ALCHEMY

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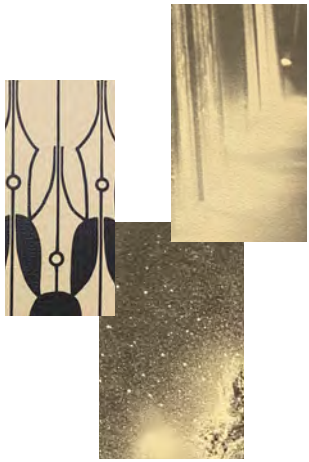
Alchemy



Volume 50 ◦ 2024

The campuses and centers of Portland Community College rest on the traditional lands of Multnomah, Kathlamet, and Clackamas bands of the Chinook, Tualatin Kalapuya, Molalla, and many other tribes who made their homes along the Columbia River.

We thank the descendants of these tribes for being the original stewards and protectors of these lands since time immemorial. We also acknowledge that Portland, Oregon has one of the largest Urban Native American populations in the U.S. with over 380 federally recognized tribes represented in the urban Portland area. We acknowledge the systemic policies of genocide, relocation, and assimilation that still impact many Indigenous families today. The struggle for recognition, systemic change, visibility, and voice are still ongoing. We are honored by the collective work of many Native Nations, leaders, and families who are demonstrating resilience, resistance, revitalization, healing, and creativity.

As we commemorate the launch of such a landmark issue in our now 50 years of collegiate publication, we want to acknowledge the events that are tragically marking our world and history forever. In light of the occurring events in Palestine, and the wide-spread marginalization of voices opposed to Israel's colonial violence against the people of Gaza and the country of Palestine, we would like to offer solidarity with the Radius of Arab American Writers by echoing the statement that they presented earlier this year: In our labor to commemorate the past, and envision new futures, we want to bring attention to the present and recognize that we are publishing during multiple active genocides taking place in Gaza, Congo, and Sudan and that the current violence these communities face is the result of decades of western imperial violence. We understand the limitations of our magazine to actively aid these victims, nevertheless, the least we can do is stand in support and solidarity while we ensure that this dark period of history is not forgotten.

We also pause to recognize and acknowledge the labor upon which our country, state, and institution are built. We remember that our country is built on the labor of enslaved people who were kidnapped and brought to the US from the African continent and recognize the continued contribution of their survivors. We also acknowledge all immigrant labor including voluntary, involuntary, trafficked, forced, and undocumented people who contributed to the building of this country and continue to serve within our labor force.

Furthermore, we want to acknowledge and bring to light the transphobic violence that is being legislated in the United States. We understand that legitimizing these forms of violence endanger the lives of trans, queer, gender-nonconforming, and nonbinary people. We stand firmly in opposition to these measures and offer our support to the LGBTQ+ community.

ALCHEMY
50th Issue

Editorial Team

Editors' Note

Dear Reader,

It might be obvious that when you look back and reflect on 50 years of editorial work, you will be confronted with the past. However, what is not always obvious is how this confrontation will take place. We expect it to manifest in differences – between the past and the present, the current editorial team and the ones prior. But the truth is, this confrontation manifests in similarities: in our shared beliefs and our chosen craft. It is much harder to accept this idea, that when we look at the past, we look at what we share.

While flipping through old issues of *Alchemy*, it became clear that the creation of this issue held the tacit responsibility to represent, not reminisce. Our intention evolved and our task was now, to the best of our ability, to embody the effort, conflict, humor, and persistence of all the people who had ever been involved in the making of this magazine. In retrospect, this is quite a daunting task. However, we were driven to imbue our work with this idea so that we could accurately represent the relationships that had been created between the contributors, the readers, and the editorial teams of *Alchemy* over these past 50 years.

This issue begins with the acknowledgment of creation: of the poem and the story. From there, creation acquiesces to the consequences, good and bad, that we must encounter from the work (and words) we put out into the world. As it progresses, the pieces in the issue reflect on the idea of a society looking at itself not as a whole but as parts, as individuals. It continues through to work that embodies self-understanding, unleashing what is inside, whatever "inside" may be. The issue ends by questioning how we look at ourselves and if, after all that we have learned, we let others look upon us as well.

