



the **LAURENTIAN**
MAGAZINE

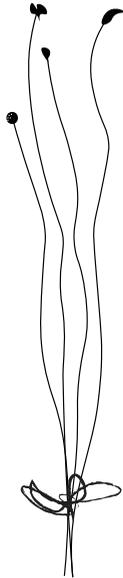
Spring 2022

W. J. ...
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The
Laurentian Magazine
Spring 2022



Feed your Starving Artist

SINCE 1888

A Note About Submissions

The Laurentian Magazine is published bi-annually, with submissions from the beginning of a semester appearing in the issue distributed at the end of that semester. We accept submissions in Fiction, Nonfiction, Poetry, Visual Arts, & Photography from current St. Lawrence University students.

In order to maintain the most stringent ethical standards possible, contributors' identity are withheld from the editors during the selection process.

For more information, please contact us at thelaurentianmag@stlawu.edu or visit our Instagram [@thelaurentianmag](https://www.instagram.com/thelaurentianmag).

The Laurentian Magazine staff would like to thank our faculty advisor, Dr. Paul Graham, for his passion, guidance, and trust in us as we put together this edition.

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PHOTO STORY

Unearthly: The Beauty of Blackness

BY KALILA CALAME

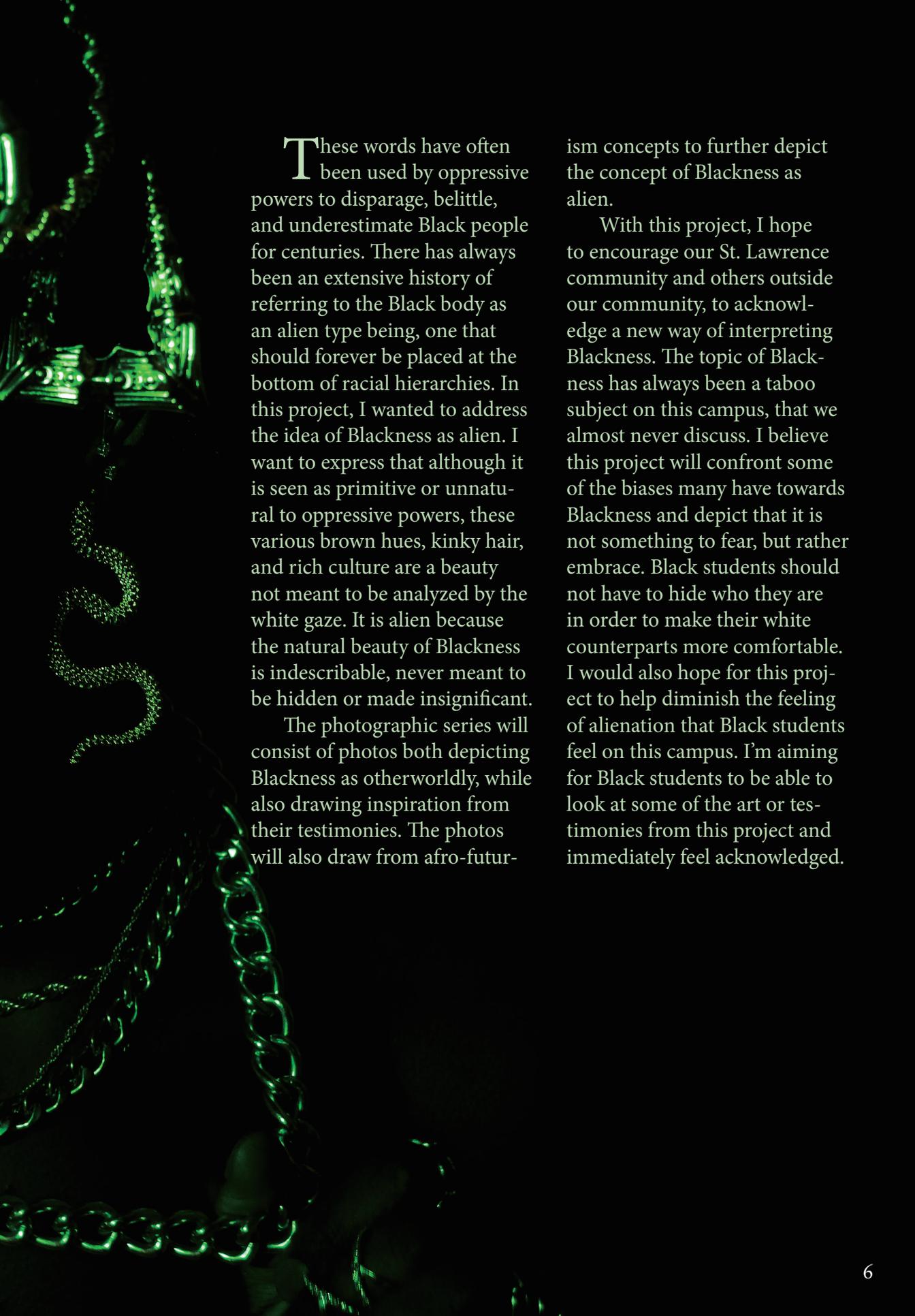
Unearthly (/, n) (often used as an adjective): To be unnatural or mysterious, especially in a disturbing way.











These words have often been used by oppressive powers to disparage, belittle, and underestimate Black people for centuries. There has always been an extensive history of referring to the Black body as an alien type being, one that should forever be placed at the bottom of racial hierarchies. In this project, I wanted to address the idea of Blackness as alien. I want to express that although it is seen as primitive or unnatural to oppressive powers, these various brown hues, kinky hair, and rich culture are a beauty not meant to be analyzed by the white gaze. It is alien because the natural beauty of Blackness is indescribable, never meant to be hidden or made insignificant.

The photographic series will consist of photos both depicting Blackness as otherworldly, while also drawing inspiration from their testimonies. The photos will also draw from afro-futur-

ism concepts to further depict the concept of Blackness as alien.

With this project, I hope to encourage our St. Lawrence community and others outside our community, to acknowledge a new way of interpreting Blackness. The topic of Blackness has always been a taboo subject on this campus, that we almost never discuss. I believe this project will confront some of the biases many have towards Blackness and depict that it is not something to fear, but rather embrace. Black students should not have to hide who they are in order to make their white counterparts more comfortable. I would also hope for this project to help diminish the feeling of alienation that Black students feel on this campus. I'm aiming for Black students to be able to look at some of the art or testimonies from this project and immediately feel acknowledged.





CHAMPION
T-SHIRT



Stoplight Charm

POETRY

By **ERIN BEHRENS**

Asphalt canal, send me
homeward
Hudson flows South,
I, North

green flirt,
yellow blink,
red swallow,

stomp right to left, heavy-footed operator
screched halt, I never learned
to cut back

always too fast
road rage, wrote rage
the brakes were never mine
to control

ask metal box, wire-hung
throat
who told you to change color?
who told me to
change?

NYC STREETS

NONFICTION

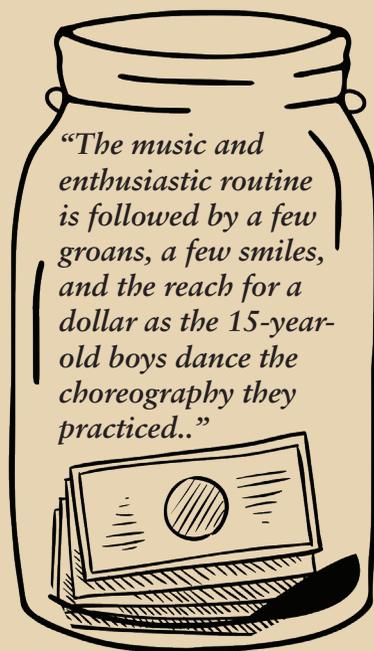
By **ANGELIKA RODRIGUEZ**

NYC. Bodegas are central. The elite bodegas make hot sandwiches - maybe some rice with chicken - and have a cat that purrs on top of the honey buns, warming it up even if no one asks for it. The cat couldn't be bothered by your reach and looks, rolling its eyes at you as you irritate the store clerk for a *bacon-egg-and-cheese*. It seems, at times, that the cat is just a reincarnation of people who have been in the city their whole lives; like uncle Tony, who just last week passed away from lung cancer. Both seem to hate the world, yet they find comfort in their own little worlds; like in a cup of coffee, the Yankees game, and hitting on women in the street. Both, however, are essential in your everyday life. Anyway, the bodega clerk just let you off the hook for being fifty cents short because they were trying to hustle you out of money anyway.

People here find it attractive for you to have a license. All we know is how to run down the stairs after hearing the screeching of the train brakes, *hoping* that paying that stupid \$2.75 isn't going to be the reason that we are late to our plans, to school, to work. We rush to swipe our metro cards as we hear *Stand clear of the closing doors, please*. We make it on, just in time to avoid being crushed by the metal gates.

We subconsciously celebrate an open corner seat, and as we get ready to press play to the best train playlist in history, we hear "Showtime!" "Showtime!" followed by bass-infected music from the JBL speaker that Jimmy took from his brother's room this morning. He didn't ask, but he plans on putting it back before his brother gets home from work. This music and

enthusiastic routine is followed by a few groans, a few smiles, and the reach for a dollar as the 15-year-old boys dance the choreography they practiced in between the uniform, brown buildings of the projects an hour away from here. Their jar is only a fifth of the way full even though they have been doing this all day. They step off at the next stop and move to the next train cart, keeping their composure most of the time, making sly comments to the cheap passenger at other times, and continue to hustle.



Washington Square Park: music once again blaring out of speakers, eventually leaking through the different cement paths, your sneakers get a little wet from the chorus of *Nice for What* and it only intrigues you to fully jump into the waves. You swim through the lyrics and find ashore in the street artists that sweat under the summer sun, each drop sliding down their faces and



PHOTO CREDIT: Thao Nguyen

falling on the canvas, slightly smudging the painted figure that the artist spent hours on. Each painting only displays a crumb of his life. Just last week he was tackled, assaulted, and arrested by park rangers for not having a table for his art. The bystanders

tried to pull them off, recording for evidence, and lovingly comforted him while he was on the verge of unconsciousness. That is the beautiful thing about this city, in the darkest times, everyone you know and their moms are going to come and fight your bat-



tle with you. Today, he turns up his music a little louder to ignore his cries and their “stop resisting” he still hears; the sounds pain up and haunt him still. Through that, he continues to hustle because the sounds in this city can never be silenced.

This artist sells his pieces to the bachelor that lives in the penthouse right up on 34th. That bachelor buys this art for the vivid colors on the sheet and the aesthetic it holds, not really understanding the meaning and not bothering to ask, either, because art for him is just a decoration. The bachelor lives in the sounds of his own mind. His walls are thick and soundproof, so when he hangs this art up on the third floor of his penthouse, he doesn't hear what the art is trying to say. In fact, he doesn't hear anything other than himself. Regardless, the artist thanks the bachelor for paying his bills this month.

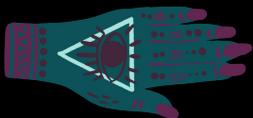
He makes all his art in his hunched-up Brooklyn studio. His walls are thin, so he still hears everything. His wife and two kids sleep on the same bed as him but that helps create an even stronger sound of love, laughter, and hope. In the morning he takes two steps and slips into the shower where he can only last ten minutes before the water is cold enough to cause hypothermia. The squeaking of the faucet and the push of water through rusted pipes wake up the rest of the family, and eventually the rest of the apartment complex. This is how most of us live, in the sounds of others.

I come from NYC where *deadass* can be a question, an affirmation, and a statement. When we see someone familiar, are looking for someone, or are stuck in an unfamiliar place, we yell *yerrr* to find our way back home because only those who experience this city everyday will respond appropriately. The language we speak here isn't really part of the census or identifiable. I have never seen a place where so much hostility can be packed into a love confession. *I dea-*

dass love the woman you are, you changed a fucked up man to be a gentleman, on god. No number of biddies can replace you. It's not what you see in the movies, but it's what we understand to be love.

The streets reek of the dollar pizza that greases up the paper plates of the teenagers down the block. They're smoking weed on the stoop of an apartment in which they've never been inside, yet feel at home. They even started hiding their bowl and lighters in the untouched planter filled with rusted leaves and dry dirt so that they don't bring that shit home to their parents. They come here often after school because no one bothers them; New Yorkers mind their business unless the problem at hand is real. At times, strangers even join them in the circle on their journey to indulge fully in a cloud of peace. At the end of it all, they get up and stumble their way to the nearest bodega for some Arizona and Takis only to step on the train one more time today. The city screams with passion all night long, but that is our lullaby.

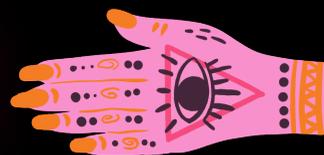




FICTION

By ALEXANDRA PENDO

MIDWIFE *of the* DAMNED



Rain poured, washing through the streets in small rivers. It drizzled from the awnings above shop windows, collecting in the cracks and dips in the pavement. A lamppost cast a dim yellow light over the sidewalk, but the night remained dark due to the heavy covering of storm clouds.

Willie Duncan stood beneath the awning of a closed news shop. His collar was turned up against the cold wind and his hat was pulled over his eyes, his gaze fixed on the business across the street. A pink sign glowed in the dark window: an open palm with a wide, staring eye in its center. Its reflection wavered in the puddle before the building, rain distorting the image.

A handwritten sign in the window read TAROTS, PALMS, PROGNOSTICATIONS, and another sign flashed OPEN. Willie wondered for a moment if this was the right thing for him to do, but he pushed those thoughts aside. There was no one else.

Willie glanced in either direction and stepped into the road. A car whizzed past, its headlights cutting through the silver curtain of rain, the echoes of Black Sabbath's "Heaven and Hell" thumping through the night.

Willie jumped back, his heart pounding, and the car sounded its horn. Rainwater splashed, dampening his coat and turning it a deep brown instead of beige. The car zoomed off into the night, speeding through the glaring red traffic light a street ahead.

Willie stared after the car, wondering if that could have been *them*. They had been after him for some time, and Willie wondered if they'd finally caught him. This was the last place he had thought of to come to for help. If this woman couldn't tell him what to do, how to get away...

Willie looked both ways again before once more stepping into the road. This time no cars came barreling forwards, and he hurried across the street. He stopped before the business, the neon of the signs burning in the night. He could almost hear their electrical hum.

A sign above the door read *Madame Orela* in a curling script. There was another note in the corner, and Willie had to squint to read the shadowed words. *Cash only*. Willie glanced behind him, peering out from beneath his hat, and raised his fist to knock. He paused for a moment, fist inches from the wood. He shouldn't do this. Only foolish people went to clairvoyants, but Willie was out of options.



A knock sounded and Orela glanced at the clock on the stove: six o'clock sharp. She set down the antique teapot she held and straightened. She had been expecting a visitor of course, but that never made it any less anticipatory.

She picked up the shawl she had discarded over the back of a kitchen chair and pushed her way through the beaded curtain into the hallway, wrapping it around her

shoulders and adjusting the fringe. She reached the door as the knock came again and opened it.

Cool air greeted her, as did the sight of a man standing on the stoop, hands buried in his pockets. His back was hunched against the cold and whatever eyes he thought were prying, for, Orela noticed, he was dressed as though he belonged to a time when movies were still made in black and white.

Orela opened her mouth to welcome her guest but found she could not form the words. An overwhelming sense of dread had come over her. On him, Orela could almost see the traces of his crimes, his deceit. She'd had customers before, but never one like him. This man had done something of which to be ashamed, and Orela knew the time had come.

When Orela didn't speak, the man pushed past her into the hall. She stood there for a moment longer, then shook her head as though clearing a fog. She peered out into the darkness. Nothing unusual presented itself, and although Orela knew she had a job to do, she took a moment to let the cool air wash over her, to steady herself, before shutting the door. Orela took a deep breath and turned to her customer.

"Welcome to Madame Orela's," she said, and her voice wasn't quite as steady as she wanted it to be. "Where futures are told, and fate cannot be denied."

Into her voice, Orela injected the dramatic inflections her matriarchs had all used with their clients. Orela thought the greeting foolish, but it had become a family tradition of sorts; a tradition which she was now going to continue to its fullest extent.

"You may hang your coat up there." Orela gestured to the hooks on the wall beside the door, and the man shrugged out of his coat and hat. Blond hair gleamed in the light, as did a boyish face that seemed to belong to another age. He did not look like

the man who had entered a moment ago, dressed in shadows and something akin to sin, but more like a child playing dress-up in his father's clothes.

The man turned, clasping a wad of cash, his knuckles white. "How much?" He asked.

"Fifty," Orela said.

The man counted, tens and twenties rifling through his fingers until he had extracted the required amount. He ran his thumb along the edges of the bills, as though parting with a friend, before thrusting the money at Orela. She did not count it as she took it and slid it into her pocket. The money didn't matter. It was just a formality at this point. No payment could make up for what Orela had to do.

She gestured to the door into the parlor. "I'll be with you in a moment."

The man glanced at Orela with wide eyes and turned, pushing through the door. Orela watched it swing closed before retreating to the small table partway down the hall, away from the receiving room and the man's ears.

Orela knew her house was an anachronism—it always had been with four generations of Amina women alive at once—and she was reminded of this as she reached for the receiver of the red rotary dial, so unlike the phones of today. Her hands trembled and she pinched her lips together as she glanced at the slip of aging paper tacked to the garish red and gold wallpaper. It had been there for as long as she could remember, and she had always hoped, perhaps foolishly, that she would never have to use it. She dialed the numbers on the paper and brought the receiver to her ear.

The receiver clicked as the line opened, but there was no answer. Orela released a shaky breath and said, "I have a soul." She waited, and when nothing happened, she lowered the receiver onto its cradle. She took a moment to compose herself, leaning against the hall table, wondering at what

she'd done, before following Willie into the parlor.



The room smelled of tea and candles and herbs Willie couldn't place, and he had to squint to see the circular table in the center of the room. Mirrors glinted from the shadows, and he thought he saw a skull resting on a plinth as though in a place of honor.

Willie approached the table. He closed his eyes for a moment, letting the shadows press in on him before he took a seat. He spent those few minutes alone to collect himself.

The door behind him opened, and Madame Orela entered. Candles flickered on the table as she floated by and took a seat opposite him. A car drove past, the beams from its headlights impeded by the thick, black curtains blocking the windows. Willie flinched.

Madame Orela was younger than Willie had expected. She was in her mid to late twenties, rather than the sixty or seventy Willie had imagined, and he thought that without the fortune teller garb that made it look as though she had just come from a church rummage sale, she might even be attractive.

Willie sat under the watchful gaze of the woman and waited, hands clasped in his lap. He didn't like the way she was looking at him; as though she could see right through him to all the lies he had told, what he had done.

"Your name is Willie Duncan."

"Yes." Willie nodded and swallowed. He had expected this sort of thing, the revealing of facts the seer shouldn't know, the mysterious nature in which she spoke, but still, it unnerved him.

Madame Orela paused, then, "My family has had *the gift* for generations. We are never wrong. What you will hear today

is nothing but the truth as I shall see it."

Willie watched Madame Orela, who he felt was examining him for a little too long, her gaze unmoving. Willie coughed and she blinked. When he did not respond, she said, "Let us see what the cards have in store for you."

The woman produced a pack of cards, the edges worn and frayed with age and years of use. She shuffled them, letting them fall from one hand to the other, her many rings glittering in the light. Willie watched her hands, and he thought there was a slight tremor to them. He cleared his throat.

Willie didn't believe in psychics. His father had called it nonsense. Hardened criminal though he was, Willie knew his bastard father had been afraid of this sort of thing—the occult—just as had many of the men in the syndicate they were a part of. It went against his father's religion. Willie didn't have a religion, and he wasn't scared—of this—yet there was something unnerving about the way Madame Orela caressed the cards lovingly, as though they were an old friend and a great comfort.

"Do you have a question you'd like to focus on?" Madame Orela's voice was

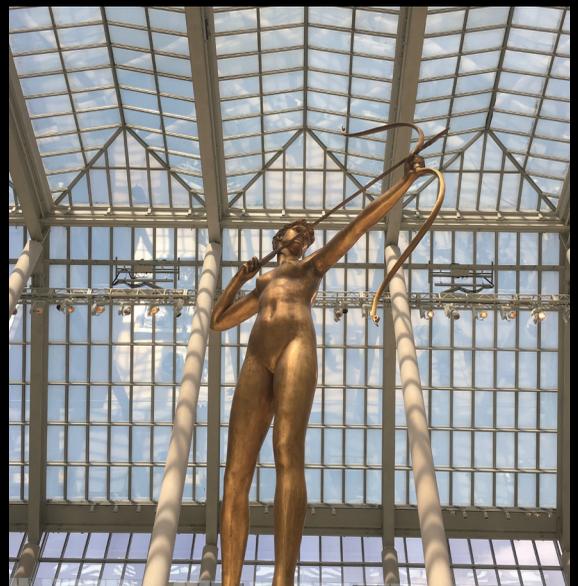


PHOTO CREDIT: Hannah Rutkowski

low, the planes of her face hollowed by the flickering candlelight.

“Yes,” Willie said. He knew all too well the matter that was on his mind. He did not like to think of it, yet he brought forward thoughts of being followed, thoughts of running; running from the men whom he had exposed.

Madame Orela nodded as though she could hear his thoughts. She shuffled the deck once more, and, one by one, plucked three cards off the top and laid them face down on the table.



Orela could feel the man’s anticipation as she reached forward and turned over the first card, trying to keep the trembling in her fingers to a minimum—it wouldn’t help Willie if she was nervous too. The card depicted a tower, spearing towards a lightning-filled sky. Willie watched the cards as though seeing his life play out, fidgeting with the tablecloth before him. Orela’s gift had told her his name. Now it would reveal his fate.

“A great change is coming to you soon. One from which you cannot run.”

Willie licked his lips and his head dipped. His breath caught. The sound of tires rolling over wet pavement reached her ears, and Orela glanced at the window the same moment Willie did, wondering if those she had called had arrived. The car passed, leaving them in silence.

“Poor thing,” a scratchy voice said. “They never know what to think.”

Orela did not turn to look at the trio of women she knew hovered behind her: mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. They too had had *the gift*. For twenty-three generations her family had had *the gift*.

Willie looked up with wide eyes, glanc-

ing around as though he had heard something. Orela had told her matriarchs not to interrupt a session. They never listened.

“We taught you, you know,”

Grandmother Delphine would say when Orela mentioned this.

“I knew before I gave birth that you would be like us,” was Orela’s mother’s response.

“All Amina women have the gift of sight,” Great-Grandmother Idris would say.

