red?

Julia Khater



THE SECOND COMING

Funfetti and Cream

Marlon Rajan

There's something charming about box cake mix. No home-made cake will ever taste as good as funfetti cake mix straight from the box. It's one of those few things that crosses all socioeconomic boundaries that usually separate some of us from the glories of things like Keurig coffee machines and champagne flutes. I haven't met a single person who hasn't used cake mix before. That's why I thought it'd be a pretty safe bet for a potluck. Funfetti cake mix is inoffensive. No one will know who brought Funfetti cupcakes or when or anything about that person so it's perfect for a potluck. And they're impersonal enough that they can be thrown out if they're not eaten. But it's not a potluck, but it's basically a potluck. I don't know. I have to bring something and there will be people there who want to eat something and everyone can eat a Funfetti cupcake. Unless anybody's vegan. But if they're vegan they'll probably bring their own thing.

The Pillsbury Doughboy watches me and laughs when I accidentally drop some of the eggshell into the batter and have to clumsily fish around to scoop it up. *Just come. Bring something!* Oh Jesus. The oven beeps, heated to the right temperature and now waiting for whatever I'm about to put inside it. Somehow, I still feel like I can mess up this cake mix. But I know I can't because I followed the directions exactly. I checked it three times and then a few more in between the steps, just to make sure. And yet I still got eggshell in the batter.

"And yet you still got eggshell in the batter," The Little Man says. He's red and looks like a tiny devil. He's only five or six inches tall, with little black horns and a big grin made of sharp white teeth. He's wearing a little three-piece suit for his little body, tailored expertly, with black dress shoes freshly shined. Sometimes he wears a little black hat that sits between his horns or a little silver Rolex. Today he's wearing neither.

"You don't have to say it again," I say. I get the eggshell out and mix everything together with a fork. It always smells exactly the same and, God, it smells so good. The Little Man starts giggling in the

corner.

"Imagine if you just didn't bake it. You brought it right like that," he snivels, shaking with laughter. He always laughs like that. I think about it. I could turn up to this not-potluck potluck with a bowl of uncooked cake batter. I could just as easily turn up with uncooked cake batter as I could with the half-full jar of olives in the fridge, or without wearing shoes or forgetting my purse. Would it be funny? I don't know anyone there enough for anything I do yet to be funny. My hands get clammy. A bowl of uncooked cake batter.

"I'm not going to do that," I say, spooning the batter into the cupcake liners. I'm not going to bring uncooked batter to the potluck. I look at the cheap tin foil liners that I hope don't matter. When it's just me I don't care how they look, I just don't want the thin paper to stick to the bottoms. Is it better to risk aluminum liners or uncooked cake batter?

"But you could." He says.

"But I could." I say. The Little Man is stupid but sometimes The Little Man is right.

The cupcakes turn out fine. I let them cool so that the frosting didn't melt off and everything. I tried to make the frosting look like flowers and it came out looking alright. I've at least got the handy skills to make Funfetti cake mix look presentable. Not that it's usually unpresentable, they've just got a little character now. A little personality. The Little Man hides in the bag I've slipped the muffin tin into. He perfectly fits into one of the empty muffin cups – I couldn't resist and had one before I came. Hopefully no one will notice. I had to carry the tin sideways in a bag on one hand the entire way but it wasn't too bad. When you're carrying a bag like that on the train everyone else knows what that's like and leaves you alone. Whether it's pizza or hot wings or Funfetti cupcakes, everybody's been there. The train car smelled like urine, though, so hopefully that didn't affect the flavor. Only one way to find out. The door opens a crack, then closes again to unhinge the latch before swinging open.

"Hey! You made it!" She opens the door with a flourish. I can't tell if she's wearing a ton of rosy pink makeup or if she's been drinking

and has a light case of Asian flush. Either way she looks great. A fat silver ring catches my eye as she fixes some stray hairs back behind her ear.

"I bet she's wondering why you're a half hour late," The Little Man says. His voice is muffled from inside of the bag.

"Yeah, I made it. Sorry," I say to her, ignoring The Little Man.

"Sorry? Come on in," she says. I meant to say something about being late but it didn't come. Sorry. She takes me to the kitchen and I put the bagged muffin tin on the counter. It's a small apartment but it's nice – I know she's got two other roommates but it doesn't seem like they're out of space. The sink is a little cramped and they don't have a dishwasher, but neither do I. I haven't had a dishwasher since I lived in a house on campus. It was the only exciting thing about living in Kenyon.

"Want anything? Something to drink? We're just chatting in

the living room while the lasagna heats up in the oven," she says. She's explaining this to me as if I have any idea what this event is supposed to be or that I know anyone there at all. She's the only one I know and it's only because I invited her to a free dance show in the basement of the Guggenheim a few weeks ago.

My mom got a few tickets for her and her friends but someone was having a baby and someone else couldn't get childcare so she decided to go out on a date with her husband instead. She gave me the tickets and asked me to invite someone, anyone, as long as I didn't waste the tickets. I had a friend from high school named Mia who had just moved back to the city from college, so I thought it'd be a good opportunity to reconnect with her and she picked up the ticket when we went out to coffee a day or two before. For the third ticket I was having trouble thinking of who to give it to. I didn't really want to invite my closest friends, since Mia was only tangentially in my circle, and inviting another friend from high school would make our conversations only about reminiscing about high school, which I didn't want either. I was out for a walk one night thinking about the ticket when I wandered into Union Square. Someone brought a boombox and a few people were really getting into dancing together. The sound quality was tinny and somewhat jarring, but I took a seat on the steps to watch anyway. A few skateboarders joined in and tried to skate on two boards stacked on top of one another. The Little Man laughed when one of them took their shirt off.

"Don't you wish you could just get up and dance with him?" he asked me. I didn't say anything. I did not wish to get up and dance with him. In fact, I had little to no interest in men unless they were doing something like balance on one hand or do a backflip like he was.

"I bet you want him to come over and kiss you all over," he said. I closed my eyes to try and shield myself from the image of it, but it came nonetheless. I shivered and shook my head, trying to erase the image like an Etch A Sketch.

Portrait of a Renewed Old Friend

< Charles Kibler



"I don't want that," I said. "I really, really don't want that."

As The Little Man snickered I saw a group of people walk up to the stairs and take a seat a few feet away from me. They seemed to be having a good time. They were all dressed pretty well and a few had interesting facial jewelry.

"Call them fags," said The Little Man. I got up to go. The Little Man was making this experience difficult for me to enjoy. As I walked by them, I paused.