In this spirit, we editors asked ourselves, will this issue be a reflection of the truth? Will it represent the world currently, or what the world will turn out to be? Will this issue be a reflection of the community created among the editors, contributors, and readers at this moment? Will this issue ground us as we look into the future and live in the uncertainty of it?

Or maybe this issue is simple: much simpler than this note is making it out to be. Maybe this magazine is just an acknowledgment of eight weeks of diligent work, acknowledging judgment and pride; acceptance and humility. Maybe, this issue is just a product of the time we chose to spend together.

In 1973, a community was created to make something. In 2024 this community chooses to continue. To keep making. To give you all, *Alchemy*.

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Fire Under Mountain - Mary Rymer

Back When Tigers Used to Smoke

Matthew D Albertson

Once upon a time, there was no "Once upon a time," no "Kan ya makan," no "Mukashi mukashi,"no "I tetahi wa," no "Zhyv-buv," nor any equivalent. The peoples of the world ate, fought, and slept. They'd craft trinkets, lie, and dream—but the story was not yet born.

There lived a nameless forebear, sitting, gazing into dull embers. This one was old enough to see what was, but not enough to be jaded by it. At the firepit in her band's cavelet camp, she held her hands up to the dull yellow-red glow in prayer, an act of her love for night and dying firelight. It was where she felt alive.

This occurred in those ancient times, when fire was technology. She made space in the coals, set down the last load of fuel, knowing the night nearly done, sleep beckoned. She thought she knew the way back to her bed pelt, but tripped. Her hand shot out, braced against the wall, so rough, so unyielding to break her flesh. Face all a-twisted, anguish never passed her lips, for her people slept in peace.

In the beginning, it was just confusion and burning pain and self-restraint. The stack of wood caught. The dark was banished, and our forebear and looked at the thing that caused her pain. Her grimace relaxed, pain receded, transfixed. She saw upon the wall a strange creature, red and black, dancing lively in flickers upon the slate canvas.

There was; there was not. She glanced from it to the charcoal ring. She crushed a chunk—fitting well in her palm—and began to make the being defined, then a pack

(some many strong, she didn't know the number), then some quarry. By daybreak the wall was full. When her siblings roused, the way children always do, they swarmed, and asked her what she made. She looked at the wall, sat them down, and started speaking softly, for the elders were slow to rise. So she spoke with words akin to these: "Beyond seven mountains, beyond seven rivers, a she-wolf reigned…"

Someday, sometime, they would spin their own yarns. Here, the siblings watched in rapture. What a stark effect, to quiet rowdy children. The rest of her people awoke to this strangeness and, in drowsy awe, joined in kind.

Someone was, someone wasn't. She who was once the fire-tender, now the speaker, continued to share her love of nights with countless "Once upon a times," countless eager apprentices, countless forms most beautiful and most wonderful.

And if they haven't died already, the stories are living happily to this day.

Author's note:

"In writing "Back When Tigers Used to Smoke," which is a modern way of saying "Once upon a time" in Korean, I started each paragraph with different languages' equivalent of "Once upon a time." In order, I used the contemporary English, Ukranian (zhyv-buv), Catalan (això va passar en aquells temps antics), Biblical Hebrew in Genesis (bereshit), Eastern Armenian (linum e, chi linum), Persian (ruzi, ruzgāri), and Persian again (yeki bud, yeki nabud). The way the protagonist begins her story about the wolf is the Polish equivalent (za siedmioma górami, za siedmioma lasami). The original alternatives to "Once upon a time" in the first paragraph are from Arabic, Japanese, Maori, and Ukranian. Lastly, the final paragraph is a way of saying "And they lived happily ever after" in Slovak (a pokiaľ nepomreli, žijú šťastne dodnes)."

