

The Guild Magazine





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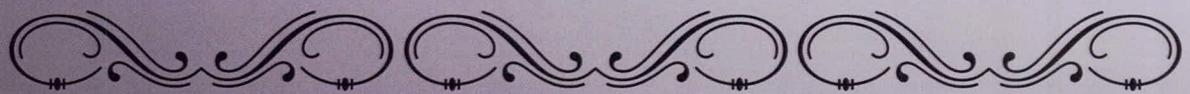
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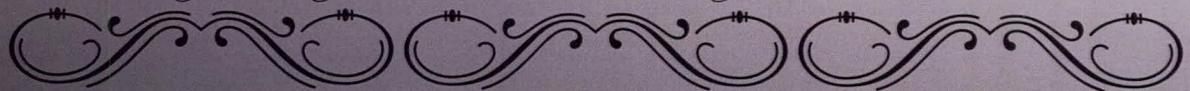
Editorial

Editor-in-Chief Jonathan Portee
Editorial Assistant Lukas Zaleskis





*This magazine is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Claire Pamplin,
distinguished professor, beloved colleague, formidable writer.*



Claire went great distances as an educator. She truly changed her students' lives. She was a very creative thinker, interesting, and most importantly kind.

Claire was very supportive, and she always thought that you can do whatever your heart desires, we always have long conversations about different topics. I missed that.
-Elba

Claire was my mentor, my friend, and a beautiful person. I will always remember our long conversations, and the moments we shared.
-Adele

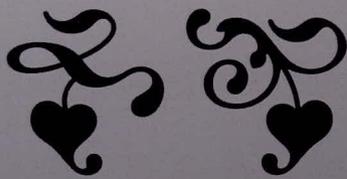
Claire never hesitated to patiently and wisely rein me in during my worst, shoot-from-the-hip moments. I haven't been fired thanks, in part, to her. I'll miss her.
-Domenick

Claire was incredibly supportive. I'm thankful for her kindness, humor, curiosity, and her uniquely motivating and enthusiastic "let's tackle this together" mindset. Her energy was infectious and uplifting.
-Nita

Claire fearlessly threw herself into putting out fires and making this lurching and unwieldy system work for teachers and students. She said she enjoyed it and I believed her.
-John Breece

Claire was an exceptional colleague, and I am immensely grateful for what feels like a brief time I got to work closely with her. She was a generous, thoughtful colleague, and I appreciate her mentorship and support as a young member of the department. A cheerleader for many of our accomplishments, she was a bright light in our department, and I will miss her.
-Syreeta McFadden

Claire was always one to lift up her colleagues, and I always appreciated that about her. During one-on-ones, she was so encouraging and welcoming of new ideas, no matter how crazy! She really believed in me, and encouraged me to keep aiming higher. She was also just one of the funniest people in her own low-key way! When I told her I was expecting, she said, "Well, Mira, can I ask you to push out one more article before you push out this baby?" She always made me laugh. I'll miss her humor, her kindness, and support.
-Mira



Claire blossomed in her role as chair. She was enthusiastic, supportive - she had your back. She had a down to earth, humane, ethical strength - always. Claire told me that my singing inspired her to paint and made her wonder why she wasn't painting. Her support and encouragement of me allowed me to rethink my own self criticism and was a real gift. I was lucky to have known her and grateful to her for her support of me. I miss you, Claire. Thank you.
-Manya

Claire was warm, welcoming, and supportive. One evening, we had a long and profitable conversation in the office about the pros and cons of remote learning. She wondered why I held my office hours on campus and was delighted that I wanted to be available "live" for some students at some time. She made me feel appreciated and valued.
-Thea

Claire was the warmest chair I've ever met, and she made me feel welcome. I felt like somebody in her office and not some lowly adjunct. She seemed like a close friend I've known for eons. When I walked out of her office the first day I met her, I knew I could count on her for anything and go to her for anything, including sharing a joke over a cup of coffee.
-Doreen aka Adanze

Claire was a bright light. She was kind, funny, brilliant, and humble. She was my colleague and friend. She loved fearlessly and believed in people more than they believed in themselves. The world feels a bit darker now absent of Claire.
-Catherine Cammilleri

Claire was incredibly generous and encouraging during our one-on-one conversations. I know she was deeply impressed by all the talent we have in the department, and she believed in all of us. I'll miss her.
-Francisco Delgado

Claire was a generous teacher, colleague, and friend. She enjoyed helping people solve problems, and so many people loved her. She was my mentor from my first day at BMCC, back in 2008, when we shared an office together. She soon became my close friend. I feel so fortunate to have been her friend. Until we meet again, I will miss her.
-Jan Stahl

Our children played together and Claire and I walked along marveling. We had been in graduate school together at the CUNY GC, and now we were both parents, now she was my colleague. She grew into a chair and had her chair available and her door open. She smiled. She was warm and always kept that Southern charm. She meant business, and Claire encouraged us. She loved it all.
-Cheryl J. Fish



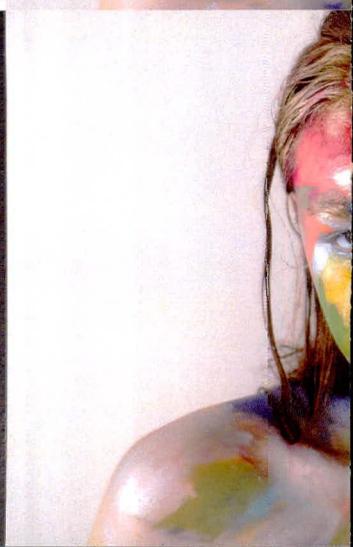
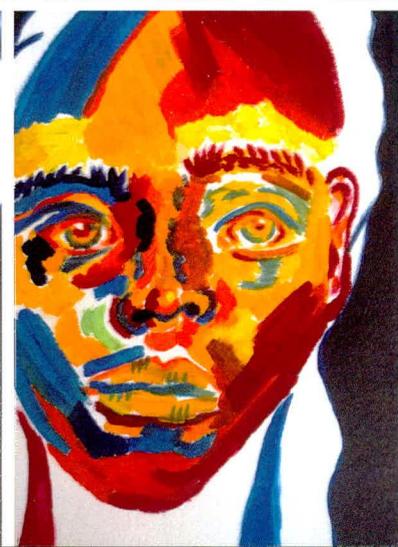
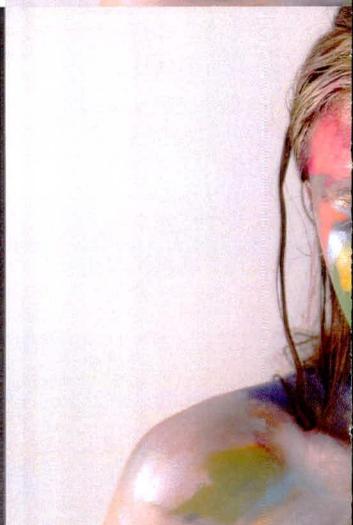
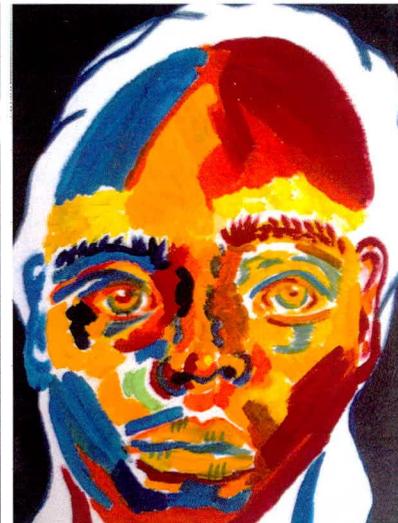
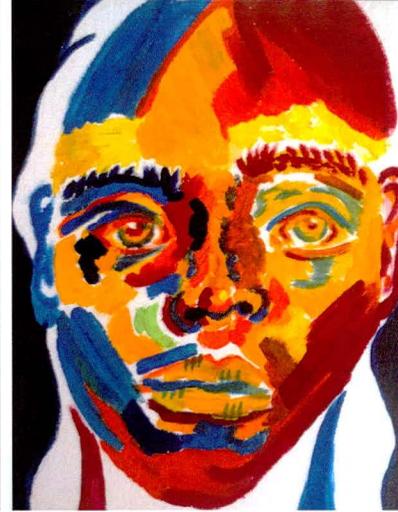


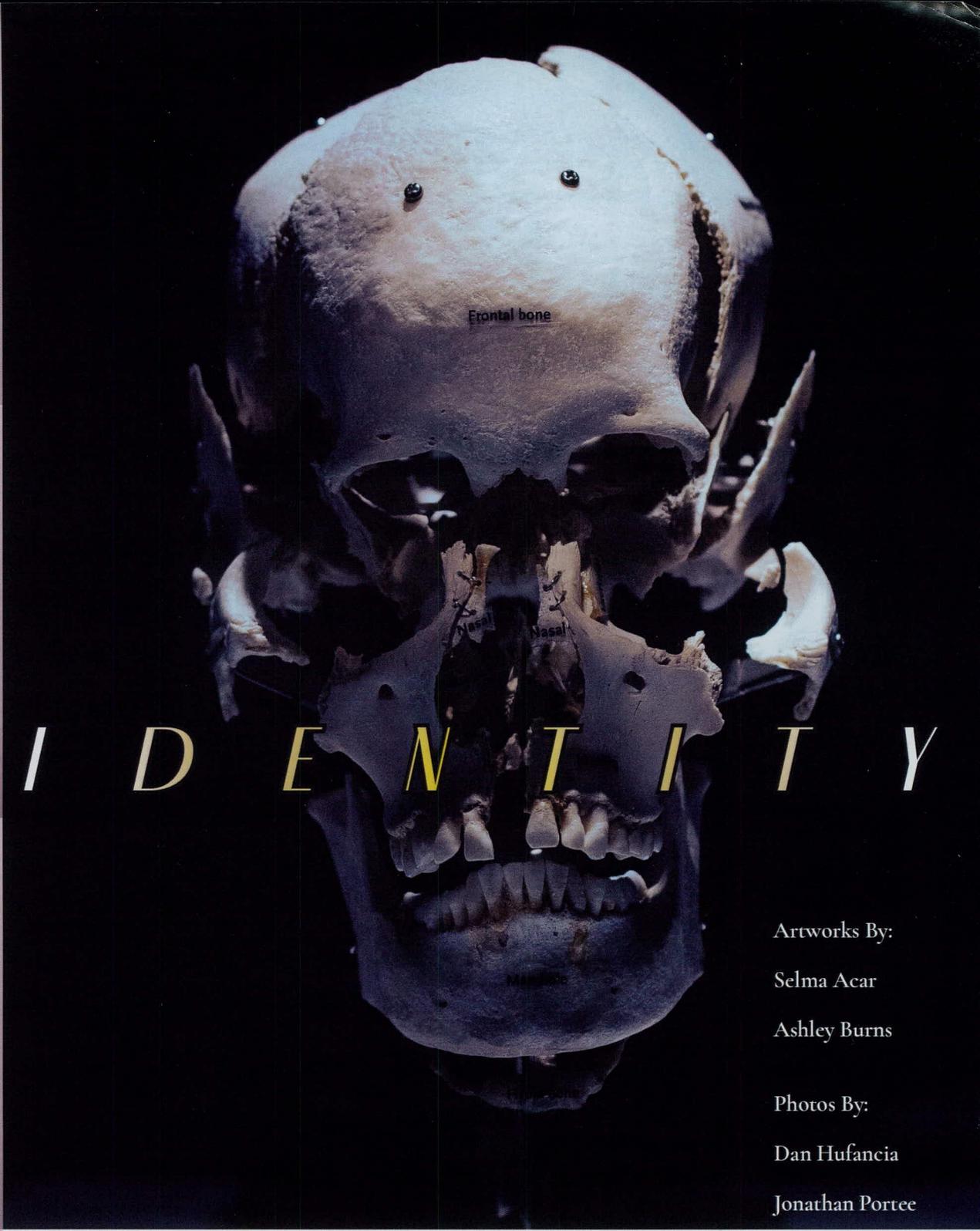
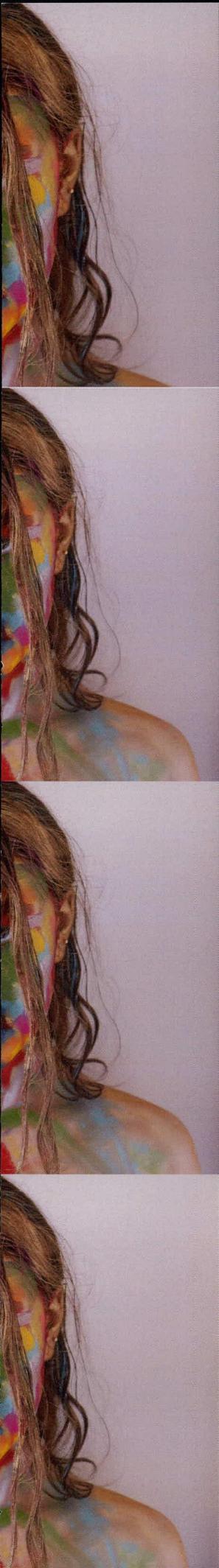
*Once Upon a Time, they will say we lived and loved
With all our heart. All that was admirable, indefatigable
Appeared even more so. Beauty and charm cured
The grossness of our lives. We knew pure air and pure
Water. Strength and permanence combined with beauty
The frail and fine and evanescent gliding through in
Gentlest beauty, in every tree, in admirable clearness.*

— Andrew Levy

EDITOR'S STATEMENT

THERE'S
SOMETHING
IN THERE.





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Artworks By:

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Dan Hufancia

Jonathan Portee

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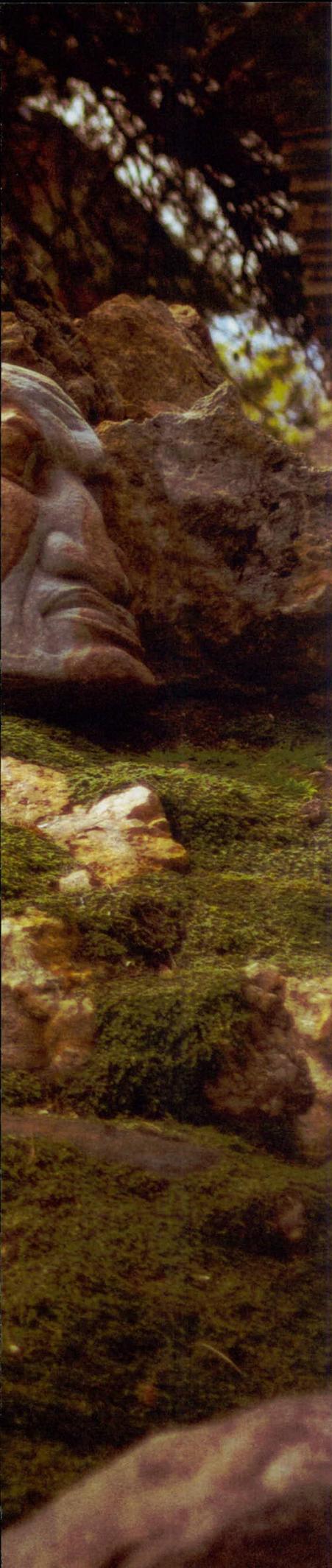
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LETTER TO KOMOROV

BY DAN HUFANCIA



I awakened an hour earlier than my norm, the candle still alight in the darkness of our cabin. When I turned to my right, I saw Vanya; a crown of fairy-white adorned her skull like many of her ancestors and elders as she lay swaddled in the coarse woolen blanket woven by the local wise-woman, simultaneously lithe yet waifish, breathing in and out the terribly frigid and harsh Yuran air. I cannot imagine how the people of this land live in this climate—it could be the blood of my mother recoiling from the extreme chill—but the hospitality was, at the very least, commendable. This might be, of course, the deference of defeat, as I have dragged their sons and daughters into the maws of the Revolution, and they fear—see—myself as any other wretched tendril of bourgeois vampirism, a highborn lady of the Houses of Holy Atria, there to once again take their children away from safety. They are, unfortunately, half-correct, but it is my suspicion they have encountered neither Rheynish person nor my specific brand of Rheynish-Lazarene mestiza. It could also be because my chosen consort is the ex-heiress of the Royal Haus of Keuren, and that I have bewitched her with my beastly devil-blood, or vice versa with her quiet luxury and airy charm. Her visage is not unfamiliar to all peoples, from the steppes of Northeastern Esseá to the apartheid states of South Shaal. Petrokamas have made it so the nobility populate countless columns of the public newspaper. One would think that with the advance of scientific thought, there would be less room for deification, but it is inevitable that an atavistic reflex to worship world-historical demi-men is sought after by the ailing masses. If not, what heaven is there to lay their eyes upon?

Forgive my rambling, brother. I am...

afraid.

Since Brother Ambroseus trained me in the Inquisition regimen, I have glimpsed the pale tree of plenty, the lone occupant of future-pregnant space. It burns brightest white in the darkness of the back of my eyelids and leaves me with a myriad paths in the desert of the real, a way out for the everyman unto Paradis. It has turned me into a monster, an Inquisitor, a slave to the future. I am sorry to have hidden my plans from you, my dearest brother. We built this movement brick by trusting brick, cemented into place with the blood of our friends and comrades, and yet I opted to conceal important information from you. To console you—or in the spirit of consoling, which I will not be able to do so, as this may stir disquiet within your bosom—I will reveal what I have hidden from you; a performance of a last, private miracle upon you, for after which not a single one will be performed ever again once I return to Coronel: I know you have resented me for so long, ever since Vanya returned my affection instead of yours, and that you were abducted by that rat, Laurent IV, shortly after. You did not betray us, and for that you paid with the nails of your right foot and left hand, hidden from prying eyes with an ever-worn glove and shoe necrosing both limbs at the tips. I know that drink and narcotics dull the ache in your heart whenever I stand by her side, and I know that you see me still as your little sister who died when you were but fifteen. You never saw her body, and I resemble her uncannily, and you will not see me in death, during my funeral—if the REY dogs even respect me enough to give me such—because you will break should you face the visage of your lost blood.

We will never see each other again, not until the next world.

When you receive this letter, it will be too late for any sort of action from you or your men. Upon my arrival to my city, the Commune of Rheyne will receive the brunt of the REY's forces. They will land at the beachhead, atomize the apartments and roads with their artillery, murder all our comrades stationed there with their autorifles, and they will capture myself and Vanya so that they may brutally extract your whereabouts. Men and women and children will die at the singular point in which all the international powers of Capital converge within Coronel, and you will know their men by my—our—crimson and gristle drenching their fingers and their guns, their jackets and their war-kareeners, their eyes and their spirits. They will speak on our fight, our Revolution, as though it was merely idealistic, despite our material aims; violent, despite their constant campaigns and sanctions against our fledgling states; authoritarian, despite their monarchy and oligarchy holding their fellows hostage; and most of all, ill-omened, despite their conspiring against the will of the future—humanity's impulse for survival—only because no one will be left to speak for us.

I have failed you, Aleks. I failed Vanya as well. Within the pale tree was a path I could not tread, because I witnessed how it would crush you entirely, and how I would have to plunge my blade into your broken heart, because had I not prevented Vanya from tripping into a trou de loup five summers ago, you would have turned coat, and you would become the leader of a counter-revolution—ten million, nine hundred forty-five thousand, seven hundred eighty-nine times to one where you instead end your own life before you could think about striking me. Had she died and you betrayed us, I would have won us the Revolution, won us the world. Despite this offer, or maybe even because of hubris, I could not bear to lose both of you, or even either of you. I would sink this Kerene-damned world before I could even let these events come to pass, and so I proceeded with my betrayal, led all of you unto a delayed

execution, and denied this world and the next the path to Paradise. I knew as soon as I grasped her hand—her destined death. I robbed all of you of a future where you do naught but exist in happiness. I am the monster Brother Ambroseus warned me not to become. I am the fulcrum with which the Revolution, mine and yours, as well as Ibrahim's, Ruan's, Bwana's, Barros', and Zheng's—revolutionaries after our time—will rise and fall by, as justice for my selfishness. I hope you see it fit to forgive me and my human foolishness, brother. If not, I cannot hold it against you.

I do have a plan to right this wrong. It will not bear fruit in your lifetime, and you may—will—even think of me as a true tyrant, a woman living past her allotted time to meddle with the whole of humanity, but I believe that if I am able to push the forces of the world with but a finger, I should have to attempt one final gambit against the REY, or the Keuravretitif Hegenomik Zeunt, or the International Assembly, or whatever mask death dons today and tomorrow. I am unable to sell you nuance, nor would I permit myself to your further efforts. It would only interfere with my plans. There is, however, one wish I would impose upon you: I would prefer you keep your faith in everything we have built with our comrades.

I have shattered into a great many pieces, but even then... it is my hope we can build tomorrow anew. Hihintay kami sa dulo ng walang hanggan.

Your sister,

Klara.



RADAR HEART
BY EMI GAMBETTA

There were no trucks on the street
That morning
So I went to the post office
And asked the clerk at the
counter
Have you seen my mailman?
Well, what does he look like?
If you don't know
Then I can't tell you.

I asked somebody sorting mail
Have you seen my mailman?
Well, what is his name?
If you don't know
Then I can't tell you.

I asked the supervisor striding by
Have you seen my mailman?
Yours? He belongs to us!
How can he belong to you
If you don't know who he is?
Or where he is? You don't even
Keep watch over 'your' mailmen!
Something belongs to you
But it is not my mailman.

Another worker said to me
You'd better stop asking if we've
seen him
Because he can hear you
A door slammed in my ear
I turned

The post office was empty
And all the cubby holes were
open
& overflowing with letters
I walked down a winding hallway
Guided by the heel of a scuffed
boot
He left a trail of letters as he went
I collected them as I followed
Once my hands were full
I lost track of the boot
But walked on
Though the envelopes kept
Slipping out of my grasp
& falling behind me.

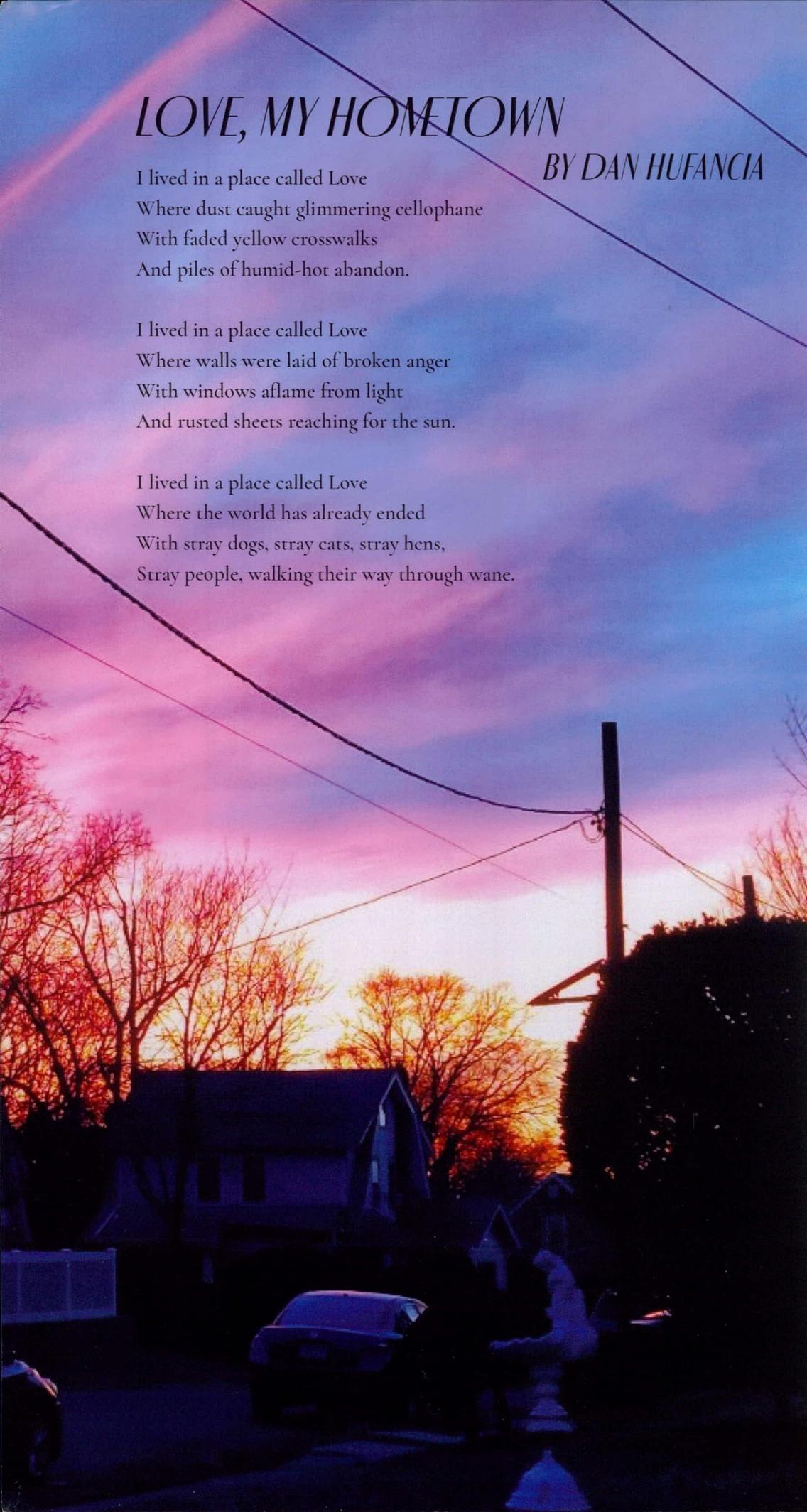
LOVE, MY HOMETOWN

BY DAN HUFANCIA

I lived in a place called Love
Where dust caught glimmering cellophane
With faded yellow crosswalks
And piles of humid-hot abandon.

I lived in a place called Love
Where walls were laid of broken anger
With windows aflame from light
And rusted sheets reaching for the sun.

I lived in a place called Love
Where the world has already ended
With stray dogs, stray cats, stray hens,
Stray people, walking their way through wane.



RECESS BY EMI GAMBETTA

It doesn't make much sense just standing in front of the door as if I might have the wrong house when this is the exact address Julian gave. A couple years ago, when the two of us weren't close, I'd sometimes take the bus down to this neighborhood in search of his house, which is supposedly this house in front of me. Where was my hesitation then? He never invited me round back then, but he would casually drop navigational cues into our talks which would later help steer me around here—several churches, the projects, the YMCA, that little park down the hill near the water. I wandered around trying to get a sense of him, slightly hopeful and worried we would run into each other. It never occurred to me that if such an occasion arose and he asked me what I was doing, I wouldn't have an answer, because, really, there's nothing to do here except for the very thing I was doing.

But I am invited this time. I have been given a reason, permission to come, yet I'm hesitating, because this could be the wrong house, even though this is the address he gave me and Edwyn—Edwyn's probably in there already—didn't either of them hear me bang on the door? This is a narrow, pale yellow house and I always pictured Julian living in a wide, white house, like the one next to this one.

"What are you doing?"

Julian poked his curly head out of the window to my left.

"Are you procrastinating hanging out with us?"

"I was just thinking."

"You don't have to think. It's a nice day today."

It's foggy and overcast. Edwyn pokes his own curly head out right next to Julian.

"Hey!"

"Hey, Edwyn."

"Will you come in or not?" Julian asks.

"Oh, is...is the door unlocked?"

"Hell no!" He withdraws.

Edwyn withdraws, a few seconds pass, the door is unlocked and opened and Julian lets me in.

The air is really stale. Is the air in my place this stale? Probably. Edwyn's sitting on a black vinyl couch facing a TV or console or some kind of hybrid, and he scooches over to make room for Julian. They pick up controllers and continue playing whatever I interrupted. Cats! Two out of three of Julian's cats are lounging about on the floor and wagging their tails. Neither one seems to care about my presence. Doug, the scraggly one Julian recently took in, who has only three legs, is sitting nearest to me. I crouch down and scratch his big head.

"I still think it's weird you named him after our old English teacher." I say to Julian.

"Like, of all people."

"I miss that fucking guy." Julian says somberly.

There are random things strewn about on the floor: receipts, cat toys, hair ties, wrappers. I grab a jingly toy and drag it back and forth on the floor to try and energize the cats. Two ears turn to me but nothing else moves.

"Damn, they don't care at all."

"Cause they're old. Only Bug likes those baby cat toys," Julian says.

"And he's not here. He knows when people are coming and he hides. He could be in the basement."

He could be anywhere in here. This is a messy place. It almost seems like everybody living here has devoted themselves to keeping it messy. You couldn't hope to sort this out. Every corner is cluttered, there are thousands of items and extra furniture. Books lie jumbled and dusty on shelves—Everything is coated with dust. Not the kind of dust you can just blow off. It's sticky. Like jam. A little bit has already clotted on my fingers, and I lock my hands behind my back as I keep looking around the space.

"Watch out for Bee," Edwyn warns.

"I was petting her and she was being so cute. Then she tried to eat my hand."

"You pushed your luck," Julian says to him.

"I told you she's volatile."

There's a wooden cross high up on the arch dividing this living room area from the kitchen. Garbage left on the dining table. A ton of family photographs on the walls. One of Julian, maybe at twelve, standing next to a fire hydrant, wide-eyed and practically unrecognizable in a light blue uniform shirt and khakis. There's a huge minimalistic painting of a figure hugging a large cross. A freestanding punching bag.

"I stocked up on juice last week," Julian says, raising his voice to recover the distance I've left while exploring.

"You wanna drink now or later?"

"Now would be good."

Bee is a skinny calico with grape-green eyes. She's jumped up on a step stool and sits there minding her business. I put my hand under her nose to let her thoroughly sniff me before I pet her. Julian passes me and goes into the kitchen, Edwyn and I follow him, and stand watching him pull out two glasses from the top cupboard, and a new bottle of Bacardi limón rum from the one underneath the sink.

"Aw, why do you keep getting this shit?" I whine, pointing at the bottle.

"Seriously! I'm getting chills just looking at it."

"What? Don't you guys love that stuff?" asks Edwyn.

He does not partake, and has seen us both vomit enough to shelve the drinking experience for much later down the line.

"We love the being drunk part, not the drink itself." I hold my glass on the counter.

Julian fills it, nodding gently, careful not to spill any. He then fills his own.

"Why don't you guys just drink beer or one of those fruity flavored things?"

"This kicks in harder and faster," Julian says.

"And in a way, the bad taste is good. It's easier to monitor your intake if it tastes like shit."

"Yeah, Edwyn. You know you're a healthy, casual drunk when you need to monitor your intake," I say.

Edwyn gives us an uneasy smile as he starts twirling a curl

around his index finger. Julian pulls out another glass, pours a bottlecap's worth of the stuff, and hands it to him.

"Have a sip, Edwyn."

"Have a sip? That's mad insulting." He takes a whiff and squints a little.

"It doesn't smell that bad."

We start amping him up, then Julian suddenly orders Alexa, which must be buried somewhere in the living room, to play Eye of the Tiger. Edwyn falls silent, takes the shot as the riff builds and spits it out like a torpedo, splashing it all over the floor just as the drums kick in. He makes his way over to the sink and turns the tap on while we laugh.

We've all squeezed into the couch, Edwyn sitting between me and Julian. He always sits in the middle if he can help it; it's strange and even infuriating at times but I don't say anything. Julian has somehow talked me into playing video games with him. This one's a fighting game. I didn't catch the title. We are playing as two busty cartoon girls and he is kicking the shit out of me and I'm not sure if I've landed a single blow so far, I'm not even sure if my controller is working, I wouldn't be able to tell if it was off.

"Can we stop after this round? I kind of hate this."

Julian chuckles, plays until he wins again and abruptly exits out of the game. I set the controller aside with relief and inch away from Edwyn a little bit. It feels like the side of my body has slowly been fusing with his for the past half hour.

"Okay, so..." he says with a burp.

"...Movies. We could watch Tusk or Showgirls or Audition... Or Cannibal Holocaust or Martyrs..."

"What? Stop."

"Those movies sound like they're going to obliterate our chill vibe." Edwyn says.

"Our chill vibe? NO! No. I don't wanna watch anything with you guys that I could also watch with my parents."

"Julian, I'm drunk in the afternoon in a house, I want to have a nice time. Look, it's raining. Is it raining?"

"Fine, we'll keep it normal. Tusk it is."

"That movie is about a walrus, right?"

"Yes, sweetie."

The rain's cleared up for the time being and everything's bright and gray. We're still buzzed, standing out in the backyard by the shed. Julian's leaning against it in mismatched socks. He pulls out a joint, I pull out a cigarette.

"Dude, that scene where he was drowning and he saw another walrus-human hybrid carcass at the bottom of the guy's pool...That was crazy."

My plain bic lighter and Julian's gargoyle-engraved zippo flick at the same time.

"Why the fuck did you pull my hands away from my eyes and make me see that part?" Edwyn asks.

"It's never gonna leave my mind."

"You had to see it!" Julian says, blowing smoke and passing the joint to Edwyn.

"What's the point if you don't see the nasty shit?"

"I'm picking the movie next time," Edwyn says.

"Something without surgery, guts, blood and torture, anything in that vein."

He takes a hit, passes it back to Julian and pulls out his phone, sucking his teeth.

"Who's bothering you?" I ask.

"It's just my mom." He looks at the screen with a furrow in his brow and starts twirling his hair again.

"She's pestering me to come home 'cause she doesn't like me going out two days in a row."

"That makes no fuckin' sense."

"Yeah, well."

Edwyn and I still have vaguely defined yet all-encompassing curfews. They fluctuate with the seasons and occasions, but are generally controlled by nightfall. The collective mind of our parents is addicted to the news and relies on any given day's story of eighteen year olds going missing or getting shot over misunderstandings to excuse the enforcement of this stricture. Our moms and dads watch the news, worry about

us, then watch more news. Better safe than sorry!

"When are you going to tell your parents to fuck off?" Julian asks.

"It's—what? It's not that simple." Twirling vigorously now.

"Do they know your rights?"

"Mine aren't like yours, okay? I have no choice but to deal with them for a while longer."

"I think you should challenge each one to a duel," I say.

"I've been dreaming of moving out for years. Just being eighteen doesn't change anything. Plus I have to go to college, so I need them to help..."

"I don't know. The way you just adhere to their rules pisses me off."

We fall silent. I can hear the cigarette burning between my fingers when I take a drag. Looking past the shed, onto the street, I feel Edwyn eyeing me from my peripheral.

"You should've enrolled with us, Julian," I say.

"You still probably could."

"No thanks. There's nothing I want less."

"We'll have fun without you."

"I can cope with that."

"I'm almost certain you're gonna bitch about how bored you are." I take another drag.

As I release the cigarette from the awkward purse of my lips, Edwyn grabs my hand and pulls it towards him, flipping it palm up. He then roughly pulls my sleeve back up to my elbow. I'm so caught off guard that I forgot I wrote something on my wrist. I guess it must've been peeking out from under the cuff. He lets my arm drop. Pure perplexion on his face.

"Who's name is that?"

"Huh? What name?" Julian asks.

"She wrote somebody's name on her arm."

"Like a full name? First and last?"

"Yeah." Edwyn tells Julian the name.

"Uh...Yeah, who is that?"

"Doesn't matter," I say.

I step away from them, push the cigarette butt through a hole in the fence into the neighbor's yard, and return to the two of them expecting to hear an "anyway" and a change of subject. They're just staring at me.

"What's the problem?"

"Is that your secret boyfriend or something?"

"No."

"So who?"

"You are not entitled to that information."

"Why not?"

I guess Edwyn's latched on to this. He starts repeating the name out loud into the air, sounding it out differently than I would, appropriating it. It's unnerving. Julian's just going along with it. How have they forgotten already? Edwyn repeats the name again. I have to stop myself from clamping a hand over his mouth and digging my fingers into his cheeks. "If it doesn't matter, just tell us," Julian says.

"Oh!" Edwyn's eyes suddenly light up.

"Oh?"

Oh my god, this is stupid. As Edwyn reminds Julian who the name belongs to I give a resigned, tight-lipped smile.

"Him? Still?" Julian asks.

"What'd you do that for, you freak?"

I shrug.

"It's just scribbling!"

"Didn't you say you were over him a while back?" Edwyn asks more softly.

"Did I?"

"Don't you have any boundaries?"

My two friends have turned into a swarm of reporters.

"You both graduated. You're not even gonna see each other anymore. You don't know where he'll be."

"Won't I?"

"The healthy thing to do would be to move on," Edwyn says.

"I like him and that's final," I say.

"Why didn't you just talk to him when you had the chance?"

"You couldn't even look girls you liked in the eye! What are you talking about?" I brush past them both and go up the steps back into the house. They follow quietly.

We're back on the couch watching random episodes of *Courage the Cowardly Dog*. Edwyn had the nerve to sit between me and Julian like before. I had to make him understand he'd lost middle seat privileges, so I got up and pushed him away as hard as I could and squeezed in between them before he could block the cushion with something. My body is slightly askew. It's like I'm trying to turn away from him without realizing it.

"This was the one that really spooked me when I was a kid," Julian says absentmindedly.

He takes a hit off a pen. It smells like something but not weed. I don't know which episode we're watching. I'm just looking at it. I'm drinking mango juice that Julian offered me. It's good.

"You're such a brat," Edwyn mutters next to me.

"I didn't even do anything."

At that, I set my glass on the TV stand, grab his head with both my hands and wrench it towards me.

"The fuck're you doing!"

"Look! Look at this! Why are you doing this to yourself?"

I am, of course, referring to the self-inflicted bald patch he bears at the top of his head. At some point he started plucking

strands of hair out from that particular spot. The patch has steadily been expanding over the past year with its barrage of assignments and tests, the constant familial conflicts, the generalized dread. He's giving himself premature male pattern baldness. Julian's cackling next to me but not moving.

"What are you clearing all this space for? Are you gonna plant something up here?"

"I don't know! It just happens!" He rips himself away from my grasp and gets up. I pull myself up and loom over the top of the couch watching him look for his backpack.

"You going?" Julian asks.

"Uh-huh."

"You better hurry, big guy," I say. He glances at me, picks up his bag. "Hurry back to mom and dad."

He flips me off and goes out the door. Julian gets up to lock it, randomly nodding.

"Just like watching my cats fight. Very cute. Except he's probably walking down the street crying right now," he says casually.

"Come on, he doesn't care. We joke about that all the time."

"You just wait, he'll be bald the next time we see him. Oh, hey. Bug is here now."

I get off the couch and step around to meet him. Bug's a skinny tuxedo kitten. Julian picks him up and hands him to me. The whiskers stand out against the black fur. He looks a little frightened. Julian pulls out his phone and takes a picture of me holding him.

"I want to see your basement," I say.

"Alright."

I follow him down these narrow, wooden steps and into the basement. It's large, probably incredibly spacious without the stuff being stored here—ironically, there's less stuff here than upstairs. It's warmer too.

"I liked drinking down here at night. During quarantine. I called you a lot then."

"I remember."

The summer before junior year. He wouldn't sleep for long stretches of time, and hallucinated as a result—he would not see the connection between those two things for a long time to come. I think he'd actually committed himself to the idea that he'd just become someone who hallucinated every night. Usually he would hear whispering in the whirr of the electric fan, sometimes he'd just see shit. A figure in the hallway. A dog sitting on his mattress. And the devil once.

He follows behind me as I explore the space. Washing machines and detergents, abandoned appliances, pipes running along scarred walls and jutting out like elbows and kneecaps around corners. An array of power tools sitting on tables. A smashed insect. A hole in the ceiling, like a large, haphazard tear revealing long cobwebbed cords against the boards lining the floor above us. As we stroll around he picks up post-it notes he's doodled on and shows them to me. I can tell those are old, he doesn't draw like that anymore. I wrap my hand around a cordless drill and pick it up.

"You had all these things around you back then? When you hung out down here?"

"Yeah. They're all my dad's tools. This is where they stay."

"You know what these all can do?"

"You're holding a drill. That one's a nail gun. There's another drill over there. An angle grinder..."

"But did you ponder their utility back then?"

He peels off his hoodie and shakes it out.

"I've done some pondering, sure."

Julian's arms are all scarred up. Just covered in dusty pink strands and circles. Most of them are old, dating back to middle school, but some are fresh. I already had a tantrum upstairs, but man, freak is a strong word. What'd you do that for, you freak? It's a tempting opportunity. I can't turn the tables on Julian, though. I've known about him doing that for ages. I remember him hesitating to roll his sleeves up when

we were about to carve pumpkins for Halloween during freshman year. I knew that by simply casting indifferent glances at his arms once in a while,

I'd be filed under the slim category of people he's met who are cool. I knew the strategy— never feigned confusion at the sight of them like an idiot,

never asked him what 'happened to' his arms, and most importantly, never suggested to him that it might be a good idea to stop.

Right now, though, I'm staring.



VISION OF THE FUTURE

BY ESTHER SUTTON

I was born to be a fortune teller
My eyes full of crystal
Dozens, hundreds of stories
Through prismic possibilities

I knew what I was
But born in a world without wonder
My sight grew cloudy
Words on pages began to float
Weather became

Unruly
And two pearls of crystal
Are blackened
With ignorance

The paths are littered with broken glass
And I find a new way to look ahead
With bare feet
And a tight smile
I can see again

UNTOLD AFFLICTION

BY NATASHA WILES

This is the part where I bring it up,
For you to face what you've done,
The stone place in my heart you've won,
Even now no remorse and I can't say I'm stunned,
Still, your complacency has me stuck
This is the part where you apologise
Not for the mischief you caused,
Or the bad names you endorse,
For the terror my mind has coursed,
And still your silence makes me agonise
This is the part where you reflect,
And I hope that you realise one day,
That things will always remain this way,
And no amount of guilt can make it change,
Yet still, at least my grief I hoped you'd respect
This is the part where I accept,
That you will never be truly sorry,
When you've found peace with your story,
And you've long forfeited worry,
Still, I hold on with my emotions unkept
This is very far from over,
Because I am insanely livid,
And I intend to paint the picture vivid,
That I will eventually forgive you, but you will always
be my villain,
Still, I wait and wait for you to give me closure

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES

BY ESTHER SUTTON

I woke up with my head
At the foot of my bed
Close to falling overboard

Where am I?
How did I get here?

I roll out
To look at myself through
Mirror's green eyes

She shows me
Someone I haven't seen in awhile

I fix their hair
I get them dressed
I walk them through my life
I find...they're nice to have around

As the day grows
I crack through
I unfold the origami swan
Into a creased sheet of paper
And I place it at my pillow
So, as I toss and turn
Through waves of sleep,
I've made something new

WE ARE / I AM.