"Hey, I like your nose ring," I said. Anything to circumvent the efforts of The Little Man. They thanked me, but as I turned to leave I heard one of them say my name. I looked back. She had her back turned towards me when I was sitting down, but now that I was closer I could see her face. I recognized her from a ceramics class I took last summer. She always needed my help with throwing the clay, but once I got her started she made quite a few nice-looking pots. I, on the other hand, almost never finished a project 'cause I got too caught up in the details.

"Eun-ji?" I asked. She nodded enthusiastically.

"It's been so long!" she said. I shrugged.

"Yeah, I guess it has," I said. The Little Man hid behind my shin. He didn't like it when I talked to people and forgot about him. But there I was, talking to Eun-ji and forgetting all about him. He'd get me back for it later, but in the moment it was a welcome relief. Her friends kept talking amongst themselves while we caught up. She'd also just moved to the city from Kenyon, but before that she'd lived in Westchester. I laughed at that because all the kids from Westchester always claim they're from the city, and she admitted it.

"Dude, I literally don't know shit about living in the city. I thought I did, but obviously I don't. At least I can say I've never gone to a Just Salad for lunch," she said. At least she's trying to be a little more self-aware than the rest of New York state's NYC gentrifying transplants. An ambulance speeds down 14th street and we pause to let it go by. I think about it crashing into me, spraying blood onto Eun-ji and the boombox dancers and the skateboarders. A sight they'd never forget. The Little Man humps my leg. The ambulance passes.

"Well, I've got to go. So nice to see you though," I say. I stand

to take my leave. She stands too.

"Yeah, so nice to catch up! Want to hang out sometime? Oh, and I need to show you a video of me finally throwing clay by myself. It happened a few days after you left, but I couldn't have done it without all your help," she said. I rolled my eyes and told her she was giving me too much credit, and she laughed. I put my hand in my pocket and felt my wallet, which reminded me of the spare ticket inside of it.

"Hey, also, would you want to see this performance at the Guggenheim tomorrow? I have a spare ticket and it'd be a shame to let it go to waste," I said. She looked so happy that I almost forgot about my guts all over the sidewalk.

"Sure, sounds great!" I handed over the ticket and we said our farewells.

Right before the show, I started to get nervous that it wasn't going to be all that great. I didn't personally know the piece at all, and had no background knowledge going into the show. I hadn't bothered to look it up before arriving, so when Mia asked me what we were seeing I just replied with "I have no idea" and left it at that. Eun-Ji met us in the theater just as the lights were going down, so I didn't get to ask if she'd looked them up beforehand. She settled down in the seat we reserved for her, taking off her jacket and arranging it on the back of the seat. She took a breath, threw her hair back behind her shoulders and wiped her forehead with her sleeve before leaning over me to whisper to Mia and I:

"Sorry I'm late, the six was a pain in the ass. We stopped at Astor Place for so long someone lit a cigarette," We shared a quiet laugh before the stage lit up and the piece began.

"I probably smell like smoke." She said. I sniffed the air. The Little Man, sitting at my feet because he hated art and always asked me to make loud noises when people were quiet, laughed.

"She smells warm and kind of like good flowers and she's cute and you could kiss her neck right now," he said. I shook my head. I barely knew Eun-Ji at all. Shut up, Little Man.

"No, you're fine. You actually smell kind of nice," I said. She chuckled under her breath.

“Why, thank you.” She smiled and turned her attention to the stage as the dancers took their positions.

The dance piece ended up being one of the best performances I’d ever been to. They were a dancing troupe that specialized in ballet and tap, and the entire set was done on a layer of sand. Ever so often a dancer would glide onto the stage and sprinkle more sand in places where it’d been danced off. The result was intensely rhythmic – skrit, skrit, skrit. The sound of dance shoes on sand.

We all went out and had a drink together after the show. We all enjoyed it, and vowed to keep our program and tickets to remember the performance. It ended up somewhere in my apartment, exactly where I don’t know. That’s when Eun-ji invited me to the potluck. More specifically, she said “It’s just a hang out with some friends. I think it’ll be fun! Just come. Bring something!” I said yes because I couldn’t think of anything else to say, and Mia said she unfortunately had a closing shift that day. We then exchanged numbers and went on our way. That night I thought about her while The Little Man danced an Irish step on my bedside table, clapping his hands and making it impossible to sleep. I really liked talking with her. She laughed at some of the things I said that I thought she might like, and had a few cool tattoos. She was working at the courthouse as a court reporter, typing on a stenotype machine for six hours. She had just come from work, so she had the keyboard with her in her purse. It was a little less than a foot long, so just a bit smaller than the average laptop, and a few inches thick. There were only a few oval-shaped keys which were unlabeled. She explained that it was used for shorthand typing, a phonetic way of typing compared to our letter-based QWERTY keyboard. I didn’t really understand it, but I thought it was cool that she could type over 200 words per minute. Her hands looked really pretty as she typed on it too.

“If you broke her fingers she wouldn’t be able to do it anymore,” said The Little Man.

“But her fingers are so pretty,” I said.

“And her smile too.” I flipped the pillow onto the cooler side and rolled over, away from The Little Man.

“Well isn’t that a shame,” he said.

“Isn’t that a shame.”

Eun-ji blinks and I realize I haven’t answered her yet.

“Uh, just water’s fine for now.” I say. She happily goes to the



untitled
Maya Levy

cabinet and prepares a glass for me. I can see the living room through the kitchen and a few people have turned to see who's arrived. They've gone back to their conversations but they're obviously waiting for an introduction. The Little Man starts to laugh.

"Bark at them. Get on all fours and start barking," he says. While the thought makes me feel embarrassed, I can't help but smile. What would they do? Scream? Laugh? Kick me out?

"Here you go," Eun-ji says. She passes me the glass. It's wide and tumbler-like, with words that say 'I'M NOT LIKE A REGULAR MOM, I'M A COOL MOM' on the side in glittery pink lettering.

love shack! baby love shack!

Maya Simonte



"What's up?" she says, noting my smile. I shake my head and take a drink.

"I just feel a little like a dog right now," I say. She smiles too, but her eyebrows give away her confusion.

"What?" she asks.

"Woof." I say. We laugh and she leans against the counter.

"So, what'd you bring?" she asks. I set my glass down and slide the muffin tin out of the bag. The Little Man is nowhere to be seen.

"Cupcakes," I say. Eun-ji claps her hands together. A few people in the living room look over.

