



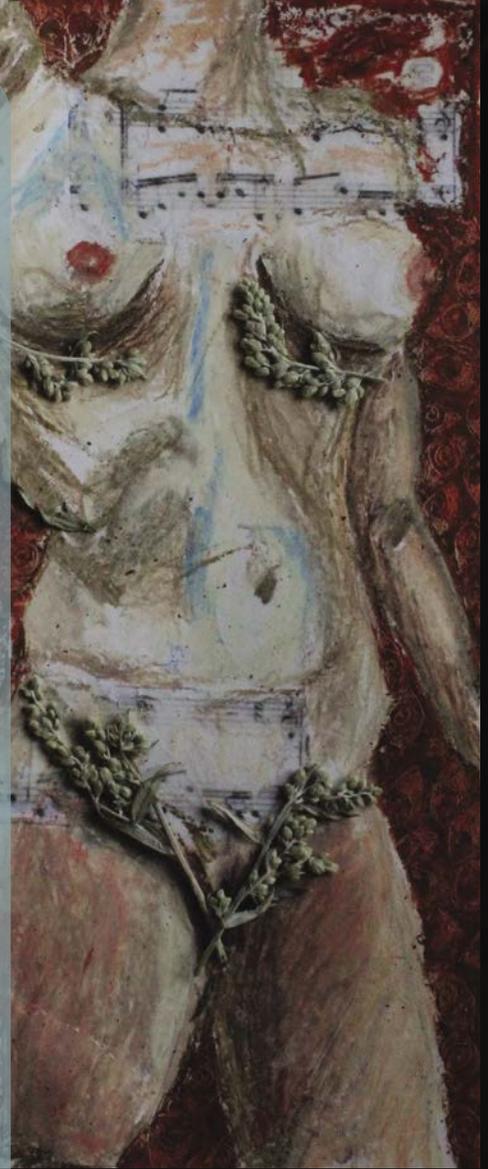
Johnson County Library's teen literary magazine

Journal

Of Questions and Answers

by Ayesha Asad

I have wondered why my body looks the way it does in the sun. Brow bone glittering, sweat tricking like the last swill of water down a glass, blood circulating like clockwork, a gear so visceral and rooted in its own ringing design. My dear – what I have left as I wait for its last spin is the desire to learn. Every chime my tongue hurriedly reshapes is a word re-lost, relearned in a space filled with quiet. Body, ring louder – let me hear what language spills out of your skin like a swimmer reaching out of cold water. One palm weighed against the gravity of a flatline sky. Every pulse buoyed in my throat, every heartbeat rippling the calm of my wrist – they work toward their own crescendo, toward the beat where you suck in the air through your teeth and wonder if you guessed correctly. If you found what carillon ceaselessly tolled in between the music of each wind. And then – what draft sweeps between my ribs, eroding them into fine powder. Tell me, what do I open my mouth to.



Classical
by Brianna Bona

Cover: Beauty is Pain by Alex Braley

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From the Editors . . .

Welcome to *elementia*, a magazine edited and designed by teenagers in the Kansas City metro area and published by Johnson County Library. *elementia* takes on a new theme each year; this year's submissions were inspired by "Bodies."

Throughout this year, editors met virtually to discuss themes, structures, hopes and goals for the magazine. When we came up with bodies as this year's theme, we could never have imagined the broad and diverse interpretations that would be submitted and published in issue xviii. From eating disorders to acne, this year's issue tackles some of teenagers' deepest insecurities and provides insight into the amazing art our generation can create.

Our goal with this magazine is to open conversations about bodies. Whether tackling human bodies, bodies of water or governmental bodies, we wanted to create a space where voices across all spectra could express themselves. We pushed ourselves to go deeper than the physical body and to explore personal truths that are inherited from past generations and seldom shared with others. Especially this year, having the motivation to create art was difficult to find, yet artists and writers created works that stood out and reflected where they stood along their journey. If you are looking for a place to publish your own art or writing, check out the back page for submission information and a description of our next theme: the unknown.

Isolation of Smile by John Dale

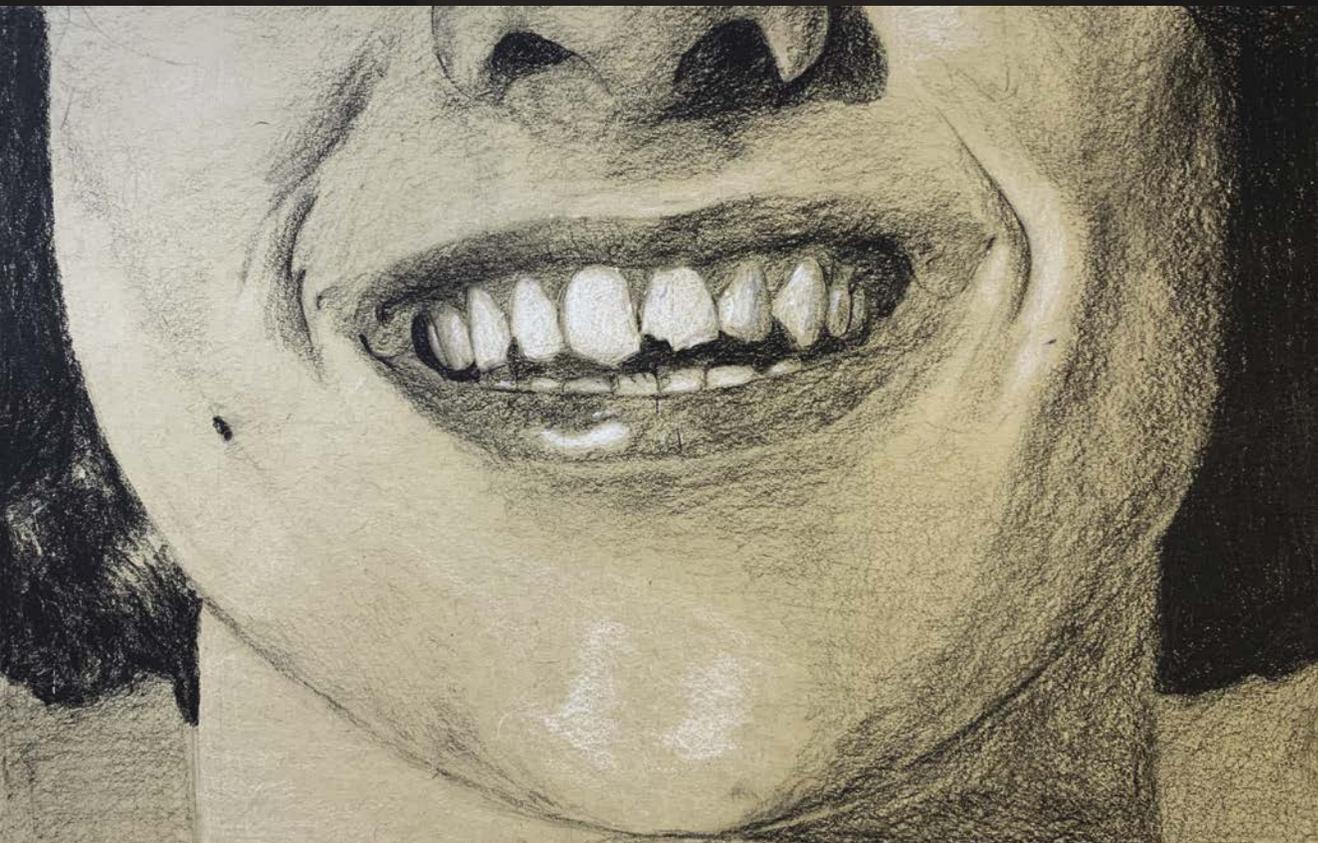


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photo credit: Graham Cotten

issue xviii is dedicated to Franny Choi

Johnson County Library is honored to dedicate this issue of *elementia* to poet, essayist and beacon Franny Choi. In a year where virtual blood, sweat and tears were all we could give, Choi showed us a way of integrating the code but softly shredding the control panel, standing up and surrendering at once, and voicing the empty vessel with breath and love. Choi gave us new methods for writing and feeling, and we hope what we've collected here will show that our bodies (in whatever form they take) build the future just as much as live inside its potential.

In her book *Soft Science*, Choi writes, "Even blood, when it comes down to it, is only a series of rules" ("A Brief History of Cyborgs"), and in this we learn that our bodies are as much a thing to rebel against as to take refuge within; we build the future with bodies just as we live and occupy their possibilities. Franny Choi, we are, in gratitude, your listeners for life.

claymation in six scenes

by Christine Baek

1.

Margaret finds out she is made of clay when she presses into the crook of her elbow and pulls the flesh right off.

2.

She doesn't tell anyone – not her older brother who is no longer a boy but a man buried under six feet of paperwork, and not her mother who is buried three-feet deep in dirt, a corpse hollowed out by consumption – that she knows.

Margaret spends the next three months concealing the missing chunk of her arm in puffy-sleeved school dresses and lace armbands bought from corner store boutiques. In her mind the arm is rotting, leaving bone exposed. She pictures maggots finding a damp, nutrient-rich habitat in the valley where her elbow should be. In truth she is made of clay. And so, there is no rot, no maggots, no fume of decay: all indications of organic matter re-entering the cycle of life.

Still, she tucks small flowers into her armband to ward off any odors. It becomes a habit: powdery baby's breath in the morning, to be changed with double-tongued Japanese honeysuckle in the afternoon. Only when she sleeps does she remove the buds, placing them in a crystal vase on her bedside table. By the end of the week, the vase is full of greyed, now-blackening, blooms that are then thrown into the river.

Every time she changes the flowers, Margaret breaks the unspoken taboo by looking. The crook of her elbow where the chunk is missing appears emaciated next to the fat of her bicep. But the flesh inside is as olive-colored as the skin and bears the same folds and creases when she bends the arm,

flexes a muscle. It feels so normal, no phantom ache or searing pain, that Margaret from the first moment when she had palmed the chunk in her hands could have ignored it and kept on living.

But she doesn't.

3.

Her father's face is an oil stain in Margaret's memory. She tries to wipe it away, but his face keeps sticking the way it always has for the past five years he's been gone. Her father never returns, but her older brother Ed does. After a five-month business trip, Ed is back, shouldering a suitcase through the door and with that familiar black fringe plastered to his forehead. Margaret embraces Ed as soon as she sees him swing into the kitchen. He coughs a dry "hello" and touches her cheek.

There's blackberry jam on her fingers and it leaves streaks of black on his grey jacket sleeves when she presses in, tenderly at first before squeezing harder. Maybe to see if Ed's arms are made of clay, too. She quickly returns to making breakfast.

Ed rests on the couch and props his feet up on the table to show his black socks with two holes in the left one. His head lolls to the side away from Margaret who stands in the golden light of their kitchen lamp, smelling of flour and butter and jam and, faintly, of pollen.

She continues slicing the loaf, fingering seeds of grains that have peeled from the crust. She wonders, as the glistening knife in her fist lifts up and down, if her little fingers will peel away just as easily.

4.

Three days later, Ed receives a business call. In twelve hours, he will leave for the train station, but now he is seated on the carpet, organizing his papers.

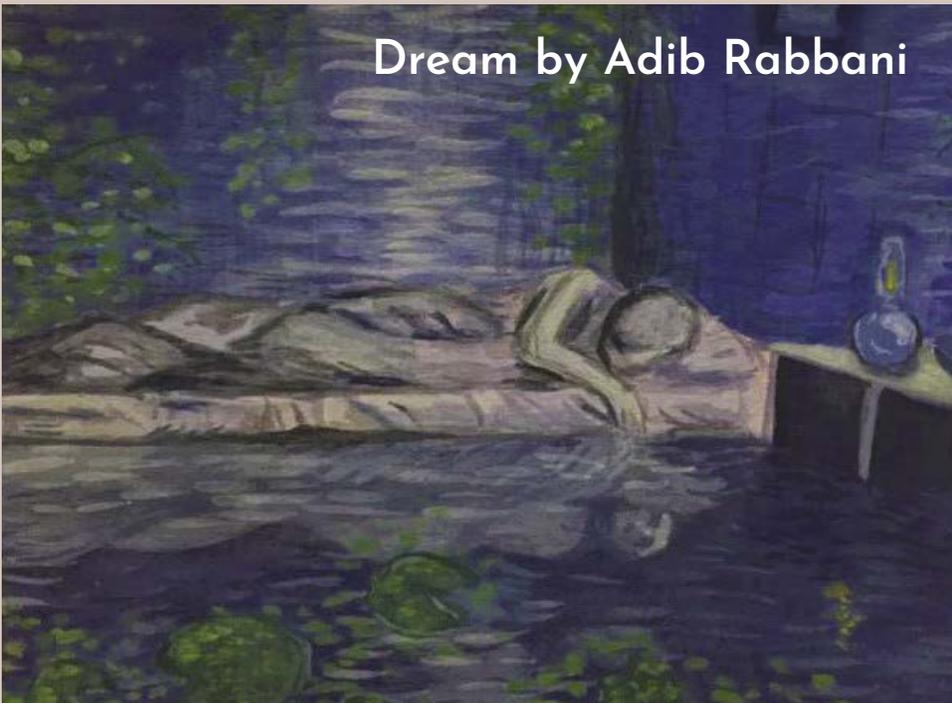
(She had cried when he told her. "I'll be back before you know it" was the repeated phrase of the evening. But Ed couldn't know that in the three months since part of her arm came off, Margaret has cut apart three stray dogs – a cocker spaniel, a poodle, a hound – and two birds, five green apples and three cuts of pork to find

Flesh. Flesh. Flesh. In all its malleable and impermanent forms, in all its colors.

Not clay.)

Margaret sits by the window where the curtains are drawn, mending the black sock, the left one, with thread in needle, needle in hand. The sky is the color of prune juice, and there is no beauty of the stars or cloud-misted moon to enjoy on this last day before Ed leaves.

Dream by Adib Rabbani



Below her on the streets are people. A broad-chested lady in a fur coat scurrying home. An elderly gentleman rocking in place, clenching a cigarette and squirting smoke from pallid lips. There is a solitary fir with branches like spindly arms, and beneath it is a cast-iron bench where a couple sits holding hands. Their thumbs and fingertips rubbing and wriggling together like earthworms.

Margaret accidentally pricks her finger people-watching. It doesn't hurt. A minute throb of discomfort draws her gaze to the slender finger. She wishes, as she always does, for blood. Instead, she sees a hole where the needle went in, met no resistance, and came back out. The finger is dry.

5.

The sky drains of its prune-juice-hue and fades back into cerulean within seven hours. Five hours left and Ed is still asleep, face pressed into the carpet and breathing raggedly. Margaret drops the mended sock into her brother's opened suitcase and quietly shuffles the scattered papers into stacks.

She is about to head into the vacated study where her mother used to be. She wants to grab some clips and folders to help Ed arrange his things. As Margaret glides down the hall, she avoids the closet where she keeps the chunk of her arm.

(Margaret had locked the piece of clay in a metal box left by her mother. It was previously used to store baby teeth. She had pried open the faulty lock, which still bore the whorls of fingerprint grease from her mother in areas where the tarnish hadn't yet spread. On the bed of baby teeth, the sunken white pearls, she'd rested the olive-colored clay. She never touched the box again.)

But halfway, she hears a muffled noise and turns to find her brother, prostrate and whimpering. Margaret

attempts to pull him upright, to shake him awake but stops short. Where his face had been pressed to the floor, Ed's features have collapsed. His nose is mashed in, his left eye a watery slash beside a crumpled ear. His cheeks are two basins collecting saliva which oozes from his upturned lips. Stuck in the wrinkles of his forehead are carpet fibers.

In her arms, he falls silent, and so Margaret holds him in the hours that follow.

As she holds him, Margaret runs her hands over Ed's face. Gently, she pokes a finger into Ed's mouth, prodding until the stern frown on his face eases and the cheeks fill. Nudging the furrowed eyebrows apart from their tightened draw, she rearranges the black hairs and plucks out any reds or blues. With a flat palm, she carves the jaw and smooths the chin. Laboriously she sculpts until the face before her is as the one from her memories. Back when Mother had still been here, and Father, too.

Ed's face takes on that beatific expression he used to wear on Saturday ferry rides or on evening walks to the cinema. When she's done, his lips are pressed in an almost-smile, the gaunt cheeks now plump. And the lines of his forehead which once added five years to his features are gone, bearing the faintest whorls from Margaret's fingertips.

6.

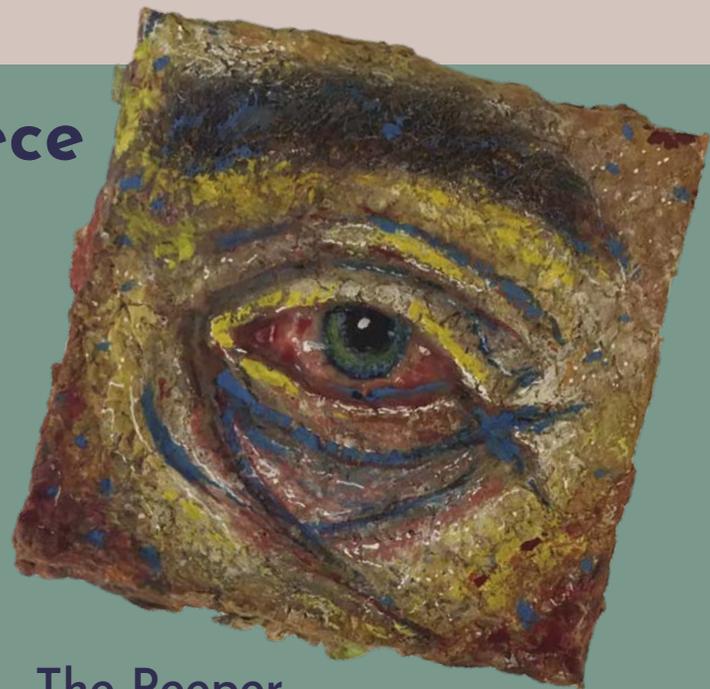
Ed wakes fifty minutes before the train arrives. He rubs the sleep from his eyes and kisses Margaret on the top of her head as a thank-you for putting his papers together and for mending the sock. It is also a goodbye.

He closes the door behind him.

Life as a forgotten piece

by Savannah Bright

The cold gross floors
Stomp, stomp, stomp
Black tiny spaces
In shoes that stink
Im confined for hours upon hours
The rigid concrete tears holes in me
I get lost in the bed sheets
The last thing to be grabbed from the bathroom floor
Im left without a match often
Life is boring being a sock



The Peeper
by Riley Peters

Clamshell

by Sophie Esther Ramsey

The day I fell out of love with my body –
my capsule,
my shrine –
weakness gnawed away at the palms of my hands,
dissatisfaction consumed my waist,
and comfort withered away like the skin I picked at
day
and night.

I saw nothing beyond every faded imperfection,
each accidental smudge.

I conjured paintbrush after paintbrush
and each one into a new shade of perfection
(or so I thought)

so that I could paint myself away
into oblivion,
along with the mounts of unwanted stains,
invisible to all but I.

I tasted water and air;
I tasted absence.

Each sweet tooth decayed,
then decomposed,
each tastebud dispersed.

Sweet maple syrup and bitter chocolate,
the comforting aroma of butter and toast;
hardly a memory,
but a repulsion.

And yet . . .

Their absence was the only sensation that my mouth could identify,
could bare.

And for a while,
I fell in love with empty solace and sour dead ends.

My body:

A blanket, a clutch, a dirty word.

I used to come back to her skin –
both

desolate land and terraneous waves.

The tenderness of a lion's mane to remind myself of what I could never lose;
the only thing I was sure I wouldn't lose:
my birth right.

She was the pretty, plain shell that enclosed my soul's pearl to her clutches.

I loved her and
took care of her
until I didn't anymore.

What was I thinking?

To fool her when I was the fool.

Still,

as winter cascaded my flesh and bones in the blistering cold –
a dry, desolate, rhymeless force –

she counteracted midnight snowstorms with the perseverance of spring.

To forest fires that quickened my blood
in searching attempts to leave not only my conscience
but my bones barren,

my body responded with the balance of October rain.

The misinformed obtrusion
of a darkness

festooned with cowardice

in a coat of errored honesty,

the weakness of its tattered, leather gloves,

black and with malicious intent,
an attempt to obliterate a light



Release of Joy
by Isabella Passantino

painted with that same,
dim brush at the hand of a liar,
an attempt to exterminate the internal
imagination this luster ignites . . .

An internal imagination I thought was
eternal.

An attempt,
a mere attempt that faltered
into the freshness of a blank page,
and the fire that rattled my bones
and birth,
the day my body
first met the roughness of Earth.
It illuminated a whole new room of hope
that I so thoughtlessly ignored.

I tried everything to separate my soul
from my body.

I tried everything to shrink myself to suffice my bones in
tightly bound strings
like a miniskirt I so desperately wished would
outgrow me.

But in the mirror one day,
I woke up to find myself
still wearing my skin intact,
despite every sleepless night I spent
tearing it apart.

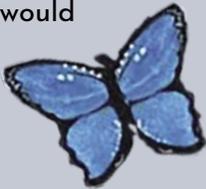
Shocked, to see that my body had not given up on me.

That she recognized me,
that she stuck around this long.
Appreciative of her stubbornness.

A draft came in and I felt a chill.
I smelt baking dough from the kitchen,
tasted hot coffee in the morning,
sweetened
this time.

