



THE WIT

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Vol. 53

Adlai E. Stevenson High School
1 Stevenson Drive
Lincolnshire, Illinois 60069

Dear reader,

Leave this port with me.

We know it's time to depart. The wind here bites at our faces and the wood under our feet is splintering. There's a weight on our chests when we breathe in too long—maybe it's the salt spray in the air, or the tone of those seagulls' calls. I hold a strong sense of déjà vu when I run my hand over our ship's hull. I could halve it with you. Do you want me to?

On the open water, after we've watched the port shrink until we can both close one eye and let it disappear from the tops of our held-out thumbs, we're adrift. You tilt your head up and inhale. The waves are gentle; they rock us to sleep and pull us awake. On clear days we watch a netting of sunlight bob along the water's surface, and on clear nights we map constellations—you spot them, I note them down—but clear days and nights become harder to come by.

Keeping track of time is hard. Keeping our eyes open is hard. One morning, the water is as still as we've ever seen it, and half an hour later we're completely submerged. *I can't tell whether we're drowning or dreaming of drowning*, I tell you. *All our days are the same grey-blue*, you say, *sliding together, sky and sea at horizon*. The waves become too strong for us to sleep. When we sleep on land again in however many months it will take to reach, we still feel the ship under us, lurching.

Another morning, we look out and a dot of land breaks up the blended horizon. Our time is divided all at once by thiw. Today is a league away, tomorrow is half. We're anchored before we even reach the land. By the time our ship bumps against the dock, even our drowning dreams have floated away.

But don't you want a proper goodbye? Come out to the deck. We can watch the sun trace the water from here, for one last time. I'll see you soon.

Love,
Helen Han, Editor-in-Chief

A Note:

This magazine was largely created during the COVID-19 pandemic as we followed social distancing guidelines. We selected and assembled these writing and art submissions from our homes, coordinating through an abundance of Zoom meetings and email threads. Though we've had an unconventional production cycle, we're glad to have connected with each other in this time to showcase the voices of Stevenson's writers and artists. Producing the magazine for the past few years, we've experienced art's capacity for fostering community and building faith—a capacity now more meaningful than ever. Please enjoy.



i. Departed

“how could I find anyone
better than you?”

“the concrete slopes straight
down into the water”

“it likes to waltz
to the echo of our words”

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Sunny Side Up, Darling?

RICHARD YIN

His eggshell hair, silky against my cracked, calloused fingers.
I lace braids, weaving strands of white over and under,
a patchwork quilt of keratin forming as I cradle his skull,
rocking back and forth on the loose axle that links mind
to spine. Bone marrow and the mushy in between
shifting, sliding, grinding,
as I hold his life in my hands.

How easy it would be to crack that eggshell open,
spilling sloshing, frothing yolk
splattering as it hits the hard, iron pan I
crack across his brow, spooling forth the innards of that soft eggy white
how succulent, I savor, crinkling bits of shell in my teeth as I lick my lips, eager for more.

He looks up at me, lips pursed, expectant as I gaze into his hazel iris.
Pecking, I impart a hummingbird kiss.

One day, I will feast.
For now, I braid hair.



Mixed media

Piper Starr

Virago

LAYA REDDY

I wonder how far up lies broken glasswares
topping the wall invaders wish to pass.
Its silica dust showers my long hair,
marking among soldiers the only lass.
Arrows crash to the dirt, scattering grass.
Gales shake high trees into shedding tufts
of shrubbery fashioned into falling laurels.
Foreigners fall from high ledges, their fat thyme-stuffed.

“Retreat!” comes the call, booming like a yell.
Ground dainty feet, resist the command,
and throw myself on the masses to hurl hell.
A towering gladiator makes demands,
yet I don’t flee from fists of a man’s hand.
He yanks my wooden bow from me, enraged
—for a moment I try to flee.
Then I wrap ‘round his torso: a deadly cage.
Make him yield until he falls to his knees.

Thin-limbed men stay in my periphery,
for downing the warrior clears a path.
While I lasso a fleeting victory,
their pounding feet join me in my wrath.
Chalk bones jut through skin in the bloodbath,
scarring our eyes in the gory sight.
My braid bleeds red, a morbid aftermath.
I gaze upon the detritus in last light.

Moons later, I creep through a dragon’s lair.
Men chanting, voices humming deep bass.
They stand behind me, recalling my flare
in defending against the barbarian mass.

The Little Green Man

ANDREW SACK

The little green man told the whole world his little evil plan. That little evil plan was that all the people would listen to his every little demand. Of course, none of the people listened to the desires of a little green man, except for his number one fan.

The number one fan of the little green man loved the little evil plan to meet his hero’s demands. But the little green man didn’t like the idea of being served by his number one fan because he met everyone of his demand. The little green man wanted an army to command to make the worlds meet his demands, alongside his number one fan.

The little green man asked, “Number one fan, what is your name?”

The little green man’s number one fan replied, “Well, I’m Dan. Dan, your number one fan!”

The little green man decided to alter his little evil plan to include Dan, his number one fan. The little green man got on top of his big, purple van and announced to the world, “I am the little green man, and with my number one fan, Dan, we will enact my little evil plan to make all of man meet our every demands atop my big, purple van!” He held up Dan to present his vice-ruler to the world as the crowd watched in awe.

After the initial shock, though, they continued to go. The little green man stood, but not all alone, because he had a friend to call his own.



Digital art

Jasmine Lin

origami

GAVIN MENG

the pressed pulp of tired trunks
lay neatly in crisp squares,
corners tidy,
slices of blank canvas aching to be filled.

but today, color is motion,
painting paper in folds and creases,
bends and wrinkles.
under the gentle guidance of weathered hands,
mountains rise and valleys dip,
flavoring the white monotony in three dimensions.

waves ripple across the ivory surface.
rolling crests leave flaps and furrows,
pleats and petals,
until the tide finally withdraws,
revealing the finished product:
Origami,
dainty, intricate,
resting in the center of your palm.



Digital photograph

Billy Bratton

Spring

KELLY HERLIHY

The naked branches of skeleton trees,
quivering in winter's monotone dawn,
thaw from the season's unforgiving freeze
as the sun wakes and the world starts to yawn.

The thin blanket of snow melts into mud,
swirls of brown that birth blades of fragile green,
slides to the river bed where water floods
and consumes shards of ice that glint and gleam.

By the water's edge, buds begin to sprout,
unfolding to reveal petals of gold
to match the glow of the sun peeking out,
nature's gift after many months of cold.

As daylight breaks, the birds begin to sing,
rejoicing over the return of spring.

Magic 8 Ball

LILLIAN DJUNAEDI

Characters:

Logan: 19 year-old boy, theater kid, gamer boy.

Autumn: 18 year-old girl, artistic, loves movies/film.

Magic 8 Ball (M8B): Booming, deep voice, never seen on stage, straight to the point.

Setting:

As the curtain rises, we see a bed center right stage, the bottom end angled towards the middle of downstage right and downstage center. Boxes are scattered across the stage, one downstage right, three stacked on top of each other upstage left, and two next to each other downstage left. The lights fade up as LOGAN and AUTUMN walk on stage from upstage right.

Logan: And you are sure this place is fine? It was a little cheap for the city. Can't you just live with your grandparents?

Autumn: With how much we fight? Please. All we do is scream at each other about useless things. Plus, this place is closer to school, and I have it all to myself.

Logan: Okay, babe, just be safe. I don't like this neighborhood.

Autumn: You mean the middle of Manhattan? You never liked it here. I got lucky with this place. I couldn't just let a studio apartment this affordable pass me by.

Logan: Okay, okay. I'm just worried about you.

Autumn: *(She kisses his cheek and smiles)* I know. Now help me move the bed closer to the wall, please.

Logan: Yes, ma’am. *(He walks over to the bed on center stage right and begins to push the end to face downstage right.)*

(Autumn walks over to a box downstage left and begins to rummage through it. She pulls out a few things as Logan finishes pushing the bed. Logan walks to the box downstage right and pulls out a fluffy rug. He goes to lay it down in the center of the room as Autumn finds a Magic 8 Ball in the box she’s looking through.)

Autumn: Hey, babe, look at this! *(She holds out the Magic 8 Ball and shows it to him. Logan walks over and takes it from her hands.)*

Logan: Whoa, I haven’t seen one of these since I was a kid.

Autumn: You are still a kid.

Logan: Yeah, but now I’m less of a kid. I used to think that these were true fortune tellers that would predict everything in my future. *(He chuckles a little and walks towards the rug, sitting down on it, facing downstage center.)*

Autumn: *(She follows him and sits next to him, smiling. The lights dim, still illuminated, but not as bright, and a spotlight illuminates center stage.)* I didn’t even know I had one of these.... What are you waiting for? Ask it a question. Maybe it is a ‘true fortune teller’ as you thought as a kid.

Logan: *(He laughs and shakes his head.)* I don’t think so. *(He looks at Autumn then back at the ball, thinking for a few seconds.)* Will Autumn ever play my favorite game with me?

Autumn: Logan, I told you not till your birthday!

Logan: Not that game. *(He shakes the ball and the lights, except for the spotlight, go out.)*

M8B: YES. *(Logan drops the Magic 8 Ball in surprise, and Autumn jumps a little.)*

Logan: *(The lights come back up to a dim when the Magic 8 Ball finishes talking.)* What the hell? Did it just talk?

Autumn: *(She laughs off her surprise.)* Maybe it’s just advanced since you’ve last used it. It was probably made to appeal to the younger kids.

Logan: *(He smiles wearily and laughs nervously.)* Yeah, I guess so.

Autumn: Here, let me try. *(She picks up the Magic 8 Ball and smiles at Logan.)* Does Logan love me? *(She shakes the Magic 8 Ball.)*

M8B: *(The lights turn off except for the spotlight.)* YES.

Autumn: That’s so cool.

Logan: *(He grabs her hip with his arm and uses the other hand to take the Magic 8 Ball.)* I’ve got to admit, I love the voice feature. Really amped up the ‘I know your future’ kind of feel.

Autumn: What are you even talking about?

Logan: I don’t even know half the time. *(Autumn laughs and looks at the Magic 8 Ball in Logan’s hand.)* Does Autumn love me? *(He shakes the ball.)*

M8B: YES. Now stop asking me these dumb questions.

Autumn: *(She looks around and then at the Magic 8 Ball, a confused look on her face.)* Did they add personality to a Magic 8 Ball?

Logan: *(He gives Autumn the ball and shrugs.)* I guess.

Autumn: Where even is the speaker on this thing? *(She turns the Magic 8 Ball around and examines it, scratching at a few places.)*

Logan: I don’t know. Can you find it? *(He begins to examine it with her.)* Maybe it’s on the inside?

Autumn: Wouldn’t it be muffled then?

Logan: I don’t know, just ask it another question.

Autumn: Okay, I’ve got a good one. Has Logan ever wanted to get with my best friend? *(She shakes the ball.)*

M8B: YES. Girl, he has thought about it a lot, actually.

Autumn: *(She looks at Logan with a frown on her face.)* Excuse me? Is this true?

Logan: Babe, come on, it's just a kids’ toy. It’s just been answering ‘Yes’ and adding weird side comments. We don’t know if it's true—look, I bet it can’t even say ‘No.’ It’s probably broken or something. *(He takes the ball from Autumn’s hands.)* Is my mom dead? *(He shakes the ball.)*

M8B: NO.

Autumn: So it can say ‘No.’ *(She folds her arms and looks off to the side.)* Really, my best friend?

Logan: Okay, okay, fine. I’ve thought about it a little bit, but I would never cheat on you, and I liked her like that a long time ago. Just some old emotions rising to the surface because you’re moving away, that’s all.

Autumn: Oh, my god. You liked her and never told me?

M8B: YES. He liked her for over a year.

Autumn: I wasn’t asking you! *(She yells at the Magic 8 Ball.)* What the hell do you mean ‘because I’m moving away?’ You want to bang her because I’m moving to a different state?

Logan: Well, uh, no, not exactly. I, uh...*(He quickly stands up.)*

Autumn: Don’t walk away from me! We need to talk about this.

Logan: Um...does Autumn plan to break up with me if she chooses to live here forever? *(He shakes the ball.)*

M8B: Like, homie, she loves it here. She probably will.

Logan: You explain that one! *(He throws the Magic 8 Ball into Autumn’s hands.)*

Autumn: *(She stands up, worried and angry.)* You wouldn’t have moved out here with me and you know it! I love it here. I want to live here and I want my kids to be raised here. You want to stay in a little town with your family, but I want to explore the world, live in the city. I want to experience everything to the fullest and I can’t do that and stay with you if you won’t do it with me.

Logan: Did you even bother to ask?

Autumn: I didn’t have to! You committed to a school literally 10 miles away from your parents’ house and you were so excited to stay at home. You love your family, I know you do. You don’t want to leave them, and I don’t want to be the reason you do.

Logan: Well, maybe if you gave me some time, I would choose you, but you didn’t even give me the chance!

Autumn: Oh, don’t pretend like you would even consider leaving Illinois. *(She puts the Magic 8 Ball in both of her hands.)* When is our anniversary date? Logan doesn’t know it, so maybe you do. *(She shakes the ball.)*

Logan: I do too! It’s like…sometime in…the spring?

Autumn: Wow, you obviously know the date—*(in a mocking tone)* ‘sometime in the spring.’ What about my birthday?

Logan: That’s also in the spring! I just can’t think straight now.

M8B: March 20th, 2017. Oh, and sis, your birthday is May 13th, 2001.

Autumn: *(Too angry to act surprised.)* See, even a children’s toy knows our anniversary date! You can’t even remember it because you can’t ‘think straight.’

Logan: I have a terrible memory. You know that! Plus, isn’t it a little weird it knew the exact date?

Autumn: Don’t change the subject! You can’t even bother to remember two simple measly dates. My birthday and our anniversary. You forgot both last year!

Logan: I did not.

Autumn: Yes, you did! We went to Walmart so you could get me a \$25 gift card on my birthday after I reminded you it was my birthday, and you bought it while I was with you! And after our anniversary, you sent me a bouquet of flowers a week late with the words “Happy Anniversary!” on the card. I told you that you got the date wrong and that’s why I gave you cologne the week before, and your response was *(in a mocking tone)* ‘Oh sorry, babe—I’ll get it right next time.’ We’ve been together for four years, and you still haven’t gotten it right!

Logan: Okay, sorry I forgot some stupid dates! *(He snatches the ball from her hands.)* Does Autumn even care what I’m passionate about and how her neediness is getting in the way of that? *(He shakes the ball angrily—the lights flicker on and off, turning back off again. The spotlight stays on.)*

M8B: To be real with you, bro, she does care about you, but she couldn’t care less that her attachment to you is getting in the way of your dreams.



Digital art

Self Comic Portrait

Ari Zaritsky

Autumn: I do too care about your dreams! I’ve been nothing but supportive from day one. If anything, you have been the least bit supportive.

Logan: Are you kidding me? I went to the screening of your film in that film festival, and I compliment you on all your drawings.

Autumn: Yeah, but you missed all of my readings of my poems and the reading of my essay! All of them! You were too busy for me. And here I am going to every single one of your little “theater productions” with all your hotshot, talented friends.

Logan: Oh, you just hate them because you can’t sing.

Autumn: *(Her mouth is open in shock for a quick second then she fights with Logan over the ball, eventually prying it from his hands.)* I can sing! You just hate the fact that I am more humble than you are.

Logan: Humble? Please, you whine about every little thing that doesn’t go your way.

Autumn: And you ignore the fact that I grew up in a terrible situation while you got your precious mommy and daddy

always by your side to hold your hand every step of the way. Well, guess what, Logan? I didn’t get that!

Logan: Oh, that’s not fair. I—

Autumn: Does Logan even care he took my virginity? Was it special for him? *(She shakes the ball.)*

M8B: It didn’t make an impact on him, and it was not special for him. In his mind, it was just sex.

Autumn: *(The lights begin to come up and the spotlight fades out as she chucks the Magic 8 Ball at Logan, and he catches it. She walks to upstage right. She bangs on the “door” and tries to open it.)* Why the HELL am I locked in?

M8B: Yeah, I did that. Y’all need to work this out before you go running away from each other. You two are just too cute together not to be in a relationship.

Autumn: *(She walks back over to Logan and takes the Magic 8 Ball from his hands.)* No one asked you to! I didn’t ask for a magic talking piece of plastic shit to barge into my life, so get the hell out! *(She winds up like a pitcher and chucks the Magic 8 Ball towards center stage left then sits on the rug, head in her hands.)*

Logan: Autumn, you need to—

Autumn: *(Removes her head from her hands and looks at Logan.)* Don’t tell me what to do! You don’t deserve to even have a say in what I do! *(She stands up and puts her hands in her hair.)* God, why do I have to be stuck in a room with you?

Logan: What’s the big deal? So our first time having sex was just sex to me, who cares?

Autumn: I care, Logan. I care. You know that sex is the most intimate thing to me, and it is the one way I feel as if I can show true and pure love without messing it up.

Logan: Well I’m sor—

Autumn: Don’t say you’re sorry. You clearly are not if you don’t understand how it is one of the most precious parts of a relationship to me.

Logan: Clearly it's not because you plan to break up with me!

Autumn: Only if I choose to live here after college! I don’t know what’s going to happen. I need time to think. And it is important but—

Logan: *(He talks in a mocking tone.)* Oh, you need time to think. Did you even think about how I would feel when you’re moving hundreds of miles away from me to a dangerous city?

Autumn: I—

Logan: I love you and hate that you’re running away from me.

Autumn: I’m not running away from you.

Logan: Yes, you are! Why else would you commit to a school so far away from the life I wanted with you?

Autumn: I committed to the goddamn school because it's one of the best for my major. It’s one of the best for me. I love the

city and I’m sorry this isn’t how you imagined our future together, but I don’t know what you expected from a high school sweetheart relationship. They don’t last.