"Please tell me they're the Funfetti kind," she says. I nod.

"They're the fucking best," I say.

"They're the fucking best," she affirms. She takes one and walks me to the living room, introducing me to people along the way. There's one other person from our pottery class, another that I recognized somewhat from my days on campus, and the rest are new to me. Eun-ji clears a space for us on the couch and we all talk for a bit before she gets up to grab the lasagna. It's vegetarian, which I'm thankful for, and she didn't go easy on the mozzarella, which makes the top a chewy and salty crust: just how it should be. The small talk in the beginning isn't the best, but eventually everyone lets their guard down and we get into some real conversation. Not that the small talk isn't real, it's just everyone trying to gauge the room: Does anyone want to hear about my indie film? Are they pretending to care about my new job, or are they actually interested? Is it worth revealing that I like to watch anime in my freetime? It's a careful game of show-and-tell, back and forth popcorns until we find our rhythm. The Little Man shows up and makes things difficult, pointing out the sharp edge of the glass coffee table and the treachery that would be spilling tomato sauce on the off-white carpet. Despite that, I'm still having a good time. It makes me miss hanging out with my friends more, so when I go to the bathroom I send them a quick text and ask to make a plan for sometime next week. When I get out, Eun-ji and another friend have taken my seat and the lasagna plates have been replaced with my cupcakes and a few other homemade desserts. I spot a tray of brownies and some rice krispy treats individually wrapped in Saran Wrap. Not the most inno-

cent treats in the world. I reach for a rice krispy treat and think better of it, opting for another cupcake. Can't go wrong with that. I sit on the floor by Eun-ji's feet and lean against the couch.

"Don't smoke?" she asked. She must have seen me reach for the other dessert.

"Yeah, it's not for me. You?" I say. She nods.

"I used to a lot, but nowadays it makes me feel like I'm trapped in some kind of second world where nothing is real. Like my mind is asleep but my eyes are still seeing. Do you know what I mean?" she says. I do know what she means. She's rambling a little, but that's just the wine. I'm having a bit of trouble focusing on what she says without thinking about her pretty hands and the silver ring and the blush, but again, that's just the wine.

"I get that," I say. She waits for me to fulfill my half of the conversation. It's not in a pressuring way, but in a let's-talk-I-want-to-know-you kind of way. I look around for The Little Man and he's preoccupied jacking off in the corner of the room.

"The last time I smoked I was still in college. Maybe sophomore year? A naked little devil-looking man appeared in my dorm room and told me to make him a tuxedo. I decided to stay up all night making this tuxedo, and in the morning my roommate woke up and asked me what I was doing. I told her, 'I'm making a tuxedo for the little devil-man.' The next day when I came back from class all her stuff was gone and I'd gotten a new roommate." Eun-ji laughs mid-bite, spraying frosting and crumbs into my hair. Everyone pauses as she coughs and sputters. Someone passes her a glass of water. When she's calmed down, everyone goes back to their previous conversations.

"What the FUCK?! Talk about a bad trip," she says. She keeps erupting into laughing fits and I watch her with a smile. It was pretty funny. I'm proud that the truth gets her to laugh so hard.

"And oh my GOD, your hair... I'm so sorry." She laughs more and tries to dab at it with a napkin.

"You're fine. What's the damage like?" I ask. She winces.

"I'll just clean it off in the bathroom," I follow her there and she wets a washcloth as I sit on the toilet seat. She pulls on my hair a little to get the frosting out and it feels kind of relaxing.

"I'm so sorry I'm laughing, but Jesus. Wow. What happened to the tuxedo? Did you make it?" she asks. I tell her that it's fine to laugh, it was definitely absurd.

"Well, I thought I was making a tuxedo, but really all I had done was eat a pack of hot cheetos and fall asleep on the floor. Not too graceful, unfortunately," I say. She laughs more at that and continues dampening my hair. We make eye contact in the bathroom mirror above the sink, and it's almost sickening how much warmth and adoration we send each other. She's really cool. I like hanging out with her. I'd like to see her more. I break eye contact to look for The Little Man but he's not here. When I look back at her she's looking away, focused on one curly strand.

We talk about this and that and eventually my hair is clean and we return to the living room. It's getting a bit more rowdy, and while I'd love to stay, I'd also love to go home and take a bath. Maybe clean my kitchen if The Little Man won't sleep. I like people and I like talking and I like this kind of thing, but the calm hair stroking in the bathroom made the alcohol settle like a weighted blanket, turning words into whispered lullabies and music to white noise. After a little while longer I tell Eun-ji I've got to go and she says 'for real?!' and I say 'for real'. It's not a momentous goodbye but a lingering one, a goodbye that means it won't last forever.

Waiting for the train back home I get a text from her. It says,
'hey stranger! Want to get coffee this week? I'll pay (to apologize for your hair)

**apologize :)'*

It makes me smile. I ask her if it's a date because I know it's a date. She says 'maybe' with a wink. Yeah, I do like her a lot. Damn. I feel stupid and giddy on the train ride, smiling at the strangers who sit across from me and complimenting an older woman's red nail polish. It's good to be around. To stick around. The air around me feels warm and I think the world is good. I feel like I drank a potion. I really need to pee.

Unlocking the door to my apartment, the house still smells like frosting and it makes me think of her. The Little Man is vomiting onto the carpet and says that the man asleep on the double seater in my

train car probably gave me an incurable disease “worse than cancer”. I close my eyes in the doorway and I see Eun-ji in a halo, her pretty hands curled around The Little Man’s neck like the way she would pull on a lump of clay to form a bowl. And if I keep watching, I can see her beating the ever loving shit out of The Little Man until he’s nothing. I open my eyes and lock the door behind me and The Little Man is gone, though the vomit stains remain. Fuck that guy.

Funfetti cupcakes, a warm bath, and The Little Man’s head on a stick. Sounds like a good time.