The Dào Poetica (诗之道)

Matthew D Albertson

The pen gives pause at page now blank,
A guiding hand without compass.
Ere thoughts can flow, soft muse of thanks,
That poem unwrit find animus.
The void's extraction takes its toll—
Fel imps begin to hiss and quip,
"Thine heart cannot assume this role,"
Yea, words remain upon tongue's tip.
So steeped in doubt, th' imposter deigns
Adorn that mask of writer thus:
Release the reins, see fit to feign.
If heart is lacked, choose heartlessness.
Sans ego, fears of replica,
There starts the dào poetica.

we[1] create[2] our[3] own[4] coming[5] of[6] age[7]

Jae Nichelle

[1]first of the names we gave ourselves
[2]dark-tinted visions, angle
[3]limbs against the wind from car windows. we
[4]nothing. want only each other. we
[5]first of the bodies we found ourselves. full
[6]bellied laughter in parking lots & bars. when
[7]is meaningless, there are always firsts to discover.

Ode to Dr. Pepper

Esa Harrington

Dear ole' Dr. Pepper, you settled my tummy
and gave me alone time with Dad. I think
about him when popping the crisp tab.
It brings me back to late-night talks
at the dining room table. He'd let me stay up
and we'd split a can, ¾ for him,
¼ for me. It was pouring
outside and I was scared of thunder and
the bullies at school. I'd say
I was nauseous. He'd say soda helps that.
It rained on the day he left us, or rather
it sleeted icy blades
from the sky. The ice in my cup kept
my soda cool.
Some pour beer out for the dead. I pour you,
Dr. Pepper, out onto the ground
¾ for Dad, ¼ for me.

Joel

Devan Hawkins

Joel's last name comes after mine. Just like the alphabet goes "A, B, and C," when the teacher reads our names from her notebook eventually it goes, "Hogan, Horvath." Me then Joel. There is nothing special about that. Everyone has someone whose name comes after theirs unless your last name starts with Z or something else close to the end of the alphabet. But in school, when your name is next to someone else's name, it matters, a lot. Sometimes I feel like me and Joel are twins. Not because we look alike or because we act alike, but because we end up doing so much next to each other. When the school year started, we both were put at the same table. Later in the year, when we went to get our pictures taken in the cafeteria, we stood in line together.

Sometimes I wonder how long it will last. Will our names be next to each other with pictures of our heads, like those in my mom's yearbook? Will our names be called after each other when we graduate? But that all seems so far away. Like the year 2015 in Back to the Future. Sometimes I wonder if another kid will eventually come between us. I've tried to think of a last name between Hogan and Horvath. There must be a lot, but I haven't come up with one yet.

I've thought about why Joel's name is next to mine. I think that's a question that doesn't have an answer. On The Simpsons, they said that those questions—like asking "How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?" are called rhetorical questions. Once I was over my friend Kenny's house and I kept thinking about why I was born with my parents, and he was born

with his. I imagined what it would be like to wake up in his bedroom. Or to eat the weird bread with the swirls on it that his family bought. Or to do whatever his family did on Christmas. I thought about that for a while—why was I where I was, and he was where he was? I never got anywhere. I don't think that question has an answer either. It's a rhetorical question too.

Joel has a teacher who is always with him. I've almost never heard Joel say anything. There are a few other quiet kids in class, but it is not the same thing as with Joel. At least five times this year he has run out of class screaming in the halls. Other kids would laugh when he did that, especially the first few times. The teacher told them to stop. I didn't think it was funny. The first time that happened I jumped and was really scared. It's gotten less scary each time, but I still don't think it's funny.

One time I asked my mom about Joel. I told her that he wasn't like the other kids. I wanted to know why. I wanted to know if he would always be like that. I wanted her to tell me he wouldn't always be like that. I thought maybe he was just like a big toddler. Eventually, he would grow out of it, like I had. Maybe it just took longer for him than it did for most people. She told me sometimes babies are born who aren't able to do stuff—like some can't walk or some are blind. It was something similar for Joel, except that his problem was with his brain. She said he probably would always be like that.

When she said that my throat felt really tight, like I had a baseball stuck inside. I started to cry. She told me that Joel was probably very happy. For some reason that made me want to cry even more. I started to wish that I didn't know Joel. I wished that one of us had a different last name, so we would never have to sit next to each other or line up next to each other, or have our names called after each other. I didn't want to think about him. I asked my mom to shake me back and forth like they do in cartoons. I wanted to scramble my brains and forget everything.