Sometimes, if she was angry, Orela would respond, “if it was a gift, then you wouldn’t have to teach me,” in her mind, so as not to scare the customers.

“Get to work,” was all the women would say.



The woman sat still for a moment, as if in contemplation. Willie had not wanted to come here, but he’d had no choice. No one else had helped him, and soon it would be too late. He could feel it.

Willie glanced at the window, and he wondered if his fate lurked beyond those curtains. Willie hadn’t wanted to kill his



PHOTO CREDIT: Sarah Weaver

father. But he also hadn't wanted the life of crime his father had forced him into. Willie had only meant to have his father framed, in retaliation for the hell he'd made Willie's childhood. Yet crime lords never did what you expected, and when you exposed them, they came after you.

Madame Orela turned back to Willie, focusing on him once more. She turned over the next card. It depicted the upside-down face of the pale moon. "Fear and deception are heavy in your life. But clarity will come in time."

"Clarity on what?"

Madame Orela watched him, her eyes round and dark like those of a barn owl. "That is for you to discover. Clarity will come. Or perhaps you already possess it, and you just need to find it." Madame Orela tipped her head and Willie fixed his gaze on the cards.

Madame Orela reached for the last one, and Willie could smell the sweat of his anticipation, sour upon the herbaceous air. He wiped sweaty palms on his trousers, clenching the fabric in his fists. He swallowed, his mouth gummy with nerves. Madame Orela turned the card over, her long fingers slow in their movement. She laid it out flat on the table.



PHOTO CREDIT: Morgan Welling

"The devil."

A shiver traveled down Willie's spine.

"You are trapped and powerless in your decisions."

Willie could not tear his gaze from the card: a horned and winged beast; a man and woman trapped in chains. It frightened him.

"Your path ahead is a difficult one, Willie Duncan. I cannot tell you otherwise. You face a long and trying journey, filled with suffering and pain."

Willie swallowed. His heart pulsated in the hollow of his throat, and nausea burned his esophagus. Madame Orela watched him, but he could not look at her. It was almost as if she knew.

A knock sounded on the door.



Willie Duncan jumped out of his seat. Orela took her hands from the cards. She wanted more than anything to disappear at that moment.

"They're here," Grandmother Delphine whispered.

Orela blinked in response. She knew how it unnerved customers when she talked to the dead. Sometimes that unease was necessary, to trick tourists and make them believe. But not now.

"You have to answer the door," Great-grandmother Idris said. "They don't like to be kept waiting."

"You knew you'd have to do it sometime," Grandmother Delphine prodded.

The knock sounded again, thunderous in the quiet. Orela glanced at Willie. Sweat shone on his brow. His lips were pinched together, and he turned to look at Orela as

she stood, shaking his head.

Orela pulled her shawl tight about herself as she moved past the table, clutching the fabric in shaking hands, nausea churning in her stomach. Her matriarchs followed her into the hall.

Orela exhaled, taking a moment to calm herself. She had done what she had had to do. She'd had no other choice. Orela opened the door. Three figures stood on the stoop. They were human in shape, wearing suits and hats many decades out of style - their kind never kept up to date with fashion - but there was nothing else human about them.

“Good evening,” one of the figures said. Its voice was deep and ancient, filled with cruelty, the voice of many voices. The scent of sulfur permeated the air. From behind her, Orela felt the disgust of the three women. She ignored them and stared at the figures. She had a duty to fill, but she didn't have to enjoy it.

“I believe you have something of ours,” the second figure said, something like glee in its voice.

Orela found that there was nothing she could say. She tried to swallow the lump in her throat and stepped aside to let the beings enter. Each one nodded as they passed into the hall.

“Ladies,” the first being said. It tipped its hat to the three dead women lingering by the stairs, moving into the parlor.



Three men entered, the candles guttering at the new arrivals. They gathered around the table. Silence and a preternatural stillness spread through the room like ink in water, and Willie Duncan looked at the cards laid out on the table: tower, moon, and devil. *That* was Willie's fate; his prognostication.

Willie had known that someone was coming for him. However, these were not the men Willie had thought they would be.

“It is time, Willie Duncan. You have run for long enough,” one of the men said, and Willie knew at once that these were not men. Its voice was ancient, something from another realm, unlike anything he had heard before, and when he peered closer, he thought he caught a glimpse of leathery skin beneath shadowed hat brims.

“Your time on this plane has passed. Your time in the realm of mortal triviality has come to an end. Your punishment begins.”

Willie felt the creatures speaking in his bones. He wiped his shaking, sweaty palms on his trousers and glanced at Madame Orela. She did not look so stately now, her gaze cast to the floor, shawl slipping from one shoulder. Her face was the pale color of the moon that gazed at Willie from the table. He took a shuddering breath and turned back to the creatures.

“I don't know what you mean.” Willie was lying. He knew that in his father's eyes, he had sinned; even if he hadn't been the one to end his father's life. Willie's lies had gotten him here.

One of the beings smiled, a cruel expression that filled Willie with despair. It said, “Eternal damnation.”



“Poor dear. Poor, poor dear,” Grandmother Delphine said. “They never know, do they? Their crimes make them stupid.”

Orela ignored her grandmother's comments. She could not look at Willie. This had been his fate. Yes, she had read it, but she had been the one to set it in motion too.

“You did what you had to do.” Orela's mother put a hand on her shoulder, her touch icy. “It's not your fault.”

“No. It’s your twenty-two times great-grandmother Velede’s fault, the old bat. Break one contract with the devil and you’re done for.” Great-grandmother Idris gave a huff. One curse and Orela’s family was stuck passing on souls like Willie’s to the devil forever.

“Shut up,” Orela muttered. The woman glowered at her, but quieted, nonetheless. As if hearing her conversation, the demons looked up at the women.

“Your duty is done,” said the first demon, the oldest. “You may go.”

Orela nodded and could not help the glance she shared with Willie. His eyes were wide, pleading, but there was nothing that could be done now. Orela turned into the hall and then the kitchen. She crossed the room and leaned against the table, trembling.

There were the sounds of scuffling feet and a crash. The hum of deep voices traveled down the hall. The front door opened and the beads in the curtain clacked together as though a breath of wind had blown through them. A faint heat singed the air.

A scream sounded. A whirl of wind and a crack.

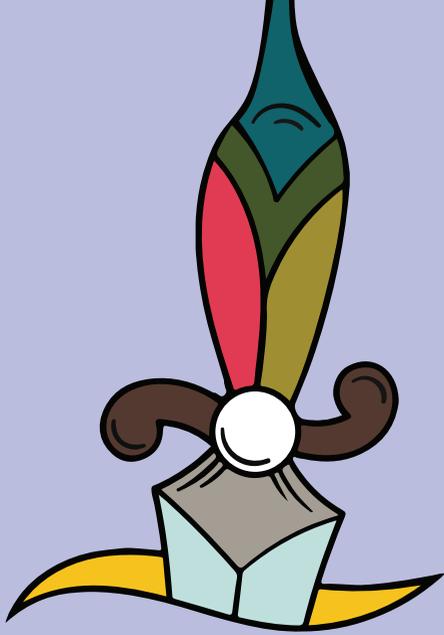
The front door slammed, and silence fell. The heat drained from the room. Orela sank into a chair beside the table and watched the ripples in the cup of cold tea still.



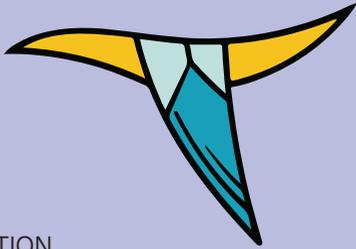








**AN IMAGINARY DIALOGUE BETWEEN
AN ILLUSTRATED WOMAN AND YOUR
AVERAGE TATTOO SKEPTIC**



NONFICTION

By **HANNAH RUTKOWSKI**

It is early 2022, and I have been tattooed twenty times. I plan on being covered in tattoos within my lifetime. I can try to describe my tattoos to you, but I cannot do them justice. I would tell you about the possum on my right inner forearm, about six inches long, with thick bold lines that outline his pink paws, bright green grass below him, a red and yellow sun above him, and how there's this brown branch he's clinging to. I would tell you how I have the words "Stop Overthinking," in my mom's cursive, but how do I describe a unique tattoo with even more unique handwriting? Tell you that the 'O' has a double loop? Whatever you visualize is probably not accurate of what's on my body. Not that it matters to you. To you, a tattoo may seem like a defiling of the body. Ugly scribbles across a

pristine clean sheet of paper.

This ink prompts questions, sometimes from complete strangers like you.

I propose this: tattoos can be a reclamation of your body. If you're not privileged in some way, or are conservative in approach and ideals, there is a lot society takes and won't give back. When a fat woman like me doesn't fit your standard, it shouldn't piss you off that I wish to ink art across my body. If I'm already down for the count, why not plant flowers where I am, you know? You're going to complain about some roses that someone beneath you planted? Silly.

My tattoos will live with me outside of your absurd, sometimes invasive questions. Tattooing can be just as natural as decomposition. Leave the fungi to the decomposition, and the tattoos to the folks who want a little control over their bodies.

I know that my tattoos can become a public attraction, therefore I know I am susceptible to lines of questioning by people like you. If I could print this essay on a shirt and wear it everyday, I would. (*Oh? You're wondering how much this tattoo cost? Check my sternum for the answer.*) Here are your answers:

What is that? What does that say?

I actually don't mind this question. I used to work at a jewelry counter in a department store, and my tattoos garnered a lot of attention from the general public. It was nice to have something to make small talk over, until one old woman found it appropriate to touch me in order to scrutinize my tattoos.

As I helped her choose a ruby ring for her daughter, I noticed her eyeing up my tattoos. I braced myself for the usual scowl, the usual "You shouldn't do that to your body." Instead, she smiled wearily, and continued to search my arms. When my arm was near her, she quickly latched a bony hand around it. I thought she was going to grab the ring and go. I was *hoping* she would grab the ring and go, but instead,

she twisted my arm until she could read my tattoo, the quote: “The Sun Will Shine On Us Again” in Calibri font.

“What does this say?” she asked, as she tried to move my arm closer to her face.

“Please don’t grab me, I can show it to you,” I told her.

“I just wanted to know.”

When I read it to her, a grin crawled up her face. A smiling woman can be taken in two different ways: she could be absolutely charming, or she could be giving a shit-eating grin and will point out your insecurities before you can. A part of me wanted to believe this woman in front of me was charming, but I felt she was anything but.

“Yes, it will,” she responded to my tattoo.

As if the lack of consent to grab me wasn’t enough, she was now including herself in my tattoo. I can’t blame her. “Us” meant different things to her and me. Perhaps she did need some light shined on her, but I didn’t want to be included in that. That’s an intimate experience. I had gotten the tattoo as a quote of empowerment for myself, but I felt like she expected others to empower her, felt entitled to it, similarly to the way she felt entitled to grab my body.

I hate that I even think that I’m inviting this attention and behavior. That I owe you study of my body because I adorn it with art. If my body becomes a public gallery, the rule to not touch the art should still apply.

It surprises me more when women do this. With men I often expect my boundaries to be ignored.

I put tattoos of animals across the visible parts of my body. I have a red panda, a possum, a Tasmanian devil and more, recognizable and likable enough for most parties curious about them. I don’t have to explain something that is unexplainable—like how tattoos make me feel like I am never alone because of the memories attached to. Instead, the strangers and I can coo over their cuteness.

What does it mean?

For *me*, it means my wide thighs I was taught to hate I now see as more canvas area to ink on, and that my creative ideas sprawl across me like a living scrapbook. This is my timeline, and my museum. My comfort.

You could assume my tattoos mean a million things. I present the most authentic version of myself on my body through tattoos, even with those like my tooth-moth, whose wings are adorned with molars and blue roots. A gut feeling about a tattoo design feels authentic. If I overthink a tattoo and begin to worry about what others may think of it, then I am not presenting my true self. I appreciate the eclectic collection I have thus far, for I am many things. Feel free to try to read me. Respectfully, though.

I find tattoos are a form of communication. When I returned to my college campus in 2021, and mask requirements were still implemented, I found myself reliant on others’ tattoos. They were a homing beacon: a snake poking out of a sleeve on a friend’s wrist, an owl on a forearm, a flower on a shoulder all gave reassurance that yes, I found the right person. I communicated through tattoos. At the very least, we both have stepped outside of some socially accepted norm.

If I see even the faintest heart etched onto a wrist, I assume ally.

You get tattoos to show them off.

They’re for other people. Why are you wearing clothes that cover them?

That there are some gross aspects of tattoos that I don’t think people would *want* to see or have shown off. I’d prefer if people didn’t show off their ink sacs in bandages, bloody drips, or scabs during the healing process that make the tattoo look illegible.

In terms of fully healed tattoos, I don’t get them for anyone but myself. There is something rewarding in wearing a sweater and having people shocked to find tattoos if I roll up the sleeves. It’s a privilege to be able to surprise people, but this act still

makes me excited. Sometimes there is joy in being unpredictable and unexpected.

I do judge strangers by which tattoo they notice and comment on. They tend to comment on the red panda. It's easy—he's cute. I appreciate the variety of people who like him. If someone likes my tooth moth, or my book with an eyeball on it, I reckon that they enjoy tattoos to some higher degree. They're appreciative of art for what it is, not for what they want it to be, and recognize that my tattoo is for me.

During this experience, our roles are reversed. I am the one reading the other person. I am not saying to avoid commenting on my tattoos—it is the only attention I revel in. Any press is good press.

Did it hurt?

Tattooing is never painless; if it was, most people would be heavily covered. But the pain isn't often your focus.

I walked in to get a tattoo of a book and flowers in 2021 to cover up a Star Wars lightsaber tattoo. The artist pulled out seats for my friends and me, sitting us against a wall filled with flash sheets (tattoos artists drew up that you could often choose from if you didn't have an idea), one of which had a snake with tits painted across it. A deer skull is mounted to the wall, framed by beautiful flowers. I felt comfortable here.

The artist drew on my arm with Sharpie as opposed to laying a purple inked stencil across my skin. As the machine whirred to life, my artist asked if I'm ready before he began. I laid on my stomach with my arm outstretched and contorted, but knew I'd leave beaming happily. My friends received a "I forgot how much I hate getting a tattoo" text, but soon the pain turned into a dull cat scratch and they then listened to my squeals of delight every time I looked down at the green and yellow hues throughout the day post-tattoo. Thousands of needles being stabbed through my skin had never been more worth it, especially when I had a pillow to lay my head on and a digital copy

of *The New Yorker* to scroll through. Two hours felt like nothing.

I should note that it's easy for me to say that because I only have my arms and legs tattooed. Haven't gone through my own rite of passage yet to get somewhere difficult tattooed.

These rites of passage are self-imposed. I don't think people should gatekeep tattoos. I dealt with the pain. I deserve to reap the rewards and still be called badass.

What does your doctor think?

I fill out a patient intake form. One of the questions asks: *Do you have tattoos?* **Yes.**

I wonder why they ask this question: are they looking for signs of self-harm? And if they found it, would they care? Does the presence of tattoos show signs of a destructive future? Or are they just looking to make sure I don't have hepatitis?

I can't fit into such a small answer box that I know what I'm doing. I would like to tell them (and you) that this is exactly reclamation, something healthy in a medical space that taught me to hate my body. That I go to sterile places, know red ink heals well in my skin while it doesn't in other's, that I love looking at my tattoos, at myself in the mirror with them. I cannot tell them all this in one line. When I answer with a simple yes, I am relieved when they compliment my tattoos rather than prodding further.

How much did it cost?

Do they want to know how much a similar style/size piece would cost, or do they want to ask just to follow up with the inevitable *wow, that's a lot of money*. Either way, *my body is worth the investment*.

Tattooing used to be for the wealthy starting in the 1880s, a symbol of status amongst them. It was a performance of importance and authority. Tattoos cannot be as subversive, one of the traits I appreciate most, if the powerful indulge in them. But



PHOTO CREDIT: Thao Nguyen

soon, a reversal. After the electric tattoo machine was invented, tattooing became an accessible art form and body modification for nearly anyone. Purchasing a tattoo can still be a sign of wealth, as some tattoos can be extremely expensive; however, because many wealthy people see them as low-brow, I still believe they retain their subversive qualities.

Innovation has also put cheap tattoo machines in the hands of people who really should not be giving tattoos. I cannot criticize it *all*. Can the tattoo machine you bought give you even greater autonomy and reclamation over your body? After all, you'd have full artistic control. However, the tattooing process requires the breaking of the immunological barrier, and this tattoo may get infected. Putting a virus in your body doesn't quite scream 'reclaiming' to me—maybe more 'handing over'.

For others, tattoos cost everything. Prisoners, victims of concentration camps, sex workers and more may not have the same relationship I do to tattoos. They did not have choice, or option to consent. I struggle with this as someone fortunate enough to have free will over my decisions with tattooing—how could an art form that was used so often by outcasts also become a weapon for the powerful? The very process of tattooing was appropriated from South Pacific indigenous cultures. You can reclaim your power over those tattoos as much as you can, use tattooing as a way to cover them, but their scars still remain. Still, someone who has been able to indulge in marking myself rather than be marked, I hope that there is time for anyone to use them as reclamation in the future.

You know that's permanent, right?

The short answer: yes.

But not really...

Sure, we can look as far back as Otzi the Ice Man, from 3300 B.C., whose frozen body had 61 tattoos, most likely from some type of acupuncture. If our demarcation of permanency is death, Otzi complicates this.

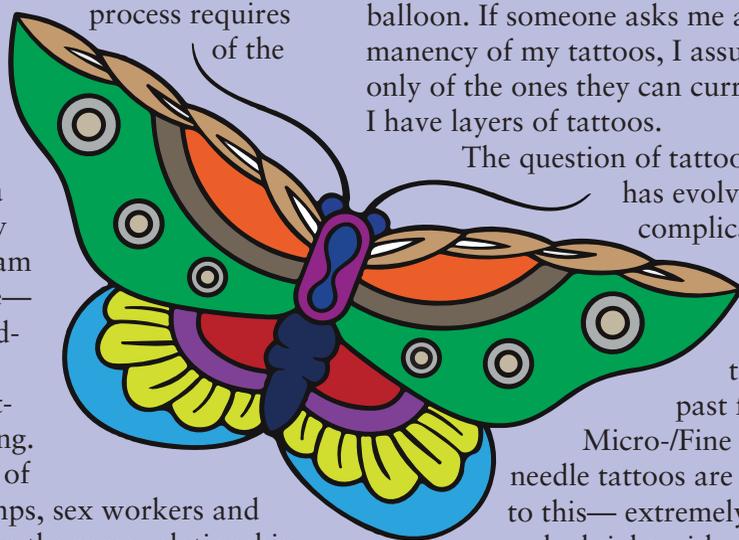
I have a very different approach to tattoos, and perhaps the idea of permanency as a whole. Though expensive and painful, tattoo removal is now an option. So, they're not that permanent, then. Or take my covered tattoos, for example: a Kylo Ren lightsaber and a Mickey Mouse balloon. If someone asks me about the permanency of my tattoos, I assume that it's only of the ones they can currently see, but I have layers of tattoos.

The question of tattoo longevity has evolved. It's more complicated now, with such growth in the industry over the past few decades.

Micro-/Fine Line/Single needle tattoos are a testament to this—extremely small tattoos packed tight with minute detail.

They look cute for a bit, but need consistent retouching, as the ink begins to settle under the skin and blurs the small details that made them so attractive in the first place. This is temporary compared to traditional tattoo styles that feature thick black outlines and deep saturated color, proven to last decades upon decades. If your tattoo needs retouching every couple of years, how "permanent" can you say it really is? There's even a newer trend of "ephemeral tattoos" meant to stay on your body for a few years and fade completely away. Does permanency need to remain a defining feature of tattoos?

Permanency might be a straw man for



people who want to criticize tattooing. Cover tattoos up, they'll question why you're wearing long sleeves saying you get them to show it off. Get tattoos removed, they'll criticize that you had it in the first place and spent money to get rid of it. Only I define what permanency means to my body.

You know you won't be able to get a job, right?

When I tattooed my fingers, my chances of filling corporate positions went down. Dots on fingers isn't very professional— but massing ungodly amounts of wealth is, right? When you get your fingers tattooed, the ink sinks for a week or two during the healing process, leaving you with blurry gray splotches. They are imperfect, non-pristine. So am I. I was rejected from a workplace for saying I wouldn't be totally stoked to work 12+ hour days through holidays and back to back. And they didn't even see my tattoos! Maybe both my tattoos and my lack of desire to work in unfulfilling jobs will serve as defense, weeding out jobs that I don't deserve and who don't deserve me. You hire me, you have to get tattoos and all.

Trust me when I say I'm thankful. The corporate jobs that look down on me aren't my cup of tea anyways.

You're so pretty, why would you do that to yourself?

My body was not considered "pretty" by social standards before I was tattooed, so I did not have much to lose.

There is a bit of rage that festers inside of me over this question. A rage that I fear if went unchecked, or became fully consuming, would turn me into the nasty person they expect

tattooed people to be. But sometimes rage is warranted, and a complete stranger trying to make assumptions and presumptions about your life while degrading you is one of these times.

Fuck people who want pristine skin on a woman. Fuck the hairless, baby-like ideal women men want to marry. Get a tattoo— reclaim your body and beauty.

What will you do when you're old?

By then, I will have nearly every part of my body tattooed. I will have traditional-style tattoos running up my arms, blackwork thigh pieces, Medusa on my sternum. When I am old and I look down at a tattoo, I will remember a time and memory so strong it envelopes me.

Most importantly, I will look badass and pretty.

What does your mom think?

She's gotten tattooed with me.

She waltzed into a shop with me for my 18th birthday, got a black and bold frame around her small rose tattoo near her ankle, and waited for me while I got my three small tattoos. When she posted it to her Facebook, she presented a highlight and happy memory: something I had been waiting for five years to get, and we made it a mommy-daughter date. What I remember most is a comment from an old family friend that read "coolest mom ever."

My mom has told me "You're going to ink what you ink."

But if she wasn't supportive, it wouldn't matter. It is my body to control. I'm sorry if your mom didn't let you do the same.



faded into a memory

POETRY

By **COLIN SMITH**

I woke up this morning faded in thought,
To past feelings sunken below the mind,
That try to release but keep getting caught.

There we were under that warm summer sun,
Alive and passion-filled from head to toe,
At the gated meadow where we would run.

I watched you take photos in your blue shirt,
Of the sound landscape outside the city,
And never again believed in such hurt.

Night fell and roaming the path of High Street,
We patched gray cracks of that ivoried stone,
Away from the shrieking of cold concrete.