Chocolate Babka

Mekulash Baron-Galbavi





The House to the Left of the Stairway

Oscar Nollette-Patul-

You're the boy that walks up
The stairway beside my house
You make my dogs bark
Until my head hurts
You should stop walking up
The stairway beside my house

Hm, maybe their chains
Should not be there at all
Well, maybe the stairs
Should not be here at all
Or, maybe my dogs
Should not bark at all
Or, maybe my dogs
Should not be mine at all

I wish I said no when,
He brought them home last year
We bought this home last year
I said 'I do' last year
I wish I had known when,
I brought the dogs to tears
I brought myself to here
I bought myself out of fear

I'm the one that lives with
The stairway beside my house
I make my dogs bark
Until my head hurts
I should start walking up
The stairway beside my house

Did God Vote Red? >
Julia Khater

When I leave,
I hope my dogs don't bark



"HE TOOK PAID LEAVE FOR OUR SINS"

From that Thrift Shop Down the Road - A Sestina

Maya Levy

A warm smell of someone else's grandma
Engulfs me. Objects filled with the memories
Of others are all around. A family once wore those shirts,
Matching on a vacation where they bought that table,
Or chair, or lamp, or whatever they desired.
Rows of sentiment and stories, found for less than a dollar.

How can we give our memories the value of a dollar?
Give away remnants of love after the death of grandma?
I know that is not what she desired.
She didn't want you to forget the shared memories —
That vase use to sit on her table!
Now you throw it in a box with stained shirts?

Boxes piled up by the dozen, old shirts
Spilling over the sides. A rich girl will buy it for a dollar,
Then post a video of her haul, camera on table
And back against a cushion that her grandma
Sat against every night. Ignored memories
From an old life that was never desired.

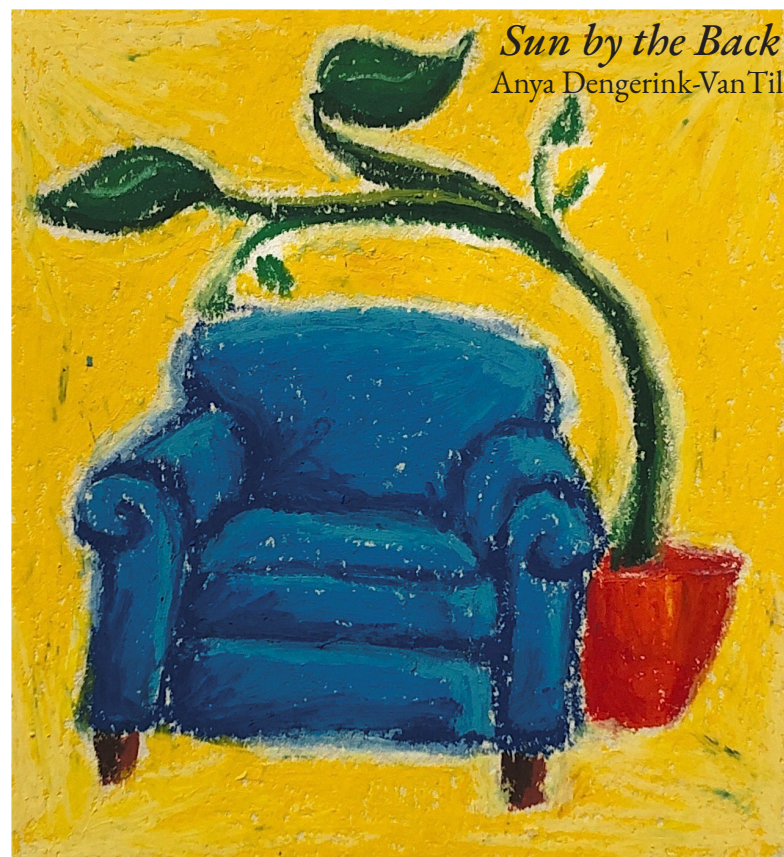
But those jeans are desired!
And that Tommy Hilfiger graphic tee shirt
That someone wore during a summer where memories
Were made and fruity drinks were sold for a dollar.
On a beach, where you can forget about grandma,
Forget about the past! Put those drinks on the table.

Do you remember that table?
Where you brought the man you desired,
Where a small spoon was put to your lips by grandma,

And where you tie dyed those shirts
And sold them in your neighborhood for a dollar.
And now, where are those memories?

In an aisle of a musty room, with other forgotten memories.
Across from a dusty table,
A sticky note marking it as a dollar
discount. Because it is not desired.
It is fashion, it is material, those shirts
That were once worn by grandma.

Let them buy that table, it's no longer desired.
Let those girls spend a dollar on your shirts.
Let memories be sold. Say goodbye to grandma.



My Name is Minette

Theo Poling

Minette's father sat upon their toughest horse. His name was Lumpy--the horse, not her father. He was a grey and white piebald draft horse, a sturdy, wide-footed work horse that pulled their carts and wagons.

The wagon he pulled today was shoddy but wide and deep. They'd kept it all these years because no other wagon could haul the same amount of copper from the mines. Minette sat in the back, straw and dust and dirt poking her butt through her trousers.

The cart bounced over the potholes, ruts, and piles of horse shit. It was a hot day, weighed down and sticky with the humidity. The cicadas were loud this year, and their cries sang of exhaustion, like Minette was permanently caught between sleep and wakefulness. Deep in the doldrums of summer, the grass was dead and brown, and the sky was a weary, endless blue.

She held a hand above her eyes as a visor, squinting into the piercing sun. Despite the oppressive heat, Main Street was bustling at high noon. Vendors put stalls out; saloons, stores, and restaurants had their doors open; and horses, carts, and pedestrians bumped into each other, pushing out a path through the disarray. Even from afar, voices carried, jostling over each other.

Her father had the same reaction she did. He stopped Lumpy, staring at the hustle and bustle with a tired slump of his shoulders. Droz-Upon-Wooton was not, by any measure, a large town. It wasn't even in a particularly hospitable part of the country.

Minette might even call it a dump. It was a nice dump, a dump she liked, but a dump, nonetheless.

Paw grabbed the reins, nudging Lumpy to the right. They skirted town altogether, avoiding the tall brownstones and cobblestones and other kinds of stones. Lumpy thumped tiredly along a winding dirt road, head bobbing, ears flicking flies away.

Minette had never been to this part of town before. She craned her neck, looking left and right. The roads were thin, some just tram-

pled grass. Hills stretched into the distance, a forest at the top of a hill set into the horizon. Here, it was just a flat field with some huts and homes.

At first, she thought it was deserted, but the longer they rode, the more faces she saw peeking out from behind curtains. The sweat pooled at the small of her back. She scratched at it, no longer able to ignore the feeling that niggled in the back of her mind.

"Maybe we should turn around," Minette called out to Paw.

"We're almost there, Mort," he responded. "Just a little further."

Minette slumped back against the cart rail, lowering her head to hide her face behind her hair. Paw and Maw hadn't made her cut it yet, but with how hot this summer was getting, she knew it was only a matter of time. She carded her fingers through the brown curls, already lamenting their loss even as they shone in the sunlight.