There are so many words. Almost every week I hear some words that I've never heard before. I know I had to

have learned the other ones too at some point, but I can't remember when. It's just like flavors. I can't remember the first time I ever tasted a strawberry, or a carrot, or bread. I do remember the first time I tasted mint ice cream though. It was at one of my mom's friend's weddings. I remember the first time I heard the word retard too.

It was Taylor who said it. He wasn't even talking about Joal that time. We were playing four square on the blacktop near the playground. Taylor had told Kyle that he spiked the ball outside of the box, so he should be out. Kyle said he was wrong. They argued with each other. Kyle didn't back down, which was rare. I thought they might start fighting. Kyle got really close to Taylor's face, but then Taylor called him a retard.

Kyle gave up quickly after that. It seemed like the word had some power. Just like being a pussy or a bitch, I guessed that no one wanted to be a retard either. Someone would usually tell me what those other words meant, but I wasn't able to figure out what a retard was. I didn't want to ask either Kyle or Taylor. I did not want to be the one that didn't know this new word. It wasn't a normal insult like stupid or spaz. If Taylor had called Kyle one of those words, I don't think he would have backed down as quickly as he did.

I needed to know what the word meant, but I was too embarrassed to ask anyone. Sometimes I would try to push it out of my mind. I decided that I would use the word around my mom and see what she said. For weeks, I was looking for any opportunity to use it. I had to say it just like Taylor had, but I never seemed to get the opportunity. Until one day, our dog ran out of the house. I was opening the door to help my mom carry the groceries in and he slipped past me. He would do that a lot and it was always hard to get him to come back inside. I ran outside after him and kept trying to chase him back into the house. He turned it into a game. The more I chased him, the more fun he had and the less he wanted to go back. Eventually, I ran inside and put some food in his bowl. I stood on the deck and shook the pellets around so he could hear them. This usually worked, but he didn't come back.

My mom was standing behind me. I knew it was my chance.

"He won't come in. He's acting like a retard."

Right away my mom asked me to repeat what I just said. The way she was looking at me made me not want to, but I did.

Mom told me to never use that word again. I asked her why.

She told me it was used for people like Joel. She said it wasn't nice.

I never did use the word again. A few times after that, I tried to tell other kids not to use that word. Especially, when I started hearing them saying it to make fun of Joel. They never listened. They would say things like: "He's not even here," or "He can't understand what I'm saying," or "What? You don't think it's funny? Maybe you're a retard like him."

When they started saying that last thing, I stopped asking them to not say it.

Every Tuesday, when everyone else is in music class, with a different teacher from almost everyone else. Another kid Kevin, from a different homeroom, comes with me. Mr. Howard's office is in a part of the school far away from all the other classrooms. The first time I walked up there with Kevin, I was scared.

I go there because it's hard for me to pronounce words with R's and L's. One time I wanted to say I love my life, but it sounded like I said I love my wife. That was embarrassing. The lessons are boring. Most of the time we would talk about where to put our tongues when saying different words.

Kevin and I do our best to make sure that no one notices that we walk the opposite way when the others walk to music class. One time we both went to the bathroom as the classroom emptied. We stood next to each other for longer than we normally would washing our hands. We both knew why we were doing it.

A few times a friend asked me why I wasn't in music class. I made up excuses about feeling sick or needing to be somewhere outside of school, like a doctor's appointment. These excuses seemed to work, but if one of my classmates saw me walking to that strange wing of the school or worse saw me in that small classroom with Mr. Howard being told how to move my mouth so I could speak like them, I would have no excuses. They would know the truth. Maybe they would call me a retard.

It took me a long time to decide whether I should invite Joel to my eighth birthday party. None of my friends had invited him to theirs. My mom told me that it was a good idea. I wasn't so sure. I told my mom that it would be too hard to watch him. My mom said it wouldn't be much worse than watching a group of ten eight-year-olds already was. She said that Joel's aide from school, Mrs. Miller, would come along to help.