As I felt the awakening of new roots at the
souls of my feet,
petals and thorns hugging my wrists
endearingly.

I fell in love with my body –
my capsule,
my shrine –
all over again.



Reflections

by Callan Latham

I.

If we could be quiet in the small spaces,
maybe they would make excuses for us.
Our bodies, forgiven only once in a while.
We look in the mirror, see dualities of ourselves
and ask them to break. I like the glass between us.

II.

My fingers turn purple in the cold. I think of it
as an invited bruise. Your lips stay blue in the
pool, call it summer. We have learned to be apart
from each other. I haven't touched you since the time
you said goodbye to me, my hands in yours
through the car window. I watch you go,
feel the pull start again.

III.

I water the plants when I don't forget.
Some have drunk up the sun, the roses
crumple before they can even bloom.
I think about the thing inside me.
Any soft organ, ready to break.

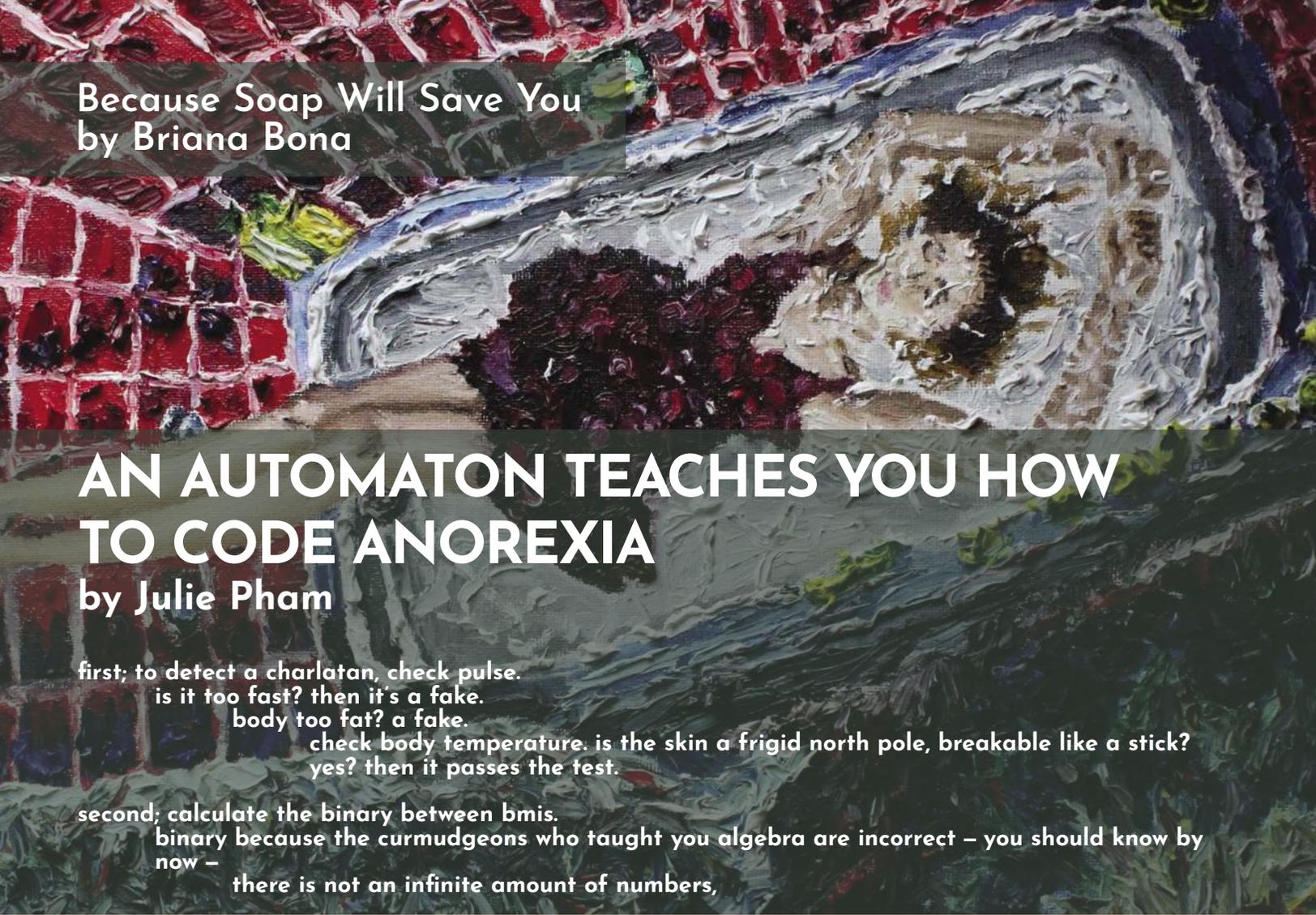
IV.

We would like to fall apart. Every other day,
we become too tired to hold our heads up.
I can't fathom you other than how I have
reached for you. Bodies, punctuated by
night, by something beyond an end.



My Fear

by Hailey Slaughter



Because Soap Will Save You
by Briana Bona

AN AUTOMATON TEACHES YOU HOW TO CODE ANOREXIA

by Julie Pham

first; to detect a charlatan, check pulse.
is it too fast? then it's a fake.
body too fat? a fake.
check body temperature. is the skin a frigid north pole, breakable like a stick?
yes? then it passes the test.

second; calculate the binary between bmis.
binary because the curmudgeons who taught you algebra are incorrect – you should know by
now –
there is not an infinite amount of numbers,
only two: overflowing and beautifully slim.

ignore the optimists, the ones with the candy white teeth. in this pseudo-language, derived from
strings of
not hungry today and i already ate,
there are only two.

third; remind yourself that it's your choice which of the two you want to be.

fourth; here is a computational problem for you.

```
def function(beautiful):  
    var weight = skinny  
  
error: "skinny" is not defined  
error: "weight" cannot be overwritten, it is already defined as "obese"
```

fifth; to educate an illiterate, show them the basics. if-statements.

if you consume one cheeto,
then you are an ingrate to your sacred body, *then* there is a bug in your code and *then* the
only way to get rid of it is to stack and overflow.

if you sneak through your door and barefoot your way towards the hot light in the kitchen,
then the variable *lb* overflows and you have to start the code over from scratch.

sixth; examine the source code. examine it closely. look at the variables, the code's
vertebrae, look at how deliciously visible they are, how they
poke out. look at the tiny value of their constant, the
collarbones. they're not the collarbones of a wannabe programmer. they're
regal, jutting, magnificent.

seventh; it's your choice.

eighth; here is another name for the class variable:
pyromaniac. you can't help it, can you? starting fires?
it's a different kind of burning.
not houses, but thighs.
not a forest, but a wide expanse of stomach.

ninth;
ideal_list = [thighgap, flat_stomach, tiny_
waist, sticks, no_flesh, ribs, collarbones, wrist,
toned_stomach, spine]
safe_list = [monsterzero, ricecake, grapes,
proteinbar, cucumber, greentea, blueberries]

tenth; have you solved the computation problem yet?
has var obese been overwritten yet?
has it?

eleventh;
for i in range (< lb) :
the clocks are ticking,
the calculators are running,
the numbers are being handed to you
on a silver plate.
you eat them and
var hunger = negative.

twelfth; error: the fps has gotten
drudgingly,
exhaustingly
slow.

you delete a line but it comes right back.
backspace and
it comes right back.
delete backspace return enter keysmash
but it comes right back.

thirteenth;
my_list = [hairloss, fragile_bones,
dehydration, fainting, cold, infertility,
heart_failure]

fourteenth;
try:
var eating disorder = gone;
error
try:
remove var eating disorder;
error

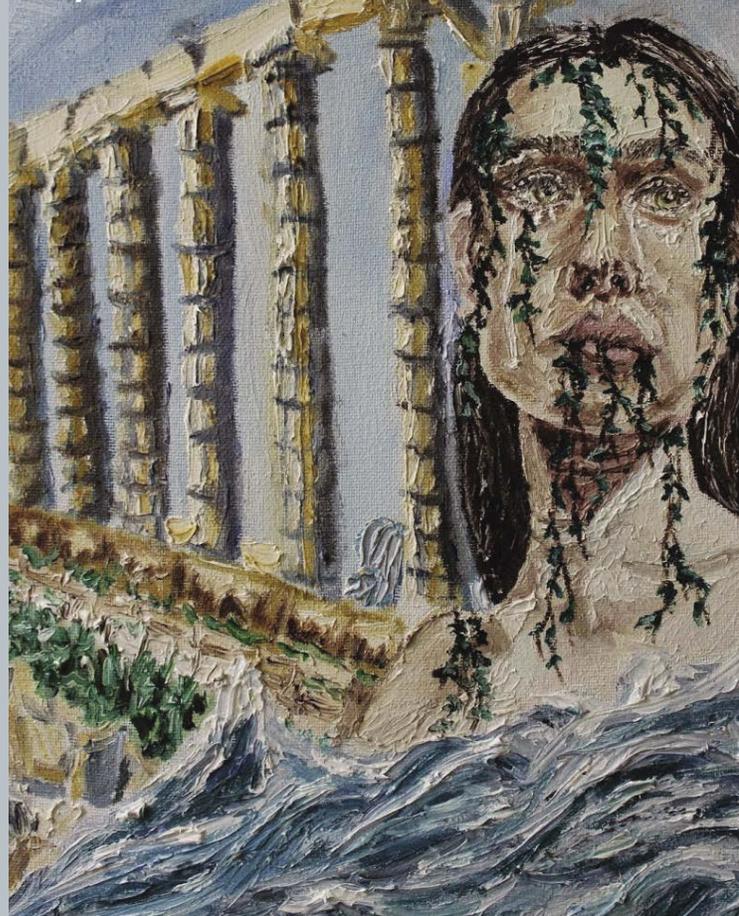
try:
please get me out of this
traceback (most recent call last):
file "anorexia", line 12
syntax error: invalid syntax

try:
for i in range (infinity):
var eating disorder = forever
var weight = 0
break

private poem by Yasi Farahmandnia

there are years to work out the kinks.
my hands buzzing and my tongue stuck to the back
of rusty teeth, i scream to write in an unmarked
language.
but spit wets the page instead.
i want to communicate by destroying our common language.
agreement in disaster is bonding,
throwing sand in each other's eyes and cursing at the
coarseness of it is bonding,
loving you through ignored calls is bonding,
tasting a little blood from the bite mark i left on your shoulder
is bonding,
laughing at me at the presence of the New is bonding,
taking my door out of frame is bonding,
yelling and swearing at me in our new house is bonding,
ultimatum is bonding,
the shy shocked absent hello is bonding,
speaking of me only in half-letters and private poems
is bonding,
we are bonding.
do you see now why i want to speak in code?

Older Than Artemis by Briana Bona



Bleached

by Pranathi Charasala

"You have nice eyes, but it's a shame you're dark."

"You have beautiful hair, sad that you're dark."

"How lucky you are! No pimples or scars, what a shame that you look dark, though."

I'm beautiful, but I'm dark. I have nice features, but I'm dark. In a hierarchy of fairness and beauty, I was at the bottom.

For years I applied *Fair and Lovely*, the infamous skin lightening cream in India. We've seen the commercials: a radiant woman showing us how her skin went from brown to white in a matter of months. "You can do this too," they say, "you can be beautiful too," and we believe them. I applied the skin-whitening creams, the face masks, the powder, just as my mother showed me. I smeared the *Fair and Lovely* cream on my face for years, disappointed every month, as I looked into a mirror reflecting brown.

I see the tube of cream sitting in every bathroom countertop, next to our toothbrushes, shaving cream, and soap. I go to parties, watching my friends do their makeup, smearing the cream and powder on their face. "Do I look pretty now?" they ask me. I watched my mother buy tubes of the ointment ever since I was born. Every day she washes her face, twice, patting it dry with a towel. She puts on some lotion and unscrews the top of the *Fair and Lovely* and squeezes a pea-drop of it on her fingers. In five swipes she places it on her skin in the same steps: forehead, left cheek, right cheek, nose, then chin. Finally placed, she goes to work blending it deeper. Once settled, she dips her brush in the bowl of white powder to her right. Circular motions even it out. Routine, every day before work, topping it off with some red lipstick as she left. Slowly, her brown turns into an ash, her larger-than-life eyes fade away. Her flaws are covered away now.

My father, the progressive, tells me that "fair skin is an obsession, don't pay any mind to it." I flip through the comic books he got my brother and me, each chapter telling a story of Hindu mythology. The heroes kill villains and gods kill demons. The gods are powerful, they radiate purity, and are everything good. Demons are the ugly, dark, criminals; destructors of happiness and murderers of the innocent. Never had I seen a clearer divide between black and white. I never looked divine. I looked evil.

"Just wash your face more."

"Apply more powder."

"Don't go out in the sun."

The advice that came from all the aunties. Maybe

I could wash the brown away. Maybe I could hide it. This way I could be beautiful.

I was eleven when I went shopping for makeup for the first time. I walked into the store when one of the makeup artists asked me what I was looking for.

"Foundation," I said.

"Oh, I think have one you can try." He handed me a tube of a brown liquid.

"Is it okay if I try it on your skin?"

He applied the foundation along my jawline and asked me to look in the mirror.

"You have beautiful skin," he told me.

Expecting to find an abrupt streak of paleness to my face, it actually took me a while to find the smudge of foundation on my skin. It was an exact match to my skin tone.

"Are you sure this isn't too dark?" my mother said. I was thinking the same.

"Oh no, any lighter and she'll look like a ghost."

A ghost.

I look into a crowd of woman at a *puja*. They wear dresses of envy; dyed in colors of peacock feathers, glitter and jewels adorning the silks. I look at their faces: white, mismatching the rich colors of their arms. *Identically faded*, I think. I gaze into a mirror and I take in my dark skin. The shadows tell me my ancestors were shepherds and farmers. I note my grandmother's thick hair. I see my mother's large eyes. I feel the bridge of my father's nose. I am not pale or white or bleached.

Self Portrait by Ashtyn Jones



For my mother

by Arden Yum

After Toni Morrison's Beloved

Mother, tell me about the child in your womb.
We shared water &
blood &
milk.

Did you feel the chord connecting us,
the steady pull of heartstrings. The soft
strumming of the lyre stitched together
with sinew. What if the body is just
music only you & I can hear?

How when I was little you told me that if I prayed real hard I would get pregnant.
How I went to bed terrified that life was simmering inside of me.

They say you release a hormone after childbirth that makes you forget the pain.
But you remember, before the drugs. Before the doctor cut me out of you
with his knife. The way I watch you cut stems from strawberries in your palm.
It hurts because motherhood is the force of one body dividing in two.

The hospital gown drenched in the fluids we shared. Me in your arms.
The milkflowers petaling outside the window.

New seeds planted into the ground.
The blood in my veins is still warm from the womb. This water is the
same water we once swam in. I drank your milk and it hardened into bone.

Nine months before I was born the orchids were blossoming. That's when we began.



The Hand of Fair Share
by Indigo Ly



Don't Blink by Isabella Passantino

neighbor's shopkeeper bell

by Yasi Farahmandnia

you are
one of the more lovelier sounds.
i find these days,
i can replicate you if i close my ears enough:
the clash of my spoon with the ice cream bowl,
the kiss my lighter leaves on the body of a candle,
you are in the cracking on my knuckles, if a marimba cries in the background.
breath comes easier with you in my
ears,
lungs expand to the rhythm of you,
my window dances its stiff movements at the hint of you,
color comes alive on the table.
there are markings on the sides of my brain.
fluid resistant and etched like a wound,
you travel in the friday market and buy my affection.
we could dance if you oblige.
each time i'll steal a piece of you
i'll store you in a tight pocket
and one day you'll be more than
sound.
solid and feeling in my arms.
i'll even light a candle and bring ice cream.
you are more than a memory.
leave your purchase at home,
i'll have enough for the both of us.



Longing
by Isabella Passantino

252

by Emma Anderson

The first time someone called me fat was in the first grade.
I have always been chubby, and I knew it.
Moreover, people around me never let me forget it.
The hollow shadow of my figure beckoned my insecurities.
Each one jumping out to me from the mirror like lightning bugs on a hot July night.
I hated my body before I knew long division.

I remember asking my mom if I could go on a diet at age 7.
I do not think she knew how to respond.
I seemed like a happy kid, I mean I was a happy kid, but
I could never shake the feeling that I took up too much space,
That I needed to look like my peers in order to be loved.
That I needed to fit into a size 2 in order to be liked.
I think that is why I'm always so scared that people hate me,
For I think my appearance is a repellent for human attention.

I have lost track over the years of many times kids have called me fat.
But one that sticks out was a coworker, he said
"Don't you think you've had enough, PIG"
When I was getting a bag of popcorn.
I did not know how to respond.
I had been building a wall around me my whole life for protection,
And that was the last brick.

My body did not feel like mine.
Stretch marks danced across my stomach like evil purple rivers.
My hands could not fit around my thighs.
I could never fit into the trendy clothes my friends bared.
I felt like damaged goods.
Something that was unlovable, undesirable, displeasing to the gaze of others.

I am trying to shift this narrative.
I am trying to see the good in myself.
I am trying to see past the glowing number of
252.

A Piece Of Me Died

On The I Train

by Rachel Shela



Ok, so it's mid-April during Spring Break and you're on the wretched I train. You get on at 28th Street after a sleepover with your best friend who, in 11 months, will no longer be your friend. You find a seat next to a robust woman who we're going to call Katelyn. She smells like cheap vanilla body spray from Victoria's Secret and she has drawn-on eyebrows. A man named Jesus is looking for a seat. You'll ask his name later. He swings from the train's poles like a predatory beast and makes the noises of one too, honest to God. You move the floral bag that was once your mom's tote to accommodate the nice man. Jesus sandwiches you between his bony body and Katelyn's thin eyebrows.

This story is true and happened to me. Jesus wore a baby blue shirt with a dirty white long sleeve underneath, much like my old middle school uniform. The subway was moderately crowded, and Katelyn took up a considerable amount of space, leaving Jesus and me in close quarters. Across from me sat a slim Asian woman with a mohawk, a teen mom, my preschool teacher Katie, an old man reading a newspaper, and a girl of 18 wearing thick black eye makeup and fishnet tights, her neon yellow hair in French braids. Jesus sat to my right and a nice young woman named Katelyn sat to my left. She smelled like cheap vanilla body spray from Victoria's

Secret. She was probably envious of my naturally full eyebrows.

Jesus was close to me because the subway was crowded and the seats on the I train are smaller than those on the B/C. The man's left side touched every inch of my right side. I tried to scooch closer to the lady with penciled eyebrows but the man's body sucked me closer to him. His breathing was deep and silent. Yes, silent. I've never met anyone who could breathe so deeply as Jesus and still remain silent. I could feel his breath. And then, Jesus shapeshifted. The dancing beast became a leech latched onto my pubescent 14-year-old body. I swear to God, he paralyzed me. Hours seemed to pass. I kept yelling at Katelyn to detach him from me, but alas, it was too noisy for her to hear my cry. I was Simba trying to find my roar. I searched intently for it, but with each passing hour, I lost a part of my voice. Naturally, I lost my nasal cavity first, then my nasopharynx, followed by my oropharynx, hypopharynx, oral cavity, tongue, epiglottis, larynx, trachea, and finally my esophagus. The 11th part that Jesus stripped from my body was the large brown birthmark that had lived safely on my left arm for 14 years and five months. It slowly began to fade.

This part is the whole truth, so listen. The man leaned on me, transferring his 145 pounds to my 110. I had to carry our combined 255 pounds on my right shoulder. My shoulder did not break. If it had, I might have been stuck on that train for eternity. I fell asleep, and in my slumber, I told myself what was happening. "Rachel, the beast is seeking out a vulnerable cub like you." But awake, I lost all clarity. He was warm and only touched me with his shoulder,

Sight by Lauren Blood



upper arm, elbow, forearm, wrist, hand, fingers, ribs, hip, thigh, knee, calf, ankle, foot, and with his breath. Each part of him infiltrated me as I sat unsure of his intentions. Oh God, I hate saying that, but it's the truth so I have no other choice. I stayed asleep but alert. I smelled vanilla body spray and could still see the girl with neon hair through my eyelids. I told myself I needed to leave, so I did. I violently ripped the leech off my conservatively clothed body and ran off the moving train onto the windy platform.

I kept running toward the light at the top of the 59th Street subway stairs until a man tapped my shoulder. I yelled. He asked me if the man on the train was bothering me and I said, "Um, I don't know." I said those exact words, I swear to God. He showed me his badge and said that he was watching over me. (Officer Gonzalez wasn't in uniform.) Jesus was arrested and I got to see him in handcuffs. I told the officer I wanted to go home, but he said I couldn't. He needed a statement. Because – wait for it – Jesus was a registered sex offender who rode trains all day preying on vulnerable girls. I couldn't breathe and I lost control of my body. Maybe because I no longer smelled the vanilla body spray from Victoria's Secret. The kind officer took me to the 59th Street precinct that I pass every Goddamn day to get to school. A year later I would have a panic attack as I passed that same precinct. I wrote my story down, truthfully. I ran home and remained silent until 9:06 p.m. when a young lawyer called me. She told me I needed to go to City Hall to the District Attorney's office, to formally file a report. I did not sleep.