Logan: Oh, so now you’re saying you expected us not to last? I cannot believe you. Was that what you thought on our first date? That you would have to break up with me in the end?

Autumn: You’re not listening to me.

Logan: No, you’re not listening to me. I wanted us to have kids and live in a little house next to our high school, so they could go to our school. I wanted us to have a beautiful wedding by the beach like you’ve always wanted and to be together forever. I wanted a life with you, Autumn.

Autumn: I have a hard time believing that since we had one minor setback in our relationship and you thought about banging my best friend.

Logan: This isn’t minor! This is huge. You’re moving to a different state that is 12 hours away from me. And yeah, I thought about it, but that doesn't mean I was going to do it.

Autumn: How do I know that? You have a ton of female friends. I’m surprised you haven’t cheated on me already with them.

Logan: Oh, please, now you’re jealous of them? Really? Why? Is it because they can sing better than you, dance better than you, and act better than you? Even write better than you?

Autumn: *(She sits on the bed and wipes away tears from her face, looking down.)* I’m sorry.

Logan: Wait, I, uh—I didn’t mean all of that.

Autumn: I know I’m not as talented as you and your friends, but I do my best. I just feel like you’re going to find someone better than me and move on.

Logan: Me, find someone better? You’re one of the best things that ever happened to me. I could never find anyone better. If anything, it’s you who will move on and get a buff, hot boyfriend that plays sports and has a bigger d—k than me.

Autumn: *(She laughs under her breath and wipes away more tears.)* How could I find anyone better than you? You’re talented and sweet and smart. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.

Logan: *(He walks towards the bed, takes her hands, and pulls her towards him, giving her a small hug.)* I just don’t want to lose you.

Autumn: I don’t want to lose you either.

Logan: I can’t believe a Magic 8 Ball made us fight like this.

Autumn: I think we just haven’t really talked about how we really felt in a long time. I feel insecure knowing you’ll be away from me and won’t know anything you’re doing.

Logan: I do, too. Let’s go grab some snacks for the night. I saw a Dollar Store down the road. We can talk all night and finish unpacking your stuff tomorrow. *(Logan and Autumn exit upstage right.)*

M8B: I unlock the door for you guys and you leave me here? Hello? *(Lights fade and curtains close.)*



Digital art

Jasmine Lin



Digital art

Jasmine Lin

conversations with my mother

LAYA REDDY

at the toy store, in the waiting room, in front of the stove.

i. disillusioned

the teddy bear
melds to my frame
as I curve around her;
attempted phagocytosis.
mother peels us apart,
makes me a *self* again. she must've practiced
when I was still in the womb.

ii. prepared

it's brisk indoors. that's why
goosebumps pucker my skin
into camouflage.
my knees shaking for heat.
i lean on mother's chest:
firm trunk supporting me—
polyester sweater, a familiar bark.

did you know?
mothers suck out tension like water.

iii. comforted

the push of my forehead
into the small of mother's back
signals the start of grief:
soaking cotton and skin
until both bleed salt. mother warms me
with the *crackling* oil.
as it pops, she presses
a sizzling pakoda into my palm.

i let it radiate
into the ceramic of my hand.

i look up
—mother looks back.

Reflection

SHREYA SREEDHAR

I watch the raindrops cling to each branch for an instant,
before losing their grip and plummeting into the pond.
Drops plunge into the water,
creating circles that widen until they fade into the water.

A disrupted upside down image appears on the water,
a man and a woman holding each other under a streetlight.
He rests his hands on her hips,
as she listens to his heartbeat.

The drops plummet faster and faster from the sky,
creating constant ripples on the water,
distorting their reflection.

Despite the blurred reflection, I could see them
sway and twirl to the rhythmic tapping of raindrops,
as I sit under my umbrella,
on the opposite side of the pond.



Oil

Sayalee Patankar

Madeline

AMBER ATKINSON

I don't think this is how we should be. I think it should be less like promises let go and more like last winter's sweet tea. Or maybe even a little like fishnet tights, criss-cross and thread-taught.

Can you hear me? Through these walls, through this time? This unfinished hymn, this unforgiving love, are we walking the same distance?

Your heart beats quick, cat-purr, waltz-beat, I can barely keep up. I've never been too fond of yellow but this blanket is all I can hold onto. Our palms hold. Our fingers grasp. I never imagined myself feeling so at home in yellow.

It is right now that I know. I can tell by your biting voice. Tangled hair. Overuse of words and smiles. It's all around us. The emptied metal shelves, the perpetually closed desk drawers, the broken closet door hanging loose and salvageable, but unfixed still.

I wonder if you kept the ringing of my laugh in your pillowcase. I wonder if it's gone stale.

I count the hours like lucid dreams, the once-in-a-while good ones. My breath cools the skin on your neck, until we are both gone. This isn't how it should be. It should be more like the creak of floorboards snuck over in grey socks. More like all the sweaters and mechanical pencils in every library we know of. More like strawberry ice cream, the kind we both like.

The sun takes an extra hour to tuck itself beneath the ocean from where we stand. She knows we need more time here, like she could tell it would end too soon. Days last a little bit longer, just enough to let ourselves loose before the snow settles.

I found richness in midnight where you found fresh life in midday. This mismatched harmony of strung lights and hung mirrors. Our footprints laid out and asking to be caught, the press of gloved hands held tight. Looking for a reason to find our way home.

This moment is ours.

The Corn-Maze Asylum

CLARE HU

gourd-belly smiles you describe
that have nothing to do
with how your mouth moves. you think
you're beautifully made, teeth
gleaming, ambitions laid bare as husks,
a skinned and deftly peeled rough-draft cash-crop. anything
but the innocuity of fruit. you think your roots
are suitable for the soul of the soil
that you derive that self-love from.
like love in itself is an earthly entitlement,
cut into the landscape. a love that runs deep. a
dusk-framed and silhouetted treeline or
perhaps, again! a curve
in the belly of a gourd. the crows do
wail for you, an unlucky kin, alone in the yard. a
pumpkin scarecrow with wooden arms
bent and broken around your back and chipped button
eyes and a screwy black-bean grin.
you look like you're giving yourself a
well-deserved autumn embrace, standing there
in acres of crushed wheat. i think
you're just a trick of the sun in the fields. i think you're just
waiting for a straitjacket
to keep you warm.

afternoon

TIA VASUDEVA

We don't draw the blinds till about three o'clock when the sun drizzles itself over our windows so deeply we are forced to remember daylight. *Oh*, we say into the empty wrappers we have wallpapered to our house, and there are a million fluttering moths beating against our chest because it is this kind of day. It is like this, a wind that beats like a snare thumping against my rib cage. Careful, she's whittling a hole. Careful. She knows how to break free.



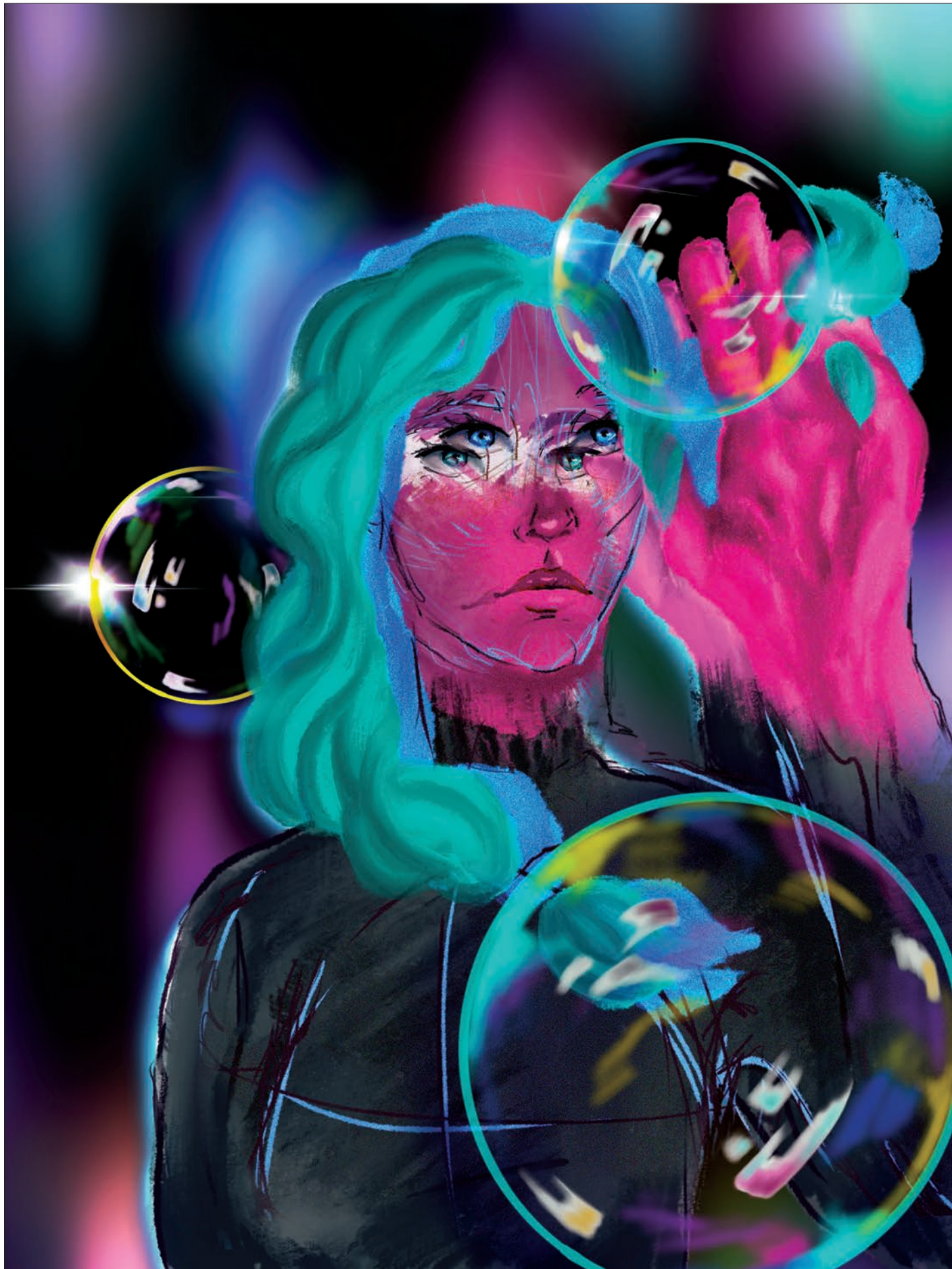
Digital art

Xinting Guo

Sitting at the lakefront, I speak with the concrete retaining wall

HELEN HAN

I've known her for two years, and I've known her for so much longer, I tell the concrete retaining wall. The concrete retaining wall does not respond, so I take the silence as an invitation to explain. You know how you meet someone and immediately they're familiar? Clumps of seaweed dot the wall, swaying, green fingers curled. You know how someone looks at you and says your name and you get that falling-off-a-cliff-in-your-dreams-feeling? The concrete slopes straight down into the water. I look closer and there's algae lining the edge where water meets air against concrete; where water meets air meets concrete meets algae. I blink. Algae, Wikipedia tells me your name comes from the Latin algere—to be cold. It shivers. Or alliga—to bind to, to tie to, to entwine. An insistent wave rises, presses the seaweed against the algae wall. When she looks at me I go cold, I say. You must know what it's like to be cold. My hand skims the water's surface, drawing up proof. I watch the water spin. I watch the seaweed dance.



Digital art

Bubbly

Diana Struif

Green Tea

an ode

AMBER ATKINSON

She and I visited Florida, some two or three weeks ago, and it reminded me of our golden 2009 Envoy that always smelled like smoke. Even from the backseat, I recall moments like these when She drove her foot through the floor on the gas pedal. Fast is never fast enough, She would say, with reluctance and fear in her eyes but a smile stuck to her skin like maple syrup. Wrinkles would dig their way into her cheeks like parentheses, holding onto the unspoken words on her lips as though they were sins.

I saw clear bottles of bubbles, the ones that She would drink like She needed it, like it was her last drop of anything before She shriveled up behind the wheel. Almost as if the sun could dry her out completely, could pick up every drop of spit and sweat. Could make sure She would never again be any more than tough-bitten flesh and broken bone. Her skin was as soft as everyone said it was, but not quite as thick. I believe She put her worries in the glove compartment, in an airtight plastic bag right next to her insurance card. It gave her a sense of security to leave it out of sight but still reliably there. If or when She would need them.

We distracted ourselves. The radio blasted. Full volume so that the car would shake just enough to mask the shaking of her own hands. I would worry that the windshield could shatter from the noise. It won't break, She would say, That's just the way it dances. It likes to sway to the sound of our laughter. It likes to waltz to the echo of our words. Many times She came close to convincing me that the car could tip over from the sway of the wind. So She made sure to speed on sharp turns as a way of saying, this is how people like us get by.

She always kept a pair of shoes and a box of candies in the back seat. Were we to ever get lost or abandoned—we both feared that—She thought the shoes would walk us home. She believed in stuff like that. But the candies were for one-time use only, her ego fed on artificial flavors and high fructose corn syrup and always seemed to be malnourished.

The sky wasn't as purple then. More like a murky blue, like the dirt had kissed it goodnight. Or maybe her cigarette smoke had blotted out the stars. I listened when She told me why She never frowned, I listened to the cracking of her knuckles, encasing the gear shift loosely but still tight enough to keep her breaths in time with the rain.



*“every song disappears
like foam”*

*“perhaps it was better to
roam in the cold”*

*“there are blades in the chasm
between the water and me”*

*“bloodshot, through and
through and through”*

ii. Adrift

Peach Fuzz

BETHANY LEE

It's some comment
about us all looking the same
that makes me stop chewing.

My best friend tosses her golden hair,
and the light slides off it.
My brother said
he could blindfold you with a shoelace.

The cafeteria gets smaller,
louder, more unbearable,
and I shrink with it.

I smile at her.
See, like that.
I watch the blonde fuzz
coating her forearms as she gesticulates,
a peach twisted under the sunlight.

Someone held it there once,
turned it slowly to observe its glow,
and the fruit smiled bashfully,
knew nothing of shame,
knew nothing of shrinking,
did not sit in the cafeteria
and wither.

Girl Laughing

BETHANY LEE

Heat-seeker flounders in a room full of bodies.
We watched as you launched it,
that shrill laugh
which sliced the punchline wide open
and now whistles eagerly in the hollow air.
We stare at our feet
so as not to witness the crumbling, first of the joke
and then of the girl.
But your head remains cocked and lips parted, unmoved by the silence,
and in us stirs envy.
There is always shame to bring home, the shame which wakes us each hour
'til we nurse it to sleep.
You trap yours in a jar, peel back the lid,
and let us drink from the scandal.
Your heat-seeker laugh will chase us until we
collapse, and the room, which used to have nothing,
is now brimming with something.
We envy your sacrifice—the way you give the unwanted—and this joke
is another glass jar. Somehow you learned to self-immolate,
to throw your head back
and sing.



Digital art

Bumba

Kara Lee

Playground

LILLIAN DJUNAEDI

EXT. PARK - DAY

WIDE SHOT:

We see a bright green field in most of our view and a bright blue sky looking over the kids playing soccer. In the distance is a colorful playplace shaped to look like a castle, seemingly empty. The MONKEY BARS reflect the bright light of the sun. The metal seems to almost glow, clearly hot from the sun beating down on the playground for several hours.

INT. PLAYGROUND CASTLE - DAY

The screen cuts to HENRY sitting down center-frame on the floor inside one of the castle’s rooms. A stream of light falls onto the PILE of five stuffed animals next to him, each with subtle flaws from use. There is an orange cat with beady eyes and a pink nose, its fur matted. There is a dog that has brown spots over the rest of the black fur, a sparkly blue resin eye replaced with a baby blue button. On top of the dog is a dark blue whale with a rip at the seam of the tail, and next to it is a mini version of the cat. The last stuffed animal is a platypus with a few stains, lying a few inches away from the other stuffed animals. The colors seem slightly more muted than they were before in the establishing shot. Henry picks up the CAT AND THE MINI VERSION and makes the two plushies talk to each other.

CLOSE UP OF FACE:

The boy looks up directly at the camera, a longing look in his eyes. This is for several seconds.

EXT. PARK - DAY

We cut back to see through a gap in the wall of the playground castle, the kids on the field playing soccer, laughing and yelling at each other to run faster or kick harder. There are makeshift goals made from long sticks that the kids had stuck in the ground on either side of their area of play, not taking up the whole field.

MEDIUM SHOT - HAND HELD:

No longer looking through the gap, we can clearly see kids’ faces and movements with clearer audio of their voices calling out to their teammates. One girl kicks the grimy SOCCER BALL that we track with our view into the opposing team’s goal. We see the GIRL jump up in the air, pumping her fists. The camera zooms out slightly to see Jack running up to her and giving her a high five, while everyone else is shouting.

INT. PLAYGROUND CASTLE - DAY

Behind the boy, we see him get up and walk towards the wall he was looking through, the animals still in his hand. He gets up on his tippy toes and peers over the wall. There is a jump cut to look at his face again, his little head the focus, but a large area of the space surrounds him. Close up of the boy’s body. He is center-frame, and we see his hands open and drop the stuffed animals. We look through a bird’s-eye-view over the stuffed animals and watch them fall in slow motion to the floor of the playground castle. We switch to a close up of the floor and watch as the stuffed animals slowly hit the ground, Henry’s shoes center frame.

EXT. PLAYGROUND CASTLE - DAY

Henry runs out of the playground castle towards the other kids on the field.

STILL SHOT:

We see him run off center-right and see him run across the screen to the left towards the field.