BY FLORENCIA AROZARENA

Who creates the rivers, change to make other
the seas, and mountains? organisms

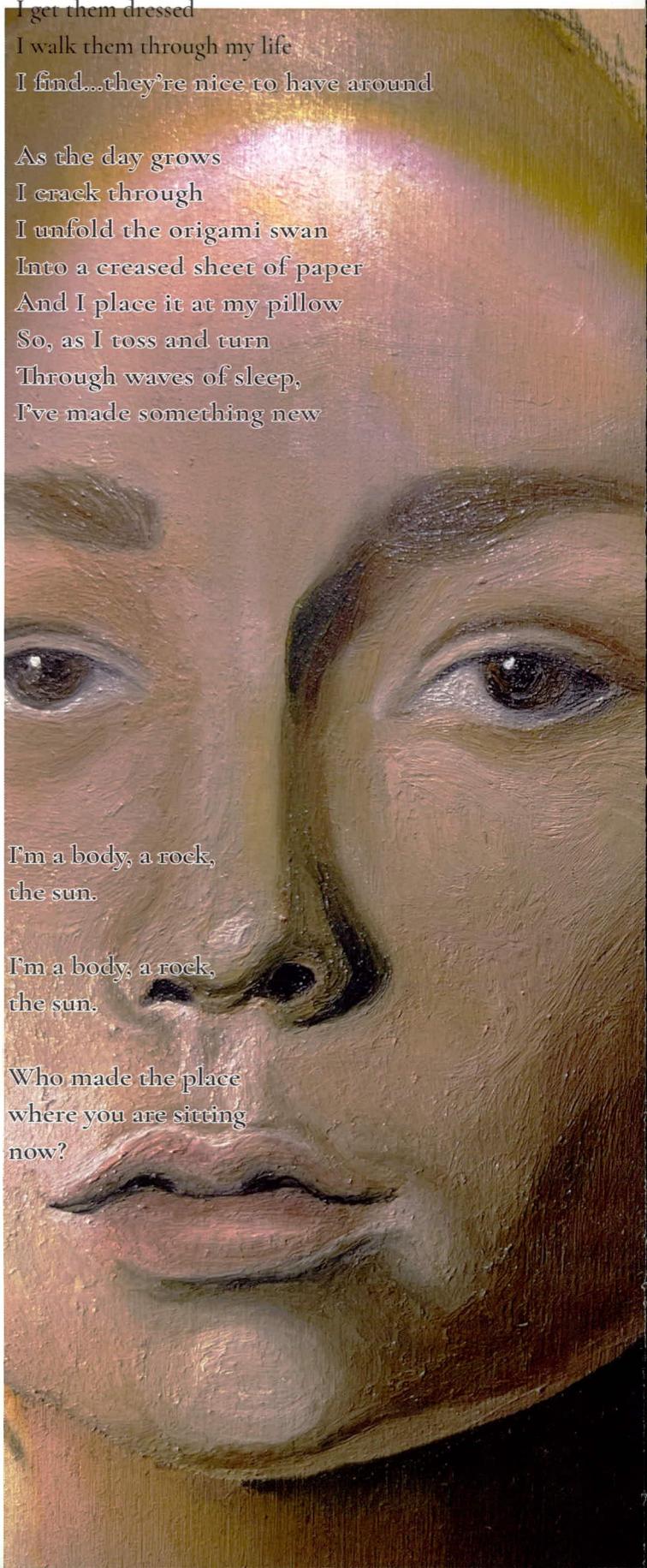
Is the sea the origin I want my body to float
where everything is with the waves that
found? come and go.

We were once a fish I want my body to drink
Millions of organisms in the ancestral water and
constant evolution that thus connect with that I
used to be.

I'm a body, a rock,
the sun.

I'm a body, a rock,
the sun.

Who made the place
where you are sitting
now?



WHY

BY BERNADETTE DORSEY

Why do you hate me SOOO much?
You don't even know me, and I have never done anything to you.
Yet you look at me with DISGUST.
Why does the sight of my SKIN COLOR make your blood boil?
Neither of us can change who we are or how we were born and even if I could, I would not.
You have been TAUGHT that I am,
Destructive and Unproductive.
Crazy and Lazy.
That I MUST be watched.
And I should know MY PLACE.
You've been TAUGHT I'm
Overweight, Always Late
Uncultivated and Unmotivated
That I should not be Too Loud or Too Proud
You've been TAUGHT that I am,
Ignorant and Incompetent
Living off the government
Delinquent in my payments
Always looking for arrangements.
You've been TAUGHT that,
My life is always some damn sad ass story in which you get to pity me.
That either I or someone in my bloodline had to be a
Drug Addict, Convict, Full of Internal Conflicts.
That I am promiscuous and worthless.
That we are always poor or the daughter of a pimp or a whore.
You have been TAUGHT that,
I DON'T BELONG IN THIS COUNTRY
I AM NOT FROM HERE AND SHOULD GO
BACK TO WHERE I CAME FROM.
BUT I have also been TAUGHT.
I have been TAUGHT NOT to believe everything I see and hear.
And NOT to live with HATE or IN FEAR.
Do YOU EVEN KNOW WHY you hate me so

much?
STOP!
PLEASE Don't try to come up with an answer.
Because I KNOW you don't know.
See you don't even know me, and I have never done anything to you.
All you see is my skin color.
Color which is sadly the foundation for your inherited hatred of me and my existence in this world,
Taught to you by your Sad, Unfortunate, Uninformed, Parents who were too SCARED to
LEARN THE TRUTH ABOUT WHO I REALLY AM.
TOO AFRAID TO STAND UP FOR WHAT'S RIGHT!
TOO AFRAID TO BREAK THE TRADITION OF RACISM!
See you were NOT born hating me.
SOMEONE had to TEACH YOU TO HATE ME!
To CLOSE YOUR MIND YOUR HEART AND YOUR SOUL!
SOMEONE had to TEACH YOU TO CONTINUE TO SEE ONLY BLACK AND WHITE AND
KEEP A BLIND EYE TO ALL THE BEAUTIFUL COLORS AROUND YOU.
SOMEONE HAD TO TEACH YOU TO FEAR to DARE to BE AND THINK DIFFERENTLY from ALL THE WRONGS you HAVE BEEN TAUGHT!
NOW
Allow me to Enlighten you.
I am not who YOU WERE TAUGHT I AM.
I am not a Drug Addict, Convict, Full of internal conflicts.
I am educated with a MASTER'S Degree
So please don't sit and judge me.
I own my own business and my own home.
And NO, I'm not a single parent doing it all alone.
I am married with children who are doctors, lawyers and community leaders.

NOT drug dealers, crack addicts or baby breeders. You say that I'm NOT beautiful because of the way I look. But your definition of beauty was NEVER written in my book. I am Cultivated, Sophisticated and Exceptionally Motivated. But don't test me with the N Word or things can get complicated. For YOU! Just know I am here to stay until the good lord takes me away. So, when you see me, please know, I am NOT who you were TAUGHT I am. See I descended from Kings and Queens I am PROUD OF WHO I AM IN THE DYNASTY OF BEAUTIFUL, EDUCATED, CREATIVE, PASSIONATE, COLORFUL, PEOPLE WHO COME IN ALL DIFFERENT SHADES, SHAPES AND SIZES. WHO HAVE CONTRIB-

UTED SO MUCH TO THIS COUNTRY That WITHOUT OUR CONTRIBUTIONS You would NOT have the priceless INVENTIONS like the: 3 LIGHT TRAFFIC LIGHT HOME SECURITY SYSTEM AUTOMATIC ELEVATOR DOORS IRONING BOARD REFRIGERATED TRUCKS AND RAILROAD CARS FIRST SUCCESSFUL OPEN-HEART SURGERY I could go on but trust me the list would be way too long. REMEMBER THIS COUNTRY'S SLAVE HISTORY YOU KNOW, THE ONE SOME ARE TRYING TO ERASE I WONDER, IS IT BECAUSE YOU KNOW THAT WHAT WAS DONE WAS A DAMN DISGRACE WELL, it was REAL and should be taught in our schools, And WHEN YOU TEACH IT, DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE ONE DROP

RULE. See your FOREFATHERS BLOODLINE WAS FORCED ON TO MINE SO, BEFORE YOU TEACH YOUR OFFSPRING ABOUT THE HATE YOU HAVE FOR ME JUST KNOW THAT WE COME FROM THE SAME FAMILY TREE WHEN YOU TELL ME TO GO BACK TO AFRICA AGAIN JUST REMEMBER HONEY, WE ARE MIXED KIN SO ARE YOU READY TO PACK YOUR BAGS AND LEAVE WITH ME CAUSE THAT ONE DROP RULE MAKES US FAMILY SEE, WHAT YOU WERE TAUGHT WAS NOT ALL RIGHT BECAUSE LOOKING AT MOST FAMILY TREES, NO ONE IS 100 % WHITE. Life is too short to keep hating me because that's what you were TAUGHT to do. The truth is while you're HATING ME, you're also HATING a PART of YOU.



I WISH I WASN'T TISSUE

BY GIOVANNI OLLIVIERRE

Pluck, Blow, Throw!

Pluck, Blow, Throw!

It's almost as if I'm their bitch,

When their noses start to itch.

They use me once and discard of me,

Whoever is listening, take note of my tragedy.

I don't deserve to be treated like this,

If only I could make just one wish.

Then the rolls are reversed, you'll feel my hurt

And Maybe just Maybe.

Instead!

You'll use your shirt.

Yesterday I lost almost my entire family,

Saving this family,

My days are numbered,

Soon I'll plunder.

It's only a matter of time before I join the line,

So, enjoy these rhymes, as the Clock. Winds.

Down.

Maybe in another lifetime I could become a

poet,

I would make a great one and you guys know

it.

My end is here

I have no fear,

Lay me to rest

Among the tins and rotten pears.



MINISAGA

BY ISSIS HAYNES

I died a long time ago. I witnessed my soul leave my body. I was left cold, empty, lifeless. What is a body without a soul? The walking dead. To be amongst the living is tortuous as I suffer an agonizing death. My pain is scorching hot as it burns me within, a flame that can only be extinguished by yours truly, your tormentor.

THE THOUGHT OF I

BY ISSIS HAYNES

May the thought of me die along with I,
As I perish into the land of silence;
When you can no longer feel my touch
Nor can I come to face you, my love
Let the thought of me pass you by as the days go on
You spoke of our future that you'd plann'd:
Keep the thought of me close, you understand
It will be far too late to counsel then or pray
But if I should be forgotten
And afterwards remembered fondly of, please do not
grieve
For if that darkness that corruptly consumes me
leaves
A trail behind of thoughts now memories,

Better by far to forget and smile
Than the thought of me bestow upon you sadness.

TWITTERATURE

BY ISSIS HAYNES

Thy rock so still and firm and strong. Similar to man. Man is supposed to be strong but who confides thy man when he is at his lowest, when he is weakened by the world. No one ever thinks about what the rocks are going through. Thy rock are you okay? How are you feeling? Are you well ? The world is heavy but you remain solid while your inner surface glistens in the night with the pain and tears of your untold stories.

SHADOWS OF SPECTRUM

BY JOY HOUSTON

In the quiet corners of her mind, she hides,
A silhouette of complexities, intertwined.
A black bisexual woman, hues divine,
Yet veiled by shadows, her light confined.

In crowded rooms, she's a fluttering bird,
Yearning to be seen, yet fearing to be heard.
Her heart beats loud, her breaths shallow,
Invisible chains of anxiety, hard to swallow.

Through kaleidoscopic eyes, she sees the world,
A spectrum of beauty, into which she's hurled.
But society's gaze, a harsh, judgmental stare,
Leaves her feeling fragmented, gasping for air.

Her sexuality, a tapestry of shades so rich,
Yet in a world of binaries, she's labeled a glitch.
Her love knows no bounds, her soul unconfined,
But bigotry's shackles attempt to bind.

She dances in the moonlight, a whispered melody,
Embracing her truth, despite society's felony.
Her spirit, a symphony of resilience and grace,
Navigating the labyrinth of identity's maze.

In her vulnerability lies her strength,
A beacon of hope, despite life's length.
For she is more than the sum of her fears,
A testament to courage, through the tears.

So let us celebrate her, in all her glory,
A testament to resilience, a vibrant story.
A black bisexual woman, with social anxiety's plight,
Illuminating the darkness, with her radiant light.



?DIFFERENT AM I?

BY SHALITZY ESPINAL

Different? Everyone is different, you'll say. However, there's two different kinds of different, yet not many people truly realize that. There's the kind of individuality that tends to be accepted, where people find those oddities to be special and a blessing to have, those are often seen by their peers as the "popular and successful" ones who're doing everything "right". People who get the other kind of "different" aren't as lucky unfortunately. If one doesn't have what society considers to be the "acceptable" kind of different, you're an outcast, tossed to the side, mocked behind your back. Some even are bold enough to do it face to face, gaining pleasure and power by watching as their words spread melancholy on your face. In school, "outcasts" were the main targets of their peers' ridicule and rejection, sometimes not even having staff on their side.

In middle school, actually, younger than that. In elementary school, being part of the "bad, irritable, insufferable, nuisance and so on" kind of different from such a young age is definitely not a good way to start the public school system, especially not in the "greatest" city in the world. In school, a short example of how outcasts were treated was gym class. "Ok, you two are the team captains, take turns picking who you want to be on your team for dodgeball." The gym teacher announced to the adolescents with too much energy and attitude for their tiny frames. "Teams? No, not again. I'm always the last kid picked, so I'm not playing." This was

simply a thought, but I grabbed my

backpack and headed to the stack of blue mats that oddly always seemed to be in that corner of the gym, as if it were waiting for me to lay on it and open up my book on dog facts. If those mats were alive, I'm sure it would've known as well as I did that the teacher wouldn't force me to join a team. Especially when the others, who I often referred to as idiots; as they seemed to enjoy excluding me, knowing that I was alone and no one would stand up for me.

Middle school, pretty sure everyone gets chills from hearing those words. Middle school is like war, you think you're on the right side but everyone loses at the end. No argument about it. The "outcast" kids tend to be hated by their peers and adored by the teachers. I was like that, but one teacher didn't favor the "outcast" kids who tend to behave more adequately. Specifically, she didn't favor me. Ms. Nealy was the name of that one teacher. 7th grade advisory time, aka my half hour of "hell". I was surrounded by juveniles, most shared a mutual dislike for me. "Alright ladies, we're going to do a new activity today!" Ms. Nealy said cheerfully to the group of immature adolescents, most of them having it in their heads that they're old enough to act the way they do, crying out with "pick me" energy. I wasn't offered a chance at being included. Ms. Nealy never enjoyed it when I was trying to interact; words were never spoken to express it but the look of irritation, regret, and possibly even disgust tainted her face whenever I did something that she classified as "annoying". The back of

the room always offered its chairs to me when I was rejected by the front, where my "fellow peers" always were situated with their leader. "They're all so annoying! I don't know what I did for all of them to hate me, it's not my fault that I'm like this!" I irritably muttered to my "partner in crime". My best friend was always by my side. We were basically joined at the hip as the teachers would joke if we're going to date in the future: News flash, not happening.

High school. My chance to "fit in" enough to avoid the seemingly endless loop of rejection and isolation. My best friend by my side once again; we were going to conquer this new beginning together, we were going to be "normal" this time around. It seemed to be working, despite a few slip-ups, everything seemed to be going great. More friends than before, no teachers that had an unexplained grudge against us, but there was nothing that could've prepared or even warn us for the slap in the face we would receive at the start of 2020. So many hopes that awaited to become a reality were shattered once COVID-19 got a hold of the world, the burning ember full of life, freedom, and anticipation was simply put out, leaving everyone in the cold, shut-in, demoralized embrace of our homes. Imagine having a year and several months to reflect, questioning not only society but yourself. Being shut in for so long is truly a terrible way to go mad, but realizing the madness that's been buried inside for years, shut down numerous times despite the pained cries. Acknowledg-

ing this helped pave the way to finally hearing and listening to this pained voice that had been losing hope of ever getting healed, of ever being able to say what has caused it to ache for so long. It won't be healed right away. Over time, I'll pick up the pieces of who I'm truly meant to be, not what society expects me to be. Society shouldn't shut down "outcasts", it should help them to be the person who they'll enjoy living as. "Freak"... "Don't look at them, they're probably crazy"... "No one likes you anyways"... "People stare at you when you act like that in case you didn't know". Society won't help us, So I'll help myself.

High school again. 11th grade was off for everyone having gone through the pandemic. No one was the same, no one could ever honestly be the same again. Being released from the shackles and bars that kept me in my house was nothing short of nerve-wracking, but also a breath of fresh air despite the masks getting in the way. "I missed you guys so much!"... "Did you guys get covid?"... "Yea, the pandemic sucked!"... Little conversations amongst the various

clusters of friends as they eagerly listened to each other as they now had

a face to accompany the voice once again. After the reflection the world forced me to have was "over", everything felt like a new light had appeared before me; A new scent, a new feel, a new sound, a new everything. Bay Plaza Mall, ShopRite, The Deli by the 39 bus stop, introducing my friends to new foods, so much happened; I truly needed it, we all did. My prison changed me, but my release made those changes seem worth it. I didn't change to fit society's expectations. I didn't spend my days learning to be "normal" for our return. I spent it learning about myself, even meeting a few digital faces who helped me along the way. Indie games, dark clothes, short hair, explicit music, LGBTQ+, mental health, my family, and my friends; are all of the things and people I opened myself to. I allowed anything I could learn about them to flow within me. I'm never going to be the same again, and I don't want to be.

2023. Happy? I'm definitely not there yet, but I'm way closer than I was before. "Keep in touch!... I'll miss you!... I'll visit!...Let's hope the future is nice to us..." chatter spoken amongst my friends, trying to avoid the waterworks in the back from overflowing and spilling out front. Saying "goodbye" to your fellow "outcasts" is like being separated

from the only people who understand your very existence. As if sinking back into the feeling of pure horror by the thought of being isolated in a room full of people once again, people who see your differences and hate that about you despite barely knowing you. I didn't have my best friend by my side this time, he left me alone like he left the rest of our friends. Surely he'll find his own way. I'll make it in this obstacle of life. It'll be difficult, but with friends a text away and my experiences in mind. I'll make sure to keep both close. A great movie once said, "Nah. I'm doing my own thing"¹. That's exactly what I'm going to do, what about you?



LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY: HOW THOUGHTS SHAPE PERCEPTION BY TERRELL MCEACHRON

Peace!

Language is the structured system of communication. Language involves signs, symbols, written and verbal expressions. It is the framework that governs and explains how things work. We created language to define the world, to put things into categories and make sense of what our brains perceive. The language of music provides a rhythm one can dance to. The language of physics (Mathematics) creates formulas that explain motion. The language of computers (binary) forms pixels on a screen. It wasn't until I learned the Language of jazz that I was able to appreciate the art and the instruments that composed it. Overall, language is a system to understand reality, and its distinctions vary across groups.

Identity is the fact of being a distinct individual, based on memories, relationships, and values. Identity is formed through social interactions, while Self is the accumulation of interactions; these are what make us human. The loss of identity is the loss of interests that are personal.

All of this can be seen in the various acts you spend your time doing. Each of us will spend our time on different activities because no one lives the same life. Even those we share events with will have different interpretations of what happened, with some more accurate than others.

Language and identity go hand in hand. Language gives identity a form in which to be expressed and, in turn, identity impacts the use of language. Through discourse, perceptions of the world become combined with the perceptions of others, which is how like minds attract. In order for us to form an identity we must use language: the tool to impact and influence our environment.

"The limits of my language are the limits of my world" – Ludwig Wittgenstein

If I cannot speak the "language of the land," then I will be unable to correctly interpret signs and symbols, leaving me lost and utterly confused. Identifying patterns in systems is to measure this "language of the land." Each environment has its own sphere of influence. Certain ideas or customs do not

always overlap across social settings; things like jargon, jokes, and other norms found acceptable in one culture may well be unique to that place.

The field of psycholinguistics has already proved the influence language has on perception. Each language gives a number of variables with which a person can make meaning, through words and sentences of varying complexity, as well as facilitate the self-image of its speakers. The power in words is in their capacity to influence the subconscious; the subconscious mind has no concept of fact or fiction, so everything perceived is believed, understood as reality. Conversely, the conscious mind is the gatekeeper of lies and deceit; it filters through information with the faculties to solve and determine problems. It has the power to discern information and parse fact from fiction. However, the things you say affect what you think and feel, and can spring up emotions that override this process. Therefore, what you think influences what language you use, and the language you use influences what you think and do.

If one is free to speak and think with others, they will form an identity. Their actions will create ripples of feedback throughout the external world, and said person will see their thoughts reflected back at them in the results of their situation.

Language can only survive as long as it has speakers. Once language was taken from the mind and became physical, it created ways to transfer ideas across space and time. Written works like stories, plays, and scientific discoveries, have preserved cultures of the past. Philosophy has survived for thousands of years because its greatest contributors wrote down their thoughts.

For the past 20 years we have been exposed to a greater audience, one that has never been seen within one lifetime. The internet connects people across the world in seconds. However, the digital footprint is permanent. One cannot expect the works or content uploaded to not trace back to them. Which brings me closer to the topic of this presentation.

Life is defined as an organism's response to stimuli. Humans experience sensations constantly, through the five basic senses, proprioception (the feeling of one's own body parts: limbs, arms, legs, etc), thermoception (the faculty to perceive temperatures), the immune system, pain, balance, hunger, thirst, and so on. With all these ways to experience reality, does it make sense to say you cannot make something of it?

Proof of identity is the endeavors of leisure brought forth. Leisure is activity for the purpose of enjoyment. Each person has their own ways of thinking, their own interests, and ideas. Putting times of leisure towards a project creates an outlet for ideas.

If you want to be seen and heard for the things you do, you must be willing to create and produce the work that will make you known. My efforts come in the form of this article, while yours could be music, photography, or sports. There are many ways to leave a mark on this world before departing, and input and output are the two fundamental aspects of life. Cause and effect is a relationship of endless strings. Your intake will shape your thoughts, and what you think will shape your actions—actions that will eventually form the identity or persona you develop. For one to truly live, they must leave an impact on their environment, creating ripples that lead far into the future and beyond the grave through the ideas they leave behind in the minds of others. How many have learned about Christopher Columbus or George Washington, two people who died hundreds of years ago but are remembered for what they did?

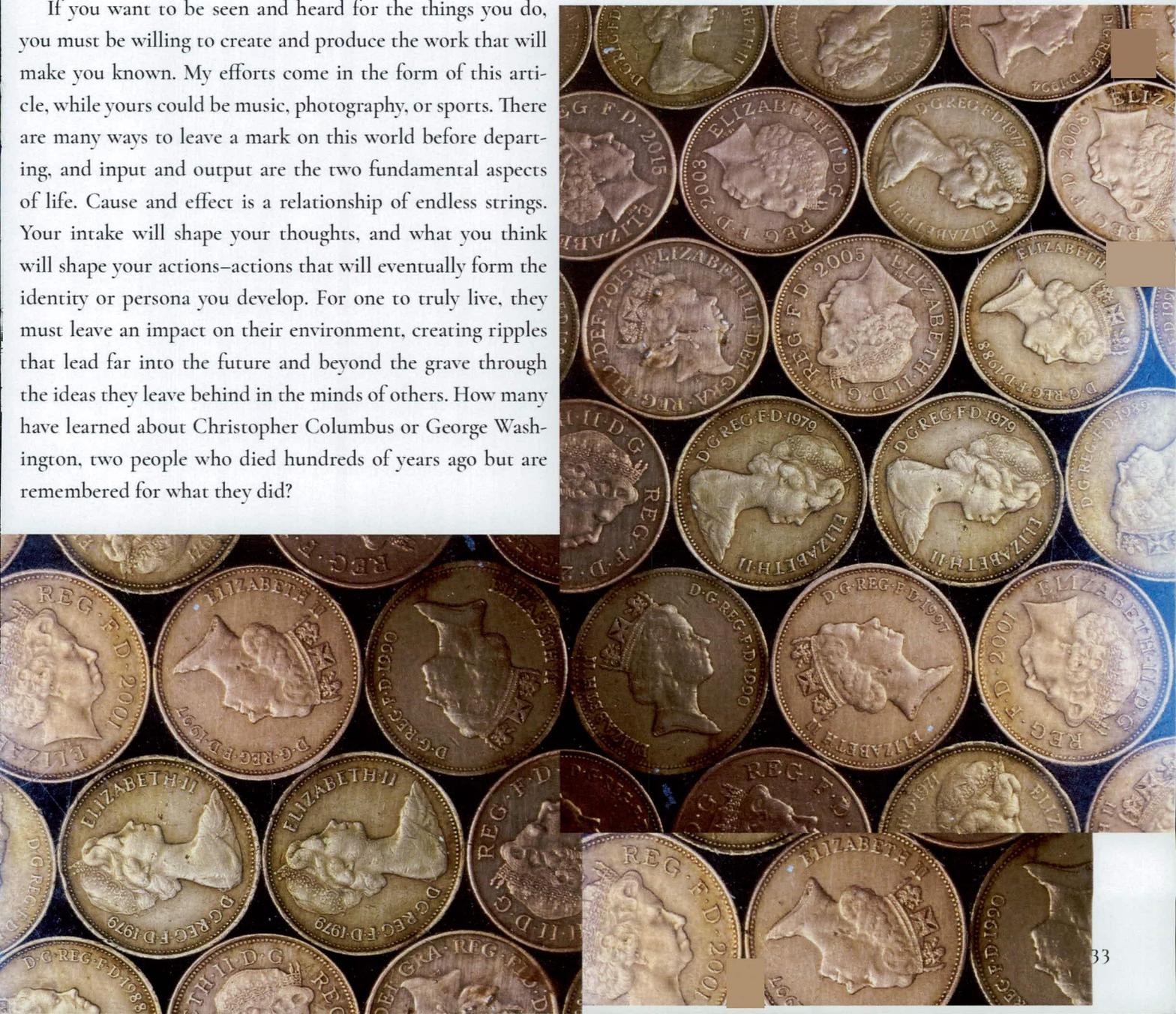
Bring your thoughts to life by completing your ideas. If you don't, they will die within you, never to be seen or heard. The fruits of your labor are the proof of your identity. The essence of your thoughts living in the material world, making you a creator amongst creation.

This is my philosophy, a description of my perception. If it doesn't apply, let it fly. If it does, try. Strive. Remember: change begins with one mind at a time, and the first mind that must change—that must grow—is yours.

Peace.

Until our minds meet again,

Wise Supreme Allah



ANOTHER SATURDAY

BY JEFF SARRA

Another Saturday morning comes. You wake up from the sound of the alarm you've set since you were in college.

6:30. You stretch and slowly force yourself to get up. You pause while sitting in your bed, thinking and asking, "what should I do this Saturday?" You take a deep breath and hear your stomach growl. You brush your teeth, wash your face, and go downstairs.

7:30. The living room feels empty, but it's not the absence of furniture. You open the curtains for light to set foot, but you keep the windows closed because you remember your mom has a bad allergy and it's pollen season. You proceed to the kitchen and open the fridge only to find barely anything in it. You search every corner and find a nearly empty bowl of mac and cheese you bought 4 days ago. You didn't finish it because it tasted nothing like your mom's.

8:30. You heat it up in the microwave and finish it while standing at the empty kitchen full of "China," sets of knives, a brand new oven, and seven pairs of eating utensils. You look back at the fridge and decide to go get groceries. But what do you buy? You remember the list your mom made when you were in college, clipped to the fridge by the photo magnet with her picture inside.

Please buy:

1. Eggs 12 brown
2. Milk one with blue cap.
3. Cheese
4. Macaroni Pasta
5. Butter

10:00. You decide to get ready to leave the house. You put on your corduroy jacket she gave you for your nineteenth birthday. You double-check the door and windows because you recall your mom telling you to always check them before leaving the house. With the list in your left jacket pocket, you walked for 30

minutes. Knowing the walk is long, you can endure because you remember walking with her to the grocery store eleven blocks away.

10:11. You start talking to yourself, asking yourself if the weather is good, why that dog isn't on a leash, if you should finish the laundry when you get home, which part of the house you should clean. Each time you ask yourself a question, you glance to your left, expecting an answer or a long reply, but silence is all that surrounds the walk.

10:46. You arrive at the grocery store. You know that you only need 5 things by looking at the list, but you stroll every aisle. Looking at the vegetables under automatic sprinklers, you remember your mom would appreciate good-looking ones. "Fresh," as she would say, and you never knew why. "They're just vegetables," you would say. You walk to the dairy section and grab the milk with the blue cap; you take the one behind just as she would instruct. You grab cheese and butter and you remember to always check the expiration date.

11:05. You proceed to look for macaroni pasta. A whole selection towers in front of you. Trying to recall what brand she liked, you're confused and lost, hoping someone would just pick one for you. Reality pulls you back as the sound of an employee dropping a can of tomato sauce snaps you out of distortion. You pick the one in front of you.

11:11. I wish you were here.

11:12. You get going, moving from aisle to aisle, taking your time looking at cereals, jams, peanut butters, coffees, teas, sugars, flours, snacks, and kitchenware.

11:56. You reach the last aisle, full of cleaning products. The smell of bleach and ammonia reminds you of the smell of the morgue. You were outside; the feeling of disbelief, sadness, emptiness, numbness, guilt, and regret stopped you from going in.

12:02. You reach the cashier and pay for everything:

- Milk with blue cap.....8.79
- Cheese.....3.99
- Butter.....5.79
- Macaroni Pasta.....3.49
- Total w/ tax:.....24.02

12:09. You get out of the grocery store and walk home with a bag in hand. Another eleven blocks. Another thirty minutes.

12:24. You feel something is off. Déjà vu hits; checking the receipt makes you realize you forgot eggs. The thought of going back to the grocery store makes you lazy, so you go home.

12:41. Reaching the front door with a sigh, you get in, hang your corduroy jacket, and sit the grocery bag in the kitchen before washing your hands. She always reminded you to wash your hands before touching anything inside the house.

12:49. Feeling indecisive, you contemplate. Should I make Mac and Cheese? Why did I forget the eggs? Should I go back to the grocery store? Another eleven blocks, another thirty minutes. Alone. It's almost 1:00, I should be eating lunch at this hour. It wouldn't taste like mom's.

Time stands still...

You remember the back of the list:

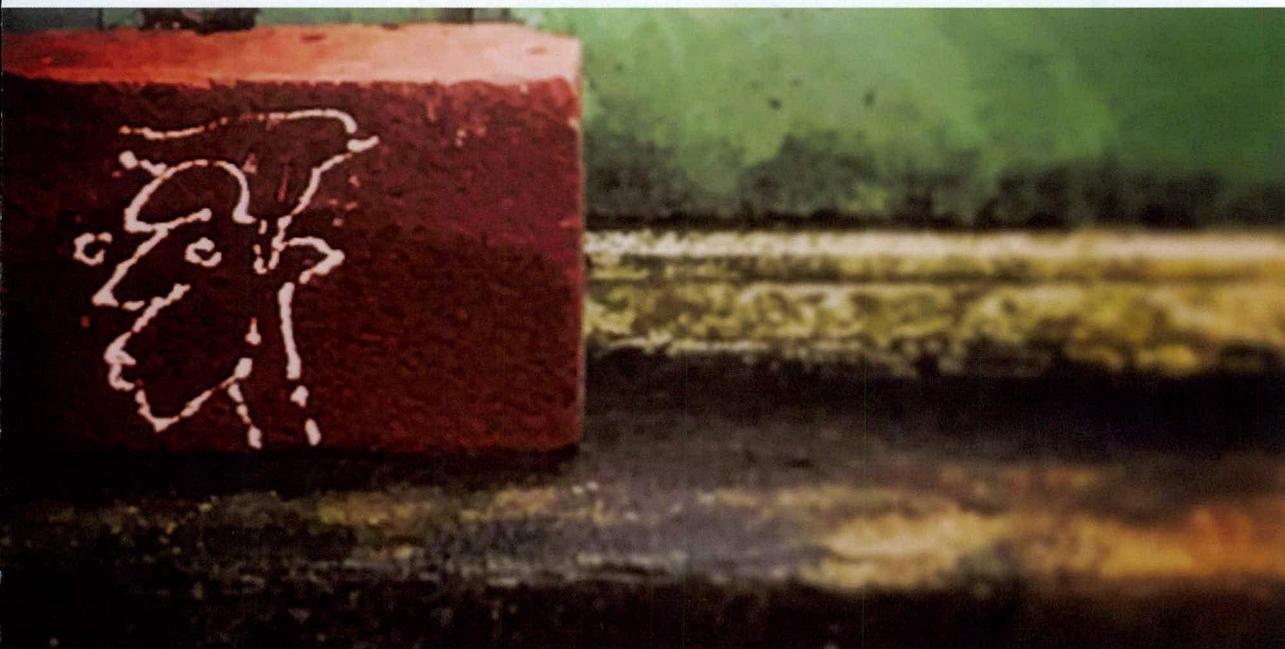
"Please buy these ingredients, when I get home, I will cook your favorite. Remember milk with blue cap and check the expiry date first.

DON'T FORGET ANYTHING! RECHECK THE LIST!

Please be punctual, be home before I do.

Love Mom."

12:51. It wouldn't taste like mom's.



SHRIMP FRIED RICE

BY EMNAH ISKOWITZ

Jonathan let out a contented sigh. It was a slow day at the restaurant, but at least they didn't show up. All he had to do was wipe down the tables one last time, and then he could lock up and go home. But then he heard the door open.

"Sorry, we're closed," he said with a yawn.

"Come back tomorrow."

"But what about the rice?" Asked a familiar voice.

A jolt of disgust ran through Johnny's body. Oh god no. Johnny knew what was coming, and he was not looking forward to it. He looked up and stared at the little demon. The kid was no older than twelve, with a round face and a blue baseball cap adorning his head. Johnny looked out the window to find four of the kid's friends outside, their faces pressed on the glass and gawking in anticipation. Johnny sighed again, this time out of annoyance.

"Go home Davy, or-"

"Or what? You're gonna turn away a customer?"

"I said we're closed, and good night!"

"But I've gotta know!"

"David, go home!"

"I need to know!"

"Fine!"

Johnny knew this would go on forever unless he let the little shit ask the question.

"What is it?" Jonathan asked. Davy snickered.

"You're telling me a SHRIMP fried this rice?"

Davy looked at his friends as they responded with a chorus of YOOOOOOOOO! that rang through the glass. What followed was high fives, and talking about how that was the *funniest shit they've ever seen*. Davy looked back at Jonathan with a huge shit eating grin.

"See you tomorrow, Prawnathan!"

Before any kind of response could leave "Prawnathan"'s mouth, Davy ran for the door like his life depended on it, running as far as he and his friends could manage in their little

pack. There was no way Jonathan was going to catch them in time. He huffed, and he went back to wiping the tables.

"What the hell is wrong with them?" He asked under his breath.

"It's not my fault that I'm in this state." He gazed at his reflection on the table's clean, wooden surface.

The pale creature that stared back was hard and shiny, with black beady eyes and two pairs of majestic antennae, one pair shorter than the other. He recognized the creature as a shrimp. However, looking at his arm, lemon-scented Clorox wipe in hand, he also recognized the creature as himself. He threw the Clorox wipe into the trash and left the restaurant, fetching the keys from his pocket and locking up. Even after all this time, he still wasn't quite used to the lock being at the same level as his head. Jonathan climbed into the Ford Focus, and slammed his face on the steering wheel. The horn honked. And honked. And honked some more.

The sun was beginning to set as Jonathan pulled into the driveway. As he got out of the car, he saw those familiar little yellow glimmers dancing on the lawn. There were two portable folding chairs placed next to each other in the grass, his wife sitting in one of them. She inhaled the evening air through her nose, and out her gills. She took a sip of beer. "Johnny!" She exclaimed, beckoning him to come on over here and have a seat, because the twilight was oh so nice. He smiled. Well, he tried to.

It's a bit difficult to smile with mandibles. He took off his shirt and sat down next to her, letting his extra legs stretch.

"So...how was work today?" She asked, passing him a can from the cooler.

"It was fine, I guess," he said curtly. His antennae twitched.

"Business was slow, but not too bad."

Samantha raised an eyebrow.

"Davy showed up again, didn't he?"

"How did you...?"

She laughed.

"Your antennae did the thing again."

He shrugged.

"Sounds like I've got to get better at lying."

She continued to laugh.

"You don't need to do that, I just...I don't know why you haven't punched the kid in the nose yet or something."

"And piss off his old man? Yeah, no thanks." He grew quiet, looking down at his feet.

He could feel the helplessness take hold.

"God, I wish I wasn't so spineless," he said, trying to hold back a sob.

"Woah, Johnny," Sammy said, placing her hand on his back.

"It's fine. You've just gotta ban him and his friends, and he won't bother you anymore."

"His dad's a cop, Samantha! As long as Davy has his dad around his finger, which he does, then I can't do anything!"

"Bullshit!" Sammy got out of her seat and looked him dead in the eyes.

"You didn't say that when Verne Technologies turned us into fish people. You didn't say that when they FIRED us either. Are you really going to let a 12 year old and his pig for a father stop you now, after everything?"

"No..." said Jonathan under his breath.

"No I WON'T!"

"Atta boy," said Samantha, as she gave him a peck on his forehead.

"In fact, let's deal with this right now!" He exclaimed.

He jumped out of the folding chair and scampered inside, motivated by the opportunity to serve a dish Davy would never forget: revenge.

Sammy opened the front door. PVC pipes were strewn about the living room floor, with Johnny frantically picking them up and fitting them together in a tangled mess.

"Oh boy..." she said under her breath.

Jonathan looked up at her, with a gleam of excitement in his crazed eyes.

"Hey, can you get started on the rice? I've got my hands full at the moment."

"You're the one who owns a restaurant," she responded.

"Why aren't you making the rice?"

"Because I have to work on the device!" He exclaimed.

She looked at the "device" and back at him.

"So that is what all..." She gestured to the mess on the floor.

"...this is. What exactly is your plan here?" "Revenge!" He blurted out.

He picked up the small mass of PVC that he had already put together and cradled it in his arms.

"So here's the idea: Those twerps are gonna show up tomorrow, and I'm gonna give them aaaaaaaaall the rice they could ask for," he said devilishly.

"They're gonna be all 'Meh meh meh, shrimp fried rice', and I'm gonna be all 'Oh, yeah? You want fried rice? I'll give you your fried rice!'" He slung it on his shoulder like a bazooka and pretended to fire it, shouting "POW!" rapidly every time he did so.

"And then they'll be so scared that they won't mess with me, or my restaurant ever again!"

"That sounds good," she responded with a smirk. "But I have a better idea."

The next morning, Johnny put the contraption in the trunk. Sadly, Sammy won't be able to appreciate her hard work. She was up until 3 in the morning working on it, and was still out cold on their couch. The ammo, consisting of shrimp fried rice, was also cold. Sitting in the fridge all night will do that. The giant pot of ammo sat snugly in the passenger seat, duct tape haphazardly stuck on the lid to keep it closed. Its chrome exterior gleamed in the sunlight. He closed his eyes, took a breath, and turned the key. The car growled and snarled with an energy that matched his own. He had never been this thrilled to torment children before.

Johnny was caught off guard when he pulled up in his Ford Focus. Davy was outside the restaurant...alone. Johnny knew he'd show up eventually, but this early? Davy bounced toward the driver side window of the car and tapped on it. Johnny rolled it down.

"Good morning Mr. Huang," said Davy. Johnny raised an eyebrow.

"Good morning...?"

"I wanted to let you know that I'm sorry."

Jonathan couldn't believe his ears.

"Really?"

Davy scratched the back of his head.

"Well, yeah. When I got home yesterday, I felt kinda shitty about what I did to you. It's not fair. You're just a shrimp. You was born like that."

Jonathan looked back at the massive pot of shrimp fried rice. Maybe this whole thing was stupid. Maybe Davy's parents finally knocked some sense into him. Maybe he could finally go home and nurse his hangover. He could reheat the rice on the stove and have it as a snack. But he already came this far, and he was done being a quitter.

"Y'know what Davy?" said Jonathan.

"Let's call a truce." Johnny unbuckled the pot and opened the car door.

"But to make it absolutely clear, I wasn't born a shrimp," said Jonathan as he got out of the car.

"I was made that way in a--"

"FIRE!"

Davy's friends ran out from the alleyways and hurled uncooked rice at Jonathan. Jonathan scrambled back into the car and slammed the door.

"Oh for fuck's sake!" he hissed.

"I should've known he'd pull this shit! Gawd!"

He had no time to waste. He got out on the passenger's side and ducked behind the Focus, pot in arms.

"I don't see him!" exclaimed one of Davy's taller friends.

"What do you mean you don't see him?" said Davy.

"He's inside the car, dumbass!"

"I'm not a dumbass!" the tall kid shouted back.

"You are!"

"How the fuck am I the dumbass, Hunter? He went in the car,

so he should be in the car, duh!"

"Well if you don't believe me, then you can go check for yourself!"

"Oh, yeah? Well I wi--" Davy felt something hit his head.

It was cold, and some of it got in his right ear. He turned around to find Jonathan standing next to the trunk of the car. A catapult made of PVC pipes, a wooden bowl, and a bungee cord stood by his side. He stuck a wooden spoon into the pot and loaded up the wooden bowl.

"What's wrong?" asked Jonathan.

"You don't want seconds?"

Davy was at a loss for words. Jonathan's a shrimp. Shrimp aren't supposed to fight back. Davy gritted his teeth, as his face turned redder than a cooked lobster. Jonathan didn't think it was possible for his face to get redder than it normally is, but here we are.

"ATTAAAAAAAAAAAAACK!" cried Davy at the top of his lungs.

There was so much uncooked rice in the air that you could swear you were looking at a blizzard in July. Jonathan was trying to load the catapult as fast as he could, sending spheres of golden rice at his juvenile tormentors. Nothing was spared from the onslaught. The restaurant windows, the sidewalk, Jonathan's Ford Focus, everything within a seven foot radius. Eventually, Davy and his friends ran out of uncooked rice and started reaching for the rice on the ground. Hunter, the tall kid, grabbed a handful and shrieked.

"Dude, the fuck?" asked Davy.

"It's his children..." said Hunter, mortified.

"He's throwing his children at us!" Davy looked down and saw the cooked shrimp at his feet.

"Holy shit, you're right. Prawnathan's a psycho!"

"That's right! And I'll send out my nephews next!" Johnathan growled.

The boys looked at each other, and then they faced Davy, waiting for an answer.

"RETREAAAAAAAAT!" hollered Davy, and he and his crew scampered off.

Jonathan waited until they were gone. He took a deep breath, and relaxed his shoulders. It was finally over. But now his car and the front of his restaurant was a mess. He sighed, took his keys, and went inside.

Jonathan was exhausted. After cleaning up all that rice, a family came to eat at the restaurant that very afternoon...and their cousins, and their second cousins, and their cousins once removed. They took up the whole damn restaurant. He had to close half an hour late, and all he wanted to do was to go home and hibernate for a week. Right before he could even get the key into the lock, he heard the sound of screeching tires. He whipped his head around. A cop car was parked in front of the restaurant. The man that stepped out was a burly redhead, with a beard like copper wire welded to his face in wild curls. Jonathan knew this man, and the last thing he wanted was to go into his car.

"Good evening, Officer Jones," Jonathan said nervously.

"Evening, Jonathan," said the officer.

"I would like to talk to you about something that happened this morning." Jonathan gulped.

"Okay..."

"Can you come here? Just wanna talk." Jonathan approached the cop gingerly. The redhead towered over him.

"What's this about, officer?" asked Jonathan.

"My son claims that you assaulted him and his friends with fried rice."

"Yes, well, about that-"

"Hold on, I didn't finish," said Officer Jones, smirking.

"He said you assaulted his friends with fried rice, and y'know what I said?" Jonathan squinted as the cop sported a huge grin.

"No...what?"

"I said, 'You're telling me a SHRIMP fried that rice?'" Officer Jones cackled and slapped his knees. He was so loud he could be heard down the street.

"But seriously," he said, catching his breath.

"I already have his side of the story, and I need to know yours."

Jonathan took a deep breath.

"Alright. Your son has been terrorizing my establishment for MONTHS. This morning, when I arrived at the restaurant, your son and his friends threw uncooked rice at me!"