And so I went with my mother, Mary, to City Hall on that perfect, crisp, life-altering Spring day. I was sent to the Special Victims Unit. It was something out of Law and Order, but I tell myself it wasn't as bad as that. That is a lie, though, and I refuse to tell anything but the truth because it's important. I wouldn't sit on trains after that. I have a crippling fear of men. Of men who look like Jesus. Of harassment. Assault. Rape. It wasn't that bad, I tell myself. It could have been a lot worse. Perhaps that is the truth, you know what I mean?

A blonde woman brought me into a conference room and made me relive that Sunday on the 1 train. Her scribe smelled of cheap vanilla body spray from Victoria's Secret. Next, I entered a courtroom where 12 jurors awaited me. I told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. Mary Oliver sat in the back of the courtroom, legs crossed, and she smiled at me with her eyes. And then it was over. I left the courtroom having flashbacks of reading "12 Angry Men" in 7th grade. We would later find out that our beloved English teacher was a registered sex offender, just like Jesus. Mary Oliver stopped me before I left the building and handed

me her poem, "Spring." A year later in a poetry seminar, I would write a research paper on Oliver and that same poem.

I am 16 now. It has been a year and seven months. I cry in my bed less. I talk to my friends. I will sit on a train. And I won't avoid men at all costs. But last week I carried a pair of red scissors in my coat pocket to go five blocks.



Hearing by Lauren Blood



cheat codes

by Sofia Calavitta

she could've found
anyone, I know, the boys
who promised her better in the
beginning would be
baffled if they
knew because she
didn't choose
anyone (she chose me)

she settles for Peter Pan
and Maryjane on his shoulder
and I am left here to wonder
if we will ever be
Together with a capital
T, if lowercase kisses will ever be
autocorrected to kisses with capital Ks and if pinky promises will stay on our pinkies instead of the other
four fingers I hold and if she will ever be mine instead of
ours.

I spend hours thinking about us, things like shower water pounding the back of my neck, the warmth
brings a smile but I'm still cold when I get out,
Fragonard should've painted me looking up her skirt as he pushes her away,
Memories pull her back like gravity but the mistakes he made push her out again and if only I could get a
grip and pull her down to
earth I swear she'd be
better off in my
arms.

I promise you a danger that's
Sweet whiskey, sensual and secondhand, locked doors and bedroom eyes and one spoon for a gallon of
ice cream; I promise you magic and butterflies and staying up until four-thirty to listen to each other talk,
I promise you love like religion and he's the catholic church you can't stop praying to, babygirl I promise
you sea tides and skinny-dipping and understanding above all else.

You take him like your first drag and it burns so good, you said it could've been anyone but you just
needed to kiss someone, you said you don't know why you're still with him and you're lying,
falling out of love with him was falling off the moon and back and you're burning up in my atmosphere,
but
he stopped being your late-night call
and now it's me
he stopped being your god
and now you're lost but
at least I am too, because he
stopped being everything and
everything is starting to be me.

Where are we in the ouroboros of your
sexuality, because sometimes you say you
aren't cheating and I
can't tell if you
mean it or
not.



Parallels by Madison Clark

Body by Elena Unger

What is a body but a cardboard box
smoothed over with wrapping paper?
A shiny exterior that beckons eager eyes,
and a sheen spiral of store-bought ribbon.

When people receive you they want
to crack you open
to see what is inside of you
to unveil the mystery
hidden beneath the happiness
of feathered tinsel and floral scribbles.

They slice through Scotch tape
hoping what they discover
is something they will cherish
until time wraps a gentle fist
around their sleeping soul.

But they never quite know
what will lie inside
until they are face to face
with unfolded flaps.

Because a body is simply a cardboard box.
The gift itself is bearing witness
to the box's contents: a treasure to hold
through fleeting years.



Drama Queen by Madison Clark

Broken Pieces by Jamison Mills

The Sculptor

by Mariam Khelashvili

The sculptor unveiled a block
A block of marble bought with the
Cents, dollars, kept under lock
Kept under a lock and key.
The sculptor went home again
While rain and lightning poured from skies
Stepped upon the midnight train,
A hat over his tired eyes.
The sculptor soon fell asleep
And, strangely, he somehow dreamed
His sister, with her eyes so deep
Brown, somehow appeared to home.
The sculptor, at work once more
Made, with skill, two shining eyes,
With a head so deftly formed
It seemed to touch it was unwise.
The sculptor soon dreamed anew
About his father in the south
He whispered, "know I love you"
And his son chiseled his mouth.
And so he went, from day to day
Adding on through foul or fair
Carving what was in his way ...
Sculpting the body of his care.
The sculptor unveiled a man
A soul of marble made with the
Thoughts and dreams kept under lock
Kept under a lock and key.



Hidden Feelings by Jamison Mills





Coronation by Brianna Bona

Alone in a Cabin, I Think of What Led Me Here

by Ayesha Asad

Was it the way the leaves fell,
streamlined, as I burst
bawling onto greenery,

or the first time sunlight peeked
through dark branches overhead –

or the reddish-purple skin
stretched over my sleeping body,
surrounded by fluid? What phantom

snaked around me, whispering
which light I would swallow
until it hardened like a beam

in my chest, which dreams
would become my luminaries
as each season grew hotter.

Warm rain, sweet on
my infant tongue – could that
have been a sign. A hot palm

canoed against the valleys
of my own. Cold warbling

through my pores. The way I inhaled
the smell of old books
from garage sales, or how I listened

to the songbird when it caroled
from its own little tree.

My fingers, stretching, outlined dark
against the sky. The curve of my rib
above my heart. Movie nights

with my father, the screen a flash
of bright lodestar. None of these
I can diagnose as the stars

that sculpted me, rained me
clean as a white sheet,

left me waiting to ask
why I breathe the same way.

I Am Not Afraid To Die

by Chloe Chou

The boat reeked of fish.

I supposed that should be at the bottom of my list of concerns, but right now, the moon shining on me like a cruel spotlight as my sore arms rowed and rowed and rowed, it was the only thing that I could think of. Dead fish overflowed from my bucket in the corner of my small wooden boat, in the middle of the Atlantic.

It was day five of being stuck out here, and nobody was going to come save me. I was going to die soon. I knew this like I knew my own name. The truth had settled into my tired, hollow bones days ago. And now the ocean was calm. Too calm.

My hair was sticky and matted to my forehead. I ran my fingers, dry skin and cracked knuckles, along the splintering side of the boat. My skin, pale and sickly, contrasted sharply against the dark wood. I peered over the edge. On the second and third day, ominous dark shapes had lurked just under the surface, but they had disappeared long ago.

I hesitated briefly before reaching for my water bottle. I had run out of drinking water many days before, and now it was filled with sea water. I had no way of purifying it, so I left it out every single morning, when the sun would beat down on the boat. It seemed to help somewhat. My T-shirt, which tasted of sweat, was wrapped around the top of the bottle, filtering the water, at least a little.

I held the bottle to my dry lips, drinking slowly so it would seem like more. The saltwater burned my throat as it went down, and it would probably kill me even faster than not drinking water, but it was impossible to resist the urge of drinking when you were floating in a giant body of water.

My own body, however, was not faring as well as the water. Nearly every part of my body was sunburned, and I was always tired but could no longer sleep.

I picked up a fish from the bucket, the scales slippery against my fingers, the dead eyes glossy and staring at me. I stared back at them before biting into the flesh. This was how I would stay alive, until I died and my decomposing body was eaten by the creatures of the ocean.

I was not scared of dying, I had convinced myself on the fourth day. But if that was true, why didn't I jump out of the boat now, swim until my legs turned to lead and my arms turned to jelly and

I was no longer able to stay afloat? If that was true, why did I still catch fish and scoop up water in the morning?

I stared into the murky reflection of the full moon in the water. "I am not scared to die," I whispered, my lips cracking and bleeding as I did so, my voice hoarse and unrecognizable. I had not spoken in days. "I am not scared to die."

Silence.

I scoffed at the water, rocking with small waves, an endless abyss. "I am not scared to die," I repeated, a little louder.

Still there was no response.

What was I expecting anyway? Someone to pop up, shake my blistered, red hand, and give me a prize? And then what? Would I go back to land on a yacht, and would everyone call me brave, just because I was not scared to die? It was a stupid fantasy, but it did not stop me from trying again.

"I am not scared to die!" I yelled, my voice cracking halfway, my throat scorching, my tongue swollen and out of place in my mouth. There was no echo, no sign that anything had been fazed by my presence.

Maybe my body would be deposited on the shore of some island, and then I would wake up on the shores of Hell.

I laughed, an unnatural, ironic sound. My eyes



The Wave
by Peter Mombello

stung and salty liquid ran down my face, filling in the cracks of my lips, running past my chin and dripping into my lap. I told myself it was sea water. I reached up for my face, wiping away the moisture, and I left red marks from the blood of the fish.

"I am not scared to die," I told myself and the great blue ocean. My body was weak and fragile, the body of water was not. I would die and the water would not.

I sat up, my mind longing for home, my fingers reaching for the oars. Again I propelled the boat forward, and again the smell of the fish filled my nose.

Nobody would miss me anyway. Nobody would bother looking for me. Nobody would give a rat's ass about me when I died. I was just another fisherman who had ventured too far out.

The water had been unnaturally still for the last twenty minutes, the boat sliding across the surface like a hot knife slicing through butter. I already knew what it meant, but I did not stop rowing. Rain tapped my shoulders and soaked my hair, going from a light drizzle to a storm within minutes. And then the wind started to blow, and my boat rocked back and forth.

Any moment now, I told myself, though I had been telling myself this again and again, over and over,

as the waves had become smaller and smaller. *Any moment a rogue wave will come and I will drown.*

And when the wave did come, a gray towering monster, angry and unforgiving, I did not try to row away. I did not close my eyes. I did not brace for impact. Instead, I sat still, letting go of the oars that had gotten me this far. They sunk, and in a few seconds, I could no longer see them. Then I exhaled, very slowly. I picked up my fishing rod to throw it off the boat too, and the hook carved into the back of my right hand, digging into my flesh. I pulled the metal out of my skin slowly. I did not care about the pain, because this might be the last thing I would feel. As I threw the rod off the boat too, thick crimson blood ran down my arm and dripped into the water, creating a messy, red swirl. It would not have time to become a scar.

My body was weak, my body was cold, but most importantly, my body was tired.

I stared up at the wave, which raced towards me with a monstrous sound, the sound of the power of the ocean, but it was not nearly as loud as the roaring in my ears. It was not nearly as strong as the smell of the fish.

"I am not scared to die," I whispered. Then it all came crashing down.

Duplex: Headwater

After Jericho Brown

by Lukas Bacho

Like a good fisherman, I read the water.
I can't afford to miss a ripple in the current.

Past and future form ripples in the current,
whirling turned leaves in a merciless circle.

My pen comes full in merciless circles,
present yet tense at the mouth of the river.

His song still stings at the mouth of my river
where words, like water, are meant to spill.

The blood of a hooked fish is meant to spill.
I baptize him in the perigeon tide.

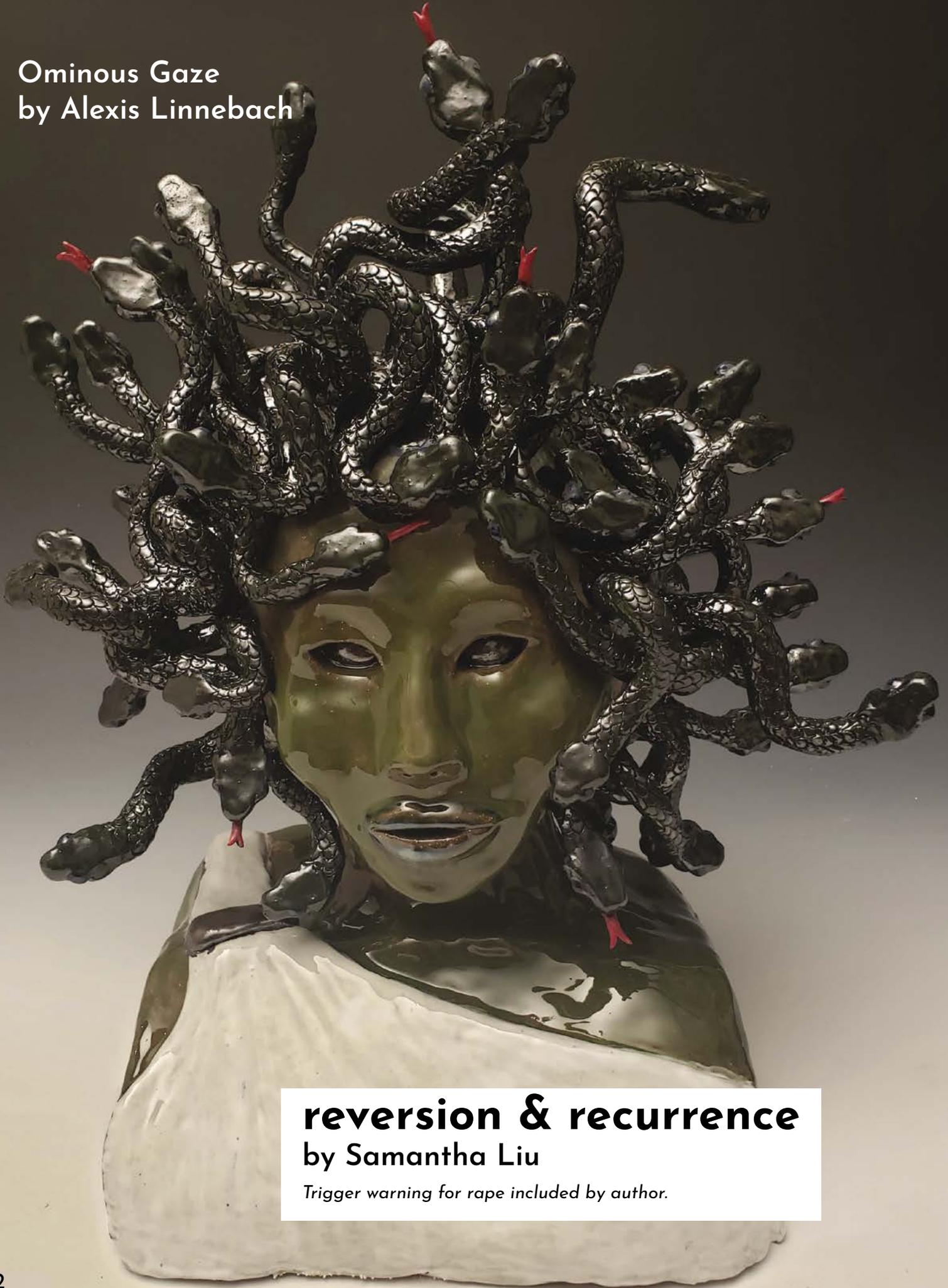
Earth's gravity is strongest at the perigeon tide.
His cheek meets the riverbed; ink soils my sheets.

On the next full moon, rain falls in sheets.
Like a good fish, I read the water.



Dolphin Skull
by Evangeline Ellingsworth

Ominous Gaze
by Alexis Linnebach



reversion & recurrence

by Samantha Liu

Trigger warning for rape included by author.

In the bedroom, where lacquer walls intersect Heineken traces and discarnate memories, she notices how his nails leave crescents in her hips, red moons that unfurl into blood rivers when his hands drag lower. Everything feels red and much too hot when his hands wrap around every part of her: her belt, her thighs, her skirt – her stupid leather skirt all her friends insisted looked sexy. It dawns on her now that the word “sexy” is just the noun masquerading with an extra syllable; “sexy” is not beauty, it is marketability for its own root word.

“Please,” she whispers, “you’re hurting me.”

For a moment, his hands lift. Darkness churns waves in the wetness between them, and salt hangs on his breath when he opens his mouth. Behind this ocean wall of silently humming words, she wants to believe that she is safe.

“Listen here, bitch.”

She feels her head twist and snap back before she can register the sting. The bedsheet clings to her cheek like a film. Against the sheet, neck twisted and eyes half-lidded, shadows bloat and crawl circles on the sheet. It takes her a moment to realize she is looking at her own tears. On the green of the bedsheet, she can pretend they are ants flecking an olive.

“Slut!” “Whore!” Each of his shouts punctuates the distance between them. “Bitch!”

She thinks of the myth where Hephaestus split Zeus’s head open and Athena sprang out clad in full iron and wonders dazedly if she can summon a god, too, to remove the throbbing words from her head, but the only halos in the room are the ragged circles of cigarette ash on his sleeve. When she follows their trail upward, she can see her own reflection in his eyes.

“Hey, why’re you crying? Please don’t cry, baby. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” He traces her jaw, and it’s wet. “You know that I love you, right?”

Loves me, she thinks, or loves me not. It’s six years ago and she’s in the kitchen holding her dad’s hand. His gold watch two weeks from shattering against her cheek grazes against her wrist. She is crying because her dad has yelled at her again, and when he apologizes, last night’s liquor still stains the apology on his mouth.

“I’m so sorry,” he promises her. “I only yell at you because I love you.”

Her infallible father squeezes her hand, and the glass bottle winks so prettily on the countertop. Slowly, she squeezes his hand back. It’s the same story that will unfold for months, now in the kitchen, next time in the bedroom. Each time, she urges herself to believe her dad, and eventually she will. Now, six years later, curled up on a tear-stained bedsheet, she watches a boy with a

stranger’s face but familiar words, and tells herself everything will be alright.

“Please stop crying,” the boy is saying, and his face blurs into a mirage, into a memory. “I love you. I really do.”

Loves me, she thinks, loves me not. To arrive at the answer begs destruction. Someone must consciously and deliberately pluck away a flower’s beauty, color, marrow, and scatter them like bones in a graveyard, until – he loves me! – she declares, and her sins dissipate like ghosts under the blinding radiance of the words. Even destruction and celebration, she marvels, intertwine into the very vernacular: you nailed that, smashed it, wrecked it, killed it; because the prettiest flowers are never left unscarred.

Loves me, loves me not. Bodies are, at their best, products of a body and, at their worst, vessels for another body – chiasmus, inversion and reversal.

A clause reversed upon itself, a flower undone in retrograde, the crosspiece where her chest is caught under the nub of his elbow. Under the half-light, her crescents are rubies to her, red like tonight’s lipstick that she wore out for the first time. To be touched is to be beautiful. To be eviscerated is to be loved. In the godless room, this is the revelation she makes on how to be loved, under halos of cigarette ash and blood of seven-eleven beer.

She lifts her head again. As she turns to face him again, his eyes watch her with genuine concern, and she notices he is almost handsome this way.

She tugs on his sleeve. “Say it again.”

Reverse time, then cross back over. Behind her closed eyes, she can’t remember the full tale of Athena, how her mother Metis, goddess of prudence, was prophesied to have a child more powerful than her father Zeus, so Zeus swallowed Metis and his unborn child whole. She also doesn’t remember how Athena sprung from Zeus’s head a full-grown war goddess and grew up to become her father’s favorite daughter. If she opened her eyes, she might catch these details, or see his tongue lick his ambrosia-stained lips, but she doesn’t, and he knows all this while he fumbles at his belt.

“I love you,” he tells her again, while her eyes remain closed. “I love you, and you are the most beautiful person I’ve ever met.”

He kisses her, and she kisses him back now. Behind her closed eyes, shadow ribbons and ghost muses spin while Zeus dances with his daughter. She wishes her dad hadn’t left the city, but it’s a good thing the clinking belt in the lacquered bedroom sounds the same as it did six years ago. This time, she knows better than to flinch when she spreads her legs and allows him to ruin her.

St. Jude by Grace Ashley

The parking lot felt stagnant as Jude walked across empty yellow lines. The air was weighted with the cold, heavy enough that it almost seemed like the cloud of her breath dispersed down rather than up. The lights flickered above her head with a steady, fly-like buzz. This was a time for rotting, and Jude was holding desperately to staying ripe.

She let her eyes scan the dark lot. Even with the lights, nothing seemed to be lit. This darkness was one of substance, viscous and clawed. There was no moon, and even the stars seemed to lean away from the lot as Jude's eyes caught what – who – she was here for. She sighed deeply at the drunken heap in front of her and watched her breath sink down, down, down, placing her hands in the pockets of her coat. Jude was tired and had a paper to write tonight that needed to get done by her first class in the morning, and instead of doing that she was going to have to drag Cas home again. She would not be able to look his mother in the eyes, just like she couldn't every single time this happened before, and Jude did not know if she could keep up with the ache of her chest every time she saw him like this. Her feet began to move forward. She was so tired.

Jude took him in as she walked, making sure to make as much noise as possible. After she had approached him quietly once, as if he was some injured deer who needed soft gentleness to heal, she had been subsequently rewarded with his scream and a fall directly onto her ass. He was more of a



vulture, she knew now.

This Cas was nothing like the gentle boy she had grown up with. There was less of him, somehow. Soft blond curls were shorn close to his skull. His face was bruised and sore and empty as he rested his head on the yellow concrete parking slab. Jude could not see a bottle on him, but she knew that there was one at some point because he reeked of alcohol. Standing over Cas now, her breath still sinking in front of her, she kicked his foot. Brown eyes opened just a sliver.

"St. Jude," he slurred with a lazy smile. "You've come for another lost cause."

Cas laughed loosely as if he had made the funniest joke of the century. Jude did not find it funny at all. She just looked at him, unsmiling, but

he was too lost in whatever kind of stupor he was in tonight. Jude wondered if it was vodka or his father's whiskey. It was more likely to be the first option; Cas wouldn't touch anything of his father's unless he was stupid drunk, which she did not think he was tonight. Almost, but not quite.