Now, despair grimly races through winter's veins,
And tenderness reflects torn desires,
As your peachy smile only brings pain.

Standing outside this rural bleakness of space,
There is a mixture of soft rain and tears;
For I cannot tell which feat to embrace,
When memories of you flood from my face.





PHOTO CREDIT: Morgan Welling



PHOTO CREDIT: Hannah Rutkowski



PHOTO CREDIT: Morgan Welling

PHOTO CREDIT: Sarah Weaver



Goodbye, Elliot

By NIKKI PETRESCU-BOBOC

Mary was pulled over on the side of the road next to the entrance of her old grade school, puking by the open door of her blue Toyota Corolla. She had been nervous the whole drive up, clutching the wheel like a madwoman hopped up on something. She hated driving. She hated where she was driving more, not that that had much to do with the reason she was puking.

“Shit,” she said, wiping her mouth.

A police car pulled over next to her, the cop peeking his head out of his window. “Everything alright here, ma’am?”

“Yeah, just a little queasy.”

“You need medical assistance?”

“No, I’m fine, thank you,” she replied, an annoyed tinge in her voice to let him know to drive away.

“Okay, feel better ma’am.”

He drove off. *So fucking nosy. Yep, that’s home alright.* Mary hadn’t been home in eight years, not even for Christmas or Thanksgiving. No, for the past eight years, Mary had spent her birthdays and various other—over-marketed and somewhat false—holidays either alone in her small, overpriced apartment or with whatever shitty boyfriend she had that month who, like her, didn’t have a family to go back to. Well, technically, Mary had a family to go back to, just not one worth making the drive for, or calling on the phone, or mentioning in daily conversation.

That same unmentionable family was the reason that Mary, now driving again and sweating to the point where she wondered if it was visible even though she was wearing black, was driving back in the same town she swore she’d never come back to eight years ago. Groversfield was like

most other small suburban towns: suffocating, boring, and all-around depressing. At least, that’s how Mary had always seen it. People were always in each other’s business, which meant for a young Mary that people who had no idea what it was like to live her life would act like they did—and worse, try to insert themselves into it. She lived there for eighteen years in a house on Main St. with her father, Elliot Charleston, a well-known and respected member of the Groversfield community. *He was also an asshat who didn’t know or care to know how to be a good father.* Of course, that wasn’t how this little town saw him. No, to them he was Elliot Charleston: avid golf player, successful businessman, hardworking and earnest single father. *Ab that’s right,* people’s respect and goodwill towards him only increased after his wife, Danielle, passed away in childbirth giving him his

one and only disappointment: Mary. She couldn't be certain as to why her father had never loved her the way she wanted him to. Maybe it was the fact that she wasn't what he wanted out of a daughter, that she wasn't enough. Maybe it was the way that when light hit her eyes for a split second she looked just like Danielle, and that was just a little too painful for him to express anything but resentment towards. To say their relationship had been strained would've been a gross understatement, and Mary would have *happily* never seen him again.

These were, more or less, the thoughts running through her mind as she parked her car. Her hands fumbled with the keys as she realized she was about to see a man that for the past eight years she had tried her best to forget ever existed.

She took a deep breath and gave herself a little slap in the face. "You got this. Come on, don't be a bitch."

She gave herself a reassuring nod in her rear view mirror, fixing her hair one last time before opening her car door. She walked up to the front door and slowly placed her hand on the doorknob, pulling it towards her. It didn't budge. She pulled again, nothing.

"The fuck?" she muttered, tugging at it.

"It's a push."

She jumped in surprise. Some of the Groversfield

residents stood behind her and had evidently been there long enough to see Mary's great battle. The youngest, likely the daughter of the older couple who she stood with, rolled her eyes as she adjusted her pearl necklace with an impatient tapping that made Mary want to say something snarky.

"Wait, you're Elliot's daughter aren't you?" Said the mother, a woman in her late fifties. She had probably seen Mary play the clarinet at one of her high school band concerts, a highlight event for the Groversfield community. "Megan, no, Margaret—"

"—Mary, actually."

"So Mary, are you gonna open the door or not?" Asked the daughter, folding her arms.

Her mother gave her a scolding look that she ignored, shrugging and rolling her eyes. Mary gave an annoyed snicker and a forced smile as she finally twisted the doorknob, pushed the door and entered the church. Inside, people embraced and comforted one another as old women cried and old men pretended they didn't want or need to as they all collectively mourned and respected and loved Elliot Charleston. Elliot Charleston the "Loving husband and father," or so his tombstone would say. Mary stared down the aisle at the open casket where her father's body was, made up in his nicest black suit and

necktie with makeup on his corpse that he would've never touched in life. The sight stopped her; she drove into town knowing it was his funeral, but the sight of the man whose shadow haunted every insecurity and shred of self doubt she'd ever had seemed so impossible to her in that moment. You never think a person like that is going to die.

She heard whispers from the pews; she could feel eyes on her.

"Is that—?"

"Oh my."

"I can't believe she came."

She felt a little silly being there. She was sure Elliot had turned her into some sob story where she and he played clear roles: her the heartless villain of an ungrateful daughter, him the poor and helpless victim. She saw a few familiar faces: one of her grade school teachers, her old neighbor, Mrs. Hendrix, someone who she was pretty certain was an old classmate of hers with a—*wait, is that a baby? Ha*. Not what she needed right now. *Oh, here comes the puke, nope, swallow that down*.

She took her seat silently and alone, looking down at her shoes. Why had she even come? It's not like she'd even talked to Elliot since she left, and that conversation—like most others—was a fight. *The hell was she doing here?* Her phone buzzed. People looked over





PHOTO CREDIT: Thao Nguyen



disapprovingly; as though she was the guy who got a phone call during the movie. She smiled awkwardly, picking it up and looking down. *Ah, Tom, the most recent shitty boyfriend.*

Left my key in your kitchen, have a good life.

How romantic. Not that Tom was any more or less romantic than any of Mary's other exes. She had this thing for guys who treated her badly. She always cared about them more than they ever cared about her, and they always tossed her aside like last week's garbage. She'd spend about two weeks wallowing, then find the next one.

"Asshole," she muttered, some disapproving glances shifting her way.

Well, that's what she'd always done before. This situation was a little different. She had a new little complication that she hadn't quite decided to deal with yet. She was sure it would be a girl—another disappointment like her. If Tom knew, it hadn't changed his mind. The more she thought about it the more she started to feel sick again. She clutched the pew, taking deep breaths; she could not puke in the middle of her father's funeral. She looked forward. *That's right, dear old dad.* How was she supposed to be a parent when her only

example was him?

When Mary was three she peed her pants on the car ride home. While many words were used in that instance, the one that stuck with her was pathetic, one that her father would use frequently in the future. That was how he saw her: *pathetic, useless, ungrateful, selfish, the reason your mother is dead.* Mary often wondered what Danielle was like. If she had lived would Elliot be different? Would he have been a better father? Would he have been a nice man? Maybe they would've gone to daddy-daughter dances, and when Mary got second place in her school spelling bee Elliot would've been proud instead of telling her that she was stupid and should've studied harder (after all, who didn't know how to spell perspicacious)?

That morning, she had left her key under the mat just in case Tom forgot his. When she'd told him that she was pregnant, there was some small part of her that had hoped he might actually be excited. But instead—

"What the fuck Mary?"

"What's wrong?"

"What do you mean 'what's wrong'? Are you fucking serious right now?"

"Look, I know it's unexpected, but I...I think I want to keep it."

"No, God!"

“We could get a bigger place, and maybe—”

“Maybe what? You think I want this? You think I want to be, your what, your husband?”

“Well, I just—”

“No this is you, all you, Mary. Not me, I don’t want any part of this.”

“You’re such a jackass, Tom.” A tear had rolled down her cheek and she wouldn’t look at him as it hit her creaky worn wooden floorboards. She heard the door as he slammed it behind him, making a few remarks about how “fucking delusional” she was—the sound made her flinch a little. Tom wasn’t a good guy, he wouldn’t have been a good dad, and he didn’t treat her well, but she hoped nevertheless that none of those things were true. She hoped beyond hope that when she told him, he would have smiled in a way he never had before, given her a hug and said he was so happy, and above all else, that he would have said he loved her.

K.

Her text sent, the little blue bubble shooting off with its chime, her ringer still on. “Ahem,” said an old man, giving her some side eye as he straightened in his seat. *Oh shut it dick-*

head, it’s my dad’s funeral, I’ll do whatever I damn well please.

“Thank you all for coming. We are here not to mourn the death, but to celebrate the life of a dear Groversfield community member and, more importantly, our dear friend: Elliot Charleston.”

Mary looked up. People sniffled, wiped handkerchiefs, and the priest continued to talk, summarizing Elliot’s life, his love of Danielle, and his love of golf, which raised a slight chuckle from his golf-buddies in the pews. Mary tuned most of it out as she tried her hardest not to hurl. In truth she knew she’d only come to his funeral to escape another horrible man that she’d let into her life.

“Then, of course, we all know about his relationship with his daughter Mary.” She felt the eyes in the room all shift over to her, their blinks aligning with her rapidly increasing heartbeat. *Shit, why was she getting a personal mention? Great. Even after death, Elliot was still tormenting her.*

“If you would please, Mrs. Hendrix,” said the priest, gesturing.

Mrs. Hendrix gave a nod from the back, stood in her clogs next to an old

school projector that turned on with a humming sound, and a faint image, slightly discolored, illuminated the wall. Mary stared in surprise at the picture before her. A young toddler Mary sat on her father’s shoulders at the local park, wearing a bright pink shirt and two tight pigtails that were slightly lopsided because Elliot had done them himself. Elliot wore something Mary had blocked out seeing: a smile, if only an awkward one, matching the grin on Mary’s face. *Did that really happen?*

“Elliot was not a man of many words, but he did talk to me at length for many years about Mary. He struggled so much as a father after losing Danielle, and many times at confession, he spoke to me about his concerns on his ability to parent.”

He should’ve been concerned. He was horrible at it.

“He didn’t know what he was doing, and sometimes, like all of us do, he failed. He acknowledged that.”

Did he now? Bullshit.

On Mary’s eighteen birthday, she had gotten home before Elliot. They were supposed to go to dinner at the Groversfield coun-

try club to celebrate, and Mary was worried about what she should wear. As she tore through her closet, nervous that everything she had wasn't good enough, an idea crept into her mind. Before she knew it, she was sliding open Elliot's closet door. He didn't like her going through his things, especially if they were actually Danielle's things. But what would be a better occasion to have a piece of her mother with her? Her eyes fell on one particularly beautiful blue dress, and a set of dainty dangle pearl earrings. When she looked in the mirror after she finished, she never felt closer to Danielle. She heard the door click downstairs.

"Mary, are you almost ready to go? Work ran late so I—"

She stepped down the stairs. "I'm ready, dad."

"W-what are you wearing?"

"It's nice, isn't it? I thought that—"

"Take it off."

"What? But I—"

"I said take it off, Mary. You look ridiculous. You shouldn't be wearing that. Take it off now." He stormed past her into the kitchen, not even offering a second glance. At that moment, something in Mary

just snapped.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Excuse me?" His steps stopped, his head turned back slowly.

"I...I try so hard to do everything, to be everything that you want, and you always—you always do something like this. Why do you hate me so much? The hell did I ever do to you?"

He took a deep breath and turned to face her.

"Hate you, huh? Is that how you see it?" Mary stared.

"You're so selfish, Mary. You know today isn't just your birthday." He turned, walking off, leaving Mary standing there. "Why don't you just go out with your friends, hm? I'm not feeling up to it." He went to the kitchen, pouring himself a glass of whiskey.

That's when she realized it would never be just her birthday—it would always be the day Danielle died. *He couldn't have loved her, even if he tried, right? She'd always be the pathetic excuse for a daughter that took away the woman he loved.*

"Let us all now say our final goodbyes."

Mary stood in line, her feet dragging like she had weights attached. Her final step to the coffin felt like a

deadlift. She looked down at him. Her eyes fell on his face. He was so pale. With his eyes closed like that, he looked sad. As she looked at him, she couldn't help but remember the picture, the smile on his face. She felt her eyes growing teary and closed them, her shoulders stiffening. She didn't want to cry, not for him. *Right? But she was, wasn't she?* She opened her eyes, sniffing a little as she looked down at his cold corpse, pale and almost a little blue. Maybe the odds were against them, maybe they never could have been the kind of people who went to daddy-daughter dances and were happy at a second-place ribbon in the spelling bee. She reached out, touching his hand for the last time. In that moment she was angrier than she'd ever been at him. She was angry at him for being a shit father, she was angry that he'd never even called, she was angry that she had to drive all the way up to this stupid place, but most of all she was angry that he was dead.

The statement is true that the most powerful hatred generally stems from the greatest love. Mary hated Elliot with every bone of her body, and she loved him with every beat of her



ARTWORK: "Owls in Tree" by Suzanne Rickard



heart. She clutched his cold hand tightly, feeling the dryness of his skin in her palm, and let her tears fall. She sniffled a little.

“Fuck you, Elliot,” she said staring down at him. There were some gasps in the crowd and an awkward silence. Then a laugh burst out. Mary looked back to see one of Elliot’s golf buddies chuckling, his wife ushering him to stop.

“Ah, but he was an asshole sometimes, wasn’t he?”

There were some chuckles, a giggle from the girl with the pearl necklace from earlier. A faint, sad smile crossed Mary’s face. “Yeah. Yeah, he was.”

“Would you like a tissue, dear?” said an old woman, holding out a pack.

“That would be nice.”

She wiped away her tears and stared down at Elliot. God, she hated him, but she loved him too, and that was okay. No one ever said that love had to be monolithic. Elliot Charleston was a horrible man, a worse father, and she missed him to death.

She took a deep breath out and with a small laugh said, “Goodbye, Elliot.”

IT STARTS

POETRY

By **LENA BOUDREAU**

It starts the first time Ginger Rogers taps her way across the stage with Fred Astaire.
The precision, the grace, but most of all, her beauty and her smile draw you in.

You buy your first pair of tap shoes in a department store,
Shiny and black, they beckon you with unspoken promises of perfection.

You only dance for one year before you outgrow the tap shoes, and the promises prove empty.
Before you quite dance lessons and turn to sports, maybe that will work.

Look at those legs, your mom says as Vera-Ellen struts down the staircase,
But all you can see is your own legs, stretch marks dancing across your inner thighs.

It gets worse when Ginger Rogers and Vera-Ellen are replaced by your friends' swinging legs,
Their legs, always in motion, and yours rooted to the ground, trapped by extra-long spandex.

You beg your mother for figure skating lessons,
You want to feel beautiful and graceful, maybe that will work.

But you can't make the quick turns or execute the dizzying spins,
And you are left, stiff and stumbling over your used, and not so shiny figure skates.

It continues when you are told to stand in the back during dance numbers in the school musical,
When you are mocked for your dancing, even though you watched the tutorials religiously.

When you decide on show night to dance and smile as if no one is watching,
Your mother says you were the most beautiful dancer but your director questions your smile.

When your track coach tells you to smile more, but then accuses your smiles of being fake
So, you stop smiling and try to ignore It.

But It comes back, It always does.
It appears as forgotten tap shoes under the bed or creams advertised to erase stretch marks.

It is the expectation that your final accessory be an extra layer to cover up and hold in.
A brave face and stiff upper lip is the only acceptable mask to don.

Not a smile. Never a smile.
One must not radiate joy or even leak happiness, if one cannot radiate perfection.



“

}

POETRY

Sweet

Nothings

By BRE HENRY



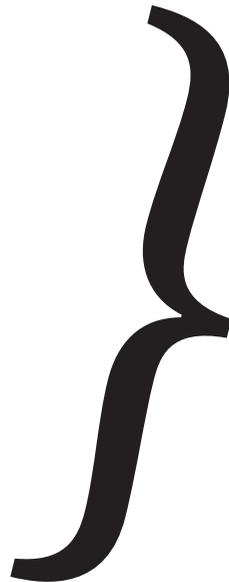


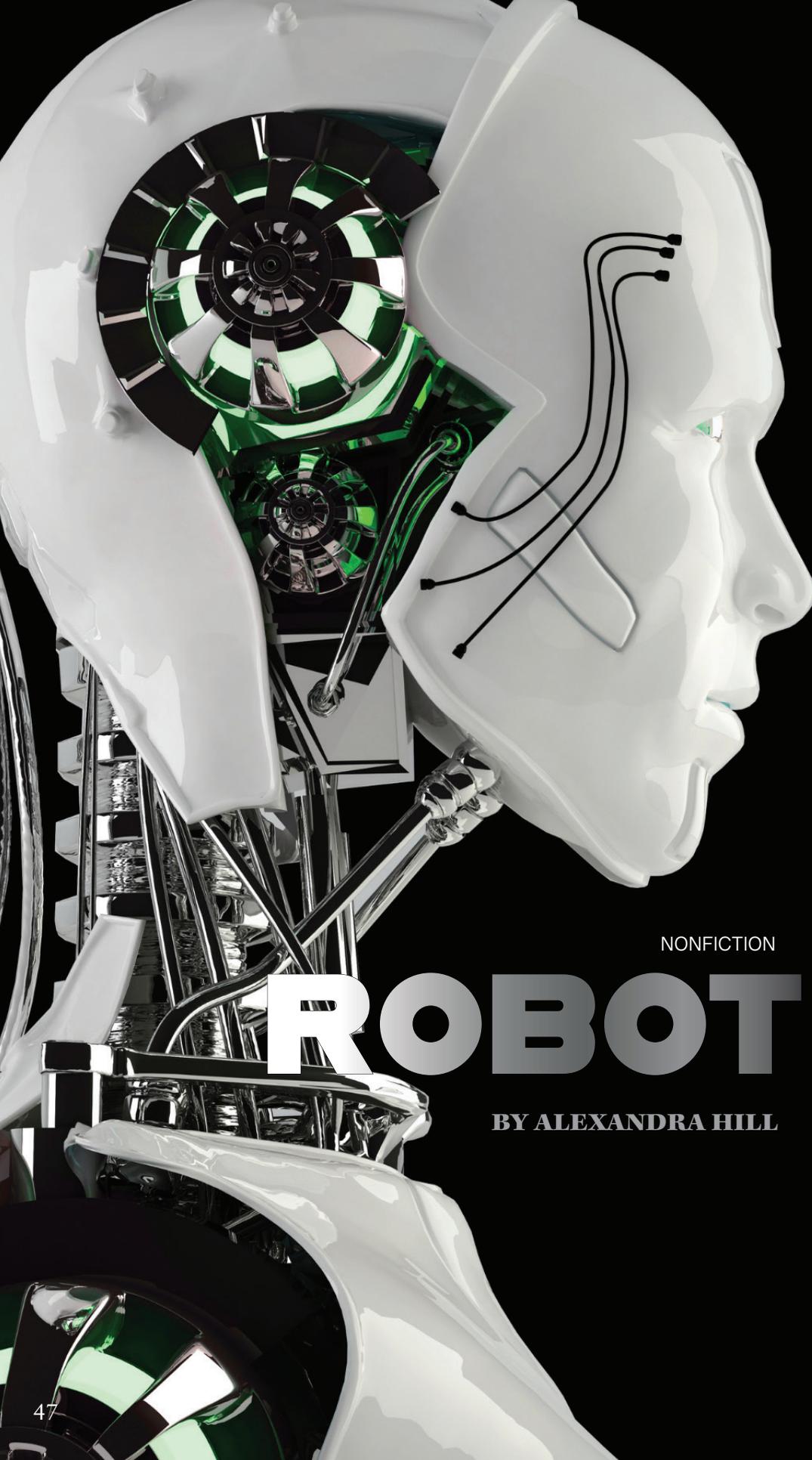
I'm dirt and you're vanity.
I'm a mirror and you're
a streetlight. I'm a slow walk
and you're a quick-foot businessman,
an escapee from a hallmark movie.

When you turn
into a fishing line, I become a
gasping trout, hooked and begging
for my life. I'm a mounted, singing corpse
and you're a proud hunter.

If I am a couch you are the rebellious teen
who plants your feet on me.
Another point of contention between
you, your mother. Another doormat
for you to wipe your muddy feet.
You and I are the leads of this play,
as well as Tree #5. You've learned how
to make a scene. I've learned how to look
the other way. I'm a critical review.
You're the resentful hands that tear me up.

We're a car crash. We're the eyes
that are glued to the violent pileup.
We're the fire that springs up between
the metal bodies molded into one another.
We're the melting of everything.





NONFICTION

ROBOT

BY ALEXANDRA HILL

I am at the foot of my parents' bed, my brother beside me. Hot tears stream down my mother's face. She hugs my brother, variations of "I love you" spilling out. My dad chuckles with an appreciative yet stoic smile.

"I love how Addison's coming out is so touching, and for my coming out y'all were just like 'Okay.'" Laughter fills the space between my words.

"Well that's because Addison came out as loving both genders, and you came out as a robot." Even more laughter fills my father's words. My mother and brother giggle along. I breathe out a laugh, too.

* * *

I guess it was unfair to compare. Our coming outs were antithetical. He was a high school freshman post-first blow job, while I had been a high school junior figuring out my sexuality together with my first boyfriend Max (barely post-first kiss). My brother stood before our parents and nervously declared his sexuality. I was not nervous at all, as I had never planned on coming out. My sexual activities were not for the ears of my parents. Until my mother pushed a condom in my hands after I arrived home from a late date. I pushed it back into her hands quickly, reminding her that we were waiting for marriage. But yet again she held out the condom to me. "Just in case you do anything." The conversation made my stomach reach up into my throat and grab my uvula.

"We won't. I'm asexual." I blurted, desperate to make her stop.

"What does that mean?"

The Asexual Visibility and Education Network [AVEN] defines an asexual person as "a person who does not experience sexual attraction." WebMD adds that asexuality is categorized into three main types: sex-repulsed (repulsed by sex), sex-neutral (not repulsed but not seeking sex out), and sex-positive (will have sex for physical pleasure but still lack sexual attraction). In "Sexuality Today: The Human Perspec-

tive," Gary Kelly further defines asexuality as "a condition characterized by a low interest in sex." Though AVEN and WebMD are most certainly reputable sources for those who try and define asexuality, people are always more inclined to fixate on sex-driven articles such as "Sexuality Today: The Human Perspective," in which Gary Kelly takes a mere paragraph to define asexuality as a *condition*. Pamela Regan and Leah Atkins' "Sex Differences and Similarities in Frequency and Intensity of Sexual Desire," establishes sexual attraction as human normalcy: "desire may be the most universal sexual response experienced by both men and women." Asexuality is viewed as not normal. For someone to lack what is so unitingly human, something must be very wrong.