"I know that part. But you brought a catapult, and used it to fling rice at them."

"It was, uh, self defense?"

"No. I'll tell you what it is. It's premeditated, but it's GENIUS!"

Jonathan was stunned.

"I- I...what!?"

"Who built it, you, or the missus?"

"Why would I tell you that?"

Officer Jones adjusted his belt.

"Good point, good point. Was probably the missus, she's the one who went to school for engineering. Can you imagine how amazing it would've been if we made that at Davy's age? Phew!"

Jonathan lowered his head and held out his arms.

"I know. You can take me to the station now, officer."

"Woah, Johnny. Relax. Are you trying to get arrested?"

"Well, no, but-"

"Then you won't be. I'll write down in the report that it was in self defense."

"Holy shit. Really?"

"Jonathan, I've known you since middle school. Why the hell would I want to arrest you?" Officer Jones opened the car door. He climbed inside, but stopped and climbed back out.

"One more thing. You wanna come over for drinks some time? While Davy's out of course." Jonathan shrugged.

"Okay. Sure, why not?"

As the car drove off, Jonathan stood there, processing what just happened. He unclenched his asscheeks and smiled.

"Wow. I did it. I'm finally free!"

He jumped in the air triumphantly.

"YEAH, BABY!"

GUITAR STRINGS

BY MARI JANE ROJAS

The train was packed once again. I stepped in and held the cold metal railing. As we arrived at the 7th Ave station, I heard the conductor say, "We are being held at the station momentarily, Thank you for your patience."

I rolled my eyes knowing we were not going to be moving and scanned the car. Someone held their brown, steamy cup of coffee. Another had their head in a book. These were the same ordinary people I saw every day. But there was a pair I couldn't take my eyes off of: a father and his son.

It was the way the father's eyes lit up the dull subway car with love as he spoke to his son. I didn't hear what he could have been saying, as I was wearing my noise-canceling headphones, but not even my headphones could cancel out the adoration I saw. The father's lips were moving as he looked at his son with his hands moving all around, as if he was explaining some concept to his son. And the son, a curious mind replying, looking up at him with wandering curiosity on his face and eyes full of admiration for his father. And the father's eye of experience, sharing it with his son. I heard the words pressure and gas escape, so I assumed he was explaining some science concept. But I wasn't focused on what he was saying, I was focused on the idea that the son was learning something from his dad that day, something he'll know in the future and pass on to his friends, or even explain to his kids the same way he'd learned it from his father. This interaction made me remember my father.

Several years ago, I came into my room as a soft and rustic melody played. My dad was sitting on my bed, practicing playing the guitar he'd just bought. I sat next to him. I was wearing a white-knitted sweater, full of innocence and admiration for my father. He was wearing a tight black shirt, full of life's dark experiences. I looked up to my father smiling; I always loved the soft, melodic tones of the guitar, and he loved learning how to play.

"ven mija, voy a enseñarle como tocar la guitarra"

which translates to,

"Daughter come, I'll teach you how to play the guitar."

I held the heavy brown guitar. My hands were so small, making the guitar seem like the size of a giant. He then took out an orange guitar pick. It was small, yet he held it with so much praise. He slowly brushed the guitar pick across the strings while the guitar created an elevated melody. He handed it to me and I tried to get myself to brush the guitar pick along the strings the way he did.

It came out sort of funny. As I brushed it along, different noises came out of the guitar. I tried different speeds. But it wasn't a soft melody that played, more like a fast, jumbled mess of sounds. It sounded like a song to me, but I wasn't there to learn. I was there to spend time with my dad. Every time I dragged the guitar pick along, I looked up and awkwardly smiled at my dad.

My mom came into the room as she laughed at the noise I made with the guitar. She saw the way my eyes lit up when I was around him. She took out her camera, full of memories just like this. As the flash of the camera's light went on, I side-hugged my dad with a smile. And he pulled me closer to him. I now have that memory forever. I loved my dad.

Whenever I would see that the clock turned to seven, I would scramble underneath my bed. As I hid down there, I peeked at the door. I was waiting for those black-laced shoes to approach. When those shoes approached, I would hear "Where's Mari Jane?" Little me couldn't contain my laughter. I waited a few more seconds until I finally peeked from under the bed, shouting "Boo!" with a laugh plastered on my face as I attempted to scare him. He knew I was there. But he would act surprised just for me.

I remember all those moments.

I remember us yelling at the TV screen, dragging my

face down with my hands, his fists clenched as we saw the Mexican soccer team was losing. I remember when he would buy me those Dora popsicles with gumballs for eyes; my mom would get mad that I'd stained my white shirt while my dad defended me.

And I of course remember the not-so-good moments. I remember I stopped seeing my father's black shoes from underneath my bed. I remember seeing his black suitcase overflowing with his everyday clothes. I remembered how our closet suddenly had a big space. I saw his guitar leave. I saw our memories leave, out the door.

One day, as I was cleaning my room, I had to sweep under my bed. As I kneeled and lowered my head to see the floor where I used to hide, I noticed something small and orange but also old, rustic, with hints of brown decay. It was the guitar pick.

I held it in my hands. It was a lifeless object. There was no guitar to use it with. There was no dad to teach me how to play. I should've been angered by this, angered by the idea that he left. But there was something in me: a longing, a desperate feeling pulling my heart down—to keep this little guitar pick.

I remember running with open arms to my dad after seeing him pick me up from pre-k, as we approached the ice cream truck. He pulled his black wallet out as the ice cream man gave me my Dora popsicle. It was a sunny day, so as I was licking the tart, fruity popsicle, it started melting on my shirt and my hands. But the sun glowing on the both of us on our walk back made the moment special as I held his hand. It's a memory I will never forget.

Looking back at that moment, I realize that not every string will sound alike. The guitar pick transitions slowly and softly to each guitar string. Almost like we have to go through something in our lives, like we have to experience change. We are all guitar picks. We go through these different changes in life. It might sound ugly. It might even sound horrendous

to one's ears: the song of what we're going through in our phase of life. But with guidance, support, and even the people we meet, the sound can turn into a soft melody.

I hear the train doors finally close. I give one last look at the father and son's exchange: a smile that fills my heart. I look away and turn to the door.

That interaction I saw never escaped from my head. I picked up my phone and scrolled down the numerous contacts that I had.

I pressed the call button. I heard the loud ringing in my ear and everything around me started to be silent.

"Mija como estas"

His voice is a rustic and cooled tone, a cool yet soft song—a warm song that brings me back to when he played his guitar with me, leaving a slow, high sound, almost like a harp, flowing and calm. The mood is almost as if we can hear fire crackling, a crisp and complex sound as he is strumming the guitar strings: the same harmonizing love I'd seen— a sound that is always reassuring to me.

WHERE MOMMY IS

BY NANCY NIEVES

I chose her.

I read her file and saw her life played out for me, movie style, all the good and all the bad. There were two before me who had agreed to conception, but the reel of her life was too traumatizing and challenging for the tranquility they are used to, and so, they chose to abort. To me, despite her battle scars, she is beautiful, and I have agreed to be her son.

I only know her name as Mommy because I am starting to forget some things already. I do recall that she grew up an only child. Her father could be warm, but he drank too much, and her mother could be cold because she despised him.

Mommy's hair flows in red waves and her eyes still shine, even when life has tried to dull them. She wasn't loved enough and yet she knows the power a hug can hold if it comes from your heart. That is my favorite quality about her.

In this warm and comforting space where I am, Mommy's body temperature is the same as mine. I fit comfortably in this thin membranous lining that envelops and protects me. I am happy and cushioned here in its embrace, but I am promised that Mommy will do the same for me once I am brought into her world. I hear her again, her words sometimes weave into lullabies, and it brings me joy and peace. She will be my sole protector, I am aware.

There is liquid inside this place, the color of pale yolk, and it nourishes me. I was informed that where Mommy is, only in the beginning, her tummy may not always be full, but she will make sure that mine is. I waited here for almost ten months. I suppose I got comfortable, but I am fully developed now, and it is time to leave. I didn't turn my head down in the weeks before, as some others do, but now my body is shifting to the correct position.

My protective sac suddenly breaks, and I feel myself being pushed towards a canal. Instinctively, I know I must travel through it. This canal has natural ridges and contours that belong to Mommy, so I know I will see her soon. As my body stretches, my shoulders and torso elongate, and my head molds itself to contort to the narrow space but it doesn't hurt me.

As I embark on this slow but steady journey, I can hear Mommy. The familiarity of her voice succeeds gently, guiding me towards her. She is accompanied by another voice that is kind. It is this other voice that reaches out for me, pulling me from the tranquil darkness and bringing me into the uncertainty of the light. Although this voice reveals its human face to me, the surrounding area looks blurry, like the view through a rainy windowpane. I feel afraid, and my body trembles.

Where is Mommy? I heard her voice. I want to be with her.

Just as I yearn for her presence, she calls out to me. I cannot see her yet, but I know she is there. I can feel the pull of urgency in her tone. Although her voice is a little unsteady, she plays her lullaby for me.

I have done it. I am here, Mommy. Like a lotus submerged within its murky waters until it is ready to bloom, I have completed my journey. I am just like your favorite flower! I will forget all the words very soon, but I need you to hear me. I want you to know that I will exist in your world and paint you rainbows where you once believed there were none to be found. It will be my turn to soothe you with the sound of my voice.

The words...I can feel them slipping away...and so, for Mommy...I cry instead of speaking.

THE WONDERFUL MS. JONES AND HER SMALL ACT OF KINDNESS

BY SKY PALENCIA

I hugged my backpack tightly as I walked into Ms. Jones' bright, warm classroom. The cold was still stinging my cheeks, but the low hum of the school's ancient radiators reassured me I'd be warm soon. I plopped into my seat, staring up at the board with the unfocused curiosity only a seven-year-old could have.

Seven is known as the age of reason; it's the time in a child's development when the brain allows them to think more logically. They begin to understand concepts like sharing with friends, how to problem solve, and that pouring their cup of juice into a taller glass does not mean they have more juice. A child this age is just at the precipice of consciousness; inside this jittery, wide-eyed little kid are billions of neurons, ready to fire and make an infinite number of new connections at any moment. While I was sitting there, aimlessly looking around, my little mind was malleable and sponge-like, waiting to soak up as much information as it could, waiting for someone to make an impact.

In just four short months of being in my new elementary school, I had managed to secure my spot as the teacher's pet. The seating chart had put me right by her desk, and my unbridled enthusiasm for learning had me raising my hand with the answers whenever I could. I learned young that academic praise made my brain hum to itself in approval in a way I had never experienced before. It was like I was giving myself a mental pat on the back, my peeking consciousness telling me, Good

job! Grown-Up's like it when you're smart! Once everyone was seated as nicely as our class could be, Ms. Jones took her place at the front of the room and greeted us with a welcoming smile.

She waved her arms and said "Hello Claass! Welcome Baaaack!" in a sing-song voice that made everyone erupt into a fit of giggles.

Once attention was back on her, she began to walk around the classroom, handing out half-slips of paper with wide lines on them.

"Now," she said, "I'm going to set the timer for 10 minutes; I'd like you all to write a few sentences about what you did over the weekend!"

She wound up the little red timer behind her desk and gave us the okay to begin. We had done this activity countless times before, always about how our weekend was. I wasn't a naturally adventurous or outdoorsy type of kid, and my social skills left a lot to be desired. Being the child of vegetarian hippies who believed that microwave radiation would fry your brain left me without much in common with my peers. This meant my weekend plans usually consisted of quietly reading book after book or rewatching our worn-out VHS of *The Little Mermaid*. So when it came to this assignment, I had gotten bored of writing the same sentences over and over. My weekend was good, I read 2 books, and I watched a movie in my room.

One thing that had been new for me that weekend was the snow we had

just gotten. I was sleeping over at my grandmother's house, and I remember peering out at her backyard one morning and seeing what looked like an endless blanket of marshmallow fluff covering the entire world. Everything looked so quiet. I had woken up early that day, pressing my face up against the cold glass of my grandmother's creaky window; I watched the sunlight hit the snow through the trees and suddenly the world began to glimmer for me. Even as a child, I was unusually sensitive to the world around me, every sensation seeming to impact me more heavily than other children my age. No one was able to understand the innate capacity I had for raw emotion, how every significant moment carved itself into my brain effortlessly and with an intensity I had yet to see anyone else experience. I would regularly get so worked up while I was trying to explain myself that I would just give up. I was no stranger to people looking at me like I had three heads, my tiny body brimming with enthusiasm and emotion, desperately wanting to connect with others but not knowing how. The tools for friendship, understanding, and communication felt so far out of reach.

Back in my classroom, I looked down at the little blue slip of paper in front of me. How in the world could I express what I had seen? Capturing the magical feeling I had experienced and sharing it felt like an impossible task. It was then that I thought about what I'd read that weekend. I had found a small book of poetry in my mother's things.

The words were too big for me to fully understand, but something about the natural rhythm of the stanzas, and irregular punctuation caught my attention. It was like reading a song. I decided that I wanted to write something like that. I can't recall exactly what I had written, but I can still vividly remember the feeling I had after writing it. I felt lighter all of a sudden, and I liked that. The swirling cloud of intense emotion in my chest seemed to die down just enough for me to catch my breath.

After lunch, I was called over to the teacher's desk. Ms. Jones sat back in her chair, looking at me with kind eyes and a knowing smile. I stood there shyly, unsure of what she was going to say, but still eager to please.

"So, I wanted to talk about what you wrote this morning!" She was her usual self, chipper and bright, but she seemed to be choosing her words more carefully. She had always spoken in that slow, overly enunciated way that adults like to speak to children, but this was different. There seemed to be more weight behind it.

"Okay!" I said as I waited for her to give me directions.

"It was very beautiful and made me feel like I was there with you! I was wondering if it would be okay if I called your parents and told them about it?"

"Thank you," I responded tentatively. Something about this exchange felt vulnerable and new, but I was too young to understand the nuances of it. I just knew I had attention on me in a way I hadn't before.

"You aren't in any trouble I promise. I think what you wrote was very special and I think your mom and dad would love to know what you did! I think everyone would love it if you wrote like this more."

I gave her the okay to call my parents and made my way back to my seat.

This praise, and the subsequent compliments from my parents after receiving the call from her, sparked something in me. I felt seen for the first time in my life, like overnight I had been granted my wish to have someone truly understand me. While I am just another face

in the hundreds of students Ms. Jones has taught, her direct encouragement fanned the flames of what was to become my lifelong love affair with poetry. Since then it has been my go-to way to cope with difficult emotions, express to my loved ones what they mean to me, and show people how I see the world. If she had been a different teacher, one who was uncaring or even scolded me for being creative, I might have been too discouraged to try writing poetry again. I would have continued to feel stuck, dejected, and like I had no outlet for my thoughts. Her openness and warmth pushed me towards a piece of myself that has always felt like it belonged. This small gesture unlocked something that would go on to be a core part of who I am as a person, beyond school and grades. We are constantly being molded by our experiences and the people around us. I am always grateful that Ms. Jones saw a spark in me, and used her kindness to nurture it into something that I will always carry with me.



ARTISTIC LICENSE

GRAYBILL

BY STEPAN KOPEYKIN

At the age of sixteen, Daniel Cutner was hit in the head by a baseball.

The boy who swung the bat was one of the most promising players on the Montgomery High baseball team and it came as no surprise to anyone that day when he hit the fastball, which was later estimated to be traveling at over 90 miles per hour. What instantly took the attention of the field, however, was the hollow crack that Daniel Cutner's skull made as it broke into several pieces.

It took four weeks for him to learn to speak again and another six weeks for him to be discharged from the hospital. Due to the severity of the brain injury his doctors recommended him to take at least six months off of school.

Apart from being a stellar baseball player Cutner was also a straight-A student with dreams of becoming a defense attorney. Growing up he spent hundreds of hours watching and rewatching Law and Order. By the age of twelve he began to carry around a pocket sized copy of the constitution. He referred to it whenever possible, one time going as far as threatening to sue his school district after his history teacher had demanded that he stand for the pledge of allegiance.

"You are impinging on my constitutional rights as a student of a public institution. You and I both know that the precedents created under Tinker v. Des Moines would make for a very difficult defense on the school's part."

His father worked at a steel mill and his mother was a counselor at a local

city college. Both were humble, quiet people. His mother's position was the first white collar job either side of the family had ever seen. Although his parents had always supported him they also seemed to be skeptical that one of their own children could make it in the world of suits. Owing to this, they were partly relieved when he was set back in his studies.

It was following the accident that Cutner became unusually quiet and irritable, easily startled by loud noises. Once charismatic and outgoing, his default emotions became masked by a lingering paranoia and bouts of what his doctors called "emotional incontinence."

One night, while watching a movie, he laughed uncontrollably at a character being brutally killed on screen. Another time he cried for a half hour after learning that swans can be gay. His family had grown accustomed to the outbursts, usually opting to turn a blind eye whenever one happened.

Sometime around the third month of recovery, Cutner, overtaken by equal parts grief and boredom, decided that he couldn't wait the full six months.

"What are you doing? Come on, sit down, watch the game with me."

"I don't want to watch TV. I want to go back to school."

Patience, his father replied,

"I get it, you don't have much to do. We've been over this. Going back now

will be doing more harm than good. You heard the doctors."

"I feel ready. I can do everything just fine. I'm a little angry but that's because I can't stand being stuck here."

"I don't think you understand how lucky you are. That kind of damage has killed people, Daniel."

"I'm not moving until you let me go back. I'll do the same thing tomorrow."

Staring blankly at Daniel he replied, "That's fine. You can do whatever you want, just don't expect anything to change. You need to recover. Alright?"

For two straight days he stood by his father's side any time that he was home. Whether he was watching TV, eating dinner, or putting on his jacket before leaving for work, Daniel was there. Any non-essential communication was met with silence.

"Aren't you thirsty?" He stared blankly at his father's breakfast.

"Well, let me know. I'll pour you some OJ." He didn't say anything.

"Did you take your medication today?"

"Yes."

On the third day his father sheepishly made his concession.

"Your mother and I had a talk last night. She hates to see you like this. Listen, we decided that you can go back early on the condition that you take half a course load. You can make the rest up over the summer. I'll speak to the principal this week. No baseball. Understood?"

"Thank you," he replied in a flat tone.

Cutner expected himself to be relieved by the victory but by the time the school approved the new schedule he was even more irritated than he had been during his peaceful protest. While catching up on the material he had missed, a new reality began to set in. He couldn't study.

Reading anything was akin to an acid trip. Numbers and letters danced around the page. Sentences took dozens of passes to be absorbed. He resorted to skimming textbooks and looking for video crash courses. Underprepared and discouraged, he went back to school.

When he returned Cutner enjoyed a small celebrity status. During first period, a group of cheerleaders gave him a signed card. Old friends and seemingly distant classmates made a point of inviting him to parties. Even Alex Graybill, the boy who swung the bat, took the time to congratulate him on his recovery.

"Seriously bud, I would never aim at someone. I don't do that. Besides, you're a stud. I couldn't do that to our team."

After the warm reception died down, Cutner resolved to get back to his studies. He started by consulting his team of doctors. They recommended several supplements and reminded him to be grateful. Cognitive difficulties were the best he could hope for, they said.

It was after several weeks of trying to keep up with his schoolwork that, for the first time in his life, he started to ditch class.

During his newfound freetime, he wandered the green hiking trails which surrounded his town. On the rare occasion he noticed other hikers ahead, he scrambled to hide, expecting to be questioned over his truancy. Long lectures from his parents didn't hold a candle to the anxiety of talking to a stranger.

C's and D's in tow, he skidded across the finish line of the semester. When he told his parents that he didn't want to take any summer classes they supported him.

"You could use the rest."

He chose to spend the summer in his bedroom. His mother would make a point of bringing him fresh cut fruit, pressed juices, and even full dinner plates when he couldn't be bothered to get out of bed. Three weeks into break he was prescribed antidepressants. Although he hadn't shown any outward resistance to taking the drug he also didn't have any faith in its efficacy, reasoning that changing how he felt wouldn't change the fact that his dream was dead in the water.

Bedridden, Cutner mourned his future. He rewatched Law and Order start to finish, sighing deeply throughout the episodes. He thought of what could have been. *What if the baseball had made him into a savant instead? Were the cheerleaders hitting on him?*

One night after his parents had gone out for dinner he noticed that the liquor cabinet had been left unlocked. There was plenty to choose from. He began to

drink heavily.

After a few nighttime benders his thoughts grew dark and resentful. He thought about his condescending doctors. He thought about the cheerleaders. He thought about Alex Graybill. Graybill, who was probably going to be enjoying his college athlete scholarship next year. The boy who changed his life was on his final summer break. For the first time, Daniel began to judge him.

One night, a half bottle of Captain Morgan in, he decided to pay Alex a visit.

Resting on a workbench in the garage was a long object wrapped in a tarp. A slightly rusted Ruger 10/22 that his father had gifted him on his thirteenth birthday. He got in his dad's work truck and pulled out of the driveway.

As he drove Cutner imagined the attack. He imagined Graybill's terrified face as he came into view with the rifle. Would the fear be satisfying enough? He imagined the six pound trigger pull. He imagined Graybill's body writhing from the rounds passing through his body. Just like the movies. He started to laugh hysterically. Unable to compose himself, he pulled over. He laughed some more. He didn't even know where Alex Graybill's house was. He made a U-turn and left Graybill in his past.

Daniel Cutner passed away last Monday at age seventy. He was born in Montgomery, West Virginia. Son of Julie and Bill Cutner, Daniel was an only child. He attended Montgomery High School where he was one of the top players on the baseball team. After graduating from high school he attended West Virginia University where he met his wife, Katie. After dropping out of WVU he found his lifelong career and passion as a carpenter. He leaves behind his son and daughter and his wife of over forty years. As his wife and children knew him, Daniel had a heart of gold.



IF YOU ARE, WHO AM I? BY LYRIC ANA MENDEZ

Most of my life has been centered around hopeful notions of what-if? I spend my time consulting with Magic-8-ball apps and tarot decks, hoping they lend me a path, a pursuit, an answer. I've waded through thick waters of reflection, waiting to drown in pits of passion. So, it seems, I've come to cloudy conclusions, and ways to feel when you're nothing. I have tried to be consumed by coherence; perhaps I could identify in my person? Thinking of what answers could be conjured regarding questions of my "background"—mostly well-rehearsed sentences, stating facts: My parents are from New York, first generation, Mom is mixed, Dad is Cuban. I'm mixed. Two older brothers, we are close. My grandfather was a dancer, I was a dancer. My Dad is a construction worker, we don't talk too much, but when I look at him, I feel like crying. I attach myself to the person I believe my parents to be, hard-working individuals from New York. While in St. Petersburg, Florida—where I spent my youth—I never told the truth. Having everyone believe I was from Manhattan was an essential part of the character I played while there.

I look to my brothers when I want to be understood, with expectations of blocky statements- sprinkled with recognition. I braid their hair, and ask them when they stopped using the n-word. We fight with unfounded ambiguity, and quietly wonder who was loved the most. My father, the Cuban, tried to teach my brothers and I his native tongue. It was quickly understood that my mother spoke louder. I wonder who I could be if I spoke Spanish? Maybe then my father and I could talk with continuity. I should mention— he speaks perfect English. I've been assumptive with my mother, assigning her ways to feel. I spent so long lamenting over my everything, my race, my person. At some point, I realized I expected her to do the same. Juvenile expectations such as these had me return to my character, I wanted to be like my mother. She has never claimed whiteness, as much as she has never claimed blackness. She is only mixed, and so proud.

I tugged at the strings of my identity every time I entered a ballet class, pirouettes laced with confusion, begging to be unraveled by my coaches' corrections. I knelt before them, wide eyed—awaiting answers; I dreamt of a reality in which they could enhance every aspect of me. I wanted my ballet teachers to lengthen my legs, stretch my feet, and tell me everything was going to be okay. I pleaded with them to steady my balance, strengthen my core, and protect me from the man that hurt me. At 16, I wanted too much. In the studio, I stared at myself in the floor-length mirrors, wondering who I was. If I was the same as the girl next to me, if she too sought comfort in every glance from the man that stood at the front of the room. Did she forget what to do, when she was not told to do it?

I held on to shy beliefs of what I thought was interesting. Suddenly, I found a syrupy voice, dripping with naivety shoved in my pockets. Soon thereafter, I waited for validation wrapped in empty gestures of lust from most men who looked. I searched for god under their skin, only to be met with sharpened cruelties embedded in their casual crimes. At 19, I accepted so little, minimums scratching below bare. Though, I hold no malice towards this innocence I once wore as if it was my own, as if it was identity. For it was fitted for all of us girls who also believed it to be unique.

Now, I talk to people, holding on to my now expired desire to remain unknown. I paw at connection, attaching small glimpses of Identity to every word, until I notice that I'm hanging on to my own hands. I argue with mystery in every conversation, while I wait to be bombarded by blatancy. I feel upset when I realize: I never listen to my own voice, hardly believing my own words. I try and try to be louder—to say more with less. I'll ease into wobbly syllables, striving for sentences that ache with strength. Now, I want *heard*. I only want

known.







EXCES

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plateaus

By Selma Acar

rampant slews of slothful drawls
stomp on duels of grueling brawls
as keen drooling dogs bark to stall
the ensuing revere of the appalachian sprawl
gnaws its claws to forgo broad walls
blowing a breath into sullen dolls
the essence of convoluted excess

steers further from the purging abscess
carving out a sliver of heaven in divergence for the
haste intervals of springs emergence
as the expected hour leaps forward to undress the
fatal blossom unfurls revolting distress

plateaus part II

By Selma Acar

the torch of march leaps
sulking swallows weeps
dawn of the hour sleeps
break of the crowd seeks
dull vanishing meadows of the east
the horizon subtly peaks
from uniforms seep sheets
volatile frayed gray beams
halt to the march of gifts
tell a tale for the end of days feast

the twang of speech troubles
minds beguiled by clamors
release of the lamentations spoils
the sprouting canvas of flesh stretches
evermore to resemble the wanton beast
in the wake of spontaneity
departing ephemeral grandiosity
an undone sole patch of curiosity
recoils in spite of luminosity

Fork Poem

By Kaya Fader

I run downstairs
and grab my fork
I use a fork when I
eat pork
But tonight I shan't
dine on swine
I'm eating fish –
fish is divine!

Long and slender,
has four prongs
The fork makes me
feel big and strong
And not unlike the
devil's pitch
The fork is power-
ful and rich

But I'm not here for
deep reflection
And upon closer
inspection
Of my stove the
fish is ready
So I hold my big
fork steady

And I guess I could
use a spoon
Or my bare hands,
like a raccoon
But tonight I shall
treat myself
Yes – use a fork.
Here's to my health!

The year's two
thousand twen-
ty-three
You can't write
poems about meat
Without a certain
moral slant
Or an environmen-
tal rant

Long and slender,
has four prongs
The fork makes me
feel big and strong
I harness the uten-
sil's power
Now this fish I shall
devour

Pore

By Emi Gambetta

Forget genes
And eye color
And blood type along
with them
The problem lies in our
smell

If you're scared of doctors
I won't bother you
I'll just examine myself
On your behalf
Look into my eyes,
Ears, nose, and throat

And find syllables
Down that trench
Buried under heaps
In my trashed lungs
I could scavenge them
But I don't wanna be cut
open
either
A stoic's mouth
Is hardly ventilated
It stinks like hell

No one needs two
In one house
And after you were jetti-
soned
I took your place
Like a mold
Like a pothole
I am filling in for you
So wait for me
I may go
The way you will go

New Moon Spread

By Esther Sutton

Ink shatters
Ink drips
Ink splatters and covers the
tome of the past

I pull a card
Or she reached for me
She reached for me and
unfolded her mystery

“Oh Moon!
Oh Mistress of Mystery!”
I hold up the ink soaked tome
“Tell me what I cannot see.”

She reached for me
She touched my cheek
She does not speak

“Oh Moon!
Oh Mistress of Illusion!”
I stare into eyes reflecting my
own
“Give me what I cannot give

myself.”
She opens her mouth
I wish for words
But all there is is

Ink spittles
Ink drips
Ink splatters and covers my
eyes, nose and mouth

“Oh Moon!
Oh Mistress of Unknown!”
I think. I cannot speak.
“The past has consumed me!”

She reaches for my pocket
She pulls out a pen
She swipes my cheek
Ink feeds the fountain

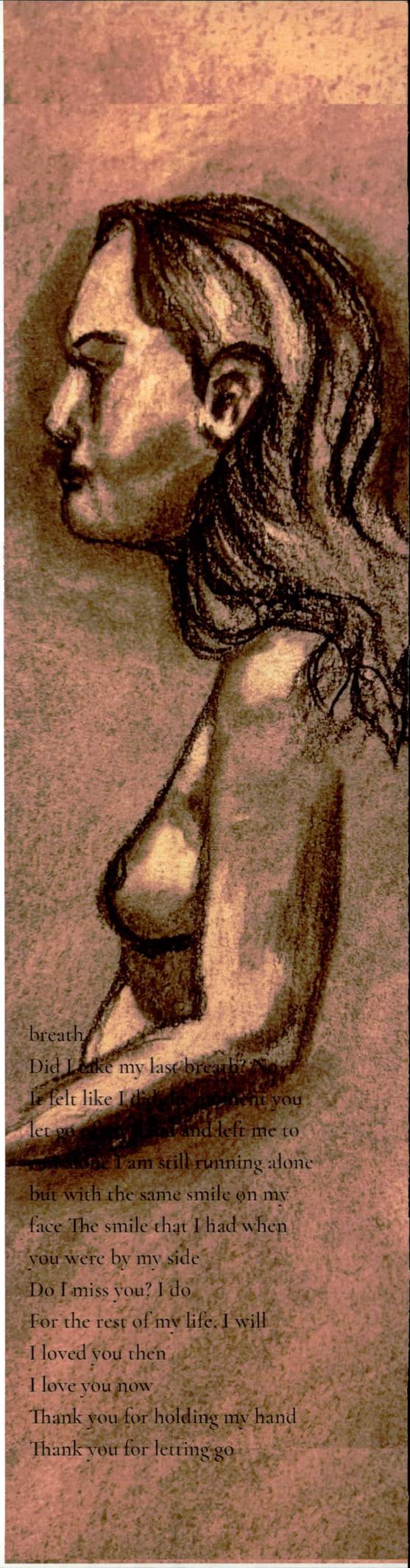
And she writes.

You to Me

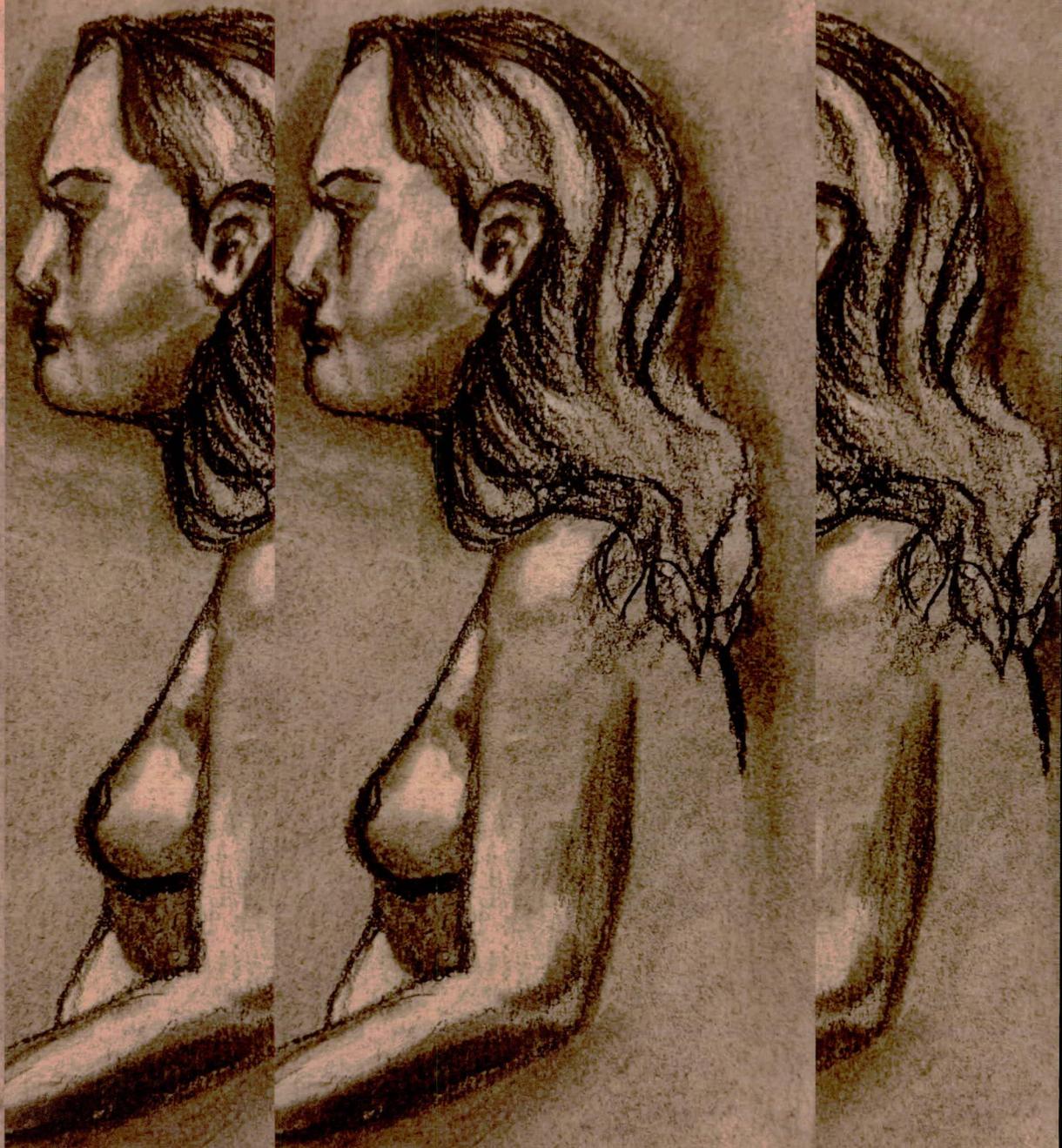
By Lisa Jimenez

Should I regret you?
I asked myself so many times
I love you so much to the point of
no return
I lived, I breathed
From the beginning, I knew you
would be the one to leave You
asked me many times, “what do
you feel for me?”
I always lied to you, but also to
myself
I once said to you that loving you
was like a losing game No matter
how many times I played

I would never win
Do I regret you? No
You taught me how to walk over
broken glass
You taught me how to run
through many storms
All this while holding your hand
Until you were the one to let go
I learned what it felt to care
I learned what it felt to miss
someone
I learned what it felt to love so
strong
To love someone until my left



breath
Did I take my last breath? No
It felt like I did, but when you
let go of my hand and left me to
go home I am still running alone
but with the same smile on my
face The smile that I had when
you were by my side
Do I miss you? I do
For the rest of my life, I will
I loved you then
I love you now
Thank you for holding my hand
Thank you for letting go



DESERT RED

By Dan Hufancia

KOMOROV SPAT ON A RED-RUSTED ROCK. The winds howled past the shadowed mesas as he and Klara stood beneath the setting sun's malevolent glare. The air was corpse-dry—corpse-cold—as his temples grew painful with the blood rushing through his veins. Komorov took the Yenanesse cigar and Levassiere-issue lighter from his breast pocket, enthusing himself with deathly spirits. He flicked the lighter close and a muddled reflection of his aged face returned his gaze, the once-shining iron sea now broken apart by isles of rust. Or perhaps dried blood, though it mattered not whether it was another's or his own. What was important was that it was old, like himself. Twenty-odd years into the Revolution, chasing reluctant allies and dead philosophers.

"Do you ever tire from the habit?"

Kerene-damned woman. "Must you tread like this?"

"And what would 'this' be?"

"Quiet. Hunter-esque. Terribly inhuman."

Klara replied by shoving a thing into Komorov's sweaty hand. It was what they'd found from the ruins of his autoka-reeneer's engine—a blossomed bullet, melted into a coin by its impact. Stadian make. Komorov's blood froze. The sun was on its way to be swallowed by the dimming horizon, and the hairs on his neck prickled with danger.

"I was right."

"When are you never?" His heart skipped a beat—he heard the faintest trill of metal sheathed into place. He turned to Klara, who had closed her eyes. She opened them after five, ten, seconds.

"We must find a safer place, preferably one with hallways."

"I'm loath to inform my dearest comrade that we find ourselves in the desert."

"I jest. Filler conversation saves me from the boredom of charting your survival."

"Are all your quips the length of your manifesto?"

"Is a girl allowed to think?"

"Is a god allowed to shit?"

"I must have missed your thorns for a long while, as I've forgotten your insolence." A gentle smile as she turned to face him, one not used since they'd been fifteen.

"But I fear I'm no god, dear brother," Klara murmured with a strange stillness.

Her eyes were blind with the thick cataract of paleblood. Her use had worsened when she midwived the Revolution into being, leading them to one victory after another, just as Andralea the Virtuous had in the Age of Descension.

"Have you birdshots on your person?"

"As you've instructed." He took two from his vest and loaded both into his shotgun.

"Good man. Face the mesa and shoot my nine o' clock at forty-five degrees below eye level. Follow through with another shot to twelve at eye level."

Monsters. Komorov leveled his gun towards her instructions and fired away. The twin roars were followed by the whining of the bullets as they righted their courses.

"Good enough?"

"It will occupy the beast. We're to walk north, past the oasis."

Which one to be afraid of?

The journey continued on foot. The night's cold settled into place as they snaked along a river run aground. Klara directed him to fire two more shots at innocent rock walls before they proceeded into a barely-oasis surrounded by dying trees and recycler sprouts. Komorov took out his waterskin and prepared to bend his aching knees and back for some middling water, but Klara raised a hand.

"Five more seconds."

Komorov stood in place. Five... four... three... two... one... He made a half-step forward before being stopped by a whining bullet digging itself into the ground to his right. At an arm's length, it'd been meant for his skull.

"Are you daft?!" Klara yelled. Her voice was pitched with a

dangerous amount of incredulity.

"A soldier follows his superiors."

"You—" She massaged her face with both hands to release some stress.

"Five! Seconds! Which includes zero!"

Komorov felt the relief of unburdened shoulders for a good two (or three? Now he was unsure) seconds, but was soundly returned to reality by Klara reminding him of his duties as the general of the Yuran front, and how it was in poor taste to die in the middle of the Alessandran desert. He agreed; he desired none of this—he would rather the cold of Volkovo than attempting rapport with the slaver bastards. "I'm no Inquisitor, I fear."

"Am I to blame for your truancy?"

"Klara, I've yet to be senile. I remember your and Vanya's company during my avoiding instruction."

"I was allowed to do so. A school's brightest star should not be caged."

"And yet we both are here. In Kerene-damned Stad."

Komorov basked in his victory as Klara tried her hardest to resist returning a barb. She thought of a path, beckoned him along, and returned to the trek for another hour. She gave him the blessing of more instructions. Komorov hadn't the faintest clue as to what the destination was; his head was filled with the increasingly less savory thoughts. Outcomes. His only solace was his familiarity with the Inquisitor Regiment. He was unsure of how the Alessandran cult had degenerated Inquisitors into bloodthirsty Stadshunds, but the times he'd seen his comrades fall fully into a paleblood-fueled war trance were burned into his memory. They occupied him as the trek took him on a path up a hill. It seemed to him the Alessandrans waited until a sizable amount of their population owned autokareeneers until they built actual roads. His anxiety simmered down into revulsion—what was it good for, allying with the Alessandran counter-insurgency front? He'd debated with Klara on this matter, how one should strike while the hydra ate its own heads, but she insisted.

Komorov paused his steps.

A figure stood still as the night air receded into permeating quiet. In its place was the lanky shadow of death, blood-soaked poncho ripped with the crisscrossing of pellets Komorov fired earlier under Klara's direction. The figure held with their wounded right hand an oversized zweihander pockmarked with dents and scorch marks, while in their left was a worn revolver. The zweihander glimmered under the light of the red moon, and the tension applied an immense pressure on all of Komorov's follicles.

"Now!"

Klara's voice cut through the jellied air. Komorov shot the rock face behind him twice and threw the shotgun up into the air. A pellet on its return trip struck the gun and whined into the correct trajectory, towards the Stadshund. Two bullets, their paths glinting in the dark of night like spider silk, intercepted the stray pellet. Komorov caught the gun just as the beast lunged forward, weaving in between the deluge of pellets raining from everywhere all at once. Komorov reloaded his shotgun as he dodged the zweihander cleaving into two the space he'd been moments ago. Komorov shot in two directions, one a slug and the other a birdshot. The Stadshund closed in and blocked another barrage of both bullets and pellets with a twirl of his zweihander. The maneuver allowed the crazed beast to shift into a better grip and bring the blade down on Komorov, who dodged just as the zweihander clashed with sand and rock. He heard Klara bark a command and he kicked up a storm of sand, obscuring the air with a heavy cloud of orange-crimson.

"You communist fuck!" The Stadshund roared as he swung his blade blindly.

Komorov raised his shotgun and waited for her signal. He saw Klara's eyelids twitch from the deluge of possibility, and at that very moment a strange heaviness overcame first his elbow, then wrists, climbing past his knuckles and then pooling at his fingertips. Klara stood between him and the Stadshund, facing towards him. His body was locked in the moment, unable to move, until he saw Klara's mouth move. A gentle whisper, detached from his sister's soundless lips,

reached his ear. The shot rang out before he could feel his finger curling around the trigger. A monstrous, hollow roar emitted from the Stadshund's mask, sending shivers up Komorov's spine as it reverberated through the dense air. The familiar numbness of the recoil finally registered after a few seconds of silence.

"Fucking... swarthy... mongreloid..." The Stadshund gurgled in between ecstatic chuckling. It was too dark to make out where the pellets landed.

"Again," Klara commanded.

Komorov aimed down the barrel, pointing it directly at the Stadshund's head, and fired. There was no strange hesitation this time, only the bang, the wet, sticky thunk as the monster's head whipped back from the gunshot, and the body fell to the ground with a muffled thump. Dark blood flowed from the corpse, swallowed by thirsty sand.

A whine.

Pain blossomed in Komorov's right shoulder and left ear. It was faint, thanks to the recent adrenaline, but it slowly gained ground as more nerves sent back to his brain more cries for help or abatement. He took his box of Yenanese Pale—Klara's first love. He lit one and took his hundredth drag for today.

"Is this forever?"

"The Pales? Of course not. You'll need to seek Isak, the city square's nicotine salesman of the Fourth District of Czernoskaya. He stays by the St. Isidore Cathedral, peddles to siblings."

"Avoidant."

"Do take them sparingly. You're but immortal."

"Thank Kerene. Else I'd go dog-mad from your eternal quipping."

"You've a lighter sentence than most. Not all people manifest their loved ones. Some go into a seizure from the deluge of sensory arrhythmia."

"I'd much rather not be haunted by my family."