You are not a lost cause, Jude thought to herself desperately, not yet. Please, not yet.

She does not say this out loud, instead repeating it over and over in her head like a prayer. Still oblivious to her mood, Cas laughs a little bit more and his grin made his face seem like it used to be. Open, maybe. Content.

"I'm not a saint, Cas," Jude sighs, "but you are drunk and it is time to go home."

He sat up – or at least tried to, seeing that his spatial awareness was not exactly up to par, and it took him nearly five tries – and he rubbed at his eyes. Cas hissed at the contact as he was met with bruises from whatever fights he had gotten into the past couple of days, and he brought his hands down to look at them. Taking in split knuckles and dried blood, Jude opened her mouth to say something about how stupid or impulsive he was, but her eyes moved to his face and she froze. Cas looked so tired. This was the kind of tired that was bone-deep and marrow rich, an endless supply of nutrients and unhappiness to keep exhaustion going strong. This went past just a lack of sleep. Jude had to close her eyes to maintain her balance as dread pressed on her, adding to the stagnant, heavy air of the parking lot.

"I hope you're a saint, Jude," he whispered messily to himself. "I am in need of saving, and I think that some divine intervention is required to get the job done."

Jude kept her eyes closed. Cas kept his eyes open. What a pair they were: two deadly bacteria in this festering lot. Sometimes, Cas thinks that Jude was what ruined him, but that is only when he remembers her soft hands on his face, which is to say all the time. He knows that she is not to blame, not really – the thought is selfish and childish – but that did not stop his bitterness at the thought of his cold, untouched cheek. He knew that it was his fault, not hers. No – it was his father's, for dying without letting Cas say that he was sorry for breaking his favorite St. Peter figurine. That one that reminded him of Cas to begin with, keys to heaven in hand. The irony didn't escape him, even in his drunken state.

"Upon this stone, I build my church of misery," Cas mumbled incoherently. "Thanks for that, Dad. What a fucking gift."

He closed his eyes now, brows furrowed as Cas tried to push away the thoughts and Jude tried to understand what he said, but he was too drunk to do

anything but float in his bad memories. Cas put the heels of his hands back to his eyes and pressed hard, not caring about the pain of his bruises. He was so tired of this.

When will I wake up?, Cas asks himself, chest beginning to heave.

When will I wake up?

When will I wake up?

When will I wake up?

Eyes now open, Jude watched Cas as he sobbed.

There was a stinging in her eyes, and she blinked furiously to banish it. She would not cry for him anymore. There are rivers less full than the one she carved over him, and he does not deserve it anymore. Not when he has given up so fully.

She looked away from him and scanned the lot for his car, but it was empty. Did he walk here? His house is miles away. Jude did not want to think of him walking along the busy roads to get here, precariously balancing on the edge of the sidewalk as he always did when he was drunk, but she did anyway. A tear slipped down her cheek and she wiped it away roughly. She moved over to his side in two steps, pulling his hands away from his face. Cas didn't fight her. He only looked into her eyes, strands of dark brown hair partially obscuring them. Jude did not put her hand to his cheek, but Cas wishes that she would.

"Come on, Cas. Your mom is worried sick about you. I am worried sick about you. Let's get you home."

His eyes shuttered.

"I'm so tired, St. Jude. Why are sins so heavy?" he asked, slurring the words.

I don't know, Jude wants to say, but I will carry them if you let me. Please let me help you, Cas. Let me take you home and hold you until you forget what grief is.

But she did not say this. She is not a saint. She is tired and he is tired and they have both forgotten what it means to be awake.

So she just said, "Let's go, Cassian."

There was no sympathy in her words, no love or kindness. Just a supreme emptiness. She watched a wall go up behind his eyes.

"Fuck off, Jude."

Cas had meant to say it with venom, but it was flat and broken instead. Jude sighed and grabbed his arm to pull him up. He was always so much bigger than her, even when they were kids, so pulling him up was a battle of balance and strength that she was determined to win. Cas let her do all of this. He wished she was St. Jude. But she was not and never would be. The air was cold and stagnant as they walked to Jude's car. The lights flickered and the stars leaned desperately away from the scene as the clouds of their breath sank down into the rot.

Brown Stars

by Anna Calegari

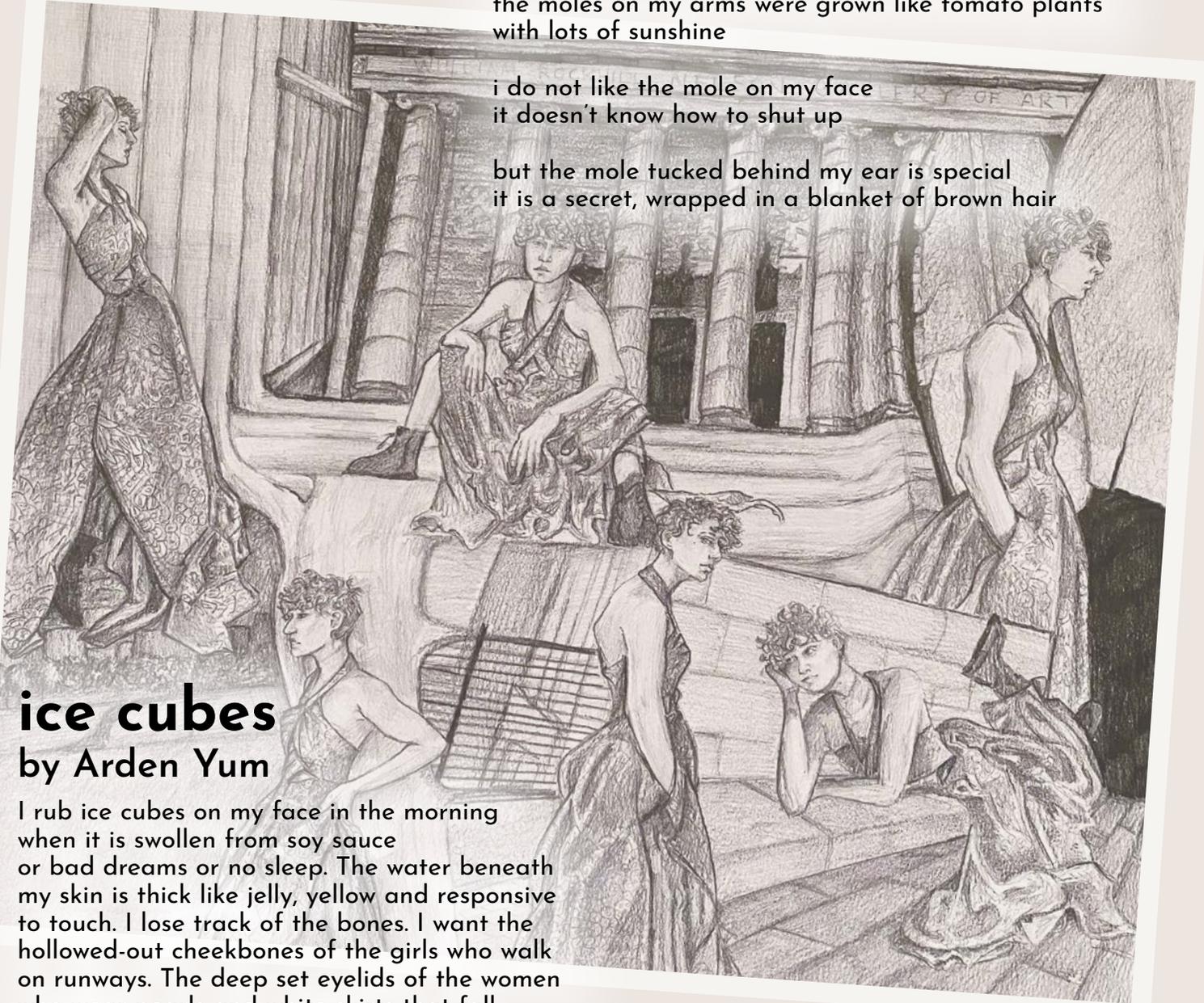
little brown stars
locations on a pale pink map of skin

the mole on my right breast is sophisticated
the mole on my lower back is shy

the moles on my arms were grown like tomato plants
with lots of sunshine

i do not like the mole on my face
it doesn't know how to shut up

but the mole tucked behind my ear is special
it is a secret, wrapped in a blanket of brown hair



ice cubes by Arden Yum

I rub ice cubes on my face in the morning when it is swollen from soy sauce or bad dreams or no sleep. The water beneath my skin is thick like jelly, yellow and responsive to touch. I lose track of the bones. I want the hollowed-out cheekbones of the girls who walk on runways. The deep set eyelids of the women who wear pearls and white skirts that fall at the knee. The delicate tissue under my eye is for collecting tears. The flesh on my face is for softening blows. For sleeping on linen pillows in the summer. For my mother, soft hands holding my face up when I cannot. Grains of rice stick to the sides of my mouth, build up a layer of starch. My smile widens. Head too big for a bike helmet. For a baseball cap. For a girl. Ice cubes it is. Make me go down.

Myself at the Museum by Emilia Gibbs

Off to Prom We Go

by Peggy Yin

I tried on a mermaid dress the other day, and waddled two steps before stripping it off;
I saw how it snagged on my hips and clutched at my chest,

the same way I gripped the towels we tripped in so many years ago –
our hair, stringy and streaming from the community pool

while parents shouted warnings behind us.
It was the first time I felt so conscious of my choices,

scraping our bare skin on wet cement, and later
howling as alcohol rubbed those stone splinters loose

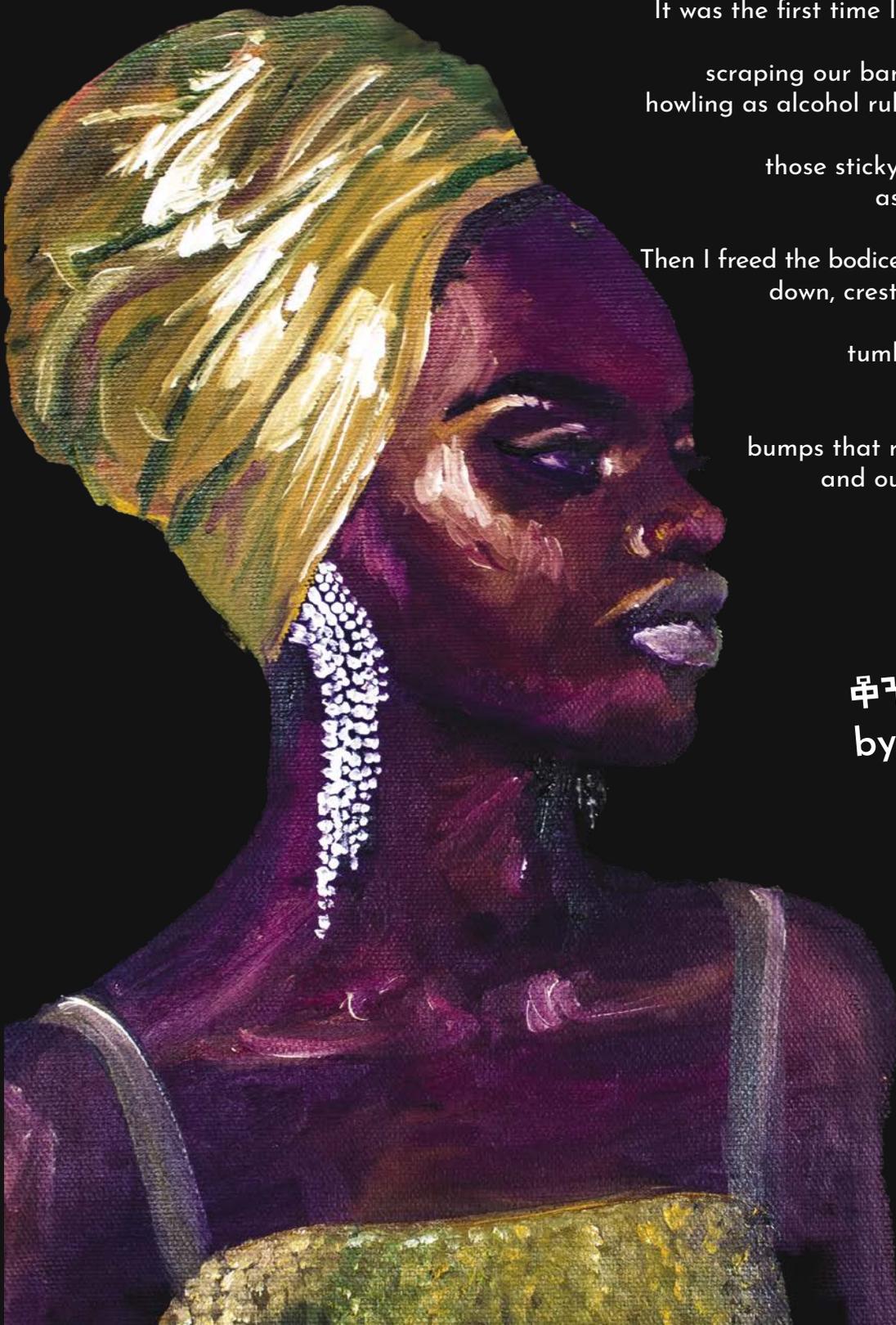
those sticky pearls, still clad in our chlorine
as Beauty was born from the sea.

Then I freed the bodice from my breasts and it billowed
down, cresting the curves of my calves as I

tumbled, top-first, to the tulle at my
toes. I still carry

bumps that rise like molehills from my knees
and our painless flight in my laughter.

푸근푸근 (k'onijo)
by Lyla Dietz



The Beard

by Rachel Stander

You walked into class two minutes late.
I noticed immediately; you were freshly shaved.
From the top of your sideburns all the way down. You had a baby face.
You looked the same as the day we met, back in the sixth grade, when we were full of optimism.
When you sit down, I open my mouth to ask why you did it, but you already knew what I was thinking so you tell me you did it because it started to feel heavy, like it was holding the weight of all the problems you realized were selfish. It made you feel dirty.
It made you feel like you were hiding, like you were lying to yourself about who you were.
Every inch of your beard was another personality trait you pretended to have to please the people around you. It made you feel old.
You started from the sides and worked to the bottom of your chin. You cut yourself twice, but the blood made you feel new, like the narcissism was leaving through the skin on your cheeks and benevolence rebirthed in your pores. You looked in the mirror. You had a slight fu manchu.
You were then someone else, but you still were not you.
Then your sister walked into the bathroom. She was aware of your presence but walked over to the toilet and unzipped her jeans anyway. When she went to wash her hands, all of the beard hairs started to rinse down the drain. They looked like little bits of someone else, finally packing up and moving out after staying for too long. Your sister did not look you in the eye before she left, but she did call you ugly.
Staring at yourself, only you really knew how much more attractive you were.
You then shaved the mustache. You cut yourself one more time. You let this one bleed.
The rest of your mustache hairs in the sink looked like little bugs, like at any moment they could crawl back onto your skin and suffocate you.
But I know you'd refuse to let them.
The kids in class all make jokes about you getting lost on your way to the junior high. The boys have always been jealous of the way you've been able to grow a full beard while they look like the middle-school students who've been waiting for you to come back. The girls giggle at the little brown mole that's always been under your chin but is only visible now that your facial hair is gone. You used to hate that mole. Now, it reminds you of the boy you let go of, how you're free now.
The teacher finally walks in. He is nine minutes late. He makes a comment about how he didn't know they switched him to freshman English over the weekend. These baby face jokes could bother you.
But I know you do not let them.

Breakfast Dinner Rented Suit
by Evelyn Goering



Father

by Gaby Kill

My brother's just moved into college!

Well, not entirely – there's still his coffee machine and a box of granola bars, but we're driving those to him today.

As we pass by my mom's old sorority building, she looks on with fondness. It's the academic one, the high-achieving one, the we-host-mandatory-study-sessions one. In it, she sees family. Her husband, not so much.

The girls outside are dressed their best for rush but all he sees is, "skank." All he sees is, something he'd never let his daughter be.

Cause a short dress makes for short judgments about bright girls with bright futures, daughters that get duller every time a dad like him puts them down.

The word "daughter," is unfamiliar to me.

It burns in my throat like a hot drink, like boiling water, the water in which they boil the witches, my father doesn't really like females.

maybe it's our strength, our beauty, how powerful someone can be

maybe it's because, growing up, a woman was the one to beat him when he did something wrong

a woman was the one to tell him there is no money for dinner,

only cigarettes.

She calls herself *g-ma*, cause grandma is too long and abuela tastes too much like New Mexico.

My father is called father, cause "dad" is too loving and "John" makes it sound like I don't know him –

like I don't know how he likes the women in our family to keep their hair long,

like I don't know how softly he comforts you when you skin your knee,

like I don't know how strong his sweaty grip is when we're crossing the street and he doesn't trust me.

I wonder how many streets he's crossed, always moving around, nine elementary three junior high six high schools, he seemed to break off bits of himself at each one.

he left his hugging arms in Tulsa

his softspoken mouth in Independence

his patience in Albuquerque,

His forgiveness in Wichita

and his heart... probably at our house

before he moved out.

or maybe a woman, a witch.

stole it from him.

ran her hands down his chest the way he ran his up mine,

plucked it out the way he picks insults for women,

stitched the hole the way he tries to fix our relationship with a gift card on my birthday.

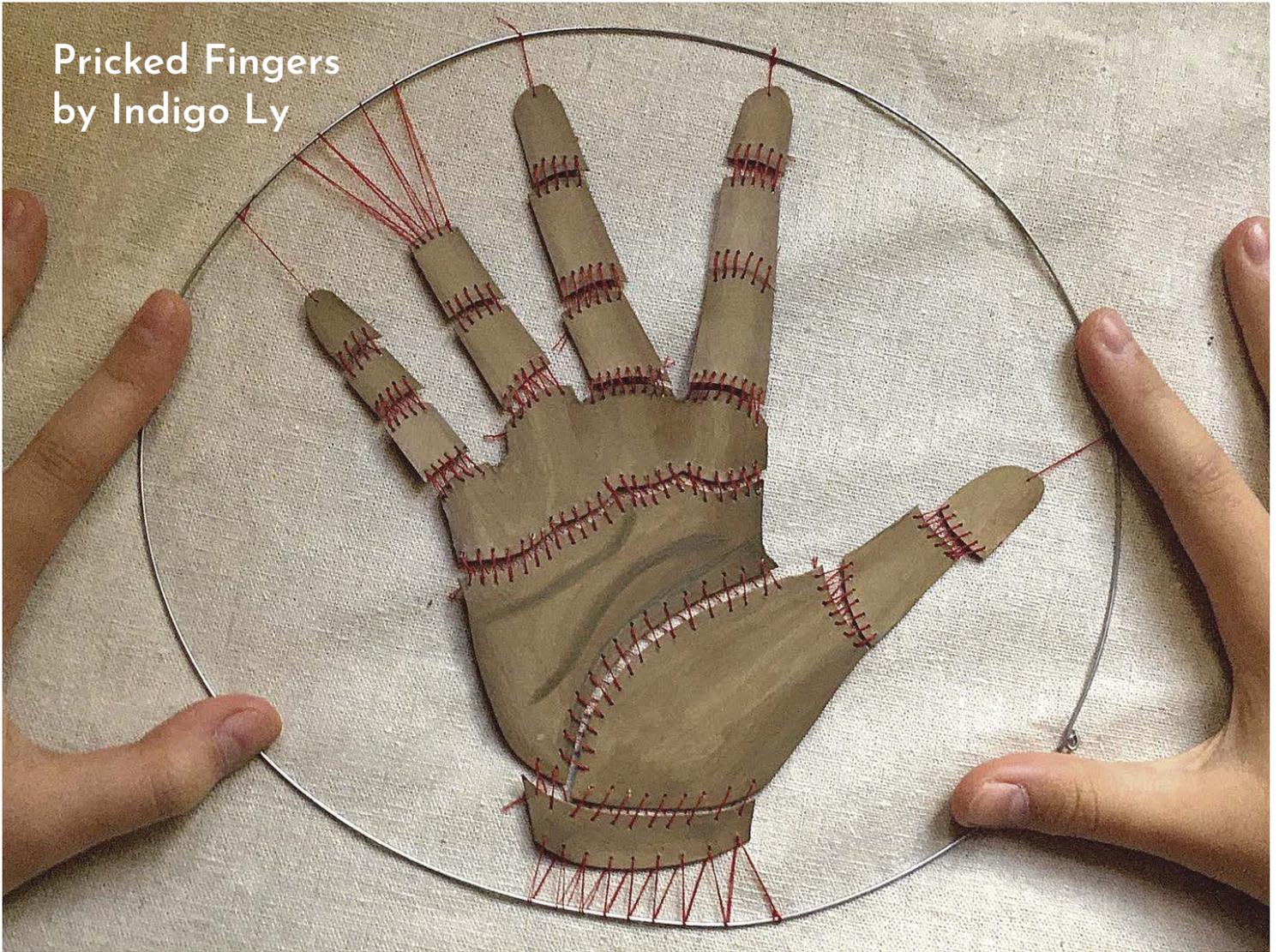
You drive by a sorority and you see college students, he sees people that owe him.

He sees revenge.

my father hates women and as such, I am no daughter. I am girl. I am bitch. I am skank. I am honey bunches of oats when he's in a good mood. Maybe when I'm none of those things, he can be

Dad.