* * *

My mom told me I had to go to the doctor to get tested for various causes of lack of libido – liters of my blood would be taken to check for irregular hormone levels, thyroid problems, diabetes, high cholesterol and liver disorders according to Mayo Clinic. Despite months of fighting her – I have vasovagal, so getting blood drawn would cause my face to go white as I sweat and nearly vomit before passing out (and having a seizure most recently) – my mother refused to concede.

"Sex is one of the most fun and beautiful parts of a relationship. I want to make sure you're not missing out because of a medical problem."

She will never understand how much that hurt. A liberal mom with a bi son, she did everything right when he came out. And yet she told me that I was missing out; that my love life would be incomplete without sex; that my sexuality needed to be fixed; that I was broken.

And so, though I was confident and content in my asexuality when I first understood what it was, I began to hate that reality. Coming out should only confirm what you knew inside all along. And I do

think I knew inside all along, I just didn't have the words. Throughout my childhood, crushes did not exist for me. The question was asked a million times – best friends just had to know “Who do you like?” - but the answer was never there. I never wanted a boyfriend, no suitable suitors in the vicinity. When it came to high school, suddenly it was no longer “Who do you like?” but “Who do you want to fuck?” I remember when one of my guy friends found out that I had never masturbated, he tried to convince me to do it, late-night talks dedicated to assuring me that I would like it. *Was my lack of sexual interest of sexual interest to you? Was it something to fetishize? Did you like my seeming innocence? Did you want to corrupt me?* I ardently refused.

None of it was of interest. None of it appealed. And then, I had my first boyfriend. The fact that Max wanted to wait until marriage was perhaps a subconscious driving force behind my interest in him. He seemed safe, intimate without the need for the sexual qualifier. And he did not want to wait just for sex sex either, but wait for everything. However, in an interview with Bustle for “This Is What Happens In Your Brain When You're Turned On,” sexologist Dr. Jess O'Reilly says that, upon the onset of horniness, “the center of reasoning and behavior in your brain completely shuts off.” So eventually Max decided to let some things slip through the gaps of waiting till marriage. But while I was supposed to be seeing stars, I was seeing a blurry version of the fabric lining his car roof, dissociating in his backseat.

With Max, everything I had been feeling while growing up began to make sense. I told Max on our drive home after making out at a park. I was apologetic, voice shaky and eyes locked on the grimy car mat, but I was comfortable with the conclusion, having found the word to explain why I was

always feeling left behind. And he was supportive, full of reassurances – of course he would stay with me, of course he still loved me. I have never felt more like everything would be okay than at that moment.

"BUT WHILE I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE SEEING STARS, I WAS SEEING A BLURRY VERSION OF THE FABRIC LINING HIS CAR ROOF, DISSOCIATING IN HIS BACKSEAT.

But after coming out to my mom, everything fell apart. I pushed away the feeling that I was sex-repulsed – I couldn't stomach being *that* broken. I clung to the part of WebMD's definition of sex-neutral that says that they “may still have sex if, for example, they're in a relationship and want to please their partner.” I let Max pride himself on having *fixed* me. I stopped saying the word asexual, as it felt heavy and rough on my tongue. When Max and I broke up and I went off to college, I clarified to new boys that I had a *complicated* relationship with sex – panic attacks, tears, ripping out my hair and banging my head against the wall, making myself puke when I could still taste the remnants of what was down my throat the night before since no amount of vigorous tooth brushings could quell the cruelty of memory. I prefaced potential relationships with “I think I'm asexual” or “I thought I was asexual” (depending on my current confidence level). Boys thought they had the answer to make me finally like sex, as if it had just been the fault of my shitty, selfish exes. And I let them. No, I believed them. I did not know deep down that I was asexual. Or perhaps I did, but all I ever did was try not to be. I

wanted to be fixed. I wanted it to be easy.

It wasn't easy. Being asexual was what convinced me that I could never live a happy life, so life was not something I wanted to live. According to a 2004 survey by the Trevor Project, the world's largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for LGBTQ young people, 13% of asexual youth have attempted suicide. According to the 2015 Asexual Community Census, 43.5% of asexuals experienced sexual violence (including rape, assault, and coercion).

There is a theory that the infamous Jessica Rabbit from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* is asexual. There is backlash and misunderstanding, of course. On Grey-Ace Space, a Tumblr blog for grey-ace people (grey referencing greysexual, which WebMD defines as people who identify as asexual but don't fit into the main types of asexuality: sex-repulsed, sex-neutral, and sex-positive), an anonymous poster criticized the theory, stating, "Jessica Rabbit is literally a sex symbol though, she can't be asexual?" But that is what makes her the perfect asexual representation. The idea that one cannot be asexual and conventionally sexually attractive permeates people's minds. It causes people to disregard my sexuality, considering instead my sex-appeal. But as Jessica's most famous line "I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way" indicates, one's physical appearance does not define their inner psychology.

Max instantly saw the resemblance in our appearances. He liked to comment on the way my waist dove in from my hips with a cartoon-perfection like the hourglass figure of Jessica Rabbit. The exuberance of our matching red hair. Our long legs. Boobs, of course; men love to comment on women's boobs.

Asexuality is not well-researched enough for there to be any data on the sex-

ualizing of asexuality, but the experiences of asexuals is evidence enough. In the blog post "Asexuality as a Fetish," Elizabeth discusses the difficulty of being a sexually attractive asexual, and even worse being sexualized due to her asexuality, quoting a conversation she had with a man who told her that, "ironically, your passivity towards sexuality, is actually what makes you sexy." With the oversexualization of women in general, I find myself constantly sexualized. I knew I couldn't escape it, so I thought perhaps I could take control of it. I desired to be like Jessica Rabbit, sexy without sex, empowered without being someone I'm not. Maybe I was desperate to have some sort of control of how I am sexually viewed. When my mom found out I was raped, she began warning me every time I left the house that I give men the wrong idea by the way I dress. Just as I went from confidently asexual to running from my identity, I went from empoweringly sexy to internally slut-shaming myself.

My sophomore year of college, in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic, my mental health was at its worst. I finally decided to see a therapist, and she told me I wouldn't be having such severe adverse reactions and panic attacks in response to sex unless I was sexually abused as a child or in a past life. I decided therapy wasn't for me.

My friends told me I hadn't met the right person, that I needed a guy who was nice to me, who actually cared. One friend was sure I was lesbian (her crush on me irrelevant, of course). I was assured that I needed to masturbate first, that I could (and should) find a way to orgasm, that they don't think I'm asexual.

After arriving home from across the country after my sophomore year had concluded, my brother Addison and I sat

on my bed, interrupting each other with excited anecdotes of the ups and downs that had occurred that year. Everyone says siblings are the ones who will always be on your side. I did not know that meant he would be more on my side than I am. He said the word so confidently. You are asexual. It strikes. It makes me uncomfortable. Hearing someone confirm your identity should make you feel seen, finally comfortable in your own skin. It makes me want to crawl out of my skin and rip apart my organs.

* * *

I had never considered I could be forced out of the closet, as I was never really hiding in the closet *per se*. That said, I did not really tell anyone I was asexual. It was not a forbidden secret, but I did not want it known either. But when I met my first ever other asexual, Joan, then my second, June, in my junior year at a convention in Albany, I had to tell them. I had never been in a room with another asexual before.

But later that night, we were playing *Never Have I Ever* on the floor of the hotel room, drinking and celebrating with the district board, and June proudly announced there were three asexuals in the room, numerated us one, two, *three*, her finger pointing into my bubble. June embraced her asexuality and did not give a second thought to sharing; she had never been in a relationship and never wanted to be, so she had never seen a bad side of asexuality. To her, it was a reason she could live happily without sex. Meanwhile, her announcement caused my throat to close.

“Wait, who’s asexual?” the girl across the circle from me questions.

Again the finger points, now with names attached. “Me, Joan, and *Alexandra*.”

15 pairs of eyes peer into my deepest

inner struggle. The part of myself that, in my darkest places, I believe will forever keep me from happiness. The part of myself that has made me want to die. My peers all tilted their heads in confusion, looking solely at me.

“How does that work?” another girl questioned, gesturing between me and my boyfriend, whose legs I was sitting between. I don’t remember if I said anything, the usual delightful buzz of alcohol now making me feel hot and sick and dizzy. Maybe I nodded. I could feel my brain shutting down, maybe even tears considering forming in my eyes. A tiny peak of the inner turmoil must have appeared on my face, as I saw the regret of the girl who had asked how we worked nod with slight guilt, pretending as if I had appeased her curious confusion. I felt hotter, sicker, dizzier. Now they all knew not only my sexuality, but the ugly parts of my relationship, too.

Dr. Anthony Bogaert claims in his book *Understanding Asexuality* that 1% of the population is asexual. How am I supposed to meet asexuals? Even if I do, how could I possibly hope that the one I met would be someone I like? Even then, could it possibly be a person I could love? The 2015 Asexual Community Census also found that 25% of asexuals are aromantic, which WebMD defines as having “little or no romantic attraction to others.” As the sole semi-decent asexual representation in popular media Todd Chavez from *Bojack Horseman* says, “Even within the one percent of the world that’s asexual, there’s an even smaller percentage that is still looking for romantic companionship.”

That leaves two options: alone forever or compromise with an allosexual partner. I want a relationship, so I have my answer: *Compromise*. “Sex is fine,” I always assure. When anyone initially hears that I have sex solely because my partner wants to, their moral alarm bells ring – and they are sure



ARTWORK: "Red" by Sierra Potaczek

Sierra Potaczek
2018-21

to alert me as such. But what relationship doesn't have compromise? Do you not do things you are not particularly fond of, but do so for the benefit of your lover? Why am I not allowed? What takes sex off the table for being used in the bargains of compromise?

So what does that mean for my identity? Am I sex-neutral? Sex-repulsed but burying the feeling deep down because I'm scared I can't be happy without sex? I honestly don't know. Maybe I will figure it out as I get older. But for now, compromise makes me see potential happiness in my life. Maybe it is not the best solution. Maybe my current boyfriend and I will not be together forever. But it allows me to believe that asexuality does not mean I accept unhappiness. I don't need to be fixed. I am not broken. I can be asexual and still find happiness.

In a few months I'll be off in France, studying abroad for the semester. I have to introduce myself all over again. I have to learn how to say it again. This time I'll learn to say it right. No more "I'm complicated" and "I don't know," even if it is complicated sometimes, and sometimes I question myself. Je suis asexué.

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FICTION

By SAMIA KRAZOUN



Always use a family recipe when baking; make sure to have all the ingredients before you start; line the baking sheets with parchment paper; thank your Great Aunt Madeleine; sift the almond flour and the powdered sugar in a large bowl; crack three eggs and separate the whites and yolks; pour the egg whites into a second bowl with some sugar; add no more than a pinch of salt; beat the egg whites until your wrist aches and then until stiff peaks form; *ignore the finger cramps*; combine the contents of both bowls and fold to incorporate; thank Ladurée of Paris; pipe the batter in rounds on the baking sheets; the rounds must be at least half a finger's length apart so they don't touch; let the baking pans sit at room temperature for as long as it takes you to set up the ingredients for the filling; thank sisters Marguerite and Marie-Elisabeth; position the baking trays in the oven; don't set the oven too hot; *you forgot to preheat it*; bake the cookies until they are puffed up and golden on top; allow the cookies to cool before carefully peeling them from the parchment; put raspberries and a cup of sugar in a large saucepan with a generous splash of rose water; turn the heat high; stir until the sugar dissolves and stir constantly but not too much; thank King Louis XIV; continue until the berries are soft and the juices thicken; turn off the heat and strain the jam into a small bowl; strain out the seeds but press the pulp through the strainer; allow the jam to cool; line a baking sheet with parchment paper; *again?*; pair the cookies and place them with the flat side up; spread jam over the flat side of one half; gently press two halves, one with jam, together; thank Queen Catherine de' Medici's pastry chefs; arrange the macarons on the sheet to chill overnight; let the macarons stand at room temperature for a short while before serving; serve your Great Aunt Madeleine first.

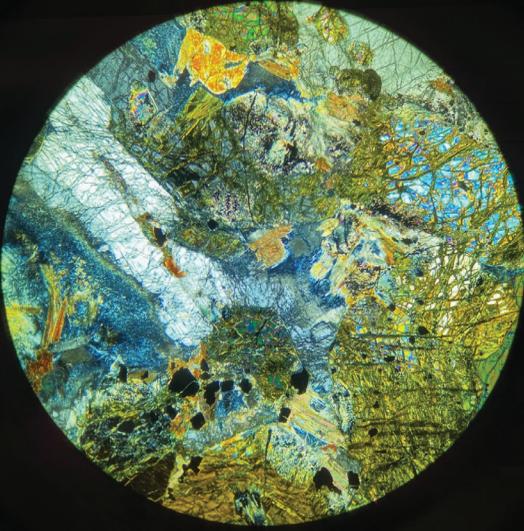


FIGURE 1.

FIGURE 2.

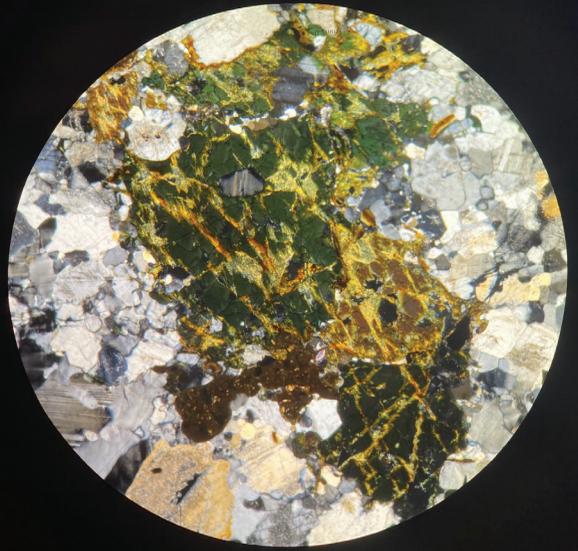


FIGURE 3.

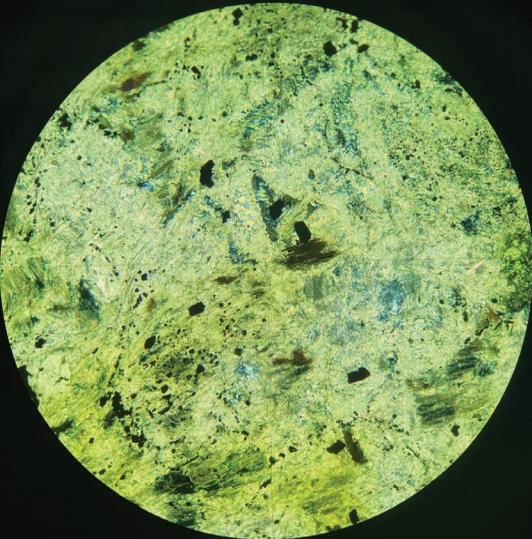


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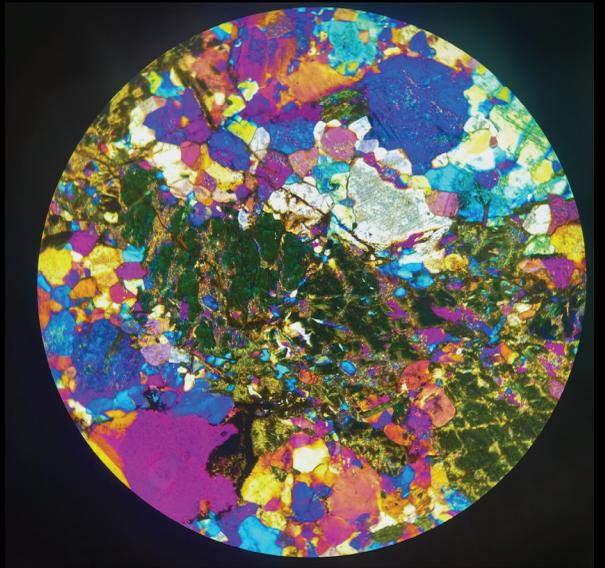


FIGURE 5.

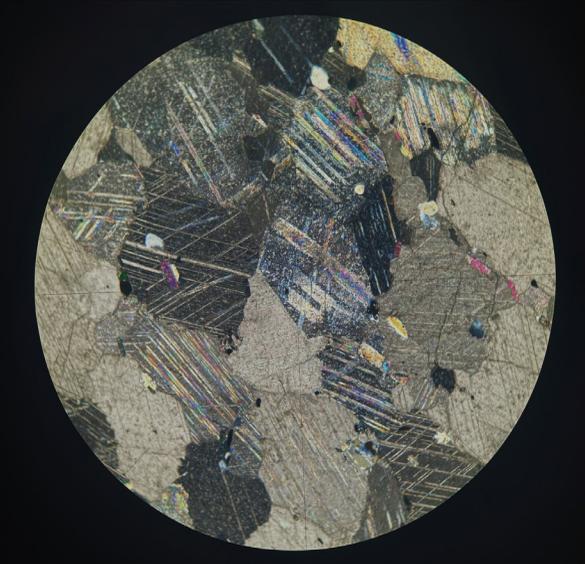
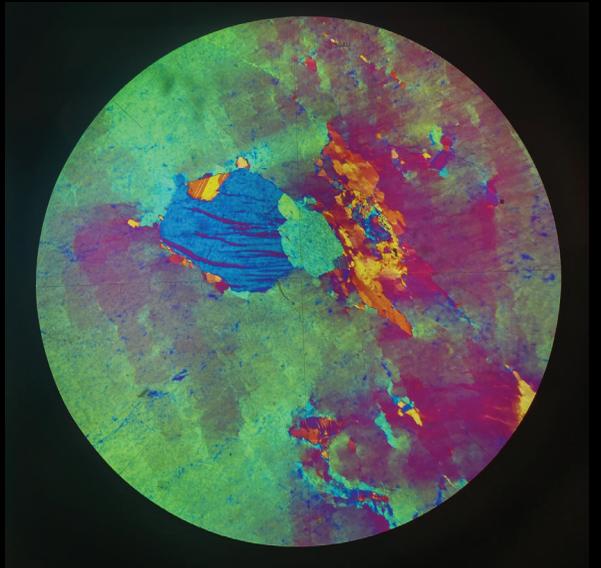


FIGURE 6.



love in the kind of an orange

POETRY

By **BRE HENRY**

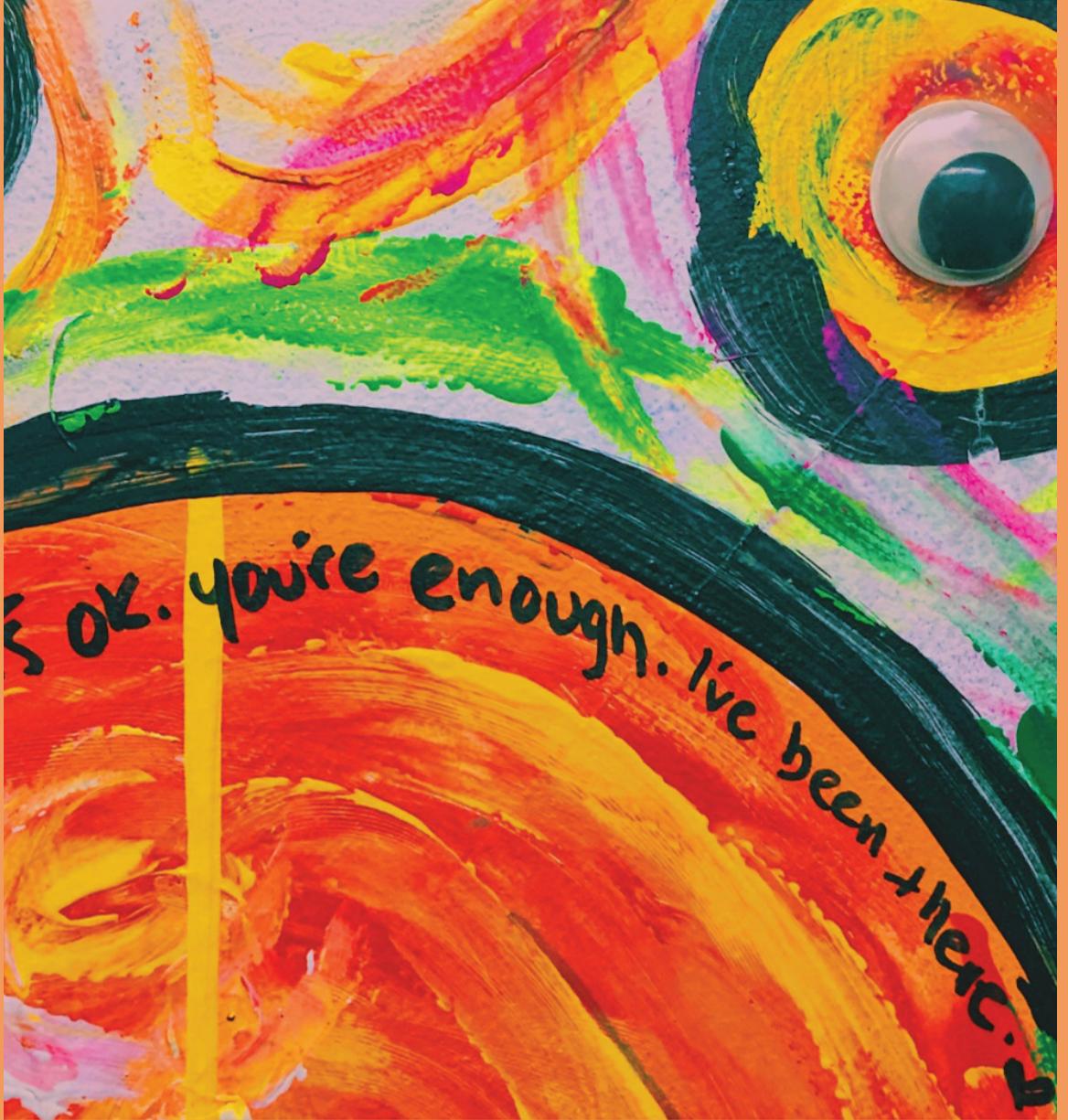
I peel an orange in the morning.
The pulp gathers under my nails,
stringy stains. My fingertips carry the smell
of citrus, sticky with juice.

When noon comes I peel an orange.
I pass slices to my friends.
With a quick eye, like a pawnshop owner
inspecting a precious gem,
examining every carat,
I look for the best pieces
and slip them into a waiting hand.

When it gets late, I like to sit at my desk
and stack oranges like a tower.
They slip and fall, scattering like a game
of marbles. My mom tells me,
voice crackling through the phone's speaker,
to stop playing with my food.
She says it gently. She says it through a laugh.
I mumble to her around an orange smile
just to hear it again.