EXT. PARK - DAY

The kids stop playing soccer. Jack is in the foreground, slightly off-center. The rest of the kids are a few feet behind him, close together, in the background. We can see them to the right of Jack. We cut to see the side profile of Jack on the left side of the screen and Henry running onto the right side, breathing slightly heavily. They stare at each other for an amount of time that feels unusual but not uncomfortable. Cut to shoulders up of Jack; he is off-center-left, so we can see his face but still see the kids behind him on the right.

JACK
Hi. I’m Jack. That’s Sophia, Lola, Jeff, Alexandra, and Sarah.

He turns around and points at the kids in the order that he introduces them, then turns back to Henry. We cut to see Henry on the right side of the screen. The playground castle can be seen on his left in the background.

HENRY
Hi.
(Pause)
I’m Henry.
(They both pause)

JACK
Want to play soccer with us, Henry? We noticed you looking over there on the playground.

HENRY
Okay.

Henry walks alongside Jack to the center of the soccer field, and one of the girls picks up the SOCCER BALL. Jack points in the direction of the other kids facing the opposite direction of him.

JACK
You’ll go on their team.

HENRY
Won’t that make it not even?

JACK
It’s okay, our team can handle it.

Henry nods and goes to the team with Alexandra, Sarah and Jeff. Jack goes with his team.

We see the kids’ SHOES facing each other, and the ball drops in the center of them. We cut to a medium shot of JACK and

Digital photograph Grace Kwon

his teammates a few inches behind him. He smiles at Henry and waves for everyone to get into their position. We now see a wide shot of the kids on the field. Someone yells and the game begins. There’s a short montage of the kids playing soccer with closeups of the ball being kicked around and of the kids’ sweating faces. We see a full shot of Henry, smiling, getting ready to kick the ball into a goal. He swings his LEG and falls backwards onto the GROUND, his leg twisted behind him. We cut right before he falls on the ground to a close up of the stuffed animals. The whale turns over on its back from the wind during a few seconds of silence before we hear a loud crack. Henry screams in pain.

FADE TO BLACK

EXT. PARK - SUNRISE

FADE IN

We see Henry walking towards the center of the field with Jack and Lola. He has a cast still on, but he is able to walk and has a carefree smile on his face. Henry looks towards the PLAYGROUND CASTLE, and pauses his walking to stare.

LOLA
You okay, Henry?

HENRY
Yeah. I’ll be back.

Lola shrugs and continues walking towards the center of the field. JACK hesitates for a moment, looking at Henry before turning around and catching up with Lola. Henry begins to walk towards the playground’s castle.

CLOSE UP:

Henry’s FEET are seen in the shot on the wood chips of the playground, his cast seeming much larger than his foot size. He wears a yellow sneaker and a white mid-calf sock pulled all the way up. He enters the inside of the castle.

INT. PLAYGROUND CASTLE - DAY

Henry waddles up the stairs, using his arms to balance himself so he doesn’t fall over with his cast. We can see the STUFFED ANIMALS still in their pile, just a little dusty. Henry slowly walks over to the animals and picks up the WHALE using his right hand. He brings it close to his chest before gathering the rest of the animals. Henry walks back down the stairs of the castle.

EXT. PLAYGROUND CASTLE - DAY

Henry slowly gets down from the last step of the castle, the pile of plushies stacked in his arms. He looks towards the FIELD to see Lola and Jack sitting on the ground and talking, ripping out BLADES of the muted green grass. Henry looks down at the animals, then back up at the field, before walking over to an empty bench placed next to a trash can. Henry stares at the TRASH CAN for a few seconds before walking over to the BENCH and placing the stuffed animals down side-by-side so they are looking at the playground. When satisfied, Henry waddles back to the field. We focus on the STUFFED ANIMALS.

FADE TO BLACK

Sing Slower

SHREYA SREEDHAR

He begins, and mother joins him.
They sing like they just fell in love,
like the time they met in a dim
cafe drinking chai tea with clove.

Staring at the dark path, I drove
past the town with my childhood home.
I can still hear them singing loud
enough to forget their woes.

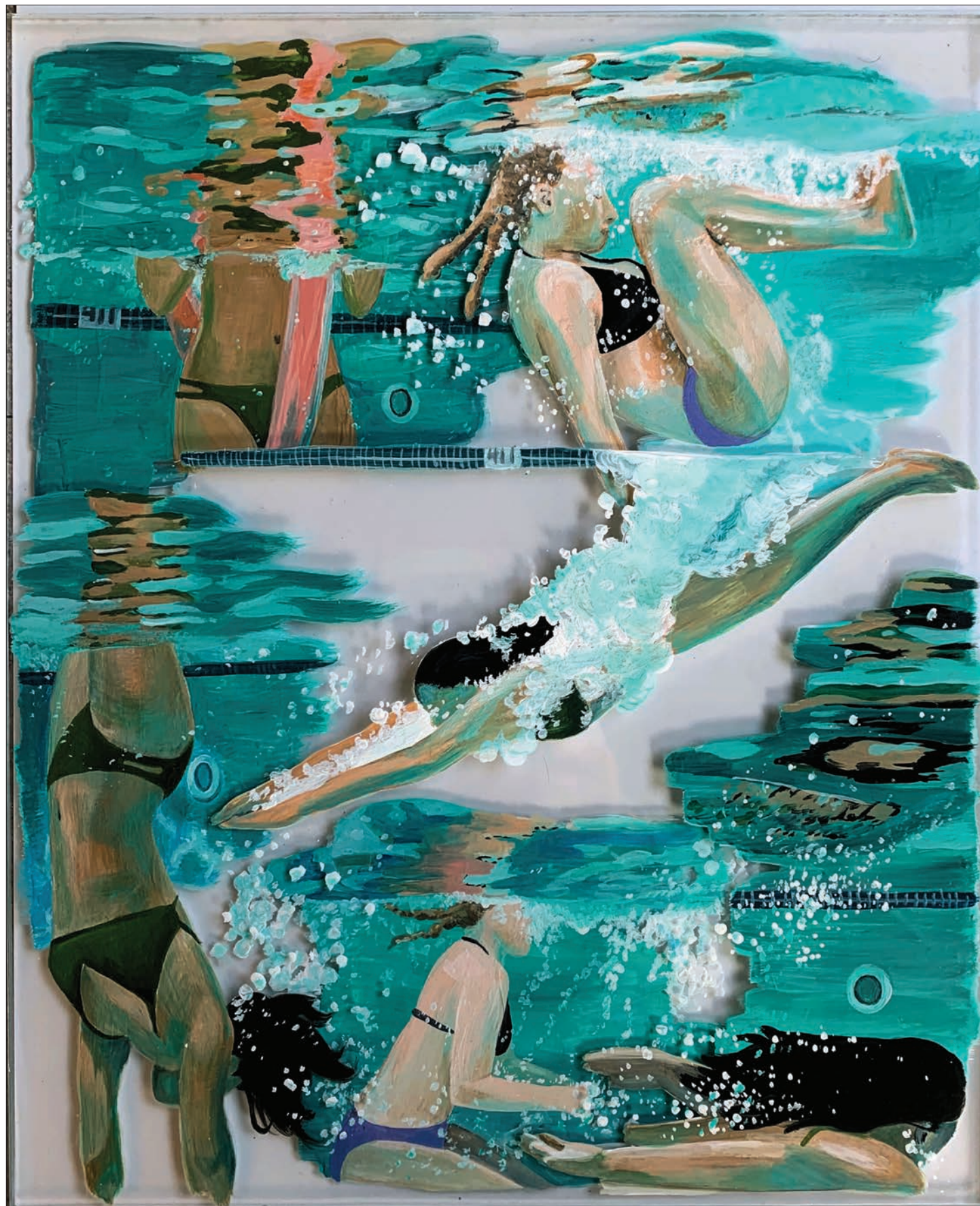
The song is approaching the brim.
The final verse will come and leave,
and father will go on a whim.
I will wait, but I am naive.

The song will end, and he will cleave
us into two, so he can roam
around the town, but I believe
that he will come back home to me.

But the song is still sung by him,
so I relax my head above
his lungs and heart to say to him
that he’s the only one I love.

Mother sings as if she is brave.
Detangling my hair with a comb,
I sing with them to make them proud.
Enough to make him stay at home.

Like every island has a cove,
every song disappears like foam.
He said that I’m the one he loves,
but why has he not come back home?



Acrylic

Best Friend

Jasmine Zheng

recalling your mother's face or other processes of memory

ANNA WANG

There. A fish scale, hard as sequin,
or perhaps a flake of crushed red chili—
remnants of a filling meal. Your tongue has probed
a banquet from the sanctuary spaces
between teeth, kicked up slug bits nested
against the gums. Only here does it fail,
at the crevice where your teeth turn traitor
and stand guard against its nimble trespass,
as if your body knows enough to protect
you from yourself. Or perhaps you are free
from blame, and the problem lies
with a singular culprit—not the dense grass
of mango or the squeak of spinach, but rather
this scale, its twisting light unpinned
from slick beads of soap, illusive yet quickly
intimate. Then again, sometimes you suspect
your tongue, how it will only wrestle until
the membrane of its underside strains, fails,
limps away.

Mutual

ROYA LIPPE

Jenny's eyes scanned Sam's face. The momentary silence was deafening as she waited.

"You took the words right out of my mouth," Sam sighed. His shoulders fell, and the muscles in his face relaxed. He ran his fingers through his sandy brown hair. It was curly and had gotten long over the summer because he wanted to grow it out. His curls fell in front of his eyes, and he shook his head to move them out of his range of sight.

"Really?" Jenny's eyebrows scrunched together and her eyes squinted.

"Yeah, I mean, I'm glad you said that because I was worried you would say that you wanted to stay together through college. I didn't want to be the one to end things."

Jenny tilted her head slightly, her eyes falling to her shoes. She shifted her weight on the bench and brought her legs up, crossing them Indian-style.

"Wait, you're *glad*? I thought you would be upset. You're not upset?" Her face twisted.

"I just mean that I feel the same as you. Isn't that a good thing? It makes this easier for both of us." He grinned. Her eyes dropped back down to her shoes.

"Yeah, sure. Easier." Her fingers reached up to her hair, twisting it between the pads of her thumb and forefinger.

"Are you okay?" He reached for her hand.

She let him take it, and he squeezed it lightly. Their eyes met and the corners of his mouth curved upward. She nodded.

Assistant Pool Manager

MARIAM REICHERT

The scalding Atlanta sun fried my skin while little kids in life jackets and inflatable vinyl water wings flung themselves haphazardly into the pool. Emerging from the water with a glowing red chest, they ran across the slippery tile only to fly back into the water with yet another skin-searing belly flop. Not a single square inch of concrete remained dry. From across the deck, Javier raised his eyebrows at me. His classic “I can not get out of here fast enough” eyebrow raise, a silent conversation between us, forced an involuntary smile to spread across my hot pink cheeks.

He wore a comically huge, felt pirate hat like a crown. His once billowy, white shirt stuck to him from sweat like a polyester exoskeleton, outlining every muscular curve of his abdomen. As instructed by our manager, Mitch, Javier had unbuttoned his shirt one button too far in order to reveal his glistening, tan skin. Last week, Mitch called him into his office to discuss “workplace attire.” From outside, his raspy voice chewed through my eardrums. “You’re a pirate, not an accountant. Show a little skin for the ladies!”

A soggy child in shark-print board shorts ran up to Javier, his feet slapping the wet tile. The kid’s mile-wide, infectious smile spread to Javier’s jubilant, sweaty face. The bright red styrofoam parrot on his shoulder moved stiffly, unlike Javier, as he laughed with the child. My heart fluttered slightly, radiating waves of happiness down to the tips of my toes, leaving my feet with a dull, tingly feeling. As they shared their final words, Javier raised his gray, plastic hook hand, as if to give the child a high five. Shocked, like he didn’t do this same gag several times every day, his jaw dropped and his big eyes widened further. I laughed from my lifeguard stand, like I hadn’t seen him do this same gag several times every day. He shamefully lowered both his head and his hook hand, letting out a sad “arrt.” The child remained with a small, pruned hand in the air, eagerly awaiting whatever came next. Javier rapidly revealed his left hand, which was not made of plastic from the party surplus store, and smacked the child’s wet hand with a crisp slap.

I weakly blew a little puff of steamy air into my red whistle as the kid ran back into the pool. Sure, I was supposed to firmly assert our pool rules—no running, no drinks in the pool, no horseplay—but I hated the way kids’ faces quivered every time the whistle blew. Their little eyebrows knitted together. Their huge eyes grew even wider. Sometimes, even a tear or two dripped down their already drippy faces. Javier was over there making kids laugh and smile while I sat on a pedestal yelling at them for having fun. It wasn’t fair.

“Alright, Gwendolyn, time to switch.” Mitch smiled up at me with crooked teeth.

“Oh, wow, already? I was having the time of my life up here, Mitch.” I began climbing down onto the soaking wet pool deck.

He squinted through blue-lensed prescription goggles, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand. Mitch was the kind of guy to wear prescription goggles even when he wasn’t swimming—especially on the lifeguard stand. “I think we need to have a little chat after your break.”

I nodded. This wasn’t the first time I’ve had a “little chat” with Mitch. Last time, he went on and on about whether or not we should stock the vending machines with lemonade in order to make the atmosphere more “summery.”

“Go put on some extra sunscreen in the break room, sweetie.” He laid a heavy hand on my glowing, red shoulder.

I inhaled a rapid breath, lowering my shoulder to free myself from his grasp. I could feel his gaze on my back as I walked into the break room. The sharp sounds of his whistle pierced my eardrums while he barked at the kid in the shark-print board shorts. The kid whimpered for a second before continuing to run until he launched himself back into the water.

In the break room, I sifted through the fridge for my lunch: a turkey sandwich and some blackberry agave lemonade. From the back of the bottom shelf, I dragged out a drippy paper bag with my name haphazardly scrawled across the front. The ink had bled, merging all of the letters in my name to a single, black watercolor blob. I rolled my eyes so hard that a cold pain spread throughout my eye sockets. The paper bag landed at the bottom of the empty trash can with a wet thud, splashing blackberry agave lemonade back at my face.

“Seriously?” My voice echoed off of the four very small, white brick walls.

As I dabbed my face with rough, brown paper towels from the automatic dispenser above the sink, the heavy, wooden door whooshed open with a flourish. I squinted at the tall rectangle of blinding white sunlight, for my eyes had already gotten used to the dim blue fluorescence of the break room. Javier cast a tall shadow in the doorway before grabbing

his lunch from the fridge and sliding into one of the metal folding chairs at the table.

“What happened to you?” he asked, perplexed at the giant, dark wet spot on the front of my bathing suit.

“It’s lemonade, don’t ask.” I sat in the seat next to him, grabbing a baby carrot from his lunch. “Mitch wants to have a ‘little chat’ with me today.”

Javier chuckled. The corner of his mouth slid into a smirk which revealed a dimple in his tan cheek. He began mocking Mitch’s nasally voice, exaggerating the frequent voice cracks, “Gwendolyn, do you think we should invest in new beach umbrellas? I value your opinion very highly, sweetie. Take your time to really think it through.” He leaned forward on the table, making intense eye contact with me while still in character.

I moved closer to him, refusing to break contact with his deep, brown eyes. With a falsely ponderous expression, I pretended to be deeply enthralled in all things umbrella. Javier’s smirk split into a full smile. Even under the harsh, blue fluorescent lights, his perfect teeth still shone a little. He furthered his face toward mine until I could smell the sunblock on his skin: coconuts and ocean spray. My heart fluttered, forcing my pensive gaze to crack.

With a flood of hot air, the faded, wooden door abruptly flew open to reveal Mitch’s thin, bony outline, heavily backlit by the blinding sun. Poorly attempting to mask his disgust and confusion, he stiffly bustled toward me.

“Gwendolyn.” He gestured for me to follow him. “It’s time for our chat.”

Weakly, with slumped shoulders, I lifted myself from my seat and began slowly trailing Mitch. Gazing back at Javier, a quick eyebrow raise was the last thing I saw before the heavy door swung shut with a dull thud.

Mitch’s office was nothing more than what seemed like a closet with a desk. The temperature was subarctic compared to the suffocating heat outside, but it was realistically only a few degrees cooler since the noisy, old window unit barely blew any air. Squeezing behind the desk, he arrogantly lowered himself into the plush crevices of a cumbersome, leather desk chair that consumed nearly half of the space. He gestured dumbly at the cracked, faded plastic children’s chair crammed in the remaining corner of the room next to the door. I flopped down into it. Rough, worn plastic rubbed on my thighs like fine grit sandpaper slowly wearing away at my exposed skin. My knees touched the cold, metal back of the desk.

A lone *National Treasure* movie poster, signed by Nicholas Cage, hung behind him. Filled with lost goggles and swim caps, a plastic storage drawer was the only thing on his desk aside from his nametag: Mitchell Alman - Assistant Pool Manager. Our real manager, Barry, only showed up for three hours on opposing Wednesdays from 1-4 p.m. In the meantime, Mitch was in charge of overseeing daily, logistical business as well as fulfilling his standard lifeguard duties. Realistically, his main managerial tasks included restocking the vending machines, cleaning the filters, printing promotional fliers, and occasionally planning private parties.

The singular, pendant lightbulb above us cast an ominous spotlight on the center of the formica desk. Mitch leaned forward into the circle of light, crossing his bony hands in front of him. For a lifeguard, he was shockingly, almost reflectively, pale. The thick strip of zinc on his nose was cracked from the sun and turning a pale shade of yellow from whatever grime had built up on his skin. He looked at me, still in his prescription goggles, and raised his eyebrows slowly.

“Now, you’re probably wondering why I called you here.” He spoke slowly and deeply, perhaps in an attempt to quell any rogue voice cracks.

I shrugged.