I think I only wanted to have a birthday party because it's what every other kid did. I never really liked them. I felt so weird having everyone sing to me. And even when I liked a present someone bought me, I still felt like I was being phony when I thanked them for it. I invited ten of my friends over for the party. Seven of them were from my class—including Joel—and three of them were friends from my street.

I wanted to have a pirate birthday party. My mom bought a pirate cake. We had a mock treasure hunt. The only thing that wasn't about pirates was the game of street hockey we played when everyone was waiting for their parents to pick them up. It wasn't my idea to play. I wanted to play whiffle ball, but almost everyone else said they wanted to play street hockey, so I went along with them. I was never very good. At least Joel was able to play. He had always played it with us in gym class. He could do almost everything we did in gym class. The only thing they wouldn't let him do was to climb the rock wall.

Joel chased the ball like the rest of us. He even took a few shots between one of the pairs of chalk marks we had made on either side of the driveway. Most of my friends would give him space. Joel was on my team. I was happy when I would see him receive a pass and do his best to keep control of the ball as he ran down the driveway.

Taylor was on the other team. I had wanted to invite him even less than Joel, but because he was popular with the other boys, I thought that I had to. He was really good at street hockey and basically any other sport we played. I would never tell anyone, but I was jealous.

But I didn't get angry about him being better than me. I was used to that. What did get me angry was how every time Joel got a hold of the ball, Taylor would yell to him to pass the ball, even though he was on the other team. If he was doing this to anyone else, I probably would have laughed about it. Every time I heard his voice, I would look around. I really wanted someone else to see what he was doing. None of my friends seemed to notice. If they did, they didn't care. Joel's aide was talking to my mom. They didn't see anything. I think Taylor knew no adults were watching him. He knew none of the others would say anything.

I had enough. After Taylor had stolen another ball from Joel and got a goal I walked over to him when he was high-fiving my friends.

"Quit it," I told him.

"Do you want me to go easy on you because it's your birthday?" He turned his head and laughed with the others.

"Stop telling Joel to pass the ball to you."

"I'm just messing around. It's not a big deal. Look." He pointed at Joel who was waiting for the ball at the other side of the driveway. He was smiling. "He's having fun. It's just a game."

That was true. It was just a game. I knew that.

"He's having fun," Taylor repeated.

That upset me more. It was one thing to be a jerk, but to be a jerk and act like you were doing Joel a favor was even worse. I walked over to him. Everyone had stopped playing.

"Do you we-ally want me to stop?"

He pronounced the 'r' in really with a 'w' instead to make fun of the way I said it. No one had made fun of me like that in a while. I didn't know what to say, so everyone else started playing again. I just stood in the same place and watched. He did it again. He called to Joel and Joel passed the ball his way. I had enough.

Taylor was a year older than me. He stayed back one year, but no one ever had the balls to make fun of him for that. It just meant he was bigger than everyone else. But because I punched him when he was running and he was not expecting it, he tripped over and landed on his face. It felt so weird when my hand hit his mouth. It felt like there was an invisible forcefield, like in Star Wars, that I had broken through. It felt unreal.

His nose was bleeding when he pushed himself back up. I could see a small pool on the pavement. The game stopped. Everyone was staring at us. I was terrified. Taylor's bloody face made him look even tougher than he already did, and I felt smaller than I already was.

My mom came running over. She had stopped talking to Joel's aide.

"What happened?" She yelled.

No one answered here. There are rules about that. Taylor just said that he tripped and busted his nose. He wasn't protecting me. After that, everyone kept playing, but no one looked at me. Slowly parents showed up and the most any of my friends did was mumble a goodbye when they left. Taylor didn't say anything. Joel was the last one to leave. He did say goodbye after his mom reminded him. He even added a thank you.

I was surprised. Taylor never ended up doing anything to me. But that Monday at school, I could tell whenever someone saw me, they were thinking about what had happened with Taylor. They seemed like they were avoiding me. Except for my closest friends, very few of the other kids talked to me.