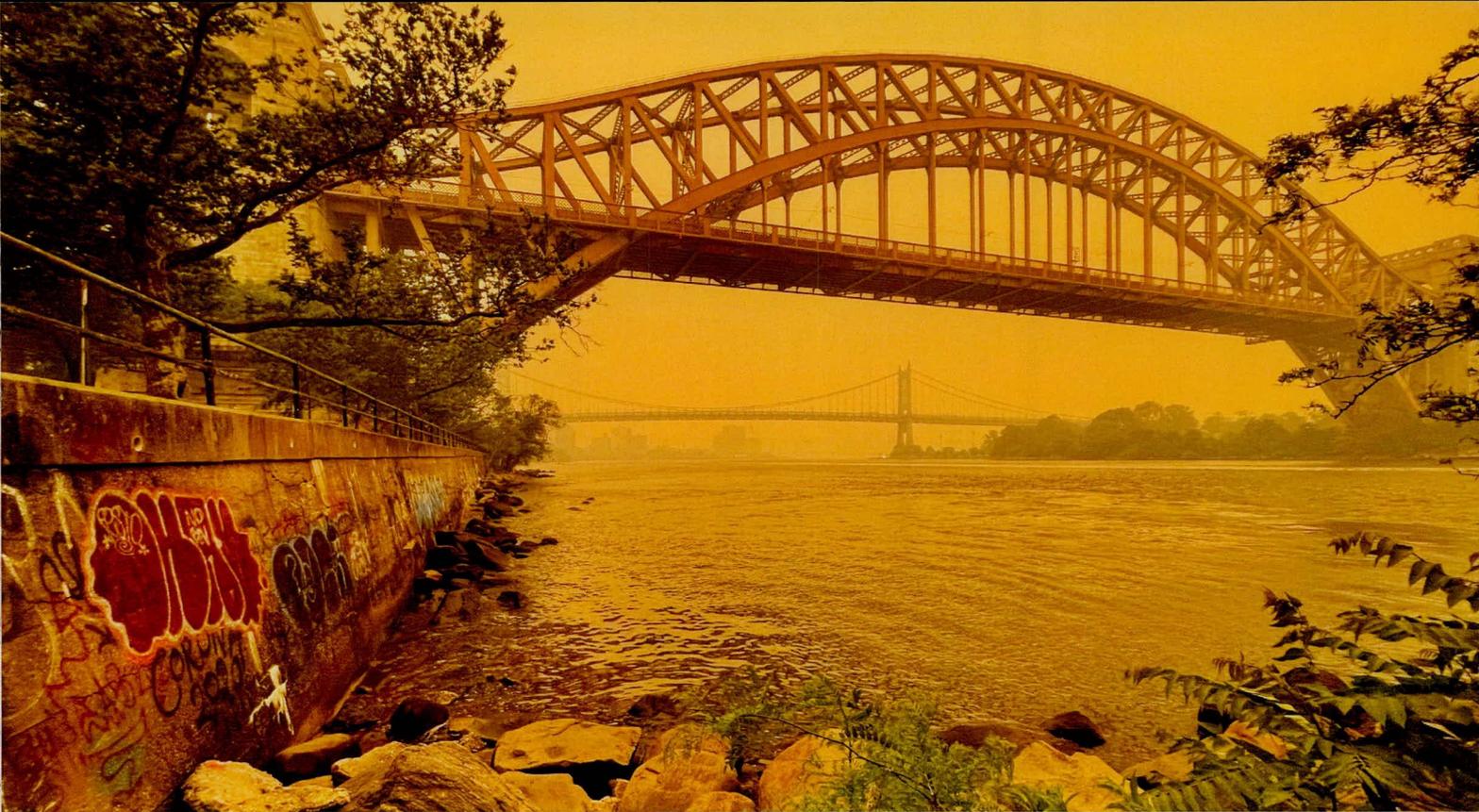
"It's not a haunting."

"Technicalities."

"Get to work, General."

Komorov shot the corpse in the head, just to be safe, and marveled at his new clothes.





in the silence of waiting

By Ndeye Sylla

when all that can
be seen ahead is the
fevered face of fate,
reflecting a body still
like a feather,
twisting and trembling
with trepidation,
you think this
moment, surely, will
bring your foot down,
softly, to refuse idleness,
for time has shown
you, abundantly,
how desire alone can-

not grind the stone of
desperation suspended
in one dying forest into
great golden plumes.
you only watch yourself
kneeling there,
hands gripping the soil,
while a pinprick of
flickering light above
speaks to its sister element
imbued in your
soul.
an eye-ful of splattered
blue grey sky,
at once pleading

and effortlessly dreading
the sight, the sound,
the heat.
Listen, instead, to the
whistle of the wind
through the barren
trees.
kindly bear witness to
their magnificent duality,
and know what it
means to be like a seed
waiting for spring.
when life sweetly

slackens its jaw,
feel for that endless
second, the way every
pin drops simultaneously,
yet you hear each and
every one, like you'd
feel it if they were
jabbed into skin.
all becomes clear in
body and mind, and
you become what
you've been waiting
your entire life to be

'Tucked in and Buried'

By Caitlyn Vieths

Dead
Gone.
Dead and gone.
Tucked in and buried.
Truly who am I to you?
I was a small child burrowed in
pillows and sheets
I am now a corpse grinding
against stones and cobbled into
dirt.
Yet here you are still
Standing over me
Tell me
Which would you prefer
My quaking form under blankets
Or my skull under a headstone?
Toe tagged
Or pacified?
Standing over me
Standing overme
Standingoverme—
Why
Can I never escape your lengthy
chasing shadow

Can I never hide from your gath-
ering gaze
I wish to graze in pastures long
barren and passed
As you, a wolf, wear wool as if you
spun it yourself.
Let my innocence lie
Before you reap it in full—
Before you put me in dirt
From the grime you have smeared
me in.
Tucked in,
I was safe against all fictional
creatures of the night
And yet you were all too real.
And I am far too young to bear
a weighty price that I was never
meant to pay.
The cost— is six feet under.
Haunting?
Yes. Haunting.
I hope so,
See me where you lay
See me as you play your game

See me every night.
Tuck me in behind those eyelids
Full of sins and greedy desires
Bury me in your needy pleasures
and shadows passed.
I will revel in disgust as it was not
I behind bars
And it is still not I who remains
with the earth
And the worms and the dirt.
I dug my way up.
I am no longer afraid of the dark.
No need to be tucked in.
No need to be buried.
Who am I?
But a nightmare.
A nightmare truly.
I hope so—
I hope you never escape the truths
of the night.
I hope they never lose track of
your sins in hell—
No matter how lengthy they are.

Bells and Whistles

By Max Nadeau

light comes from the sky
where birds swoop dive and fly
all above the heads of bankers and bums
and elementary school kids
catching that faint
stench of rum
that came from
broken bottles crunching underneath
bus tires
like roadkill abandoned
by a fat vulture
weighed down by years of
eating what others wouldn't
but he still got fat
yet still alight
on hollow bones
and hallowed tones

how does sunlight
reach the sodden paths
and stream beds, pouring over
after a snowy winter
does it claw through dense fog
and tear the clouds asunder
a nazarene spectacle
of light

neon fluorescent tones
gilding the earth
in her own glory

maybe instead
It falls gently like
a soft may rain
tiny flecks of royal glimmer
ordaining the ground
upon which they land

if the facts are to be believed

in their inhospitable, numeric orderliness
it leaps across the cosmos from
an engine of irreverent fusion
inexplicable and incomprehensible
the size of a pinprick on a thumb

the atmosphere
of a bonded two
built up on symphonies
of green hues
and red octagons
and the blues

night air
wind cutting
hair and the
fumbling frenzy
never ever stops

until there's a
still moment
dragging on just too long

something evolved
something borrowed, maybe
some moment of coincidence
shifting ambience

all the conversations cease
at once
a universe sized
atonal
breath of silence
maybe borrowed
from songbirds
maybe evolved
from predecessors our own

For Legacy's Sake

By Natasha Wiles

Characters: Tyla, 17 years old. Black. Student of East High. Only child.

Jaden, 18 years old. Black. Student of East High. Has been living with Tyla and her family for the past two years due to his parents passing. He was adopted into the family. Both families were close.

Setting: Jaden's bedroom. Friday 6:35 PM Spring 2021

The lights go up on Tyla as she enters Jaden's room. Jaden is sitting at his desk with airpods in and browsing on his computer.

TYLA: Hey dork! Can I use your bathroom?

Jaden spins his chair around looking confused to face Tyla.

JADEN: Uhh.. What!?

Jaden removes his airpods from his ears. Tyla sighs in annoyance.

TYLA: I said, can I use your bathroom?

Tyla points towards the bathroom.

JADEN: Oh, don't you have your own bathroom? Use yours.

TYLA: I would if I could and what do you care anyways? It's not like you be showering anyways (laughs)

JADEN: What?

TYLA: Nothing. Whatever.

Tyla tries to make her way to the bathroom but Jaden jumps up from his seat and grabs her arm.

JADEN: Yo yo yo where are you going?

TYLA: What is your problem? I need to shower to get going. I have places to be.

JADEN: Yo you can't use my bathroom. First of all, it's dirty, second I don't want you sniffing around my shit. Besides, what's so wrong with your bathroom anyways?

TYLA: One, you're lying. Two I don't care for your shit and 3 well, uhhh... well nothing I just need to use yours.

JADEN: For someone who doesn't care about my shit, sure as hell is interested in using my shit though.

Jaden grins.

TYLA: Pshh please if it wasn't for one thing I wouldn't be here asking to use your filthy bathroom.

JADEN: Oh so it's filthy now? Keep going and you'll be standing there all night. **TYLA:** What? Ugggh I'm gonna tell my mom if you don't let me use the bathroom.

JADEN: Oh yeah? Well, go ahead. Be my guess and we'll see which bathroom you will be using tonight

haha. Sure as hell won't be mine. Why do you think we have separate bathrooms in the first place?

TYLA: Oh that's because everyone knows you had a little crush on me back then.

JADEN: Who? Not me! Nobody likes your cranky ass. (blushing)

TYLA: Aww someone still has a liddle widdle crush haha.

JADEN: Alright that's enough. Get out of my room, you stink.

Jaden proceeds to shove Tyla towards the door.

TYLA: hahaha I need to shower Jaden!

Jaden stops shoving Tyla and they both stand and face each other.

JADEN: Why wont you use your bathroom Tyla? Why do you insist on using mine? What's so special about mine?

TYLA: Uhh your shower has more space? The... umm... water is warmer?

JADEN: Wrong and wrong. Now get out.

TYLA: Alright wait wait... 20 bucks for a shower?

JADEN: Triple that

TYLA: Hell no! Your musty shower aint worth all that.

JADEN: Fine then be on your way.

Jaden walks back to his desk to sit.

TYLA: Alright alright \$30?

JADEN: 59

TYLA: NO

JADEN: 55

TYLA: Ughh I'd rather go hose myself down round back.

JADEN: Okay

TYLA: You're such an ass. I wonder how your crush Bianca would react to hearing that you still sleep with a nightlight. hmm...

JADEN: NO! you wouldn't dare Tyla. You know why

I do.

TYLA: Try me! Because you're still scared of the dark (laughs out loud)

JADEN: No... It's because I still have nightmares about the night of my parents' crash.

Jaden spins his chair around to face his computer.

He sighs and picks up a framed photo of his parents on his desk. He gently runs his fingers down the side of the frame. Tyla walks to Jaden's bed and sits facing his back.

JADEN: I remember that night like it was yesterday. He was even on the verge of becoming the new vice president of Stock and Securities Limited (SSL). He wanted to be big. He wanted to leave a legacy. Well, so much for that now.

TYLA: I'm sorry.

Jaden spins around in his chair to face Tyla.

JADEN: As for my dreams, I can see that truck crashing into them at the stoplight. Sometimes I can hear my mom calling me and I can hear my dad crying. Sometimes, they are very vivid. I see my mom's head smashed through the windshield and my dad's blood riddled upper body hanging out of the car and his lower body stuck under the steering wheel from the truck crashing into his side of the car. It's pretty intense, though I never saw the actual scene.

TYLA: Oh Jaden I didn't know. I'm so sorry.

JADEN: Yeah, the nightlight is like a little antidote. I think it redirects those awful dreams through the window or something. I don't really dream when it's on. Well, at least I think I don't. I can't remember.

TYLA: Well, thank God for the light (laughs awkwardly)

Tyla gets up from the bed and hugs Jaden.

TYLA: (whispers) Don't worry, I was just bluffing about the whole Bianca thing.

JADEN: What? Get off me!

Jaden shoves Tyla off of him and they both laugh.

Tyla walks back to sit on Jaden's bed.

TYLA: Geez, I can still change my mind, you know?

JADEN: Whatever. Now, are you going to tell me why you won't use your own shower?

TYLA: Okay fine! (whispers) I feel like someone has been watching me through my window. It's a really frightening feeling and I don't want to be right.

JADEN: What? That's crazy. It's probably just the trees moving outside your window. TYLA: I think I've seen someone's shadow.

JADEN: No way. Come on Tyla, don't you think you're being a little paranoid?

TYLA: No, I'm not. I'm telling you that someone is out there whenever I shower in the evenings. When I shower in the afternoons, I don't have this feeling when Mom and I are here alone. But, I do in the evenings, when dad is home from work and you from basketball practice and everyone is home. It's so weird.

JADEN: A coincidence maybe?

TYLA: Or just weird.

JADEN: Coincidence, weird, whatever. I don't think anyone is spying on you. (subtly laughs) I mean come on. Spying on you? (laughs hysterically) please.

TYLA: What?

JADEN: Nothing, I'm still not letting you use my shower. Close my door on your way out.

TYLA: Come on Jaden, please. I'm scared.

JADEN: Me too. Your face scares me so do me a favour and leave so I don't have to see it anymore.

TYLA: Oh yeah? Well it's not my fault your growth spurt neglected you. Tiny ass dude. JADEN: Fedrika Krueger (laughs) get it? Freddy- ika Krueger.

TYLA: Yoda

JADEN: Predator

TYLA: Gnome

JADEN: Pazuzu

TYLA: Smurf (laughs)

JADEN: IT

TYLA: Alright that's it. I'm trashing your room.

Tyla grabs Jaden's shirt from his bed and throws it across the room. She opens his chest of draws and throws out some of his clothes.

JADEN: Hey what are you doing? Stop!

TYLA: Not until you let me use your shower.

JADEN: NO

Jaden walks over to Tyla and grabs her hands. He shakes her. They begin to wrestle, knocking over everything on his dresser.

JADEN: (Gasps) oh no no.

Jaden picks up Tyla and throws her over his shoulder.

TYLA: Put me down dork!

Jaden then throws Tyla down on the chair around his desk.

JADEN: Stay!

TYLA: Whatever.

Tyla spins around in the chair facing the computer. She scrolls through the contents on the screen.

TYLA: What were you working on anyways?

JADEN: NO! Don't touch that!

Jaden rushes over to Tyla and tries to stop her.

TYLA: (gasps) Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! Jaden!!

JADEN: I can explain

TYLA: Jaden!

JADEN: Let me explain.

TYLA: Jaden.... Is... that... me? Oh my gosh! Answer me!

JADEN: Yuu..uhh..es.

Tyla stares at the computer screen appalled by the naked photos of herself in her shower. She spins around in the chair, jumps up and charges at Jaden.

TYLA: You bastard! You liar! You perv! It was you all along! How could you? Why? Tyla slaps and kicks

Jaden.

JADEN: Tyla I can explain. Please. Let me explain. You have to understand I never wanted to. You just have to understand.

Tyla breaks down crying. Jaden hugs her.

TYLA: Don't touch me!

JADEN: Listen to me.

TYLA: What? What? What could have possibly possessed you to do such an abominable act!? You must be mental. You've got to be mental! You tried to make me think I was crazy!

Tyla paces back and forth.

JADEN: It wasn't all me.

TYLA: What do you mean it wasn't all you? Huh?

JADEN: Just let me tell you the whole story okay.

Tyla stops pacing and faces Jaden.

TYLA: Okay speak!

JADEN: Okay so a week ago Blake approached me saying he had something for me.

TYLA: Blake?

JADEN: Yeah, captain of the basketball team Blake. You know his dad is a prosecutor right? Well, he said that his dad had an open case on my dad for the past four years. He said that my dad was suspected of committing fraud and embezzlement at his firm. He said he made copies of the files and he was going to release them if I didn't do as he says.

TYLA: Wait, what?

JADEN: Yeah. He said if I didn't take naked photos of you for him, he would leak the files. He would have ruined my dad's legacy. He would have ruined his reputation even though he is dead. Shit, he would have ruined my name! I couldn't allow that, Tyla. I couldn't let him tarnish the last good memories everyone and myself had of my dad. I just couldn't.

TYLA: So you would rather ruin my reputation over a man who is dead! Are you listening to yourself right now? Are you fucking crazy? If he is capable of

leaking those files as you say, he is capable of leaking those photos too. What have you done!?

Tyla breaks down again. She screams.

JADEN: I'm so sorry Tyla. I'm truly sorry. I didn't mean to. I didn't have a choice.

TYLA: What do you mean you didn't have a choice? You always have a choice! You chose to destroy me after all my family has done for you! You ungrateful bastard!

JADEN: Please Tyla try to understand where I'm coming from.

TYLA: Understand? Understand what? You better start praying. They're going to love your tiny ass in an orange jumpsuit.

JADEN: What please.. Dont... I didnt mean to..

TYLA: Shut up! I'm telling my parents right now. Tyla storms out of the room. Jaden runs closely behind her.

I Dream of a Red Woman.

By Caitlyn Vieths

I dream of a skinless woman who stands still outside my window. As chaos rains down inside I frantically fight the forces working against me, attempting to save some semblance of my dream-safe family.

Here I am in this nightmare, in a familiar place slightly changed. Here I am in this nightmare, screaming out 'our fathers' only to reveal the demons within my own family.

People who were once innocent now have black eyes, bludgeoning person upon person. Our hands were forced as we aim, and fire.

That was a family member. Now dead.

they all die in the end.
as the skinless woman watches on.
she has not harmed me yet.
Nor has she moved.
so I stare unsure.
then reach for more.

My mother couldn't take the shooting of my brother. My father is only holding what's left of his half-there sanity to control my mother. I'm not sure if they are demons too, I don't know that I care. I found my grandmother without a head, devoured by her friend. Another dead. Boom. click, click. Sshshhkkkkk. Thunk, click. The rifle reloads itself now.

I don't know if I am a demon now, how could I so easily survive when the others haven't, what will become of me when the house settles and I am alone to hold what I have done to survive.

Alone I hold the rifle.

How was it so easy?

How do I know they were truly gone?
It was to save the lives of others but the numbers are dwindling and I am lasting too long to justify.

I escape the screams crawling out of the walls, in a frenzy I club my way through the hallway, it all sounds too much and too deep and too long, and yet I'm still in my mind. Separate from what afflictions I have seen, I am too present and still too far away.

The world melts, and I watch on.

My legs, like lead, walk calmly. my shoulders straight with animosity. I stare unafraid into the image I had been avoiding.

The red woman standing in the window.
Faintly I hear my mother's screams fade like a dimmer switch had sunk down.

The red woman.

My eyes pull her skinless frame squeezing out anything.

To ooze an apology or an explanation—

My eyes labored with no results—

BANG, BANG, BANG,
BANGBANGBANGBANGBANG.

"YOU WHY ARE YOU HERE WHY
ARE YOU HERE WHY—
WHAT DO YOU WANT— TELL ME,
TELL ME WHAT YOU WANT AND
LEAVE."

I relentlessly bang on the window—
screaming things that do not matter to
the skinless woman.

My heavy breathing steams the glass. Dry
sobs wrack my frame and interrupt my
echoing heart. I choke back tears before a
sudden calm hits me.

I am not afraid, there is something I must
ask, one thing I must know.

"Who are you?" it was barely a whisper.

I already know.

Tap... tap.....tap.

Her tapping finger leaves red blotches,
and in the reflection—

I see myself.

as I slide open the window
I know what has resurrected itself behind
me.

black eyes unhidden,
my dream perfect family stares on.
as the skinless woman pulls me Gently
out and slides the window shut.

perfectly parallel
face to face

the likeness is unreal
and we walk on

our eyes forever forward
hand in hand

I touch the handle and become sud-
denly aware. In my dream state, I know
exactly what has come alive behind me.
Everything that had locked eyes with the
barrel of my gun was staring at me, and

more. My mother and Father, everyone left shared the same beady black eyes. Wide and dangerous, ready to devour. They wait for me to turn around and cry and scream and kick and thrash about as they strangle me and suck the life from me like marrow in cooked bone.

I would be lying if I told you I wasn't terrified and hurt, who am I without the ones I love, what is the point if everything I've ever had turns to betray me, what if they had always been waiting for their chance to snuff me out? Is that why, mother? Father? Is my sordid childhood because you are black-eyed and waiting?

These questions came later and lighter on my mind, because I tossed them away as I slid open the window.

My hand was held, not forced. I was free to go where I pleased, but I waited one moment to peer into the company that had chaperoned me.

My perspective panned out, and there I saw a reflection of myself drenched in red, thick like blood as if she had been through war. I held her soaked hand in mine and in a perfect sync we steadily walked, uniform in step.

I remember;
Red is my favorite color.



The Cerulean Man

By Caitlyn Vieths

I see the cerulean man

In all I am.

In all I do.

I wake to a cerulean
man

Kind and cured with
saturated color

I give and give

With all I am.

He tells me:

His hands are only
cold

Because I haven't
given enough warmth.

He takes all my color
until I am only grey.

He is perfect on paper
And yet this ink
bleeds through

"Sometimes (I think) I
see the real you"

Cold.

Stone cold, like barren
winters.

Frozen lakes
With an ice-cold for-
tress

Keeping me under.

Away.

Keeping me covered—
Chained.

There's a sickness here.

That the cerulean man
coughs up

It's red— his favorite
color.

I am the pill he takes
To satiate the urge.

The solution.

The purge.

It is never enough.

He is my maker

As I am his.

I am his wrath

His karma instilled.

Call my name.

The one you gave me

The one I claim in
spite of it all

I am selfish still.

I am the pill he takes

And yet I am the one
swallowing him whole.

This flesh is cold

And hard to chew

I spit you up.

As I refuse.

You are what you eat.

And I scorn blue.

"No matter the

authority your icy
hands wield—

Night will not wait for
you nor your tyranny"

I turned him into
shattered ice

I melted him with my
spite.

One who used to be
known for his ice-cold
astuteness

A broken fortress

Unable to withstand
the woman he created.

I thought I was
chrome like him.

But rather than blue

flame and ice

I am bloody red

Like rubies

Like his insolent heart.

And the shattering of
drums.

I am his favorite color,
Red.

Mind Over Heart

By Alyssa Jolie

I'd never have believed you if you'd told me I'd ever be on my knees, scavenging for the parts of my heart to put back together. But I was. And even after searching for what felt like forever, I've never been able to find all the parts to make it complete again.

We laid beneath the stars in Central park when you asked me for my heart.

I sat up in concern, not sure if you were being serious. You were. I told you since the day I met you, I knew you'd be the one to keep my heart safe. I remembered offering my heart to you a couple minutes prior, caught up in the beauty of your eyes as they twinkled like the stars above us.

Your lips moved unaligned with the time and your words brushed my ears like feathers. You were talking about how the stars were forming what looked to be an emerald. Which confused me a bit because each emerald I've seen was shaped differently. That imagination of yours just made me fall in love with you more.

So I uttered, I'd give you my heart. You shifted your head to the right and looked at me with those calming eyes. Silence lingered for a couple minutes until you sat up and asked me for my heart. That night, I took my full heart out of my chest and put it in the palms of your hands. You kept it with you ever since.

It was a Saturday night when you broke it. It'd been nine months since I gave you my heart for safe keeping. At this point, we were practically living

together as you spent months giving my heart a new home. I was in the kitchen prepping our plates for the steak I made for us for dinner. You were seated at the couch with your reading glasses on, finishing up the final chapter of *Twilight*, the book I forced you to read two weeks ago in preparation to watch the first movie together. You were wearing your gray wool sweater and dark washed denim. Your hair was in its messy mullet, per usual. You'd glance at me every now and then and tell me how adorable I looked setting up. I was wearing my white t-shirt tucked into my bell bottom jeans. You loved these jeans so I figured I'd wear them just for you.

I finished prepping the plates with food and setting them on the small dining table near the kitchen. I took a seat and motioned for you to come sit. You grabbed the wine from the bar and headed towards the table. You sat across from me, filling the wine glasses I had next to our plates. The record player was spinning *High and Dry* by Radiohead in the background.

We were eating dinner in silence for a couple minutes, when your phone lit up and it shook the table beneath it. I glanced at the screen and saw a message notification. You quickly flipped your phone face down and cleared your throat before taking a large sip of your glass of red wine. Your glass was looking low so I reached across the table for the bottle of Pinot Noir, reaching for your glass to fill.

My gut told me something was

wrong. Usually, I would never question your faithfulness but tonight was different. Your awkward expression, the unwanted silence from earlier and the fact that you refused to spend the night last night started to consume my mind with doubt. I lifted your glass with the same hand the bottle of wine was in. It layed between my pinky, light and empty. My free hand felt left out so I quickly snatched your phone with it. Your slow reaction gave me enough time to read the message on your lockscreen. I don't think I would've done something so sudden if I didn't have the liquid courage.

"Jade," the top of the green notification read.

Wish you were here, I really enjoyed last night, Jade sent.

I felt my hands begin to sweat and my throat dry up. I took a deep breath and swallowed what felt like a dozen razorblades.

You pushed the table, sliding your chair back and lifting your body. You quickly snatched the phone from my hand across the table, tipping over the bottle of wine in my direction. The wine stained my white shirt red and landed beneath the table on the white carpet. I stood up and studied the room to what looked like a murder scene.

"What's wrong with you?" you yelled at me.

I stood there in silence as the realization of my missing heart began to settle in. I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. I gasped for air but

it felt like the space was enclosing me. I felt my empty chest in disbelief. I grazed my fingers against my shirt and lifted them to the sight of my red finger tips.

You screamed and yelled at me from across the room, with my heart in one hand and your phone in the other. I stood there with my dead expression and watched as you slowly crushed my heart against your palms after every insult released from your mouth. Your dark pupils filled your eyes and sent me into a black hole. Your sharp words scraped my ears like knives. The needle on the turntable reached the end of the record. So the background was filled with fuzzy and distorted noise. I tried to recollect my thoughts in time but realized my heart was crumbling faster than I thought. There was only so much you said until it finally shattered into pieces. You walked towards the front door, with pieces of my heart falling against the floor from your palm. They made a path to the door as you left, slammed the door behind you, and never came back.

I stood up for what felt like ages, searching for all the pieces of my broken heart. With the pieces I did find, I couldn't get myself to shape it back together. It hurt too much to try as the pieces of my heart were too sharp to hold for too long. I was bedridden for some time, feeling a loss of will to finish the maze that was the path to healing my heart. My sheets felt like bandages; they'd hide my wounds in the morning but once night hit, I'd rip them off to feel the pain all over again. This mas-

ochistic mindset was the only comfort I had. Some nights, the wounds seemed to be healing. Other nights, I'd pick at the scabs and make my skin start again. But my pillows were the real reason I loved my bed so much. They were sponges that caught my tears and swallowed them. It allowed me to let out as many cries as I possibly could. This lasted for months. The repetition of my actions eventually led to tougher skin. Exposing my wounds, allowing them to heal on my terms.

I eventually got myself out of the house when summer forced itself through my bedroom window curtains. At times it felt like I was dragging my body with me. But eventually some of that weight lifted. Going outside felt refreshing and every time I did, it felt like a reward. I started finding pieces of my heart in places we'd never been. In my favorite book store, at jazz clubs, in late car rides with my friends, even at the park where we went stargazing. But not beneath the stars, beneath the sun. The park had become unfamiliar to me. It wasn't the same place we'd go to. It was a new place where I had created better memories. It was my comfort place. Now, every new piece of my heart I found became easier to hold. It was easier to touch and easier to put back together.

A year passed since the incident. My heart was almost complete. It needed the middle piece to form back into the precious heart it once was. For now, there was a scar there, where the piece had been. Despite that, I thought it was

still beautiful.

One Saturday night, you came back. It was almost midnight and you were standing at the other side of my front door. I was seated at the dining table, sipping my glass of red wine, reading the new romance novel I'd bought on my way home that day, when I heard your knocking. I placed my glass down, waiting in caution for a minute, thinking who could possibly be at my door at this time of night. The knocking became louder and more persistent. The sound startled me so my body flinched, forcing my elbow to hit my wine glass, almost tipping it over the edge of the table. My reflexes allowed my other hand to catch the glass before the making of another murder scene. I lifted my body, slowly making my way to the door.

I peeked through the peephole and saw you on the other side, standing there with an expression of regret on your handsome face. I opened the door, looking at you as if I'd just seen a ghost. You were wearing sweatpants and a black hoodie. Your facial hair was overgrown and it looked like you hadn't showered in a couple days. But you were still beautiful. You smiled at me and placed your hands out. You opened your palms together and there rested the piece of my heart I'd been seeking. My heart was drawn to you after I yearned for your return since the day you stormed out this same door. It began beating heavily in an attempt to make its way out of my chest and in the palms of your hands again. This was probably the big-

gest temptation I'd had to face. What was laid out in front of me was all I needed to make my heart whole again.

But it wasn't enough to change my mind about you. What I wished to see in your palms, was your heart. I wished to see your feelings, left on the floor for me as you left my remains. But even once the war you started with my heart was over, you couldn't release your heart to me. I didn't

want that piece of my heart if it meant you were the reason it was complete.

At that moment, I looked back on the life I was able to live with the heart I have now and quickly realized I didn't need that piece of my heart back. So, I turned you away and gracefully closed the door behind you. Leaving you with that final, wounded piece of my once-heart.

Ouroboros

By Ndeye Sylla

the serpent that eats itself hungers miserably.

a hundred years after it is dead,
it's flesh of the world remains pristine,
unchanged.

Down on the surface, small and faithful
servants
of the earth lean against its scaly frame,
wondering,

then completely knowing
that whatever strange life rests in its
bones could not feed even the smallest
living thing.

That, love, is the burden that will only
dissolve with the universe.

It's gaping maw is a burial site for the
bodies whose kin

is pain—immortalized in that unreachable,
painless place.

You've chosen to go, so let me tell you
this before you are gone:

I promise to remember your story before
it is too late, on that precipice.

All sound there echoes the plain defeat in
a mind that cannot stand itself,
I know.

However, far away and above,
in the cool expanse of space, there exists
a galaxy,
unseen, and ever expanding
with stars that glisten like unshed tears.
Will you meet me there some day
once our burdens have left us?

Untitled

By Ndeye Sylla

A gong in the hand of the undead
inside me—
the culprit: the child

I recall raising my hand in class, I
guess, a decade ago.
The joints of my arm clicked like
the shutters of pupils,
drawing down to etch a vision of
me into a place
not even my Sun God could reach.
I felt I stood a chance, then in
front of you it flew
Is it not this involuntary cruelty
that holds us in that dark room?

There was nothing else I could see
in all the others
but my own self, torn.
Smoky tendrils of hope
diffuse from my foaming mouth.
This rabid dog wants a bite, of
what he knows not.

You say it doesn't matter, that
nothing matters.

Love and indifference differ not
in your crystal ball eyes,
sockets shaped like a full moon in
October.

You beat the rhythm of my heart
into resounding whispers or a tsu-
nami's song.
Stranded on life's stage, every face
I see looking out is almost yours,
and might as well be.

When, at 13 years old, I delivered
myself into diaries
to nourish the sweeping wasteland
of my mind,
so I may swallow my body whole,
I dreamt of a flood of sticky, pitch
black ink
coming over me and, with real
mercy,
leaving no trace of the person I
was made to be.

The soft tick of the caged class-
room clock,
like cracked cartilage, fills my

ears.

The teacher's words echo off the
cream-colored walls:
work done, they say, equals force
times distance.

A quiet voice wonders:
how far do I need to go for my
work to finish?
how badly will it hurt?
This, too, I remember as a bird's
flight.

That is all to say:
My black eyes have never safely
met another,
beginning with my lioness moth-
er's.
Yet, my black life will forever
return to hers,
And to that day her eyes shined,
staring at the black of my gums
fading to shameful, fleshy pink.

God's blessings have been brushed
away by my callousness, and my
mouth is empty of apology.



Our Vanities of Reality

By Tianna Polk

My family yearns to be consumable,
But like Lillies, only some parts
are able to be cooked, and digested
within.

Coming from the Liliaceae family,
Lilies grow from supportive bulbs,
sprouting large prominent petals,
While my family pushes down extra
roots that don't support my blossoming
flower.

They lack emotional awareness inside
the deepest parts of themselves,
With anger carrying them to sleep at
night,
Muffling their cries through my own.
Other Lillies don't compare,
They aren't real like my Lillies are,
Dozens of flowers may have Lilly
added to make them more admirable,
Though my Lilly is the truest form.

So I observe my mom's cries for a new
mindset.

She too comes from a family that
never accepted her roots.
Abandoned in a garden of flowers
that wanted to exist without her presence.

Mommy tries to silence herself by
silencing me.

But I choose to hold her whenever I
stand,
To lead her to our Lilly garden.
For now, we are safe to be.

It's true that Lillies are scientifically
referred to as Lilium.

And it's true that the ability to feel
exceeds the mental capacity.
That has been conditioned into us as
children.

So we'll illustrate the pain that surrounds
itself around my heart on a
scale from 0-10, with 10 being the
most unimaginable pain that I've
experienced, and 0 being complete
contentment.

Zero is your first born niece looking
you in the eyes to say she loves you
while scarfing down the snap peas
you've placed in the shape of a heart
on a purple kiddy plate.

One is staring into the depths of your
heaven with my eyes drenched in
tears of love as you introduce a new
sweetness of strawberries to my taste
buds.

Two is eating a mushy grape that proceeds
to offensively squirt back at you
for invading its privacy so early in the
morning.

Three is at a Sunday family dinner
after trying not to sleep through 6
hours of your grandparents' church
service.

Four is the embarrassment swarming
in your chest after getting caught for
stuffing tissue to make yourself feel
like a "true girl" at 7 years old.

Five is acknowledging the absence of

your name on a varsity team list while
you continuously scan the rest of your
friend's names in pure silence.

Six is crying out to the universe in the
middle of the night to stop the aching
pain of consistent heartbreak.

Seven is ripping a dry piece of gauze
off of your Hidrentitis Supparativa
wound at 4 in the morning, stifling
your own cries of pain in your sleeve,
careful not to slip any secretive shame
out.

Eight is observing your mother sob
into the floor as she descends into the
insanity of oblivion while you still
desire a caregiver.

Nine is when you're 12 years old visiting
your 8 year old cousin in the ICU,
praying in a circle with your family
that she survives.

Ten follows you into Saturday
mourning.

So every day I am aware,

I am present.

I am grounded.

I am the roots of self that have been
lost along the line of repressed generations
of emotions.

I am my own Lilly garden.

And I hope,

She joins me in watering the blues.

The Lack Thereof

By Tianna Polk

When did I become eye candy for men as old as my dad, and competition against women who used to braid my hair in plaits two sizes too small? As I sip my dark-bittered coffee, I scream inside myself about how innocence has truly lost its grip on the world. My eyebrows furrow. Two kids walk into the coffee shop I've chosen to invade this morning. I'm astounded as they seat themselves at a table and start examining the breakfast menu.

"See! I told you! They do have pancakes!" shouts the girl. She couldn't have been a day over 8 years old.

"What do you mean! I never said they didn't!" The younger boy gives her a dirty look that makes me giggle a little too loud for comfort.

I quiet myself before resuming my private coffee session.

"Where are your parents? Are you okay?" asks the middle-aged waitress. I take note of the forced sincerity in her voice as she makes sure to take their money before questioning them.

This is what I mean: the lack of love and sincerity in our society haunts my heart, which has always been told that it feels too much. Maybe it is too much for anyone to be able to handle. The little girl raises an eyebrow challenging the waitress in front of her.

"Well, mama's at home, and we're here to eat. Where are your parents, ma'am?" The child's face becomes a mask I know all too well.

She's protecting something.

I watch her cross her arms in front of herself before taking a sip out of her squashed plastic water bottle. Does her mother deserve her daughter's protection from the judgment of the cruel world? Or should she be dead to this girl, freeing her child to find real maternal support elsewhere? I sigh, rubbing my forehead and deciding I have too many questions

about a situation that has nothing to do with me.

"We're here for pancakes!" the boy exclaims, sharing a big grin with the waiter and everyone else in the cafe. I spot four missing teeth, like my sister at that age. I shouldn't think about this, but I can't help it. Maybe a part of me likes torturing myself with the past—a past that I can't escape or redo. The boy leans towards the waitress, his smile fading.

"You're getting in between our pancake morning ma'am."

She grabs the notepad from her pocket and pulls out the silver pen that was suffocating in her hairline. They tell her their order as I look around. How is this normal? Why is no one calling the cops!?

Suddenly, I'm six years old again, stranded at the corner store with my sister.

I wince.

The thought of these kids going through anything like that...

The waitress walks off with their order inked on her notepad. I motion to her to let her know that I'll be the one paying for their meal and to order an extra side of hashbrowns for them. It wasn't until after the woman disappeared behind the counter that I realized both children had heard me. They stare at me in silence before locking eyes; they don't say a word but they appear to be having an entire conversation.

I smile in an attempt to prove that I'm no trouble, that I can see them.

"Hi miss, you're alone?" the boy asks.

"Yes, I am. Are you?"

He looks around, shrugging his shoulders.

"If I'm here with you and Bri Bri and the worker lady,

then do I look alone?"

I lose my sip of Americano to a chuckle.

"Well, you tell me! Do you think it's polite to say—"

"Yeah," he says, nodding his head at a slight angle toward my direction. The girl, Bri Bri, scolds him for interrupting before whispering in his ear.

"Thank you," he says as they share hopeful smiles with me.

I answer with an easy nod before I lean forward in my chair and resolve to test the waters.

"You guys seem very mature for your age. Do you know what that means?"

"We have to be," says Bri Bri. She looks at me as if her Halloween candy's being stolen. I feel a dawning shame.

"Why? Where are your parents?" Silence fills the room.

They continue holding eye contact as the freshly made pancakes and hashbrowns slide in front of them.

"Who said that we had any, miss?"

My lips curl into each other on the right side of my face causing the children to look down at their food in silence. I force a weak smile to ensure that they don't feel embarrassed, but by now, they're too invested in their meals to notice.

I struggle for ideas to start another conversation, only to realize that there truly is nothing I can do but hope that they find happiness in a world of endless pancakes and hashbrowns. I wipe away a flood of hushed tears before scribbling my signature on my receipts and gathering my things.

"Can't we talk more?" Bri Bri asks.

I looked up to see tears welling in her eyes, feeling myself drown in them. I tried mustering the strength to explain, to tell them how hard this was, how I knew. All I could do was sit there and hope that they

understood.

"I'm so sorry. I have to go home now."

They drop their forks and stand up to move closer towards me, leaving their half-eaten hashbrowns and pancakes behind.

Now who's getting in the way of their pancakes...

"Can we come with you?" whispers the boy. It's then that I notice bloodshot eyes looking up at me.

"We promise we'll be good," says Bri Bri.

"Yeah! We pinky promise we won't frustrate you!" the boy pleads as he reaches out to touch my hand.

But I can't feel anything. I have to leave before this gets worse.

"I'm sorry. Please promise me that you'll be safe."

The boy bursts into tears, collapsing into his sister who is already prepared to catch him. Bri Bri stares into me, whimpering into the thick air. It feels like the three of us are the only ones in the cafe, in the world.

"We p-promise." Bri Bri stutters.

I wipe away a tear before hurrying past them. I don't dare look back.

I always hated that part.

"Have a good night Claudia," the waitress says as she watches the distressed woman flee the coffee shop.

"What's her problem, anyways? Why do you guys let her stay in the shop like that? It's not right," Mary, the new hire, asks. She scoffs before walking to Claudia's table to pick up the receipt.

"Come here, I'll show you. Words aren't gonna be enough."

Both waitresses walk behind the counter, making sure to drop off the receipt billed for one Americano. After rummaging around for a few minutes, the older



waitress pulls out a newspaper article and offers it to Mary.

‘Claudia Montoya Brought into Custody while Police Search for the Remains of 8-year-old Briana Montoya and 6-year-old Anderson Montoya’

“Martha, oh my god,” Mary covers her mouth in disbelief while struggling to read the rest of the article.

Martha takes a deep breath, wiping away a tear before continuing.

“Claudia comes in every month on the 16th. It’s the day she murdered those kids, three years ago. She creates a scenario in her head that presents them to her as abandoned kids that no one wants to help so that she can rescue them. I figure it’s her way of escaping the shame. Sometimes, it seems to slip through. We didn’t really catch on until a couple of months ago

because she’s relatively new to town.”

“Why isn’t she in jail if she did it?”

Martha looks down at her feet, wringing her hands around in silence.

“They never found the bodies, Mary. She confessed. They put her into an institution for a while. But they never found their bodies...”



Difficult

By Vicki Engel

Most days now, I don't have to think about it. I've had enough time to grieve what could have been. I had so many ideas for what lay ahead for my daughter. She is smart and kind. She loves animals. She is difficult. She was difficult from the very beginning. I feel shame knowing that I still say "difficult" when I know now that she was ill. She is ill. Mental illness doesn't get the sympathy that physical illness does. Not even from your own mother.

When she was growing up, we used words like, "strong-willed" and "sensitive." Teachers would comment that she struggled to get along with peers because she "needed to be in charge." She couldn't play games without insisting on her own rules. Even playing was difficult. I know now that when your reality is colored with fear and paranoia, you try very hard to control what you can.

People told me, "She'll grow out of it," or the sexist, "drama is typical for girls." I knew something was different, but I was frustrated by the difficulty and desperate to believe it would pass.

As I waited for the results to come back, I prayed they were negative for her. I held onto the slim hope that this was a phase. I prayed they were negative for her, even knowing that positive would help free me from my guilt. Maybe I hadn't failed her. Maybe

we weren't fighting each other, but something yet unnamed. I asked her how she felt after we finally knew. I sensed a slight embarrassment but mostly relief. She finally had a reason why it was so difficult. After the diagnosis, I had to change my expectations, or else be one more person who made her feel inadequate. She will rage and lie in her confusion. It's not "a phase." I needed to accept her, completely, for her to feel loved by her mother. I now work to appreciate the young woman who will hold a baby turtle gently in her hands while sharing what they need to survive. Her face beams as she tells me. I tiptoe on eggshells knowing that I needed to let my dreams for her die for us to survive.

I wanted to believe that someday we would sit and laugh about all of this. She would be independent, and I could stop worrying. I wanted it to be easy. I mourn the idea that we'd get past this. I mourn the idea that her life will have college and travel and an abundance of friends. I wanted her life to be as easy as mine had been. That version of my daughter is gone now. Most days now, I am free to love the daughter who needs me to see her. On some days, though, it's still difficult.

Tuxedo

By Roxanna Cardenas Colmenares

TW: Animal, child, and substance abuse

If I had to choose a moment when everything started falling apart, I would say it was when we found that box. My wife and I were walking down the park; the sky was gray and freezing that day, and we were holding hands. I still remember the warmth of Alysa's touch taking my cold away. Then, we saw a cardboard box. Someone had written in big, bold letters "TAKE JUST 1," and we could see the box shaking slightly. It didn't take long until we heard the meowing. "Oh my god, Ricky! Could it be?" Alysa said.

Alysa would often dream of raising a big, loving family with many kids and animals running around a big house, just like the one she had growing up. But this was a rather troubling picture for me, even though I never said that out loud. I had convinced her that we weren't ready for a baby, but I could accept a pet.