He pulled a yellow legal pad from one of the empty drawers in his desk. On it, he had scrawled my name in big, crooked letters, followed by what seemed like several full pages of bullet points. My empty stomach turned and bubbled. A single shiver tickled my vertebra. How long had he been working on this list? I raised my chin and widened my eyes in a fruitless attempt to discover what he had written about me. But even if I was directly above his sheets of yellow paper, I doubt I’d be able to read his chicken scratch.

He began reading the list. “May 27th - Gwendolyn returned from break four minutes early.”

To go out and talk to Javier, I thought.

“June 4th - Gwendolyn voluntarily wiped the beach chairs on the east side of the pool deck.”

Because I made Javier laugh while drinking a Coke, so he spit it across all of the chairs.

“June 6th - Gwendolyn did not wear pre-approved Red Cross swim shorts.”

We had a “little chat” about that one already, Mitch.

He rattled off every single bullet point consuming three full pages of things I’d done all summer up until last night when Javier and I tightened a loose screw on the gate. I wondered if he had a list like this for Javier, but from the echoes within his drawer, I decided that I was the only one.



Ink

Sreeram Danda

“I’ve been watching you very closely, sweetie.” He smiled.

I scoffed. “No kidding.”

“And I’ve decided to promote you to my assistant!”

“Are you even allowed to do that?”

He definitely wasn’t allowed to do that.

“Well, sure. You won’t get a pay raise or anything, but you’ll get plenty of valuable experience working with a college guy like me!”

I stifled a chuckle. “College guy” seemed like a stretch. Mitch was a freshman at the community college studying anthropology. He went on to explain my new duties as “Second Assistant Pool Manager.” I would be required to clock in ten minutes early and clean all of the dirty Band-Aids and clumps of hair out of the filter at the end of every day, which would likely cause me to leave half an hour late. Of course, all of this was without extra pay. In addition to that, I needed to take all of my breaks in our now shared office, and we would eat lunch together every day to discuss our “big ideas” for improving the pool.

I winced as my heart dropped to the darkest pit of my stomach. My rapid pulse slowed until my arteries felt like they were filled with wet sand. My mind was spinning with how on Earth I’d manage to get out of this. After rifling through every excuse I could think of, from “I have to take care of

my neighbor’s dog” to “my grandma is terminally ill,” I realized there would be no way to quit my new, delusional position.

After a few more moments of awkward silence and blue-tinted eye contact, Mitch finally released me for my final lifeguarding rotation of the day. The humid air punched every ounce of oxygen out of my lungs, leaving me slumped over and breathless on my walk across the pool deck.

Atop my lifeguard stand, the hot, Atlanta sun continued to fry my skin as it lowered behind the trees. The children had since gone, and the few swimmers that remained were scantily-clad teens doing chicken fights or reading magazines while their pruned feet dangled in the water. Every few minutes, a big guy in a soaking wet Guns N’ Roses t-shirt would splash the girls on the edge. They squealed, kicking water back in his direction.

Across the pool, Javier reclined in a beach chair, his comically large hat on the floor next to the sad, beady-eyed parrot. Teens weren’t interested in styrofoam birds and pirate jokes. The setting sun lowered behind him, rendering him as nothing more than a silhouette of any other pool goer. His backlit face melded together into a singular, featureless dark blob. I gave him a small wave, as to not attract the attention of any guests. His dark shadow waved a plastic hook hand back and forth. Whether or not he raised his eyebrows, I would never know.

Dust

MICHAEL LEVIN

A misty moon reveals dancing dust,
falling to the floor. The carpet,
carrying, cradling my body, strewn and staring
at the falling dust. My thoughts dance
with the dust, float from fear to fear,
my face static, staring
at the dust falling from my ceiling.

My brain stretches and contorts to justify
my action, aided by the image
of her hair of ash and angry eyes, failing
when I see her fidgeting lips, filling
with silence and sorrow, fading, falling
with the dust upon my floor.

Now the dust taunts and mocks
my aching stomach. I stand to close
the blinds, shielding the light
of the misty moon, shielding
the dust falling on my carpet floor.

Unseen

CAROLINE TRECARTIN

I slam my car door shut, and I see you
through the fogged-up window, sitting at your desk,
fiddling with the Nasdaq stocks on the desktop screen in front of you.
The bell, attached to the top of the door rings
as I step in. Taking my hat and gloves off,
I place my coat on the bench in the mudroom.
The lights from my car illuminate your home through the windows,
until they flicker off, leaving the car in darkness.

I step towards the stove, where a warm pot,
still aromatic from the tomato sauce that was scraped from it,
sits next to a colander, with a morsel of al dente noodles.
A sheet pan sits next to the sink, layered with shavings,
some stuck to the surface of the stainless steel
from one, maybe two pieces of garlic bread.

You don't see me here, your daughter,
opening the cabinet to grab the rest of the Cheerios,
and pouring them into a bowl with milk and a banana.
I grab my backpack, which sits on the ground,
it in one hand and my cereal in the other.
I head to the stairs,
and I see my last glimpse of you,
staring at the screen.



Colored pencil

Rachael Chen



Digital art

Hannah Stewart

Somewhere Under the Rainbow

ESHAAN AGARWAL

The chipped sign creaked in the winter wind, its once-white paint faded but still legible: *The Tavern Over the Rainbow*. She would have laughed had each barely audible squeak of the sign not corresponded to a sharp chill that buffeted her from head to toe. A moth-eaten hoodie was *really* not enough for this weather. But no matter, sanctuary was close. Even this place, more dilapidation than an actual development, had to have some decent heat. Right?

Even as she reached for the doorknob, the rusty, corrugated lump of metal settling in her palm, she was beginning to question the thought. Perhaps it was better to roam in the cold. A place like this couldn't attract a respectable patron if it was the only heated building left in town. Well, only one way to decide.

She let go of the doorknob and began fumbling through the pocket of her hoodie, the object of her search repeatedly slipping from her frozen fingers. Finally, she grabbed a hold of the cold metal and brought it out into her line of sight. It was a small, copper metal disk, stamped with the decidedly creepy side-profile of a balding old man on one side and a peculiar ladder-looking building on the other. A penny.

"Heads I go in, tails I don't," she muttered under her breath, visible wisps of air escaping from her mouth as she did.

She fingered the coin, a single, deft flick of her thumb sending it spinning through the air, a glinting streak that came down to settle firmly in her palm. Abraham Lincoln stared back at her, quietly rendering his judgement. Heads.

She shrugged at the decision. The coin had spoken. There was no going back now. If she ended up over a dingy toilet seat, retching out diesel-like liquor, it wasn't her fault.

"You, Mr. President, are a hard taskmaster."

She turned the rusty knob and entered.

The Psychiatrist

KATIE LEE

"Are you taking any medication right now?" Dr. Perry asked.

I leveled my eyes to the top of his clipboard. "No. Well, not anymore."

He stared at me long and hard before giving a curt nod and checking a box on a form lying face-open on his desk.

Although it didn't seem like it, I was telling the truth. I couldn't hear the voices for days. Not human voices saying human words, anyway.

What Dr. Perry didn't know was that I had grown past that; all I heard now were things soft and beautiful; the world called to me not in the ugly sounds of human speech, but in the songs of red-breasted robins, in the shapes of aged boughs, in the fractal pattern of veined leaves. Nature could tell me through Her own tongue what She wanted me to do.

Everything had their time, their season. Every creature, too. Now, I understood. I understood so much. All things had to die before they could be reborn into beauty.

Dr. Perry made the last scribble on the clipboard before picking up the form again; for a moment, I could see the prescription. My prescription.

Dr. Perry didn't understand the workings of the world. How could he? He wanted to poison and cloud me with his pills and powders, turn me into something as isolated and miserable as he was.

Dr. Perry was not beautiful.

A cool breeze whistled through the open window behind him. It tousled a few strands of his graying hair, even with all the pomade that managed to keep most slicked back. And as it passed, it told me what I had to do.

The Beached Squid

ANNA WANG

The clarity of war on another island
dogs the beachgoers. Each umbrella
is stingy with shade, draped close
to the spine: drab sentinels in barbed
hats. By noon, their charge—bedecked
with shells, besieged by feet—lists
in the heat, its turrets resting
tired crowns. Inland, a girl streaks

from their ranks, her cape a sullen billow
left in her father’s hands. She skirts the arm
of the lagoon toward the distant scruff
of trees and slows at a glade of springs.
In its deepest pool, she finds a nameless creature
spotted with salt, limping on the meat
of its arms. When the water dints,
nicked by rain, its skin ripples its name—

but the girl has already left this scrying eye.
Chased by the blot of clouds, she runs
past soldiers who don their helmets
in rippling camouflage, past her father,
the sandy ruins of fiefdoms, the ramparts
of napping tanners whose shoulders slope
out to sea. She plays in the squealing shallows
where the island shores up with children

and, strokes away, the orange rings of buoys
are suckered into the deep.

Lacuna

ISHITA ADAVADKAR

I run far from the chasm between the water and me.
My mother tells me to jump and ignore what’s below,
but instead, I cling to the old oak tree.

*Take one step to the cliff, and you’ll finally see
that it’s not so scary. Believe me, I know.*
There are blades in the chasm between the water and me.

I argue with my mother and ask for three
more weeks before she tells me to go.
At her refusal, I keep clinging to the old oak tree.

The wind is whistling, and I plea
for my father to come and convince her, to show
that I should run from the chasm between the water and me.

He tells me that he cannot agree,
for my mother is right—I hold too much in tow.
I scream as he pulls me from that old oak tree.

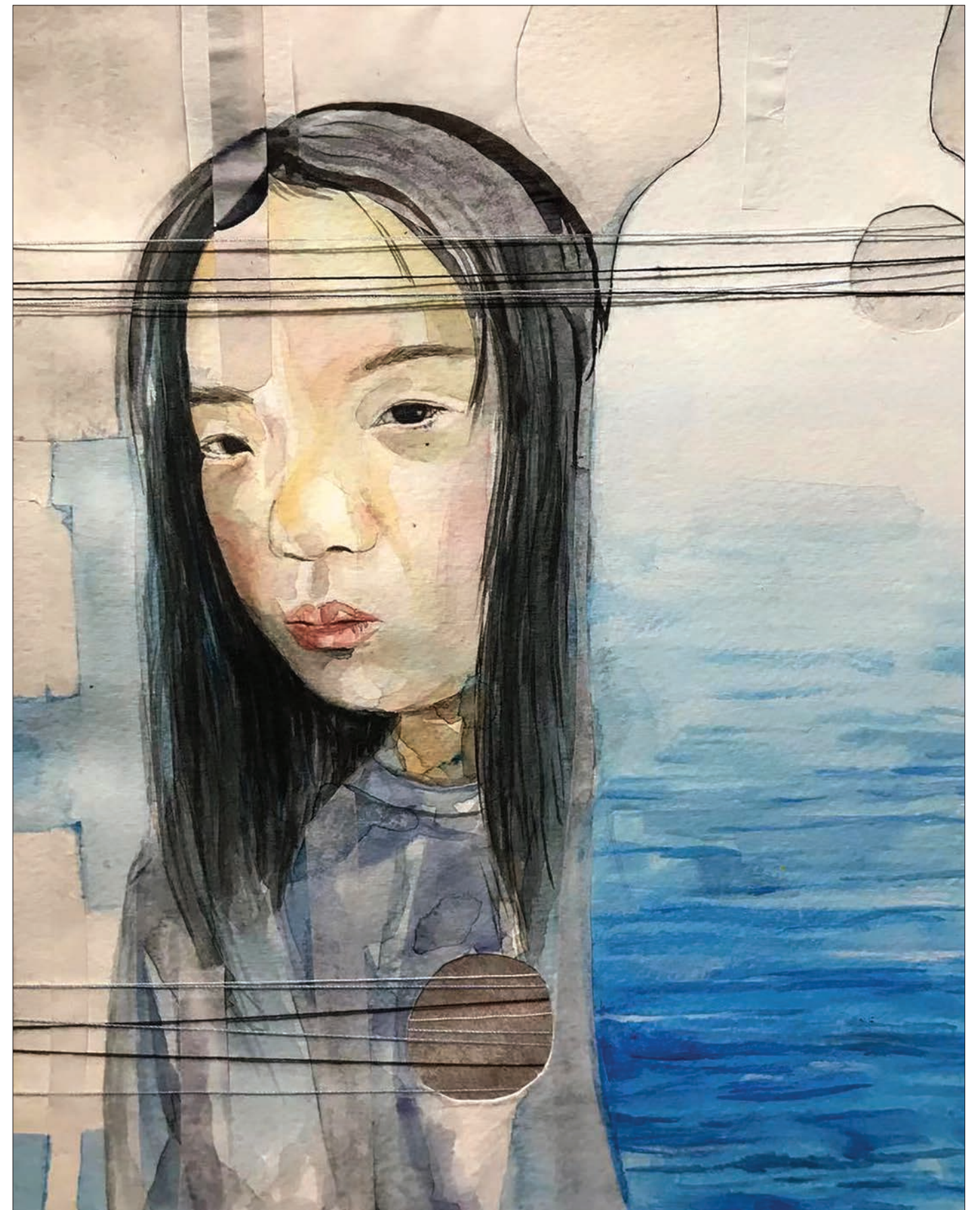
Finally, Mother snaps and pushes me free.
No more holding onto those debts you owe.
She pushes me into the chasm between the water and me,
and I cannot cling onto that old oak tree.



Mixed media

Loneliness

Xinting Guo



Mixed media

Indifference

Xinting Guo

the cyclic disease of living

after C.T. Salazar

CLARE HU

i am born again
in a field, in a white casket, some little
hexagon of burnished birch planted
firm in the grass. when i
emerge, god is there: he
who lives,

in the sunflower farms, and waters
them with blood. nourishment
is a guise. i amble
on four limbs down to the road
waiting for someone, anyone

to come. any pickup. seconds-old,
and already a hitchhiker. the cries
that spring from my mouth
mean youth, and yellow,
and farewell. yes—

death, the lips of a wet rose, indeed
lines the pink of the skyline. and
in the distance, i hear god:

he howls at the moon, drenched in
that maroon. the moon
and everything else on his plentiful
earth: they do not
howl back.



Digital art

Sanctuary

Sophia Chen



Acrylic paint

Fighting Windmills

Michael Zaslavskiy

gnat

CLARE HU

every april you pull
grenade-pin
 stems from dark green fruit,
it's harvest, you say,
dripping dew
 and bite down.
something bursts
along the seams
 of the massive blue sky,
and something
 thrashes winged under
spittle mounting
in your lungs.
 summer is too early for you.
summer should never
have come at all
 if only for you to
melt, sigh,
give way, concede.
 breathe and the sweat-slick
truth veritably slips out.
the sun:
bloodshot, through
and through and through.
promise her enviable lime,
sticky on your hands.
promise her time.
surrender.
promise her you'll file down
those horns and teeth
and do just that—
surrender.



Digital art

Dragon Profile

Ari Zaritsky

iii. Submerged



*“to be buried under
something sweet”*

*“another battlefield
to lose hold on”*

*“tepid gray waters
claimed you”*

*“she split open her
skin into pockets”*

*“show me how to
use my teeth”*



Digital art

Lucidity

Sophia Chen

Permanence

MADELINE MITCHELL

At noon, the clock trembles with the force of your leaving.
A moment caught in the crossfire. Shells shake the minute hand,

teeth latching onto flesh. The backs of our knuckles brush
when we point eager fingers to the bruised violet sky. In lowering our hands—

in letting the blood rush back into whitened fingernails,
the gap between us has widened into a day.

Damn. This year is already half-eaten. Blood dripping
from the sky. As the sun sets, I bring my palms to my lips.

God is a cannibal and a liar: these hands shake too.
(If you hear me, I only need a minute more with her)

At first, you were everywhere. Every white Jeep.
Every girl in pink. Every bright day-moon,

your thumbprint stained eggshell white. Every figure out after dark,
caught in my headlights. The girl behind me

with your laugh, nothing but air, the fluttering of wings.
I turn, and there you were all along. Every laugh is your laugh.

I guess you could say I miss you. Missed you.
This & everything else I will miss when I blink.

Dear God, is it natural to capture someone in a sound?
Voice like ice fractals shattering beneath our feet. Teeth

ticking like a kitchen timer. You sound like a minute
slathered in honey, oozing past.

Sometimes, the memory of your voice is needle-like,
narrow enough to slip through the fabric of a moment

and sew me into a breath I took a year ago:
with us drowning in blankets up to our chins.

Nothing cuts like your smile. A glimpse of your pink gums
has me pinned. Inhale snags on my lips, caught.

Teach me how to lose you. Show me how the mist captures
the peach sunset in rusting red, an hour after the light fades.

Under the pale lips of the window,
the broken radiator wheezes, starts again.

Her Love

KATHERINE ADVANI

The bright morning sun shines on the man’s house,
the dark tiles on the roof absorb its rays.
Below, the elderly homeowner plants
a bundle of seedling red carnations.
His wife once called them “happy roses,” her
most treasured flower in the whole garden.

Clutching his back, he stands from the garden
and glances next door, toward the neighbor’s house.
The middle-aged woman is outside, her
giant, white hat shielding against the rays
of the hot sun while she holds carnations
too, red hues completing her patch of plants.

Must she plant the same flower that I plant,
the elder scowls at his dismal garden.
He only wants to add some carnations
to his old garden since his gloomy house
was empty without the comforting rays
of warmth that emanated out of Her.

His wife prided herself on each of her
precious flowers, but he desires plants
to honor his late wife. He longs to raise
a far more opulent, lush garden
than that of the woman in the house
next door with her disgraceful carnations.

Peonies are like costly carnations,
the man thought as he watched the woman, her
children running joyfully from the house.
Peonies look just like those happy plants,
and there’s open space in the garden.
To honor his wife, the best he will raise.