If they could stop calling her Morton or Morty or Mort, that would be nice, too, but at this point, it was wishful thinking through and through.

Just like it was wishful thinking to dream of escaping being the golden "son," the "heir" to their copper smithing business, the "strong, tall boy" who was "built like an ox."

No one realized it, but their words, their assumptions, burned Minette to her very core.

A building up at the next street corner caught her eye. It was solid brick, two stories, with a porch and a puffing chimney. It was out of place among the tiredness of this part of town, and it was the first building they'd passed where people didn't hide or dart away.

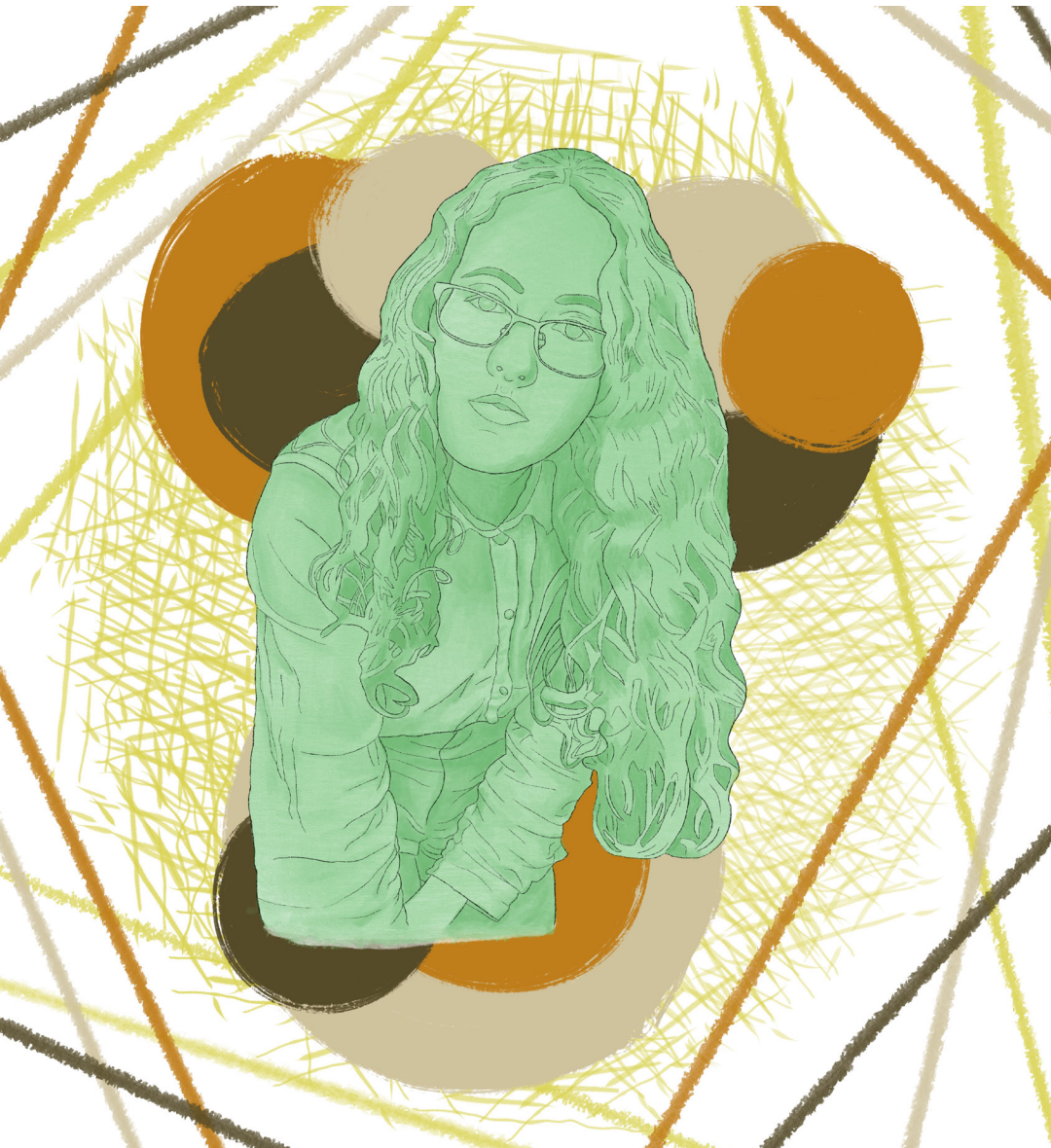
A few fat, old men sat on the porch spitting into spittoons. One man had a banjo and was playing a type of music Minette had never heard before. It was twangy and morose, but oddly upbeat: she felt like she could cry about a dead lover and beat the crap out of a bad guy while listening to it.

She made eye contact with the banjo man as they passed. He smiled up at her, gap-toothed, and played even faster, all without looking down at the strings.

A few people came outside, the door hanging open. She

couldn't tell if they were boys or girls from afar--some had makeup on but short hair. Some wore dark clothes with cloaks hiding their features. Some were broad, others rakishly thin. One of them said something to banjo man and they all started dancing. They moved freely, raising their hands to the sky and sashaying their hips. The music possessed them.

Minette couldn't look away. She kept looking at banjo man for as long as she could, their connection only severed when they turned a



corner and the building vanished out of sight.

Paw was noticeably silent, jaw clenched as he pushed forward into the deserted hills.

"Paw, what was that place?"

"Droz's only shame," Paw growled, with surprising ferocity. "Don't you ever go there, Minette. That place is full of thieves and liars, weirdos and outcasts."

Minette's heart thumped in her chest, as if to tell her to take note.

"Oh," she said, trying to sound angry or disturbed. "That's... terrible."

"Damn right," Paw growled. "Sinners they are. Just do your work and find a wife and give her some sons and you won't be like them."

They reached the yawning chasms set into the hillside, surrounded by all sorts of lumber devices. Some of the mines went underground, but they also carved into the hillside, creating dusty, orange canyons where forests and valleys used to be. The copper mines were practically the only reason Droz existed.

Paw whickered to Lumpy. The horse knew the routine by now. He ambled over to the rack, stopping just as Paw swung himself out of the saddle and tied Lumpy's halter to the post.

Minette climbed out of the cart. It was times like these that she bemoaned her long legs and well-worked muscles. Now she was the workhorse, not Lumpy.