When I want to say
I love you
I dig into the skin of an orange
I coat my hands with yellow stains
I set a slice down into the space
I have made for you
right across from me.

PHOTO CREDIT: Morgan Welling



FICTION

ROUTINE

By **IZZY HARRIS**

Remind him that you love him. At least once a day. If you forget, there's a chance he gets past it. Take the dog out. Walk him when it's light out. The city can be dangerous at night. Smile when you see your doorman-- you want him to like the couple living in 4E. Always leave a good impression. Highlight your dimples. Once you get back to your apartment, tell him that the dog went to the bathroom. That way, if he has an accident, you won't be to blame. He's your responsibility. Tell him that you like his glasses, that they suit his face. But don't tell him they make him look more intelligent. Tell his family that he has been drinking less. Even if it pains you to lie. Don't ask him how many drinks he's had when you're around friends. Pay attention to how many times he secretly flags down the waiter. Tell him it looks like he's lost a couple of pounds. But don't get upset when he says you've gained some.

When your parents are around, talk him up. After,

tell him how much they adore him. Even though you know they don't approve. Don't talk about how stressful work is when you get home. Don't tell him to *finally* get a job. He hates it when you do that. It emasculates him. Embrace the sound of the city on nights that he is out with friends. Take advantage of being alone. Take as long as you want in the shower.



No one can rush you out. Make your mom's famous pasta bolognese. No one will control your portion size. Drink a glass of wine on the rooftop. No one will deflect their alcoholism onto

you. Sleep in late. No one will call you lazy. When you wake in the morning with the left side of your bed empty, don't fret. Don't wonder whose bed he ended up in last night. Tell yourself he crashed on his friend's couch. When he finally gets home, smelling of a concoction of things, mostly booze and cigarettes, tell him he looks great.

"Don't wonder whose bed he ended up in last night."

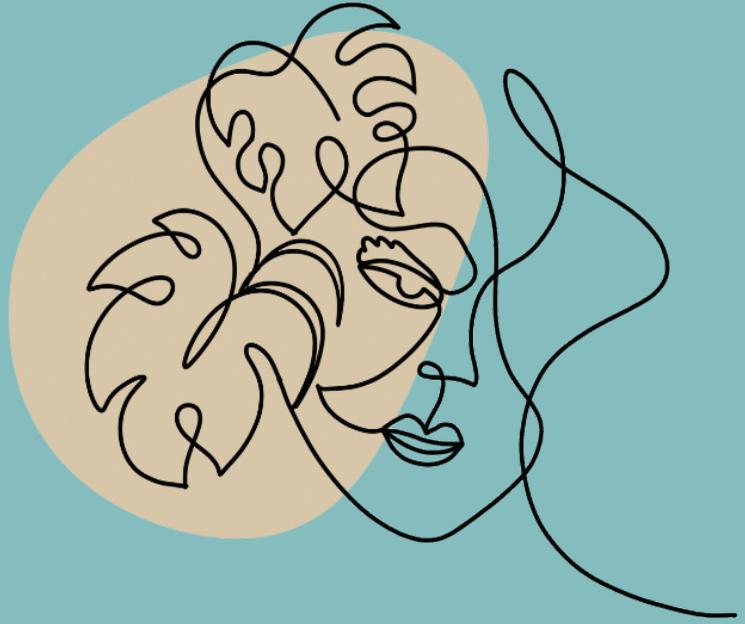
When he asks if he can treat you to brunch, say no. You know he means he wants a Bloody Mary. Or two or three. Remind yourself that his family's trust fund is paying back your student loans. Take advantage of having an apartment on the Upper East Side. Or don't. But know that living lavishly only lasts so long. Don't talk about the future out loud. Only think about it. If he opens up this conversation, digress.

Invite his family over. Wear the cashmere sweater they bought you for Christmas. This year it was meant to be spent with your family, not his. Show them how you've newly decorated the place. If they roll their eyes, just smile. Don't draw attention to his drinking. Unless they do first. Fix your pos-

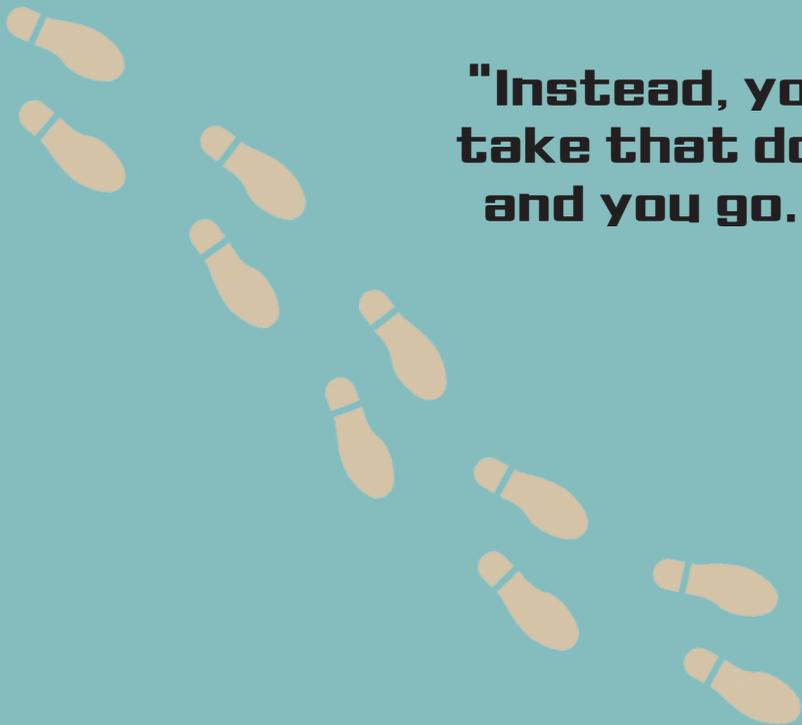
ture. Show them how lucky their son is. Know that you look magnificent.

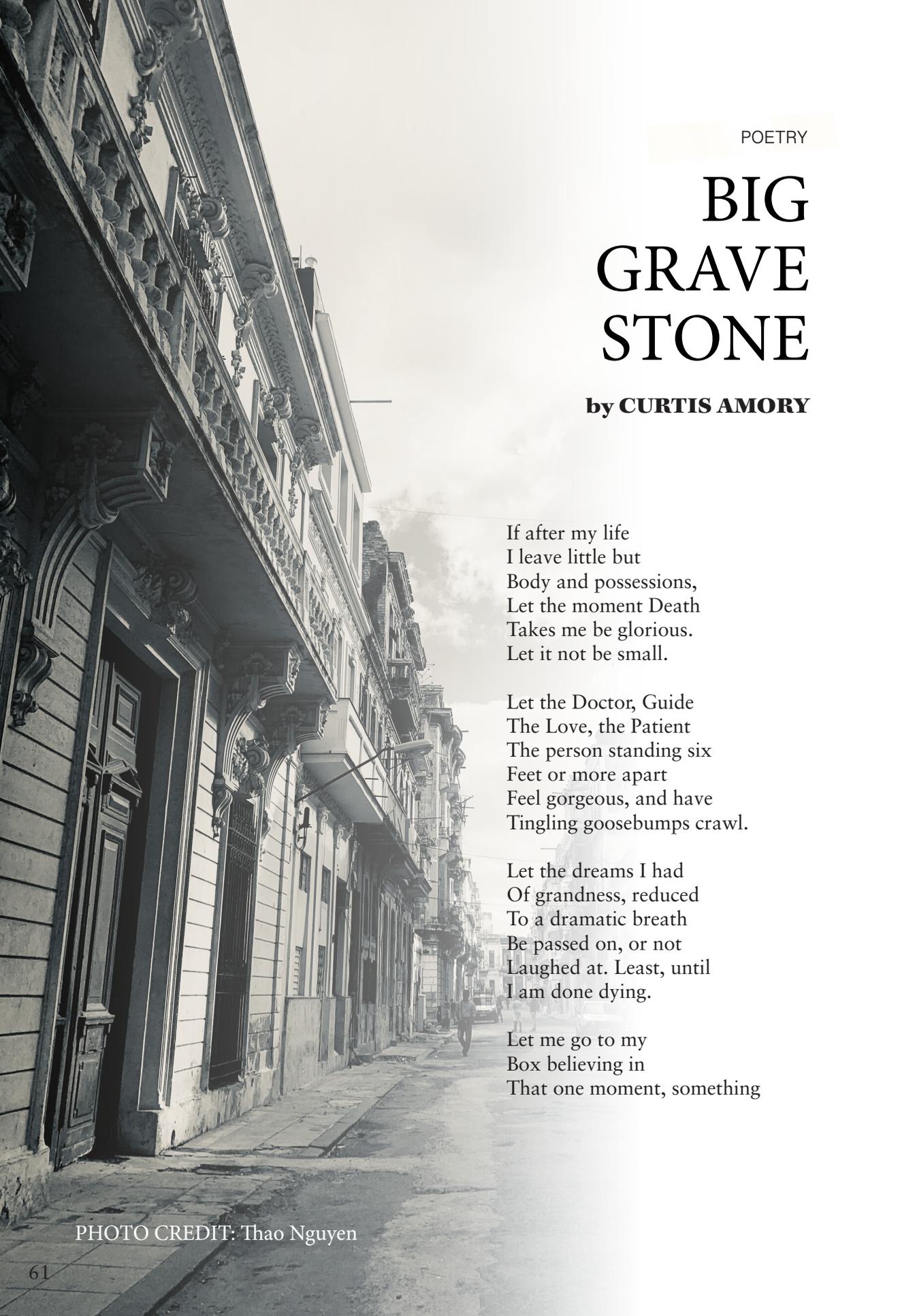
You watch as he stumbles over his feet and slurs his words. You are amused, though reminded that you share a life with this drunken fool. When the conversation of having children is brought up, end it by talking about what it was like to grow up with a single mom.

Once the night is over, tell him to go to bed. Don't get upset when he doesn't insist on helping clean up. Look around the apartment. Remind yourself of the memories shared. Realize that every item surrounding you leaves a bad taste in your mouth. But don't cry. *You cannot cry.* Instead, you take that dog and you go.



"Instead, you take that dog and you go."





POETRY

BIG GRAVE STONE

by CURTIS AMORY

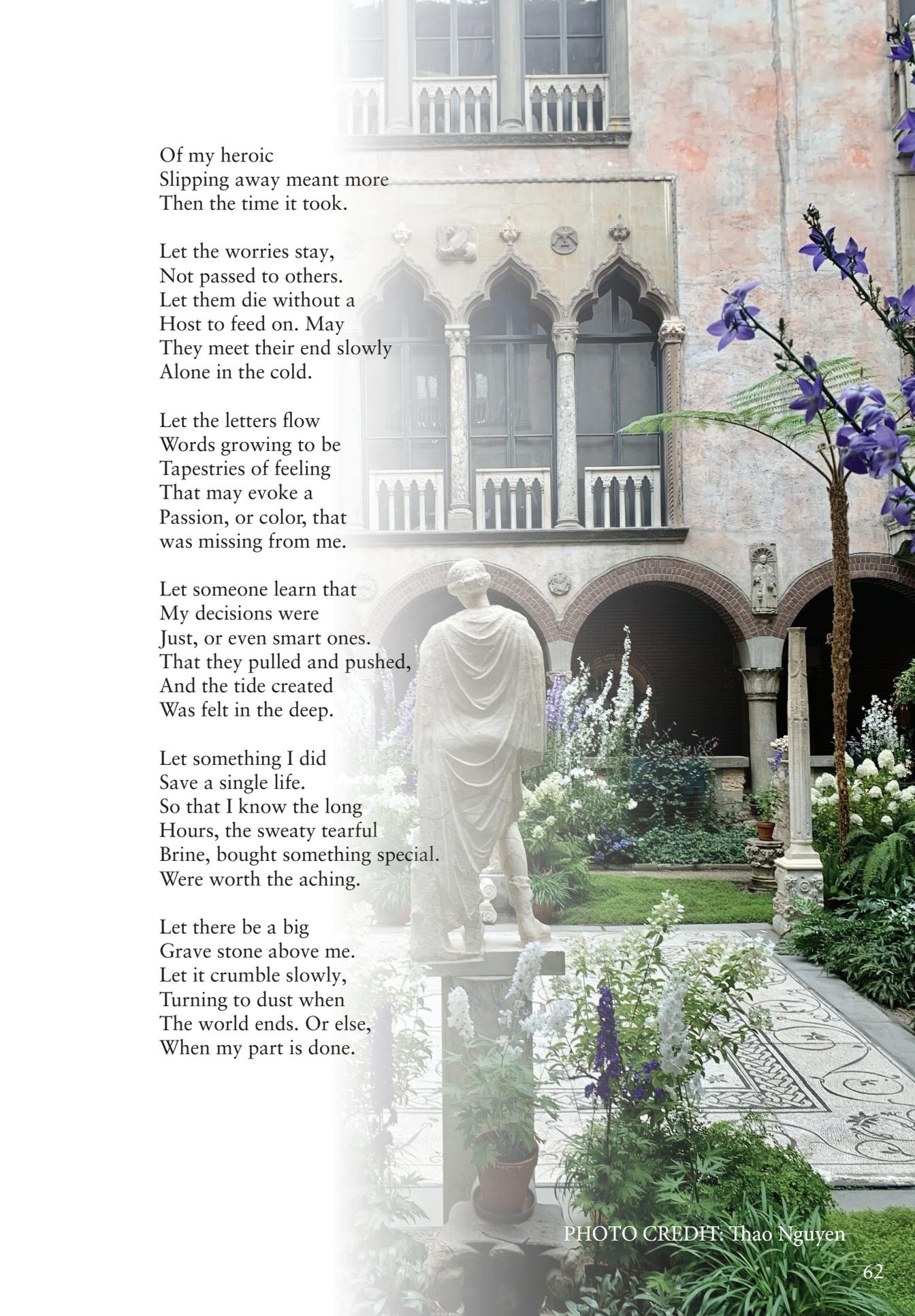
If after my life
I leave little but
Body and possessions,
Let the moment Death
Takes me be glorious.
Let it not be small.

Let the Doctor, Guide
The Love, the Patient
The person standing six
Feet or more apart
Feel gorgeous, and have
Tingling goosebumps crawl.

Let the dreams I had
Of grandness, reduced
To a dramatic breath
Be passed on, or not
Laughed at. Least, until
I am done dying.

Let me go to my
Box believing in
That one moment, something

PHOTO CREDIT: Thao Nguyen

A photograph of a courtyard with a statue, arches, and flowers. The scene is a courtyard with a central stone statue of a figure in a long, draped robe, standing on a pedestal. The background features a building with Gothic-style arches and windows. The courtyard is filled with various plants, including tall purple flowers and white flowers. The ground is paved with a decorative mosaic pattern. The overall atmosphere is serene and historical.

Of my heroic
Slipping away meant more
Then the time it took.

Let the worries stay,
Not passed to others.
Let them die without a
Host to feed on. May
They meet their end slowly
Alone in the cold.

Let the letters flow
Words growing to be
Tapestries of feeling
That may evoke a
Passion, or color, that
was missing from me.

Let someone learn that
My decisions were
Just, or even smart ones.
That they pulled and pushed,
And the tide created
Was felt in the deep.

Let something I did
Save a single life.
So that I know the long
Hours, the sweaty tearful
Brine, bought something special.
Were worth the aching.

Let there be a big
Grave stone above me.
Let it crumble slowly,
Turning to dust when
The world ends. Or else,
When my part is done.

PHOTO CREDIT: Thao Nguyen

TOLERANCE BREAK

BY JD LARABIE

POETRY

Empty bowl, dry glass
Put the lighter on the shelf
The one stolen
From the 7/11
Won't need it for a few
Weeks
 Months
 Years

How far can you go without it?

How long can you survive
The pressure of a father
Slumped in the corner with an empty
Can half teetering off the seat
Of his ragged
Too young to be old hands
Snot sliding down his face
Smelling like his open grave

Butterfly wings flap
A hurricane of smoke falls
From waterfall lips
Onto the floor of a glass filled
Hazy room

Stiff drinks
 Flowering weeds
Neatly wrapped presents

Hand picked poison
See you next week



ARTWORK: Karoline Bass



Though

POETRY

By **NIKKI PETRESCU-BOBOC**

Sometimes I wonder what we would be like if I said you could never touch me?
Would you even care to be near me?
Would you still look at me the way you do?

Women are valued by our bodies,
But when we set our own price it becomes a rip off.
You say you love me but what does that mean?
You love to hold my hand and put your arms around me,
But you don't really love me,
Who I am, what I want, what I think.

You like to call me yours.
"Mine," you say. I hate that word.
I'm not sure if I ever want to be anybody's.

ts on Love

You act like my heart exists outside my body,
That way it can be stolen or lost without your error.
People do that a lot,
We acknowledge that the heart is not an object but we treat it like car keys.
I hope you'll forget me in the cupholder and lock yourself out.

Patience, that's what people tell me.
Love, real love doesn't happen overnight,
You have to wait.
But how long?
And who am I waiting for?
Somehow I don't think it's you.

Going, Going

ELIZABETH O'KEEFE
FICTION

Out behind his building was a patch of asphalt that had called itself a basketball court since long before Matty was born. Little green patches of grass shot up between cracked veins in the pavement, and the surface of the court was so warped and uneven that it was nearly impossible to keep a game going for very long; inevitably the ball would bounce off a raised bit of asphalt at the wrong angle, causing whoever was dribbling to stumble awkwardly, and the play would have to start all over again. All around this gnarled court was the city, with its buildings that took away the horizon and its sounds that never fully left Matty's ears, not even while he slept. New York towered over his life, every skyscraper keeping watch with their great glass eyes. He was a Lego boy, and this was his Lego world.

He grinned to himself, dribbled idly on the asphalt. He liked that idea: Matty the Lego boy. He liked to think there was no such thing as college in this Lego world, that Lego people never grew up and Lego families stayed perpetually together, a plastic conglomerate that fit as one perfect unit, and once fit, would never fall apart.

He tossed the ball at the hoop and missed spectacularly. The hunchbacked structure could hardly even be called a

hoop anymore; someone had stolen the net long ago, and its plastic base tottered lamely every time the ball hit the backboard, threatening to topple over if anyone put too much force behind their shot.

It was late August, and the day had been phenomenally muggy, but at last the sun was starting to dip behind the lowest buildings. One of the hottest seasons on record was nearing an end as the days rolled into September, but Patrick had been funny about the heat all summer. He claimed he needed to soak up the "real sun" one last time before moving upstate for college, where he was concerned the sun would not shine with quite the ferocity that it did here in the city. Matty wasn't sure he believed this, though it had been entertaining to watch Patrick stride down the sidewalk at peak heat in July, arms spread wide, grinning face tilted skyward in worship of his oppressive sun. Some people gave him quizzical looks as they passed, laughing a little at the performance, and Matty would feel a bit embarrassed for his brother, for the unabashed pleasure he always took in the world.

Behind him, the back door of the apartment whined open, and Patrick stepped out from



the cool gloom of the stairwell.

“Your sun just set,” Matty said, motioning around at the court, which was newly plunged into shadow.

The basketball had rolled to a stop in front of the adjacent building’s wall, and Patrick leaned over to pick it up. “My last real sun of the summer,” he said. “Gone, just like that.”

“Our last game of the summer.”

Matty pointed out. He tried his best to sound nonchalant, but it was difficult: somewhere between the sun’s setting and Patrick’s arrival, his stomach had tied itself into knots.

“Very true,” Patrick said brightly, lobbing the ball at Matty. He caught it hard against his ribs. “I assume you’ll be shooting out here until it snows?”

“I’ll shoot in the snow. I’ll be sinking every shot by the time you come home,” he said. Though both the idea of snow and Patrick’s coming home seemed unfathomable just then. The heat of the day still reverberated up from the pavement. Patrick was still leaving tomorrow.

“One on one?” Patrick said, and Matty nodded. He dribbled, and Patrick crouched low.

They fell into the rhythm of play as twilight rose and the windows in the surrounding apartments began to glow. The light above the back door eyed the court beneath its industrial glare. They dribbled and dodged, passed and jumped and laid up, bemoaning the raised veins in the pavement as if by groaning they might pave the surface flat.

After a long stretch where the only sounds were their scuffling shoes and the occasional exclamation from an open window high above, Patrick spoke. “I talked to Dad on my walk home,” he said, raising his hands in preparation for Matty’s shot.

Matty was so startled by this news, in particular by its casual deliverance, that he bounced the ball off his left toe, sending it careening in the other direction. He didn’t bother to chase it. Patrick stopped, panting from the exertion of chasing Matty’s fast legs around the court, and faced his brother with an oddly expectant look on his face, as if they were rehearsing a script and Matty had forgotten his lines.

After a pause, Matty settled on the only question he could manage to articulate, which was: “He has a phone?”

“He has a phone. He has an address. He invited me to come see him tonight.” Patrick ventured these pieces of information like he was tiptoeing around a ticking bomb, as if he feared Matty might explode on him if he said the wrong thing.

“Tonight?” was all Matty could say.

“Yeah, tonight.” Patrick, steady Patrick, always so sure of his place in the world, shifted on his feet and looked, for a moment, like he might cry, or scream, or do something else completely out of the ordinary. Matty couldn’t fathom how casual his brother had been just a moment earlier: talking to their father was not a regular part of Patrick’s day. Now that the news was finally sitting between them, Patrick didn’t seem to know what to say any more than Matty did.

“Did you call him?” Matty asked.

Patrick let out a breath that he’d evidently been holding. “Mom gave me his number awhile back. I just wanted to have it. I wasn’t sure I’d ever call him but I’m leaving for college tomorrow and I want to do this before I go.” He said it hastily, still giving Matty the odd impression that he was afraid of how he, Matty, would react, as if Matty was the adult and Patrick a child who needed reprimanding.

Matty’s heart sank as he realized what

this meant for their night. “So you won’t be home for the Last Supper?”

For weeks, this is what the three of them had been calling their plans to get Thai takeout on Patrick’s final night at home. Patrick would catch the bus early the next morning; his mother couldn’t take two days off from the hospital to drive him upstate for move-in. Matty was dreading Patrick’s departure fiercely, but he’d been looking forward to the Last Supper for the meager amounts of comfort it would provide. They’d sit at the kitchen table and gorge themselves, elbows bumping, on far too much Thai food, and then they’d go out for ice cream at their favorite place down the street, the one where Matty had famously palmed chocolate ice cream all over his mother’s new sweater when he was two. They’d go home and throw last-minute things at Patrick while he packed, like the Mets sweatshirt lingering on top of the laundry pile and the pair of socks Matty had borrowed from him last week. All summer, Matty had looked forward to this night as one of togetherness, when he could use what he knew was coming the next morning to illuminate what he had right now, which was his brother and his mother and the success their lives had been without his father.