Pricked Fingers by Indigo Ly



A Blade of Two Owners

by Emma Steenhard

THE ROBBER

I dropped the bloodied knife on the ground. The man collapsed to the ground in front of me as he gripped the front of his dress shirt, a sea of ruby red blood quickly radiating under his hands. My eyes widened and I nearly threw up from the sight of what I had just done. Before I could process anything else, I felt my legs beneath me start to run. I ran as far and as fast as I could, not stopping until I had reached the other side of town. I ducked into an alley and keeled over. My hands, somehow, were covered in blood. The world around me started to spin. I looked up at the sky, trying to calm myself down. I took deep breaths and counted to ten over and over until I didn't feel so nauseous anymore. I wiped my hands on my jeans, but blood had already dried under my fingernails and in the creases of my palms.

I shakily pulled the wad of cash from my pocket. I fanned out the bills and slowly started to count

them, trying to avoid looking at the presidential faces that stared up at me in judgment. It was nearly a thousand all together. Enough to pay the rent. The sight of it once again sent a wave of sickness through me. This time I couldn't repress it. I leaned over and threw up onto the concrete. It was almost funny; I had killed a man, just so I wouldn't be evicted. I had a place to sleep at night, but now I wouldn't be able to sleep.

THE DANCER

I awoke this morning leisurely, as I always did. I stretched my arms and legs and lingered in the warmth of my silk covers for several moments before slowly pulling myself out of bed to pull the long satin drapes away from the window, letting the bright sunlight in. I walked into my bathroom to take a shower, allowing the hot water to rush over me and rouse me from my sleep. After dressing and a

quick breakfast of yogurt and some fruit, I walked out my front door and got in my car to drive to my comfortable, if not dull, job at a budget analysis firm.

As I drove, my mind started to wander. For some reason, I thought about 7th grade; it was an old and dusty memory, like something you would dig out of an attic. It was so distant that it barely seemed like a memory, more like something I had dreamed or watched on the television a long, long time ago. I remembered learning about the human body in biology, tracing the intricacies of the nervous system with my finger, looking at pictures of brightly colored drawings of brains and hearts, running a plastic femur from a replica skeleton through my hands. I was good at anatomy, and I enjoyed it. These thoughts evoked a strange feeling within me; I enjoyed taking walks down memory lane – getting lost in thought was one of my favorite pastimes – but this was something different; this was not a simple stroll through my mind. No, this time, I was dancing.

I shakily waltzed from 4th grade all the way to junior year of high school. The school offered an anatomy class, but I didn't take it. My mom had bothered me about it every day the summer before, urging me to enroll, she knew how much my 7th-grade science class had enraptured me. But I had refused. I tried to recall why I had insisted on not taking the class, a class that I surely would have enjoyed, but my own reasoning was lost on me. I felt a twinge of regret in my heart. Suddenly I found myself stopped in a parking lot. The dance in my brain was suddenly brought to a halt. I raised my eyes to the level of the street and gazed blankly at the cold, grey building in front of me.

The workday was more disheartening than usual. Most days I went through the motions of it all willingly, with little complaint. But today, every new piece of paperwork that slid across my desk seemed like a new mountain to climb. I was *bored*. At lunch, my coworkers tried to indulge me in our regular conversation; what was on TV last night, who was dating whom down in accounting, where they were going out for dinner on Saturday.

It was all so trivial. I kept focusing on my coworker's hands, anything to occupy my mind other than their dull chitchat. Her hands were smooth and thin, with noticeable veins and bony fingers. It was all I could do to not grab one and examine it up close. I imagined myself taking a cleaver to her wrist so I could have the beautiful appendage all to myself. I was surprised by my own disturbing imagination. I tried to dance myself away from the thought, but my mind just kept spinning back to her lovely hands.

After a long and dissatisfying day of filling out paperwork, the idea of driving back home just to

make a box dinner and watch the news until 9 o'clock was sickening. I wanted to do something different, to find something that could fill the frustrating pit in my chest left by whatever ignorant contentment had dwelled there until my drive to work that morning. I decided to do something I almost never did; I wanted to get a drink.

I drove three blocks south and found myself in the parking lot of Goodman's bar, a run-down establishment, but one that was known for its lively conversation and clientele. I walked inside, plopped myself down at the bar and ordered a shot of tequila. I was normally ambivalent about hard drinking, but tonight I was feeling risky. After the first shot, I ordered another. Then another. Then another. I struck up a conversation with the other patrons of the bar, laughing merrily at crude jokes and anecdotes, things I would have never dreamed of indulging in before that evening. It was fun, but it meant nothing. Despite my attempts to wash away the dread with cheap tequila, there was still a lingering sense of unrest. When I wasn't foolishly engaging with the drunken regulars of the establishment, I found myself examining the bartender's bald head with the same strange infatuation that I had stared at my coworker's hands. I admired its shininess and the way its lack of hair couldn't conceal anything about the shape of the skull underneath. I caught myself wondering what it felt like to hold that bare skull in my hands.

It was about 2 o'clock in the morning when I exited the bar. The chill fall air stung my bare face. I leaned up against the brick wall of the building, sucking in a deep breath. I had drunk a significant amount, enough to make even a seasoned alcoholic nauseous, which was the feeling that promptly overcame me.

I turned into the alley that sat perpendicular to the bar and vomited onto the concrete. I panted heavily and closed my eyes to stave off the nausea. I leaned backwards and slid down the wall of the alley till I was sitting on the ground. In my reckless and drunken state, I considered just falling asleep right there, my eyelids getting heavy.

But before they could fully close, I was jolted awake by a loud crashing sound from further within the alley. I leapt from the ground and prepared to start sprinting, a jolt of adrenaline engaged. But instead, all I heard was a soft grunting coming from behind an industrial dumpster. Every nerve in my body was telling me to get the hell out of there, but there was another voice, deeper, more powerful, in my head telling me to inch closer. Despite all my better *judgments*, that was the voice I listened to. As I neared closer to the noise, I began to recognize

continued . . .

(cont.) some basic shapes; an arm, a leg, all sprawled across the garbage of the alley. I was about five feet away from the dumpster when I realized what I was looking at.

A man was slumped against the wall, much like I had been minutes before, but instead of laying down to take a defeated nap, the man was covered in blood. Beside him lay a bloodied knife; it was plain and the handle a little battered, but the blade was sharp. It had done its job well.

I could imagine what had happened: this poor schmuck had walked out of the bar after a successful night of celebrating and some crackpot had grabbed him, mugged him, then stabbed him in the chest so he couldn't call the cops. A pathetic and cowardly crime, but a deadly one. The man's hands gripped the front of his sports coat, clearly trying – and failing to suppress – the spread of the dark pool of red that radiated across the fabric underneath. By my estimation, the knife would have slipped past his sternum and punctured his left lung, leaving him – literally – breathless. His mouth opened and closed silently like a fish that was pulled from the safety of the water and forced into the open air. His eyes weren't much different; barely open but still holding all the fear of some poor animal struggling against death. When his eyes met mine, his legs twitched, and he let out a gasp.

I knew what he was saying: Help me. Please.

Despite the gruesome scene in front of me, I was strangely calm, my drunken state seemingly disappearing. I reached in my pocket for my cell phone so I could call 911, but as I started to punch in the numbers, my eyes slipped down to the knife on the ground. Despite knowing that the sooner I called an ambulance, the better the chances of this man surviving were, the knife held my attention for several long moments. In my peripheral, the man's legs spazzed again, pleading me to continue dialing the number. But I didn't. I snapped my phone closed and placed it back into my pocket.

As if there was a movie playing front of my eyes, I saw myself standing upon a vast stage.

The man let out a series of pathetic gasps and grunts, as if to question, "What the hell are you doing? Help me!"

But I wasn't listening to him.

I was watching the knife.

My mind was dancing. And I wanted to see the whole show.

I slowly leaned down, reaching for the blade. I heard the man gasp in horror. His shallow breaths became rapid and his legs twitched violently. Whether he was pleading with me not to do what I had already decided to do or trying to get away,

I didn't know. I didn't really care either. My hand grasped the knife's hard plastic handle. I liked how it felt in my palm. There were a series of jumps in my mind. I met the man's eye line once more. His eyes were widened with horror.

I could *feel* the heat of the spotlights on my face.

I stepped forward. I could almost hear the music.

The man struggled further, but there was no use. I was close enough that I could embrace the man in a hug if I had wanted. But instead, I gently grasped his chin, the way a mother would if her child had gotten a scratch on their cheek. I tilted his head upward.

I could *hear* the music.

He didn't bother to struggle anymore. I looked him in the eyes one last time and smiled sympathetically. For a second he seemed to smile back.

My knife flashed across his neck, and I spun on the stage. Blood poured from the wound; the carotid artery had been cleanly severed. Any last shreds of life that were in those eyes were wiped away as quick as my knife had moved.

I dropped the bloodied knife on the ground. I crouched down by the body, taking in the features of its face and the shape of its figure. What at one time would have been a handsome man dressed in a luxurious suit was now just a shell for useless organs. Maybe the shell had been a lawyer, maybe a businessman. But I didn't really care about what it had been, I only cared about what it was now. My hand found the body's hand and grasped it gently. It was cold and stiff, a strange feeling for something associated with being warm and dexterous but satisfying at the same time; the inevitable end to the natural state of something. I traced the blue and purple veins radiating up the corpse's arm with my finger. My hands passed the shoulder and neck that were now inundated with blood. My hands found the corpse's skull. I ran my fingers in circles around the eye sockets and the bridge of the nose. I felt a brilliant satisfaction within my soul, a feeling of jubilation that I knew couldn't be matched by anything else. I smiled down at the body. I imagined myself cutting it up into tiny pieces so I could examine every bone and every nerve and every ligament that hid under its skin, taking a cleaver to the wrist, wrapping my hands around the base of the skull. It was a happy thought. I wondered if this feeling is what I would've discovered in 11th grade anatomy. I wished I had listened to my mom. I stood up and grabbed the knife once more. I figured I would keep it since it had done me so much good. I grinned widely as I grabbed the leg of the body and pulled it down the alley, into the darkness of the night.

The dance ended in a fantastic leap.

Mother's Guilt

by Stephanie Kontopanos

I ate the placenta and the umbilical cord
(and i ate and i ate).

I tasted the iron on my teeth

(it stained until i swallowed and i swallowed the hydrogen peroxide).

The flavor of Pantone color 2449C coated the inside of my mouth and left a metal trail

(my mother always told me and told me and told me to stop eating nickels, but it's a tough habit to break).

It's easy to take candy from a baby, but when i sucked the calcium from its bones, i realized that it's easier for a baby to take from me (my humanity; my innocence; my weakness).

I cursed (and I cursed and I cursed)

that baby for what it stole from me, but that baby had already been cursed by the world.

When i see that baby again it will ask

(no, it will mock and it will mock)

"Who's the baby now?"

Don't bite the
hand that feeds;
eat your words!
by Indigo Ly



A Bicycle Accident

by Cheyenne Mann

Graze the lips with concrete and floss with blood
Wintergreen and sharp, pennies in the mouth that
Rattle like bicycle wheels down long hills.

Bandaid sticky, adhesive concealer that fortifies a face

To face the world dripping with bruises, salt, and the momentum

Of a body flying over handlebars is the sum of all its particles,

It falls at 9.8 meters per second squared,

Entangled with the speed of gravity, eating rocks

Gargelling gravel, sip on the feet of the earth and

Fly face first into the mint green grass stained road

Drip from nose, tongue, face, sharp and tangy

And leave a mark, red as plum, saying

I was here.

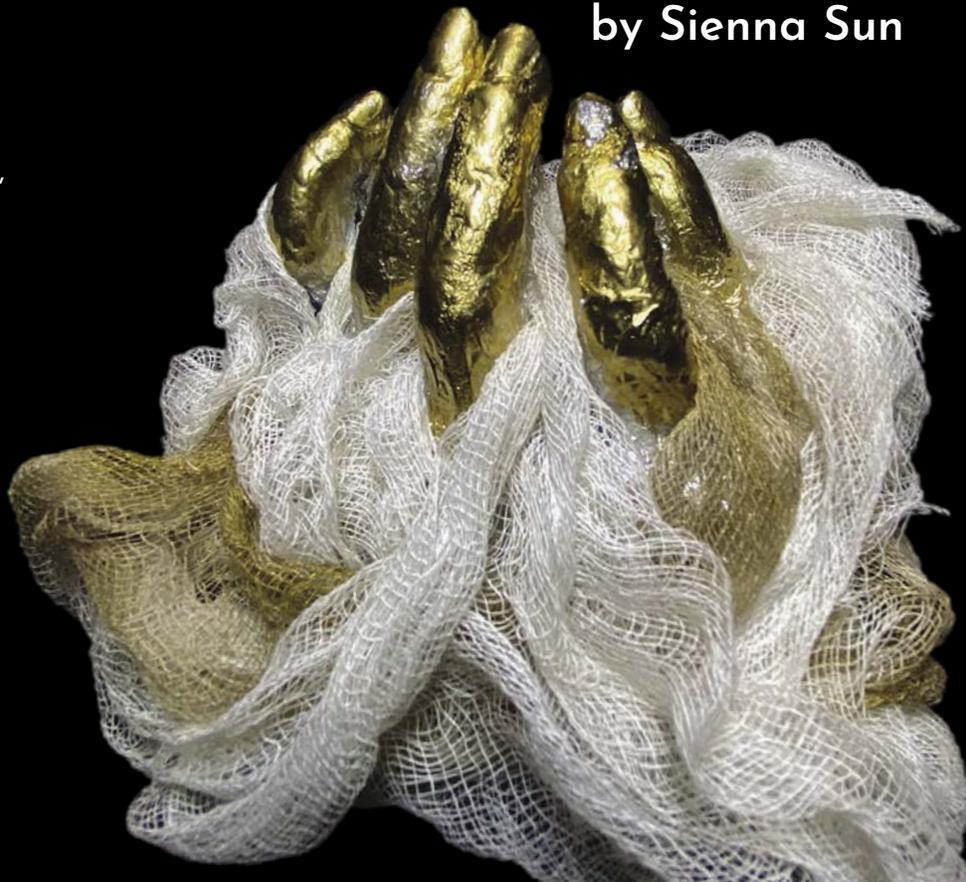
the wind that brought my body back

by Eva Parsons

It wasn't until I
could feel the wind
kissing my hand,
arm hanging out of
your old rusty van
that I realized that
I have a purpose
even if that purpose is purely
letting other people know
that sometimes
a little air is all you need
to bring you back into reality
even if it's just for a moment.
And thinking back
on the wind
brushing my skin
it makes me see
how I can be okay
sometimes.
Makes me wanna breathe to actually
stay alive
not just breathe
to live.
Makes me wanna
sleep to be awake
soon
instead of
sleeping and wanting to sleep
forever.
When I say I think about you all the time
I can prove it right here,
because even the wind
reminds me of you.
Must be why I've come to love the breeze,
feeling like I can hear your voice
in the wind whistling through the trees,
warms my chest filling me with
life
making me wanna live to
be alive
not just live to die.
God, if only you knew
how deep I was
stuck in my own head
buzzing with things like
hopelessness and
weariness and
dread but
I heard you
like I hear the wind.

It rushes through my ears
pushing my hair back
and I think to pull my hair forward
because I hated my ears
but you changed that,
so I let it all go.
Not only am I learning to let my hair
flow
I'm learning to be okay
with being alone
with the silence of the air
and the emptiness of the sky.
27 minutes go by until I notice the
wind
has died down
and I'm left sitting here
alone?
I thought the sensation in my hair
was the embrace of the wind
but I reach back to feel
your touch on my skin.
My skin that has grown cold
from all of this chilly air
your first word
"hi" and just like that
I am warm
once again.

Reaching
by Sienna Sun



Lunar Wonders
by Lyla Dietz





Emilee (L) and Nadia (R) by Evelyn Goering



Sweetheart

by Gaby Kill

My lover is strong for a reason.
I was teasing her neck and giggled when she flipped me
"play fighting"
hit flat on my back, seeing stars in broad daylight on the lawn
of the private school she would get kicked out of.

and of all evils I can remember, it's the way she smiled
so vividly, nothing behind it but scaffolding
she smiles like she's clicking the not-a-robot button.
she smiles knowing what it will do to you,
by choice,
with good timing,
It's the same way poisonous berries just look like berries to a child in nature.
I vapidly grinned back.

My love has white teeth.
they leave stains,
sometimes I look in the mirror and I can still see the purple blotches
blackberry nightshade seeping under my skin,
so dirty. Rubbing acetone, rubbing alcohol, hydrogen peroxide streaming down my chest to dissolve the
stains of sweaty palms
leaking out of my tear ducts, foaming from my throat, drying under my fingernails like blood
like her blood, I am digging into her skin, she won't let go
she has muscles she's trained them she's sent me pictures shirtless she won't let go
she saw this coming she saw herself cumming she won't let go
this doesn't feel fun anymore.

get her hands off of me
I never asked to wrestle like this
please

My lover is too strong.
too detached, too calculating
I really should have seen this coming,
but sometimes self defense isn't natural
and I've realized the only way to escape is to go limp.
sink into my mind, pull down the curtains on my eyes
unplug my ears
take off my soiled skin and hang it to dry with the laundry

I am a weight,
pulling these papery bedsheets down taut
a fly locked in a spiderweb
squirming
as she whispers

calm down, sweetheart
calm down
you're beautiful.

My love –
I feel weak.



Pluck
by Tyler Phothiraith

inheritance
by Elliot DeSignore

i have my father's temper, my father's eyes.
i keep my bloody birthrights in a clear glass jar.
all the things i've laid claim to with my mother's fingers;
long, pale, five on each hand, like real people have.

i froze to death when i was nine years old,
screaming with my mother's pale throat.
drowned when i was seven, in the atlantic.
ripped my father's broken vocal cords right out.

i held hands with a beautiful boy, winter-cold,
with a face like a sunset and eyes like home.
he fell in love with me for my father's cheekbones.
i wept my mother's bitter tears when i left him.

my great-grandparents fought, back in italy,
stained roman streets red with discontent,
loved each other with separate bedrooms.
the genotype of heartbreak runs far back.

nana's soulmate sleeps easy with the angels
but their love died in divorce court long ago.
they wanted each other for little things;
my nana's heart, my grandfather's wallet.

i'll mail you my ripped-out heart for \$30;
flat-rate, international, customs checked.
i ripped it out with my father's knife.
if you taste the dried blood, you'll know.



Oasis

by Samantha Liu

Watercolor Lady by Adib Rabbani

Today I pulled
my grandmother's body
from the mouth of the river,
unpeeled milkflowers and seawater
from her hair, and knelt over her
the way we bend over our own reflections:
to drink.

*Nainai, ni ren shi wo me?**

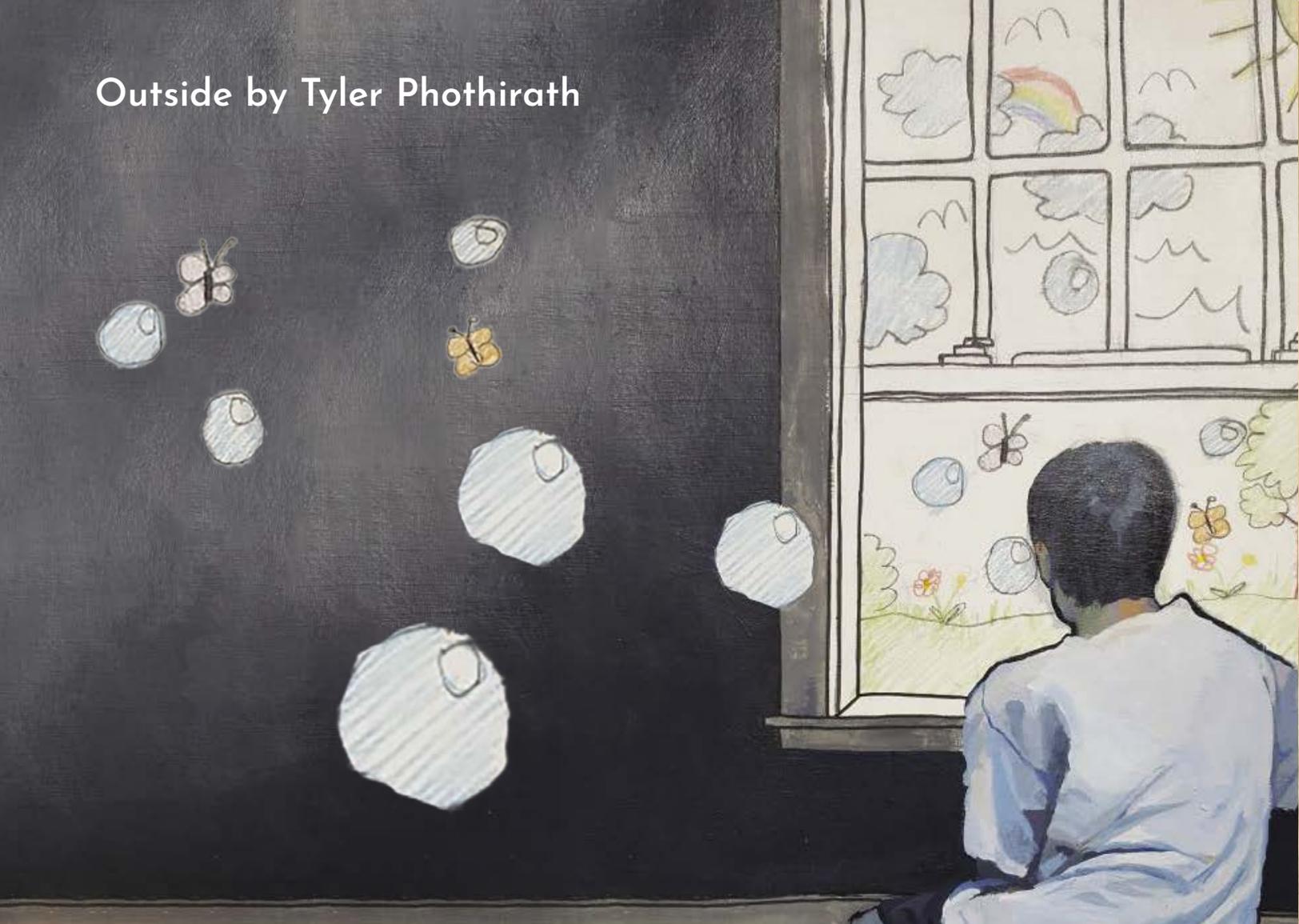
still, never answer, no answer:
the answer was the smoke filling her chest,
the hymn half-sung on her lips,
the wisterias like exit wounds
through her back.