I started to regret hitting Taylor. Not because of the pain I caused. Not because of his bloody nose. Not even because everyone else saw it happened. It was because the moment my fist was going through the air and landing on Taylor's nose, I wasn't thinking about Joel at all.

The Cure

Amita Basu

Alban's within reach of the fireplace but still playing innocent, sitting on the carpet in lotus pose. He's been inching towards it and away from me, peeking back up at me as I iron the clothes, then looking back at the book in his lap as his butt muscles earthworm firewards. When the fire's five feet away he loses all caution and stares, the light dancing orange on his face, yellow in his blue eyes. He leans over and reaches his arm towards the grate, fingers already through the grate, all else forgotten, his body about to fall forwards.

"Alban!" I warn.

He gasps, his hand retracts, and he loses his balance and falls over onto the carpet. He giggles, picks himself up, and walks back to his beanbag near my ironing board. I've been ironing all morning and the pile's still endless, as it was yesterday, as it'll be tomorrow. I wish I'd let him touch the fire.

I walk my old-fashioned iron over to the fire and refill it with fresh embers.

Alban watches me hungrily all the while. "I just wanted to know how fire feels," he says, running his hand sheepishly through his grizzled hair. As he sits below me his hand steals towards my iron.

I slap his hand away. "Forget about it. Tell me about your book."

"It's about meme theory!" He rubs his hands. His bright eyes, as big as when he was five, leap across the ceiling as he gathers his thoughts. "It's a compendium of research papers. The idea is that, just like genes survive and reproduce based on their fitness, so do memes." His

face glows as if the fire still shone on it: an unlined face, the complexion fresh, the features open, even though he's almost fifty. "A meme is an idea, you know, a catchy one that generates many variations. Like ballgames, or, or," he stutters a little in his excitement, "berry ice-creams, or eternal youth. Cool concept, right, Aima?" He effervesces joy and searches my eyes for joy, as if watching me unwrap the best birthday present.

Is it cool? I'm trapped here forever and nothing matters. "Here's a meme for you," I say. "For centuries, some people have believed that the only way we can really learn is through pain. What d'you think of that?"

Alban laughs. "You said that yesterday, Aima, and the day before! You must be getting dementia." His dancing eyes invite me to laugh with him. I don't. His laughter dies. He springs to his feet, his book falling away, and takes my face in his hands. "Maybe you do have dementia! We've got to find a doctor! Where will we find a doctor on Mars?"

I shake him off. "Rubbish. I only keep saying it because you never reply. I know I've said it before."

"Oh, then you're fine!" His tanned face relaxes. "Well, I don't think it's true that you can only learn through pain. If it were true, I'd know it, wouldn't I? I know a lot."

"Yes, you do."

Something darkens the window and draws our eyes. The eagle, dark against the sun, flits past the window again then disappears, probably to perch on the roof. We gaze down the hill: scrub and grassland for miles on every side, the leaden sky wide.

"You do know a lot of stuff," I repeat, studying Alban's face, "but it doesn't do you any good, does it?" I make no effort to animate my flat voice. "You're stuck out here forever, like a loon locked away." I know I shouldn't. It's like kicking a puppy. But I'm stuck here because of him and he doesn't even know it. Well, it's all eleven of them, but he's the worst. Unquenchable.

Alban's face spasms with pain and joy surges in my heart. His face scrunches up small and teary-eyed like a toddler's and my joy sinks cold through my gut towards my feet, leaving my gut hollow. Slowly his face clears. He laughs and says, in the same tone, "I know a lot of stuff, don't I?"

My pulse slows and then I realize it was racing, that time had slowed down. For his face didn't clear slowly, it cleared quickly: the time seemed long to me only because I was watching his face, terrified that this time I had managed to do what I've been trying to do for fourteen years: to throw away his love and respect. "Yes, you do, Alban. I'm proud of you."

He hugs me so suddenly I almost drop my iron. I shut my eyes and pretend it's my son hugging me, my son who has finally forgotten all he's done to hurt me, who has therefore finally forgiven me. But Alban doesn't smell like my son: he smells of shaving cream. I open my eyes and run my finger over his scar: two inches behind his hairline, parallel to it, three inches long, smooth and colorless, visible through his thinning hair. I drop my arms. He releases me.