Patrick looked at once pained and stoic. “It took me almost four months to work up the nerve to call him, Matty. I know I’d be kicking myself tomorrow if I left without at least having a conversation.”

“And Mom’s okay with this?” That seemed unfathomable to Matty. He re-



membered the worst days of his father’s drinking, how their mother would take them on the longest route home from school just to prolong their time away from the apartment. He remembered the fighting, how fear and distrust rippled through their home like radiation that could kill them all if the source of it wasn’t put out. He remembered the crash of glass as his mother dumped bottle after bottle into the trash on the day their father left for good. It sounded like she’d been playing music.

“She gave me his information when I turned eighteen. I’d been asking for a long time before that, but she said I needed to become an adult first.” Patrick snorted like he’d said something funny. “Although I’m pretty sure I’m about ten times the adult Dad is.”

Matty fiddled with a loose string on his shirt. His throat was tight, though whatever was blocking it felt more like anger than sadness. Across the darkened court Patrick’s features began to blend into the night. He seemed impossibly far away. The silence between them was becoming oppressive, and Matty scuffed his shoe against the pavement to break the quiet.

“Why would you go looking for your dad,” Matty said slowly, “when you have me and Mom right here.” It wasn’t a question.

He could feel Patrick roll his eyes in the dark. “Matty, come on. Don’t pull that ‘your dad’ thing. I get you don’t remember him, but that doesn’t make him not your father. And I didn’t ‘go looking for him.’ Don’t put it like that, like I’m some lost puppy.”

“I do remember him!” Matty said. His anger was starting to well up now, tart on his tongue. It was on this court, too



too dark
strange to

be standing across from Patrick this upset. In another version of this night, they'd have already raced upstairs to place their Thai order before the dinner rush.

"No, you don't remember him!" Patrick ran a frustrated hand through his hair. He was starting to sound wild, the way he always did when he was trying to prove himself right. "You remember *parts* of him, not all of him, like me and Mom do. The drinking wasn't the only thing worth knowing."

"Yeah? And what're you expecting to find tonight? Some version of Dad who doesn't live for making other people totally miserable?" Matty could hear himself shouting, but he didn't care any more than he wanted to make Patrick feel as sore as he did. "There's no such thing, Patrick!"

As if on some sort of cue Patrick bent to pick up the basketball, which had been resting placidly near his feet. "Not that you would understand," he said sharply, marching towards the door, "since people are so one-dimensional to you, but Dad actually isn't one big mistake of a human being."

Matty felt a hot prickling run up and down his spine. "You wouldn't understand, you wouldn't understand," he mimicked in a vulgar falsetto, following his brother off the court. "Right. Only *Patrick* would understand why he needs to ditch his family on his last night before college."

Patrick whirled around, his eyes wide, long limbs aglow under the stairwell lights. Matty stepped back, startled at the vision of their father that leapt across his memory. "Yes!" Patrick was saying. "My last night. Not yours. I'm sorry if you don't like what I'm choosing to do with it."

Matty knew it wasn't a real apology. They stood in the stairwell for a long moment, each one staring hard at the other as

if seeing him for the first time.

After a beat, Patrick spoke again. "And for what it's worth," he said, "I asked to meet him two weeks ago. He only returned my call tonight."

He turned and took the steps two at a time, all ten flights.

Upstairs, everyone was quiet as Patrick scarfed down a piece of toast and tore a comb through his hair, then slipped out the door hardly meeting their eyes.

As his mother slid the locks into place, Matty moved across the room to the window. With an effort, he pulled up the heat-jammed sash and climbed deftly onto the fire escape. He perched on the windowsill, still as a sniper, and listened for the door to open below.

A warm breeze ran down the street, plucking a flake of paint loose from the fire escape railing. Matty watched it hang in mid-air for half a second before it swung down to land on the toe of his grubby shoe. He flicked it off, sent it falling through the bars to join the sidewalk grime. Another moment passed, then the front door exhaled open, inhaled shut. And there he went, loping down the sidewalk in his long way, illuminated every few steps by the storefronts spilling their light onto the street. He looked so ordinary, moved so easily, and Matty almost let himself believe that he was only out running an errand for their mother. He'd be home soon, he'd be home soon. Matty watched him until he couldn't, when Patrick was finally swallowed up by the city, by the unassuming passersby moving to and fro down the street, obscuring his brother like a tidal wave amidst the confusion of their bodies.



POETRY

A Love Letter to the Caribbean

By **GLENDALYS MEDINA**

you love to goat me.

you'd make the humidity so thick,
that I'd have to pull out all my brushes,
and coax my hair into f o r m a t i o n.
with pounds of product,a
i make my fingers p r u n e as if I've been f l o a t i n g in your seas all day.

the power will go down,
there are people screaming out on the street,
“*Se fue la luz*”,
i hear you laughing quietly.

i'll share a drink with you now,
we can laugh about the struggles that you and I have adapted to.

we can be a girl
and her island again

we can ignore the fact that my family ran across borders,
seeking the opportunity your seas lacked.

we can ignore the hiss of the straightener
as I force the trickle of curly waves to stop crashing.

we can ignore how badly I tried to abandon the language we spoke quietly to ourselves on rainy nights.

the delicate winds we turned into hurricanes
i left while you tore the sky open.
i watched you scream,
watched you pelt the sky with the rain.
i was up in the clouds while you caused hurricanes.
you asked me to stay, and I -

I don't know.

i don't know how to be both. I don't know how to be dominicana y Americana.

maybe when I was fighting the war within myself,
you were the one waving the white flag.

maybe I need you.
but how do I explain to you,
that I have no clue how to come back to the place I rejected.

how do I even begin to ask for forgiveness?

needing you is something I cannot accept.
sometimes needing you and wanting you the way I do

mi dios ayudame

when your waves caress my skin and the sand burns my toes,
i can't tell if I'm drowning or if this is my salvation.

you see here they don't appreciate you the way I do.
they say "third world country" but all I see is the way we were before.
hot sands and blue water,

you made me want to be beautiful.

so when I left, I didn't mean for it to take so long for me to come back.
i feel like I've been perpetually on my way home.
i should know what it's like to be holding out for someone,
but I'm almost there.
i'm almost home.

Te veo pronto mi isla bella.

VALENTINE 2022

We asked SLU students to send us the sappiest love poems, pictures or artworks that capture true love, or their response to our (literal) love sick prompt.



*Entre deux cœurs qui
s'aiment, nul besoin de
paroles*

By NIKKI PETRESCU-BOBOC

You never had to ask me,
it was as simple as breathing,
as beautiful as a million sunsets,
as natural as the moon pulling the tides.
Loving you was never a task,
a senseless bolder carried up mountains and hills
just to fall.

It was never a burden
to count stars endlessly in the night sky.
You needn't apologize for it.
We never needed words,
do not be afraid as they slip free now,
do not cry as the sun rises.
Do not worry my dear,
your voice could never hurt me.





To Be
Loved
by
Sierra
Potaczek

'Tis the Season

By **HANNAH RUTKOWSKI**

I am sick because of a snowball fight with my neighbor. It was intense... in the moment... I didn't wear a coat. Couldn't be bothered to walk the five yards to get one. Stupid, I know. Because now, I'm in bed everyday, in and out of sleep, my chest aches and feels heavy, and my cheeks shine a brilliant shade of red all day.

I have no fever. No swelling. I am simply bedridden. I'm not terribly mad about it though, for it couldn't have come at a better time: ~~Capitalist Greeting Card Day~~ Valentine's Day Weekend. I don't have the stamina to walk through the showers of reds and pinks and gushy cards that would probably make me barf, illness or not. The only thing I can stand right now are the corny rom-coms marathoning through the cable stations, and even then I fall asleep before the end, the protagonist frozen in my mind as a clumsy, single fool.

My neighbor comes by. I think she might feel guilty. It seems like my ailments get worse when I see her, as if my body remembers the time I spent with her in the cold, and every lobbed snowball I received to the face. She brings a warm cup of soup one night, small doses of chocolate another. She even smuggles in a glass of wine for me one night—

"I don't know. It always makes my mom feel better." she whispers in the dark between the cliché dialogue of characters-who-say-they-aren't-in-love-but-totally-are.

She becomes entranced by the screen, nodding and smiling along, giggling softly when appropriate. She's practically lying in bed next to me when my stomach squeezes, reminding me I'm sick.

"Hey. I don't want to get you sick." I manage to get out, pulling a bit away from her.

She frowns.

"Oh, yeah. Right. Well, it would only be fair for you to get me sick. I mean, I can't help that I'm better at snowball fights, but you did get brunt of it." She moves farther from me, sitting at the edge of my bed.

A restaurant commercial comes on, selling a night for fine dining on the most romantic day of the year. My neighbor's



head tilts like a curious dog.

“Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” softly plays over videos of smiling couples. I roll my eyes, but I hear a snuffle from her.

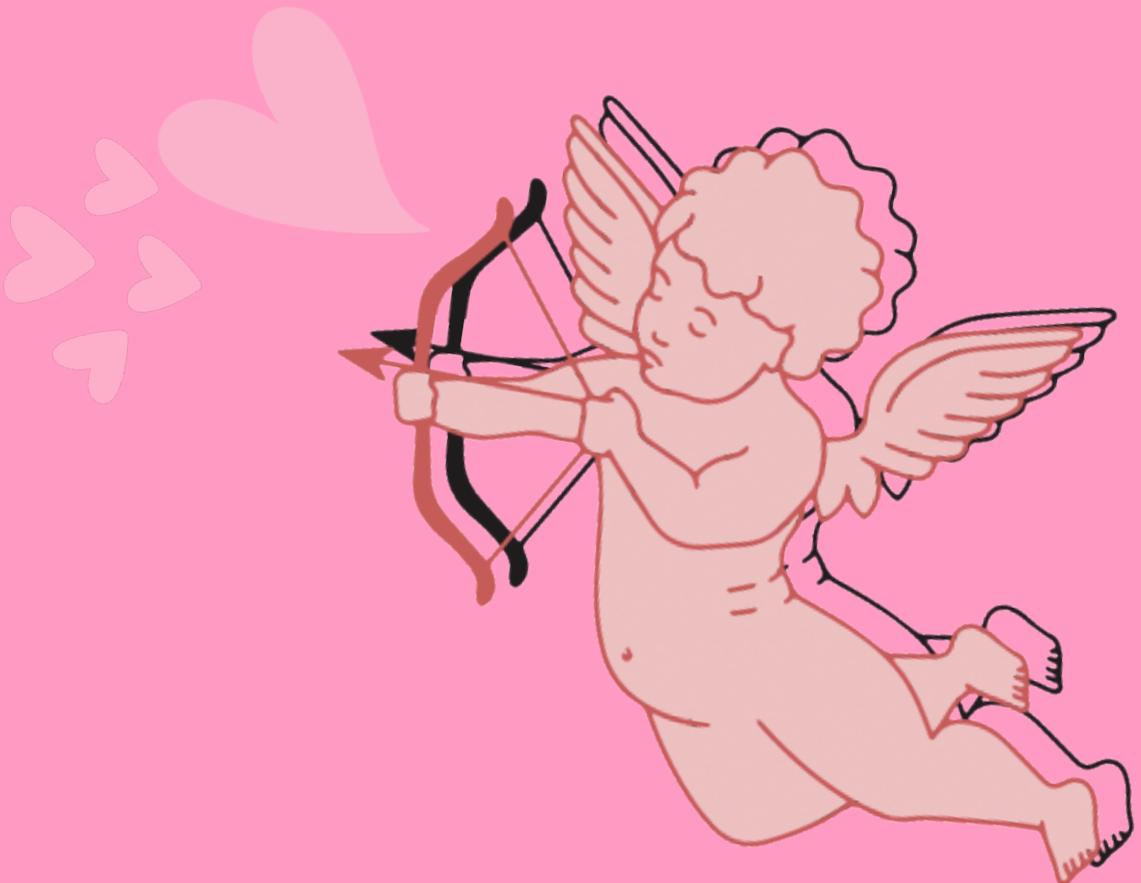
God, is she crying? I guess it’s a nice song. I continue to “watch” the TV, actually staring at the back of her head. My chest tightens. I fight every urge to keep my eyes open, to be sure to say goodbye to her before she leaves, but I can’t. She looks at me and smiles as I give in to a fatigued night.

She doesn’t come the next morning. I’m told she has the same sickness as me.

I finally got into a sterile doctor’s office. My throat aches from an earlier swabbing. I wait for my results, only for the grumbly old man to walk in and exclaim loudly to the cubicle-like empty room.

“Well, you aren’t sick, but you are in love.”

Ugh.



How to be

AMERICAN

Guide to Fitting in

NONFICTION

By ANA CHOE

Tip #1: Speak English.

You were born in a small hospital in Chicago. Your parents think that you being born in the States is a blessing because you are American, something they couldn't be. They give you an English name and put your Korean name as your middle name. They name you Ana Yerin Choe. You grow up in a tiny house with your younger sister and parents, speaking in Korean. It might've been a tiny house, but your home was full of laughter and happiness that the size of your living space didn't matter. But soon, your parents decide that it's important for the family to move into the suburbs where their education system is better. They came to the United States to make sure you had the best resources for your future.

Your family rents a smaller 2-room apartment than the house you used to live in. There is a tiny garden with colorful tulips on both sides of the sidewalk that leads you to the entrance of the building. Different shades of red and white bricks are alternating in a pattern that go all the way up to the third floor. The stairwell is wrapped in carpet with metal handles you hold to go to the top to enter your home.

Your parents tell you that you're going

to school and how you are going to make many new friends while you pick out your Disney Princess backpack. However, they don't mention that the friends at school speak a different language. You walk with your parents in front of your home and stop at the sidewalk. You see a huge yellow bus coming to a stop in front of you. The bus driver opens the door and starts speaking to you. You don't understand any words that come out of his mouth because of the kids yelling. But you understand that they want you to ride the bus.

You look at your mom, she's wearing her striped pajamas under her apron with her red slippers that she got a year ago. She's nodding her head, encouraging you to ride the bus. You violently shake your head and look at your dad.

He's wearing a white button up with black slacks, he usually is gone before you wake up. But not today. He doesn't even look at you, you see his wrinkles forming as he squints looking towards the sun. He looks everywhere but you and just says "You need to go on the bus." This is not your dad. Your dad always takes your side, especially if it's anything against your mom, but not today. You're on the verge of tears,

but deep down you know you must go. You take your steps toward the bus and look back to see your parents. They don't look at you as the door closes and you find an empty seat on the bus. You look outside the window as the bus moves forward. Your eyes are so blurry, and you are so consumed in your thoughts that you don't realize that you've reached your destination.

You are the last one to leave the bus and walk towards the crowd. You see people waving and talking.

"Are you lost?" a woman asks. You realize that they aren't speaking the language you speak at home. This is the language that Disney princesses spoke on the T.V. This is the language you would use at the playground across your home. You would look at other kids and their body language to understand what they meant. Even though you've never had a full conver-

sation with the other kids at the park, you watched enough of *Barbie* to understand what people were saying.

"I don't know," you say.

"We're at school and you're going to have a fun time! We're going to lead you to your classroom" says the woman holding her hand out to you. You hold the woman's hand and give her your name. You are very skeptical of this unknown woman, but you don't have anyone else to trust. She looks up your name on her computer to lead you to a room. The classroom was filled with colorful posters of numbers and animals. The children were all in a circle sitting down with an older woman at the end of the circle. The unknown woman lets your hand go and she guides you to join the circle. She waves to you as she leaves the room.

The older woman has brown braided hair on her right side. You can see all her



PHOTO CREDIT: Thao Nguyen



teeth from her smile and automatically you have a feeling of security with her. She stands up and introduces herself.

“Hi! I’m Ms. Brown and I’m going to be your teacher this year for Pre-Kindergarten! I can’t wait to meet every one of you and teach you! We’re going to go around the circle and you’re going to tell us your name!”

The introduction starts with the kid on her right, it seems like everyone understands her and it seems like they have no trouble talking in front of the class. You realize that soon it is your turn. You use all your brain power to make out what they are saying. You introduce yourself in the same way Cinderella introduced herself to Prince Charming.

“My name is Ana,” you say as your hands are shaking.

“Nice to meet you,” says Mrs. Brown and all the kids clap for you and they move on to the next student until everyone in your class has introduced themselves.

Mrs. Brown breaks the whole class into small groups and meets new friends. You try to speak the language that you speak at home, and nobody understands you. You learn that this is the language you need to speak to make new friends. After spending a couple of hours meeting new friends and meeting your teacher, it’s time for you to go home. You have a good time at school but you’re eager to go home to tell your parents and your younger sister about your day.

You go back on the bus that picked you up to see your father waiting for you at the bus stop. He usually comes home when it’s pitch dark outside. Relieved to see him, you run over to give your dad a hug. He picks you up and asks how school was.

“학교 어땀어?” he asked you.

“It was kind of scary, but I didn’t cry! It’s just that they didn’t speak in the same way that we speak to each other. I had to use what I knew from the movies of princesses” you tell him.

“친구들이랑 노는게 힘들었어?” he asks.

“No, it wasn’t too hard. I thought about what Barbie would say in that moment if she were me. But I like the way we speak with each other. It’s easier for me to understand.”

“아빠랑 엄마는 힘들 까봐 걱정했지. 예린이 학교에서 영어로 친구들이랑 했어? 집에서는 한국어 쓰니까 걱정했지.”

“So do we need to speak English at home too then?” you ask him.

“엄마랑 아빠는 영어 못하니까 예린이가 많이 가르쳐줘.”

“Yes! I can teach you, mom and my sister English!” you say. Speaking in English is what Americans do. This new language is what you need to master as an American.

Tip #2: Don’t use your ‘foreign’ middle name.

After years of adjusting to the American school system, you make new friends, you have new teachers and now it’s time for you to transition to middle school. You walk into your new classroom as your new teacher, Ms. Henderson welcomes you in. She’s an old lady with dark curly gray hair. She has a red cardigan on with a black t-shirt and jeans. She’s going through attendance and gets to your name. You see her smirk before she calls your name.

“Ana ‘Urine’? Choe,” she calls out. Everyone starts laughing. Including the teacher. You’re so confused because your teacher hasn’t said the middle name of anyone else. Just yours. Your face starts to turn bright red from embarrassment and your voice shakes while you try to correct the teacher.

“It’s Ye-Rin, that’s my Korean name. But you can call me Ana,” you correct her.

“I hope you don’t mind that I couldn’t pronounce your middle name correctly. My husband is also Korean, and I can’t even pronounce my children’s middle name correctly. So... it’s fine. I hope you understand. It’s just so hard when you don’t speak the language you know,” she says.

“Yeah, I understand,” you say. But you don’t. You don’t understand why she decided to try to say your middle name to everyone in the room. You don’t understand why she couldn’t just ask you how it is pronounced. You don’t understand why she had to pronounce it as urine. You try to smile it off, but you feel so humiliated. You can hear the boys snickering in the back saying ‘Ana Urine Choe’. You try to block it out, but you can’t.

You ride the bus back home and you storm into your home. You find your mom and start to yell at her. You don’t understand why your parents couldn’t give you a normal middle name like Hana or Grace.

“Why couldn’t you just give me a regular middle name?”

“니 한국 이름이야,” your mom replies in Korean.

“Just because it’s my Korean name doesn’t mean it has to be my middle name. I hate my Korean name. Why couldn’t you have given me an easier Korean name that people could actually pronounce?” you grunt in frustration in English.

“엄마가 집에서 영어 하지 말라고 했어. 엄마 모른다고!” she yells.

You slam the door and after this day, you never use your middle name. You never tell people your Korean name. You hate your Korean name written in English and unless it was official documents to the government you had to fill out, you never include your middle name. The only way people will acknowledge you is by using your American name, it doesn’t matter what your Korean name is. If anything,

people didn’t take you to be American if you had a foreign middle name.

Tip #3: Just follow American culture.

A couple of years later, you enter high school. Most of your friends are Asian because you started to gravitate towards people who understood your life at home. You and your friends started to listen to K-pop and watched K-dramas. You would sing along with your friends and fangirl over certain members of a popular boy group. Often, you and your friends would go to a Korean BBQ place to go to karaoke after. This is how you spend your free time, and this is how you started to learn to embrace your culture.

One day, you were in the cafeteria with your friends watching your favorite K-pop boy group’s music video. The music video just came out that day and after waiting for a new album for 8 months, you couldn’t wait to start streaming. While you start to watch the video, you hear a voice behind you.

“You really like watching boys with eyeliner dance?”

You turn around to see who is talking. It’s a boy from your grade named Lee Farkas. You recognize Lee because last year you were in his history class, and he picked on a Korean boy named David Ha. One time, he wrote “David Ha loves to eat dogs” on the board and David was so mad that he told the teacher, Mr. Zaplar, but he didn’t really do anything about it. Mr. Zaplar just told him it was unacceptable behavior and Lee ‘apologized’ that this conversation was never talked about again. This was because Lee’s father was on the school board, and he apparently gave the school lots of donations. You knew that Mr. Zaplar was intimidated by him to even write him up for this racist remark. Lee would say things like “I’m not racist be-

cause the definition of racist is thinking that you are above someone because of their race". This was how he justified himself to make himself feel better about his behavior.

You don't like to use the word, "hate" but you hated this kid. You hated how he got away for so many mean things he would say. You hated how you and all your friends were intimidated by him. You hated how even the teachers and staff were intimidated by him. So, when he started to talk to you, you pretended to ignore him. When he realized that you were ignoring him, he took his phone out and shoved it in your face. It was a music video of a girl group dancing.

"This is the stuff you like to watch?" he asked. You and your friends exchanged worried glances at each other.

"Yeah, it's Korean music," you said.

"You like to watch boys in eyeliner? That's really gay," he said laughing. You glared at him when one of your friends Sophie started talking back to him.

"One, it's not okay to use the word gay like that. Two, a lot of men wear make-up and it's totally ok for men to wear makeup. Three, this isn't your business at all" she says. Melissa was your friend for over 5 years, you bonded over having strict parents. Melissa was Taiwanese and her family situation was so similar to yours that you couldn't help but be attracted to each other. This startles Lee because Melissa is a quiet person, but just because she's quiet doesn't mean she won't stand up for herself. That's what you admire about Melissa because she would speak up for you whenever you felt intimidated.