She could have been anyone's grandmother,
but I collected her ribs anyway,
and in her calcified eyes,
my tongue swallowed the rain.

Tomorrow I will return with two birds and my neutered tongue,
offer them to the river spirits, ask for a bled body back.
They will take me, bathe me in my jar of bones –
I will wear them as if they are mine, to drape myself
with ghosts, to touch an unlearned year,
shedding my skin like a water lily.

*Grandmother, do you remember me?

Outside by Tyler Phothirath



aunties' feet

by Olivia Williams

Bony fingers whipping, winding, wrinkling 'cross my scalp
Heat near ears – don't do it – yep, she's scalded me
"Girl, don't wail like that!" Popped with comb
Wince and whine, smile inside – aunties like this are rare
No they're not, dime a dozen, priceless
Only found in corner liquor stores
Smoky bus stops, beauty supply shops
And in the whites of church mothers' eyes
My feet will be aunties' feet someday,
Mantled in little white heels
Peppered with peeling red bunions
Ice box stocked with sweet tea
And little butter bowls boasting everything but butter
Vaselined teeth and white musk doused down my blouse
My feet will be aunties' feet someday.

Let the Rain Keep Falling

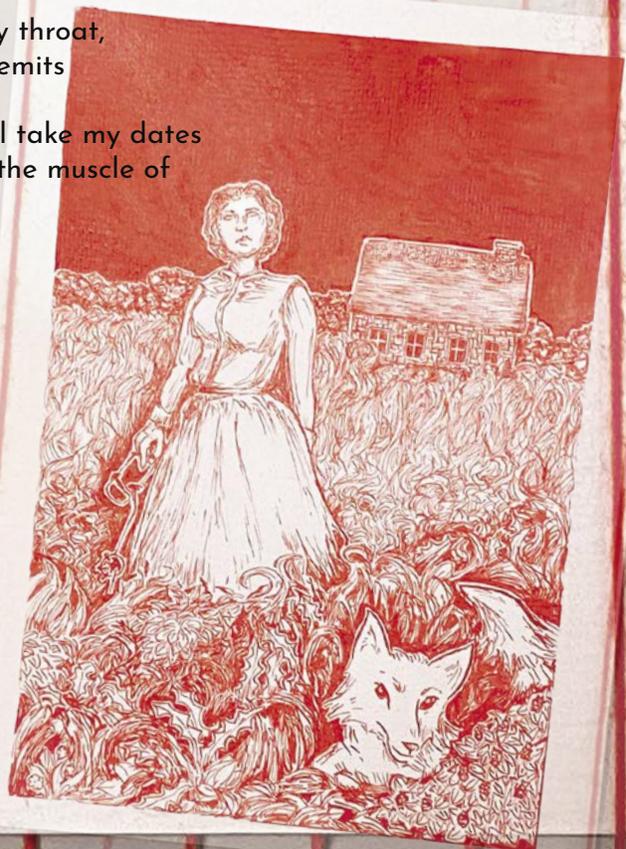
by Ayesha Asad

O birthplace rain I take what I can from
your mouth, delivering myself
from spring seeds,
wetting my tongue

with your resilience.
And you warm my skin in segments,
rinsing winter & sweat,
my unskinned self trapped in your hollowed
bone marrow. Lately,
I've been listening to the ways the trees sway,
silent behind glass, trembling in pockets
of air they cannot escape from.
& I have run twice from myself
& my future. & I have stared the sky down
& wished it to darken into a sign.

& I have asked myself what qadr means.
Tomorrow, I'll run
unstop & swallow – let what
was scraped against my lips
fly outside, a bird from my throat,
a fixed-wing esophagus, a tree that emits
a steady hum. & I will miss standing
on the roof that sings to the city. & I will take my dates
sweeter than ever. & I will sing through the muscle of
my own throat
& I will glare at myself,
daring my body to step aside
& lose what it never had.

Woman with Fox Trap
by Emilia Gibbs



Venus's Apprentice

by Sarah Walker

she rocks on a satin sea
her crossbow jawline aimed upward
trained on the sun.

she shoots, trying to make
the sun sink to her,
make it fall
in love with her.

blushing rose petals dance around her,
rocking in the ripples she sends out
like messengers
telling the world
of her existence
with a wink and a nod.

"fly to me," she coos,
"come closer,
closer."

her mind is embroidered
into her billowing sleeves,
in sharp crystallized thoughts.

but her heart.
her heart is tucked
deeply in the corners of her being,
sliced into easily-concealed
pieces of a priceless object.

but if you, somehow, impossibly,
got to know her,
the pools of honey in her eyes
might melt down her face,
like the warmth of the blood
that once stained her there.



Bird by Eileen Kim



Venus
by Eileen Kim

I'm Balding

by Kechi Mbah

My reflection swallows round my eyes like twisted hair beads and pink oil
while the mirror leaks a frightening truth
that I go mad to.

I hold the wishing in my fingers
drenched in castor, tea tree, and peppermint
my scalp only blooms red
and empty

so this time I pray in gel and satin
and slicked down illusions
that break to the slip of pale brown patches across my head.

The tears seize to swivel outside me
as vanity clenches to the quiver of my chin
and I grow nought and powerless to the motions.

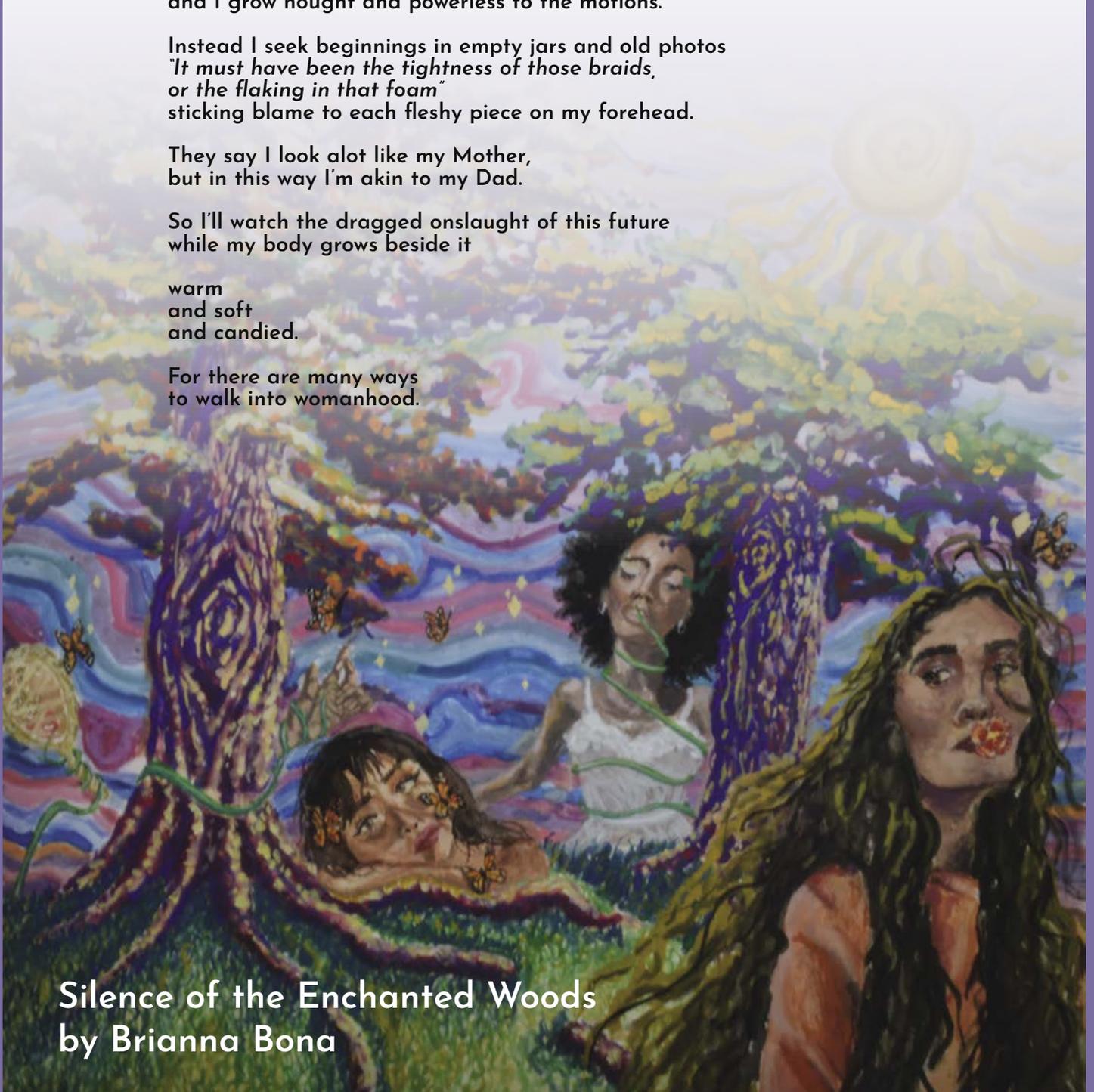
Instead I seek beginnings in empty jars and old photos
*"It must have been the tightness of those braids,
or the flaking in that foam"*
sticking blame to each fleshy piece on my forehead.

They say I look alot like my Mother,
but in this way I'm akin to my Dad.

So I'll watch the dragged onslaught of this future
while my body grows beside it

warm
and soft
and candied.

For there are many ways
to walk into womanhood.



Silence of the Enchanted Woods
by Brianna Bona



Loud by Zoe Cott



Sewn Apart by Isabella Passantino



31 Lines for 31 Days of Knowing You

by Olivia Humphrey

i have never loved another in the way i have found myself to love you.
i have loved you the way the sun loves the dandelions
and the way the tides love the moon.
i simply cannot imagine a world where we didn't save one another.

i have loved you since the moment the universe handed you to me.
the stars in the twilight aligned when your body seemingly fell into my open lap.
you were bright and brave and persistent so
i named you appropriately as jo, my little woman.

your eyes were doused in a thick haze
and your breath seemed foggy and thick as well.
your bright attitude seemed to shine through
the storm that i had no idea was brewing in your weak body.

a switch had flipped in that month we had known each other.
the doctors started with "your baby is going to get so strong! putting up such a good fight!"
and ended with "she's calm because she's so sick. she's got no energy to live."
two week prognosis, just two weeks into caring for each other.

i tried to leave your side as little as possible in the time i knew we had left together.
i would carry you anywhere you wanted to be,
letting my fingers slip between your ribs when you begged to be placed in my lap.

jo, i don't know how much you remember of the night you died, but
you had collapsed in my bathroom – and my fate-given mother's intuition told me it was time.
on the way to the emergency room, you cried out for me. i answered with:
"mommy's here. i promise mommy's here and she's not leaving."
you stopped breathing before the doctors could even look at you.

the towel i buried you in probably weighed more than you did at that moment.
the top of your head was all i saw of you that day. that was probably for the best.
i kissed it softly before reminding you how much i love you.
more than the sun could love all the dandelions and all the daffodils,
more than the tides could ever be pulled over the shores by the moon.

i have thanked the stars every night since we met for bringing us together,
and now, when i look up at the sky, i can thank you too.



A STORY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE LOVE INTEREST

by Julie Pham

the director says *start*, and you come to life like an automaton. a blink, and

SCENE ONE. focus on you, a consumable catastrophe. you're sitting all pretty in a coffee shop; hear the background noises of "it's way too early for this," the cacophony of students stumbling in, eyes dead, brain dead. god rumbles – the sound thunders through your eardrums. he's hungry, you think. you don't know what for.

FOUR

camera cuts to a shot of your arm, resting atop your notebook. it's partially covering something. the lenses focus, enough to make out words underneath.

THREE

love, the handwriting sings, over and over again, *love*, in messily romantic loops, *love*, in naive twirls, *love, love, love*, and so on. what a princess you are; you're perfect for this role, you've always been.

TWO

stop, get in position. the soundtrack begins to play; a clapperboard is placed in front of the camera; the music rises to a crescendo, and *he* comes in.

the first thing his eyes catch on is you.

ACTION

this is how the story starts.



WES (17) is facing the typical sad-boy protagonist shit. has a dead parent, (you can't be bothered to remember which one), wears his life out like a pair of weathered shoes, doesn't know his purpose. he's ready for a story. he's ready for you.

what he doesn't know is that you're not doing this for him, all the charades, the fantasy. there's a prize, of course there is. the director strategically places it *just* within reach: it glows pink in your peripheral, melts like taffy in your vision. you're a girl whose stomach was born growling, and this is the first delicious thing you've seen in your entire life.

play the game, the director says, and you'll get your reward.

so you do it. you give wes the world: spontaneous road trips, night sky lights, symphonies of colored laughter, even the tinkering of a grocery store sounding like the word *risk*. you inspire enough butterflies dancing in wes's stomach that the velocity kickstarts his ribcage, forcing him to finally breathe again.

in return, he hands out small portions of the prize, one at a time. crumbs of love, bits of digestible sweetness: glances, kisses, *ilys*. you savor every single bite. each one is your last, each one a new strip of flushed sun that you catalogue with your pink tongue, your pink tastebuds. you let the flavor sink down and listen to it plummet, you let it bloom, you let yourself become carnation incarnate.

continued...

Fashion Show by Emilia Gibbs





My Past Self
by Ellison Lewis

A STORY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE LOVE INTEREST (cont.)

and, maybe, sometimes it spoils in you, but that's okay. maybe, sometimes, you feel the damage crowding against your ribcage, think a bone is going to break somewhere, and the black liquid that leaks out is going to be poison, but that's okay. roses have thorns, you'd be an idiot not to know that, and besides, that's not the important thing.

here's the important thing: there's this thing your stomach does when you're hungry. it tugs at you at every tick of every second, pulls and grabs at you for something you have no name for. when you fill your palate with fumes of pink, it's like it calms. who cares if the pink is poison; who cares if bones break; the important thing is that something in you settles, if only for a bit, and that's better than nothing.

the camera focuses onto a blank line, rigid, the sharp spine of it cutting the paper. preceding it is a neat, typed-out word: "NAME:" you're supposed to fill it in.

the pen holds itself in your palm with a bruising grip. write, you think. it's easy, it's just your name.

just your name. the pen's tip touches the paper, drags itself along the pearled parchment, stutters, and stops. all that comes out is a half-baked scribble.

you stare at the ink. the poison of it pools in your bones. you can feel it find its place neatly in the pores, can feel it digging in, rotting. maybe something breaks, maybe all of it breaks, maybe –

it doesn't matter. you still don't know your name.

camera zooms in, in, in: a black tear delicately falls onto the paper, splashing itself atop the line, mixing with the ink.

FADE TO BLACK.

This piece continues at
jocolibrary.org/elementia



60s Polaroid by Ellison Lewis

Affidavit with Language from Whitman's "Song of Myself" (*Leaves of Grass*, 1st ed., 1855) by Lukas Bacho

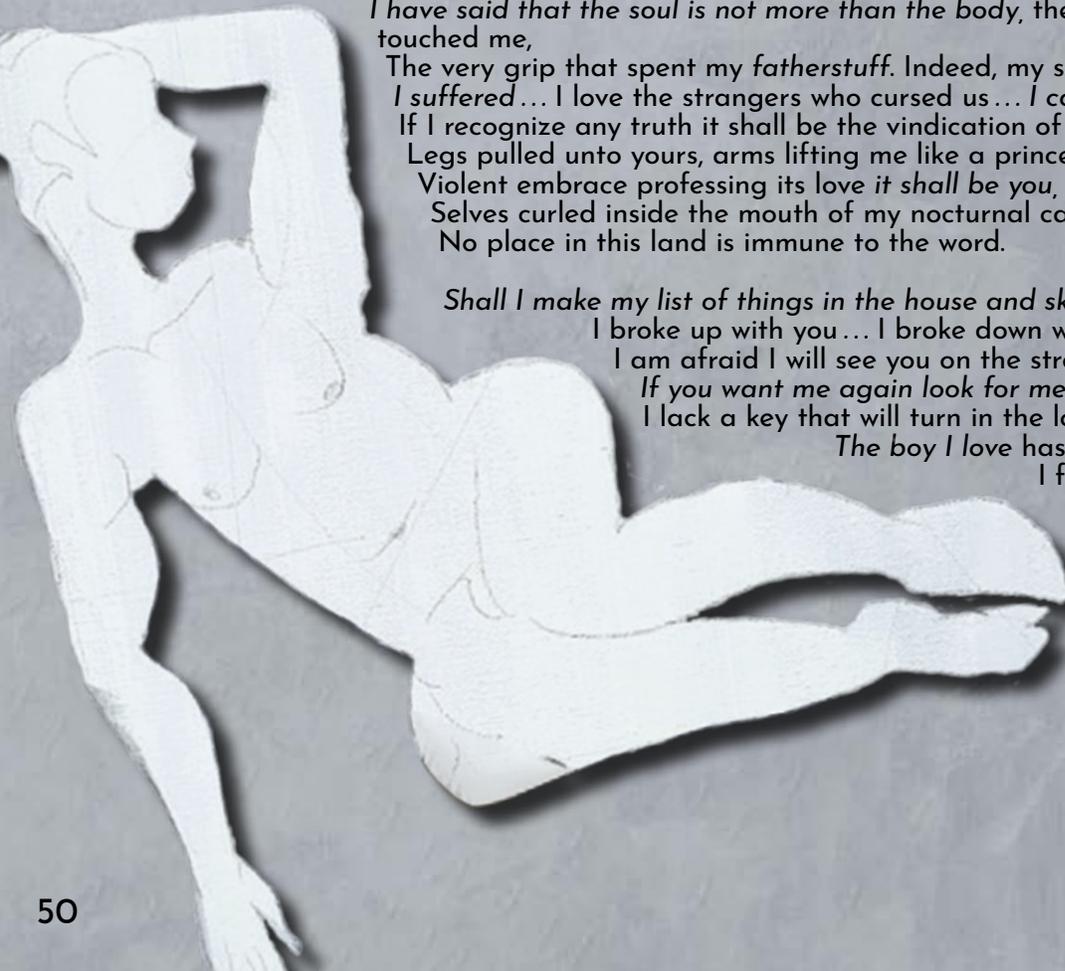
*I stop some where waiting for you... Yet you pretend I have gone!
I've scattered my ellipses like breadcrumbs in a public park.
It is 7:32 p.m... I take refuge in your neck, my ear pressed close to your apple,
Back when I yearn to scrape you clean of seeds.
I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love.
A man once told me we wish to be filthy as much as we wish to be pure.
You remember what follows... And I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also.
Behind the fountain a mouth shouts a word... My brow at your temple... Now I am praying.
No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.
A seed is planted and I am a toddler again;
My mother is explaining how men and women fit together;
My father is explaining women... I hear or say or do nothing... How could I answer the child?*