Getting copper from the mine was when Minette felt the least like herself. The miners called her "boy," teasing her about "manning up" or "getting some soot on his shoulders." They compared muscles, loading her up with the biggest raw ingot of copper available just to admire her form and how tough she was.

< *Portrait of a New Friend* Charles Kibler

"That's a big'un you got there," she'd overheard one worker say to Paw one day. "You better find a wife for 'im and sire up some more soon."

She hadn't stayed around long enough to hear what Paw would say. She was afraid of what she'd hear.

Paw and Minette got to work. She joined the train of workers moving copper from the mines up to the repository. They took ingots from the lode. They must've hit a good vein. There was a lot more copper than usual.

Paw was excited. "Think about what we can do with this, Morton," he said with a wrinkly grin. "This is gonna be a good year."

Minette sighed internally. She nodded and smiled at her paw, taking the lump of dirt and metal from him and thunking it into the wagon with a grunt.

This would not be the rest of her life.

The thought of hauling copper until her shoulders gave out made her sick. She didn't want to wed some lady to give her children she looked after all day while Minette hammered out copper in the smithy. She didn't want to stay in Droz-Upon-Wooton for the rest of her life, swinging a hammer instead of singing. Adventuring. Wearing fine outfits. Laughing. Dancing.

Minette had never danced before.

And how she wanted to. How her feet itched to dance to banjo man, to go in that place and discover its secrets. To be like those people. Free. Honest.

Real

Maybe that mysterious place--and all of its mysterious patrons--was her ticket to freedom.

She had to go there. Tonight. It was her last chance to jump out of this story, this fake world everyone else had built up around her. It was her last chance to be her own character.

To be Minette.

Buoyancy

Grace Meinke

Ragweed bends to meet the sun.

Kettles sing and thorns become ash.

Coneflowers lace the meadow where we dwell,
accumulating at our feet with a gossamer touch.

Unruly vines and dewy mornings made us their prey.
Mother Nature shows no pity for the victims who fall in love
with places before people. Powdery clouds come and,
without trying, our heads get caught in them.

This is more than glasses tinted rose, these are new eyes.
Poppies place us in trances, wind speaks of harmony
and whimsy as it gallops through the meadow
in a whisper that smell like lilies.

The humming of the bees falls cluelessly into
the downbeat of our laughter. The sun reaches
in rays to spotlight your smile and melts the
ice in our teas. Delectation.

Bullfrog nags, weeds sigh. Every thunderstorm
feeds the river that could drown me without effort, but it
is your hands and ringing bell of a voice
that will forever keep me afloat.



january

Kennedi Killips

the grief is damp and warm still, not yet cooled or
scabbed over,

not yet neglected the grief growls
low and oozes

like fresh milkweed blooming in August telling stories
of my mother

leaves a metallic taste in my open mouth
I can almost forget

how she looked in the hospital bed so small
that the bleached

sheets swallowed her whole and not even
God

could pull her from her own body's wreckage during
the funeral my sister



read a Bible passage about salvation and I
left the church

before my knees warped below me
the snow

in the parking lot got caught on my tights
I could hear

the congregation sing about death and the shep-
herd coming

to collect his sheep but my mother was not
a lamb

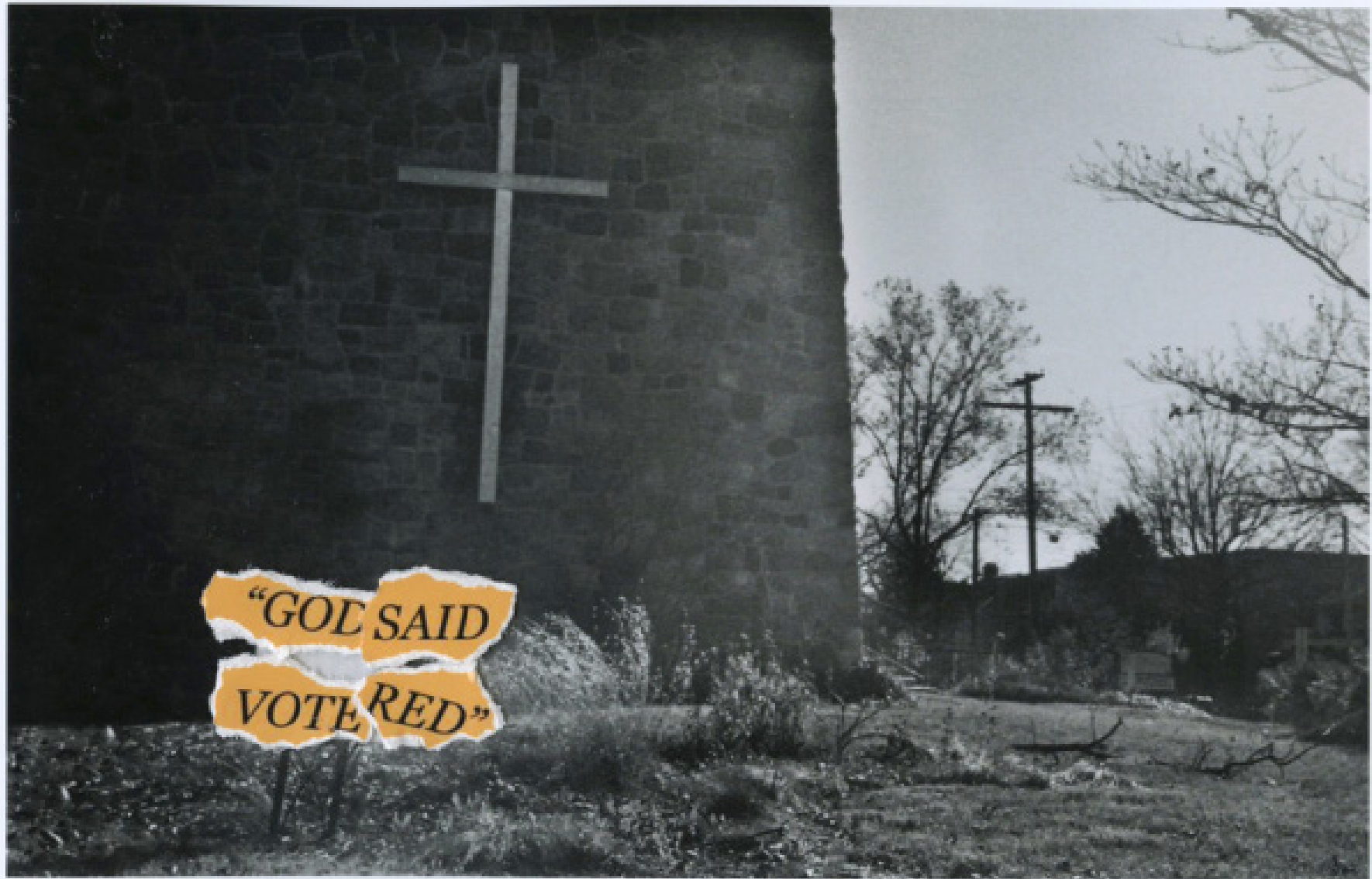
or a bird she was a woman until she was a body
beneath a sheet