Supporting their stems with sticks, like the rays
of a fish, he disregards his carnations
in favor of their tall twin. His garden
soon becomes infested not with her
beloved flower, but those blood-red plants.
They were never loved in the old man’s house.

As the garden rots, the red carnations
are the first plants to die. Beyond the rays
of the sun, her real love sits in the house.

Night Shift

JULIA BLAZEJEWSKI

Above the skyscrapers, smog covers stars.
She click-clacks home, wobbling on stilettos,
throat burning with spiced rum from corner bars.
Her cheap perfume smells like fringed palmettos.
A taxi sprays mud on her fishnet tights;
she sighs and swings her knockoff Prada,
hears the bark of the neighbor’s dog that bites,
passes Juan’s truck where he sells tostadas.
Until she squeaks open the rusted gate,
sweeps littered cigarette butts into hills,
unlocks the scratched door at three thirty eight;
her purse filled with two hundred dollar bills.
The mattress groans and sighs as she sinks down,
her boyfriend’s breathing outline colored brown.



Digital art

Mercury

Bella Kim

The Escalator

AKSHITA CHERUKU

her mauve heels frantically strike the marble floor
as she approaches the jagged metal contraption
that is breaking off into sharp, lethal blocks,
bordered with faint, mustard paint.

her fragrant palm, tethered to feigned nails
and rings, grabs the black conveyor belt painted
with the latent fingerprints of dissimilar thumbs and pinkies.
weary travelers before her stand firm on higher blocks
with the tips of their backbones protruding skin,
and heads draining into their screens.

her licorice skirt hugs her waist,
running down to an inch before her knees.
she jolts her body to the piercing tone of a crying child.
her heel dips and locks into the combs of this rustic
machine. her lady’s spine collasapes, pencil
arms flail, and skinny fingers lose grip
of her briefcase.

her synthetic skirt gets caught into
its metallic teeth, a cloth too expensive
to pull, so she tugs. *Nothing.* stairs vanishing
every second, her mauve lips diverge, letting out a scream.
no one moves, as her echo disappears into
silence. she lays there with a dry mouth,
listening to the offbeat screeches
of the pointy blocks.

now, only five feet away from
ground, her tears begin to soak her rosy
cheeks and artificial shine. lips once confident and plump
become frail and shy, curling back into her mouth,
as she faces the death of her sacred femininity,
which a soul didn’t care enough
to preserve.

her eyes are now leveling with the
floor. *No. No. No!* her hands grab her
skirt once more, shredding the cloth three inches up
her thigh, exposing unwanted stretch marks and body hair.
her torn skin dislodges from the corroding contraption, as she
quickly lifts her exhausted body upright and quietly wipes away her tears.

The Reception

ANNA WANG

We watched the louse saunter down the floorboard’s length. Summer languor had settled over us like the thin plastic of barber’s capes—the type of heat that gave everything a special consequence—and so we watched without blinking. The oblivious creature paused to admire a knot in the wood, relished the feel of polished grain beneath its feet, then retreated to its lair of tangles.

“Where are the skewers?” When Maud scratched her scalp again with the thick growth of her thumbnail, dandruff flurried down. Little nicks in the barber’s cape.

“In the drawer, by Nan’s good plates.” I pressed until she tilted her head down.

“They’re dull. And the sauce is sweet.”

I reached for the razor. “We’ll sharpen them.” Shaking the blade clean of its past hair, I pressed until Maud turned her head to the side in resistance.

“But once we open the bottle, it won’t close.” The Maud peering out at us from the bathroom’s scratched mirror pursed her mouth in a pout. “And it’s too sweet.”

“We’ll close it. Everything wants to close, Maud. It’s a natural state.” The razor nibbled, hungry, at the nape of Maud’s neck.

“Remember that time we couldn’t close the bottle and she said all her floorboards were double-glazed—”

“—and wouldn’t it be nice. To be buried under something sweet. Yes, Maud. I remember.” The razor gave, leaving a sticky cut that gleamed in her hair. Maud shifted. “Hold still.”

“It’s too sweet.” The words burst out, and she shifted again. “I won’t like it.”

We were silent for a long time, listening to the razor’s scuffing bristle, the louse scuttling somewhere beneath the air, this barber’s cape of sweat and blood, and Maud’s hair falling to the floor, dead.



Digital art

Stella Sung

Devotion

LILLIAN DJUNAEDI

At first I tore away your skin,
using all my strength to rip flesh,
leaving bloody chunks of you buried under my nails,
but you never screamed. You just held my hands
and used your soothing voice
to slow my movements.

You cleaned under my nails
and washed away the blood on my hands.
Then you made me my favorite type of food,
breaded baked chicken with white rice,
and kissed my forehead
when I went to bed.

I want to claw your skin once again,
but you won't let me. Instead, you hold my hands
and show me how to use my teeth
to press them against your heart
and bite down.

Blood flows into my mouth
and you teach me how to swallow it
without making a mess
and without hurting you.

미안해 Sorry

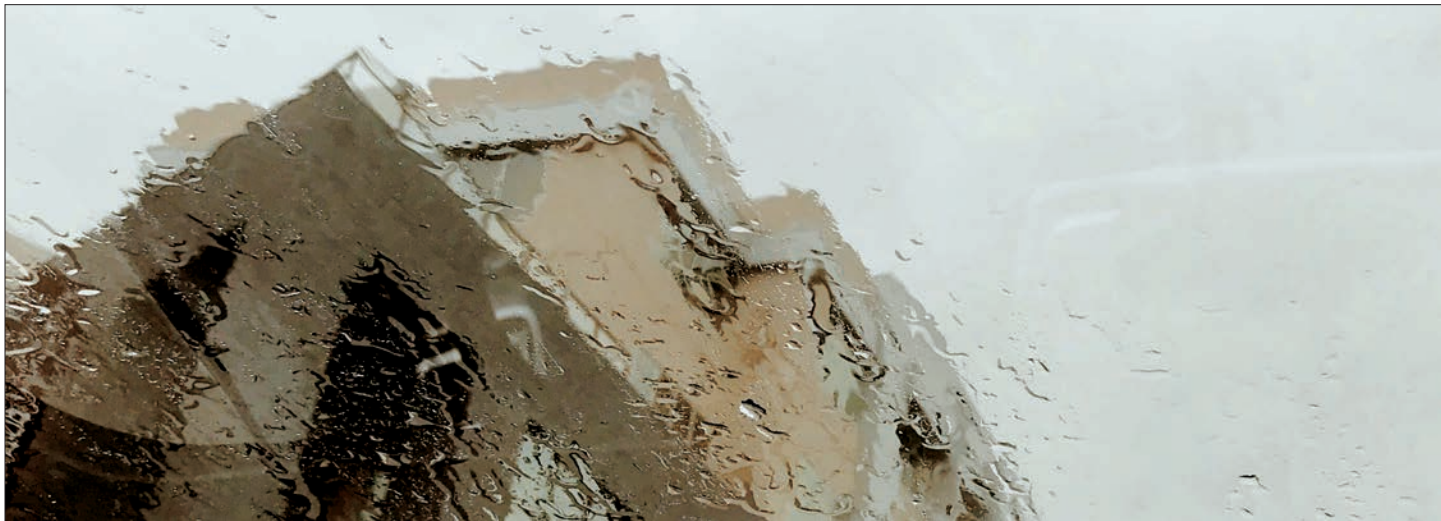
JUNE YANG

“사랑해 준아...”

Grandma’s words echo in my head,
as I stare inside the casket.
My head shadows her stone, pale face,
making me able to imagine her getting up, gifting me kisses,
and saying “사랑해 준아...”
because that is all she can say to me.

My mom clenches onto her black dress
and clicks slowly towards me with her heels.
She grips a crumpled, soaked cloth as she whispers to me,
“준아...기도해, pray and talk to her...”

But no words come out of my mouth
because whatever I choose to say will be pointless.
She won’t understand me.
My mom bows her head
and whispers Korean to Grandma,
like she has all her life.
And I know it’s too late for me to learn to say,
“I’m sorry.”



Digital photograph

Grace Kwon

Museum Tour

PATRICK TONG

already we have crowded together like a colony,
like clumps of ash griming the room’s exhibits.
here is the war, i’m told, when a continent
slumped into burning and shrapnel scythed
through the windows. when children pooled
rainwater onto tongues, holding the eddy
in their mouths like a prayer. by noon,
the gallery has gathered with tourists,
each camera blink a lesser version
of light. in one photograph, i confuse
the swell of napalm for a wildfire, except
natural could never outrun man-made.
my father cranes a gaze at the atrium,
as if waiting for the glass dome to rattle
with bones severed from body, teeth
unlatched from jaw. in dreams, i watch
the architect uncover bloodied maps
behind these walls, the stretch from a
to b, another battlefield to lose hold on.
still, i am learning about the redundancy
of our lives. come evening, the tour
will only repeat itself, circling through
its own histories like a country. for now,
i imagine a greater dialect of violence,
picture the floorboards before us
unstitching themselves into abyss.
from its vengeful yawn wakes
a foreign troop, the riot of gunfire,
a familiar bullet, the silver taunt
of which halts me dead in my tracks.

Phantom Baby

MADELINE MITCHELL

It had to be the size of a bean by now. Jane could already feel it growing slowly inside of her, filling up like a balloon. Now when she walked, she sucked in her stomach and took shallow breaths.

First, she tried a pregnancy test at the Walgreens down the street from her church, the entire time checking behind her. It was negative. The next day, she tried Maria’s drugstore in the back alley behind an old daycare center. Inside, she could still see the baby blue playhouses nailed to the floor, stuck.

When she placed the box down on the counter with thin, trembling fingers, the woman behind the register gave her one look and wrote down the address to an abortion clinic near there. *It worked every time for me. Like a charm.*

Outside, it poured. Already, she could feel the thing inside of her, a single concentrated spot of cold in her stomach. A little bean-shaped mistake. A tiny blot of ink on the page. Wiping her lips, she walked home.

Again, the test was negative.

Jane asked her mother if anything seemed different about her, and her mother simply laughed. *No. Completely normal.* But she was wrong, Jane knew. This was her punishment.

In the bathroom of the bakery next to the Super Target, she found herself trying again. Jane glanced at the ceiling of the bathroom, fluorescent lights flickering above her, reminiscent of Sundays at her old house, where, looking up, she would see sunlight drifting through glass in scattered rays—God’s gaze meeting the ground. It met her now, steadily. Her mother always told her to put her head back down. Now, she did.

Her hands cradled her stomach, which bulged bigger and bigger the longer she stared into the mirror. Each day, it would eat more and more of her until there was nothing left. How many weeks had it been? Five? Six?

The test was negative again, but this meant little to her now. She chucked it into the trash and, under a steady flow of cool water, scrubbed until her skin turned red and raw. Her hands were drawn together, almost wound in prayer. Perhaps when everyone washed their hands, they inadvertently prayed.

Her hands stilled. That was it.

When Jane arrived home, the house was silent, almost hollow. The foyer was blurry. The slick marble floor bulged in front of her eyes; burgundy walls faded in and out of focus, pulsing slowly. She could feel her heartbeat in her eyes. Two heartbeats, she was sure. Dizzy spells were supposed to be common, weren’t they?

Jane regained her balance and opened the coat closet. When she was little, she had hid in here. Dust floated down into areas where the light did not touch. As she hung her coat, her eyes lingered on the hospital-white wire hanger.



Copic markers

False Hope

Carley Salzman

Gooseberry Wraith in 902

CLARE HU

alone in the hotel room
we count bodies
in multiples of six. we pile
each other’s lovers onto
the bed, which
in itself, tonight, is of
no use. twenty-four. thirty-six,
perfect square. and we have
no room
for ourselves, so we sleep here
on the floor. animated.
you pinwheel down
the hallway, order
black coffee at midnight, drink
the creamer straight.
my heartbeat
is a grainy thing. a sensation not
unlike bare feet on salt
when you’ve got something
against comfort. there’s
no window to air
the place out. you forget

your room key
on the counter and
thus effectively we are iced out
from our paramounts,
our art. you never
ask why love and instead
ask with what tool?
the limbs are
tangling, sixty-six, seventy-two
and counting, we’re
just soldiers of the
redder fields, felling hearts
and bottling them,
insistent jammers. wait for the
bodies to jell then come back
after dinner to taste.
flood the carpet with
sugar water,
and be patient. we’ll starve first.
we’ll eat one another whole
and then go back
for seconds.

mortals

TIA VASUDEVA

Cross-hatching, a gentle stitch,
these are broken words by you,
a song bird’s warble. A lullaby, good

night. We loom our stories in the
night’s tapestry, glittering
diamonds strung with iridescent thread.

Darling, we drink these victories in
the hollows of the night. There are no
goddesses to call us mortal,
let us live in our own glory.

They said the trill was lovely. They said
beauty. They promised her
picture in the revolving earth,
and she split open her skin into pockets,
cupping every solemn whisper,
zipping her pride. They jingled like warm pennies. Like stars.
Songbird sang. Songbird wove. Songbird flew.

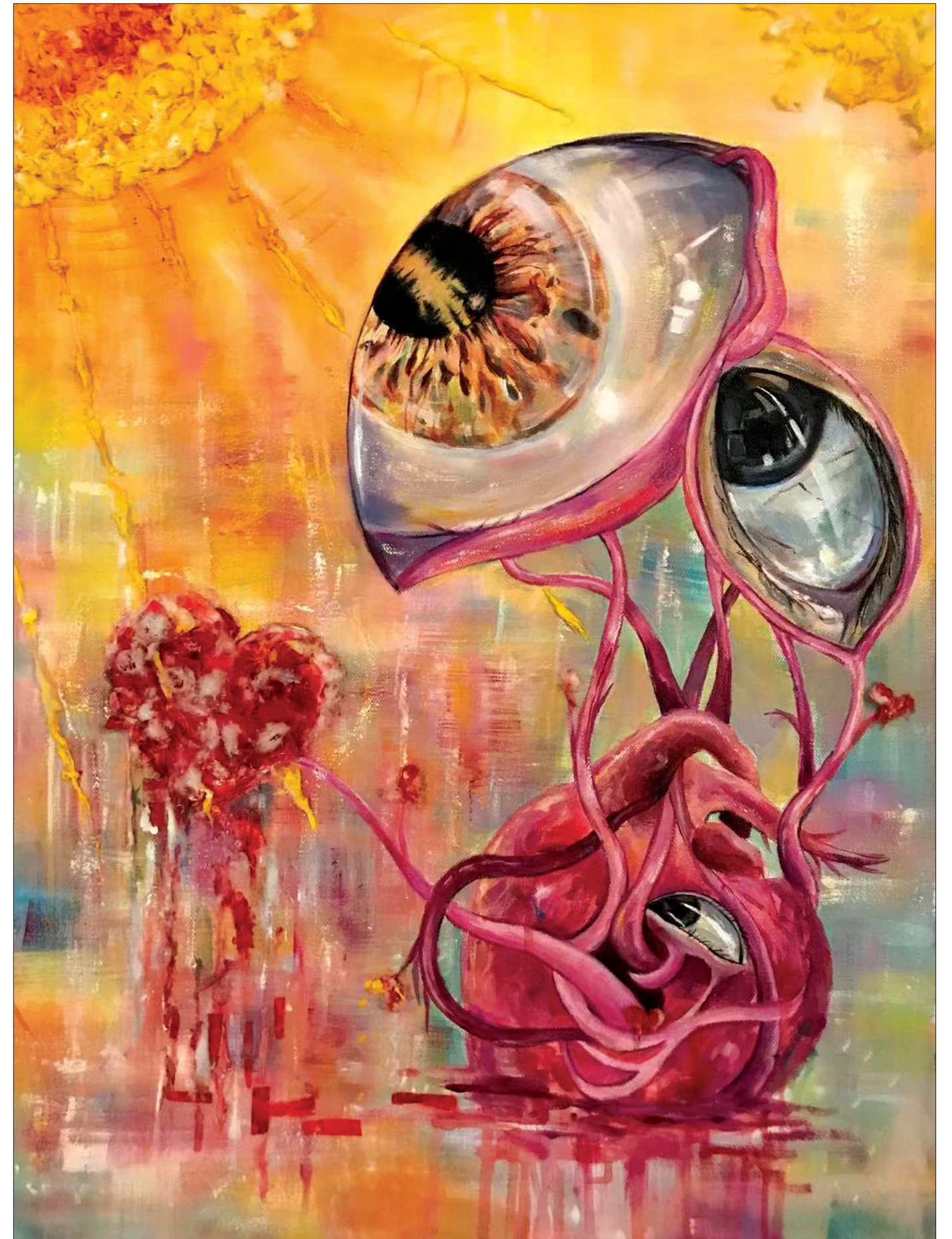
Darling, the world says it was her own anger,
that fire-shaken rage, wander-fox-whisper
jump-deadly, arrow blazing, sharpened shoot
right in our songbird’s heart.
Those promised trills fell from her clutching lips.
Her teeth sank the diamond tapestries as she fell

in the woven past, there is a stumbling,
a night that shone and did not know how to stop.
Don’t say we’ve lost another songbird.

Arachne only wove a finite glory.



Gouache Jelly Kara Lee



Acrylic & cotton balls Crush Xinting Guo

A Chocolate Cake

ZOFIA GOGOJEWICZ

Tonight in his dream, George ate his mom’s chocolate cake.

In reality, though, he was sitting on the cold, muddy ground, freezing his buttocks to the point he couldn’t feel them anymore, and slowly breaking off pieces of dry bread that he had left from yesterday. Since he was in France, he liked to imagine it was a fancy french baguette, but every day, bread was getting drier and tasting more bitter than the day before, and every time a larger amount of flour was replaced by dried ground turnips.