"Put your book away, Alban. Get some exercise."

"Can I help you iron? That looks like good exercise."

Afraid to open my mouth again, I shake my head. He wanders around the drawing room we all share. He stops before the front door of our mansion-sized log cabin. I refresh the water in the steamer and watch him gazing out the windows, left of the front door and right of the front door. Then he seems to wake up, with a shudder in the muscles where his neck meets his back. He looks up at the speaker above the grandfather clock. The others are in the yard beyond the kitchen: over the speaker we hear them playing catch, cleaning the fountain, and feeding the goats and chickens. He heads kitchenwards. Soon among the other voices I hear his: a rich tenor, which might be pleasant if you didn't have to listen to it all day.

I don't have to look out, or even listen to their voices, to picture them: squatting ungracefully over flowerbeds, trying to lure ants up twigs, wrestling in the dry grass. Their piping voices leave me cold.

A shiver of guilt creeps up my spine. I shake it off. They're not my children. We were born in the same year. It's sheer chance that's put them there and me here. 'Chance' is what the privileged call privilege.

"But what's the problem," says Dylan, "with marigolds and sunflowers in the same plot?"

"Two flowers of the same color," says Harriet, "that'll look weird, like, accidental. We can do sunflowers and lavender? That'll be a nice contrast in color and shape."

My attention wanders to another conversation. "Just wait till spring," Tess is whispering. "We'll sneak out the front door and down the hill and search for signs of life beyond the glass dome."

"Aima says she's positive there's no other life on Mars," Jason whispers back, "no oxygen or nothing. What if we die out there?"

"She's got to be wrong," says Tess. "How can we have all these birds and trees here, and nothing out there? And it's just like it was on earth, like in the photos in the books. Look, we won't tell Aima we're going to explore, that'll just worry her, but when we come back with good news, she'll be as happy as" –

I speak into the transmitter hidden in the wood-bead bracelet on my wrist. "You're all jackasses, and you're on Mars because your families sent you away, and nobody wants you."

I hear my voice ringing out from the speaker in the garden. Amplified, the flatness becomes harshness. A hush falls on the eleven survivors. I've done my duty but I can't bear to turn and face them through the back windows. I can picture them, suddenly still in the weak winter sunshine. I iron their clothes assiduously. The silence is brief.

"But what's the problem," says Dylan, "with mixing marigolds and sunflowers in the same plot?"

Harriet scoffs. I hear a splash: it must be Tess and Jason, who've forgotten what they were doing, and have decided they were about to splash around in the fountain barefoot in January. I speak into my microphone sweetly to tell them to get out, reminding Tess she's just got over her flu.

"Alright, Aima!" Tess and Jason chorus liltingly, like children. Soon I hear them setting out with armfuls of hay towards the stables, discussing whether the fog is thinner than yesterday. I'm relieved they've forgotten the hurtful words they made me say. I wish I could forget.

Why do they get to be happy? I've tried all the therapy there is. I grew up envying my sister, wondering whether happiness just depended on the brain you had. Now I know. Oh, I can act happy when I need to. How d'you think I got this job? I always pushed myself. I didn't want to end up like those losers who break down in their 20s, like a toy train that stops short and says No, they simply can't, just can't manage one more lap around the toy tree through the toy station. Not me. I refused to give up, I've been fighting all my life. So when the project that wouldn't let me in on the other side, the project I'd been working for since I was sixteen, wanted someone 'well-adjusted' to look after these freaks, there I was.

The grandfather clock strikes noon. I walk towards the mirror, smoothing my hair and straightening my collar. I brace myself. Living around these eleven, my own face is always a shock. Today I see that the wrinkles from the corner of my mouth have cut their trenches almost to my chin. My eyes are leaden, their whites never-again-white. My skin, which lied so beautifully when I was young, has done a reverse Dorian Gray and betrays decades of guilt-binging on junk. I restrain the urge to punch the mirror. Glancing all around the empty room I remove the mirror and retrieve my mobile phone from the hidden compartment.