"Well, I was using the word gay as in happy. Also, this is America, so we all need to follow the pop culture here, not in some other country," he said as he walked away. You are so dumbfounded by him, but you take what he said to heart. It wasn't like you didn't listen to any songs in English, it was just you preferred to listen to Korean

music. To avoid awkward situations like this, you decided to stop listening to Korean music in public. In fact, you submerge yourself in American music, start to watch American T.V shows and try to prove yourself to be "American".

PRO TIP: DON'T FOLLOW ANY OF THESE TIPS

After graduation, you take a step outside of school and realize that you were deeply rooted with many misunderstandings about being "American". You could never be fully American even if you were born into this country. You would be Asian American or Korean American to people. You were struggling to accept your identity your whole life, that you resented being Asian in this country.

You tried to stop speaking Korean in your household. You were embarrassed that your parents didn't speak English when you should've been proud of the sacrifices your parents made for you to be in this country. You resent your parents for using your Korean name as your middle name. The concept of middle names was completely different in the United States than the way your family used your middle name. To you, your middle name IS your first name as well. Being Ana was equal to being Yerin. As much as you were called Ana at school, you were called Yerin at home. You also stopped watching Korean entertainment just because you felt that it wasn't right as an American.

How foolish of you to believe that you had to neglect your identity as an Asian to be fully "American".

POETRY

REJECTION

By ANNIESA ATISCHAND

At age twelve,
I decided not to go to mandir anymore.
On Sundays, I stopped praying to
Mother Lakshmi.
It's too early,
I lied to my parents.

At fourteen,
I decided I hated the scent of agarbatti.
Phagwa was too messy,
and lehengas were too itchy.

I washed myself in your whiteness,
and still, you rejected me.

You thought mandirs were *unique*,
I explained jihadis to you.
My gods were *pretty*,
So, I prayed to my mother's alter.
You liked to light *incense*,
I reveled in its scent.

You wanted to go to the
Festival of Colors,
I drowned you in rainbow.
You wanted to wear lehengas,
you shined in mine.

My culture was not valuable until you placed your white hands
in it.



ARTWORK: Thao Nguyen

Milk Coffee

By: Sarah Corp

NONFICTION

I woke up one morning knowing it would be a good one by the sweet smell of Haitian kafe tugging me forward by my nostrils. I followed the unmistakable scent as it drew me into the kitchen where I found the evidence: the waiting mug, the saucepan full of coffee, the toasted bread, and of course, the milk—all laid out loudly and openly on the table. I found my mother standing at the counter in a yellow robe, pouring hot water through a brown cloth bag filled with coffee grounds. First, she fixed her cup black—just the way she liked it—using a technique passed down from generations of Haitian expertise and taught to her by her own mother. For me, however, standing there at seven years old and looking up at her expectantly, she added a few drops of milk to her mug. She poured her love into that cup, enough to show how much she cared—that she would spoil her drink so that I might feel beautiful. She dipped a strip of buttered bread into the mug and raised a coffee-soaked slice to my lips. Petulantly, I turned my head away and refused to eat until I could see myself fully reflected in that cup. Though she knew what would come from placating an oblivious child, she added more milk anyway until a smile returned to my face. When the



dishes were done and the crumbs were wiped off the counter, I learned later that she would bear the discomfort alone and in silence—belly cramps and bloating, the cost for loving a child. At the time, she dared not reveal the sad truth to me: that her body could not tolerate all that milk.

My mother was not born with lactose intolerance. It just appeared one day and forced her to adjust. The Mayo Clinic indicates that an inability to tolerate milk typically occurs after reaching adulthood. For many people, it's an abrupt change. Imagine you've finally settled into your adult skin, and then with the flick of a switch, the milk you've always had with your cereal is hurting you. I suppose that must have been what it was like when my mom met my father. He was a charmer, a smooth talker. Words flowed from his mouth like liquid. He poured himself, warm milk, all over her Frosted Flakes heart and melted the ice. Then, as milk does when you leave it out for days, weeks, months, years of happy marriage: he turned sour. Or maybe he was just rotten all along, and no amount of refrigeration could keep him fresh,

could make him keep his angry hands or words to himself. The problem with lactose intolerance, according to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, is that it prevents you from obtaining the key nutrients found in dairy, like vitamin D or calcium. Calcium in milk is particularly important for maintaining healthy bones and growing, but the milk meant to strengthen the body's bones can also break them. When I couldn't find milk in the refrigerator, or my dad in my new home, I would ask my mother where they went. She had been hoping that because I was too young to understand it, I would not notice the absence. I could not yet bear the answers to my own question, and she could not shield me from the truth without telling me a lie. So, she'd go out and buy some more milk or call my dad on the phone for him to lie to me instead.

The mirror was not my friend. As a young girl, I was constantly seeking out my reflection in anything willing to show me an image—the walls of buildings I passed, or car windows, or shiny metal objects—until the dull hope of change eventually faded from my mind and I stopped looking. At this moment, however, I was five years old and still believed in magic. I squeezed my eyes closed tight and whispered a spell that would make everything better. I opened my hopeful eyes again to a disappointing picture. I saw the same girl still staring back at me: a tooth missing in the upper right corner of her smile, unruly curls spilling out from her pineapple bun, and skin still the same neutral beige as it had been before she closed her eyes. Upon realizing I wasn't like a chameleon with an outer layer that could change to match my environment—to match the people who raised me—I began to cry

in dismay. My mother appeared behind me in the mirror not long after the tears came. I cried harder as I saw her come into view: warm, brown, beautiful, and everything I wanted to be. She asked what was wrong and I responded: “Why don't I look like you?”

She replied, “Of course you do,” and bent down to my level. Tracing the lines of my features and then pointing to her own, she said, “See Sarah, you have my eyes, and my nose, and my mouth—everything on your face is mine.” In that moment, seeing my features reflected in her own, it was enough. Until it wasn't.

The questions and frustration would come rushing back when people passing through our life would at some point comment that I was almost her spitting image, just a lighter version. After hearing it enough times, I learned pretty quickly that almost was never enough. Sure, it was nice to share her face, but I wanted her skin. Then, finally, perhaps moved by a mother's desire to soothe the internal ache of her child, she gave an answer to my lifelong question. I will never forget the day my mother introduced me to myself. Back when my mom used to drink her coffee the way she liked it, I was six years old and holding her hand as she led me into the kitchen. On the table she had set out three cups. One was a mug half-full of freshly brewed coffee, another was a plastic cup half-full of cold milk, and in the center was an empty glass. She pointed to the coffee mug and said, “This one is Mommy, the milk is your dad, and here you are right in the middle.” Then, she proceeded to pour the contents into the glass and stirred them together with a spoon. “See Sarah, you are made of both of us.” Coffee and milk mixed into one body. I wrapped my hand around the glass and was surprised to see how well it matched the drink inside. I asked

if I could try some. She nodded and held the glass to my lips. I took a sip of myself and decided that I was delicious.

It's actually stranger for your system to be able to tolerate milk than it is for it not to. The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases estimates that 68% of the world's people are afflicted with lactose intolerance. You're also more likely to have it if you're of African, Asian, Hispanic, or Native American descent. It makes sense, then, why my mom has it, but my dad doesn't. I suppose I was spared from the irony by my father's genetics. It would have been quite uncomfortable living in a body that could not digest half of itself. As for the people afflicted by it, the effects look different for everyone—ranging from mild to severe. The Mayo Clinic lists common symptoms as gas, bloating, nausea, stomach pain, and diarrhea. For my mother, it's abdominal cramping, bruises, indigestion, scars, and her stomach swells up like a balloon. It's a wonder that even with all that potential for pain, many people with the condition continue to consume it anyway. How can you ask people to give up their milk, their ice cream, their butter, their misguided daughters? Even if they might hurt a little. We continue to fill up our bowls, we long to know our fathers, and maybe we pour a little milk in our coffee if it makes our children smile.

My best memories of my father consist of a voice on the phone, a card in the mail, or a big box waiting on the doorstep. When I tried to picture him, however, he was only an inverted silhouette in my mind's eye—not of a body, but of a stark white question mark—as

if my thoughts were trying to emphasize the only thing I did know about him. My mother, in her consideration for someone who especially did not deserve it, would try her best to fill in the gaps. But when the phone stopped ringing and his voice retreated from memory, I stopped listening for his description and allowed his image to blur and fade too.

After the milk spoiled, my mother quickly moved us away from our home in the small village of Chittenango to the equally small village of Elmsford, NY. Although the village did boast a fairly racially diverse population, I went to a small school, and if there were any children like me there, I did not know them. As a new student, I had to get used

to being the subject of the guessing game. When you're young, you speak your mind without considering the consequences. On my first day of first grade, a girl with neon pink barrettes in her hair walked up to me on the playground and asked with unabashed curiosity, "What are you?" I responded then with the carefree naivety of a child who'd just discovered herself:

"Milk coffee." But when that interaction continued to play out in different versions of the same scene throughout my life, those words eventually began to taste bitter as they left my mouth. It was not the coffee that left a bad taste, but rather the disappointing realization that followed. I soon came to learn that no matter how much some people might shower me with their version of love, they were leading me all the while down that worn-out road to arrive at their true destination: that dreaded question. "What are you?" I did not want my life's walk to be tainted by anger, but many times I was angry—angry at a world where the measure of your worth lies in



description, one where you must be content with being categorized. You become an object personified: milk coffee.

When I finally found out that my mother was lactose intolerant, I decided two things: that my mother really needed to stop adding milk to her coffee, and that I would no longer drink milk as well. I went on a milk strike for an entire week, valiantly refusing bowls of my favorite cereal, buttered toast, and even mint chocolate chip ice cream. The following week, my mother brought home almond milk and oat milk to throw a wrench in my plans. I was thoroughly confused. I had thought that the problem was in the name, that milk was the cause of all my mother's distress.

My mother was everything I wanted to be, and all that I was not. In high school, she was an "It girl" of sorts—smart, popular, athletic, and clear in who she was. I found myself constantly trying to compare myself to her: my more reserved personality to her bubbly one, my small group of friends to her effortless ability to broaden her social circle, and my pale wrist against her gentle brown. When I didn't measure up to her achievements, disappointed her, broke the rules, or made her cry, I thought myself equal to the cause of her stomachache. I read between the lines of "You sound just like your father" or "I will not tolerate your behavior," and I thought *it must be all that milk I'm made of*. I blamed milk for most of my problems too. It was what made me different from everyone else, what kept me feeling like a guest in my own house, the curse that tried to confine my existence to a checked box, the basis of my father's cruelty, and the reason why it seemed that everyone always had to know what I was made of before they could be my friend.

Although it's sometimes called milk

intolerance, it isn't entirely the milk's fault. It seems that the true culprit comes from within, from the body's own deficiency. The UK's National Health Service says that it is specifically the lactose in milk that the body cannot tolerate. People with the condition usually do not produce enough of the enzyme lactase that breaks down lactose into a simpler sugar. If your small intestine can't do it, it becomes the responsibility of microbes in your colon to finish the job. Painful symptoms are simply the price you must pay for their help. Is it your fault that your body isn't fully equipped, or is the lactose to blame for being something you can't handle? However, not all milk has lactose—that detrimental component that can make something that tastes so good hurt so bad. It is still quite possible for people to live happy lives with almond milk, oat milk, goat milk, or even cow's milk with the lactose removed. There are also plenty of other dairy substitutes offered on the market—designed specifically to look and taste like the real thing—with none of the ill effects. There's dairy-free ice cream, vegan cheese, non-dairy yogurt, and lactose-free men.

There eventually comes a point where the anger fades into fatigue and you get so tired of people trying to make you choose whether you're more coffee than milk or more milk than coffee or just coffee or just milk. The world has made you weary. Your fingers no longer have the strength to keep hold of your milk aversion. You cannot blame all milk just because lactose does bad things to lactose-intolerant people. You were raised on coffee, but if



you ever claimed that coffee has never made your stomach hurt, you would be a liar.

Therefore, I will no longer count the days before I spoil or freeze my body to keep from turning sour. I will not be the one to divide myself in half, nor will I rest as a passenger in a frame left for the world to define. Instead, I will tear down the wall within that says one is not the other, that says because I am half-and-half, I cannot possibly be whole. When poured into the same mug, coffee and milk don't separate in the cup like oil and water. Instead, two become one as they blend together into something warm and beautiful: milk coffee.

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Movement

POETRY

By **CURTIS AMORY**

Darling, he's lost too
Not daring to be found
Muddled, sitting in a puddle
Of water and blue oil.
Oxidation, on every inhalation
Finds a way inside.
Orange clouds the lungs, and
Wheezing sounds as irate eyes
Invest in every sight, arrest
On a spray-painted dragon.
Invested, he touches
It's dark green scales, old nails
Scraping underfoot.
A soft smell of dust and mold
Content warning – destruction.
The horizon comprising
Of wrecking balls surmising
Their way to rubble fields
Healed land, building sealed
Packed up, with him inside it.
From broad rooftop vista
To dark basement, he lists a
Series of quick quiet dreams
That reap sleep at night.
Resting, deep desires lighting fires
All a small leap away.
And broken class crunches
Down corrugated stairs that
Correlate the high above
To below, and show
Signs of decomposing,
Jagged holes that grow
Supposing that the building stands still.
So alone he just wanders
Left behind to squander days,
Pondering the places where
He might find a sign
Or a person who's kind
Lost, when memory became
An elegy for peace of mind.

HOW TO BECOME A DOG PERSON



NONFICTION

By **TEAL BORDEN**

Before going to college, figure out what kind of person you want to be. When the question “Are you a cat or a dog person?” is asked, don’t tell them you are a cat person. Instead, during the summer before you get there, accept the dog-sitting gig from your sister’s best friend. The dog-owner’s husband is having his right knee replaced, and they pay generously for a weekend of staying at their country-side mansion with their three gentle dogs: Sully, CiCi, and Etta. When your sister’s friend gives you the run-down of how to care for Sully, the dog with cancer, believe her when she says, “he should be fine, he’s very low maintenance.”

Take the joint she offers you in appreciation

of your help, but don’t tell her that you’ve never smoked weed before. You’ll have to learn before college, so tell yourself there’s no better time than a day of filling food bowls and letting the dogs outside when they start to whine.

When the owners take their leave, take the lighter from their junk drawer and light the joint. Its delicate paper will curl into orange as you take a steady drag. When you don’t feel anything after your first few inhaleds, take a few more. Then, remember your father’s scolding to “waste not, want not,” even if he’s unaware what you’ll end up using the advice on, and finish the joint. Lounge on the couch adjacent to the dog’s bed, and as the dog with cancer naps, pick a show from the staticky selection of the twelve channels that the dog-owners receive. Enjoy

your nap, for when you wake, the dog with cancer will be shaking in a way you aren't sure is a side effect of the weed or the cancer.

Call the owners. Keep your voice steady, don't stumble over your words. Send them a video and ask, "Is this normal?" only for them to point out the lump protruding from his stomach, the white, wiry hairs poking out against their course. This is most definitely not normal.

They'll ask you to take him to the vet; try not to worry about how hard driving standard in your newly passed down Toyota Corolla will be when you're high. Think of all the drives your sister would go on in high school only to return with the windows hazy as she made a beeline for her room with a bag tucked suspiciously under her arm. Know that you can pull it off too. Gently wrap the dog in a blanket, tuck him under your arm, and stroke him tenderly as you situate him in the backseat. Recall every rule your father taught you when driving stick, and stall only once as you pull out of the dirt driveway.

Hope your tears will disguise the red of your eyes as you pull into the parking lot of the vet. Try not to overthink how to act normal as you wait in the front office while they take a look at the dog. Drum your finger across your knees as you read a brochure selected from the side table. Know you should never adopt a dog, no matter what the creased pages tell you.

When the owners call your cell phone, pick up on the third ring.

"Hi! I'm so sorry, but they still haven't told me anything yet. I am just in the waiting room."

"Oh Teal, I am so sorry that this is happening to you on your first time with Sully. But, the vets just called us, sweetie. Sully's going to need to be put down."

Cry harder; your eyes are already red. It's your fault, you'll think. "It's not your fault, his time was coming," the owners will assure you.

The vets will return to the waiting room to ask if you want to join them as they give him the euthanasia.

You'll want to say "no," but say "yes."

Walk steadily as you enter the back room, the cold metal table in the center reflecting the blurred fluorescent ceiling of light. Try not to blame yourself as you look at the dog panting on the table. Remind yourself of the cancer, that this was inevitable. Chalk it up to poor timing of the pet-owner's surgery.

When they give the dog the first shot, scratch behind his ears. It's what your cats enjoy, and hope he appreciates the comfort. Whisper gentle coos into his ear and reassure him he's the bestest boy you've ever met. Don't beat yourself up for not knowing how else to show a dog affection. Overthink how each stroke of your hand meets a quieter intake of his breath, the bulge of his soft stomach slowing in its movement upward.

When they give him the second shot, remove your hand. Watch how his eyes seem to beckon to you, but know it's his owners he truly yearns for. Alas, remember you're all he has, and reach out to give him a final pet just as the vet declares, "and, he's gone" before you feel the release of his final breath. Remove your hand quickly. Hesitate as the vet starts to clean up.

Ask, "So, do I need to take him or..." trail off, and hope she doesn't bring out the cardboard box they put your first cat back in when you put him down.

"Oh no, honey, his owners are having him cremated." Try not to feel so relieved his care is finally out of your hands.

When you return to your car, don't look in the rearview mirror, at the empty pile of blankets still traced with free flying bristles of hairs. Don't notice the way the other dogs look at you when you return to the house, don't let them



tell you it's your fault. Instead, practice petting behind their ears and under their necks with a loving delicacy.

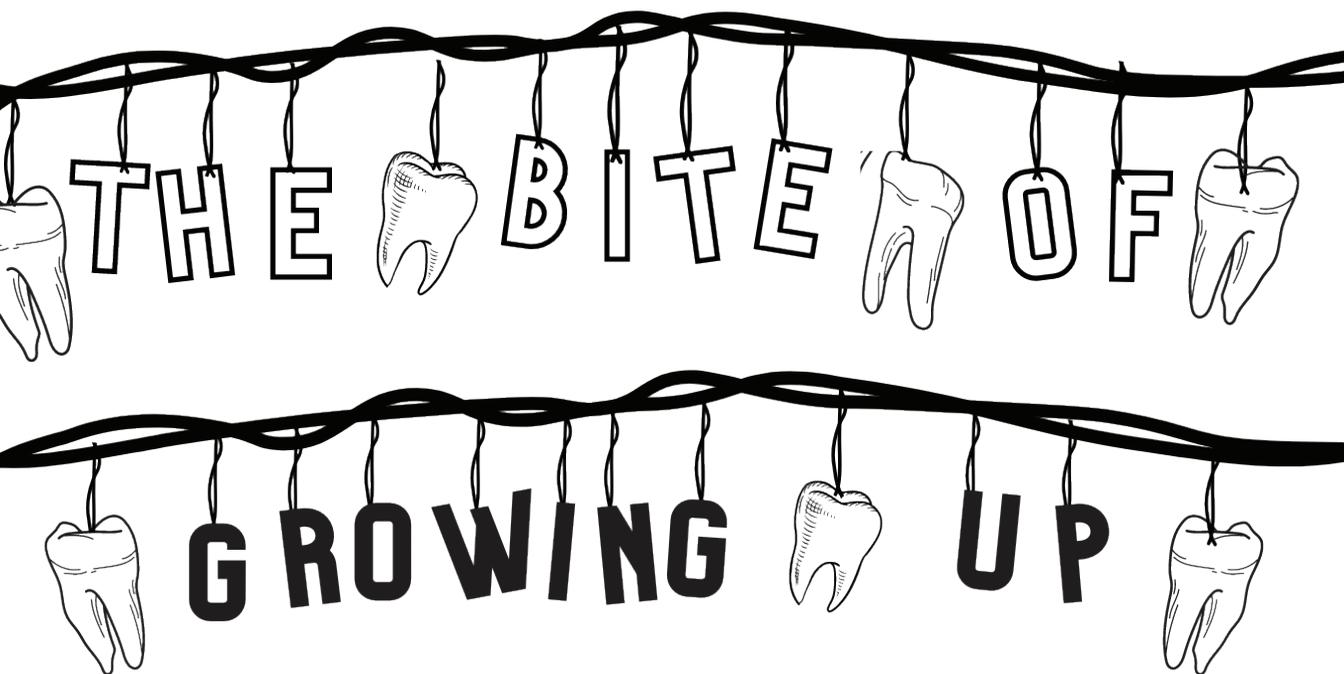
Pack up the dead dog's medications, for you don't want to confuse them in the feedings. Return the lighter to the junk drawer, and let the dogs out for a bathroom break.

When the dog owners send you a sympathy bonus for the trauma you endured and the care you took in their loved one's final moments, use it to purchase your first bong, for you've started packing for college, and it may come in handy.

When you get to college and the orientation icebreaker comes up, "Are you a cat or a dog person," tell them you are most definitely a cat person. Don't accept any more dog-sitting gigs, no matter how many joints you are offered in exchange.



PHOTO CREDIT: Thao Nguyen



FICTION

By **HANNAH RUTKOWSKI**

“Aren’t you too old to go trick-or-treating? You’re what, fourteen now?” Athena’s mom asked, leaning against the doorframe. She smiled at her daughter, baring yellowed teeth.

“This is my last year,” Athena grumbled as she pulled a black top from the bin in front of her. She unfolded it and held it up to show her mom, partially to ask for approval or recognition. There was no response, and no one in her doorway anymore. For always being only 90 feet apart in their home, Athena felt miles apart from her mother. It had been like this since she was a child: Athena was treated as more of a mini-adult, them both doing their own thing. She enjoyed the independence but at times yearned for her mother to treat her like a child she was responsible for rather than a roommate. At the very least, she would have liked a compliment on, or acknowledgment of, the shirt she held up, an easy and harmless ask.

Athena spent the rest of the afternoon putting her costume together, finding orange tulle wings and a black umbrella she

decided to paint oblong white dots on. As if on cue, she heard a few raindrops tap on the roof.

It always happened to rain on days Athena felt conflicted with the world. The pattering followed a rhythm against the roof of her and her mother’s single-wide trailer, sliding off and dropping onto the windowpane with a hollow thud. Today, it rained because Athena was once again confronted with the realities of unforgiving time and the strange feeling of in-betweenness that could come out of it. She felt she had no label for herself. Yes, she was fourteen, and yes, maybe she was a little too old for trick-or-treating— but where did that put her? Unable to enjoy the treats of childhood and the benefits of adulthood. She felt as if she had been inhabiting this space for way too long: her mom sending her at age seven to the gas station alone at night to pick up ibuprofen for her headaches, or leaving her to walk or take a bus to friends’ homes when her mom refused to take her. Such things had given her a fierce sense of independence. However, she had no one to turn

to when that independence began to shrink and shrivel under insecurity and uncertainty, which seemed to precisely define her adolescent years. In a perfect world, Athena would mold a family to sit around her dining table that would laugh with her, look her in the eye when she spoke, and offer a tissue when she cried. The best she got here was some reheated food from the restaurant next door, and a terse “Life’s not sunshine and rainbows, is it?” from her mom when Athena mentioned something was wrong.