or a body inside the box or the grief that
rang hollow

through a room of regret



Did God Vote Red?
Julia Khater



THE WORD OF GOD

Cemetery III

Emilia Ferrante

This cemetery sits politely behind its fence.
Most of the leaves on its side
are already on the ground,
paying their respects to the dead.
On our side,
the side of the living,
the fading sun makes the leaves glow yellow.
We force death to be so tidy,
we put it into rows and mark it with stone,
but we forget that it is like leaves,
falling where they may.
Somehow
the leaves in the cemetery
know to fall first.



Hand and Cat

Marlon Rajan



The Parable of Jane and the Boy of Clay

Emilia Ferrante

Jane dreamed of the little boy on the riverbank. He was the little boy, known from a children's story passed down in the region, who was crafted with the clay of the farmlands on which they sat. She knew this, of course, knew it as well as she knew any other fact about the world around her at that moment. She sat next to him, quite placidly, and though she already knew the answer, asked where he came from. He just pointed at the ground, gestured to the fields all around them, and she nodded.

You, too, are made from this, he said.

At first, Jane protested. *I was born,* she told him. *I was not made. I bleed.*

Do you remember being born? he asked.

Well, no, said Jane. *I was too young to remember. But I'm sure I was.*

I don't remember being made, he said. *That makes us much the same. But I was made, all the same. I am from the earth,* he said. *You are too.*

But I bleed when I am cut, Jane said. *Clay cannot bleed -- it is not flesh -- so I am not clay.*

He looked at her for just a moment, then took out a pocket knife and, before she could stop him, he cleanly sliced his palm. Skin broken, blood began to flow, viscous and real. Jane touched it in awe.

He put his wrist in the stream of the river in front of them. The water ran red, then clear again. *Brief,* he said. *Pain is like that.*

< Clay Bust

Noelani Conahan

So is belief. You believe in me now. I see it, written all over your hands, in my blood. But tomorrow, even in five minutes, that belief will be gone. Washed clean. The stream in your head will once again run clear, unmarred by any belief in one so unbelievable as I. Your belief in me is momentary, fleeting, transitory; it will wash off you quickly, as quick as the blood will be washed from your hands.

Jane froze, feeling caught, her hand just beginning to lower into the river at that moment. *Why does it matter what I believe,* said Jane. *We both bleed when we're cut. We are both washed away by the river.*

I suppose it doesn't matter much, in the grand scheme of things, he said. *How would you live your life differently if you believed everyone was made out of clay?*

His words settled heavily before Jane spoke. *I guess I wouldn't,* she said. *I guess I would live my life in exactly the same way I do now.*

He laughed in a short burst. *Exactly,* he said.

He brushed his hands, now clean of blood, on his pants until they were dry. He began to stand up when Jane grabbed his arm -- which felt for all the world as much like flesh and blood as her own. *Why tell me, then?* said Jane. *Why bother telling me if I will live exactly the same way, belief or not?*

He kicked at the water and shrugged. *I like to see that moment of belief,* he said. *I like to see the stream run red.*

The LaCroix Family

Oscar Nollette-Patulski

Wednesdays are for trash. We roll the bins out of the garage and onto our driveway, the sun raking the leaves in the yard and the top of the driveway. My brother and I alternate our garbage responsibility each week; this time, I do recyclables. I tell the yellow lid to open wide, and then feed it a week's worth of plastic, metal, and glass. I escort it down to the end of the driveway, my bare feet pressed to the peaks of the rough pavement. The trash and recycling sit there together overnight, keeping each other company until each of their trucks pick them up, vomiting their waste into one of the city's moving stomachs. The next day, I meet the bins back at the driveway after school, pushing them back to the garage, their wheels growling on the irregular cement, already hungry for next week's feast.

Thirty minutes earlier, twenty-five on a good day, I leave school. My heavy backpack, brisk pace, and the afternoon sun cultivate thirst in the back of my throat. My mouth becomes a desert, so I walk faster to escape it. I climb my street up to the house, push the bins back to the garage, pull the screened door open, put my hands to the cold aluminum, and pop open the tab. Bubbles flow faithfully, popping on the roof of my mouth, the temporary pain a small price for the prize of hydration. Life returns to my throat, the afternoon drought finally broken. After several more gulps, I sigh in relief and toss the LaCroix can with the other returnables. The empty container blends into the background, my faint reflection walking away in the metal.

On Wednesdays, the bin overflows with them, swirling cylinders all signed by the same brand, like a jumbled Andy Warhol. Our cans are former drinks, former friends, former pleasures, exchanged at the local grocery for ten cents each. It is because of this value that they avoid the city's trucks and get the special treatment. My brother and I bring them to the garage, and my father takes care of this next leg of the journey to the store. It must be a weird way to go: flung on a sticky conveyor belt to a room soaked with the scent of metallic alcohol, with thousands of others just like them.

Our LaCroix destination was Kingma's Market, ten minutes on foot. Walking inside, the entryway was a cardboard mosaic of flavors and cans, towering over passersby, emblazoned with the trademark cursive lettering. Each of us had a preference: my parents liked lemon and lime, while my brother and I favored fruit flavors like Cran-Raspberry. My dad or my mom buys the sparkling water to replenish our stock, my brother and I put a few in the fridge and leave the rest on the back porch, and we all drink our rationed amount. The dozens of cans make their way from the store to the house, and back again: an aluminum ecosystem of hydration, powered by the blood of family. I feel like we are in our own little world — our bubble, floating around in a carbonated glass, the routine hidden from the outside.