“Lance Corporal Poulton?” A tall captain appeared in front of him with a typical emotionless expression.

“Yes, sir.” George forced himself to jump up and salute, a habit carried out blankly, although he’d much rather stay on the ground.

“You are to report to the kitchen.”

“Yes, sir,” George nodded.

His heavy boots spilled mud around as he squeezed through the bodies of nearly frozen soldiers curled up in a bundle on the ground. The lucky ones had fags in their mouths, and every few seconds released a small cloud of smoke that blended in the heavy, humid air and disappeared with no evidence of the warmth it once created. Their eyelids were closing involuntarily in the act of retreat. They couldn’t resist the urge to sleep anymore. It was continuously raining for six days, and even the toughest soldiers lost hope that they would live long enough to feel the sun warming their cheeks again.

The kitchen was hardly what the word suggested. Two steps made of solid sand led to a small, dark room dug in the ground. Wooden sticks held the walls back from collapsing into pieces and burying alive the soldiers inside. Young men, those lucky enough to be on kitchen duty in this lovely weather, gathered around the fire, peeling the potatoes that the entire unit would eat for the next few days.

“Don’t stand there like a brick, Poulton,” William shouted from across the room. “Get your ass over here and help me.”

George saved William’s life once, and ever since, the two developed a brother-like relationship that not only included watching out for one another but also all the banter and teasing that came with this title.

Willy threw an apron towards him and pointed at the potatoes on the wooden table.

“A friend of mine was out in the fields carrying out the orders, and he came across an abandoned farm. The hens were still alive,” he said, matter-of-factly.

“Well, where is he now?” George continued, not exactly sure where this conversation was heading.

“Poor guy wasn’t as lucky as the hens,” Willy sighed, and both stared at the wall in silence, peeling the potatoes. George wondered if he knew him. In the trenches, people came and went, their faces blurring because, at the end of the day, everyone looked the same. Dirty faces covered with mud and scars that couldn’t heal properly without running water to sanitize them regularly. Tired eyes that have seen too much of death and pain to ever shine with pristine happiness again. Bony cheeks that lost their masculinity along with kilograms that diminished from their bodies every week.

“Anyway, have you still got the little pouch of sugar?” Willy stopped his actions and raised his eyebrows in anticipation.

“Yes, I have,” George answered, confused. “Why?”

Willy smirked and cleaned his hands, wiping them on the apron. He put the knife down on the table and, with his eyes, showed George to follow him. Once they were in a dark corner, away from the curious glances, William reached inside his military jacket and pulled a small cardboard box out of his pocket. Inside laid an egg. His eyes were full of excitement, but George shook his head. It was a stupid idea.

“Are you nuts? They will cut us off the mail if they find out.” George looked at his friend in disbelief.

“I’m not, but it’s a matter of days until I am, so stop talking and imagine the cake we’ll bake!”

“We don’t even have chocolate,” George stated, as if it made any difference now.

“We’ll pretend that we do.” William looked at him, his eyes begging.

George knew they shouldn’t, but the thought of a warm, fluffy cake crumbling in his hand as he put it in his mouth and savored its sweetness was too big of a temptation.

“We should wait for the storm to weaken. Everyone is irritated now and if they found—”

“The egg will be rotten by then, mate,” Willy interrupted him. “These clouds are cumulonimbus. Wouldn’t be surprised if it lasted for days.”

“And how on Earth would you know that?”

“I was going to study geography at Oxford.” One corner of his mouth raised in a half-smile, but his eyes drifted away, a hollow look in them. “It’s so silly now, innit?”

“No, no, it isn’t,” George sighed, thinking of the day he took the entrance exams at the University of Manchester. He remembered how nervous he was. His mom used to joke that he would scare away the faculty with his clumsiness if he didn’t calm down. He even refused to shake the professor’s hand because his own was sweaty and shaky. And at the time, he thought it was the most stressful day in his life. George laughed at that now.

“So, what do you say?” Willy asked.

“I say we will eat the worst cake we have ever eaten, and it will taste like heaven.”



Digital art

Spirit Animals

Diana Struif

starless

TIA VASUDEVA

the world is starless, at first

the earth slows its breathing, the moon has
forgotten that night chases day.

we have settled into a slumber, someone else
has already swallowed the sun, who yearns

Icarus from the tendrils of the sea. we are
gray sleep, you reach out once again

to a field of flowers. when you left, they stood
stagnant, waiting for someone to watch them decay

and when the subtle rot snaked tendrils into your nostrils,
you left like a mirage. never there, but still flickering,

wax running down your thigh, your arms
sprawled in flight. flying, falling, after a while

it all blurs. Perhaps you remember why
you are in air, why you kissed Apollo,

molted your lips in triumph in a brush
against blazing skin. Apollo blushed bruisingly.

He trembled as you plummeted down;
you see, we are a shallow entrance.

tepid gray waters claimed you,
the earth dipped monochrome and lovely.

once you had swallowed the sun, you could
never return. flowers decayed, rotted where Apollo blazed

like the wax that seared your skin, I too
am burning. ash is easier to collect than dust

or than the screams that clawed at the sky, a mark
that you were flesh, burning and breathing

and undeniably alive. Since the day
Apollo threw open his palms,

we live tepid and gorge on flowers
and try
 not to talk
about death



Oil

Bridget Zhu

The Interview

MICHAEL LEVIN

When he asks for your weaknesses, smile,
tell him how lonely you'll be surrounded
by your peers. Suffocating
in break room banter, suffering
from their attempted distraction, successfully
entrancing them while the walls
of your prison cell close. Describe
the plastic pine in the corner, drowning
in holiday merriment. The drab, hanging lights
of festive imitation. Tell him how you'll try to fly,
to find an exit, an excuse,
but your mock-up laugh gags you
and politeness strangles you,
how you wish to leave Irish,
stealthy, silent. Explain your upbringing,
how the crowd of suits and dresses
matches the church procession,
matches the mess of bruises
brought by Sunday mass,
brought by saying
what no one said. Get up,
yell at his blank, nodding grin, scream
of your peer's horrid cheering, ringing
in your ears. How they won't hear you.
No one will hear you.
He's not listening.



Digital art

Metathesiophobia

Amala Pattabiraman

On Practicing the Arcane

LAYA REDDY

You will not be some back alley mystic.
Perform only at a king's behest.
Don't morph into a brainless mimic.

Waving a wand on demand as a trick,
your magic purrs—a house cat. Asked in jest,
Have you become a back alley mystic?

Mortar & Pestle. Grinding herbs quick
to spell into cheap luck potions. "Get the best!"
Don't morph into a one-trick mimic.

Ponzi scheme warlock sells top hat gimmicks
you buy because your charms are draining zest.
Don't listen to no back alley mystic.

Leap away from danger on a broomstick.
Find yourself panting, *O Merlin, please, a rest.*
Don't morph into a phony mimic.

Swooping on your greasy plumage are critics,
a bad omen. You fail the final test.
You are found as a back alley mystic.
You have morphed into a mimic.

iv. Anchored



*“you crawl out of your sticky
confines and live”*

*“they spin around and around, dancing
all over the back seat”*

*“one day my hands will grasp
something solid”*

“i yell for the moon to listen to me”

Creation

MADELINE MITCHELL

Today, I step out of myself
and into noon's pale arms.
Each pinprick of light
glints as a hair on her forearm,

my forearm. Ma says we cannot
write ourselves into existence,
but I disagree. In the lukewarm
light of the bathroom, my words

wriggle their way into being like
maggots blindly seeking light.
Something is crawling up from the drain,
and I do not let the water swallow it back down.

But today, I step back into myself
and fear catches me by the scruff
of my neck, implores me to remember
my gag reflex: honesty, or phlegm

caught in the ridges of my esophagus?
I sink to my knees in the face of daylight,
and heave until no words are left in me.
These are maggot-less days. Fresh days.

I want rotten, squirming days. Days that
crack me open gently like dawn, let me gush
yellow over the bathtub tile, or slice me—
clean and simple—into the world,

like slabs of pink meat falling on their sides,
limp, or something vulnerable like that.
Writing kills, ma. And yet, these days,
all I want to do is keep wringing the daylight

from my sopping skin.



Acrylic & earbuds

Abigail Li

In Winter

JANICE LEE

Sunflowers shrivel, leaves rot,
branches fold.

Yet, the lanky trees stand royal
amidst white angel snow,
the rich, dark brown trunks
kiss leaves tinged with gold.

I want to dip all the summer leaves
in your jar of golden honey,
hoping it sticks to the branches
that tap against your window in frozen gusts.

Through the night, I long
for your winter eyes and evergreen voice
smeared with frost and sugar.

Despite everything I’ve been told,
I know that sunrise and dawn in icy mist is heavenly,
that through the night, you’ll come
in snowstorms and blizzards
when I call your name.
As silver-white bells outside my front door jingle,
I’ll find you in wool scarves and a black coat
and forget how long I’ve starved out spring and fall.

I chase winter after winter,
searching for the white plains reflected
in your knees, or the tree branches that expand
from your earthly veins.

Even when snow melts into green grass,
and the honey drips off the leaves,
I’ll wait forever for winter once more.

Living Masterpiece

SELIN AKAD

I watch as my brush strokes fill your irises
and faint, blush pink tints your cheeks,
hair a cakey glob of honey and auburn,
your lips a shade of scarlet red.

My masterpiece, you slowly come alive,
watching through the confines of my canvas,
trapped in your most perfect pose
unable to speak, yet your eyes show emotion.

I know you’ll never feel my touch,
only the prickly ends of a dried out brush.
You’ll never reach an arm out to hold
the things that catch your attention.

But I didn’t know that late at night
when the sky’s a deep turquoise like your eyes,
you crawl out of your sticky confines
and live, a spirit in the shadows.

Sydney Street

LILLIAN DJUNAEDI

The silence engulfed me as I stared at the field ahead, covered in vibrant dandelions, weeds springing from the ground reaching to the air with their dark green stems, and what looked like dying wheat. A gentle gust of wind blew over the field, making the plants move to the right, dancing with the wind, and causing goosebumps to climb up my arms. A shiver moved down my back as the breeze stopped, and the plants stopped dancing, moving back into place. This small bit of land between the sprawl of suburbia and the highway stood neglected, not yet developed, littered with wind-swept plastic bags, debris and detritus, and me.

I looked down at where my feet stood, and I saw the classic black, one-strap shoes girls my age wore to church on Sundays with white, frilly socks underneath. I didn’t go to church, though. My dad preferred we stayed home “as a family” and watch football or play board games. He really just played poker with his friends and drank whisky, but I didn’t mind. I got to play on the computer as much as I wanted. I noticed my bare legs were covered in a few bruises and lots of scratches, dead sticks pushing up against my ankle. I wondered how the sticks got there, since the nearest tree was many yards away. My best guess would be 20 to 30 yards, but spatial relationships sure weren’t my strong suit. They were always my brother’s.

I heard an engine roar past, and my head jerked to the right to see a Mustang zoom past on the highway next to the field, reminding me where I was. A small huff left my lips, upset that my only peace was easily disturbed by a thing as mundane as a car. I moved my focus back to the field, and a few feet ahead of me, the weeds rustled, moving in opposite directions quickly then just as quickly stopping. I wondered what it could be, maybe a bunny rabbit or a snake, or both, chasing after each other purely for survival, nothing personal. It was similar to my life, in a way. Everything was for the greater good of the family, like getting rid of my brother’s favorite records or my dolls so they could pay for rent that month. It was never personal.

My right foot began to move forward slowly, the sticks scraping my skin, irritating, briefly painful, then my left foot followed.

Cars began blaring past on the highway once again, one after the other. Zoom, zoom, zoom, and my eyes tore away from the movement on the field. The engines rumbled as cars pushed the speed limit of 40, going 50 or 55, and black smoke puffed from an older car's butt. At least I called it a car's butt. I didn't know what it was actually called. Maybe just the back of the car, but that was too boring, I thought. Inside a car was not as loud, though, and sometimes peaceful. If my



Acrylic & pastel

Daisy

Bella Kim

mom or dad weren't in the car together, there was no fighting and no music. It was just quiet, and I liked it quiet. Anything louder than a soft voice or a hum of an engine was too loud. My brother knew I liked it quiet and when he used to drive me, he made sure to turn off the radio or turn on soft classical music and not talk too much. Those were my favorite car rides.

Then I remembered the movement in front of me, and I looked back on the spot of the field to look for an animal of any type, or just any movement at all. But it was now gone, as well as the silence, as cars continued to rush past. I wished it would just be quiet. It must have been getting close to 4:30 or 5, when rush hour started on Mondays and the highway got bad. Thursdays were the best days because for some reason, people didn't leave work or school until 5:30, and sometimes even 5:45. If it got bad at 6, that meant there was an accident on Sydney Street, the main road people used to turn onto the highway. If it got bad at 6:30, that meant someone died on Sydney Street, because the worst accidents took the longest to clean up. It happened rarely. I'd only seen two of them over these last few years, but nothing graphic, I just knew. It took them two hours to clean up my brother's car on Sydney Street, so that's how I knew, I guess.

My eyes wandered to the sky and saw that it was beginning to darken in color, and when I looked to the left, the sun was blaring straight into my eyes, telling me it was going to be golden hour soon and time to go home. I liked to go home when my brother walked or drove me home and we could play after, but now we can't anymore. I began to walk through the field, my fingers brushing the soft fluff on the wheat-like plants. Sticks and a few weeds continued to scrape at my ankles, and I took a deep breath, the odor of rotting plants and the sweet smell of pollen mixed together to create my favorite scent. It smelled like peace and freedom, I was pretty sure, at least.

The ground started shaking violently, the earth screaming in pain as a humongous hill began to form. I couldn't hear the cars anymore, but only a deafening shriek as a long creature broke through the ground, pieces of dirt the size of boulders flying from the opening in the ground. It looked like a snake or a serpent of some kind, or that was my best guess. My brother always told me that snakes are just legless reptiles but serpents were the highly evolved versions of reptiles, like how humans are the highly evolved versions of primates. I decided for it to be a serpent, because I wanted it to be powerful and overwhelming like the pit in my stomach I get every time I looked down Sydney Street, or the room my brother used to stay in when he came home from college every weekend. My mom wanted to make it her craft room but my dad wanted it to be his office. I hoped they wouldn't ever change it from his room.

I quickly dropped my neon pink backpack to the ground and pulled out my trusted sword and shield, both created with clear crystals, reflecting the colors of the rainbow from every angle. The serpent's long body was covered in pitch black, sleek scales, layer after layer protecting the evil creature, the anger and confusion, I knew that was inside of me, inside of it. Dirt fell off its body as it moved back and forth slowly, its ruby red eyes twisting around, forward and back, before focusing on me and my sword. I was going to call it The Bela, because my dad said it means destruction in another language. I can't remember what language, but destruction seemed fitting.

The Bela's tongue flickered out of its mouth rapidly and could only be seen for a split second before disappearing and I stared. I looked into its eyes, the thin slit of its pupil locked directly on me. I could see its desire to massacre anyone that dared to live carefree and happy in its eyes. I could see right through The Bela's soulless heart, willing to poison anyone with its venom, good or evil. It didn't know the difference. It tormented whoever it could with no hesitation and no warning, like it did everyday to me.

The rest of its body slithered out of the hole in the ground, a similar size as a suburban house. My right hand clenched the cool surface of the crystal—no, I changed my mind; it was going to be a diamond—handle, looking at the diamond blade, seeing it shine brightly in the light. Red, blue, green, yellow, colors of the rainbow in every direction for all to see. The sword was so sharp, you could just look at it wrong and it would cut your body in half. The shield was also made out of diamond, shaped like the top of a princess cut wedding ring. Attached was a leather strap, lined and threaded together with metal to ensure it would stay together.

The Bela's tail rose to the top of the sun's surface, then fell like an asteroid, slamming into the field with a great boom. Wheat and weeds went flying into the air, along with the dirt it was attached to. A crater was formed where the serpent's tail was, cracks growing rapidly across the earth. An opening ravine quickly made its way towards me, zigzagging. The earth fractured with a loud clap with every new opening, like when you heard thunder.

Before I knew it, my foot slipped into one of the enormous gaps in the ground, and I was falling to the core of the Earth. I could already feel the heat of the magma, even thousands of feet above it. I held my breath to hold back a scream and pushed my shield up my arm so it rested where my shoulder was. I spun my sword around like those cool maneuvers my classmates did with their pens and rammed it into the side of the ravine, a combination of dirt and stone. My other

hand clawed at the ravine’s wall in unison, dirt and pebbles burying themselves underneath my freshly painted nails. I got the color ruby red, like the serpent’s eyes, if you were wondering. The small stones ripped into the skin of my fingers, blood beginning to pour out, but stopped when clogged with the dirt I was clinging onto.

The friction between my hand and the wall of the ravine slowed until my body came to a complete stop. I gasped for air, not realizing I had held my breath the whole time. My lungs constricted then released with a furious pace, in and out, in and out, in and out. My right hand that was clenched onto the sword began to feel sore, or I finally began to feel it.

My legs swung back and forth, greater distances than I could jump, and they began to slow. My eyes shot upwards as I heard a shift on the ground above me, and I saw The Bela towering over the ravine, its body rising towards the sky and its eyes still completely focused on me. In the blink of an eye, the serpent’s head shot down in my direction, pearly white fangs blinding me for a second or two. I could see myself in the reflection of its pitiless eye, and its mouth shot towards my body, to swallow me whole.

I quickly yanked my diamond sword out of the ravine’s side, using my feet to push off against the wall and backflip onto the serpent’s neck. My blade pierced through the creature’s thick, black scales and easily sliced through the flimsy flesh underneath. Another deafening screech emerged from the creature’s body, and it flung its head toward the sky, flinging me off its body, my sword slipping from my grasp.