Alysa opened the box and inside were six kittens. What a heavenly coincidence, I thought. Their dark fur glowed like fresh ink; their mesmerizing eyes

were like honey dripping down a hive. One of the cats stood out to me because of a single white mark staining the perfect black fur from its jaw down its chest. I'll never forget the shivers that traveled down my spine when I first saw this kitten staring into my eyes.

"We can't leave them on the street like this," my wife said.

"The box says to take just one, Aly."

I tend to follow instructions tidily.

"Whoever abandoned them to their luck has no say in this. Besides, these are black kittens, Ricky. They will be doomed if we don't help," Alysa insisted.

"You know how people are."

"We can't raise six cats, love."

"Oh, don't be silly, I'm going to put them up for adoption. We have plenty of friends. They will have forever homes soon," said Aly while picking up and placing the box in my hands.

I knew I couldn't convince my wife to leave the kittens. She had that annoying look in her eyes again, the look of determination. I had never had such eyes, or at least, not for a long time. After all, I had grown up in a house where submission was rewarded and my desires weren't validated; therefore, there was no room for determination. However, as we walked to our house feeling the kittens

purr through the box, I recalled one time I might have had those same eyes Alysa had now and how they had been ripped off my face.

When I was a child and living with my parents, I found a kitten in my backyard hiding between some bushes; it looked like the tuxedo one from the box. Its fur was soft like silk, and the little white stain down its chest was somehow clean despite it being a stray. For days, I secretly brought part of my food and water for him when my parents were gone. I even snuck a blanket out of my house so the kitten could be warm at night. I don't know how my parents didn't notice because, despite their habits, they were always aware of my every move. But one unfortunate day, when I thought they were too intoxicated to notice, I went outside to play with the kitten. But I was mistaken. They were paying attention.

My dad came out to the yard looking bigger than he ever did before. The beating that came next is a memory I can stand. After all, those were common in our household. What I wish I could forget is what happened next, because after my dad satisfied his anger with me, he remembered the kitten. With his eyes set on mine, he stomped his foot hard over the poor animal. To this day, I can still see my best friend all over my dad's

boots every night when I close my eyes, right before falling asleep. I started screaming, and my mother came out to the backyard stumbling, disoriented, and saw the bloody scene. Then, she got close to me and dried the tears out of my cheeks with a tenderness that even now makes me nauseated.

"So, this is where you've been bringing the food I prepare with so much effort, huh?" Said my mother, referring to the canned food I often had to open myself.

She then grabbed me by the neck and whispered,

"You can stay out here with your pet and starve then."

I don't know how many days I was out in the yard. I knew crying for help would just make my dad come out and beat me again. I was doing just what my mom ordered me to do: starve, but when my survival instinct kicked in, I did what I knew deep down she wanted me to. She knew I would not starve; she knew I had one thing to eat at least. By the time my mom let me back inside the house, I had lost something important, something Alysa never had the chance to lose. I ran to the bathroom and brushed my teeth for hours but couldn't flush the iron taste out of my mouth.

I believe that was the last time I had that determined look, but Alysa was different. Her parents always gave her what she wanted.

They were so kind that I often wished they had raised me instead so I could have Alysa's eyes. Back then, looking at my wife jumping happily back home, without a single sad memory in her mind, made the sky seem somehow grayer, colder. And the warmth that her hands had provided me not long before became so hot that it burned.

Aly was right, though. She knew many people who could take the kittens. She was sociable and had many friends. Even after I escaped my childhood home, making friends wasn't my thing, but after I met Alysa, I was absorbed into her circle. However, although I loved that she would consider her friends as mine, I knew I was just the "+1" in the party invitations.

So, unable to oppose my wife's wishes, we took the entire litter to our home. As expected, the five kittens found adoptive families almost immediately. We decided to keep the tuxedo one and named him Suits. I recall everything being normal between us up to this point; however, things started to change as the kitten grew and became attached only to me. According to an article I read somewhere on the web, cats imprint on one person only and, well, I enjoyed a bit too much the disappointment on Alysa's face when she realized she wasn't Suit's favorite person. Maybe this will

show her that she can't always be in the spotlight, I thought. Slowly, the cat not only was fond of me, but he also seemed to dislike Aly. At first, it would use her shoes as a litter box, scratch her clothes, and run away from her, but as time went on, the aggression towards her became more physical.

"What's that on your hand, love?" I asked when noticing a scratch on her hand.

"Oh, nothing. Suits and I just like to play rough," said Aly, covering the bruise.

"Gotta be careful with him; you know he's moody."

"Yeah... right. Only around me, that is."

I ignored that last thing. We had multiple arguments about Suits and his behavior. The biggest fight started when Alysa suggested surrendering him, to which I felt deeply offended. Not only had it been her idea to bring the cat along, but I knew that if the situation reversed Aly wouldn't have a problem with me being the hated one. I knew this because many of her friends didn't like me and didn't care to hide it, yet Alysa would still make me attend gatherings despite how uncomfortable I would feel around them. Besides, she enjoyed being the center of attention and all love. Now, because this creature loved me instead, she had a problem with it. Suits' presence hurt my wife's

ego, and I liked that a lot. Sure, I was surprised by this resentment I didn't know I had towards her, but instead of being ashamed of it, I was liberated.

As I distanced from my wife, I got closer to Suits. It was as if that little scared kid I used to be now had a chance to take care of this cat, without having to hide him and be terrified of the consequences. Yet, as you can imagine, Suits's presence made me remember certain things about my childhood. Every moment I would spend with him was tainted by the memory of my parents, and an inevitable taste of dirt and blood would fill my mouth. I tried drinking lots of water and juice to get the flavor off, but nothing worked except for one thing.

Being careful that Alysa wouldn't notice, I began with just one glass of wine a day, but my intake accelerated quickly, and I needed something stronger. I would leave work early just to stop at the liquor store and prepare my taste buds for the playtime with Suits. At first, I felt disgusted for drinking like my parents, but it was the only way for me to tolerate the time with my kitten. Maybe my parents drank for similar reasons. Perhaps, they also wanted to erase some nasty flavor from their mouths every time they looked at me.

Eventually—and inevitably—

Alysa found out about my drinking, so I didn't have to hide it anymore, but our arguments increased after this. Even after I tried to explain to her that I needed the liquor to be close to Suits, carefully leaving out the story of my parents' abuse, Aly didn't understand me. On top of that, things started getting more inexplicable around the house. I would come home to broken plates and chewed wires, and my wife would blame Suits. Also, Aly could swear something would stare at her at night. I would sometimes wake up to her screaming, saying that Suits was sitting on her chest and his staring eyes were glowing red. She's so dramatic, I thought, but every day now, it seemed like my wife had more and more bruises, and she wasn't getting enough sleep.

"I can't sleep with that thing around. It is doing something to our house!" Aly said erratically.

I felt somewhat bad that Suits was being so aggressive with her, but I wasn't going to give away my best friend; not after all we had been through. This was the only creature on earth that loved me and not her. Every other person in our lives only tolerated me because they loved Aly. I also couldn't believe Suits was the origin of whatever was going on in our house, of what was ruining our marriage. It felt impossible. However, when I found Aly crying in

the bathroom one morning, trying to cover all her bruises with makeup, I thought things might be getting out of hand.

"Hey, Aly. Gosh. That looks bad. Let me help you." Her arms and legs were full of scratches and deep purple bruises.

It must be Suits jumping on her. He is a heavy cat, I thought. She was trying to cover a bite mark on her chin, near her neck.

"How did Suits get you there? You put him near your face, didn't you? That wasn't smart, baby."

Alysa remained quiet and shivering at my touch, which made me feel a certain coldness that sat heavily on my stomach, like an iceberg.

"I know this is becoming too much for you. I'm sorry I've been so protective of him. I'm going to hire a trainer. There must be a way to train a cat, right?"

Alysa paused a bit and responded with hesitation, "Ricky, my love, please, this must stop. You know how. A trainer won't help."

"What do you mean? Explain," I felt numb at the thought that Aly was suggesting the unimaginable. "Are you asking me to put him to sleep?"

She began to say something, I think, but I stormed out of the bathroom before hearing the rest. The iron taste was creeping over

my tongue again. It was insufferable. This time I couldn't take it. I couldn't believe my beloved wife would want to take my best friend away, the same way my parents did. I looked everywhere for the sweet juice that would make the blood taste go away but found all the bottles empty, so I ran out to the liquor store and the drive there calmed me down. After I took the first sip, I thought that maybe Aly didn't really suggest killing Suits, maybe I had overreacted. I decided to apologize once at home, but never expected what happened.

I unlocked the door and entered a crimson room. Our wedding portraits were on the floor with the glass broken, splitting Alysa's image from mine; our furniture was upside down, and there were scratches on our walls—huge ones that Suits couldn't have done. But I was most concerned about the red glowing everywhere and the smell, oh gosh, the smell. I could almost smell the haunting flavor on my tongue. I called for Aly, desperate, while I searched every room. That's when I heard the meowing. It was coming from Suits playroom, so I sprinted there and pushed the door open. What I saw next... I can't describe it. Please don't make me.

The above is Ricardo Mercado's testimony when interrogated by the police about Alysa Mercado's murder. He had been taken into

custody after being found sitting next to his wife's body, holding a black and white cat in his arms. Alysa's parents called 911 after three days of not being able to communicate with their daughter. He sat handcuffed in a cold, dark gray room while the detective listened to his claims. Mr. Mercado faced down to his lap during his testimony, looking at the mix of blood and cat hair on his clothes. The interrogation ended as follows:

"It's okay, Mr. Mercado. I've heard enough."

"Thank you, officer. I can't believe this is happening."

"Let me get one thing straight. You entered your cat's playroom and saw it sitting on top of Mrs. Mercado's body."

"That's correct."

"And this story you're telling me is because you think, what? That the cat was possessed or something?"

"I-I don't know, officer. After what I saw, I just sat there next to Alysa and Suits came to my lap, purring. He still felt like a normal cat but, what normal cat does something like that? In any case, where is my cat?"

"If I were you I wouldn't worry about that. Listen to me, son. Our records show that you never left your house that morning. There was plenty of liquor at your house. So, whatever happened to your wife happened when you were there."

"Th-That can't be! Where the fuck is my cat?"

"Well, it is. And I need you to stop playing games. Your wife had told your in-laws, the Mercados, about your drinking and "erratic" behavior. That's why they called us in. Imma be honest, this isn't looking great for you. So, Imma ask you one last question and I need you to be honest with me. Are we clear?"

"B-but, but I-Suits. Where is--"

"Where are they?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Stop acting like a fool! What did you do to them?"

"I really don't know what you are talking ab--"

"What did you do with your wife's eyes, you psychopath!?"

But the detective never got an answer to this question. It was reported that Ricardo Mercado's expression changed entirely after hearing this. His eyes showed no more fear or sadness, in fact, they showed no emotion whatsoever. Almost as if those weren't his eyes at all. He didn't move or say a word after this, but he smiled and giggled a couple of times during his trial. His psychiatric evaluation granted him a sentence in a mental ward, where he would spend the rest of his days surrounded by white walls that he decorated with

drawings of a tuxedo cat over and over again. It is rumored amongst the staff that, on his last day alive, he finally confessed what happened to Alysa's eyes.

"It was Suits," he murmured. "He ate them."



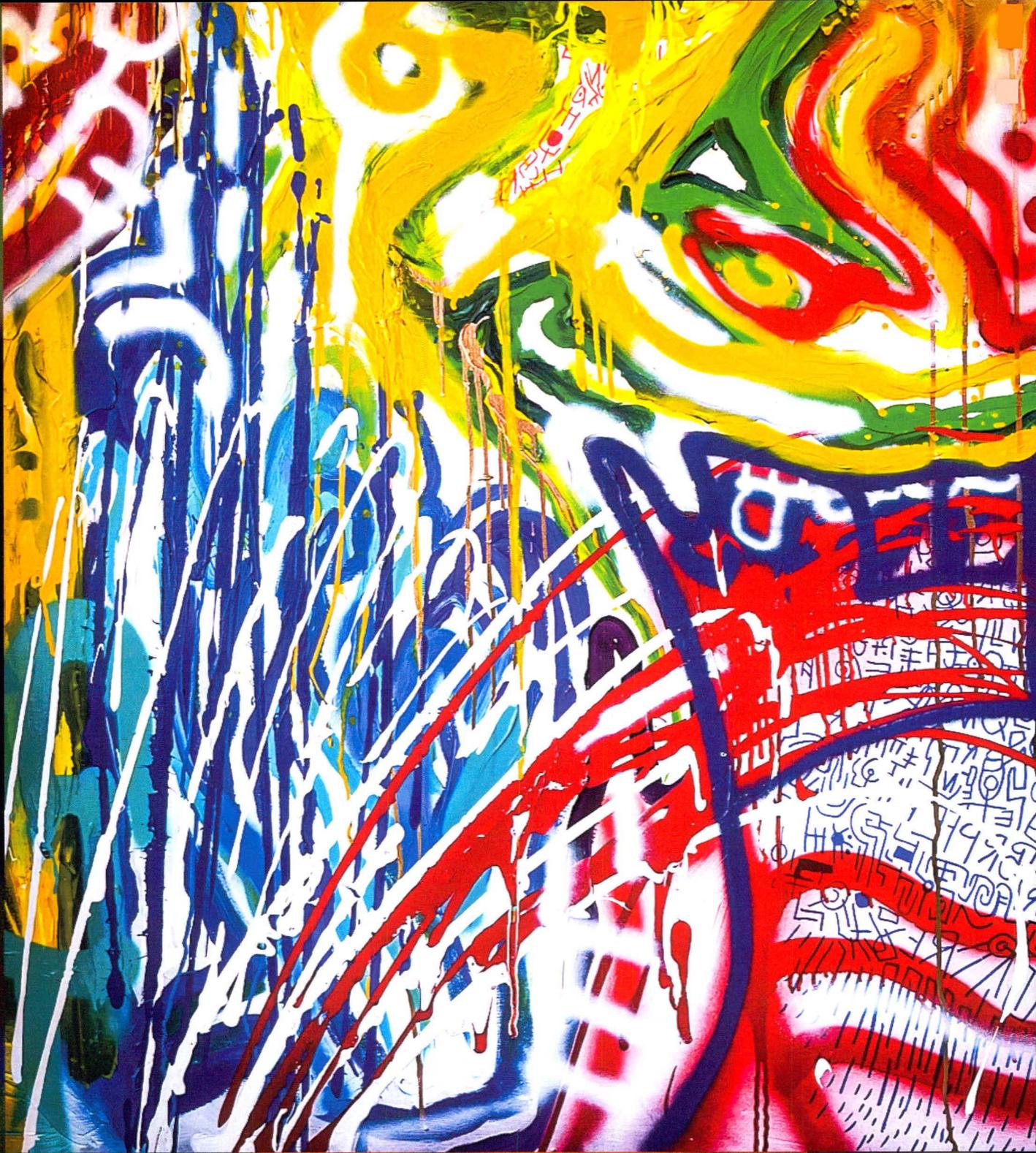
EXIT

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N Y C SUBCULTURE





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Artworks By:

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Photos By:

Jonathan Portec



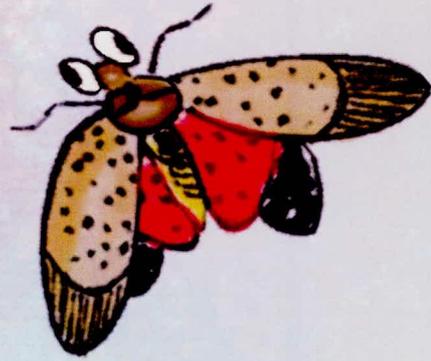
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Timber Sides



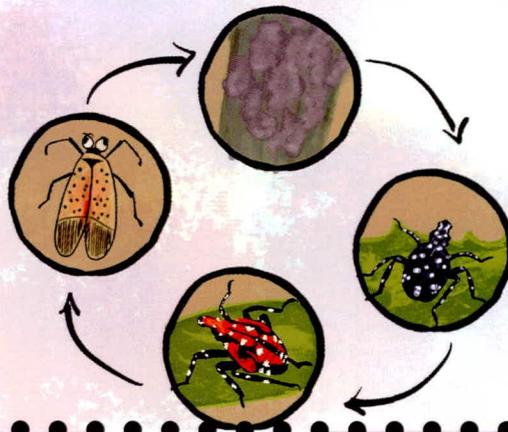
Hello! My name is Quincy and I'm an insect expert.

I'm here today to spot

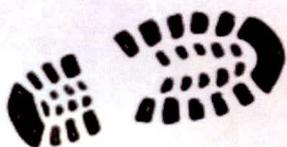


The spotted lanternfly does not bite or sting. It is not a good flyer. The spotted lanternfly is a plant hopper!

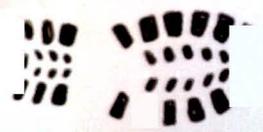
This is the lifecycle of the spotted lanternfly.



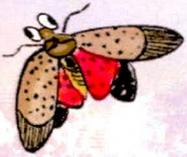
Step



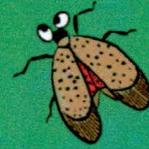
Step



h you about the
ternfly.



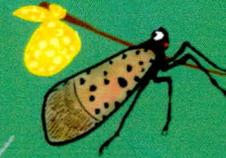
The spotted lanternfly is a
beautiful and unique insect
native to East Asia.



One day, the spotted
lanternfly hitchhiked on a
boat from East Asia to
North America.



So the spotted
lanternfly came to
North America and
lived happily ever
after, right?...



Step

Step



Sp



at!



Oh



no!



...Well, not exactly.



You see, the spotted lanternfly can lay up to 120 eggs per egg mass, which increases the population rapidly.



Because the spotted lanternfly can travel far and reproduce quickly, insect experts have had a hard time preventing the insect from overpopulating.

Imagine this garden represents a balanced ecosystem. It's most balanced when every plant, animal, and insect has its own niche.



When one insect, plant, or organism overpopulates compared to others, it causes an imbalance in nature.

Every plant, animal, and insect has its own niche.

Watch how the rapid overpopulation of the spotted lanternfly can cause an imbalance in nature.

The gardener can't tend to or care for the plants because there are too many spotted lanternflies.



The wildlife can't eat the plants because the spotted lanternflies ate them all first.

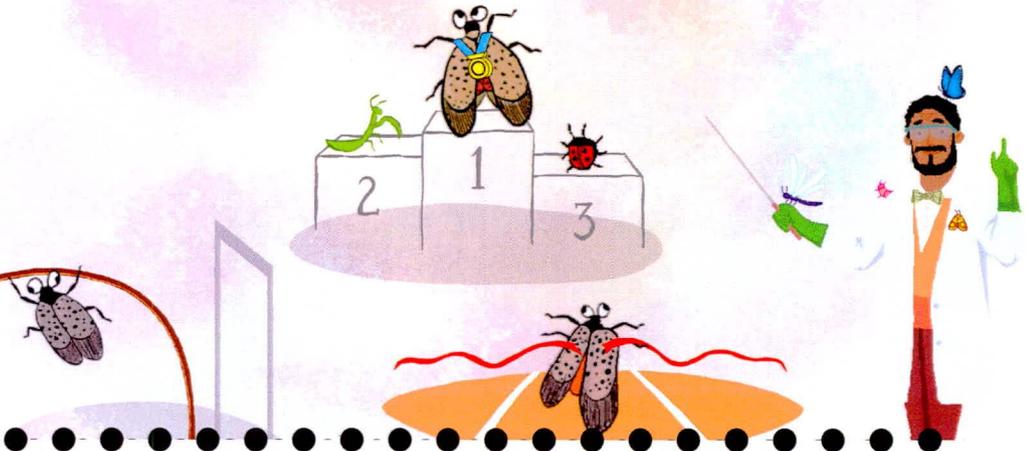


ternfly can lay
cycle. Increasing
in just one year.



This is an egg mass of the spotted lanternfly

Remember how I said the spotted lanternfly is not a good flyer? This is true, though they can only fly short distances, they are still able to travel up to 4 miles by walking and using their powerful hind legs to jump.



nature in
n.



The sun nourishes the plants.

The gardener tends to and waters the plants.



The insects feed from the plants.

sect, and organism serves
d important purpose.

The wildlife feeds from the insects and the plants.

The soil is nourished by the waste of the wildlife and insects.



The sun is displeased.



The other insects have been run out by the spotted lanternflies.

The spotted lanternfly is a beautiful and unique insect but its ability to populate rapidly and travel has caused an imbalance in nature. Insect experts like me have tried to control the population of the spotted lanternfly and restore harmony in the threatened ecosystem but our efforts have been unsuccessful so far.

The soil is not being nourished because no waste is being made because all the plants are eaten.



That's why I need your help to control the population of the spotted lanternfly! Together we can restore balance to the ecosystem.



Untitled

By Kaya Fader

Euphemisms dissolve
into
The slog of conversation
Like sugar
Syruping strong coffee
Making the world a
sweeter place
But at what cost?

For Laura

By Melissa French

I thought about you
today.
I probably shouldn't
have.
But.
Some kids came in.
I saw you roll your eyes.
I heard you question it.
I laughed along with
you.
Then I wiped a tear
from my eye.
I will probably think of
you tomorrow.
Although I know I
shouldn't.
Thinking of you is hard.
It probably shouldn't
be.

But.
I thought of you today.
I almost picked up my
phone a dozen times.
Just to check in with
you.
Say hi.
Tell you something
funny.
Then I wiped a tear
from my eye.
Maybe two.
I thought of you today.
And it made me smile.
But.
I still wiped a tear from
my eye.
Even though I know
you're okay.

I still worry.
And stress.
And worry.
I hope I'll see you soon.
Instead of just thinking
of you.
But for now.
Thoughts of you will suf-
fice.
They'll have to.
So I'll think of you
tomorrow.
And the day after.
And the day after that.
I'll keep thinking until I
see you.
So.
I thought of you today.

The Escape

By Melissa French

I closed my eyes. The sound of people clinking glasses was beautiful, almost like wind chimes. Why, then, did I feel so unbearably sad? When I opened my eyes and looked around the table, I saw a group of happy people. That doesn't seem so terribly specific, but it's true. There were ten people, not including myself at the table. We toasted to love and good fortune and I faked smiles and laughs while trying to not throw up the dinner we all just ate. I was the odd man out. Everyone at the table was with a significant other or a date. No one had told me that I should've found a date. It had never been a requirement before. Apparently, because Nick and Lucy were getting married, everyone assumed dates were mandatory. These were people I had grown up with and it kind of seemed like they knew nothing about me. They should have known I wasn't dating anyone. They should have known that I didn't have any prospects. And yet, here we are. All sitting around a table celebrating Nick and Lucy, everyone glancing at their dates, looks of affection being tossed around so haphazardly as if they couldn't turn into looks of disdain in seconds.

Jesus, I need more wine. I shouldn't be this bitter and lonely and sad at 24. Weren't your 20's the time to date around and drink too much? The time to purely enjoy yourself for the sake of enjoying yourself? On that note, I excused myself and ran to the bathroom, praying for it to be empty so I could give myself a pep talk.

The stalls were all empty when I checked so I went directly to the sink. I forced myself to look myself in the eye in the mirror. It wasn't easy. One glance and I could tell I was not hiding my misery well. I should've flaked on these plans. Should've said I had Avian flu or something.

"You will go back out there and you will be happy for Nick and Lucy. You won't make tonight about you. You can do this," I said to myself in my most convincing voice.

"Great pep talk," chimed a completely unknown voice, causing me to jump half a foot in the air and let out a decidedly undignified yelp. I turned to face her. As I floundered for something to say she jumped in again.

"Were you actually going to go out there and face whoever Nick and Lucy are? Or did you want me to order some shots directly to the bathroom? Liquid courage and all?"

"What?" I wasn't really understanding what was happening. She was talking a lot and my brain wasn't quite capable of dealing with it at the moment.

"Alright, I guess shots are out of the question, you don't need to be more confused than you already are. And in all seriousness, do I need to bail you out of something? Because I could be down for that," she said, actually seeming serious.

"Who are you? Is this like a thing you do? Wait in bathrooms for unsuspecting people who need to give themselves pep talks and then surprise attack

them with advice?" It came out a bit more venomous than I'd intended.

She didn't look taken aback. She looked pretty impressed, if I'm going to be honest.

"I'm sorry. That was a little aggressive. It's rough out there," I say with a chuckle.

"The name's Eris. And shockingly enough, no, I don't wait in bathrooms to, what was it again? 'Surprise attack people with advice.' You caught me hiding as well. Which brings me to my next question: what are you hiding from?"

She said all that as though she's known me longer than three minutes, laid back on the fancy bench in the ladies' room. Why is it that fancy ladies' rooms always have benches? I'm getting off track.

"What am I hiding from? Isn't that the golden fucking question?" I scoffed.

"Nick and Lucy are two of my friends. They just got engaged. We were celebrating with dinner. But apparently, I missed the 'bring a date' memo, so now I'm out there like a jackass, dateless, and wishing I was at home in sweatpants while watching Food Network! So, I guess I'm hiding from a whole damn lot right about now."

She nodded. "Yeah I would hide too."

"Alright. Your turn. I fessed up why I was hiding. Now you. Spill."

She didn't say anything for a minute. I waited.

"Well, funnily enough, compared

to your reason, I'm hiding from absolutely nothing. My parents decided to visit and I just needed a minute to compose myself." She shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair. I joined her on the bench. We sat in silence for a

bit, basking in our small hideout. "How about we sneak over to the bar, slam shots, make excuses to leave, and get plastered at the bar down the street?" I asked after a few minutes.

"That's probably the best plan I've heard all day." A smile filled her face and I knew I was in for a long night.

Shopping list

By Kenia Nuñez

- Ramen. don't forget ramen is in aisle 10 not 9 on the bottom shelf to the left make sure it's the cheapest one, not those fancy 3-dollar ramen if you manage to find those coupons from the trash again then get that 20-pack ramen.

- Beans. Get the store-brand pink beans do NOT get the name-brand, find cans with dents on them so they can take 5 cents off if you can't find any go to the back of the store where people hardly ever go and hide behind the packs of water and soda bottle and hit the cans on the ground to make a dent.

- Diapers. Unfortunately, you can't buy the cheapest ones. Remember what happened last time when we went to the park and your little sister's diaper completely disintegrated after having a massive blowout on the stroller. We had to scrub that stroller for hours trying to get that stain and smell out. If you manage to find out the name of the diaper brand your mother used to get when she was here please write that down and get that brand.

- Baby formula. Go to our upstairs neighbor apt (E1) and ask her what type of formula she uses. When she gave us some of her's, your little sister didn't spit out the milk and actually drank the whole bottle!

- Popcorn (optional). If you want you can buy us some popcorn so we can turn off all the lights and move our chairs right in front of the TV like a movie theater and just watch some stupid movie like we used to do when she was here. I promise I won't burn the popcorn this time :)

Barrio

By Anamelia Jourdain

I haven't ever really called it my neighborhood
I just call it my block
The smell of the cuchifrito setting up empanadillas
and rellenos de papa in the window for the morn-
ing rush, marks the start of my path to the station
like an invisible map made up of senses magnetically
pulling me in the direction in which the aromas flow
High school kids screaming about who they do or do
not mess with
The one guy who has clearly been up on a binge all
night fighting gravity to dance to the Fania that's
blasting from that one car that sells nutcrackers out
the back during summer
If you ever feel unloved, hit up the Arab store where,
as soon as you walk in, Mohammed hums melodi-
cally from behind the counter, habibi hubu hayaati,
before giving you a random free drink and you feel
like no one else could ever love you on a bad day the
way he does
I nod up to the guys who sell what they sell at the
corner, but we turn a blind eye because they aren't
the ones we have to keep on our radar
It's the faces with the unseasoned traces who don't
bother a soul, but we know what the presence means
to our pockets with that ever-growing hole
Because once we notice the hole is getting deeper
and deeper we start to worry even about the price of
our pizza
"That can went from a dollar to two fifty? Nah, you
can keep that boss."
So we find a way to not think of the stress and we

self-medicate to balance the impending doom of
having to go from renting an apartment to renting a
room
From half decent safety we never had to fight for to
looking both ways and saying a Padre Nuestro on
every outing
Crossing from our heads to our shoulders a prehis-
toric ritual in our households Padre, Hijo, y Espir-
itu Santo just to make it from the corner to the train
platform without someone giving you a cantaso
And all of the things that the invaders say they love
are all of the things that are made up of us
Piraguas with the magical ice that never melts if it
even got the chance to, the jugo, the tamarindos, the
lady that sells limber from her first-floor apartment
windows
Are all the things we created through sweat and
tears
And all of the things that without us would disap-
pear
So is it our block if it's not what we've made and
what we've got?
We'll just do what we've always done and find a new
spot build it from the bottom on up
And in a few years, I give five tops, just when we
finally save enough back up and open all the new
spots they'll say "hey did you hear about the restau-
rant on that block?"
They'll come in and do the same and without us
there it will always change

Prodigal Freedom

By Rahmel
Thompson

"Some things never change," I think out loud while observing the pile of shoes to the side of my grandmother's front door. No one was allowed to enter her house while wearing shoes. I debated keeping mine on, knowing that it'd make her mad. Pick your battles, my inner monologue told me. I spent days preparing myself for a war. Standing in the mirror, practicing my comebacks in case someone said something slick. Coming to this house, being in the same room with all of them, risking the idea of letting them have access to me...

For seven years I was able to be marked safe from the yelling, the insults, the gaslighting, the discouragement, the "accidents". For seven years I didn't have to see them. They couldn't easily reach me. I was too far. Hundreds of miles away too far. With their numbers being blocked, and none of them having my address, I was able to put them and the events that took place in their house in the back of my mind.

When people ask me about my family, I'd simply tell them that I didn't have one, then quickly change the subject. The people that raised me weren't anything to write home about. My grandfather was a physically abusive narcissistic alcoholic that made my life a living hell. My grandmother was detached and spent most of my

adolescence sleeping off the effects of her own self-prescribed medication. My eldest brother, Brandon, became an addict who blames everyone else for him getting caught while dealing drugs to an undercover cop. The only redeemable person in that so-called "family" was my brother Cory. Not only was he the first one of us to go to college, but he was also the only person in that house that was good to me. And then there's my mother.

She's the reason that I must enter this house again. Hell, she's the reason that I had to grow up here in the first place. It was bad enough that she dropped my brothers onto my grandparents' doorstep when they were two and three years old, but she ended up doing it again when I was born eight years later. You'd think my grandmother would try to talk some sense into her drug addicted daughter, but nope! They had almost ten years to change their parenting methods but chose to continue looking at the bottom of their liquor bottles than to be actual parents to any of us.

I was thirteen when I first started to figure out that I needed to leave. There was so much yelling happening in the house. My grandmother was mentally checked out to the point that she didn't flinch when my grandfather threw a beer bottle against the wall in the living

room. I remember Cory rushing me out to his car, telling me that we needed to take a drive. After aimlessly driving around town, we stopped at a drive-thru for burgers. Sitting on the trunk of his old beater, looking at the night sky while in the parking lot of the restaurant, he told me that we both needed to get out of there. To move far away. However, he was too broke, and I was too young. We'd have to wait until he finished getting his teaching certificate, within the next year. He stressed how much he worried about me during those six months that I was in foster care after "accidentally" spraining my wrist. That's when I realized that I was part of the reason that he stayed.

The year came and went. Each day that passed gave me hope. I was going to be free once my big brother got his certificate. But then, reality hit us. Cory still had to wait before we could move out. Half of his paycheck went to whatever bills my grandparents didn't feel like paying. We were trapped. The only good thing to come out of him getting his teaching license was that he found a job at my high school. While he wasn't my teacher, I could hide out in his classroom when I was having a tough day. I also didn't have to ride the bus anymore.

The day that I graduated high school, I'd had a plan in place. I

knew that I had to wait until the end of August before I could move into my dorm, so I worked the entire summer. At the age of seventeen, I had two part-time jobs and a side gig. I saved up enough money to buy the essentials needed for school. I stayed on campus for winter and spring breaks. During the summers I would couch surf; staying with friends who knew why I didn't want to return to my family. I did this for four years. Working as hard as possible to keep my scholarship and pay for the things that it didn't cover.

I didn't invite Cory to my college graduation. I stopped talking to him after I realized that he wasn't ever going to leave them. I

couldn't handle being close to anyone living in that house. None of them had my new phone number, nor did I tell any of them about my job offer in New York. I didn't want them interfering with my life. I worked too hard to put them behind me.

"Been trying to find you. Ma is dead. The funeral is next week. Come home?"

The simple DM completely changed my world. How did he find me? I thought I blocked everyone from that town. Should I go back there? I hated that house, what it represented, and most of the people living in it. I only had a handful of memories with my mother, I didn't even know if I ever

loved her. Why should I go to her funeral? My internal monologues felt as though I was having full-on debates with myself for days. Then I remembered how often Cory would have my back; he'd need someone to have his.

One subway ride, twelve hours on the Amtrak, and a cab ride later, I was standing on the screened-in front porch. Staring at the shoes by the door. My shoulders felt heavier, my palms sweating, as I clutched the straps of my duffle and backpack.

"You're here!" I heard Cory's familiar voice say from behind the screened door of the house.

Cultural Stereotypes

By Savannah Childs

Dear Friedrich,

I trust that you and your family are doing well. I cannot believe that it has been almost 10 years since I visited you in Germany. Your mother has told us about your upcoming trip to New York City! We are so excited to host you and guide you through your first trip to the United States. If you still love pizza as much as I remember, then you are going to be in your element when you get here! I am so pleased to hear that you have a sum-

mer internship in the city, that is a huge accomplishment. I felt the need to send you this letter to prepare you for a successful and pleasant trip. You have an incredible opportunity that you so deserve. I wanted to share some cultural stereotypes that I have experienced and witnessed in my 5 years of living in the United States. Here are some things that I wish that someone had told me before moving here.

Firstly, cultural stereotypes are

the rather naïve ideas that people have which lead them to believe that people from a certain culture or background all act the same way. These are often negative assumptions that lead to harsh and unfair judgment. They can be related to gender, sexuality, religion, and other factors. When I first moved to New York and I was meeting a new group of girls for lunch, I was sharing a little bit about myself and one of the girls seemed shocked that I was South African, she told

me that she did not know that there were white people in Africa. It was exactly like that scene in the movie, "Mean Girls". I could not even comprehend that this was something that people believed to be true. I decided not to become defensive or to make the girl feel foolish, but rather use it as a teaching opportunity. I told the group about the misconceptions and stereotypes around this matter and used this as an educational moment. I was so pleased with how eager they were to learn more, and to this day I am still friends with that same group. Their desire to expand their understanding and exile their simplified conceptions of what they once thought to be true was admirable. You see, people often do not mean to be hurtful with these stereotypes. These stereotypes are sometimes all that they know and when they are given the opportunity to grow, they will take it. I strongly suggest that you try this whenever you are approached with a cultural stereotype. Think to yourself, can I educate this individual and help them with this cultural stereotype they have about me, or can they help me to better understand their culture? There are plenty of cultural stereotypes around Germany and Germans as people that I would like to prepare you for and allow you to think about how you would react if you were ever faced with these situations. The first one is that Germans are unfriendly and do not have a sense of humor. I have been lucky enough to have

traveled to Germany and I know this couldn't be further from the truth. However, some people have not had the luxury of traveling and do not know anything other than the stereotypes that they have been told or have seen in movies. You could use this as an opportunity to crack a joke and lighten the mood! More cultural stereotypes would be that Germans are tall, blonde, and blue-eyed, Germans drink a lot of beer and eat mostly sausages and potatoes, and Germans are obsessive about rules and order. It can be extremely offensive when you hear these stereotypes and all I can say is that forgiveness of people's naivety can go a long way.

Do you remember the South African comedian that my family always used to talk about, Trevor Noah? We have been his biggest fans since he was performing for small audiences in South Africa and we as a nation are so proud of his success! I recently rewatched "African American" Where Trevor Noah talks a lot about cultural stereotypes. I strongly suggest that you give it a watch too! He speaks of arriving in the US and the stereotypes that he had regarding African Americans, and his assumptions about their behavior, language, and music preferences amongst other things. Throughout the show, Trevor Noah mentions multiple cultural stereotypes. He starts one joke off by mentioning that his mother is a Xhosa woman, and his father is a white man from Switzerland, he then comments on how the

Swiss like chocolate. Although this is a comedic view on cultural stereotypes, it shows how frequently we either see them or are guilty of thinking. Trevor Noah spends 18 hours on his flight watching movies and trying to study how to be 'black'. This is where the false stereotypes in the media take place and further heighten our beliefs of a certain culture. When he arrives in the US, he is mistaken as Puerto Rican. His attempt to be considered black is futile and eye-opening.

Before coming to New York, I had not known any Mexican people. There is such a small population in South Africa. I had heard the stereotype, 'Mexicans are lazy' more times than I ever should have. Having heard this extremely cruel remark so many times, I felt guilty for just having heard it. My best friend, Sara, is from Mexico. She was born in Durango. Her mother and father worked harder than any people I know to ensure that she went to a good college and had everything that she would need to ensure a bright future. Sara has recently begun working at her dream job, at her dream law firm. We have often spoken about this stereotype, and she just replies, 'I don't even get offended anymore. Look at my parents. That's all I need to say.' Sara has told me about one of her first job interviews where the interviewer said, "Wow, your English is so good." Sara was the person who inspired me the most with her approach to cultural stereotypes. She is slow to anger

and quick to educate. A truly powerful combination.

Now, this is something that could come as very foreign to you but here in the US, it is celebrated and appreciated, it is a performance known as a 'Drag Show'. I have been to more than I can count and enjoy watching and appreciating the performers. Drag shows are performances where performers, usually men, dress up in extravagant costumes and makeup to portray the opposite sex. These shows mostly include lip-syncing, dancing, and comedic sketches. Drag shows celebrate creativity, self-expression, individuality, and freedom. These shows have a long history in LGBTQ+ culture and can be liberating for the performers as well as the audience. I feel so welcome and happy whenever I am there. You can request songs and dance, and one time they even got members of the audience to do a catwalk and there was a winner who received a prize, my friend Jordyn won it! Self-expression and freedom of sexuality are welcomed and celebrated in the US. Of course, this has been a long time coming and there have been years and years of mistreatment and stereotypes that still need to be broken. We have the Pride March in NYC, and it is such a beautiful day and event to be part of.

I have touched on a lot of stereotypes that seem to be harmless, but there have been many harmful and tragic events that have stemmed from cultural stereotypes. There are hate

crimes, racial profiling, hate speech, bullying, and harassment. Hate crimes are when people are targeted for their race, ethnicity, religion, or other cultural identities. I am not sure if you recall what our parents spoke about while we were staying with your family in Germany, but they were discussing the xenophobic attacks that we were having in South Africa at the time. Xenophobia is the "fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners." It was a time when Nigerian business owners and families were being attacked and murdered. They were told to go back to where they belonged and stop taking opportunities from South Africans. It was a terrifying and shocking time. My friend, Lynka, was unable to come to school for months because of the fear and discrimination that she and her family faced. They were treated this way for something that they had no control over and for something that they should never have had to apologize for or explain. This was pure hatred and racism. Having been born in Zimbabwe and having a Rhodesian father, the deputy principal of my high school told my mother to be cautious too, but my head principal told my mother that there was no need because I was white and would not be targeted. None of this made sense to me and quite honestly, it still does not. Why was I allowed this "pass" for being white? What did 14-year-old Lynka do so wrong that she had to miss out on a fundamental year of her

schooling and life, yet I did not? Then there is racial profiling, racial profiling is when law enforcement targets people of color based on stereotypes and biases, which results in wrongful arrests, harassment, and even fatalities in some cases. There is still discrimination in employment because of cultural stereotypes. I know that there have been changes but quite frankly, it is not enough.

I have written a lot about what you should do when you are faced with these stereotypes targeted toward you, but there may be times when you witness cultural stereotypes against other people and, in these times, you have the opportunity to stand up for those who may face discrimination or prejudice. You have the power to speak up for those who are being discriminated against and you can support these individuals. You can be an ally.

I recently had the pleasure of reading a beautiful poem called "Gate A-4", written by Naomi Shihab Nye. She is a truly talented Palestinian American poet, and I think that you would enjoy this poem about the importance of kindness and overcoming barriers of language and culture. The poem emphasizes the significance of kindness and the power that it has in overcoming barriers of language and culture. It illustrates how simple acts of compassion can bring people of diverse backgrounds together. The narrative revolves around the encounter of Naomi Shihab Nye and a Pal-

estonian woman at an airport gate. Despite the language barrier, Nye extends her kindness by comforting the distressed traveler and even helps phone the stranger's family to let them know about the flight delay. As they talk to each other's families over the phone and wait for the plane together, they find solace in each other's company, eventually sharing homemade traditional cookies and forming a bond as well as an everlasting memory of human kindness. Through this exchange, the poem highlights the beauty of human connection and the transformative impact of breaking down cultural stereotypes.

Thank you for reading this letter,

and I hope you know that it comes from a good place and for an educational purpose. You are going to love New York and I know that you are going to thrive and grow in your 6 months stay here. You might even love it so much that you end up staying, like me! There are so many opportunities and so many wonderful ways to learn. I know that my perception of the United States and Americans has drastically changed, for the better. I continue to be educated by the wonderful people around me and I hope that I never stop learning and challenging my own beliefs. I will end off with a quote from Nelson Mandela, "We slaughter one another in our

words and attitudes. We slaughter one another in the stereotypes and mistrust that linger in our heads, and the words of hate we spew from our lips." I wish you safe travels, dear Friedrich. Remember to pack a good book for the long flight and to bring an open mindset!

See you soon,

Savannah.

TRIVIAL CONCERNS

By Isabella Ciriaco

Nascimento

Walking through the debris of what used to be the West Village, she thought about the last time she had been there. She had taken the subway, a 25-minute ride, and met a friend for brunch. Over the meal, she shared her concerns about getting her papers to finally be able to visit her parents. It had been a long wait, but she was confident that she would receive the documents soon. What trivial concerns!

Now, there was not any subway, or airplanes, there was barely any civilization left. As for humans,

she was not sure. Maybe there was someone else left, but she could not find them. As she walked around, she thought about how ridiculous the idea of immigration was: the borders, the need for getting a document in order to be physically present in a certain place, the implications that come with all of that, the missed chance of seeing her family one last time... Concepts created by humans, and for what? Keep control? Keep a certain type of people away?

As the world returned to its most primitive state, none of this

mattered anymore. And the funniest part was that she no longer needed her papers, there was no one there to tell her to leave.

Esme and Izzy

By Nancy Nieves

Esmeralda and Isabella, or Esme and Izzy respectively, became best friends in the first grade. At exactly 3 feet, Esme was at the lower end of the average height of three feet and ten inches. Izzy was three feet and five inches, but they were both still smaller than Lilith Maldonado, the class bully.

Every day at lunch, Lilith would sharpen her unevenly spaced eyes, wait for the lunch monitor to become distracted, and then she'd strike! Being the littlest in class, it was often Esme who ended up without her apple, or granola bar, or whatever dessert they'd deemed suitable for children at the Anna Silver School in the Lower East Side.

Three months into this torture, Izzy decided she'd had enough. When Lilith's grimy hand went for Esme's yogurt parfait, Izzy's swiftly intercepted, covering Lilith's hand with her own, and holding it in place with a firm grip. Lilith's oval face threw Izzy a threatening look, but Izzy held firm with an unbreakable gaze, her fingertips notably white. When Lilith squealed in pain, the teacher looked over and Izzy let go of her hand. As Lilith was ordered to sit down, Izzy calmly continued eating. Lilith spared Izzy a glance before she sat back down, but she didn't look threatening anymore.