I guess I underestimated the power of observation. Other people could see our mountains of cans piled in bins on the back porch. It was a conversation starter when friends came over, and by the time they left, they would have contributed a can or two to the living record. LaCroix followed us to the shores of Lake Michigan, the sidelines of a soccer game, the bottle holder on a bike. We never meant such flagrant promotion of a beverage, and therefore our values and beliefs. It just happened; your story has a way of slipping out. My neighborhood friend told a secret to his dad: that our family had a special room in the back of Kingma's. The latest and greatest flavors of water were shelved there, each can polished to shining perfection. We would have crystal glasses, refracting rainbows onto bursting bubbles, our taste buds ringing bells on the brain, the silence of thirst replaced. When we heard of the story, we couldn't help but laugh. Of course it wasn't true, but for me that didn't matter. A new identity had been created: we were the LaCroix family.

This revelation was oddly comforting for me. Uncontroversial, based on truth, with an essence of aristocracy on the side. To say that you liked LaCroix was something

Roasted leg of lamb with fresh chimichurri with roasted potatoes and mushrooms

Mekulash Baron-Galbavi



normal, to use it as a foundation for identity couldn't have been far off either. It is simple, recognizable, timeless — a personality trait that follows the path of least resistance. Because of this, I was tempted to exchange my transnational conglomerate of a surname — Nollette and Patulski shoved together, with only a narrow bridge of a hyphen connecting my mother's and father's sides.

I felt constantly shoved to one side or the other: in school, my login name would switch from both Nollette and Patulski to one to the other with no explanation. To relatives, we were either, depending on which side of the family we were with. Our neighbors' attention span gave out after one last name; the Nollette-Patulskis would be whatever sounds escaped before their lips locked tight.

This advent of my double last name came after I was born. My parents decided to move my mom's last name from my middle to my last, while keeping my father's at the very end. The rewards from this game of legal Jumble were two different birth certificates and two different Social Security cards. Sixteen years and a move from New York to Michigan later, this added up to one headache at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and I found myself months later in family court, defending my hyphenated identity. The change in the birth certificate during my infancy had been lost in the shuffle of much more important world matters, whisked away on the conveyor belt to a room where these then-insignificancies piled up.

It is an odd feeling to be asked to change something when you have been living the change as long as you can remember. When the judge looked at me, and I was to affirm my Nollette-Patulski identity, my mind was distracted by the shiny glimmer of simplistic, refreshing, mainstream surnames. Smith, Jones. How much time and confusion could I save in the seconds those extra syllables disappeared? Johnson, Brown. The thorough pronunciation explanations that had been part of my introduction routine, gone with a stroke of white-out. LaCroix. The impulse bubbled in my mind, my thirst for normalcy rising.

The confirmation, "yes", slipped out of my mouth faster than expected, my lips quicker than my brain. The window of opportunity had shut, normalcy vanishing from the future. After all this time wondering about what my name could be, the moment that mattered was

gone and discarded, returned to the place of forgotten non-reality.

If anything, the legal hearing cemented the permanence of my last name. The pendulum that constantly swung between my mom and my dad's names was now stopped dead in the middle. It took a lot of effort to get it this way – redundant phone calls and months-long mail exchanges with the New York City Records Department, the flow of documents like paper birds migrating back and forth. There seemed to be no reason to render meaningless the strategic work that had been done. We had popped our open familial bubble to the outside world in the process; a glimpse of our ecosystem, looped together through blood.

Our LaCroix can ecosystem has since reached its demise, successfully preyed out by the SodaStream on Christmas morning. All of us have our own special bottle, differentiated by Sharpied initials, that replaces the pile of colored chrome. Cans became a rarer and rarer sight within the home until finally reaching extinction. The roles we had in the former process are forgotten. We pulse the carbonation machine steadily, not unlike CPR, hoping to revive the glory days of crackling tabs and bustling bubbles, the blood flow that bonded our family together. Once in a dozen weeks, store-bought seltzer makes a guest appearance in our home; a special treat for beach days or nights with neighbors in the yard. It doesn't last long, and soon LaCroix fades from an esteemed beverage into our recycled memories. I open a final can, snapping the pull tab up, and drink the water down to dry metal. I see my distorted face on the outside of the now empty can, swirling in the kaleidoscope of tie-dye pastels: a rose-colored reflection of an alternate reality. I toss it in the returnable bin, forgetting about my aluminum image. A few days later, the Nollette-Patulskis are a dime richer.

Roots: A Hometown Story

Grace Meinke

Cardigan sleeves passing fingertips. Worm smell fated for bait. Powder paint on propane tanks. Dented passenger side doors. Storefront windows, part-time mirrors. Chasing runaway napkins on restaurant patios. Buckled brick boulevards. Boys with hurriedly tucked shirts. Whirligigs in the garden. Chucks on a power line. Salad dressing with separated layers. Orange glow of factory lights outside a trailer window. Runny eggs for breakfast. Paint peeling from brick at the smoke break spot. Farmer vendors in Sunday morning dew. Taped-off bridge, no longer bearing weight. Ketchup packets in the glove box. Hands, more ring than hand. Lake smells and geese. Construction site, project abandoned. Pink carpet called "cotton candy" at the store. Girl with leather boots, time-softened. Victorian homes that just need new paint. Slushie runs, 1 am. Overgrown brush reclaiming our train tracks. Broken swings at the old elementary school. Rumors that the prohibition left behind tunnels beneath us. Leaning stop signs. New bakery facing a rusting gas station. Gum tucked beneath the seat of a bench.

My favorite café used to be a barber shop, and before that a candy parlor, and before that a general store, and before that it was 1893. Outside, there is a tree so big its roots must run deep, deep under a town of rust and glass. Its branches form right angles, like arms in surrender; when it was young, the tribes around here tied its limbs to mark the trails. Now, its roots branch further than its stunted boughs can, reaching into the piping; reclaiming the town as if to have the final word.

Nichols Arboretum, November

Emilia Ferrante

I climb the hill like it is a metaphor.
The leaves are golden -- I knew they would be --
I knew I couldn't miss them this time.

A sense of urgency

drives everything.

Already the leaves are withered
I am too late for the big show,
but I can still see the magnificent
aftermath.

The green that lingers here
is late to the party, much like myself and
I have to wonder if I am still green, like them,
still waiting.

When I am alone,
sometimes it is because I want someone to find me
and sometimes it is because
I think I've disappeared,
and I need the universe to re-discover me.

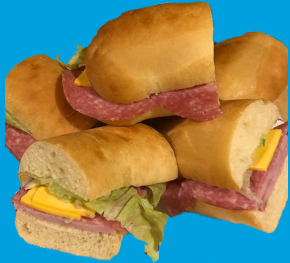
(Find me again, and let me live!)



staff sandwich menu



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