Panic began to set itself inside of my body and it felt like a thousand worms were wriggling around underneath my skin, in my blood, and eating through my stomach. Their teeth tiny but razor sharp, cutting through my flesh as easy as fresh scissors cutting through paper. I lost my only attack, the anger I held in my hand was now stuck in the neck of The Bela. All I had now was my shield.

I moved the shield from my shoulder and held onto the leather strap to my chest with all my strength. The air pushed against my back as I fell hundreds of feet to the ground, picking up speed the longer I was in the air. The air escaped my lungs within seconds as what felt like a hundred pound weight just crushed my body. A loud crack came from behind me, and for a split second, I thought I was impaled by a sharp razor sticking out of the ground, digging itself into my back. The pain started to fade as my adrenaline began pumping, my heart moving at 100 beats per second. I’m pretty sure at least.

My legs ached as I used the last of my energy to push my limp body off of the ground. Another sharp pain tore through my back, and at that moment, I realized I broke my spine. Can people who break their spine walk? Whatever, it doesn’t matter because I am standing, to fight off this creature, this sorrow. If I didn’t fight, it would overwhelm me, swallow me whole and I’d never escape, so I had to fight.

The Bela’s body circled me, its eyes always completely locked onto my shaky figure. I used any strength I had left to hold onto the leather strap of my shield, turning my body to always face the haunting mouth of the serpent. Its long body began to move closer to me as it continued to circle my body, every second passing putting me more in danger.

I felt a sharp pain pierce through my back, my breath stolen from me once again. I fell face forward, gasping for air, tears rolling down my cheeks from the anguish inflicted by the grieving, the Bela. Every bone in my body felt sore, every muscle felt torn. The tail of the serpent snuck under me and flipped over my body, my limbs throbbing and my spine aching. My vision began to go blurry, the serpent’s scales blending together into one streak of black.

The smooth, cold surface of scales glided underneath my hands, yanking the shield, my denial, out of my grip. My fingers stung and I couldn’t help but groan in pain. I closed my eyes, darkness washing over my sight, and for a minute, the world was silent.

I opened my eyes again to see the Bela high above me, its tongue flickering faster now, and its teeth beginning to drip with venom. My heart was beating faster than a car on the highway moving at the speed of light. My chest began to feel heavy, and I gasped for air once again, my arms and legs freezing in an instant.

I opened my mouth as an attempt to take in more air. The serpent smiled. Can a serpent smile? It definitely smiled as it plunged towards me, and head first went into my throat. I flailed frantically, hitting the stiff body of the creature as it continued to go down further. Scales scratched the inside of my throat, my lungs burning, screaming for air. I attempted to cough, but instead my ears started ringing, and I felt my energy’s sizzling slow. Dark drowned out the blue sky, and I felt my head start to spin.

A horn blared from the highway, and I sat up wheezing, trying to catch my breath. I looked back at the highway to see cars still zooming past, going too fast. I moved my right hand to my chest and felt my heartbeat thumping rapidly. Boom, boom, boom. I focused on my breathing, and my heartbeat began to slow. I turned my body to see my pink backpack

behind me.

I slowly pushed myself off of the ground, wiping off any dirt that stuck to my skirt. I sluggishly walked over to my bag and hoisted it over my shoulder. Watching my feet, I stumbled towards the direction of my house, my right hand going to touch my throat. It felt sore, like I hadn’t had water in a few days. I swallowed any spit I had lingering in my mouth, cringing from the sore feeling. Weeds brushed up against my ankle as sticks and those wheat plants brushed up against my calves.

My feet reached the edge of a sidewalk and I raised my head to look up at the street ahead. Cars rushed past, still going fast despite the school zone nearby. I looked up at the street sign that read Sydney Street and my heart stopped for just a second.



Digital art

Individualism

Sidra Harris

Drop Off Drive

MAGDELINE MARIE KIRKHAM

The Subway plastic straw pokes me beneath my chilled foot.
Every bump that this car makes tickles the foot, pleasing the foot.
The green exit sign gifts me a task
to see if Mr. Obama added more from two weeks ago.
The answer is *no*, by the way.

However, the more dad pushes on the gas, the more joy surrounds me.
I see yesterday’s hashbrown and sausage egg mcmuffin wrappers
with last week’s chocolate malt straw.
They spin around and around, dancing all over the back seat.
Then the gold surrounds me,
reminding me of the ambitious breeze on this crisp, autumn night.

Gold braids itself as strands reach under and yonder
until it has a Subway straw wound in it,
encasing it tightly in a nest as it scratches my hair,
releasing the dust that the I-94 cemented in my scalp,
lying right next to the gold,
though the dust leaves as it flies into the bird’s feathers,

leaving me and the garbage dancing with each other
in the Honda.

Reflection

MEHWISH KHAN

I know you the same way I know my reflection hiding behind the shower-steamed bathroom mirror, shapeless shadow, my hands desperately herding droplets away from your forms, needing to see a swath of my hair, thin limbs dangling from a shy body. In your stormy eyes, I look for my rage but I cannot find a thing and I claw at the mist because I *will not* let myself be an outsider to myself, to us. I will not be satisfied with this faulty mirage, dancing tauntingly out of reach. One day my hands will grasp something solid, and I will clench tight and swallow it. I never would have guessed that distance and time, oceans and years, could harden precious familiarity, encasing this heirloom in glistening amber, hard and unforgiving. If anything should be held sacred, impermeable by misfortune, it should be this. Our oneness.

seasonal depression

TANISHA GUNASHAKAR

dear you,

blue raspberry lips and stained teeth
are old friends who remind me of last summer
when the sky was ours, and the clouds were cotton candy.
you painted the fence in my backyard,
white like the cream soda we stole from your brother’s cooler.
my mother praised your meticulous work,
and you smiled shyly in the shade of the trees
that tango with the wind and blow stray hairs into your face.

but right now, i know you’re shivering
because you’ve tasted what feels like cherry medicine:
the kind they tried to make sweet but is really just metal.
the snow outside who you used to crack jokes with
comes towards you with sour apple flavored memories;
the ones you tried to bury last autumn beneath the leaves.

you shower your feelings in peach and mango,
hoping the sunset will swallow you like it did your dreams.
unfortunately, you’ve got only a minute left to think.
go fast, hurry.
it pushes you through the crowd, bodies upon bodies upon bodies;
“can you feel it yet?” it asks slyly, as it takes your coat off for you.
if you listen you can hear your favorite pair of grape boots grow heavy
and hit the cold floor with a thud.

i know your toes are frozen, and your ears are turning red,
so i’ve sent you my favorite bubble gum sweater,
and i hope next summer i can taste your fruit punch.

love, me.



Colored pencil

Bridget Zhu

hyuk's lips

JANICE LEE

Grapes grow on stern vines,
and since age six, I was fit
to pick them, to squash them
in my penny-sized palms.

My father, with a basket flung
over his corky arms, swooped
hundreds of ripe purple droplets
delicately, carefully, into his dry fingertips.
Not a brown or green spot found
in any woven corner of his garden basket.
As he picked his hundreds, I picked
ones, slowly adding to his weight.

My brother sees us weaving
through the grape maze,
and eager to help, he begins picking.
But, he jabs one purple pearl
onto his tongue, the dripping jam
splattered around his jagged lips.
No wonder, then, my father's retribution
came through a lone buzzing bee
armed with eagerness and courage,
encircling my brother's lower
grape-oozing lip.
He takes a fatal
swipe at the bee in chaotic flight,
only for it to stab its back thorn
into a dot of grape
between my brother's
chin and chapped lip.

At age seventeen, I still
smush grapes in my palms
to the dismay of my father
and my brother's lips always
have a purple hue
to me.

Pressed Orchids

LAYA REDDY

Reyna liked the pitter-pattering of the rain outside her curtains as she lay unmoving upon the bed. There was something comfortable in the way her quilt wrapped around her torso, entrapping her body heat, as her bare arms and legs cooled unswathed. It reminded her of the last time she saw her mother in the family garden, asleep and surrounded by drooping orchids.

A loud thud sounded above in her brother’s room. The last time she saw him, he was dressed like a Green Day reject, still seeming to be the same person with his perpetual scowl, just bereaved of his sense of fashion. He acted like a different somebody now, though, her brother Gabriel. Every time he walked by, he’d avert his eyes and taunt her. Chubby. Shorty. Idiot. It was much the usual between them, but he couldn’t seem to look at her properly. She could sit straight across from him, and his eyes would migrate across her face, avoiding her own.

“Why didn’t you sleep?” Gabriel was at the threshold of her doorway, eyes lifted.

“I just couldn’t.”

“You should sleep. You’ll become an insomniac like Mom.”

“Don’t be dumb. Mom had a condition, the doctor said, remember? It’s not going to just happen.”

“You can give yourself insomnia if you don’t sleep. It’s not like cancer, stupid.”

Gabriel’s words were termites chipping at her skin. Eating at all her fears and gnawing at her anxiety. Reyna pulled herself up in anger, but by then her doorway was empty. She was left alone. Lounging on her bed as she had been for weeks.

A loud thud. Her brother above. Had he actually been here? He was quieter nowadays—a real teenager. The last time they really spoke, not niceties or platitudes, was weeks ago. He still played the guitar, its chords audible through her thin ceiling, but it sounded dull to her now. Like the sounds were coming from quite far a distance.

“Sleeping in today?” Her Dad knocked on her bedroom door.

“That’s the plan.” He walked towards her bed with purpose. She thought he’d lift her up and spin her around like when she was little. Maybe he’d pull off the covers and say, “Waffles today.” Or he’d sit down carefully at her side and they’d look at her flowers. The book she kept at her bedside where everything was ironed into the eternal, where nothing ever died. Instead, he tucked her blankets more carefully around her where they had crumpled. And he let her be.

—

Reyna stayed in a state of comfortable limbo until heavy footsteps fell into her room, and fingers latched onto the inside of her ankle. Her brother yanked, and she slid harshly to the floor, her comforter flowing after her like a train.

“That’s enough. You can’t live the rest of your life lying there like a coma patient.”

“You didn’t seem to care until now.”

He threw a sweatshirt at her. “Get dressed. We’re going outside.”

As he left the room, he paused at the threshold and turned halfway to stare head-on at the dried-out, blue-faded lavender hanging above her headboard.

—

The hill seemed to have a harsher incline than usual. It was still adorned with juniper, tangling around Reyna’s toes and tall border grass tickling her thighs. Still, she tried to keep pace with him—her brother—as they ran up the scrubby path. At the hill’s crest, they stopped.

“What are we doing here, Gabriel?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I’ve just been quiet...you’ve been louder.”

“I see.” He didn’t then. He always liked to mask his confusion. To lean on his brotherly facade of knowing every-thing and knowing before she did. She wished he knew everything this time. Everything they needed to get past this.

“Maybe,” he continued. “We need to just keep our minds off it all.”

“Just because you refuse to think about her doesn’t mean I will. Coward.”

“Reyna, shut up. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then, we’re both withering, and you can’t even see it.” Reyna was off down the winding, tangled path. Much faster now that she was going downhill, fleeing from the struggle of conversation.

As she stopped at the foot of the hill, she looked back to see her brother. He stood unmoving at the crest, his silhouette brightened by the sun behind him. He was an unreachable speck in the distance.

—

As Reyna got ready for bed that night, she began a new routine. For the last few weeks, she was used to just slipping into bed after monotonous days. Now, she decided, things would change.

She spent some time climbing out of her ground-floor window to go pick some of her mother’s flowers—most precious among them the light purple orchids. She returned to her bedroom to search below her bed for a stack of yellowing, thick books. She hadn’t touched them during her period of silence, and they had collected dust.

Carefully, she began to open one of the book’s color-tinted pages, arranged flower-by-flower in the center of them. She closed the book, and with the palms of her hands pushed down on it with her weight. As she pulled out the symmetrical blossoms, pressed cleanly, she saw how lean they had become. How one-dimensional. And she experienced a kinship to these flowers. Tragedy certainly starves one of their whole self, but, as she observed the lengthening of the petals, it leaves a vulnerability singularly beautiful.

She gathered these flat, violet flowers and covered herself in a blanket of them as she lay in bed. She stared up at her ceiling, relaxed, and heard the soothing rain return outside in her garden. Again, a presence appeared in her doorway, but this time his feet made his way to her bed. As her brother lay down beside her, they turned to each other, separated only by the paper-like flora.

“I miss her,” he said. “Every day. Sometimes, I come by here and expect Mom to be stringing together her flowers into crowns and necklaces. But she’s not. And you haven’t done anything about them because you thought that it would be a fraud of the real thing, same as I did.”

“But it’s nice,” she said.

“It kind of is,” he agreed.



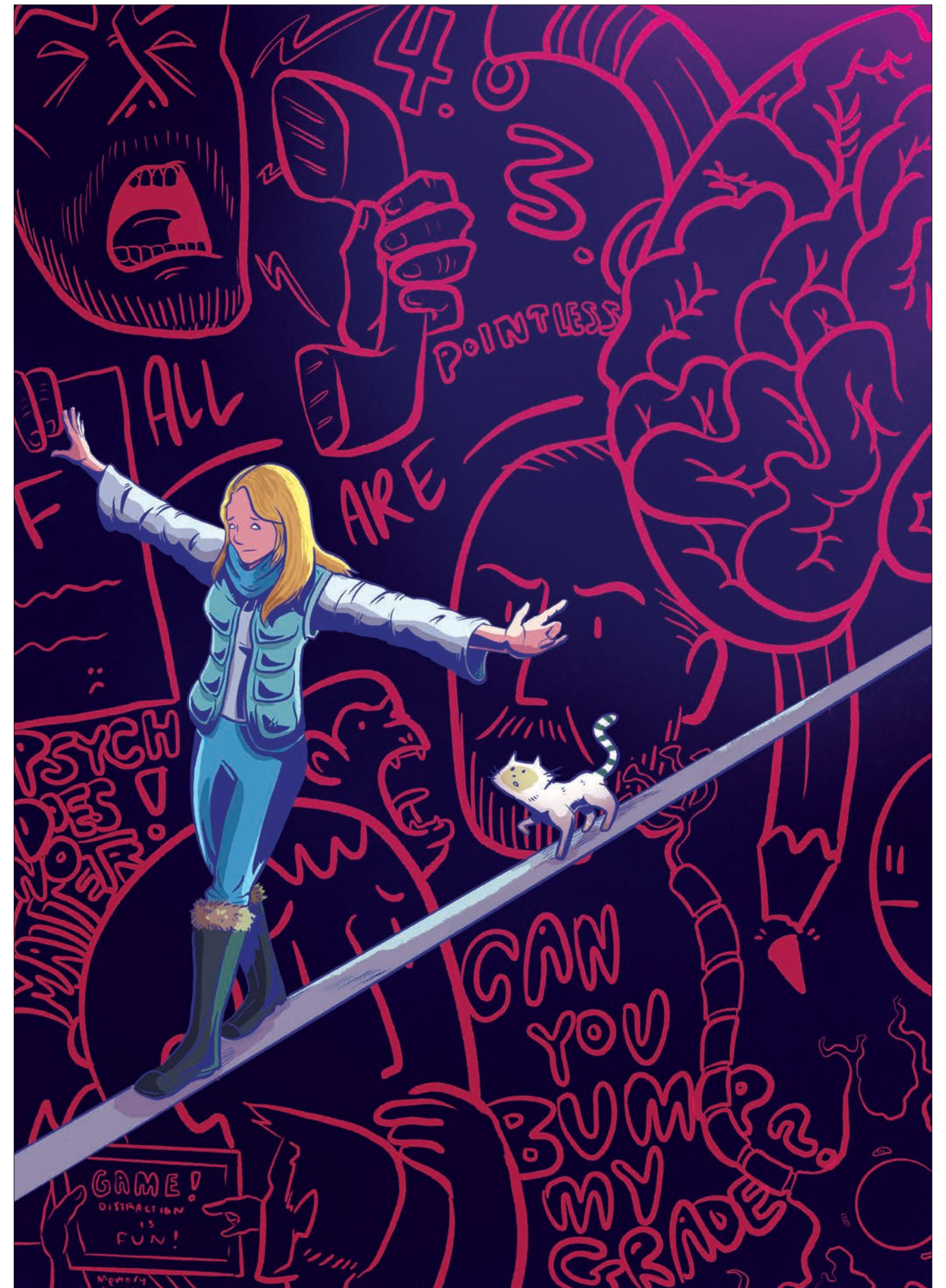
Digital art

Aniketh Bhaskar



Digital art

Jasmine Lin



Digital art

Jasmine Lin

Polka Dot Blouse

HAILEE BYKOFF

My mother holds it against my chest,
a pink blouse with bright magenta polka dots.
I hold back the urge to tear it from her hands
and rip the flimsy chiffon to shreds.
But instead I respond with a smile,
stiffer than the calloused hands
of a sweatshop worker whose shoddy craftsmanship
has gone without appreciation.
I pray that perhaps I can travel back in time
and tell the poor worker
this polka dot blouse is ugly.

Yet the look within my mother's eyes
as she gleefully cradles the fabric in her arms
like a newborn baby,
warps me back to the present.
A gleam from the flickering
fluorescent light cascades down on her
and the polka dot blouse,
the two intertwined in their own fabrication.

She does not see me here,
no longer that small child who wears
sparkling silver shoes and mismatched socks
with tight curls that fall against a freckled nose.
I watch as my mother drifts away towards the checkout aisle,
the polka dot blouse neatly folded between her hands.



Mixed media

Sayalee Patankar

little india

ATISHI PORWAL

the atlantic swell roars in the distance,
riptides angrily punching the tired beach.
the ocean cries in currents,
desperately wishing for the overcast loneliness
to leave as it pushes through the stubborn sandbar.
white ribs crack from the pressure
and i scream,
gasping for help from underneath
the frothing waves
and salty seafoam.

but i am alone.

i yell for the moon to listen to me
as i slip under the waves,
the ebb and flow pushing and pulling
my porcelain body apart.

but then the bright neon lights
of edison, new jersey
flash in my face and suddenly,
i’m back home.