Though the land around the home became cakey and her boots sank into the earthy mud after a bout of rain, she luxuriated in great renewal and a scent of freshness that cut through the air. The stale smell of cigarettes didn’t waft by her nose and linger. When the rain let up, a pale sundown greeted her, light pinks and oranges flitting their way across the sky. The clarity of the atmosphere she got to witness often made her jealous—the sky would be cloudless, but never her mind.

“Oh! Let me guess...butterfly! Monarch, of course.” Aria said as they marched through the door and into Athena’s living room later that night.

Athena did a twirl, dressed head to toe in black with a short orange tutu and thin orange wings looped over her back that dug into her shoulders. She waved the painted umbrella as Aria smiled. They wore a black cat onesie and had painted whiskers across their cheeks. Athena’s mom walked by.

“Aw, don’t you two look cute,” she said, carrying a bowl of popcorn and a bottle of wine to the couch. She propped her feet up on a table holding a bag of candy, ripped open and spilling pieces, though most had already been eaten.

“Gonna leave some for the kids?” Athena asked her mom.

“Can’t I treat myself? No one comes out

here anyways.”

Athena took the bag of candy as her mom unwrapped a final one and popped it into her mouth. She nudged Aria back out the door, dumping the candy bag contents onto a table outside. A raindrop fell on her arm.

“Again?!” Athena whined. It wasn’t how she expected to spend her last Halloween night. She opened her umbrella and hovered it over her and Aria as they began walking away from their home, the stench of oil and gas from the nearby Mountain Mart next door dissipating. Though she was once grateful for the imaginary adventures the expanses of land around her home allowed for in childhood, it meant no neighborhood close by, no family nearby, and none that could be made in such an isolated space.

“Can’t we just stay in your house?” Aria asked, covering into Athena’s arm under the rain.

“You wanna spend more time with my mom? I’m sure she’d love to have a glass of wine with you.”

“No. And no...that’s illegal.”

“Right. I’m surprised you were allowed to even come tonight. What was it your mom said last time? She’d prefer us to hang out in your house, in a more constructive space?”

“She didn’t mean it like that...and she only agreed to tonight because she had to take my brothers trick-or-treating. It’s their



first year going out.”

“Why didn’t we just go with them?”

“Because that would be lame. Plus, this is the neighborhood I grew up in, remember?”

“C’mon you moved when you were like, four. I’m surprised you even remember anything other than your gated neighborhood rich people world.”

“Hey.”

“Alright, alright. Let’s keep going.”

Aria did not actually live in a “gated neighborhood rich people world.” Yes, their house was in a more affluent neighborhood than Athena’s. But it was mostly lower echelon, middle-class suburbia. Nonetheless, the open and clean living room that the front door of Aria’s home opened to, the fact that Aria had their own room, and the fact that their family sat at the table every night for a homemade dinner was enough for Athena to consider it highbrow. Yet there was something discomfoting about it at times— whenever she visited, she felt like she stuck out like a sore thumb. Aria’s mom spoke to her in a tone an octave too high, more patronizing than welcoming, and Athena blamed herself. She felt like there was something wrong with her since she wasn’t happy with her actual home, but couldn’t

find the contentment she thought she would in a house like Aria’s either. She didn’t think there was a place for her. Yet.

The pair made their way to the closest neighborhood, feeling like giants out of place amongst the swathes of children bumblng down the street with their parents. It filled Athena with a strange tugging in her chest. She felt no nostalgia in this scene and yet something fulfilling drifted up through the neighborhood too, wrapping itself around Athena and clutching her tightly.

“You okay?” Aria asked Athena.

Athena snapped out of it for a moment, plastering a smile on her face and nodding until Aria seemed content and convinced.

“Well get ready, because rumor is the house on the end of the street is giving out full size candy bars, and we got to make it there before all these little gremlins do. Since we had to flee your mom so early I think we might just make it.”

They grabbed Athena’s hand and picked up the pace.

She was thankful for Aria telling her what to do. They were the closest thing she had to a sibling, though they weren’t exactly the nurturing or person-to-confide-in type.

She loved Aria, but similar to the way



their house wasn't the fit, there was a lot Athena held back. Something did come out of it nonetheless, as the friendship clarified Athena's yearnings; she wanted a mother who was more supportive and could help guide her in decisions that seemed more important the older Athena got, but didn't want a support system who made decisions for her, like Aria's mom. Why was it so hard to find a balance? People who'd care for her as she is— imperfect, in-between, but trying?

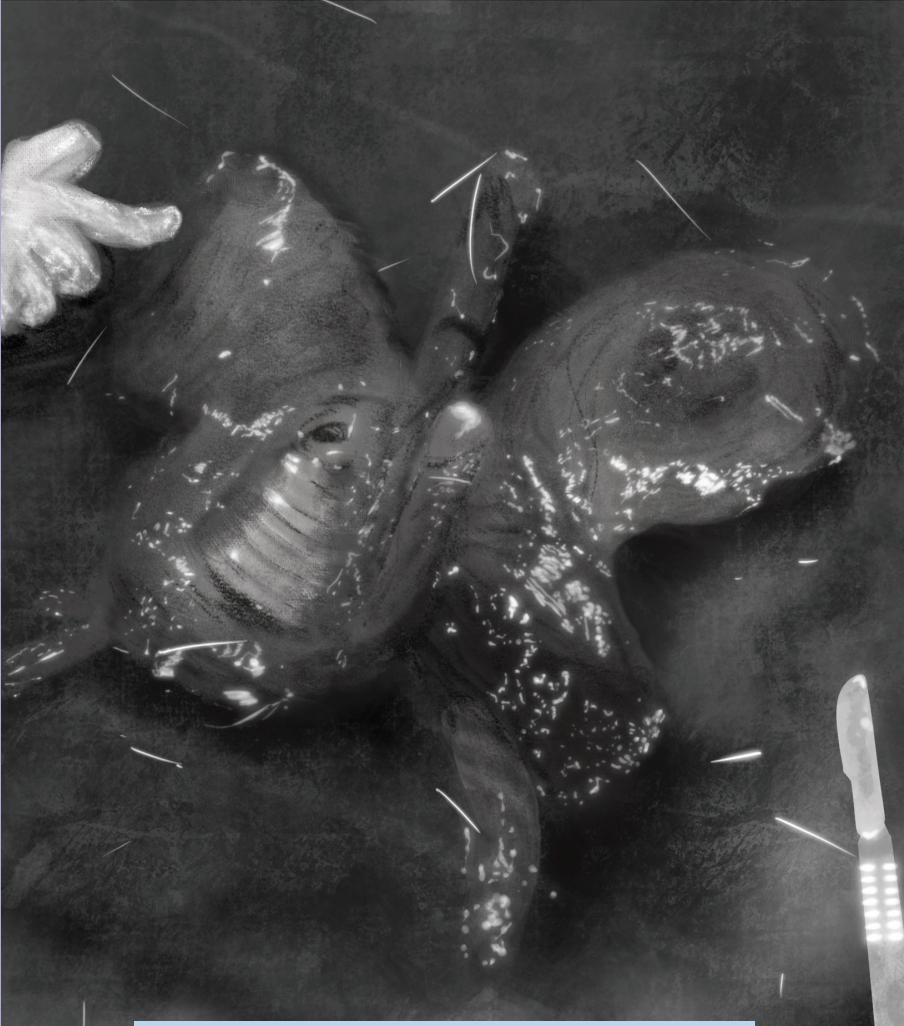
|| THOUGH SHE WAS ONCE GRATEFUL FOR THE IMAGINARY ADVENTURES THE EXPANSES OF LAND AROUND HER HOME ALLOWED FOR IN CHILDHOOD, IT MEANT NO NEIGHBORHOOD CLOSE BY, NO FAMILY NEARBY, AND NONE THAT COULD BE MADE IN SUCH AN ISOLATED SPACE."

Nonetheless, she floated through the night alongside Aria happily for the time being, the act of trick-or-treating feeling familiar. Athena knew what was always coming next as Aria dragged her from house to house: the smiles that met them fading once house owners realized two teenagers stood at their door with open bags instead of cute 5-year-olds who didn't know how to pronounce what they were dressed up as, making handing out candy a chore. Doors were closed on them before they finished their thank-yous.

Proud of their heavy bags, they made their way down the next street, headed back to Athena's home. The houses were sparser on this side of the street, longer yards separating each one from the next. Eventually, Athena and Aria reached a small mint green house. The nostalgia Athena wanted but didn't think she could have. Dilapidated, small, but still standing all the same, the home took Athena back to her childhood.

When she was too young to get to the bus stop herself, Athena's mom would begrudgingly walk her daughter to the end of this street. The mint green house always provided a welcomed pop of color Athena looked forward to. The stubby white picket fence around it always made





ARTWORK: "Deer's Lung" by Suzanne Rickard

her mom laugh and roll her eyes, calling the nice fencing “ironic” for the worn-out home, but Athena liked its charm. She imagined herself in the home’s hallways, tried to picture how the floors would feel under her feet if she ran across them. When Athena daydreamed about herself in the home, her mom wasn’t there. Instead, two faceless parents held out open arms. Her fantasies ended with her imagining herself on the house’s rocking chair, alone with the soft rhythmic creaking on the porch.

She drew this house at school with basic stick figures, and painted her dollhouse, her prized possession, the same color with watery pigment. On nights where her own home felt too small, her mother too uncaring, the mint green house seeped its way into her mind and dreams. These memories dissipated as her bus stop changed, and she outgrew the idea of the home in terms of practicality for her situation. Better not dream too much about things she wasn’t able to attain, she would tell herself as she

blocked its images out.

Until now.

Aria tugged on her arm, trying to skip the house, but Athena wouldn't let them. She took charge this time, pulling them closer to the front door where a single light flickered. Pieces of the fence were missing, the pathway that led up to the house was no longer paved with rocks, instead was left to nature's entropy. Up close you could tell the shrubbery was overgrown and overflowing with jumbled weeds. The wooden stairs were riddled with cracks and chips, creaky as they walked up them. To the right sat the old wooden rocking chair, half of one of the arms missing. Under the worn soles of her shoes, Athena felt the bristles of the doormat: "Smile! You're Home."

Athena knocked on the door.

They waited. Aria was about to turn to their friend and urge her to leave when a middle-aged man showed up in the doorway. There was not a single trace of hair on his face, and Athena noticed that even in the moments where he looked them over, he didn't blink once. His lips curled into a smile. He clapped his hands together, making Aria jump backwards.

"Hello friends," he said. His voice was gentle. Soothing.

"Hi!" Athena perked up.

"Hi." Aria added.

"How are you two doing tonight? Lovely night we're having, huh?"

Aria looked around at the dampness and scoffed.

"We're good, and yes the night is very pretty. So is this house—when I was younger I always—" Athena began.

"It is lovely, isn't it? Quite comfortable for my family and I," the man said.

He smiled, and Athena noted a few gaps between his teeth, pink gums glinting under the porch light.

"Oh, family? I didn't know that—"

"Trick-or-Treat!" Aria interrupted and

held their bag open towards him.

"Right! Halloween." The man turned around and ruffled around in the darkness. When he came back to the door, he shoved his hands into the pair's bags and dropped their contents.

"Enjoy the night, friends." He nodded and shut the door carefully.

Athena skipped her way down the street. There was something rejuvenating about seeing the house again, let alone being on its porch step. Her own yearning for the home since childhood had taken her by surprise, and for the first time that night, she was truly ecstatic as she pulled Aria down the sidewalk.

"He was weird," Aria said.

"Maybe a little. But he was nice. I think you're judging a book by its cover."

Aria rolled their eyes, having heard that line plenty of times.

"Kindness doesn't mean normal."

"Shouldn't it?" Athena asked.

"No. You're kind, but I know you're not normal." They laughed.

They continued walking when a minivan drove up: Aria's mom.

"Happy Halloween!" she said while rolling down a window.

"Time for you to go home?" Athena asked.

"You think I can say no?" They both laughed, but Aria plopped themselves in the passenger seat. Before Athena could ask for a ride home, the woman left. She sighed.

"You look great!" Aria's mom shouted, voice fading.

As she passed more houses, the patter of rain started up again. It seemed fitting, sending off part of her childhood scrunching under a butterfly umbrella and getting soggy socks while dragging along a bag full of candy she now felt should have been saved for actual kids. Her last childhood memory of playing with dolls had been ages ago. But she couldn't see



ARTWORK: "Little Horrors" by Suzanne Rickard

the rated R movies in the theater that her mom instead put on full blast at home, hell, she couldn't even go on the middle school graduation field trip without her mom's ratty signature. Yet here she was, walking in the dark on her long trek back home, alone. Aria would call her lucky; boundariless and therefore free. Athena considered apathy perhaps one of the worst boundaries of all. If she could slip into the shadows of the night, she might just be able to stay this way forever.

She didn't want to think about it much longer, instead she would shove the night away like she did the mint house long ago. No use in crying over collected candy. There was only one opportunity to savor it.

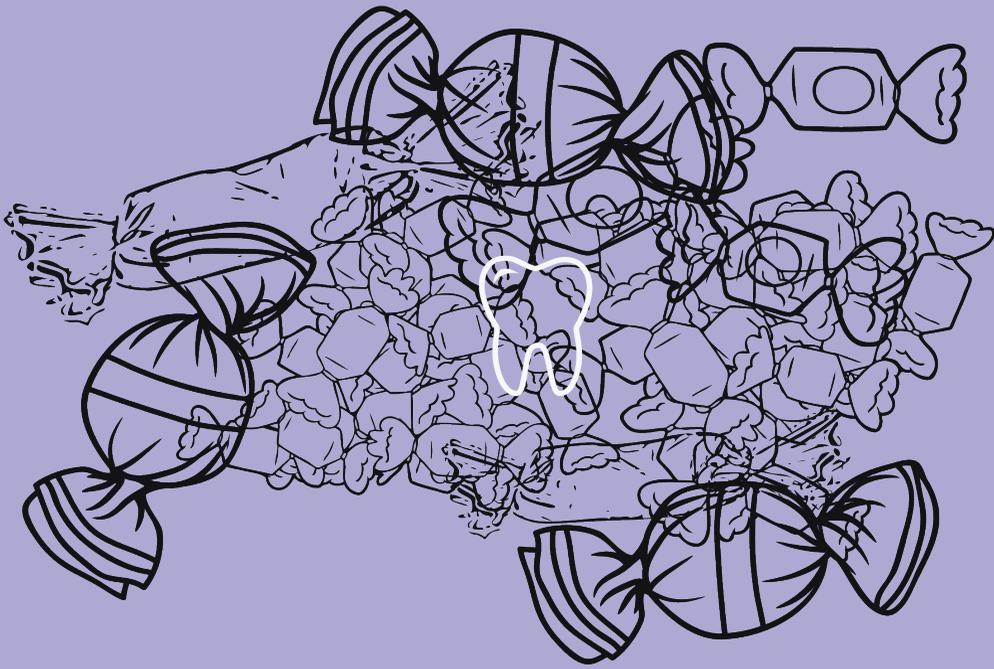
Athena got home faster than she hoped. The candy was still outside, untouched. When she opened the door, she was met with a TV at full volume, black and white creature features playing across the screen. Her mom looked over, raised her eyebrows, and gave Athena a small wave before be-

coming enthralled in the TV again.

Athena slipped out of her costume and buttoned up her pair of pajamas with silhouettes of dogs all over them. Hoisting herself into the chair at the dining table, she poured out her bag's contents and sifted through them. Her fingers hit something hard.

A tooth.

She slid her tongue around her mouth, feeling for any empty sockets, but found none. It still had flecks of dried food plastered to the ridges on top. Athena was transfixed by the long roots as she rolled over the jagged bone between her fingers. She knew to keep it quiet, worried if she screamed her mom would only give her grief if she saw it. It's not like she would do anything with it anyways, or knock on every door and ask who gave her child such a crummy Halloween treat. Besides, the tooth reminded her of her own lost teeth, yanked out on a school playground, pulled out after biting into an apple, and wrapped



up neatly in a small treasure chest charm put around a necklace during classes for safekeeping.

Get anything weird in your candy? she texted Aria.

11:15pm. Aria was asleep. Their mom had probably taken their phone by now.

She set the tooth on the table carefully. As she pulled out more pieces of candy, her mom got up from the recliner, stretching like a cat before putting a cigarette between her lips. She lit it. A puff of smoke wafted by Athena as her mom walked up to the table.

“Anything good?” she asked, rummaging through the small piles of candy her daughter neatly organized.

“I got some Twizzlers...” Athena began quietly, “and a tooth.”

“A tooth?”

Athena nodded, pointing towards the small yellowing molar. Her mom picked it up, inspected it, and nodded as though she concurred, yes, it was in fact a tooth.

“At least it wasn’t a razor in your Twix.”

Athena shrugged, letting out a huff somewhere between a sigh and a

laugh.

As her mom stole a few pieces of candy, she sat quietly, sucking on one of the three lollipops she received. It wasn’t long before she resorted to crunching down on the hard candy, fractals of sugar crumbling onto her tongue. Eventually, her mom fell asleep, and the snoring and blaring TV covered the sound of Athena’s jaw working in steady rhythm against the treats. She looked down to see all three of the lollipops gone, unaware she had gone through them all, their wrappers smoothed out and piled onto one another like napkins. She took the final white stick out from between her lips, held it daintily between her two fingers like her mom did with a cigarette, and placed it onto the table.

All at once, a tiredness hit Athena. Her muscles ached from the long night of walking, her mind felt ragged from its constant running in circles. Why was she the one to get the tooth? She had already concluded the act was deliberate: the world would have to jump through an egregious amount of hoops for this to have been an accident—the tooth would have needed to fallen make its way into a candy bowl, be

picked up, and be put into Athena's bag all without notice. The possibility of someone seeking her out intentionally piled onto the other conflicts she was trying to make sense of felt like pulling teeth.

Athena believed that a part of her wanted to be in control of something in her life at this time, and this presented her the opportunity. She could find the tooth's owner, and...and...well she didn't quite know she would do once she found them. That night, Athena didn't need an answer, but needed rest. As she slept, she dreamt of nothing but the mint house.

"What did you mean by 'did you get anything weird in your candy'?" Aria asked her a few days later during lunch when they returned to school. They pulled out a fruit bar.

"Oh, I—" Athena started, slapping a lunch tray on the cafeteria table.

"Did you mean like something sharp in my candy? Cause my mom checks all my—"

"Like a tooth."

Aria stopped eating, setting their fruit bar down.

"A tooth? Ew." They felt their own teeth, prodding at their mouth.

"Yeah. But it's not a big deal, I just—" Athena waved her fork, hoping Aria would let it go. An 'ew' meant bad news; Aria wouldn't unlatch. She wanted to backtrack to what they were talking about before—what was it? Aria having to go visit their relatives? Athena's encounter with the gas station clerk who'd known her since childhood, but had just recently started telling her how pretty she was?

"Um, Athena. That is a big deal. You know what? It was probably that weird house that you're obsessed with. You know, the one that—"

"Oh, please. You'd say that about any-

one who isn't—" Athena paused, thinking back on the man who gave her candy at that house, the way half his teeth were missing, "Shit."

"Don't say that word." Aria said, picking up and biting into their fruit bar.

When the bus let Athena off, she walked to where her old stop used to be, knowing her mother wouldn't notice her late return home. The mint green home came into view, and she felt the same way she did Halloween night. Something drew her in. Fiddling with the tooth she had kept in her pocket, Athena made her way to the front door and knocked.

No answer.

Her hand tightened around the tooth. Whether it was a lingering childhood curiosity, or a gut feeling that just made the time and place and tooth feel right, Athena found herself sneaking up to a fence that cut across the backyard. She couldn't help herself.

She heard commotion grow louder and became even more intrigued. Athena admitted to herself that it was strange to see such a wide expanse of land confined to such small boundaries. Was it for privacy? Or did they needed to bottle up the house's seemingly good energy in some way?

Athena could just see between the cracks along the side of the fence and began watching the family that sat at a large table on the back porch. She didn't mean to spy, not really. She only wanted to know about the tooth, find answers, or maybe even wanted the family that sat at the table. Each person at the table looked different from the rest, but they laughed as one.

A woman in a glimmering red dress stared at the yard, spacing out and taking sips from her wine glass. After each sip, she'd smile with her lips shut. A plump man sat at the end of the table, waving his hands

around animatedly and making noises that cracked up the people around him. A young man with a blue mohawk leaned over to a short, scrawny man, cupped a hand and whispered something into his ear. The short man nodded and looked into the young man's eyes, patting his hand as his blue mohawk bobbed up and down. Athena saw the back of a woman's head, a low-hanging braid of brunette hair with wisps at the top of her skull. It looked like the back of her mom's head. The woman leaned her head back in laughter, and her hair off in one swoop to reveal a balding head with splotches of thin hair.

She found the scene disturbing in many ways, but found something comforting about the camaraderie between what seemed to be a family. Her eyes fell on the man who had given her the tooth earlier in the night. As he opened his mouth widely, Athena noticed he now had only pink gums. Then she noticed the absence of teeth in every person's mouth until she landed on a boy who sat at the middle of the table. He was about the same age as her. Staring off into space, he raised a hand that wielded a pair of pliers, opened his mouth, and revealed only a few teeth left in his jaw

that sat amongst a dozen deep craters in his gums laced with red velvet blood.

He clamped the tool around one of his teeth, clenched his eyes shut tightly, and pulled. The tooth hung between the clamp, root coated in blood. The boy opened his mouth to groan, his eyes clamped shut in pain. Before any noise came out, the entire group of people began cheering, drowning out the sound of his shouting. Athena let out the smallest squeak. The man who gave her the tooth looked directly at her.

Athena turned and ran as quickly as she could. Before she could successfully leave, a soft creaking lulled through the wind. She looked over to see the rocking chair on the porch swaying. She appreciated the reliable rhythm. Holding onto the tooth in her palm and hearing the continued roar of laughter from the backyard, Athena was coaxed to march up to the porch and plop herself down in that chair.

After a few minutes of blissful rocking, she heard wood creak. The screen door opened carefully to reveal the man Athena made eye contact with no more than ten minutes ago. He looked over to her, and gave a wide smile, gums and all.

"Hello, friend."