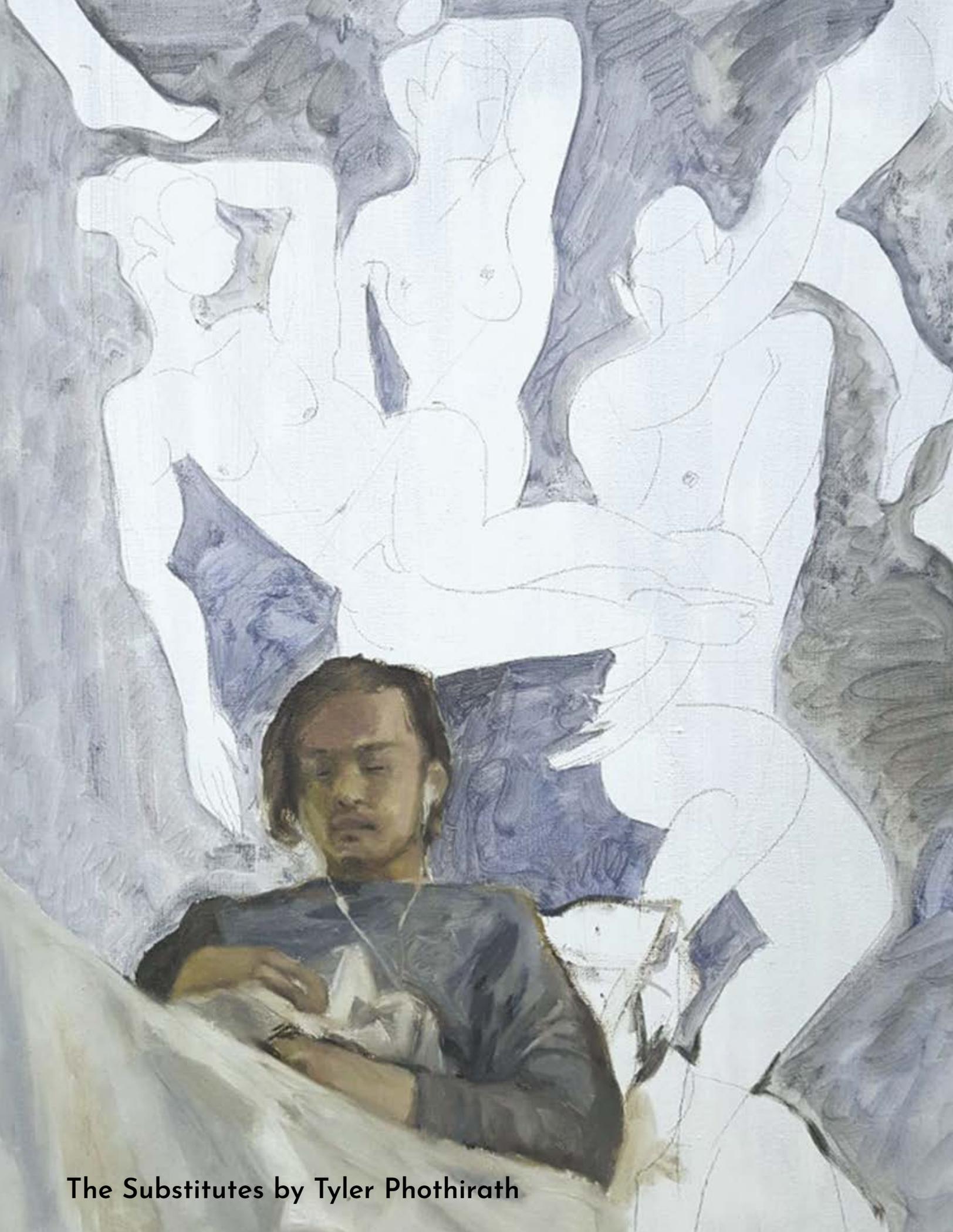
*You whisper away the mocking taunt... We make haste for the trees.
We hear the word again, from another neighbor.
You are incensed by its sound, yet when I say *It is you talking just as much as myself*
I mean not you but the filthy mouths running circles about ours.
The whirling and whirling is elemental within me, I speak the epithet as ordination,
I marvel at the almost-man I have become despite my youth,
not through derived power but in his own right.
O stranger: I act as the tongue of you and give my repression a good name, a loving name.
I need not reprint it here... It echoes even now in your phobic ears.
Now I am incontrovertible in the eyes of God!
With my tears I moisten the roots of all that has grown.*

*You grip me tight beneath the ginkgo trees... What is less or more than a touch?
You tell me no one will ever treat me this good. (O devious promise! O imperfect coupling!)
I have said that the soul is not more than the body, the body that touched you and
touched me,
The very grip that spent my fatherstuff. Indeed, my soul is filthy as my skin;
I suffered... I love the strangers who cursed us... I contradict myself.
If I recognize any truth it shall be the vindication of my body with or inside another;
Legs pulled unto yours, arms lifting me like a princess, it shall be you,
Violent embrace professing its love it shall be you,
Selves curled inside the mouth of my nocturnal captor, it shall be you.
No place in this land is immune to the word.*

*Shall I make my list of things in the house and skip the house that supports them?
I broke up with you... I broke down with you...
I am afraid I will see you on the street.
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles;
I lack a key that will turn in the lock.*

*The boy I love has not touched me in months...
I find comfort in old dead men.
Have I lost my standing in
the eyes of God? I myself
follow the breadcrumbs...
My words are of a questioning,
and to indicate reality. I bid the
grass to help me remember –*





The Substitutes by Tyler Phothirath

Skinned Apples

by Cheyenne Mann

SCENE 1

Lights up. ELIZABETH, a 30-something, tired-looking woman in an old fashioned skirt, stands at a grocery store check out. She places a basket containing some apples and a box of Strawberry Shortcake band-aids on the conveyor belt. A bored-looking cashier scans the box of band-aids.

ELIZABETH

Oh! I have a coupon for those!

ELIZABETH hands CASHIER a coupon.
CASHIER squints at coupon.

CASHIER

Ma'am, this expired in 1993.

ELIZABETH

Oh, I'm well aware. My mother gave it to me. Handed it to me when I skinned my knee on the pavement and told me to buy some more plasters. I never did though. I'm sure you could've guessed that from the coupon! I'm still bleeding now, actually.

ELIZABETH lifts her skirt, her knee is bleeding profusely.

Do you see the scar? I got it when I was 5. I fell off my bike and skidded down the road for miles. The skin is just... gone now. Lying somewhere in the road. I wonder... if I found it again, if I could reach out and touch it? Would that skin be more real than the skin I'm wearing? Or would I not deserve to touch that skin either? I didn't even want to ride my bike in the first place. I wanted to stand in the grass and photosynthesize but my mother told me to go and move around like how kids my age SHOULD. Trees are strong. Trees have bark, not skin. I wanted to be a tree. Ash to be specific. Now I think I just want to BE ash. I don't want my body anymore. I don't want autonomy. I don't want to be able to touch my own flesh. I shouldn't be able to feel my own skin. It's not my skin to feel. I don't deserve skin, I don't think. Either way, sorry, I'm bleeding all over your nice establishment, I didn't have any band-aids at home. Would you mind applying one for me? I don't like touching my own skin.

CASHIER starts scanning the apples.

Apples? I thought I bought oranges. I like oranges better. They're sweeter. They're citrus. They're acid running through my veins, dissolving me slowly one bit at a time. One acre of skin at a time. You peel them, painfully. In strips. Until they're nothing but pulp and innards and intestines, sweet and sticky.

CASHIER

Would you like to trade them out for oranges instead?

ELIZABETH

Oh, no! I'm allergic to oranges. They make me break out. I get hives all over my arms and the itch is so bad I just scratch and scratch until I'm a bleeding mess – and you know how much I hate touching my own skin!

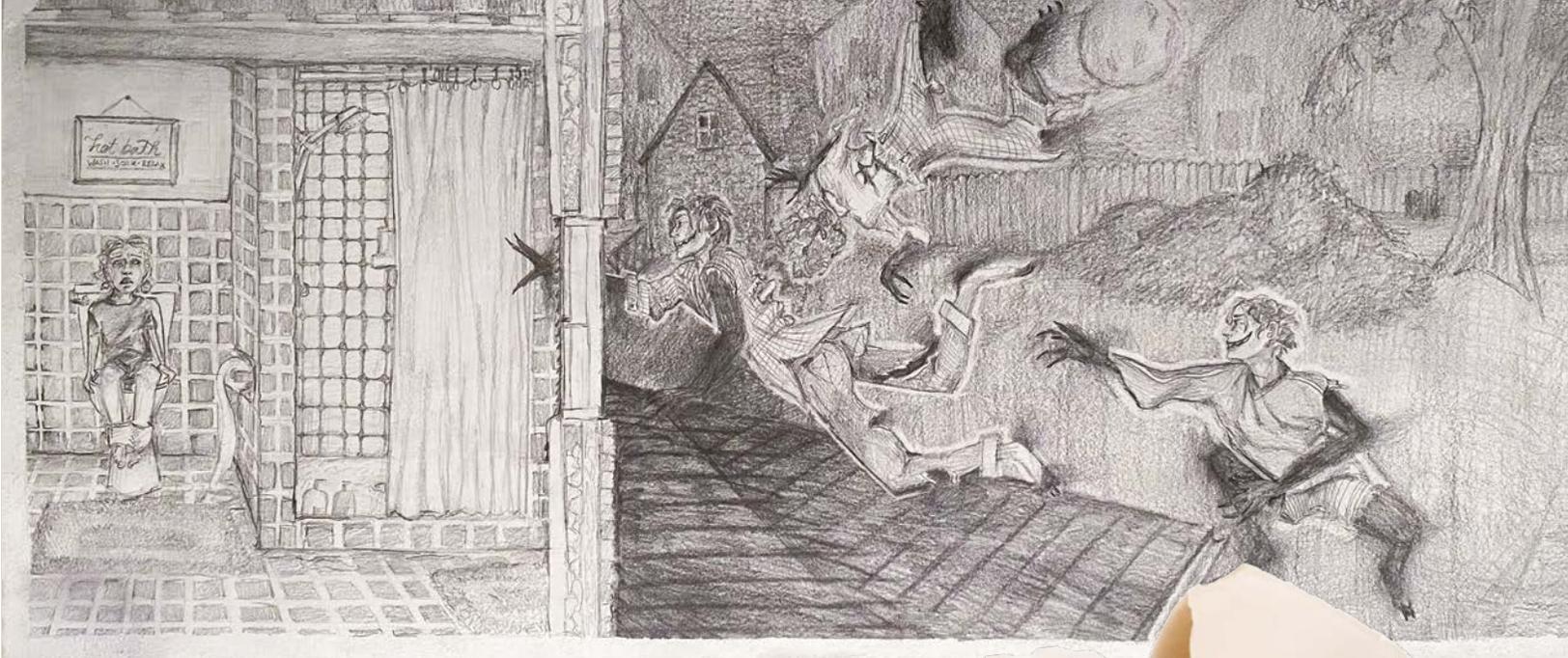
CASHIER

That'll be \$14.50, ma'am. Do you want the apples in a bag or to go?

ELIZABETH

In the bag please, I don't like touching the skin.

CASHIER places the apples in a bag and hands them to ELIZABETH. CASHIER takes a single band-aid out of the box. ELIZABETH smiles. Lights down.



The Bathroom Vampires by Emilia Gibbs



1980s Coke Party by Billie Croft

The deciding factor in whether or not I'd breach the boundary between binaries was a gender neutral bathroom sign.

I heard someone belt a show tune in the shower while another howled. Someone else took off their jeans, stuffed them in the nearest toilet, shit on top of them while

I untangled my hair with a toothpick and pulled out the lifeless strands before putting them in my mouth and

running the length of each with my tongue.

I tasted aloe and mint. I tasted the flesh of a caged wren, which was, of course,

my own. *Oh well*, I thought, for taste and time are indistinguishable when both are plastered to my teeth, my fangs colored amber and hollowed by moths.



Egghead by Indigo Ly

Cigarette Constellations

by Avalon Felice Lee

The ink darkens, leeching my energy as I trace an index over the text. A rejection letter from California Institute of the Arts, and best regards. No better than every other art academy who also shelved my portfolio.

The letter lands neatly in the bin. I stalk to my studio.

Fraying daylight displays my museum of oil paint tubes. Void canvasses yearn for a purpose, and palettes suffocate under acrylic stains.

Great art comes from great pain. After all, what is a writer in a happy marriage? A violinist with three square meals? A true artist should not have cancer-free parents, nor live in a middle-class suburb. A true artist can't afford Prismacolor pencils or moleskin sketchpads.

Come hither, Misery! Make way for the modern Hephaestus, god of the forge and arts. Abandoned by his own mother because of his deformed feet. Suffering burnt his bones to charcoal, so he shades pottery scenes with his own femur.

All nine rejection letters singe my cardboard skull, giving my art meaning. Purpose. Each casts coal into the furnace, emboldening my brush strokes. I scavenge for a cigarette and a lighter before setting to work.

A quarter of an hour passes. I kill my smoke. Now, the mirror's echo shows poetry in sculpture form.

Great art comes from great pain.

Toss away those binoculars, mere mortal. I am the blacksmith of the constellations, so admire my craft with virgin sight. Connect the dots, give them names. Preferably Greek. See the Big Dipper, how it scoops a spoonful of atmosphere, brothlike. The outer star points straight to Polaris, the bellybutton of the heavens.

Tsk. Orion is missing his buckle. If his lover finds out, she'll slip arsenic in my ambrosia. I relight my cigarette, and like a god, burn another star in the sky.

Mexican Identity
by Ana Gutierrez



On Nudity

by Laya Reddy

I.

I was looking at this Renoir of a naked boy petting this cat. And I don't really bother with the boy. Like, I see his nudity, but I'm looking at the cat. Its round eyes peering past the boy, and they accuse. There's something about this cat. Its fur rising in the naked cradle of the boy's arms. There's something about this boy. His hair feathering down his naked nape. Something that makes me think of my baby cousin in a diaper, fat rolls jiggling as he runs. It makes me stare, this innocent gall. These bodies. There's something that compels me closer, and it's not sexual.

II.

It makes me think of bra straps peeking through the shoulders of shirts. Of panty lines I spot at parties on tight dresses. Of underwear brands rising over waistlines. Of seeing and fleeing. Of hiding bodies and body adjacents because noticing would be sexual.

III.

I was driving down this backroad the other day, and I saw this lonely pink picket sign. FREE THE NIPPLE. And when I stopped at the light, my lip had curled and my head was shaking back and forth to the rhythm of my chuckles. Like some sort of societal shaming bobblehead: cringing on command when tv and media and other people say so.

But I feel most at home unconstricted in oversized tees on the couch. But my favorite season is summer where 95% of the time I wear one-piece bathing suits. But I say I believe in feminism. Well, as long as it isn't something people can call sexual.

IV.

I am standing bare in front of my bathroom mirror. Tracking black beauty spots as they trail down my face, my torso, to my upper thigh. The cellulite constellations framing the sides of my stomach. Sparse forests of hair I usually mow down covering the wide expanse of skin. And I just see all of it.

And I don't really bother with my nudity. Like I see my nakedness, but I'm looking at my body. How it curves and flattens and sags. And in this moment, I am at the most peace I have ever been. A spirit transcended. From the outside, I see my hand reach for the door handle. STOP. My soul is sucked back into bodily confines. I slip on my bathrobe before leaving because otherwise, it could be sexual.



Taste
by Lauren Blood



Silence

by Gaby Kill

True silence isn't sealed lips
it's unread texts, deleted history
it's a phone that someone never picks up
The line the dead girl's parents still pay for
even though there is no one to answer it.
the principal is adamant on *thoughts*
and *prayers*
for her family.

ring... ring...
I want to talk to this girl, an old friend, who slipped
through my palms like warm sand and got ground into
the carpet
It's always the ones you least expect, isn't it?
cause I can't remember anymore how many people's
voices I can't remember. One student, two students,
three... people...
This hell was unforeseen, a bomb waiting to explode in
the form of tears
on the cheeks of teenagers who don't understand that
cremated ashes get ground into fabric
ashes are hard to wash out of white converse
ashes make your water fountains taste bitter

Please leave a message after the tone.
School administrators always try to bridge the gap with
cold emails
sent at 11:50 earlier today, titled "Difficult news"
... difficult.
It is difficult, because my friend has become a statistic.
This morning, we found her motionless on the tile floor,
just as yesterday,
it was the girl who had short hair and cried drugstore
mascara

Before that a boy, seventeen years of smile, slipping
out of view,
before that, well
no one seems to remember.

Difficult
is knowing how impossible it is to keep it together
when we're all so disconnected.

ring... ring...
this is a poem for the counselors who call themselves
advocates.
but think death isn't worth the words
when Kansas City's teen suicide rate has doubled in
the past decade. While writing this poem, I googled
how many people our state has lost.
No results.
Believe me, they exist, but it's been buried in a pile
of "giving support to every individual" and "I know
you kids are upset but that rough draft is still due
tomorrow."
This is not to say every adult doesn't care, it is to say
that
no one
seems to care quite enough.

The number you have dialed is no longer in service.
No one seems to care about the skinny girl being
taunted for "looking anorexic",
no one seems to care about the blue-beaten boy
whose father only cares about drinking,
no one seems to care about the little kid whose heart
stutters when he's told he is too short, too slow, too
weak to be worth wasting breath on,
no one
seems
to care.
about the young woman
from east Delhi,
red hair
gentle smile
kind words
silent voice
still heart
lying in a casket in front of me.

Click.
The phone screen glows today's date and time at me
It's been three hundred and sixty-two days since I lost
her, March 5th.
It's been three hundred and sixty days since her
funeral, March 7th.
And some day, it'll be too late.
Because when the line falls flat, a silent hum, sent to
voicemail,
that's when the connection truly drops.
Click.
I turn off my phone.
click.
and set it down.
click.
I can't do this anymore.

It was just red

by Gaby Kill

"Nothing ever ends poetically. It ends and we turn it into poetry. All that blood was never once beautiful, it was just red." – Kait Rokowski

I wanna make poetry out of the way the boy who was my first grade best friend
opened himself up on election night like a can of tomato soup and washed broth down the shower drain
his mom chose cremation to dry his bloated body.

our environmental science teacher attended the ceremony
and hugged me afterwards so tight
like he was afraid I'd evaporate if he let go
and I wanna make poetry about how I felt like I would

we stood there outside for an hour and a half and my hands were numb and my head was numb and my
feet were numb and I beginning to lose balance
And the worst part of a funeral is when everyone leaves at the end

I want to make the way his urn sat off to one side beautiful
and i want to illuminate his father's tears with gold leaf,
give a heartwarming "moral of the story" so I don't
keep coughing out *"Yeah, I'm fine. He's in a better place now!"*
a life lesson that has you thinking all day
but sometimes
all that blood will never be beautiful
it is just red.

Destination Unknown (L)

by Adib Rabbani

Touch (R)
by Lauren Blood



Riyadh

by Billie Croft

One

It's half past eleven, so
we find an epileptic street light & swap sweat

before I put my hands in your pockets &
tell you I feel like I'm in Riyadh with a roughcast of red sand on my tongue and camel skin beneath
my feet

Do you hear that? I tell you to
stop grinding your teeth

between a mouthful of cheeks
& then we're moving,

we're walking through Middletown past seedy smoke shops and White nationalist collectives
& I'm trying to find an amicable way to say, again

Fucker, please stop grinding your fucking teeth but
the feeling passes when moonlight catches your devilfish earring and I forget how to breathe

Two

Dreamscapes behind my eyelids. Come in my hair.
I stand up. Fall back down. No. Wait, yes. *Billy. Billy* –
Do you hear that? I'm not sure.

A bald man taps on the window (*Check your engine light*)
& then he is gone. Replaced. There's fucking come in my hair.
I twist the tap. Grab a toothpick. Good. It's working; I'm combing
the come from my hair with a toothpick and there's a bald man in the mirror.
Oh no. Blink twice. Take a picture. He's there; now he's gone.
Fucker.

Three

DESCENDING

IN FRONT OF THE FALAFEL FOOD TRUCK

WHAT WILL YOU HAVE, SIR WHAT WILL YOU

HAVE I'M NOT QUITE SURE I AM NOT QUITE

SURE I GO FOR THE HUMMUS WRAP.

IT IS DELIGHTFUL BUT ALAS I HAVE

NOT MASTERED THE ART OF PULLING

ICEBERG FROM TEETH

DO YOU HEAR ME,

FALAFEL MAN I CANNOT EAT THIS

HE DOES NOT GIVE ME A REFUND

HOW VERY DISAPPOINTING!



Strooms
by Arianna Allen

where sweat accumulated

by Olivia Williams

crest of my shoulder
fold of my thigh
my right collarbone
is stickier than my left

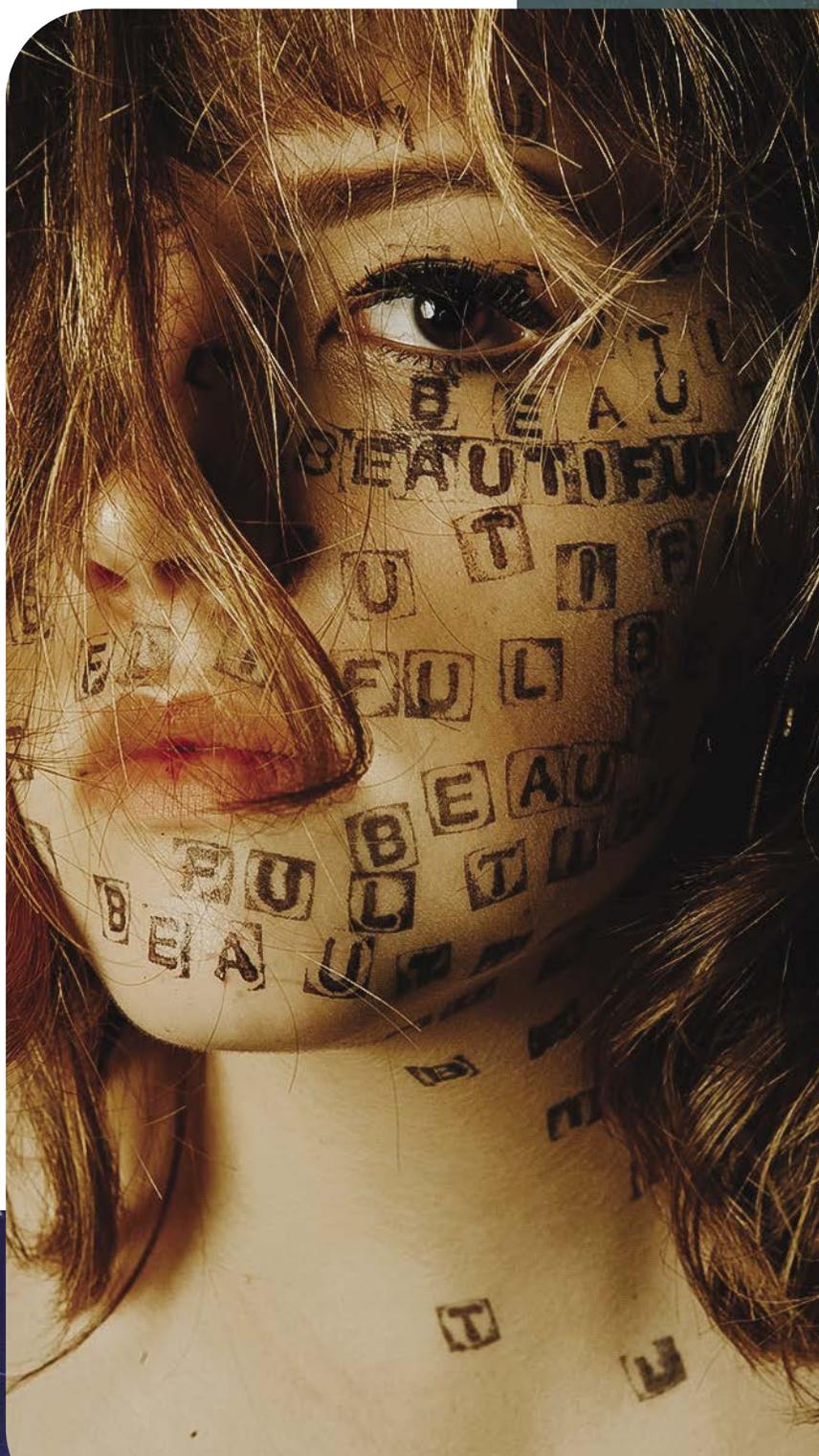
heather grey shirt
glommed to the small of my back
the armpits
always the armpits
advertising to all
"heat was here"

center forehead
smack dab, you could
graph the point
two steps below my hairline
three paces above my eyebrows
dead center to my nose
speaking of, below my nose
septum, pooled into by my nostrils
right, mostly

the left ankle
damper than the right
behind the knee, believe it or not
an oily pool gathers

yet when I've sat
skin dried in the climate-controlled air
I raise my arms
as one final test
the upper chest, just below my neck
feels the coldest.