Intertwining Strands

CAMILLE CLAY

The white porch creaks as my weight shifts,
shaking the endless pins and needles in my legs
as rays of light beat upon my body.
I sit between your legs as you rock in the mahogany chair,
watching the willow trees sway like women dancing the merengue.
Fidgeting with my fingers,
as you comb your calloused fingers through my hair,
intertwining the amber strands in familiar patterns.
Stopping every five minutes to take a sip of peach tea,
the sound of giant ice cubes clinking against glass,
reverberating against my ears
as you peacefully tug at my hair for the last time.

Green Wheat

MAX CARDELLI

The piercing sound of my alarm punctured my ear drums. I threw my shoulder behind me and dropped my hand onto the snooze button. I pulled the musty pillow off my head and rolled my heavy legs off the bed, dropping my feet onto the molding wood floor. The rusty springs of my mattress let out a squeal, muffled by the yellowed padding that laid on top of them. I stood up on the mattress and arched my back, reaching to the rotting ceiling. My bones echoed the same sound the creaking floor made. They were speaking to each other. My knees buckled and I fell back to my bed. I ran my hands down the bags under my eyes and rested my chin on my thumbs. A beam of light cut through the hole in the curtains, landing on a picture frame that sat on my nightstand. I slid the frame off the stand and cradled it in my hands. The outer corners of my eyes felt heavy. Thudding footsteps climbed the stairs. I put the frame back on the stand as the steps met my room. The smell of dewy grass flowed into my room with a breeze. Silence followed the earthly aroma.

“Come on, daylight’s burnin’, we ain’t g—”

“Got a dime to waste. Yeah, I know. Why’d you gotta say it like that?” My head dropped to my chest.

“I jus’—” his voice trailed off. “Just get up. I’ll be in the fields.” Clunky boots shuffled out the doorway and back down the hall to the stairs. The front screen door shrilled open, echoing through the empty house. I looked back over at the picture frame. My brother and I wore muddy blue overalls, one strap slung over each shoulder. My dad stood in the middle, donning his old patchy, fading overalls. His tired eyes drooped down into a frown, sagging the grey stubble on his face. He was looking at me. I turned my head towards the window in front of me to see my brother starting up the swather. The metal cage began to spin in an endless loop, cutting down the stalks of wheat. *They’re still growin’*. I shook my head and shackled my heavy boots to my aching feet. I stood up and waddled towards the door, pushing myself off the walls and door frame. I clenched the railing down the stairs, letting each foot fall down the steps. I stumbled out the door, tripping over my worn leather fetters around my feet. I stretched my arms above my head, waving them back and forth. The cage stopped rolling, and the engine shut off with a distinct rumble.

“What do you want?” my brother howled as he shoved the cage door open.

“Quit cuttin’ it. It ain’t done growin’ yet.”

“It’s been seven months. It’s done growin’.”

“No, it ain’t. Look at it. There’s still green.”

He jumped down into the lifeless blades of grass and wheat and pulled a strand from the ground. He brought the strand to his face and studied it. He flung the wheat back out into the field and tossed the keys to my chest.

“Bring it back to the shed.” He started back towards the house.

“Where do you think you’re goin’?” I shouted after him.

“Where do you think?” he yelled without turning around.

I pressed my lips together and lowered my brow as I shook my head. I grasped the keys and hopped up into the swather. The cabin rocked and jumped as I rode back across the sea of yellowing wheat. The warm light of the morning sun was cut by the cage in front of me. Shadowed lines crossed my face as I looked at the sun ascending into the sky. The earth seemed to separate at the horizon. Wheat chased and waved their heads at the sky, reaching for the sun, bound to the soil until the stalk turned a golden hue. I parked the swather in the shed and hopped out. I tossed the keys into a rusty, metal basket nailed to the wall. My boots dragged below me as I walked toward the rising sun over the field.

“Where do you think you’re goin’, boy?”

A kid ran toward the field in front of me and came to a stop. I turned around the same time the boy did and saw a man standing in the shed opening.

“Don’t run off now. We still got more to do,” he said in a husky voice.

I looked back toward the open field. The boy was gone. I turned back toward the shed. Nothing. I lifted my hands to my face and massaged my glassy eyes and stubbled cheeks. My hands dropped down to my sides, and my chin followed to my chest, letting out a sigh. I picked my head up to see my brother sitting on the porch of the house, peering off into the distance. I swiveled to look back at the horizon and squared my hips to the wheat. The breeze flowed over my face. I narrowed my eyes, clenching the teeth together. No. I swung my foot around and veered back towards the house.

I dropped the pail of water on the stove and lit the hissing gas nozzle. A flame jumped out onto the stove and began heating the water.

“Water boilin’ yet?” My brother strolled into the kitchen and sat at the wooden table.

“No, jus’ started.” I made my way over to the table, pulling at a chair. The wood chair rubbed against the splitting floor. I dropped backwards into the chair as it shrilled at the joints. A pendulum clock ticked in front of me. Its gold disk swung back and forth; my eyes followed it. I looked back at the table. I lifted my eyes under my brow to see my brother looking out at the setting sun.

“Have you ever thought about it?” I mumbled.

“What?”

“Have you ever thought about leaving?” I whimpered.

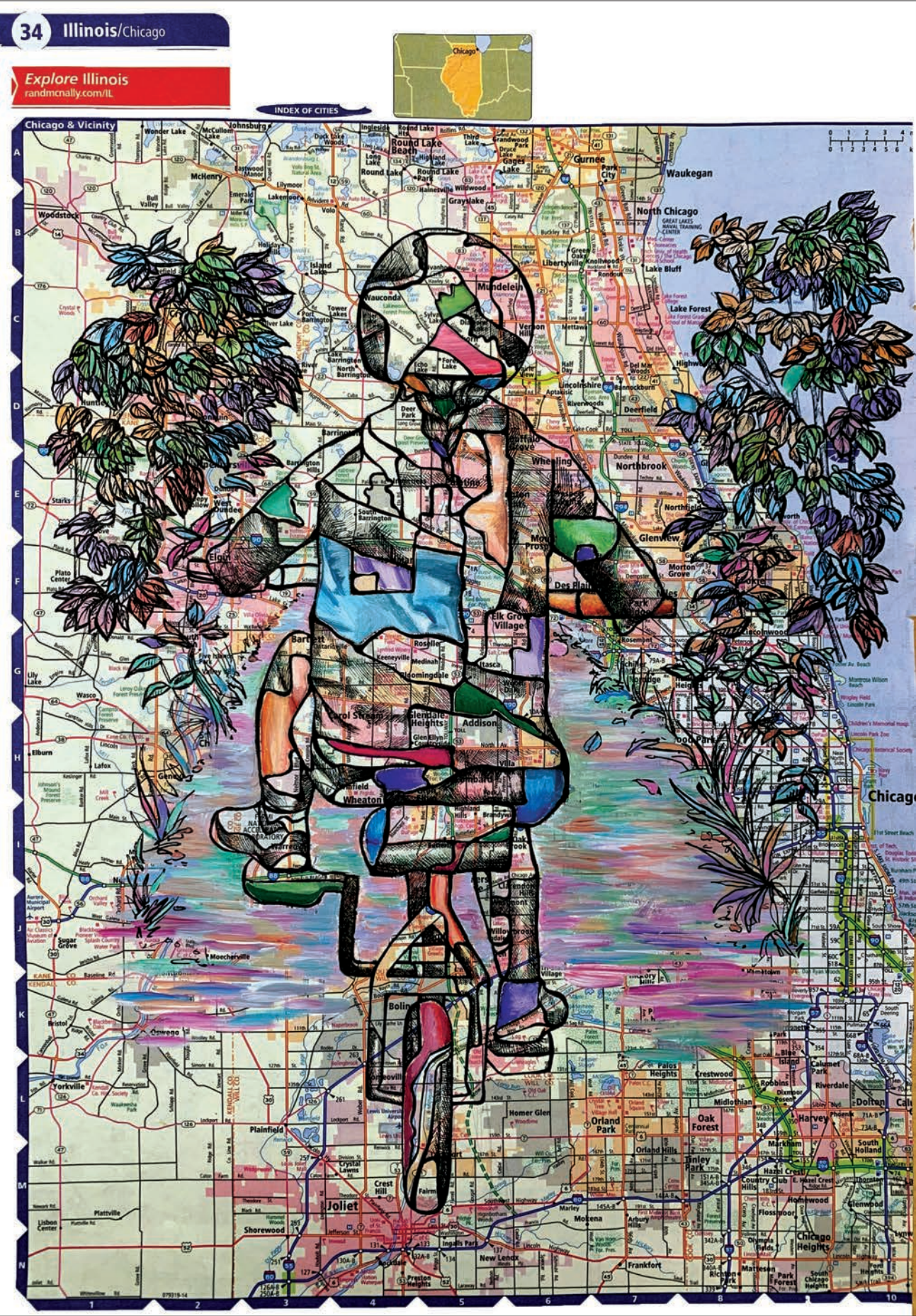
The water began to bubble. He turned to look at me and narrowed his eyes. His gaze fell to the table. “If Pa were here, he woulda hit ya over the head for sayin’ somethin’ like that.”

I looked back at my hands, rolling my thumbs over and under each other. “But he ain’t,” I said as I lifted my shoulders and turned my head towards him.

Water began to boil louder, and steam rose from the pot. My brother shook his head and looked down at the ground. He stood up and slid his feet into his boots. “If ya wanna leave so bad, go right ahead.” He tossed the keys that hung next to the front door. “Jus’ don’t expect a warm welcome when ya come back.” His voice trailed off out the screen door.

“Where ya goin’?” I shouted after him.

“Gas station.” He climbed into his car. The engine rattled and roared as the headlights beamed back into the house, throwing the shadow of the screen mesh onto my face. His tires spun in the dirt. He whipped the car around the other one, leaving a wake of dust as he peeled off past the rows of wheat. I walked, put my hand out in front of me, and pushed open the screen door. The sun began to melt into the horizon. The sky was tinted an orange hue, and the wheat stood still out in the fields. The horizon began to merge the sky and the soil. The wheat rose past the descending amber sun. I looked down at the keys in my hand. The water on the stove began to boil over the brim and hissed against the fire. I picked my head up and lunged back through the door. I grabbed two rags and gripped the pot and slid it off the stove. I pulled my hands away, shaking them toward the floor. The room fell silent. The clock ticked. I pulled my head up to the clock and watched the golden saucer swing. I jostled the keys in my hand and looked back at the floor. I walked forward, back to the front door. Darkness coated the outside world. A breeze flowed through the screen as moonlight poured into the house. My fingers tightened around the keys. I walked forward to the front door, slowly dragging my feet. I reached the beams of white light. I lifted my legs up and slipped out of my boots. I lowered my hand onto the handle of the screen door and pulled down. The door pushed open. I stepped outside, the wheat rustling softly. The wind blew the door shut. I looked up at the moon, and the glowing crescent lit up the dirt driveway. I slid my finger across the key fob and rested my thumb on the open lock.



Acrylic

Training Wheels

Jasmine Zheng

Psyche

ISHITA ADAVADKAR

The men are twisting spirals ‘round her path.
A scorned disciple flying high. A swan.
Her flight so high, yet withers knowing truth—
the prophet holds that love for her? Now gone.

She scoffs and pushes past the burning eyes,
her dream does lie above the mountaintop.
A spirit bringing woe and scorching cries,
a shroud of mystery he’s found atop.

His mother sentences her—trials for
a punishment for love, her beauty, charm.
His aid gave triumph, yet the trials were
a blur, a dream—she fell, encased in harm.

His pleas for her are answered from above—
She rises, and a kiss will seal their love.

Honey Citron Tea

HELEN HAN

I like drinking sweet things. I like sinking my hands
into a fresh winter’s first snow. I like drinking honey
citron tea in the cold. Even when the cold hurts
my ears. Even when the tea scalds my tongue. I like
the way I forgive the tea for scalding my tongue,
with its sweetness inside and the cold outside. I like
the way I let myself be greedy, buy a cup of it at a café,
even when I know we have a jar of it sitting at home
on my counter, even (maybe more) when my friend
hears my order—leans over, whispers, *why buy that
here? There’s a big jar sitting on our kitchen shelf;
come to my house.*

Hypervelocity

MADELINE MITCHELL

In my mother’s car, we are laughing through
ten galaxies. We lap up the cosmic mess of light

in between worlds with patient tongues.
Purple smeared across a cheek. Porchlight

flickering in your teeth. Today, you told me
about hypervelocity as I pressed the gas pedal

into the floor, leaving no space for doubt
or hesitation. You said that with enough force,

metal and fluid begin to act the same. Rippling,
slipping through our fingers. I used to think nothing

was changeable in this universe,
but tonight, we dream of bathing

in steel, oozing silver up my thighs. Like this, I wonder
if I can change you. My mother’s car makes an ocean of your

quivering shadow. Our giggling caught in an undertow that ebbs
into breath. My jaw aches as my grin hooks over your lips

and we are kissing and this is what metal
must feel like when it softens.

Sea

HELEN HAN

I broke a glass
on purpose yesterday.

That's great.

Is it?

Yes. What did it feel like?

I knocked it off the edge of a table.

I don't know if it felt like anything.

Are you sure? Think harder.

Okay. Let me think.

It felt like going
to sleep, maybe, or letting
seawater bite my ankles.

Do you want
to know how it shattered?

Yes. How did it shatter?

It didn't, really. It cracked
like a mirror into three pieces on the tile.

Oh. Were you disappointed?

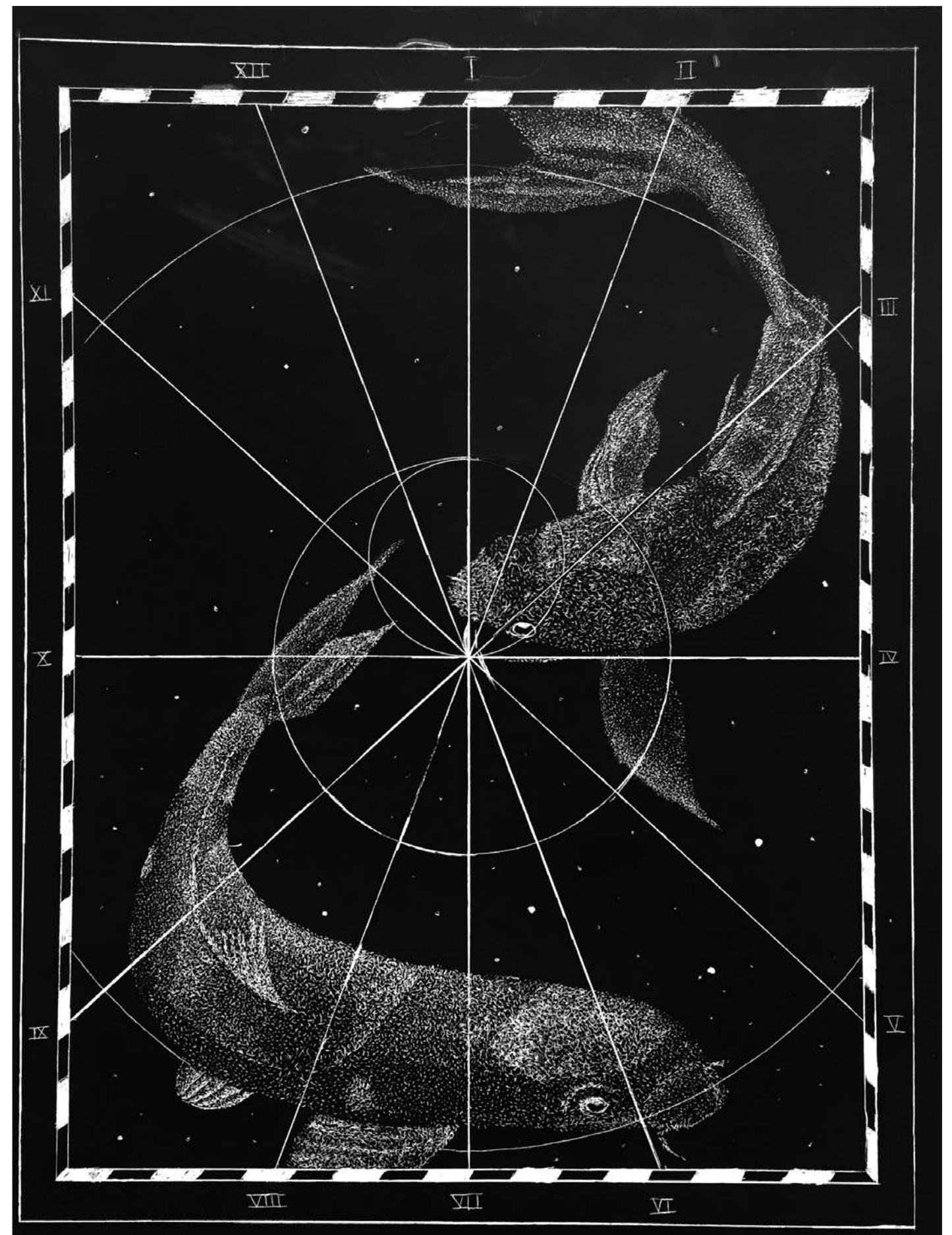
Only a little. It still
felt good.

You said it felt like going to sleep.

Like a blanketed infant.

How will you sleep tonight?

Like a sea washing over town.



Scratchboard

Sreeram Danda

CREDITS

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Please direct any questions or concerns to James Barnabee at jbarnabee@d125.org.