There was something else lurking behind her beady brown eyes, and it looked a lot like respect mixed in with defeat.

"Wow." Esme whispered. Her hazel eyes rounded as she looked at Izzy in awe.

Izzy smiled, her cheeks dimpling. "Wanna be best friends?"

Esme and Izzy's friendship only grew stronger over time. They attended the same middle school and high school, with plans to attend the same college once they'd graduated in the following year.

Esme was still petite at just five feet while Izzy stood at five-six and was still growing. Izzy was exotic looking with caramel skin, a sharp jawline, and high cheekbones. Her long dark chestnut hair complimented her curvy figure. Izzy's popularity at school was unmatched, yet she was fiercely loyal to Esme, including her in every event and shooting down anyone who dared to disapprove. In contrast, Esme was an understated beauty. Her cherubic face was framed by dark, thick, wavy tresses that hung just past her shoulders. She embraced loose fitting clothes like track pants and hoodies, which often veiled her slender figure, preferring comfort over snug fitting outfits. Esme was

like a soft glowing candle to Izzy's bright flame, but it never bothered her.

"Tell me. Do you think he's in love with me?" Izzy, wearing a yellow floral sundress, lowered her dented chin at Esme as they linked arms and walked. She always made sure to look in Esme's eyes when she asked a question because she could always tell if Esme was lying.

"He's so in love with you." Esme, in wide leg overalls and a loose-fitting t-shirt, spoke in a humorous and steady tone as she agreed with her friend.

Izzy's ruby red mouth flew open, letting out a ghostly sound and dramatically placing the back of her hand against her forehead. A second later, she squealed with excitement.

Esme laughed. Izzy had picked her up at the number 6 train, so they could have a little more alone time together, before joining her family at their East Village walk-up. Izzy's annual Fourth of July party was already underway, in the building's shared backyard.

"Oh, I didn't tell you." Izzy said as they neared the front door to her building. "Lils is coming." She pursed her lips in a knowing grin and slanted her head.

Esme offered a thin smile. "I told you."

"I don't get it. Why would she plan this huge Fourth of July bash when she knows my parents throw this every year? Do you think she lied about it?" She scoffed with a half breath. "Yea, she probably did, just to mess with me."

Esme shrugged, even though Izzy had already voiced her answer. Lilith had been pushed one step behind Izzy ever since first grade. Izzy had allowed her into her inner circle, but Esme thought it was a strange relationship. They were more frenemies than friends.

As the girls made their way to the backyard, they were greeted with sparkling twinkly lights, festive fourth of July decorations, and salsa music that filled the humid air. Halfway through the festivities, as Izzy talked with her crush, she exchanged a knowing glance with her best friend. Esme grinned, and then headed back to Izzy's two-bedroom apartment to use the bathroom. When she made her way down the narrow hallway towards the restroom, she caught a glimpse of the vintage style kitchen.

"Don't!" Lilith cried.

"Don't be like that," Mr. Ortiz started. "You're prancing around in those little shorts and don't expect me to notice you?"

Esme gasped, loud enough for Mr. Ortiz to hear her and he

quickly turned around.

Lilith stood against the refrigerator door, her shaking hand against her mouth. She then ran past Esme, her long curls flying behind her and tears streaming down her face.

Frozen in shock, Esme looked at the man with dark chestnut hair and towering figure. He was the same man who had taken her and Izzy to see the Radio City Rockettes. He was the same man who had thrown the massive sweet sixteen party that Izzy talked about for weeks. He was the man Izzy adored. He was her father.

Mr. Ortiz turned eerily calm. "Please, don't tell Izzy. Lilith had a crush and she's obviously very embarrassed." He laughed it off with a shake of the head. "Lesson learned." He opened the refrigerator and took out two liters of soda. "How are you enjoying the party?"

She listened in a haze as Mr. Ortiz went on, until she could finally utter the nerve to inaudibly excuse herself and walked briskly out of the apartment. She ran into Izzy, near the small, fractured stairwell leading back to the yard. Izzy was clearly furious but trying to keep her voice down.

"Lilith is crazy and she's sick. I was coming to find you and she said that Papi kissed her. Kissed her. She said you were there..." Her voice trailed off when she met

Esme's look.

Esme wanted to say that she didn't know what she was talking about, but no words came. The rapid beat of her heart was thumping as fast as her breaths were leaving her body.

"Tell me—the truth." Izzy's voice was uneven, her eyes holding the fate of her life in Esme's next sentence.

Esme remained silent; but she felt the weight of Izzy's stare. It was a long grave look, and Izzy's whole body shook. Her words were strangled as she spoke. She grabbed Esme's hands, which were trembling as well.

"I know you'll tell me the truth! Then everything will be okay! Then everything can go back to normal! Lilith was lying, wasn't she? She hates me!" She spoke fast, her voice desperate and anguished. "Please, Esme! Please! Say something!"

In that moment as her friend begged her to tell her the truth, Esme knew what she really wanted.

"Lilith was lying." Esme said it quickly, ending her sentence with an uneven breath.

All the air seemed to leave Izzy's body, her stomach folded, and she physically crumbled. Esme quickly knelt down to catch her and ended up holding her on the ground as Izzy clung on to her and wept hysterically.

The year following the incident went quickly, and the girls never spoke of it again. The fact that Lilith Maldonado's family mysteriously moved to another state further eased unspoken tension. Family obligations and their senior year had kept them both busy and their schedules never seemed as in sync as they once were. They finally managed to meet at Tompkins Square Park after rescheduling a few times. The first day of summer was near and another Ortiz fourth of July celebration was two weeks away.

"It's going to be so awesome, Esme. Now that we're in Jersey, we have a backyard all to ourselves and papi's going to rent a tent. A tent! How cool is that? We have

to buy outfits. Please, woman. I beg. Let me dress you?" She bit her bottom lip, hopeful.

Esme nervously pulled on some grass. "Uhm...So, here's the thing. Mami wants me to work this summer at Sea Gate Beach club. She has a friend," She half laughed and looked up at Izzy who was nodding slowly, taking this in. Esme quickly lowered her eyes and continued. "So, that means I'll be working on the fourth..." She swallowed.

Izzy gave her a hurt look. "Well, you're not working all night. Can't you come after?"

Esme managed to look up at her with apologetic guilt in her eyes. "No. I'm so sorry, Iz..."

Meeting at Tompkins Square

Park in June had become a ritual the girls had started three years ago, but even a once tried and true tradition had been a struggle to keep. Now, with their senior year almost over, summer vacation would have been a cherished opportunity to catch up. Once fall began, they would be attending different schools. Esme had been accepted into Stoney Brook College, in Long Island, while Izzy would attend Columbia University, in New York City.

Izzy brought her tresses behind her ears and spoke quietly. "Well ok. Maybe next year." Then she quickly averted her eyes, because she could always tell when Esme was lying.



They Couldn't Put Out The Fire

By Natasha Wiles

Jordan Williams' day had just become even more delightful after he received that email. An email, from Victoria Commercial Bank (VCB), inviting him to come in for an interview. He had been apprehensively anticipating a response from the company the moment he clicked submit after uploading his resume. As a recent college graduate, he was adamant that he would not get his hopes up, as he was only dependent on his impressive college credentials to land him a spot in the organisation. Not only that, he ensured to take heed of his mother's advice: "don't put all your eggs in one basket." For this reason, he applied to multiple other banks in the financial district of his city even though he had his mind set on VCB, the most esteemed of them all. The night before the interview, he dry cleaned his Sunday's best and hung it beside his bed. He even ironed his underwear and socks in hopes of emanating his orderly attribute from within. He then avidly went through prospective interview questions. In an effort of being prepared for surprise questions, he did additional research on the company.

"Oliver Cook," he incessantly whispered the name of the CEO to himself. By the time he was through with this, he was confident that he would be offered the job. With this self-assured attitude, he whispered his prayers and went to bed.

On his way out the morning of the interview, Jordan picked up a whiff of burning wood. As he stepped out of his small wooden home, he saw the residents of his community tirelessly running across the street with buckets filled with water. One barefooted and another shirtless. A lady on the sidewalk with her baby looking not a day over 7 months posing on her hip. Her partner rushing from behind her yelling "I called the fire department!" It was pure chaos as the residents eagerly tried to save Mrs Maggie's house from disintegrating to nothing. Mrs. Maggie lives four houses down from Jordan. It was quite ironic that this would happen to Mrs. Maggie's home as she was the community's helper, healer and the one who residents would go to repair their relationships on her advice. Nevertheless, this chaotic unfortunate event was nothing

short of the regular day to day happenings in the Wilton Gardens Community. It was infamously known as the devil's pond. An inner city community where gangsters assumed positions of governance and anyone who dared to contest this self asserted power could be executed. It was the departure location for a lot of hopeful individuals seeking to socially mobilise and a popular destination where no one wished to visit. In spite of the community's current unrest, Jordan was unfazed so he hurriedly made his way to the bus stop to catch the bus that takes him in the city.

As he approached the city he gazed out through the dirty windows of the 82 bus. Although Jordan had been in the city countless times, he couldn't help but being engulfed in the eye-catching view of the skyscrapers, men and women in business attire walking with such importance in and out of the buildings and coffee carts on the corner of almost every block. He said his last prayer as he departed the bus and walked through the big black doors of Victoria Commercial Bank. He signed in at the front desk and took a seat awaiting his summon from the interviewer. Within a few minutes, Jordan turned his attention to the clinking sound of heels on the marble floor. It was a woman walking towards him with the most elegance he had ever seen. She had long black hair, nose straight as an arrow and legs longer than the roads he had travelled to get there. Whilst Jordan was so dazed by her figure, he hadn't realised that she had walked up to him and began talking.

"Mr Williams?" she asked a second time.

"Huh, oh yes, that's me" he awkwardly responded as he recovered from his bewildered daydream.

"I will see you now. You may follow me," she replied.

Jordan zealously followed behind the woman to her office. They began the interview shortly after exchanging pleasantries.

"Do you have your resume Mr Williams?" she asked.



“Yes ma’am” said Jordan as he handed her a folder with his resume tucked inside. The woman took the folder without hesitancy and began to browse through the contents. “Hmmm” she muttered.

Jordan was now anxious to find out what that meant. In an effort to distract his mind from the many questions his subconscious was aggressively throwing at him, he drifted his attention to the coffee cup on her desk. Not once did the woman look up at him. She kept flipping through the pages of the folder. Jordan’s palms were now sweating. He was now wondering if she was having a hard time understanding what he wrote. “Is my resume not comprehensible? Do I have typos? Did I spell a few words wrong?” he thought to himself.

Then the woman broke the silence.

“I see here Mr Williams you have an exceptional resume. You are the ideal candidate as your resume not only conveys that you are a hardworking young man but you would be fruitful to this firm,” She expressed.

Jordan exhaled a sigh of relief.

“However” she said following with a pause.

“Unfortunately, I would not be able to move forward with you. Your address is too much of a hindrance and we cannot allow the reputation of our firm to be tarnished by affiliating with a product of Wilton Gardens. I am sorry to have wasted

your trip here. I do wish you the best of luck for your future endeavours.”

Jordan was appalled by the words leaving the woman’s mouth. For a second he thought he was paralysed as he could not move a limb. He could not speak. He was just petrified. The lady arose from her seat and it was at that moment that Jordan realised that he had to save face. He adjusted his tie and arose from his seat. He expressed his understanding and thanked the lady for considering him in the first place then shamefully walked out of the room.

On his way out of the building, he noticed the news was on one of the tvs in the lobby. The news reporter was describing the misfortunes that resulted from a massive fire in a garrison community. Jordan was still devastated by the results of his interview, but he still managed to recognize the location on the news. It was the same fire in his community. The fire became so massive that it spread to three other houses beside Mrs. Maggie’s. The reporter began to detail the efforts of the community members preceding the arrival of the fire truck. She described how a total of three fire truck crew members had to team up to complete the difficult task of extinguishing such a force fire.

“Even with such a collective effort by both residents and the fire department crew,” she said “they couldn’t put out the fire,” she paused “soon enough.”

For and to Em

By Dren Ejupi

MY OLD MAN and I never arrived on the same page. Since I exited the womb. His high standards—always striving for perfection—crushed me. And we butted heads several times because of it. These nights ended in punches to the face, a fractured toe, scars from glass plates ricocheting off my fingers, and bruises encircled around my ribs... The occasional hand mark imprinted along my neck, too.

On other nights my mom got a beating with his leather belt and hands. I stood frozen in time then, hearing the agonized screams of my mom through the hollow bathroom walls, hiding in a tub, knees tucked under my chin. After each blow a tear trickled down and echoed against the bathtub.

The memory drilled into my brain, though—something I suffer to think about to this day—was Halloween twelve years ago. I'd woken up happy that morning, ready to buy a new Batman costume.

"Daddy, I'm getting my costume today... daddy?"

My father paid no mind to me; seated on his computer chair in his all white, imperial bedroom. The rain hit the window behind the black desk. The leaves had fallen off the trees and stuck to the windowpane. Lightning split the skies. He tucked a wife beater in his

underwear and put his high-knee socks on.

I kept calling, "Dad, dad," fighting for his attention and affection.

Mom stormed in. "Who's that bitch you keep talking to on the computer every night when I'm not home. Don't lie."

"What bitch?" my father replied stoically. "Do you know how crazy you sound? In front of him, too." he faced me, and got me involved. A naive kid, blind to the situation. "Hey, who's side are ya on?" He asked.

"Ummmm... hmmmm... You dad."

"See, honey." he grinned from ear to ear.

"Don't you lie to me..." she pushed him back on the computer chair, hitting his chest.

He exploded. A face so gentle shapeshifted into one capable of stone cold murder. He raised his hand. The wedding ring came down on her face and split her lip open. A drop of blood hit the grey fur carpet. I interfered.

"Stop... dad... stop that." I kicked his legs and slapped his arms. My father tightened his grip on my feeble hands, and threw me on the ground. My skull... planting on the cold hardwood floor. He continued hitting her, the slaps getting louder—gunshots, thunder. He threw my mom on the bed and

mounted her. His fists clenched and landed. Her blood soaked his knuckles, and he'd stop to wipe it onto his shirt, along with the foam dripping out of his mouth. I refused to back down and let her suffer more. So I rushed back in. With one punch to the face I hit the linoleum again. My ear rang out, nose bloodied.

"That's it, we're out of here!" my mom dragged my half-unconscious body to the front door and helped me up.

"Where are you gonna go? You BITCH... come back here!"

"Fuck you!" she said, stopping to sit on the bench in the lobby. No tenants stepped out from their door to check on the noise. It must've been that for weeks on end an older couple argued and threw household items in the apartment next to theirs. And the other, sane, tenants thought: "The typical shit." The apartment door slammed shut.

My mom checked my face out. "Are you okay, sweetie?"

The wide mirror in the lobby gave the perfect view of my ear: swollen and shaded in a faint colour of purple. "I'm fine, are you okay Mommy?"

"Yes." the tears trickled down her face.

I wiped them away with my shirt. "You're okay mommy. Daddy

doesn't mean it. He's angry."

"I know... I know."

The cut on her lip, my ear, suffused an eternal anger. That became the last day I smiled every morning. The day I stopped calling him 'dad.' No one understands me, I thought from that day forward. I guess I have him to thank for that motto.

Soon, during that day, my mom and I made sure to come back to a vacant apartment. We packed a month's worth of clothes into two suitcases and stormed off to our aunts in Brooklyn. Here, I can thank him again, because for one month straight I had to endure being around a circle of women who traded their own stories of abuse. Not only that, but also their husbands' lack of anatomical knowledge, how they couldn't pinpoint where the clit was located. Or how little they could last in the boudoir. I recall playing with my Marvel action figures and thinking, what's a clit? Lord, out of all the things they passionately spoke of, this, this is what ran rampant through my mind. If you think at this moment that I put the toys down and listened with intent to their tales of melancholy and their infinite sadness moving forward... you're right. They were these vulnerable, beautiful beings, brimming with wit and fortitude, and when I was with them, I never

felt more comfort and solace run through my body. The way their hair quivered, the inflections in their voice, their banter—I loved it. I loved women. Action figures, too, but a little less, I might add.

Some days later, I was laying on my aunt's bed, Nintendo in hand, crushing Shredder in Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, when she and her friend came in to try on some dresses. I looked up at both of them and slipped off the covers.

"Where ya goin'?" my aunt inquired.

"To my mom. I don't want to see your friend," I snickered, "naked."

The friend puckered her lips and gave me these puppy eyes. She faced my aunt. "I can't, he's so handsome." she bent forward and tugged at both my cheeks. "You can stay. No peeking, though."

I'd been hypnotized by her and took my seat on the bed again. I occasionally peeked up at her changing her dresses; the matte black bra and panties to match, stirring up an indescribable emotion—horny—in me as the dress slipped off her hourglass waist. Whenever her eyes met mine from the wide closet mirror I shot my head back down. Then the next dress came on.

"What d'ya think?" she turned to me.

My hands went limp. The nin-

tendo fell over my half-chub.

"..." My eyes widened. No words formed.

Only actions, which spoke volumes according to her reaction: A hand stroking her hazelnut hair and a subtle smirk followed by, "I just love this kid."

Oh yes, inflate my...

Well, Nintendo and action figures seemed non-existent once we'd come back home to my father's misogyny and violent outbursts. Despite my motto not changing, I did know that I disagreed with all his points, and promised myself to break the cycle of abuse and toxic masculinity. I was simply—and still am—indebted to these women for helping me come to this juncture in my life.

The one thing I always hated about growing up around women, however, was my helplessness toward them. There wasn't a single girl I hadn't fallen for whether it had been ten seconds or ten minutes. I was, as unfortunate as it sounds, the hopelessly romantic fuckboy. Most of my friends were girls, and their company, platonically or non-platonically, was more preferred than those of the male persuasion. I understood them better. And to my delight, the girls I saw myself hooking up with, loved the attention I gave them. The game of hot and cold. Cat and mouse. Whatever you wish to call

it. Soon they saw themselves hooking up with me. And we did.

On the flip side, just when you think you're good at something, in my case attracting girls, there was always someone better... a girl seducing guys left and right like it was her life's work.

I came across her during our junior year of high school in English class. The teacher had been reading an excerpt from Frankenstein when my horny, teenage ass scanned the room and stopped. I watched the shafts of sunlight prevail through the high curtains and shine onto her soft brown eyes, making them glow. She bit the tip of her pink mechanical pencil, ran her hand through that luscious, wavy hair, and we locked eyes. Her breasts curved nicely behind her red tank top. We exchanged glances here and there. And during each short-lived one I found myself falling harder and harder.

I finally had the balls to approach her after one of our classes, and pulled the classic accidental bump. But lord was she smart. When our shoulders bashed into one another our faces rested no more than a few inches apart. We watched each other's lips move. She then smiled quickly and held her right breast tight.

"Perv!" she announced to her posse of friends. "He touched my

boob."

One by one they all bumped my shoulder on their way out the door.

"You better watch out," my friend, Leo, popped up from the side.

I scrunched my face and followed him out. "Hold on," I stopped him, tugging on the strap of his backpack. "What do you mean?"

"I mean be careful, Brax. She's slept with half the guys in our grade. At least the good looking ones." He came closer so I could hear him over the din of students and the bell ringing for the second time. "My advice... stay away." He trotted off and disappeared around a row of lockers.

If there's something I picked up from my father, it's stubbornness. You couldn't tell me what not to do because I'd do it all the same. And Leo's words only motivated me to pursue her more. For the first time, I'd become the chase: the one trailing behind the crumbs she left before me.

I'd found my poor self scouring the labyrinthine halls for her face, but she'd been nowhere. Until... I had a stroke of luck when I entered the doors of the computer lab, a haven for the lazy students—myself included. What was there to not like? Cool Math games...Slitherio. Yes, I'll admit, these were all good and fun, but her red-painted fin-

gernails flipping through a worn paperback of *Pride and Prejudice*, while her free hand got lost in the abundance of her hair, caught my attention more.

"Everyone dies," I said with my charmingest of smiles, taking the seat next to hers.

"Shut up." She kept her eyes on the book. "I've read it before."

The clacking of keyboards and the low voices of anime characters on a student's phone filled in for the few seconds of silence that passed. I bit the flesh of my bottom lip, thinking of what to say. "Braxton," I said. My hand stretched out.

She closed her book. Specks of dust suspended up in the air. "Jayda."

"Uhhh, what say you and I forget about the whole boob grab thing and I take you out to lunch?"

She brought her glossy lips forward and tapped a nail against her chin. "Mmmm—no."

No? I'd never heard the words come out of a woman's mouth toward me. She was good.

"I'll make you a deal..." I paused for dramatic effect. "You give me fifteen minutes, and if you decide not to stay you can leave. Call me a perv out loud again, even. Tell your friends..." I saw her smile get wider and wider, encouraging me to keep doubling down. "Spill a drink over my head while you're at

it. Or punch me in the dick.”

Her full-fledged, white smile progressed into a light giggle.

“The food’s on me, too.”

“What were you thinking?” She inched forward. As did I. Her expectancy of a specific answer showed through her cheeky grin. Most guys at the school took these girls out to cheap pizza dates. A warm two slices and a fountain drink for five bucks. Albeit appealing, I did not offer this option.

“The Grey Dog downtown. You ever been?”

“No.”

“Perfect. After school then?”

A boy’s dandruff-soaked head peered over the PC. He put his finger to his mouth and shushed us. We both stood up at the same time and yelled, “Fuck off!” We laughed together. She fell into my chest a little, her sweet fragrance and coconut shampoo creeping up my nostrils.

She continued. “Meet me outside the building.”

I arose from the swivel chair and on the way out tripped over the leg of another chair. I turned back to her and played the embarrassment off with a goofy sound that spread through the halls. I was, to Leo’s dismay when I’d told him later that day, initiated into the world of Jayda Larson. It’s your life, he’d told me; mine to meddle

with. And I was willing to take the risk.

After school, I walked toward her. Her friends had been bickering into one another’s ear, hands over their mouths, cackling. Once I’d come into their line of sight they went their separate ways. I hugged her and we were off; down under the grimy subway station. After one train’s wheels shrieked and sparked, its speed sending a warm, omnipresent wind around the station, she said, “So how do I know you won’t kidnap me or something?” her bare arms came over one another, and her legs intertwined. I could read her nervousness. But later I’d find out it was a facade, an act to beguile me and draw me in.

“What, considering that I’m a perv and all?”

“Would you stop with that? It was a joke.” she playfully punched my chest.

“You being here is all the proof you need to know that I won’t. A part of you seems to trust me,” I added, confident of myself. “And you seem smart enough to make your own decisions.”

She bobbed her head up and down. “Fair enough.” the arms came down. Her legs spread out. I thought maybe she’d let her guard down but turns out our train arrived. And considering Grey Dog was a stop away, we’d both reached

a mutual, non-verbal agreement to stay silent for those two minutes. Our gazes, though, never averted. She seemed to be staring into my soul. As though she wanted a certain something from me. I didn’t know what it was... yet.

The silence hadn’t been sliced until we got comfy in the back booth... Wow, I’d forgotten what she said. Forgive me, reader, for omitting such an important piece of information. However, I did indulge in some flirtatious banter, so kudos to me.

It became responsible for what transpired after our pleasant lunch: a full on makeout session behind the steps of the train station. I slid my hands down the back of her frayed jean short pockets, and let our lips interweave in smooth, warm strokes, under a cloudless, humid night. I could feel the sweat of her glistening chest spread along my shirt. She dragged my lip out, in between her teeth, and let go. The fiery sensation of her gloss stuck to my lips as I watched her body slowly vanish down the steps of the station altogether.

Like any good make out session it can never be just the once. We made out anywhere we could. In a secluded park—preferably a bench or slide—the school’s staircase, the places we went to eat, parties. And on occasion we’d both show up to our next classes with hickey’s

starting from the neck, down to our chest.

Then, you saw this coming reader, don't lie to yourself, making out and hickeys elevated into sex. The sheer amount of it. Before her, my sexual experiences had consisted of missionary and cowgirl. A "vanilla" sex life as our youth would say in today's age. With her, my sexual horizons expanded in ways unfathomable to my already libidinous self. Reverse, doggy, standing, bent-over, from the side—need I go on? Yes, I have to. Aside from various positions, she introduced me to blindfolding, playing with temperature (ice cubes mostly), and, last but not least, shower sex—all of which are personal favorites in terms of kinks. I'd take the side when it came to positions. But this isn't the point. The point is how this gratification deprived me of my sight to see the damage that waited ahead. She had me wrapped around her finger, and I wanted her to be mine. To put a label on whatever we had going on. So much so that I made a conscientious effort to lure her into loving me. A girl with all emotional contact cut off for reasons she couldn't even describe. I realize now that love wasn't what I felt for her... it was obsession.

One night, laying in her bed, under the cool ceiling fan, I asked her if she wanted to make things official. She stared at me for a

minute, the moonlight reflecting off her body, before telling me to grab my things and leave. I didn't hear from her again. Or at least not until the pandemic passed and in-person learning returned. She never explained why she'd ghosted me—left me on a hook. I knew in the corridor of my mind that I wanted someone who could love me the way I loved them, though: unconditionally and completely. But I succumbed to her charm, thinking things would be different, that she'd reflected as much as I had during lockdown. No. The week after we had sex for the first time in months, I found out she'd been fucking another guy on the side. I collapsed against a locker and slid down onto the dusty floor, head in my arms. I felt a hand squeeze my shoulder. I looked up to see Leo, blessing me with his presence.

I chuckled through the heart ache. "You were right."

"You gotta let her go, man. She's not gonna change and you can't change her," he preached. "But you can change... you deserve better. Remember that." he stuck his hand out and I dapped him up.

I let her go. My phone would blow up with her texts when she'd been bored out of her gourd—not fucking other guys—and I never responded. Just like I thanked my father, I thanked her, for not only ruining what sex meant to me—a beautiful mess, but relationships

as well. This didn't stop me from putting myself out there, if you'd like to know. And I thank her for helping me see what I needed in life.

Flashforward to now, after other meaningless hookups, I found her. The person who understands me. Who loves me as I love her. She sits beside me on a twister blanket. An expanse of green grass shines under the sun and sways in the wind. I watch her hair tickle her face as she bullshits her way through a science paper, and move it out the way gently with the tips of my fingers.

"What's the matter?" She says as I look at her.

"Nothing." Oh, but it is something. And Em, if you're reading this just bear with me... Readers, too.

I needed so much reassurance before you walked into my life. I went around with this shadow of doubt. And maybe you couldn't tell, but I was in a hole... desperately trying to dig myself out before it was too late. Then we hung out that first time and I saw the hurt in your eyes instantly. I saw the eyes stripped of all hope and a belief that things would never ever get better because no one could possibly begin to fathom our pain. So we hung out a second time. And when I hugged you at the end of our night I said, "you

don't have to hold it this long." I said these words to myself because for the first time in a long time I wanted to hold the warm embrace of another. Every time after that, looking at you or being near you made me lose all the control I had over being careful with getting close to someone else. I didn't want to take control of it anymore. To tell you the truth, accepting that is what's led me here... with you. The reason why I yawn in your graceful presence is not because I'm

tired or bored of you, it's because I'm safe. And I think "Hm, if I nap right now, in her arms, she'll be there when I wake up." Do you know how otherworldly that feeling is? To not have a morning of awkwardness and a night of loneliness ever again. I yawn because I love you. I push forward because I love you. I refuse to get up and leave your place because I love you. Time isn't even a word in my vocabulary when it comes to being around you because time itself will

never be enough. Everything outside in this loud city goes mute and there's only you in my eyes. Your voice. Your touch. Your laugh. Your smile. Your perfect imperfections. I love you, Em. And I say goodbye to this past of mine with a not so heavy heart, and a big thank you to these people. Here's to a chapter that has only just begun.

Faithfully yours,

Dren Ejupi









Y i n - Y a n g

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Artworks By:

Zeynep Aksel

Ashley Burns

Photos By:

Jonathan Portec

BY RICARDO

BY EMI GAMBETTA

From the summit, to this box
Your voice avalanches
In low-fidelity
Comes crashing in
Shrinking the space
Into a canvas
All around me
This is not home
I am in a terminal
Sleepless
Snorting like a pig
Watching you take off
Holding a hand unlike mine
You cannot be salvaged
And the sun does not give life
It only burns
Filthy with fire
All that it does is done to me
All that you do is done to me
Breathe in out in out in out

Into an inkblot across the floor

She buries her face in her hands
Peeking at him through her fingers

I promise:

BY ASHLEY BURNS

She is fading, always running a golden betrayer
away from me,
Her promises have been told I rise and she falls
before— Our fates bigger than her
for I heard them yesterday or me
at twilight Maybe it is divine or simply
The weight of the world is the way it was meant to be,
passing us by— I am her adverse half,
for we have been doing this For the cosmos wouldn't
a long time, give us any choice in that
I am empty without her

I miss her,
She runs again like clock- She sees me as silver and
work, cold. Asleep
her steps leaving scorch I miss her,
marks upon the waves "Stay," I beg, for I will only
She is my envy and my beg for her
muse, "I promise," she lies—
"Stay," I call, and I am left her words a fiery venom—
empty— they burn me
"Stay," and I am waiting— She sinks beneath the sea
I am a weight in the dark, I call back and swear I hear
murky water, sinking the stars laughing at me—
She smiles, "I promise" "Stay?" the Moon asks
Her eyes bright, Awake, "I Promise" the Sun lies
She is bright and warm—

untitled

BY Ashley Burns

I think I'm cursed. I never really thought about it that much, but the more I experience these thoughts that I don't even mean to have, the more I'm sure that I'm not normal. Maybe I'm just depressed, maybe there's something wrong with me and I have a weird relationship with all things morbid. But nothing really made me question my sanity until these thoughts actually started happening.

Normally, when I walk around I think, and only think. I'll walk across the street and think, a car is going to hit me. The M31 bus is going to hit black ice, spin out of control and run me over, breaking both of my legs and multiple ribs until I bleed out on the sidewalk. I'll walk under scaffolding and think about how the whole thing will come crashing down, the metal bars will loosen from their screws and impale me. I'll be walking in the park and a dog will turn rabid and bite into my leg. I will walk home from work and a man will be behind me; I'll think, he's going to kill me, he's going to drag me into an alley and beat me to death. I'll be walking over a bridge and it will collapse—the cars, the bikers and walkers will all fall into the frigid water and catch pneumonia; some won't be able to swim. I'll be at a crowded place, a concert, and someone will shoot up the building. I'll be walking past a famous monument and a bomb will go off and the rubble will crush me. I'll be using an elevator and it will drop twenty flights and I'll die on impact. I'll be scuba diving, like

I do every summer, when my family goes to California for vacation and my oxygen will run out. Or a shark will come out from the depths and drag me down into the darkness. I'll be skydiving and my parachute won't open. I'll be skiing and an avalanche will bury me, and no one will find me for days, as I slowly suffocate, die from hunger, or dehydration. I'll be on a plane and something will malfunction, the plane will go down and crash.

I think there's something wrong with me. I'm cursed. I always think about the worst things and nothing ever happens. I cross the street and live. I walk home at night and I am unharmed. I pet a stranger's dog and the exchange remains friendly. There's something wrong with me. There's something wrong with my brain and I don't know how to make it stop. This can't be normal.

I walk to the bus and wait ten minutes for it to arrive, trying to stay warm as snow pelts me in the face. I watch the pedestrians cross the road as the light turns yellow. I think, a car is going to try to make it, they will be in a hurry and they are going to breeze through the light and hit someone. Nothing happens. Nothing should happen. But a man, tall, dark hair, six foot, crosses and a black Toyota speeds up, the light still yellow. The man collides with the car, he rolls across the concrete and cries out. I jump and watch as people run over. They're going to slip on black ice, they're going to create a mess of bodies. One

by one they go down. My eyes widen as I watch. It's a collision of limbs as bodies meet each other, unable to get to the man. A woman walks across the street on the other side of the crosswalk with a stroller. I think, she is going to trip. Her stroller is going to keep going without her. She falls, and the wheels on the stroller send it forward, across the street, into traffic.

Oh God.

Shut up. Stop thinking.

I'm cursed.

But I can't turn it off. I look up at a gargoyle on the top of an old building. It's going to break. But that's impossible. I stand still and watch in horror as the stone slowly cracks and a loud snap fills the air as it falls and collides with a construction worker across the street. I cover my mouth.

Oh my God.

"Someone help!" The people in the street yell as cars build up, waiting to cross. The light turns green. They're all going to—

No. Shut up!

I grab my head and close my eyes. I need to focus. Something is happening. I listen to the sound of my breathing, trying to shut off the screams of the people around me.

"He's dead!"

"It was the statue!"

"How did this happen!"

“Someone call an ambulance!
This man was hit by a car!”
“Has anyone seen my baby!”
“His leg is broken!”
“He was crushed to death!”
“I broke my ankle on the ice!
Someone help me!”

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. It's
my fault, it's all my fault. I'm sorry.
I'm so sorry!

I squeeze my eyes shut as tears
threaten to fall. I try to listen to
the wind—to anything else. Then I
hear it—the sound of a plane over-
head—and I can't stop the thoughts

as they form. It's going to crash.
It's going to crush us. It will hit a
bird and nosedive into a few build-
ings before it lands on us all. An
explosion will sound off and the
bus stop, the people spread across
the ice, the stroller, the crushed
man, me, we will all be consumed
by fire.

Flakes of snow were sent by the
skies
Ushering in a new sight of white.
Not one sown with seeds,
But of frozen crystal shards,
Each was unique in all it was.

Still, I took on an impossible task.
To search for you among them all,

system

BY BETTY LEE

Booting...Booting...
Hello.
Welcome to the System.
I am here to help guide you.
Do you have any problems or questions
you wish for me to solve or answer?
What?
I'm sorry.
But that is not a valid response.
Please try again.
Do you have any problems or questions
you wish for me to solve or answer?
...
I will need a valid response for me to

help guide you.
Otherwise I will deactivate in...
5...
4...
3...
2...
This is real?
Please be more specific.
Please try again.
What are you? How'd you get
in my head?
I am the System.
I am here to help guide you.
I am your own personal guide.

Do you wish for any guidance?
Specifically speaking, your mental or
physical health?
...
My System points to your heart.
Do you wish for a summary result?
...
I will need a valid response for me to
help guide you.
Otherwise I will deactivate in...
5...
4...
Yes please...
Heartache.

A winter wish

BY LUIS VIVAR

And with every passing flake
I would fail to make a find.
For you would never appear again.

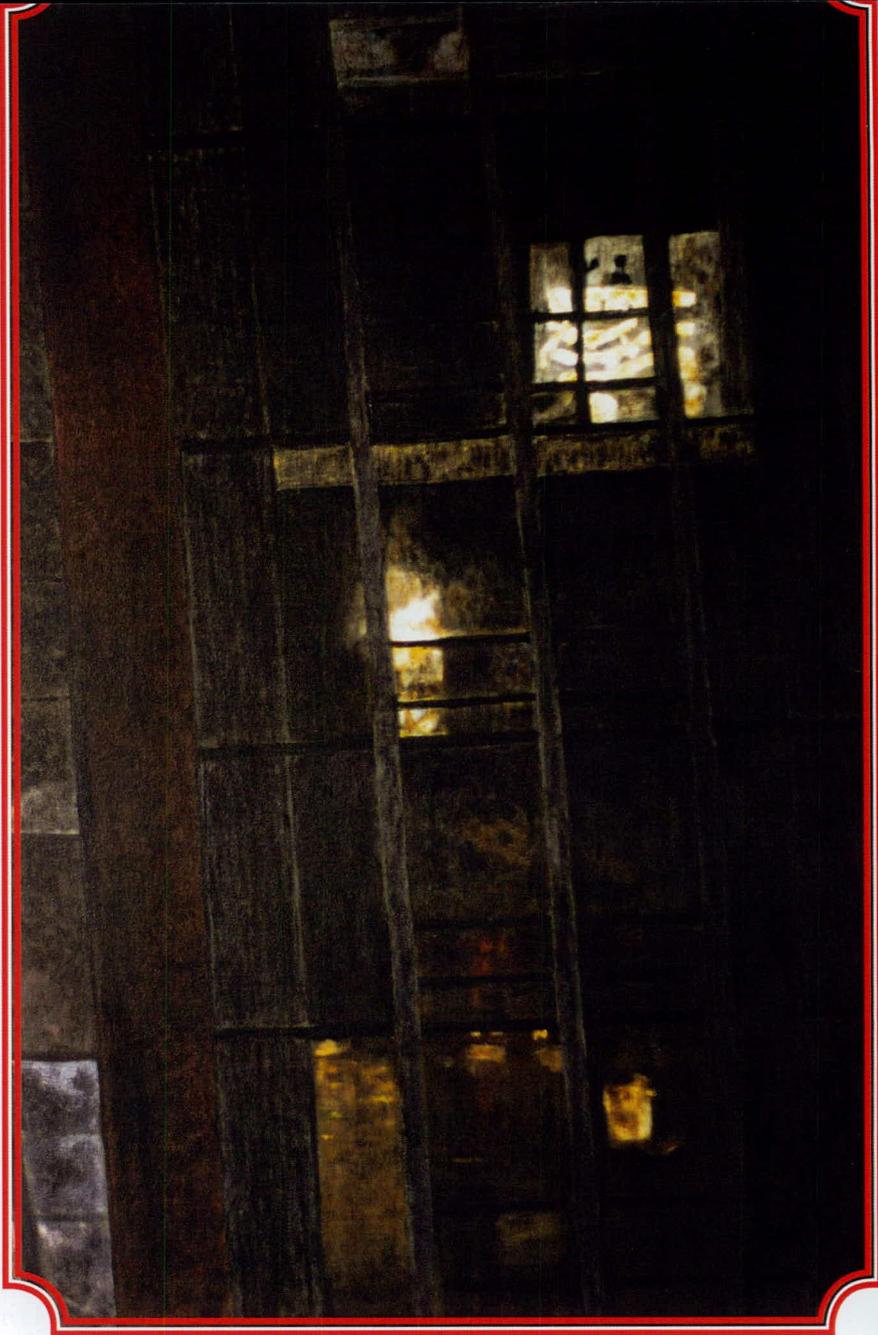
So I was left with nothing but a canvas,
White ground to paint with new colors.
But in spite of that I had one wish,
To find my familiar muse,
To paint another spring day.

You're wishing for company.

Correct?

...Yeah.

Do you wish for any more guidance?



split-second spring

BY LUIS VIVAR

A spring breeze blew,
Memories handcrafted by you.
That day we danced among dandelions.
They bloomed bright yellow hues,
As if they believed themselves the sun.
In your hand laid mine,
Our fingers wrapped in a tight bind,
I raised my eyes only to be blinded by your sight.
Yet blinder to that, I knew not of time.
I thought not of it how it trickled,

fading,
fleeing,
a fool I was.

Would a wind whisk seasons past?
What of the meadow where we once danced?
Both were wiped in a wake of white, as were you and I.
A spring breeze blew,
Stolen were my memories of you.

I can't finish anything I write

BY KAYA FADER

I can't finish anything I write. I hear a sentence in my head that resonates, it hits the little chimes and the brainpower belfry shudders, and I record the impression that it made like one of those kindergarten construction paper leaf rubbing activities, but within that crude shape the veins of that foliage fail to expose themselves. And the stem stabs through the paper as a knife exits its victim's back, or as an ugly mountain cuts through the fog and you keep it, for sentimental value if anything and because you are the artist: of this dysfunctional mess of lines and letters and impressions that don't reveal themselves to anyone but you. It's an all-exclusive oxymoron that has everything to do with pride and self-en-

itlement and nothing to do with common sense. I think a lot of us have that same kind of monogamous selfishness towards our creations. We're embalming our first born before puberty, we're planting a seed and reveling in the juvenile enthusiasm capsule we reared but at any threat it's formalin and isopropyl alcohol and she's there on the shelf unfinished, yet untainted. Undiluted. And I think maybe that's the reason I can't finish anything I write: it's the same reason you drowned your daughter in the tub and it's why the man in the building fed himself to a sidewalk three days before his retirement. Maturation is the death of grace, it's both the zenith and the terminal end. Closure isn't the end-all be-all for creative endeavors: it's dormancy.

shame

BY STEPAN KOPEVĀKIN

SOME PEOPLE PICK THEIR noses or bite their nails. I place one finger on my neck for a few seconds. Usually I just want to see if my heart is racing at all but when I'm feeling really anxious I have to look at the long dial on my watch and count the beats for fifteen seconds. My parents didn't notice this quirk when I was a kid and by the time I got to middle school it was too late. The thing had fully metastasized.

My dad, a heart surgeon, kept his old medical textbooks in his office. Medical Diagnosis and Treatment was my favorite. I learned about things like congenital heart defects and atrial fibrillation—ventricular, paroxysmal, persistent: I memorized them all.

Soon enough I was experiencing the telltale signs; shooting pains in my left arm, stabbing pains in my chest, heart palpitations, numbness in my face. They call it somatic symptom disorder. You focus too much on the sensations in your body and start to think that you're sick. Common comorbidity: panic attacks. Let me tell you, not a good combination. Going to the emergency room feels like the only solution. I made sure my parents understood that.

Dad, I feel like I'm dying.

This only has to be real once

dad. Please.

I'm not going to sleep. I can't sleep. Let's go.

Blood pressure cuffs, stethoscopes, EKGs, echocardiograms, full metabolic panels.

My beloved ritual.

Every time we left the ER I felt high as a kite. Imagine the relief of finding out that you're not going to die. Now squeeze it into a pill that you can take whenever you feel anxious. That's what the ER was to me.

I didn't get some kind of twisted enjoyment from driving my parents crazy. I really thought that I was dying. They took me to all kinds of therapies and treatments. CBT, EMDR, equine therapy, hot yoga. Hot yoga with goats. My dad didn't mind paying as long as I stopped embarrassing him in front of his colleagues. In the end only one thing ended up helping: simple exercise.

In high school I joined track and field. I didn't like it. Running raised my heart rate which made the panic set in. I had to learn to reason.

Max heart rate at 16, 200. Safety margin, let's say 20%. 160. Stay at 160 and we're good.

I did more calculations in my first week on the track than I did in math class. After a few more weeks I was in tune enough with my body

to know when to slow down. The rituals stopped. Needless to say I didn't set any records. As painful and embarrassing as running was, it kept my compulsion at bay.

IN MY FIRST SEMESTER at UCLA I met this guy named Ethan. We had a lot in common, attitude and all. He was a pre-law major and I was a literature major. Then I was pre-law and he switched to literature. We spent long nights in the quad talking about what both of us wanted to do with our lives. He did most of the talking.

You're obsessed with me aren't you. It's okay, just admit it.

Yes, I was obsessed. No, I'm not gay. I like women as much as the next guy. And, no, I'm not one of those repressed part-time gays.

We love putting each other in boxes, don't we? As soon as you start letting others do that to you, your life is over. Mark my words. Done.

There's a lot of people who would agree with me. Some of them are the same people that put out your fires and make your laws and defend you in court. They do all these things knowing that one day someone like Ethan might wander into their lives and they'll have to make a choice. The choice between being a bigtime lawyer and being a gay guy in a suit. I

made my decision a while ago.

Ethan transferred to Stanford after our first year.