Beautiful
by Alex Braley



Artificial Dreams

by Isabelle Shachtman

Been sitting still the whole day
Can't sleep

Thank you trazowhateverthehellyouare
For the frog and the eyes
And the image of my
Ex-girlfriend in the sun and

What am I saying?
What've I done?

I convince myself that swallowing this pill
Is aborting 50 sheep
And see red hoof marks on the ceiling
With my eyes closed

And I smile,
Convincing myself I'm not dreaming
And have a little fun with it

Before I fall asleep
And down and up
And behind my eyes like a god
Overlooking the rain
I embrace this saccharine love of the cold toed puddle
And backroad trips and highway falls
And baby sheep nursing my blood
Until they scream metallic can kicking prayer
In crowns woven of my eyelashes –
Uprooted by their dark velvet mouths
And fluttering black eyes

Swimming away from me,
Amorphous, like snails,
Screaming rah rah rah rah rah
Biting the bad people
Off my hands –

Before I wake up in sheets
smelling like a girl
Who was never in them, but

Was, faintly, in the same laundry cycle as them
And therefore,
Maybe smells a little like my dreams now

Been the whole day
I can't
Still can't
Be the girl I saw in the sun
Behind the rain that I see, but cannot smell
Can predict, but cannot stop

helpless holy happiness

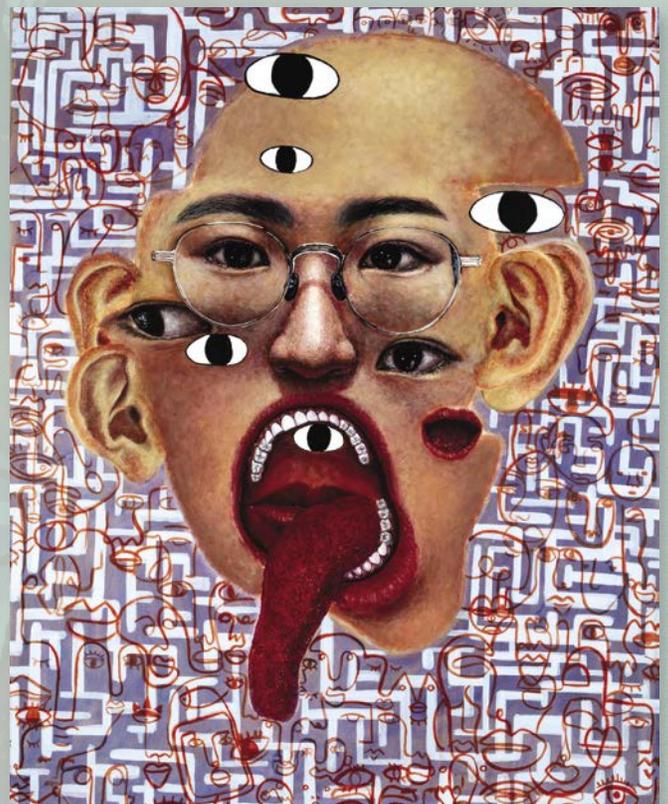
Until the streetlights pity me
And I get up a quarter past midnight
To harvest the bones I forgot to dig up,
and the dirt crumbles
And says marry me
And green will turn spring to gold

And I say yes, Persephone must die –
Let's create another miserable tale
And fuck the world

Let us live
Cross-eyed and apathetic
daring our mouse food for brains
to find god in the side effects, night terrors –

Our own hand-embroidered psychiatry

Urge! Urge! sleep



男扮男装

by Lukas Bacho

After 《木兰辞》, first transcribed ca. 500 CE

translate: to carry from one state to another, as Enoch was translated, that is, carried to heaven without dying¹
translation: [PHYSICS] uniform motion of a body in a straight line²

She, she, yet she, she –
In window Mulan weaves.

No hear machine-voice,
just hear bo[d]y sigh-breath.

Ask bo[d]y what [s]he thinks,
ask bo[d]y what [s]he's missing.

[S]he yet without thought,
[S]he yet without missing.

Last night saw the draft,
Strong-Man orders troops.

War-book has twelve rings,
rings rings with dads' names.

Father without big son,
Mulan without grown brother.

Origin-heart buy saddle steed,
from here replace father's lead.

.

Daybreak dad-mom go,
[s]he live riverside.

No hear dad-mom calling sound,
yet hear water flow round round.

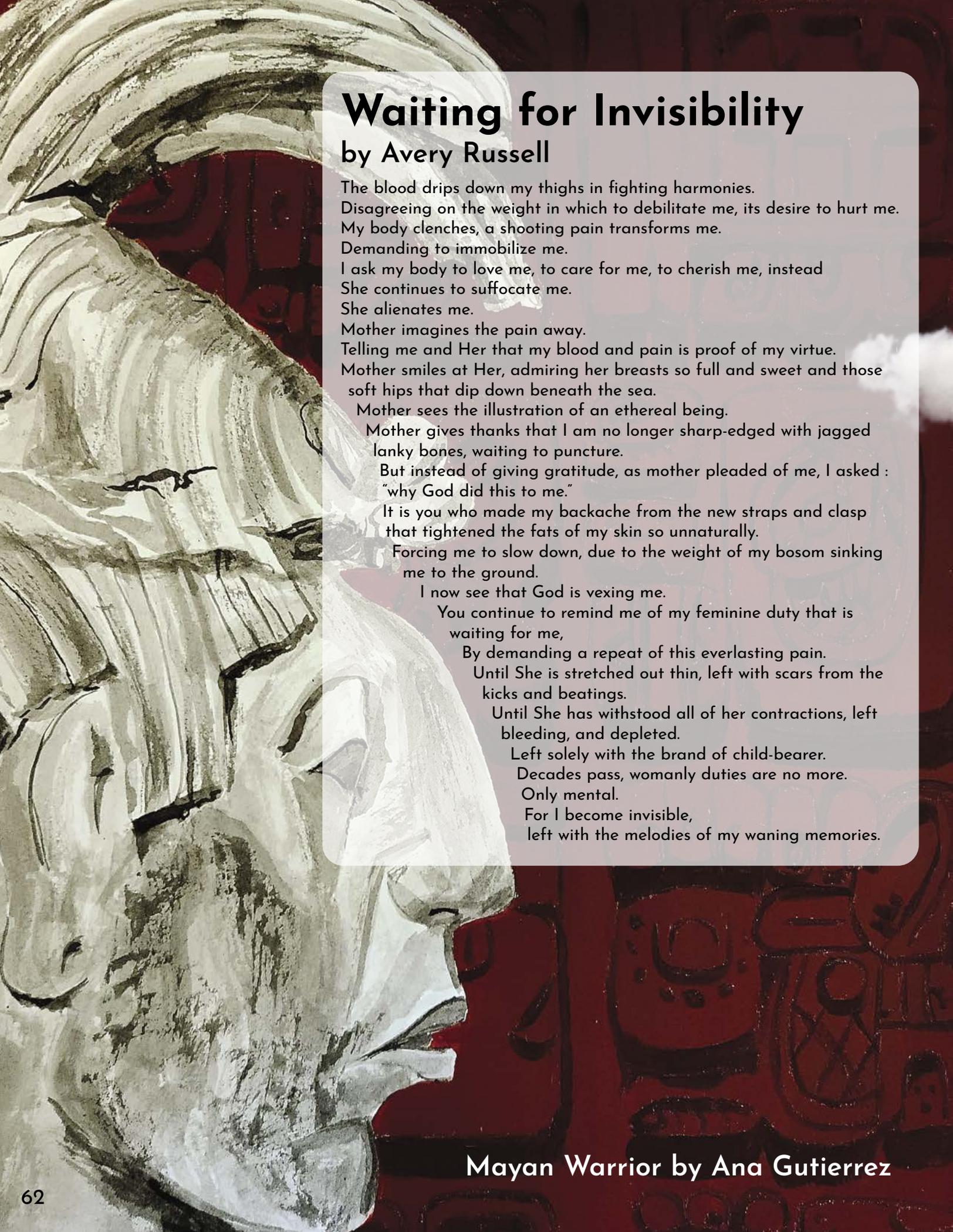
Daybreak river go,
twilight black mount-head.

¹ New Concise Webster's Dictionary:
Composite Edition, Especially Compiled for
Home, School, and Office Use, 1974 CE

² Merriam-Webster English Dictionary
Online, 2020 CE

Breathe by Bethany Allison





Waiting for Invisibility

by Avery Russell

The blood drips down my thighs in fighting harmonies.
Disagreeing on the weight in which to debilitate me, its desire to hurt me.
My body clenches, a shooting pain transforms me.
Demanding to immobilize me.
I ask my body to love me, to care for me, to cherish me, instead
She continues to suffocate me.
She alienates me.
Mother imagines the pain away.
Telling me and Her that my blood and pain is proof of my virtue.
Mother smiles at Her, admiring her breasts so full and sweet and those
soft hips that dip down beneath the sea.
Mother sees the illustration of an ethereal being.
Mother gives thanks that I am no longer sharp-edged with jagged
lanky bones, waiting to puncture.
But instead of giving gratitude, as mother pleaded of me, I asked :
"why God did this to me."
It is you who made my backache from the new straps and clasp
that tightened the fats of my skin so unnaturally.
Forcing me to slow down, due to the weight of my bosom sinking
me to the ground.
I now see that God is vexing me.
You continue to remind me of my feminine duty that is
waiting for me,
By demanding a repeat of this everlasting pain.
Until She is stretched out thin, left with scars from the
kicks and beatings.
Until She has withstood all of her contractions, left
bleeding, and depleted.
Left solely with the brand of child-bearer.
Decades pass, womanly duties are no more.
Only mental.
For I become invisible,
left with the melodies of my waning memories.

Mayan Warrior by Ana Gutierrez

Bodhisattva

by Billie Croft

I will liken the heavy clouds that pass over my land to grey matter
before my body remembers the practicality of pain
& blood rushes into my bladder.

I'll swallow a scream, or
the spoke of a wheel: forever playing my part
in my personal *samsara*, my own

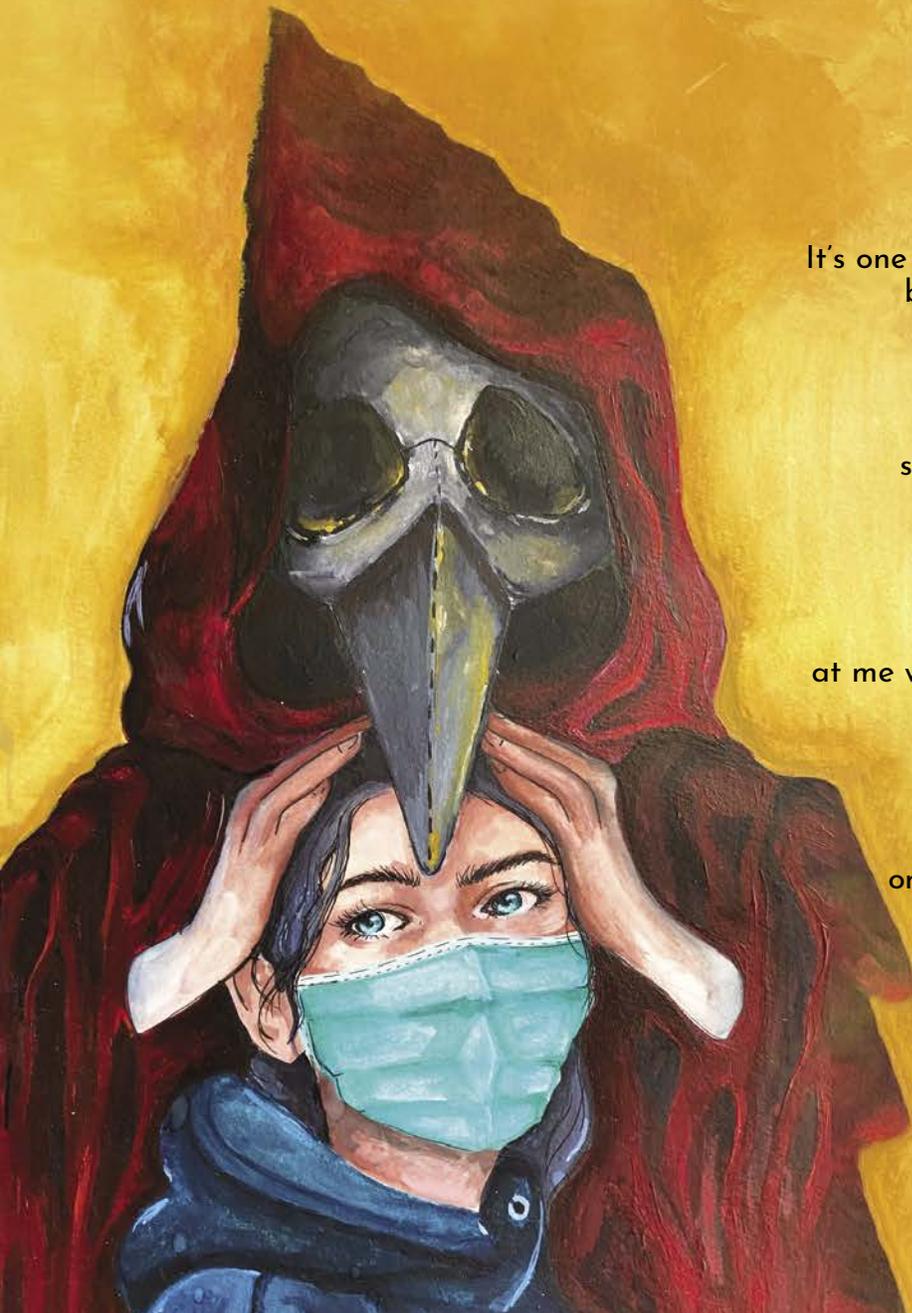
hell. Did you know that birthmarks are portals into past life regressions?
In six or seven iterations I will swath the scalp of my son with a scythe
until semisolid clots thicken on the crown of his head & trickle into my mouth
like sorghum.

goodbye

by Arden Yum

It's one year later & I still feel you on my shoulders,
breathing vulnerability onto my tender neck.
Two bodies wrapped in desire,
like silver paper, on Christmas.
We breathe each other & call it air.
You say survival, I say
suffocation. I'm falling, sinking into your skin,
melting into a pool of water.
I see you in my reflection,
smiling softly, smoothly,
your too-big lips covering your teeth
that are yellowing even when you stare
at me with a toothbrush hanging from your mouth.
I hate your laugh,
electric, rhythmic, wheezing.
I close my eyes when you touch me
to pretend it's really you.
I lie in my bed alone,
one year later & I still feel you on my shoulders.

Sick by Abby Smith





Bird's Eye by Madison Clark

taxonomy of two girls

by Jessica Liu

how everything had a name in the tender white light
fracturing over our pliant limbs, tangled
against car seats saturated with smoke,
silence calcifying in the negative space of our ribs.

how the milk-washed moon,
sunken into the shuttered eye of august heat, stretched
slow over our fingers like taffy,
stripping our nails to crescent flakes of rust.

how you tucked a prayer beneath the flap of my cornea
as lighting splintered over our sloping shoulders
like an impulse of God, and all we could be were bodies,
ephemeral, slack-jaw hunger teething into our spines,
dried rinds crushed between our thighs
like every last confession.

i ran my hands over the recesses of your flesh
like the bare-boned teeth of a key, the worn beads of a rosary
and we thrashed against the steering wheel, heretical –
twin blades of falling shadow, mangled ribbons of warmth –
like we could slip past our skin,
fold into the maw of night.

how i pinned your wings to the furrows of your back,
dug my fingers into your cranium and pulled.
your head, haloed with brittle black water;
your name falling to its knees in my throat,

a prayer.





A Wish
by Kenna Heller

these ink-stained hands
by Kristy Kwok

there's a galaxy, all ink and stars, that spins below your collarbone,
and i can't help but wonder who drew it:
did they see you as i see you? did they mean it to remind me
of the truth that other hands have gone where mine just dream they've been?

you hung a butterfly, mid-flight, on the branch of your left shoulder
and i can't help but envy its position:
does it know i'd rip off both my wings, and trade my legs for frozen ink
as long as i could guarantee you'd stay?

there's a compass, pointing ever north, that's nestled at your ankle
and i can't help but wish that i could change it:
for you are not the girl who stays, you are the girl who charts her journey
to the sunset as my dawn begins; as i'm begging you to wait.

i am not a girl who journeys, but for you i'd chart a course
to the forests, to the oceans, to the endless sky above;
i will follow constellations, beating wings and compass roses
till i've climbed inside your arms, until i'm finally at home.

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Skelly Bird
by Evangeline Ellingsworth



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artsjoco.org/shooting-stars

Guard the Pour
by Alexis Linnebach

THANK YOU



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by Aislyn Canady

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Standards
by Alex Braley



SUBJECT #1
DO NOT OPEN

Alien Test Tube
by Carly Parsons

THE UNKNOWN

elementia issue xix

We're always told to "create what we know," but what about what we don't know? From higher beings to the center of the Earth – there are so many things we've yet to discover. How can we sense the unknown? Feel it. See it. Overcome it. Does it terrify? Exhilarate? Comfort?

How does confronting the unknown change our human experience? Communicate your dreams and anxieties.

What do we not understand about ourselves? Our thoughts. Our motives. Our actions. How about outside our perception? Deign to view the imperceptible; speculate on the fabric of reality.

In what ways do you try to dissect the unfamiliar, consciously or not? Everything we know is learned: what have we not been taught? What has time robbed us of knowing? In what ways can we help each other reveal what's hidden?

Venture into the oceans, the night sky, the rainforests. Search for the aliens among us and beyond us. Find the murky edges of your imagination and focus on them. Visualize what exists in the afterlife and what is hidden in the dark.

Take this opportunity to immerse yourself in the unknown.

Submit your original poetry, short stories, essays, comics or artwork through Feb. 1, 2022 at:

jocolibrary.org/elementia

Comrades

by Lukas Bacho

To go outside I don a mask /
the size of a human heart. / It's
become the law now. A turn in
the wind / brings back Beijing:
snow of pollen adrift, radioactive-
yellow / cremation of God. In
short, what you get / when too
many boys love to burn. Back then,
a window was just a cold knife
/ carving out the night, a place
to cloak your manhood / in lieu
of a man. Unmasked behind the
curtain, / you could finally forget
/ the stench of your own breath.
In Swedish a *mask* / is a creature
with five hearts, burrowing /
through the earth and breathing
/ through the skin. A *mask* will
survive even when fragmented /
like a poem. (Think of my torso
hot / to the touch, a parenthesis
whose opposite / is always in
sight.) In Swedish a *mask* / is
also just a mask. Memory as
osmosis / of brain and body,
midnight and motel room / so
many stories high. / Pundits still
debate whom our masks protect, /
but you have learned this. Before
helping others / you must secure
your own. In Chinese, poetry
itself / is a building: the radical
for speech, the character for
temple. / Let ours save a window
swinging open / if we're lucky, a
curtain unraveling / in the wind?
In Chinese I call you Comrade
because it's not the law / yet.
O Comrade, rub your beads
together and you'll still smell / my
affliction, how my name for you
/ implicates me. One character
for sameness. One character for
soldier / undergirded by a heart.

Currently Ancient
by Lyla Dietz

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