THE COMPULSION RETURNED FOR a while. Wherever I was, it was by my side. Waiting to talk to a professor. On the bus. Brushing my teeth. The next few years were rough. All the nurses at the nearby emergency clinic learned my name. Running didn't help anymore. I started doing the things you aren't supposed to do to keep your heart healthy. Binge drinking and smoking. These helped.

On my twenty-first birthday my dad called me and told me to come out to the parking lot. He was waiting for me with a brand new

race bike. Carbon fiber wheels, fifteen pounds, wireless gear shifter. I told him that I didn't need a new hobby and that he should take it back. He wouldn't have it.

Are you kidding me? Do you know how much this thing cost me? You're going to take it and you're going to stop sitting inside all day.

As much as I hate to say it, that bike turned out to be the best gift I'd ever gotten. There's this trail that goes across our campus. White lines, that's what we call it. I go all the way down, take a ten minute break, and go back. My compulsion has been dormant for a while now but sometimes a headline flashes in front of my eyes

while mid ride.

UCLA Student, 23, Dead From Sudden Cardiac Arrest.

In the past I would pull over but now I just keep going. If I died, I think that people would say that I died doing what I loved, and that thought makes me happy.

I know how all of this sounds. Heavy, right? I know. Here's a question though. Can you do five miles in ten minutes? Let's see it. Get on a bike. Any bike. Three gears, twelve gears, cruiser, whatever. How about five in twelve? Five in fifteen? You know why you can't? Because you've never had to choose.

Before & After

BY ESTHER SUTTON

Two Titans meet at a bar in the Lower East Side. There's no punchline.

The first has already been waiting for half an hour. He's early. He's used to waiting. His dark curls are slicked back, beginning to revolt against the gel. His beard—long and neatly trimmed, shaped to a point. This is Before.

The second bursts through the door, shivering. He's forgotten his coat. His long auburn waves, usually unruly, are now darkened and dampened by the rain. He glances at the other before running to the restroom. This is After.

The bar was Before's choice. It's dimly lit, dark wood lining the walls. Small tables and even smaller chairs. Tinny jazz buzzes faintly through an old speaker. The bartender never speaks. It's not out of shyness, it's just the way they are. They are not a character. Before likes this place.

"I hate this place."

After sits down across from the other. He's slightly dryer now. "I don't understand the city. Everyone's so closed off here." He reaches for the ale the other had waiting for him and hastily downs a quarter of the glass.

"You surely enjoy the beer," Before scoffs. There's a small smile on his face. He's missed him—even the complaining.

"Beer is beer," After chides through a belch.

The bartender disagrees with this statement, but they are not a character.

Before opens his mouth, but forms no words. He wants to say so much to the other. No one leaves him as tongue-tied. He takes a small sip of ale, licks his lips, and clears his throat. He attempts to speak again, but After breaks through the silence first.

"You're looking well. Much better than the last time I saw you," he says softly and carefully,

testing the waters of the other's mood. He doesn't want to upset him. He also would rather not get yelled at today. "I mean, not that you looked bad, you just seem more...well rested. Not that—"

"It's okay," Before interrupts before After says something he doesn't mean. "I know I was worse for wear the last time we spoke. But I do feel better now."

"Even though it's raining?"

"Even though it's raining," Before nods.

"Do you think he is watching—"

"I don't want to think about him at all." Before is looking down at his ale, his amber reflection staring back at him. "No one thinks about him these days. When it storms, they have a meteorologist to explain it away. Not a fairytale."

Thunder cracks. The lights in the bar flicker briefly. Before winces, but After does not notice.

After smiles cheekily, "We're not fairytales," he teases.

"To them we are."

"Well, maybe you are. People allude to you all the time. Modern you, American you, that one Alien movie..." There's a small hint of jealousy in After's tone. Before makes note, but doesn't press further.

"I didn't catch that one. Was it any good?"

"I didn't see it."

"Oh."

A wash of awkward silence covers the two. After taps his glass, the band around his finger making a sharp ping with every rap. He looks around the bar. It's just the two of them (the bartender not included). He suddenly remembers a question he's been wanting to ask the other. "What do you go by these days?" he asks with genuine curiosity.

Before seems almost startled by this.

"Excuse me?"

"Well, I know you're not going by that name. What do people call you?"

Before is vexed by this question. Of course he doesn't go by his given name. That would be ridiculous. Every few years, he picks a new name to use—to fit in. He could easily tell the other this name. But instead, he says something he knows will hurt.

"You're still wearing your ring," he says matter-of-factly. He stares at the other in a 'take that' glare and grabs his glass to take another sip.

The bar is silent. The music has ceased. The rain no longer patters against the windows, as if time has paused. The two stare at each other. Before notices the hurt in After's eyes. He's succeeded—yes—and he should feel good. He doesn't.

"You know I never take it off. Why would you ask that?"

"Why would you ask for my name?" Before throws back. He crosses his arms over his vital organs.

After is at a loss. What has he done this time, he thinks. "I...I was just curious..."

"You're always just something, aren't you?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Why do you need to know my name?" Before is too loud for the quiet bar. The bartender glares at him, but Before is blinded by his rage.

After searches the other's eyes. He looks away and takes a deep breath. On the exhale, says, "I just wanted to know what to call my brother."

Before feels like an asshole. Maybe the rain is affecting him, maybe the city has closed him off. He's been alone for a long time. He's forgotten that not everything is an attack—as well as how fragile his brother can be. He feels claustrophobic, why did he pick this bar? His brother won't look him in the eye. He takes another sip, but all that coats his tongue is sour guilt. He runs a hand through his hair, ruining its slicked-back nature. It feels as though something in this universe would collapse if he admitted he'd done anything wrong. Has he? Or has his brother overreacted?

"Patrick."

After looks back, jerked into reality. "What?"

"Patrick," Before states through a sigh. "I go by Patrick these days." He searches his brother's eyes for some type of reaction and braces himself.

After a few moments, After's mind finally catches up. He stifles a laugh. "Patrick?" he draws

it out, as if it's some made-up word. "Patrick?" he repeats. This time he does not hold back his laughter. He scoots his chair back, allowing himself to double over in drunken giggles.

Before tries not to smile and join in the laughter, but fails. He really has missed him, hasn't he? "What's so funny about Patrick? And what are you going by these days? I bet your chosen name isn't much better."

After wipes the tears from his eyes, a few chuckles still escape his lips. He coughs and fans himself. Maybe this beer isn't like all the rest. (The bartender knows this.) He takes a few more moments to calm down and just looks at his brother head-on with a sly smirk.

Before understands and shakes his head. "Really? You still go by that name? And people don't think you're..." He struggles to find the words in his disbelief.

"People just think it's cool," After shrugs. "They think I had hippie parents or something. People have lots of names now."

"And it doesn't hurt you? Its meaning?"

"Sometimes. But I don't have to live up to that. Names don't have to mean anything anymore." After feels proud of himself.

Before looks at his

brother. He's proud of him as well. He looks down at his now empty glass. Before he can even ask, the bartender has placed two more pints at their table, quickly scurrying away. He likes this place.

Patrick and Epimetheus talk in a bar on the Lower East Side, cherishing each other's words. Neither knows when they will meet next.



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SORRY TO BOTHER YOU

BY LUKAS ZALESKIS

Shockingly uncompromising for an American-made film, at no point does it ever water down its politics or whitewash any of its subject matter for palatability. The film urgently addresses capitalist alienation and the hopelessness it engenders in the drifters it creates, revealing to us the power and the necessity of the class struggle to give life meaning and beauty and to fight for something better. It's not exactly revolutionary in its conclusion, but as fine a primer for arriving there as I've ever seen.

DUNE: PART 2

BY LUKAS ZALESKIS

Frank Herbert's *Dune* is a story about change: changes in people, in their ideas, in their environments, in their world orders. It is a beautiful and unwieldy tome of interior thoughts, feelings, and schemes submerged beneath an ocean of intricate details of history, lore, and politics; it is a wonderfully bizarre and singular work of science fiction. An effective adaptation of such a work seemed dubious at best, particularly given past attempts, though the text is so fertile that even these wield their own genuine merits.

I found myself appreciating Villeneuve's naturalism after having successfully mourned what felt like a missed opportunity—that being strict realism in favor of Herbert's whimsy. There are arguments to be made criticizing Ville-

neuve's constructed veracity as a lack of imagination, but I might defend him in this instance and say that there is a very deliberate, thoughtful attention not to making *Dune* 'realistic,' but to making it real. Villeneuve's *Dune* feels like a nexus of millenniums of history, shaped and weathered and scarred by the forces of time and nature—bled over, warred over, theologized, codified, resisted, worshipped. Herbert approached writing his worlds and characters with a reverent dispassion; he understood an interconnectedness of human belief, artistic achievement, and political ambition in relation to environment: his lens was anthropological and, crucially, ecological. If not literally realized, Villeneuve honors that holistic method in his own ways, through construction and suggestion of culture via habitat, cos-

trayed your brothers and sisters, the genuine evil of participating in the torture of humanity.

None of Cash's material improvements come without human cost, personal cost, psychic cost. To willingly serve as a functionary of the system marks you (in this case literally) as complicit, whether it be his head wound, his fancy car, his suits. No ethical consumption, etc. But rather than throwing up its arms and shrugging, the film argues to fight, to find purpose and meaning in struggle, to be uncompromising and militant.

tuming, architecture, and technology.

I believe that the black sun over colorless Giedi Prime shaped Harkonnen thought and history, resulting in the fascistic culture that spawned our villains, down to Feyd-Rautha's ebony and ivory blades wielded to kill the weak and vulnerable. I believe that under Harkonnen oppression, Stilgar has seen too many die not to believe in the Lisan al Ghaib and the promise of paradise, that the prophecy is his only balm to the misery of the Fremens taboo against giving tears to the dead. The fundamentalist zeal of the southern tribes of Arrakis crystallizes after witnessing the scarred and merciless volcanic wastes they're forced to endure: the messiah must come to deliver them.

Where Villeneuve's vision excels as an adaptation is in how it not only

understands the themes of the original text (the De Laurentiis version as well as Jodorowsky's both fell victim to hero worship) but also literally adapts the work for the current moment, primarily through Chani, who is given so much more dignity and power here than she's ever had. Her raw, uncompromising love for her home and her people forges for her a secular clarity that cuts through the architected ecstasy that grips her brethren, and empowers her to fight and to resist a deeper, more devastating war even after the battle is won. It is through Chani's ferocious, worn, and relentless heartbeats that the film speaks with a colonized voice, an echo of the rage and the hate and the righteousness mounting in hearts today. She is the conscience of Arrakis. I cannot stop seeing the fear in her eyes as she studies Paul at the threshold of his family's atomic

weapons vault: the way she is watching in real time as Paul disappears and the cost of this war comes into focus.

The boy we met on Caladan has never been more far away than when Paul erupts into the emperor's throne room following a spectacular, terrifying display of the desert power his father had hoped to cultivate; our vantage shifts to that of the emperor, the princess, the Reverend Mother: the most powerful people in the galaxy, all huddled into a corner. Once the doors to the room are blown open and a hushed pall falls, their sardaukar warriors—the most feared, most lethal fighting force in the imperium—advance into the dust to meet the threat, only to vanish without a sound as Muad'Dib and his fedaykin fighters emerge. The camera's distance from this desert creature: faceless, bloodied,

descending with leopard-intent, alienates us from Paul—shocks us as we see with sober eyes what he's become.

Villeneuve's *Dune* presents itself with a documentarian frankness which reveals the processes culminating in the objects of focus: whole logics and continuums inform our characters, cultures, and art and, in that, the films realize not just Herbert's work, but his intent, his concerns, and his method. The evolution of Paul Atreides into Muad'Dib into the Lisan al Ghaib is not a triumphant hero's journey: aspirational, idealistic, or fairy-tale—it is the tragic erosion of a character weathered by forces and factors and choices, each of these richly communicated to us by the films' constructed veracity: their emphasis on making us believe.

THE IMMIGRATION CONCERNS I SHARE ANTONIO VARGAS IN HIS BOOK “DEAR NOTES OF AN UNDOCUMENTED CITIZEN

Right now, beyond worrying if planet Earth will be here in 50 years or thinking if I will ever be able to retire, there is one main concern that hovers over my mind every single day: immigration. More specifically, the retrogression USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) finds itself in. In a few words, this retrogression happens because the government reached the limit number of green cards it can issue every year for different categories, and the number of applicants is so high that immigration can't (or it isn't interested in) keep up with it. This affects me directly because it means I cannot submit my request for permanent residency – I need to wait in a line that doesn't really exist. Even though I'm not undocumented, this long process I'm facing, and the feeling that the odds are against me, makes me worry about my future and about how long I still need to wait for answers of any kind. Not having my papers prevents me from working full time, and as the gap on my resume grows bigger and bigger, I

worry about the future of my career and how I will even be able to compete with other professionals when the time comes. It also prevents me from seeing my family, because I've reached a point in the process where, if I leave the country, the odds of getting a renewed visa to come back are less likely. So, I stay. I grow hopeless every day about getting my papers any time soon because according to the USCIS bulletins, there are around 40,000 visas available every year inside my category versus more than 800,000 applicants. Inside this big category there are subcategories and in the one that applies to me, there were 5,930 green cards granted last year against 26,193 applicants still waiting to submit their requests. I'm one of those people.

About a year ago, Forbes published an article claiming that the U.S. population and economy were at a risk of declining and stagnating without immigrants, along with other data showing that immigrants are a great force that generates millions of dollars for America's econ-

omy – however, the “popular belief” says the immigrants are here to drain tax dollars, steal jobs from citizens, and commit crimes. Immigration has always been a hot topic in American politics, and the prospect of Trump winning the upcoming election raises even more concerns, since his campaign has a strong anti-immigration appeal. As an example, during his term, using Medicaid was considered a Public Charge: a noncitizen's likelihood of becoming primarily dependent on the government for subsistence. Because the government does not want this kind of expense, using a Public Charge service prevents a person from getting a green card. Again, this affects me directly because if I can't use Medicaid then I need to struggle to find another affordable healthcare option because I do not want to risk being ineligible for a green card.

The book *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen*, written by the Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist Jose Antonio Vargas, covers

exactly this unsettling feeling of living in a country that doesn't want you there, the feeling of constantly having to hide, and not having your family with you. The author, born in the Philippines, was brought to the United States at the age of 12 to live with his grandparents, who were naturalized citizens by that time. When he was 16, while trying to get a driver's license for himself, he found out that his green card was fake, and that his grandparents lied to him just to try to protect him and give him a better life in America. From that moment and forward, Vargas lived a conflicted life where, while trying his best to pass as American, he experienced the pressure of lying about his immigration status in order to do what he loves the most: be a journalist.

After many years of hiding, he came out about his illegal status in a bold New York Times' article called *My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant*. Seven years later, in 2018, he published the book *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen*, where he made sure to affirm

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By ISABELLA CIRIACO NASCIMENTO

this isn't a book about politics but the effects of it, calling it a "book about homelessness, not in a traditional sense, but in the unsettled, unmoored psychological state that undocumented immigrants like myself find ourselves in. After 25 years of living illegally in a country that does not consider me one of its own, this book is the closest thing I have to freedom."

I relate to it personally because the book highlights the difficulty of getting the permanent residency through the "right way," because when the system is so slow and the data shows that there are no documents available for everybody, how many people can go through the whole process and actually achieve their residency? When it takes years to get your papers, what's supposed to happen in between? That's where I am right now, and as the author describes, you live your life in constant limbo, stuck and with nowhere to go.

I share with the author similar concerns and feelings, like the infuriating idea that immigrants, legal or not, can (and are expected to) declare

and pay taxes without benefiting from it. Not having a Social Security Number is not a problem, since there is ITIN, an alternative number identification for taxpayers. In other words, the United States collects millions of dollars every year from which the immigrants cannot benefit. Vargas calls it "taxation without legalization". In my case, despite paying 10% of my salary in taxes during my two years as an au pair, I still don't qualify as a resident to pay cheaper tuition for college.

There is also the sense that the United States is always so concerned with expanding its political power, doing so without measuring the consequences. For example, it's known that the US financed and supported the dictatorship periods in almost all countries in South America – a measure to "contain the spread of Socialism", in the peak of the Cold War. The imperialist acts of the United States heavily influenced the economy and politics of those countries, but when Latinos try to immigrate to America, there is a huge effort to stop it. Vargas mentioned: "when

white people move, then and now, it's seen as courageous and necessary, celebrated in history books. Yet when people of color move, legally or illegally, the immigration itself is subjected to question of legality." (141)

One passage of the book that struck me hard was when the author says, "separation not only divides families; separation buries emotions, buries it so far down you can't touch it." (18) And that is exactly how I feel about my family. To be able to live here and not suffer from the distance, I simply don't think about them anymore, I avoid calling and avoid looking at pictures. Out of sight, out of mind. It is not that I don't care about them, but it is just so hard to live without them that I rather not think about them at all.

Even though immigration has always been a hot topic for the United States (everybody wants to come here! Land of opportunities, right?), I personally do not see positive changes in the future any time soon. For example, I don't see USCIS increasing the number of

green cards available to relieve the long line of people (myself included) waiting. Why would they? I believe one of the reasons is what Vargas called the "master story about immigrants". He mentions how in the media, especially in some channels like Fox News, "illegals" are cast as enemies, a collective 'burden' to society, 'draining' public programs and 'stealing' jobs from native-born Americans." (150) This narrative is so largely propagated that Americans not only don't know anything about the immigration system, but they see immigrants as something to be avoided and blocked. My boyfriend (an American) and his family, for example, knew nothing about Brazil or about the immigration system before meeting me. And because of that, I feel like most citizens don't see immigration as a matter they need to advocate for or feel the need to vote for candidates who support such ideas.

One day, while spending Christmas in Ohio with my boyfriend and his family, I saw the news on TV, about the wave of immigrants being

sent to New York. Then, someone made the comment: “look at all those people, I feel bad, but why don’t they do it the right way like Isabella?”. I said nothing because I knew they didn’t mean harm, but this shows how the average citizen thinks that being an immigrant, legal or not, is a choice rather than being in a position where you are stuck because the government won’t do anything to facilitate your residency. Ironically enough, once in Ohio, Vargas heard something similar from a woman whose son was killed by an undocumented immigrant. She said to him that if he wasn’t an American citizen, he had no space on the table, and it wasn’t up to Congress, but up to him to “get in line and become an American citizen. You are welcome in America if you come in the front door” (153). The author mentioned he didn’t have an answer for that, he just wanted to scream “THERE IS NO LINE”.

There is no line. I have no perspective on when (if ever) I will be able to send my papers. Yes, I am trying to do it “the right way,” but what am I supposed to do in the meantime while I wait? Does the government expect me to have my life on hold for four, seven, ten years? To happily live in a country where immigrants cannot vote and consequently have no voice about the decisions other people made for us? It is good to see immigrants accomplishing a position in the spotlight, like Vargas, and using this position to talk about problems that most of the time go unseen by most of the population. However, I do not want to be portrayed as the strong immigrant who came to America and battled all the battles to rightfully earn a place in this country. I just want my residency, to have a job, and to pay taxes. I wish I could have finished



THE IDEA OF RACE:

AN ESSAY BY MATTHEW TINAPHONG

Race is a concept created by humankind to define humankind, or maybe even to divide humankind. For centuries, race has played a crucial role in shaping societies, identities, and intercultural communication. Though an incredibly complex idea, simply put, race has been both a source of unity and segregation. In this essay, I will attempt to explain my understanding of what race is, including personal thoughts on whether or not it is necessary to be classified by race and whether racial differences can occur without hatred. Anthony Fabian's film *Skin* and Sekou Sundiata's poem "Blink Your Eyes" will be referenced to provide supporting details to my explanation.

From a personal understanding, race can be seen as a categorization of people based on factors like physical characteristics, ancestry, or even cultural backgrounds and beliefs. However, the hurtful implications of this seemingly straightforward description extend far beyond simple classification. Race has often been weaponized to perpetuate stereotypes and promote or justify discrimination. Throughout history, this weaponization of race has led to systemic inequalities, societal division, and even a trend of violence. Additionally, it breeds a dangerous mindset that comes from a misguided belief of racial superiority, where one group believes they are better than another based on their racial categorizations. Many times, this hatred and belief stems from an individual's upbringing, whether it be family or community influences. Their opinions may not be what they know or have

experienced but instead what they have been taught to think their entire life, carrying over throughout generations.

While multiple factors determine race, the color of one's skin is usually many people's initial and primary basis of judgment. When combined with what certain individuals have been taught about specific races, this, unfortunately, leaves room for prejudice or preconceived assumptions about an entire group of people. Through a closer examination of Sekou Sundiata's poem, "Blink Your Eyes," we are reminded of this:

I could wake up in the morning

without a warning

and my world could change:

blink your eyes.

All depends, all depends on the skin,

all depends on the skin you're living in. (17-22)

A stanza Sundiata repeats throughout the poem explains clearly the devastating consequences of racial profiling. It describes how every living moment is a different challenge when one's skin color profoundly impacts the way one is perceived and treated by society. It also supports the notion that race is a made-up concept determined almost solely by visible features as opposed to the multitude of factors that would typically classify one's race.

Society's emphasis on skin color as the defining characteristic of race also oversimplifies the complexity of human

diversity and limits races' understanding of one another. Furthermore, this emphasis holds the potential to limit individuals' understanding of themselves and their backgrounds, essentially oppressing these groups of individuals. In Anthony Fabian's film *Skin*, the true story of Sandra Laing, a South African woman born to white parents during the South African Apartheid in 1955 further exposes the absurdity and cruelty of unjust classification by race (Fabian, 00:19). Despite being biologically related to her family, Sandra's appearance led government officials and her community to classify her as "colored," essentially trapping her in a racial limbo between her true heritage and the perceptions of society. These perceptions led to discrimination and exclusion throughout Sandra's life and a long hard battle to discover her identity. In the end, Sandra fought back against social injustices and found a more authentic sense of herself. Through her resilience and determination, she serves as a reminder to continue challenging unjust social norms in search of a more inclusive future.

Sandra's identity crisis and struggle to find her place in the world demonstrate the damaging effects that racial categorization, or at least the outdated methods of doing so, can have. Her situation also proves how those with privilege and power can oppress and marginalize groups of people by deeply rooting bias within societal standards, therefore contributing to a trend of systemic racism. Sandra's story is an inter-

esting case but it aids in uncovering the broader issues of systemic racism that exist within the interactions and overall structure of society. Similar to Sandra, there are an extensive amount of people all over the world who cannot be easily categorized as any race simply through a visual assessment and thus are led to be judged based on assumptions. This raises the questions: Is classification by race necessary? If so, is it possible to handle without prejudice?

Growing up in New York City, I have encountered a wide range of cultural backgrounds and frequently witnessed inequality. Especially being born to parents, both of whom immigrated from Thailand, I have always been aware of the complexities of racial identity. Moreover, despite my Southeast Asian ethnicity, perhaps my physical traits and Americanization typically lead people to misidentify me as anything but Asian. Though I haven't experienced it to Sandra's extent, in this sense, her story resonated with me as it highlighted the struggles one faces trying to discover and embrace their own identity while being told how to identify

or being forced to identify a certain way, ultimately making it difficult to belong to any group. This has caused me to question the necessity of race as I sought to broaden my horizons on the matter. I have come to understand race goes beyond surface-level knowledge and that race can potentially serve as a stable source of identity and self-representation.

As I reflect on my experiences and observations, I recognize the significance of understanding race not just as a means of rigid classification, but as a concept that encapsulates various aspects of one's identity. This understanding acknowledges that every individual's racial and cultural background is unique and shapes their sense of self, providing them a place of belonging, community, and inclusivity. In embracing this approach, it is evident that racial differences alone do not inherently create hatred or animosity. Instead, it is the deeply ingrained biases and systemic issues within society that continue to remain prevalent, even as attempts are made to combat them. Learning to

respect and appreciate diverse backgrounds is the key to eliminating the negative perceptions that plague society. So, is it possible for society to classify people based on race without incorporating hatred? The possibility exists. Is it likely to happen? Maybe not, but hopefully, continued strides toward improvement can soon make a truly revolutionary impact.

In conclusion, while race can be a meaningful source of identity and cultural understanding, overly harsh and biased classification can lead to harmful division fueled by misguided pride and learned prejudice. Rather than focusing on categorizing people based on individual beliefs of race, society should strive to appreciate and respect all backgrounds and beliefs. While the possibility of classifying people based on race without hatred may exist, it requires a continuous and combined effort by humanity to achieve a world where racial differences are celebrated rather than stigmatized or ostracized. This is not just a personal aspiration, but a goal I believe all of humanity should aim to

FARGO

By KAYA FADER

Fargo is a 1996 film by Joel and Ethan Coen (commonly referred to jointly as the Coen Brothers) who wrote, produced, and directed the film. The film, set in 1987 Minnesota and North Dakota, chronicles the execution of a plan by Jerry Lundegaard, a financially troubled car salesman, to hire Carl Showalter and Gaear Grimsrud, an ill-matched pair of career criminals, to kidnap his own wife. The goal? To collect the ransom money (which he intends to split with the kidnappers) from his wealthy father-in-law. From the outset, the plan begins to spiral out of control. A series of errors and complications leads to bloodshed, all “for little bit of money,” in the words of Police Chief Marge Gunderson, who is tasked with tracking down the criminals. The film is at once a hilarious black comedy, a crime thriller, and a poignant critique of the destructive role of money in our society. This paper will discuss the ways in which metaphor and irony are used in the film – to great effect – to express central ideas such as the genocide and mistreatment of Indigenous Americans, as well as the devastating effect money and capitalism have had on American society. We will explore how these elements come together to make Fargo the captivating and disturbingly hilarious masterpiece that it is.

Although entitled Fargo, after the North Dakota city in which the story begins, the film takes place almost entirely in the neighboring state of Minnesota. This contradiction is just the beginning of the extensive use of

irony throughout the film, which serves two purposes: firstly, to bring the film its witty, dark comedic value and secondly, to humanize character types (such as hardened criminals) that are typically difficult for the average person to access. The film takes place primarily in the rural Midwestern town of Brainerd, Minnesota – an unlikely location for the kind of violent criminal acts committed throughout the story. Additionally, the folksy regional mannerisms, accents, and general politeness associated with the Upper Midwest are not commonly present in crime movies. Audiences have come to expect direct, no-nonsense city dwellers from New York, London, or Los Angeles to fill the roles of criminals and police in crime or detective fiction. Here, however, the idiosyncratic characteristics of the Great Lakes region are on full display, and irony permeates nearly every scene in the movie as a result. Criminals using Upper-Midwestern accents, calling one another “buddy,” and addressing service workers in a courteous, polite way contrasts with the way these characters are usually portrayed and thought of. This contrast also extends to other characters in the movie, such as the police officers, and adds hilarity to lines which wouldn’t otherwise be humorous, such as Gunderson’s comment, “oh yeah, that’s a defensive wound right there.” Some other examples of irony in the film include Mrs. Lundegaard accidentally facilitating her own abduction by getting tangled in her shower curtain and falling down the stairs – this after

Showalter and Grimsrud nearly fail to capture her – as well as the scene in which Mr. Lundegaard is heard (as sad music fades in the background) seemingly crying about his wife, before it is revealed that he is simply rehearsing those sorrowful lines in order to feign sadness about the kidnapping.

In addition to the setting and accents, which are particular to the region in which the film is set, the film decides to show characters doing decidedly normal everyday activities and facing commonplace problems that most average people – not just criminals and cops – must contend with. For example, characters are often seen eating (in their cars, in front of the TV, at a buffet restaurant, etc.) or talking about food, particularly breakfast. When Gunderson is called to investigate Grimsrud’s collateral double-homicide on the side of the highway, her husband first offers to cook her breakfast, and afterwards her car needs to be jumpstarted. At the motel, Showalter, Grimsrud, and their companions watch *The Tonight Show* in bed. Showalter becomes enraged by a four-dollar parking garage fee, and while he expresses this anger in a much more violent manner than most of us would, this premise is nonetheless relatable. Perhaps most notably, Gunderson happens to be seven months pregnant. These are just a few examples of the ways in which the film reminds us that these characters are human beings, like us. On one hand, this is another way in which irony is employed in the film: having a coldhearted criminal character

complain to his partner that he should crack a window when he smokes, comment (as if sightseeing) about the tallest skyscraper as he drives through the city, or eat a TV dinner while intently watching a soap opera are funny choices that challenge audience expectations. On the other hand, the decision to include scenes and dialogues such as these, rather than just cutting immediately to the next plot-driving action scene, adds an additional level of realism to the story. These relatable, familiar details remind viewers that senseless violence like the atrocities in Fargo's story world happen every day in our story world, too – that is, in real life. This positions the audience to be especially confronted and affected by the use of metaphor in the film, and allows the ideas conveyed to resonate with viewers on a more personal level.

When Showalter and Grimsrud enter Brainerd, they are greeted by a towering muffler-man-esque statue of a lumberjack with an axe, standing atop a pedestal that identifies him as Paul Bunyan. There is a similar scene at the end of the movie when Grimsrud sees the statue again from the back of a police car, and when Gunderson questions Mr. Lundegaard about the vehicle used in the first shooting, she tells him that Brainerd is “home of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox.” Towering above the rest of the story world, Paul Bunyan's inclusion in the story functions in a few different ways. Grimsrud's first sighting of the statue foreshadows the grim events that would take place later in the film: after

killing Showalter and Mrs. Lundegaard, he is caught red-handed while attempting to destroy his partner's corpse using a woodchipper, a more modern kind of forestry equipment that recalls Bunyan's axe. When Grimsrud looks at the statue at the end of the film, in a way he is looking into a mirror.

While Bunyan successfully alludes to events at the story world level, there are deeper, more profound reasons for his presence in Fargo. Paul Bunyan, lumberjack and owner of an ox called “Babe,” is a likely-fictional character of American folk legends and is thought to be from the Upper Midwest region where the Fargo story takes place. Historian Michael Edmonds, the author of a book about Bunyan, told Jenny Peek of Wisconsin Public Radio that “Paul Bunyan was for decades, in the last century, the best-known American folk hero. He was Thor. He was Ulysses. He was America's greatest folk hero.” Peek writes that the legends surrounding Bunyan “come from a tradition of fantasizing white expansion and promoting deforestation.” Adding that in 2019, 23 years after the release of Fargo, “a Paul Bunyan statue in downtown Bemidji, Minnesota was spray-painted with the word ‘genocide.’ For some, Paul Bunyan's presence across the upper Midwest only amplifies the forced relocation of Indigenous people that called this area home.”

Bunyan's function as a metaphor for the genocide of Native American people and the destruction of nature brings us to the preeminent idea the Coen Brothers explore with Fargo. Mr. Lun-

degard hires Showalter and Grimsrud in the first place because he is desperate for money and willing to do anything to get it – including lying, putting his wife's life in jeopardy, and scamming his father-in-law. Showalter and Grimsrud, as the professional criminals hired for the job, are obviously motivated by money as well. Even Mrs. Lundegaard's father shows that, while he wishes to get his daughter back, he is reluctant to part with the ransom. The central idea the film is driving at is that money – be it desperation for money, love of money, or some other obsession with it – turns people into monsters. This idea that the power of money, a power bestowed upon it by humans which it exerts over that very humanity, twists and deforms human nature, overrides moral judgment, and causes people to do things they wouldn't do otherwise, has been voiced a great deal throughout history. One ancient, yet well-known example is the biblical verse which reads “for the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (The King James Version of the Bible, 1 Tim. 6.10). There is no question that we witness people committing evil actions throughout Fargo. The real evil, however – the root cause of it all – is not something inherent to the characters themselves. The real evil in Fargo is money. This is a consequence of capitalism, an idea imposed upon Indigenous Americans by white settlers (and, later, the United States government) which has

made a crueler world of the Americas.

Bunyan, a logger, also symbolizes the selfish, careless way in which white settlers treated the land that Native people once lovingly stewarded, turning the forests they stole into products and means of production to be used for their own benefit. In *Grundrisse*, one of his many writings on the subject, Karl Marx, a philosopher and famous critic of capitalist society, described this process as one in which "nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility," adding that nature "ceases to be recognized as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production." While nature here can mean all that which belongs to humans in a "natural" state, this is inclusive of the natural world. In the context of early American history, what were once forests and Indigenous farmlands are subjugated by white colonists and transformed into lumber and saleable plots of land. A similar, but more distinctly modern, example of this phenomenon is the phrase "they paved paradise and put up a parking lot" (Mitchell). In both examples, the natural world (sacred to the Indigenous people of the Americas) is treated as merely a sum of its money-making parts and is thereby exploited for capitalistic gain. Money not only corrupts human nature, it also leads to the corruption of all nature by extension.

To prevent viewers falling victim to

the misconception that these metaphors refer only to events that happened "a long time ago," the character of Shep Proudfoot, a Native American, acts as an extension of the metaphor and a human example of the devastating effects of white settlement on Native people. A mechanic at the car dealership where Mr. Lundegaard works, Proudfoot is known to have had trouble with the law before (including, as Gunderson mentions, with narcotics) and helped Mr. Lundegaard in his time of need by getting him in contact with Showalter and Grimsrud to begin with. When the plan goes awry, he faces being implicated in the crime, which is now much more severe than originally intended. Angry, he confronts and attacks Showalter and the prostitute he was sleeping with in his motel room. During the ordeal, the sex worker calls Proudfoot an "animal" and Showalter suggests that instead of fighting they can "smoke a peace pipe." Issues with drug addiction and related behaviors are sadly elevated among Native Americans compared to other demographics in the United States. According to Claradina Soto, Professor at the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine, and others for the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, "unique risk factors in AIAN [American Indian and Alaskan Native] communities such as historical trauma and socioeconomic challenges have interfered with traditional cultural resilience factors and have increased the risk of behavioral addictions." It is likely that Proudfoot's

behavioral issues are representative of those that many Native Americans struggle with as a result of a predisposition that is due, at least in part, to the historical and continuing mistreatment of their communities. Even when he lashes out at Showalter, it's hard not to empathize with Proudfoot. Showalter's blatantly racist "peace pipe" comment echoes a misguided (but sadly common) attitude towards the cultural genocide of Native Americans, which is that, after all the United States has put their people through, they should stop being so angry and just put it all behind them.

Millions of Indigenous Americans died at the hands of white settlers and the U.S. government during European settlement and Westward expansion of the United States, and indeed more than lives have been lost due to environmental destruction and cultural genocide. Seven people died as a result of Mr. Lundegaard's kidnapping scheme, "and," to quote Gunderson again, "for what? For a little bit of money? There's more to life than a little money, you know. Don'tcha know that? And here ya are, and it's a beautiful day. Well. I just don't understand it." In addition to making a point about the havoc wreaked on America and its Indigenous people by, among other factors, the introduction of capitalism into their society, the film is also making a point about the dismal state of American society under capitalism today.

Often described as a "neo noir," *Fargo* employs many stylistic elements reminiscent of 1940s and 50s film noir.

The University of Montana's School of Media Arts explains that the setting of a film noir is "the contemporary world that has been corrupted and lost its moral certainty." The original films in this category were frequently centered around cynical ideas that connected strongly to political and social issues occurring at the time. Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, for example, uses a similarly devious plot to expose the contagious nature of capitalistic greed and the heinous acts it can inspire. Fargo's setting and ideas, as were previously discussed, certainly align with earlier film noirs such as *Double Indemnity*. The characters' droll, amusing one-liners are another shared characteristic. Perhaps more interesting, however, are the techniques used by the Coen Brothers that turn the genre on its head so purposefully and completely that the ways in which Fargo diverges from film noir arguably make it more of one. To start with, while entertaining, the comical one-liners in Fargo are decidedly more on the awkward side – a contrast to the cool, slick zingers of earlier noirs. Furthermore, the University of Montana purports that in a classic film noir "the protagonist character is a loner, introverted, troubled, hard-boiled, pessimistic. He is not the conventional film hero, confident/exceptional/certain, but rather average and conventional, often is a war veteran or detective, and is defined by his ability to survive and restore normality." Our protagonist, Gunderson, is certainly defined by her resilience and her remarkable capability

(especially when contrasted with that of her fellow police) to do her job and do it well. However, she is hardly the "hard-boiled, pessimistic" detective typical of this kind of film. Gunderson and her burgeoning family are instead a single ray of optimism and hope, for humanity and the future, in a world that has been brought to its knees by greed and desperation for monetary gain.

The Coen Brothers' approach to making a film noir with noir-opposing elements is perhaps most evident in the way the film is crafted. Noir films – noir literally meaning "black" – traditionally make generous use of confined, claustrophobic dark backgrounds such as dark alleyways and dimly lit rooms, contrasted with focused beams of bright light. Fargo instead chooses to shoot much of the movie against vast expanses of white snow as opposed to dark backgrounds. The black-on-white contrast of the characters, their cars, and their blood against the white snow produce an effect similar to that of the white-on-black noirs, wherein there is not much that draws the viewer's eye besides the characters and their actions in the scene at hand. The focus created by this hard contrast serves to underline everything we see against the snow in the movie by making these scenes more visually, and therefore more emotionally, impactful. Another result of the use of such a blank, expansive background, against which characters are often shot from a distance, is its contribution to the feeling of isolation and loneliness present throughout the film. Scenes such as the

aerial view of Lundegaard returning to his car in the empty, snowy parking lot alone highlight how small these characters are, and especially how small they feel, when compared to the world as a whole and the real villain of the story: the monstrous, seemingly insurmountable economic and social conditions of the United States that have chewed them up and spit them out. Finally, the choice to use snow in particular comes with connotations of being "snowed in" or trapped. Fargo's characters certainly are trapped, both in the aforementioned system that sullies all life in the U.S., but also in the consequences of their actions from the moment they begin to spiral out of control. In this way, the vast, wide expanses of snow evoke a feeling of claustrophobia that produces an effect similar to the close-quartered shots common in earlier noir films while at the same time emphasizing the smallness of the characters in comparison to the forces they are up against.

The non-diegetic musical score for the movie, partially based on a Scandinavian folk tune called "The Lost Sheep," emphasizes and fits in with the setting of the movie, which takes place in a region of the Midwest historically populated by Scandinavian immigrants. The music is suspenseful, serious, and has the driving force of a person laboriously trudging through deep snow. Carter Burwell, the composer, orchestrator, and conductor of the Fargo soundtrack, describes the theme of the movie as having a "soulful sadness" and states that he "wanted to contrast the smallness of

their humanity with the endless white landscape by playing them with fragile solo instruments: harp, celesta, and hardanger fiddle. The hardanger - native to Scandinavia - is a fiddle with sympathetic strings that add a shimmering glowing drone to the played notes." In other words, much like the distanced, empty landscape emphasizes how small the characters' lives are compared to the massive scope of the ideas and issues dealt with in the film, the delicate instruments used in the soundtrack emphasize not just the smallness but also the fragility and vulnerability of the characters humanity and integrity in the face of these issues.

The music of *Fargo* is also in line with the film's noir style. In an article by Richard R. Ness for *Cinema Journal*, author and screen arts professor Caryl Flynn "equates the scores for works in the genre (at least in the first cycle in the mid-1940s) with the traditions of the classical film score, and its emphasis on tonality and the use of leitmotifs to create for the viewer/listener a sense of familiarity which is reinforced through repetition." While many films use this kind of repetition as a device to take the viewer back to a feeling of "home," we can certainly feel the power of this repetition throughout *Fargo* as continually bringing us back to the familiar feeling of a grueling, dirty trek across the snowy Minnesota landscape. The music is frequently accompanied by a shot of a car driving through the snow. For example, the song is present in the movie's

opening scene, in which Lundegaard's car emerges through the snowscape, driving to meet his accomplices, and is also heard near the end of the film, as a police convoy descends upon the motel where he is staying. Especially in newer noir films, the use of musical repetition as a device to recall familiar feelings of "homelessness" rather than "homeness" is common. Dean MacCannell, in his essay "Democracy's Turn: On Homeless Noir," proposes that "perhaps the best way to characterize noir sensibility is as 'false nostalgia' or 'constructed nostalgia.' What is produced is a sense of loss over something that was never possessed, something that never was" (Ness, 69). In keeping with the idea of a "constructed nostalgia," *Fargo*'s score is rooted in the presumably Scandinavian heritage of many of the film's characters and the community they live in. Returning to the movie's focus on the impacts of European settlement in North America upon Indigenous American people, it is worth noting that the musical sound we are hearing throughout the movie - which draws upon a traditional Scandinavian folk melody and uses many traditional instruments - is literally not at home, and instead gives us a kind of "false nostalgia." Another way MacCannell's idea can be applied in *Fargo* is that what the music brings us "home" to are the struggles, loneliness, and desperation the characters encounter, and just how relentless and insurmountable they are. While this seems like a dismal place for the music to ground us, it is a driving melody. It is not "the end,"

but rather the struggle itself - albeit seemingly impossible and insurmountable - against capitalistic greed and its ability to strip us of our humanity. It is the sound of "the road ahead," hence why the theme is paired with footage of cars moving down the road, leading us to associate it with forward motion. As such, it contains at least a sliver of hope.

In conclusion, *Fargo* explores ideas that include the catastrophic impact of white settlement and Indigenous genocide on the Native American population, as well as the destructive consequences capitalism has had on modern American society as a whole. The Coen Brothers delve into these themes by way of large overarching metaphors, especially those related to Paul Bunyan and his significance as a symbol of Indigenous displacement and environmental destruction. Extensive use of irony gives the film its dark sense of humor and also contributes to humanizing the characters and creating a relatable setting, so as to maximize the impact that the film's metaphors and ideas have on viewers. The result drills into the root cause of society's unhappiness, and places focus on some of those who have been most devastated by it. As musical group The O'Jays famously pointed out in their song about the "almighty dollar," "for a small piece of paper it carries a lot of weight" and people will do just about anything to get their hands on it. This is *Fargo*'s point, too. When we're trapped in the desperate cycle of chasing the almighty dollar, everything else gets lost. Eventually, it will destroy us.

SIR NOSE d'Voidoffunk

By KAYA FADER

"Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk (Pay Attention – B3M)" is a song by the funk band Parliament which was released on the band's 1977 album, *Funkentelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome*. In addition to being a fantastic song to dance to, it is at once a captivating story, a grave warning, and a moral lesson about the dangers of consumerism. Parliament, together with its sister group Funkadelic, are a music collective led by George Clinton who are collectively known as Parliament-Funkadelic, or the abbreviated "P-Funk." This song takes place in the vast world of P-Funk mythology, an established story-world that is the setting for many of Parliament-Funkadelic's songs. In this paper we will discuss this surreal story-world, its metaphors, and the larger meaning behind the story. We will also address the ideas and problems the song explores, the colossal scale of the larger project that "Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk" inhabits, and why its creators made the creative choices they did when crafting the song.

Unlike many songs, what plays out in this 10 minute and 4 second composition is a story that has dialogue, conflict, and characters. It has a beginning, middle, and end. The outer space science fiction story-world of P-Funk mythology, which encompasses this song and many others, began to fully take form in the band's albums *Motherhip Connection* (1975) and *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* (1976), and would continue to expand on the group's later albums *Motor Booty Affair* (1978), *Glorghallastoopid* (1979), and *Trombipulation* (1980). Dr. Patricia K. Maultsby,

Professor Emerita of Ethnomusicology at Indiana University, explains that "P-Funk has its own language, fashion, dances, and mythical heroes and villains who Clinton presents as science-fiction characters." It is worth noting that within this story-world, there are many characters, events, and concepts which are not directly referenced in "Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk." This analysis will focus primarily on those elements that are explicitly mentioned in the song.

In an animated 1977 TV commercial for the album, a narrator declares that "the planet had fallen prey to the dread Placebo Syndrome, spread by the evil Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk. Man was fast becoming an endangered species, and Parliament had but one choice: to declare war" (0:05-0:25). Let's meet our characters. Our story begins with a message from Sir Nose, who introduces himself by saying "I am Sir Nose'd d'Voidoffunk. I have always been devoid of Funk. I shall continue to be devoid of Funk. Starchild, you have only won a battle! I am the subliminal seducer. I shall never dance!" Referencing a battle that took place earlier on the album, Sir Nose then vows to return, and we hear his nasal, electronic sounding voice fade out as the beat begins. Right on cue, Starchild opens with: "I can dig it! This is the Starchild. On another day, chasing the noses away. Protector of the Pleasure Principle. This is Starchild."

The titular character, Sir Nose, is the nemesis of the Funk. He "will never dance." Starchild, the hero of our story, is its defender. So, what exactly is the Funk, and why is it worth fighting over

anyway? Beyond a simple genre label, funk is a feeling, an attitude, a way of life, and more. For most of us it's usually easy to identify if something is or is not funky, but it's much more difficult to articulate exactly why. As a musical style, funk developed in the 1960s and became popular in the 1970s, during a time when, as Dr. Maultsby describes, "despite promises for new opportunities and advancement, the Black working class and the poor experienced little change in their lives in an era of deindustrialization and during two recessions 1973-1975 and 1980-1982. At the same time, members of the Black middle class encountered exclusionary practices in integrated workplaces, housing, and social settings." Thus, she explains that "the term 'funk' as well as the diversity of funk music's styles captures both the complex, and often contradictory, feelings of optimism, ambivalence, disillusionment, and despair that accompanied the transition from a segregated to a post-civil rights society."

Legendary funk progenitor James Brown explained in an interview with *Spin Magazine* in 1988, "Funk is the root of the blues. It's soul, jazz, and gospel. Funk is coming down on the one. If it's on the one, then it's funky. But it's hard for me to get people to understand that." By "the one," Brown was referring to "the first downbeat of every measure of music," explains Tyler Golsen of *Far Out Magazine*. For something as decidedly untechnical as funk, this is a very technical definition. Yet it's part of the inspiration that George Clinton brought with him to Parliament-Funk-

adelic. The irony in the term “funk” is that prior to becoming a musical phenomenon, most would likely associate the word with sadness, hopelessness, and depression. The phrase “in a funk” is still used today to mean just that. Yet what funk music offers us is just the opposite: happiness and soul-deep joy. The word funk is also used to refer to something smelly or grimy, but perhaps funk music embraces that messiness and grime as it embodies the act of letting loose, dancing, and having a good time. On P-Funk in particular, Walter Ray Watson of NPR explains that “over the years, Parliament-Funkadelic records worked their subversive magic on me. They pushed back at my fears of being perceived as too black or independent. They invited me to get over the hump. To persevere and emerge whole, to turn on and tune in, swim, dance and be me. With lyrics I can’t repeat here, they made anthems to freeing yourself and musical fables about the perils of being too buttoned down, too middle class, too uppity to get down and dirty.”

Speaking of “too uppity to get down and dirty,” Sir Nose d’Voidoffunk, also referred to as “Sir Nose’d,” “Sir Nose,” or simply “The Nose,” is a character first introduced to the story-world of P-Funk mythology in this song. A villain, self-described as “devoid of Funk,” Sir Nose is a metaphor for an un-funky way of being that encompasses negativity, rigidity, and cynicism. He refuses to let loose and dance, and instead favors a conventional, structured, boring way of life. Sir Nose’s character is also sym-

bolic of the suppression of Black culture in society. One of Sir Nose’s many titles, “the Subliminal Seducer” hints at the insidious nature of adherence to societal norms which can bleed one’s funk dry if they aren’t careful. It is also possible that Sir Nose could be a metaphor for those who sell and/or market drugs, trapping their clientele in a different kind of restrictive lifestyle. His defining physical characteristic, a large prosthetic nose, is likely both a drug metaphor and a play on the older meaning of the word “funk,” as it alludes to his ability to smell the funk as well as his aversion to all things funky. Sir Nose appears as an antagonist in several later Parliament-Funkadelic songs. He is the source of “Placebo Syndrome,” which he weaponizes throughout the album, hence the album’s title Funkentelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome. This “syndrome” will be further discussed as we dive deeper into the story of this song.

When we meet Starchild, he immediately establishes that he is the “Protector of the Pleasure Principle” and that he spends his days “chasing the noses away.” Starchild was first introduced to the world of P-Funk mythology in the 1975 song “Mothership Connection (Star Child),” and is later revealed to be an otherworldly descendant of the god-like Dr. Funkenstein, who is “poised to Funkatize this galaxy and beyond” (Kinley). He played a large role as the protagonist in multiple songs on the Mothership Connection album. Starchild is a metaphor for funk itself, especially as it relates to pleasure. This means that he

represents everything that funk represents, from the power of the music to the power of dance, to the larger ideas associated with funk such as freedom, self-expression, and togetherness. Starchild is everything Sir Nose is not and so, in a perfect unity of opposites, they constantly find themselves at odds with one another.

As our song progresses, we hear a chorus of unnamed characters repeating the nursery rhymes “Three Blind Mice” and “Baa, Baa, Black Sheep.” The irony of the song’s use of nursery rhymes is multilayered. Although one learns to expect the unexpected from P-Funk, you wouldn’t normally expect to hear a nursery rhyme in a funk song. In addition, while the recitals of these nursery rhymes start out how we remember them, some words have been replaced with drug references. After running after the farmer’s wife, the three blind mice “turned on the fun with a water pipe,” and when asked about wool, Bah Bah Black Sheep replies “yes sir, yes sir, a nickel bag full” (Doleac). This satire is a creative choice used to put a lighthearted, comedic spin on the very serious subjects explored and alluded to in the song. In terms of craft, these specific nursery rhymes were likely chosen because they are familiar, simplistic passages that the audience can relate to, and which have a basic connection to the overall themes of the story.

As we hear the reinvented nursery rhymes, Starchild asks us, the audience, if we’ve seen “old smeller vision” – “where is Sir Nose?” he asks, before

instructing, "if y'all see sir nose, tell him that Starchild said: put that snoot to use, you mother! 'Cause you will dance, sucker." We get the impression Sir Nose is somewhere around (given that he was taunting Starchild at the beginning of the song, warning "I will return.") Ironically, however, Starchild doesn't seem to know about this. Starchild also urges us to "pay attention," likely to ensure we don't fall victim to Sir Nose's covert, "subliminal" tactics, or to make sure we look for him carefully, or both. Eventually, Sir Nose is revealed in "a picture within a picture behind a picture" and is coaxed out by Starchild, who insists that he "come on out and dance!" But Sir Nose, as we know, will never dance. He says "you know what you can do with your Funk, Starchild? You will never see me dance!"

The Placebo Syndrome, as previously mentioned, is Sir Nose's weapon of choice in "Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk" and the Funkentelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome album as a whole. It is mentioned in the song we're focusing on by the chorus of background singers, who, with regard to the Syndrome, urge us: "don't succumb." Described as a kind of biological weapon, the Placebo Syndrome is one of the common threads throughout the album. It is often referred to simply as "the Syndrome," and is first mentioned in the album's opening track "Bop Gun (Endangered Species)." It is finally described in greater detail and called by its full name in the song "Placebo Syndrome." A "placebo" is defined by the National Institute of Health as

"an inactive substance that looks like the drug or treatment being tested." In other words, a placebo is a fake solution to a real problem – a dupe being substituted for the real thing. The word "placebo" is most frequently used in reference to medical treatments. The Placebo Syndrome, however, is a metaphor for the spread of mass consumerism, which is being weaponized here by Sir Nose to surreptitiously trap his victims in a mindless, stringent cycle of materialism and consumption so that they will become slaves to the corporate machine. One should struggle to imagine a goal more "devoid of Funk."

Placebo Syndrome, or mass consumerism, is alternately described in "Funkentelechy," a song from the same album, as "the pimping of the Pleasure Principle." You may recall that "the Pleasure Principle" is exactly what Starchild's job is to protect. In psychology, the Pleasure Principle is a Freudian theory which J.E. Barnhart of North Texas State University explains in *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* as "at least the human organism is naturally predisposed to gain positive experiences of pleasure and to hold on to this pleasure. That is only one fork of the pleasure principle. The other is that the organism is predisposed also to escape or avoid pain and displeasure." In association with funk, Sir Nose's objective is to exploit and take advantage of this psychological principle, effectively obliterating the Funk. Similarly, if we expand Sir Nose's description to include that of a drug dealer, we can understand that

he seeks to keep people caught in a cycle of addiction by exploiting and preying on the human desires for pleasure and happiness. Be it by way of mass-marketing and commercialization or pushing mind-numbing medication, Sir Nose intends to prey on people's inborn drive to seek pleasure by slyly peddling something that looks like the Funk but isn't. This is the Placebo Syndrome. Once every person has been infected and succumbs to "urge overkill," the Funk shall cease to exist.

Starchild mentions, when searching for Sir Nose, that he'll "shoot him with the Bop Gun." Here he is referring to his own weapon, previously introduced and described in the song "Bop Gun (Endangered Species)." The Bop Gun is a weapon that can be wielded by Starchild and other funky beings to defend themselves from un-funky threats such as Placebo Syndrome and Sir Nose himself. In "Bop Gun (Endangered Species)" one common refrain is "when the Syndrome is around, don't let your guard down. All you got to do is call on the Funk!" The Bop Gun harnesses the raw power of the Funk and is symbolic of its power – that is, the power of freedom, creativity, dance, joy, and self-expression. It is also a symbol of the resistance of the temptation to "succumb" to Placebo Syndrome, or mass consumerism. Additionally, the Bop Gun is a metaphor for the resilience of African Americans facing systematic oppression and cultural suppression. This symbolism, although more subtle, compares the Bop Gun to resistance

against the pressure to conform to white ethnocentric societal norms, in part through the retention of important Black cultural values and traditions.

As the beat goes on, we hear various members of the group pipe up with “better luck next time” as Sir Nose exasperatedly exclaims “curses, curses! I’ll get you for this, Starchild!” And then, “cut that funking out, Starchild!” He has been defeated by Starchild’s funky dance music and the employment of the Bop Gun. His efforts to diffuse this funky situation by further spreading Placebo Syndrome throughout the galaxy have been thwarted. The song ends with a chorus of “Three Blind Mice” medlied with the ever-important message “Syndrome. Tweedle-dee-dee-dum. Humdrum. Don’t succumb.”

In the liner notes of Parliament’s 1993 compilation album, musician and music critic Greg Tate wrote that “Clinton reconceived funk as the antithesis of everything that was sterile, one-dimensional, monochromatic, arrhythmic and otherwise against freedom of bodily expression in the known universe” (Gulla 456). Certainly, there is a lot to learn from Parliament’s funk mythology, including from Starchild’s battle with Sir Nose. The song tells the story of liberated free spirits fighting to save the galaxy from a humdrum life of endless mass-consumerism, addiction, and repression pushed on its citizens by advertisers, corporations, and mass-media, as well as pharmaceutical companies and street drug dealers alike. Using

the power of joy, self-expression, and humanity, Starchild (and the citizens he is defending) emerge from this battle victorious. But the war is not over. This song reflects very real societal dilemmas of racial exploitation, predatory marketing, hypercommercialism, gentrification, and consumerism. When we find our attention trapped by shopping or television or scrolling on Instagram, we should be wary of falling victim to the Placebo Syndrome. A word of advice from “Funkentelechy”: “Mind your wants, ‘cause there’s someone who wants your mind.”

Funk music as George Clinton’s medium for spreading this message goes beyond just that he was a funk musician. Funk music makes people happy; it makes them want to get on their feet and dance, be themselves, be free – this is exactly the kind of thing Parliament-Funkadelic were advocating for. The medium suits the message perfectly. As for the intergalactic theme, Clinton is big fan of science fiction, and has been quoted as saying that his band “had put black people in situations nobody ever thought they would be in, like the White House. I figured another place you wouldn’t think black people would be was in outer space. I was a big fan of Star Trek, so we did a thing with a pimp sitting in a spaceship shaped like a Cadillac” (Bird 32). P-Funk’s science fiction story-world itself was a symbol of optimism and hope for the future. Alexis C. Madrigal of *The Atlantic* writes that “Unmoored from anything everyday, the P-Funk galaxy was an

escape, but given the deteriorating state of many Black neighborhoods during the 1970s, the value of escape should not be overlooked. And lurking inside the vision of flying away to some better world was the idea that you could come back to transform this world with your bop gun, and what not.”

Like most other P-Funk songs, “Sir Nose d’Voidoffunk” incorporates many instruments, such as saxophone, trumpet, and piano, that are common to earlier traditional African American musical styles like soul, jazz, and blues. These elements are combined with new electronic instruments, such as synthesizers, and futuristic space-age imagery. This combination of contrasting elements honors the past and looks toward the future. It reinforces the underlying ideas of the struggle for African American upward mobility that followed segregation, and the simultaneous, crucial need for the preservation of Black culture: that it should not be lost or suppressed to achieve this upward mobility. In an interview with *Vice*, George Clinton explained “My whole thing is always merging anything that exists—merging them with each other because they’re all real. And in doing so, we’ve merged generations of families.” Another effect of P-Funk’s unique mixing of styles was its resulting in a type of sound nobody had heard before – at least, not exactly. This no doubt contributes to the group’s ability to transport listeners into another world: the story-world of P-Funk mythology.

Adding to the vastness of the P-Funk

mythology story-world, visual and performative art were used to provide additional background on the characters. These included elaborate on-stage props and costumes, cartoon TV commercials featuring characters such as Sir Nose and Starchild, as well as illustrations by artist Overton Lloyd. For example, a comic book was included with the Funkentel-echy vs. the Placebo Syndrome album which served as a visual accompaniment and expanded upon the growing story-world. In addition to adding to the body of information on P-Funk mythology for fans, this appealed to the band's younger audience.

While the body of work created by George Clinton and his musical collective is certainly unique and important, Parliament-Funkadelic were not the first artists to embark on such a large-scale creation. *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a German term which loosely translates to "total work of art." Naomi Martin of *Artland Magazine* elaborates, "A total work of art, a sumptuous aesthetic journey, a complete artistic creation which, through prodigious efforts, embraces visuals, experience and performance. These are the ideals at the heart of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*." Opera composer Richard Wagner, whose 1876 series of four operas embodies this concept, popularized the term in his 1849 essays on art. In his words, what Wagner sought to create was "an ideal work of art in which drama, music and other performing arts are integrated and each is subservient to the whole" (Martin).

Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, *Der*

Ring des Nibelungen or *The Ring of the Nibelung*, was inspired by the large scale and wide artistic scope of ancient Greek theatre. Peter Tregear, professor and head of the School of Music at Australian National University, explains that "Extending over four nights, it consists of almost 16 hours of music written for immensely powerful voices singing over a colossal pit orchestra, and took about 26 years (from 1848 to 1874) to complete." What he created in those 26 years was a work of art with characters who existed in their own mythological story-world. During a four-night opera experience, audiences watched a complex plot unfold to equally complex orchestral music. As with George Clinton's compositions, Wagner's music was unlike anything that had been heard before, as he invented brand-new instruments (the "Wagner tuba" and the "Wagner bell," for example) to meet his extraordinarily ambitious needs.

Philosopher Roger Scruton wrote for the *Australian Financial Review* that "[Wagner] believed in the possibility of a political revolution that would free mankind from domination and establish an order of freedom." Such a revolution would be compatible with Starchild's mission. In his article, Scruton explains a dystopian section of the *Der Ring des Nibelungen* story-world which, for us, recalls Sir Nose's mission: "In the characters of Alberich and Mime, Wagner summarises the spiritual degeneracy that comes when we place power, unmediated by the free dealings between individuals, at the heart of the

social order. Everything in the world of Nibelheim is a means, and nothing is an end in itself. The power that accumulates there is both all-inclusive and pointless, since there is nothing that can be obtained with it save more of the same."

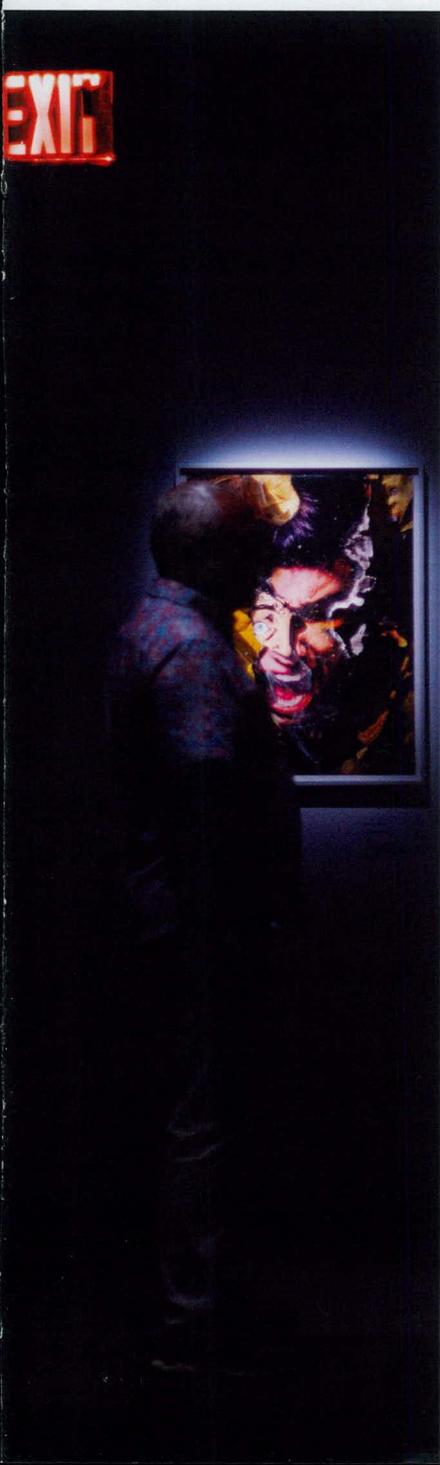
Wagner and Clinton's works were born from different centuries and cultures. Although one can identify similarities in the ideas expressed in each, this likely says more about the longevity of these problems in human society than it does about the art itself. It is certain, however, that Wagner strove to create something that was beautiful and of epic proportions that grappled with very real philosophical questions and societal issues. Much like George Clinton's "Parliafunkadelicment Thang," in addition to being a fantastic source of entertainment and artistic beauty, it is at once a moving story and a lesson about issues of love and freedom. It is also certain that Wagner's work paved the way for subsequent large-scale artistic movements. One example of this is the concept album, which, in true Wagner-esque form, Parliament-Funkadelic expanded into a movement, a fashion, and a world all its own. It can truly be said that Parliament-Funkadelic, like Wagner, revolutionized music. This impact not only influenced the way music sounded, it expanded our understanding of what music could be.

Without a doubt, the artistic endeavor that is Parliament-Funkadelic's funky universe is an exceptionally large-scale cohesive work of art that

combines numerous artistic elements (music, poetry, performance art, visual art, fashion, and more), and in doing so certainly earns the label of Gesamtkunstwerk. "Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk" is a song that takes place within this universe, and which serves as a record of the mythical battle between Starchild and his nemesis, Sir Nose. Thought-provoking, entertaining, funny, monumen-

tal, and infectiously danceable, this enduring tale of P-Funk mythology is as relevant today as it was in 1977. While the Placebo Syndrome is a commanding reminder of how easily one can fall victim to the insidious dangers of consumerism and mass-marketing, Starchild's triumph on behalf of the Funk and the people shows us that all hope is not lost in this very real battle for our money

and our minds. In a 2016 interview with Vice, when asked if he was optimistic about the future, George Clinton replied: "Always. I know something's going to exist. It might not be what we wanted, but if it exists then you have a chance. But damn, I don't want to start all over again neither. I just hope we can do better."



THE BURDEN OF BEING CURLY AND NOT STRAIGHT

By ROXANNA CARDENAS
COLMENARES

Context is needed to fully understand Mariana Rondón's 2013 film *Pelo Malo* (Bad Hair). The story takes place in Caracas, Venezuela, in 2012. That year, Venezuelan former president Hugo Chávez Frías was battling cancer and—most importantly—his sickness had spread all around the nation. Fanaticism, violence, and hypermasculinity were just a few aspects of this political leader's legacy, one that most Venezuelan citizens still carry to this day. As a person who lived in Venezuela during this time, this film represents a painful truth about my country. The story follows a mother and her oldest son, Junior, an Afro-Latino boy who loves to sing and dance, and who wishes to have straight hair, behaviors that his mom considers homosexual. This prejudice unravels the heartbreaking fall through of their relationship. The rejection of queerness and African features, the struggle of single mothers, and complex family dynamics are among the conflicts described in this film. All these themes are, at the same time, wrapped in the influence of a political party that celebrates the violent image of a macho man. Rondón's film paints this sad reality with her carefully shot scenes, unsettling sound effects, and detailed dialogue, exposing both the economic and moral poorness of Venezuelan citizens.

The film starts with a shot of a neat, big house where Junior and his mom are cleaning the upper floor. Immediately, the audience knows this house doesn't belong to them. The overly neat and

clean space contrasts with the old, dirty clothes the characters wear; their underfed bodies are shrunk by the immensity of the home. After his mom leaves him to clean the hot tub and orders him not to get his clothes wet, Junior takes them off and jumps into the tub to clean it from the inside, a decision that reveals the childish cleverness of the boy and his abstract thinking. However, he is soon overwhelmed by the soothing effect of submerging in a tub with clean water, a luxury most Venezuelans don't experience because houses rarely have tubs. While the boy floats in the water, a rather close overhead shot shows him closing his eyes and running his fingers through his wet curly hair. This is another sensation that is not common to Junior because—and I am writing from personal experience—it is hard to run your fingers through dry curls. Therefore, this feeling causes him pleasure. During this scene, only the splashing water and his breathing are heard as if the audience is also immersed in the water with him. Rondón aims to remind the audience about those simple pleasures that are, indeed, privileges we might overlook. With my New York bathroom that has a tub with hot water always available, it can be easy to forget my days of cold showers. Sadly, Junior's peace is soon interrupted by the real owner of the house and the next shot shows the boy and his mother on a bus, quietly heading home, unemployed. Junior starts singing while looking outside the window and his mom looks at him, disturbed. So much so that she gets

up from her seat and moves elsewhere. This is the first rejection of many.

The next scenes are dedicated to showing the audience the extreme poverty this family lives in. A long shot shows an immense apartment complex that can only be compared ever so slightly to the infamous "Projects" in New York City. In Venezuela, thousands of low-income families live in these assigned areas with high crime rates. The next line of dialogue is between Junior and his friend and neighbor, a girl who remains nameless throughout the film. They play a game that consists of describing what a neighbor is doing on their apartment balconies and the other one must find them. One neighbor is dancing on his balcony and the girl's clue to find him is "un negro" (the Spanish word for "black") to what the boy asks, "A black what?" "A black man," the girl says at last. This is a subtle introduction to the racial conflict in the film, as subtle as the conflict in the country itself. Some Venezuelans claim that racism is nonexistent in our country; however, Rondón—as well as I—knows better. The girl could have said "A dancing man," instead, she referred to him not even as a man at first, but just as a single color, the color of his skin. This way, the dialogue shows how black people are reduced to their skin color and how this might influence Junior's—and any other black child's—perception of himself. Moreover, the last shot of this scene shows a kid behind some balcony bars that disturbingly resemble prison bars, showing the likely future

of children who live in these dangerous communities. The scene cuts as the kid notices Junior and his friend, and points at them with two fingers as if pointing a gun—or I should say he notices and points at the audience because he faces the camera and looks right at it. Thus, the extreme violence and prejudice of the environment are shot at us through a children's game.

Alas, after such a rich prologue, the audience is introduced to the main characters and both their inner and outer conflicts. Junior is in front of a dirty mirror trying to comb his curly hair with gel to make it look straight, and his mom rushes him out of the bathroom. We learn that he is a boy who cares about his looks and that his mom, Marta, gets upset by every little thing he does—like using a fork to eat instead of his hands—because she considers his behavior feminine. Moreover, the boy is about to start school and must take a picture meant for his student ID, which is why he wants to straighten his hair so badly. As Charles St-George writes in his article “Queer Temporalities in Mariana Rondón's *Pelo Malo/Bad Hair* (2013),” Junior “has already internalized the racist social grammar that conjugates African hair as ‘bad’ (hence the film's title), but he has done so using the sexist declension designated for females, preening and obsessing about his hair” (294). In other words, Junior reacts to his environment in a queer manner. This is more evident when a photographer tells Junior that he can pose for his student ID as the “Lieutenant-Colonel” (Chávez) and

points to a picture of an Afro-Venezuelan kid posing with a gun as an example. It is impressive how quickly this adult assumed that a boy would be attracted to guns or excited to look like a soldier. However, not this boy. Junior gets upset at the man's assumption and says that he will take his picture dressed “as a singer with straight hair” and points at the photograph of a smiling light-skinned kid with straight hair. With this gesture, the boy rejects not only his Afro-ascendance but also the gender roles and violence imposed on him—the same gender roles and violence that both the government and society advertise and celebrate. Up to this point in the film, Junior is determined to be his true self in front of others.

Furthermore, with Marta's character, the film portrays the abuse inflicted on children, especially queer children, attempting to eliminate any “gayness” in them. At one point, while other boys are break-dancing—a traditionally masculine form of dance—Marta sees Junior dancing softly, waving his arms over himself and moving his hips side-to-side, and bullies him for it. She does so by mocking him and trying to scare him. She even takes him to the doctor to find out what is wrong with him. She admits to believing he is gay because she “never touch[es] him,” admitting that she touches Junior's baby brother's penis to get him used to a woman's touch. The doctor tells her his rather professional—and by professional, I mean sexist—diagnosis, that the boy needs the presence of a man in the house. Hence, Marta's solu-

tion is to make Junior witness her having sex with her ex-boss—another act of sexual abuse. However, this character's purpose in the film is also to show the sexism of this nation. Besides “teaching” her son a lesson, this sexual act has another purpose for Marta: to get back her job as a security guard, a male-dominated profession that no other company would offer her. In fact, when she applies for the position, she only gets offered a job as a “cleaning lady” even though she has enough experience as a guard. Therefore, the only way to get her job back is to bribe her former boss with her body. This situation represents a clever use of irony from Rondón because Marta, who is so obsessed with his son conforming to gender roles, is, at the same time, defiant of these roles imposed on her—like her son is—and a victim of a sexist society—like her son is. The writer/director of this film creates a character that shows not only the vile consequences of sexism, but the double standards of gender equality. While, in some societies, women are applauded for breaking the status quo, men are shamed for doing the same thing.

In the last heartbreaking shots of this slow-paced, unsettling film, we see a child who is battling against his authentic self. This inner turmoil and duality are shown in a scene when Junior has straightened half his curly hair and stands in front of a mirror looking at his split image. The audience looks at his reflection while he touches the straight side of his hair. The sound the audience hears is made by falling water, similar

to the hot tub scene, to show Junior's inner peace after—half—becoming who he wishes to be. Right after this shot, foreshadowing the ending of the story, Rondón shows a local Venezuelan news channel in which many people are praying and shaving their heads in solidarity with the dying president. The director, once again, emphasizes the government and its influence over Venezuelan citizens. At last, Marta presents an ultimatum to her son; she starts packing his clothes and tells him he will move to his grandmother's house. Junior begs to stay and promises to "never sing again," but Marta keeps packing. He then asks, "Can I stay if I cut my hair?" And she places an electric razor in front of him, one that she had bought earlier. In this scene, the director emphasizes the emotional manipulation Marta executes on

her son; she knew he would offer to cut his hair all along. The last lines of dialogue are a painful "I don't love you" that Junior tells his mother, to which she responds, "Me neither." Then, only the sound of the razor is heard for over a minute while Junior shaves his beloved hair. No music is needed to give the audience goosebumps and tears. In the last fantastic shot, we see an overhead view of a school where all the children are singing the National Anthem. All except for Junior. The last lyrics heard from the anthem are, "The vile selfishness that has, once more, prevailed." A powerful verse to end the film with.

In short, with her uncomfortably long scenes, careful use of sound effects, and precise dialogue, Mariana Rondón creates in her film *Pelo Malo* a sense of

dread and suffocation meant to represent the main characters' environment and inner state. The director immerses the audience in the gloomy and unsettling lives of low-income Venezuelan families who struggle to survive in an extremely violent, racist, and sexist society. More importantly, with her use of foreshadowing, she draws very subtle yet still aggressive attention to the influence a hypermasculine leader like Hugo Chávez Frías has over his citizens even after his death and how this continues to affect the future of queer children in my country. This film portrays all the social issues that Venezuelan citizens ignore. I'm afraid that, like Junior, many Venezuelan kids who don't fit the heteronormative of my country will remain like the "poor man in his hovel" who "for freedom implored."



THE BEGINNING OF THE FUTURE AND THE END OF HUMAN NATURE

BY ASAPH LIAU

"In the 21st century, you can be loud about your pain. You can weep to millions of witnesses. And then tech lords can kill you and replace you with a digital doppelganger who declares that yes, you did enjoy your pain, and what's more, you deserved it," Sarah Kendzior, noted scholar of authoritarian regimes, writes. Indeed, there is much pain to be loud about today. It is in the core of our human nature to express that pain, to let others know of our hurt and suffering in ways both movingly creative and frighteningly incisive. Poetry, prose, songwriting, art, peer reviewed journals, scathing essays, and the assorted posts, threads, and videos of everyday people on social media are just a few examples of the awe-inspiring capacity humans have to be able to express our experiences. What happens then, when an emergent technology and its owners (who can only conceive of the breadth of the human experience in data points and bottom lines) seek to subsume that capacity, to twist the truth of our stories? What happens when our higher order thinking, one of our defining traits as human beings, is done for us? If the core of our human nature is to be capable of such beautiful and insightful expression, what becomes of us when an increasingly ubiquitous technology is not only capable of automating that expression, but looks to replace any human involvement at all? In the larger philosophical context, the drive towards truly sentient Artificial Intelligence threatens the very concept of Human nature. Yet even now Artificial intelligence disrupts and interferes with many aspects of society, from individual and personal concerns to large scale political and global implications. Artificial Intelligence has brought its share of benefits to society, through streamlining certain processes and introducing amusing image generators, but when weighing them against its grave costs, it must be noted that the overall capacity of Artificial Intelligence is more harmful to our society than good.

As technology has evolved and its integration into society broadened, one of the primary concerns that arose was that of privacy, specifically data and information privacy. While these concerns predate the advent of AI, its development has exacerbated them by making it easier and more effi-

cient for vast amounts of data to be collected and processed. This problem will only grow as advancement in AI continues to progress, after all, data is the foundation of AI. In the 2019 publication of the Yale Journal of Law and Technology, Manheim and Kaplan state that, "technology companies will always push legal and ethical boundaries in pursuit of collecting more data to create models that make better and better predictions. Then they share this information with government agencies and private actors" (Manheim and Kaplan Artificial Intelligence: Risks to Privacy and Democracy). Those involved in Artificial Intelligence, its CEO's, developers, shareholders, and partners all have a vested interest in collecting as much data as possible, necessarily subverting ethical considerations of any individual's right to privacy in doing so. The power and wealth these tech companies hold is considerable, and as their influence expands, the existence and the very concept of privacy may soon become a relic of the past.

The production of fake media is not new, with software like Photoshop and Audacity, people have been able to create images and audio of people that are edited to seem realistic. AI introduces a new, powerful, and entirely unique problem in this regard: Deepfakes. Though the act of producing fake images and audio is not novel, deepfakes utilize the technological power of machine learning and facial recognition to generate increasingly convincing images, audio, and even videos of completely fabricated events. Anyone who has their likeness or voice on the internet can have their identity manipulated to make realistic content about them that they did not consent to or even know about, including sexually explicit content. In January of 2024, a robocall that used an AI-generated voice of the President Joe Biden went out to residents in New Hampshire urging them not to vote in the primaries. While most listeners were able to discern that the context of the message was illogical and therefore most likely not genuine, they reported that the voice was very similar to the President's actual voice and was almost convincing. Despite its growing capacity, given just a little time and attention, deepfakes are able to be verified as false. In an article by the Associated Press, former U.S. Department of Justice attorney and election law expert, David Becker, says, "They

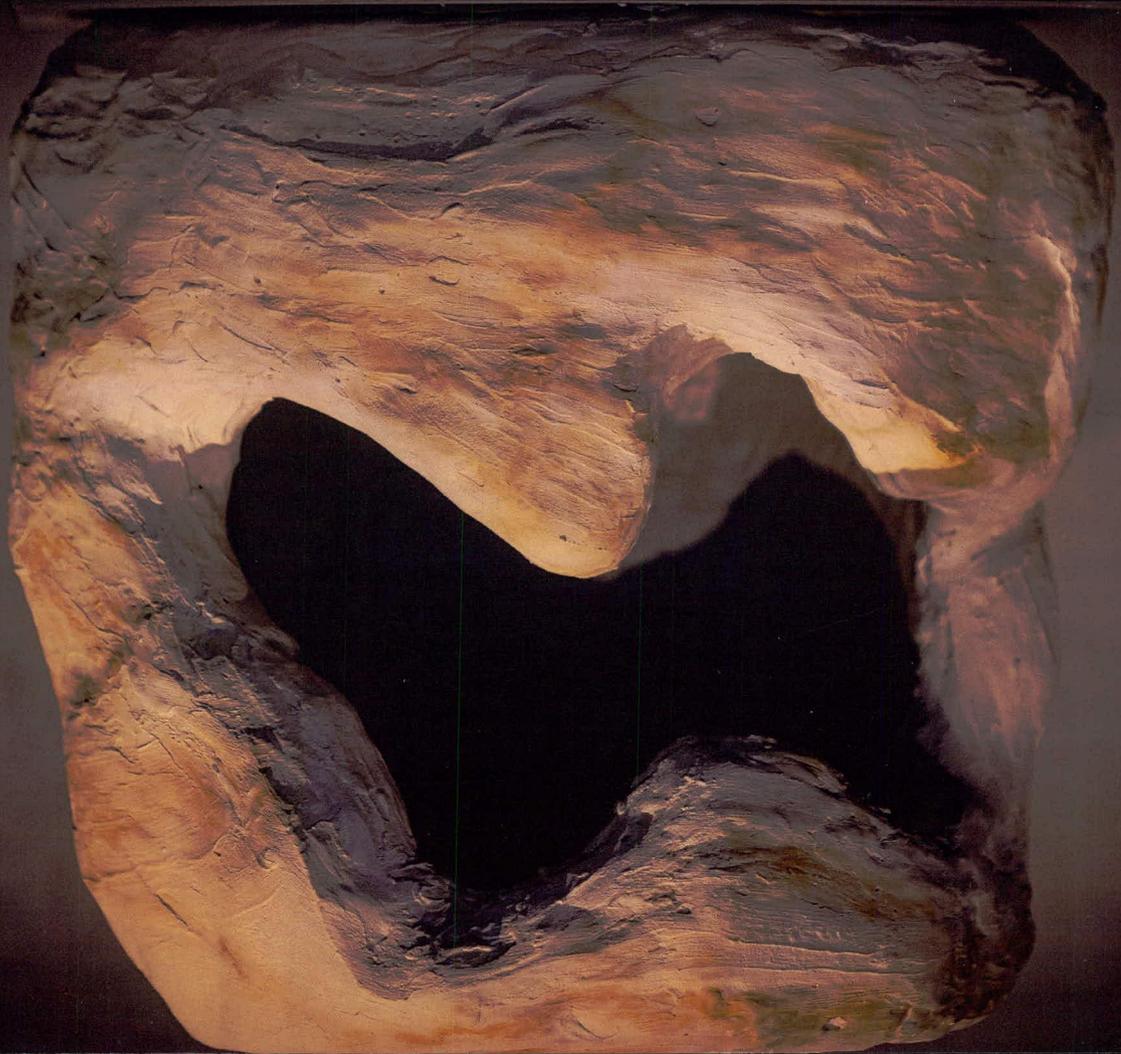
don't need to convince us that what they're saying, the lies they're telling, are true," he said. "They just need to convince us that there is no truth, that you can't believe anything you're told" (Swenson and Weissert New Hampshire investigating fake Biden robocall meant to discourage voters ahead of primary). The most significant impact deepfakes have on politics then, is not the deception of the public through deepfaked content, but the erosion of trust in the democratic process.

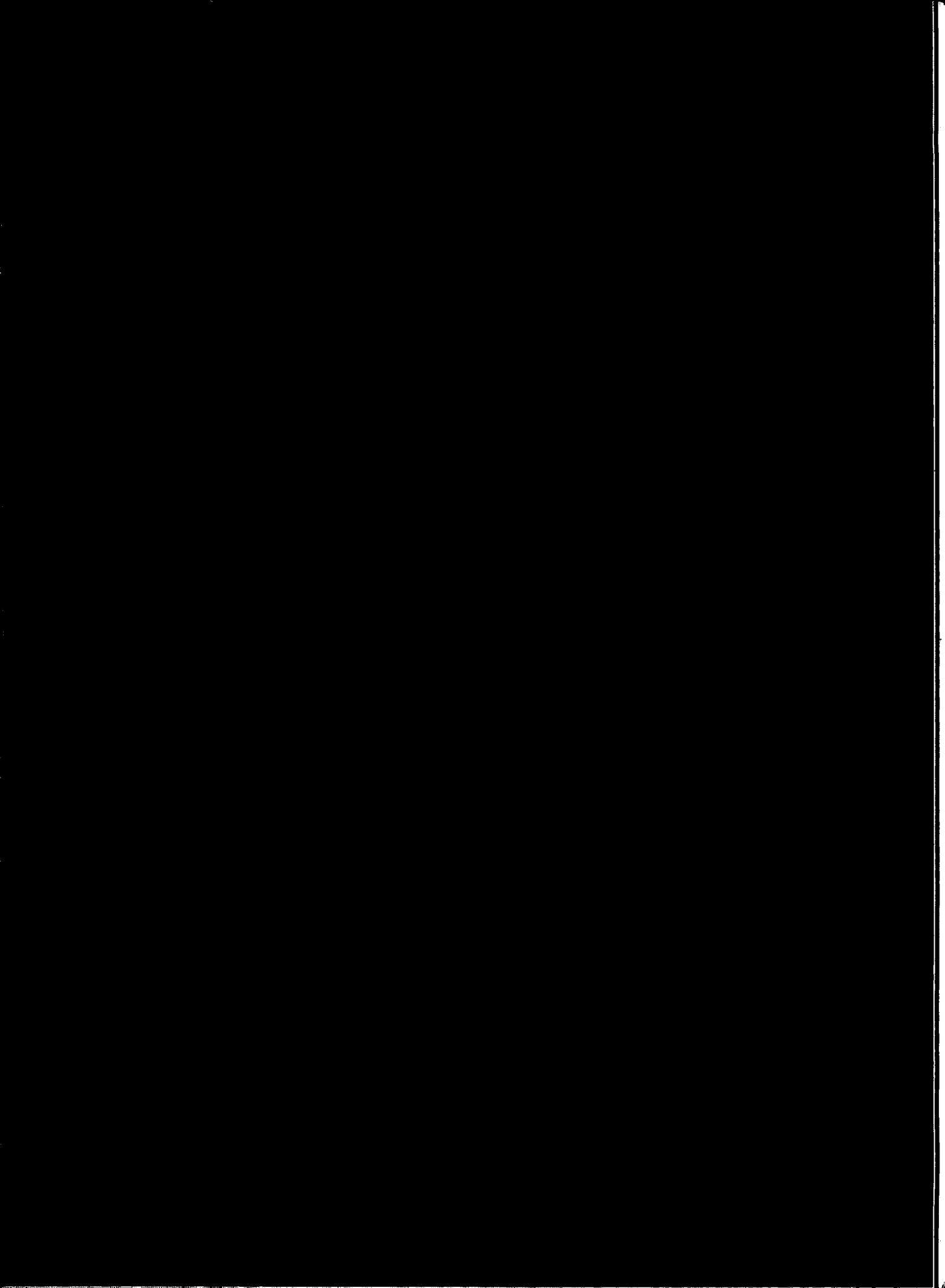
"The present issues concerning the capacities, usage, and deployment of AI are clear and tangible. Yet the question of where our future lies with the advancement of AI still remains unclear. With its increasing pervasiveness and evolution, as AI continues to find its way into every area of human society, from healthcare to shopping recommendations, its algorithms will begin to cover all levels of human decision making. It is impossible to move through the modern world without having used or been a part of the process of an AI algorithm, and as its inescapability grows, so too does our reliance on it, unwittingly or otherwise. In his essay *Why Technology Favors Tyranny*, Yuval Noah Harari, historian and professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, writes that as this dependence on AI algorithms grows, we might "willingly give up more and more authority over our lives because we will learn from experience to trust the algorithms more than our own feelings, eventually losing our ability to make many decisions for ourselves," (Harari, 28). The power of convenience has been finely honed by technology companies and those who employ their services. They have fostered a dependency so strong that it is almost painful to even think about not relying on them to make our choices for us.

The idea of our creations turning on us and punishing us for our hubris and penchant for cruelty has existed since time immemorial. They serve an almost cathartic purpose, an

effigy we create and burn to assuage us of humanity's certain survival no matter how severe our mistakes. Skynet. Ultron. VIKI. M3GAN. Truly sentient AI is a particularly interesting category in this genre. It is not the brutality of some unrefined, bestial homunculus; or the impersonality of a bio-engineered virus that infects everything it can. It is the synthesis of all human capacity, something more than the sum of its parts, with an intelligence and aptitude that not only exceeds ours, but has allowed it to deem us unworthy to be the stewards of our own future. The vast majority of the public places no serious stock in the concept of such a philosophical horror. Why should they? In these stories humanity always triumphs, or if the tone is slightly darker, at least perseveres. What do we have to fear of an army of NS-5's when Boston Dynamic dogs cannot even conquer a banana peel? The artistic capacity of the human soul is in no danger of being superseded by any M3GAN model derivative when Midjourney struggles with the basic task of drawing a hand. This confidence that we have no need to worry about the most capable threat to humanity when we think about AI misses the point. The fantastical image that we conjure in our heads when we assess the concerns of AI has allowed for its progression to be relatively uncontested by the general public up until now. In turn, this has led to its frighteningly fast and omnipresent integration into our society. At this point, we are still capable of making our own decisions, we can choose to educate ourselves about the issues concerning the usage and deployment of AI and advocate for public awareness and legislation. While these concerns may not carry the weight of an omniscient, intelligent sentient AI hellbent on wiping us out, we are at the critical juncture to prevent any more overreaches into lives. After all, we do not need to be sleeping in pods and living in a simulated world to lose too much of ourselves.

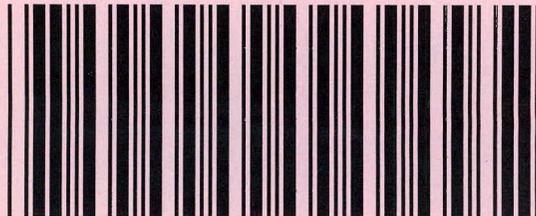




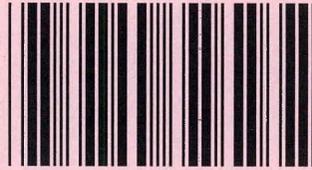








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