"All well," I email. "Tess's stomach flu is almost gone. I said I got the antibiotics from an old pharmaceutical pod I dug up during the night. When they heard that they spent all week digging in the garden. They keep planning a search party to explore the rest of Mars and I keep nipping it in the bud. So they keep hatching the same beginning-of-plan every day, and I've got to quell the same beginning-of-plan every day. But it's manageable." It's like babysitting the world's easiest, most frustrating toddlers. "I bet you

they die of old age without realizing we're still in Kansas, just like in their favorite book." For nobody's told these eleven, not as far as they remember, that grownups don't read fairy tales.

It's been fourteen years. Is anyone still reading my reports? I send the email, lock my phone up again, and return to my ironing.

These eleven are the remnants of a failed experiment. Thirty-two years ago, one hundred volunteers signed on at age eighteen. It turns out that no, people would not be better off if they could forget pain instantly. These eleven can still feel pain, physical and psychological. What they can't do is learn from pain or remember pain. The surgery lesioned the neural circuits that connect the experience of pain to the process of learning: a pretty simple process, really. These eleven can't form conscious memories of being hurt. They can't even experience the long-term potentiation that underlies reflex conditioning a la Pavlov's dog.

After the 89th death among the 100 – a gang of teenagers kidnapped the subject and tortured her till she committed suicide – the scientists finally tried to reverse the procedure. That wasn't so simple. The scientists had tried at first to achieve the painblocking effect by altering gene expression. But the gene regulators quickly learned from experience and reversed the scientists' fiddling. So the scientists had had to perform brain surgery. The subjects' lesions were permanent. Finally, long after the condemnatory articles and cruel memes had petered down, they gave up on their much-lauded, much-hated experiment. The bigwigs sponsoring the study decided, since these eleven could never function normally, to reward their contributions to science with paradise: a house-in-the-middle-of-nowhere with a full-time caretaker.

So, fourteen years ago, I threw my life away – for good money, paid not to me (for what would I do with money here) but to my children back in Chicago, who told me to drop dead, who probably think their wish came true, who don't think to wonder where the money's coming from, because they were always smart that way. The eleven's families are getting paid too, handsomely: they're getting the compensation the eleven were getting when we were back in the real world. All the families had to do was agree never to contact them. They agreed. Have you ever been around a toxic-positive person?

The voices in the garden have dispersed. Last to stay out as always are Clint and Patty. He's whistling and she's humming the same song, the whistling two octaves higher and moderately out of tune. The dissonance pleases my ears.

The kitchen door closes softly. I pretend not to hear Alban till he's crept up almost behind me. I whirl suddenly and catch him, his arms extended, his hands put out as if to choke me. He grins ghoulishly and waves his still-taut hands.

Is he just playing, like the overgrown baby he is, or does he remember somewhere in his ravaged brain that I'm the person who hurts him? There's no guilt in his face but his body is slightly crouching and his fingers curl tense. The scientists assure me that the eleven form no memories after any kind of pain. You don't think I'd be here, alone among them, insulting them whenever they're planning something dangerous, for their own silly sakes, if I didn't believe the scientists? I hate the scientists – I wanted to be among the 100, nobody deserved it more than I did, I who'd hurt so badly all my life, I who'd quit school to wipe their petri dishes and eavesdrop on their lunches. I hate them - but I believe them.

"You're still ironing!" Alban exclaims.

"Hmm." I don't have to iron so much every day – these fools don't know shabby from dead – but there's nothing really to do. I can't read and garden all day, here in the middle of nowhere, and care what flower I'll plant, and pretend it matters what's in my head when nobody will ever know. Ironing keeps me from bashing my head in.

Alban's watching the steam curling up white from Jason's button-up shirt, the wrinkles disappearing, the heavy iron sleekly gliding. His face shines with joy and curiosity eternally new. I can almost see his ears perking like a puppy's as the steam whistles. He's fifty and dumb as soup but he looks as if the world were still ahead of him, as

if nobody's ever told him he was a burden on society, as if he had a right to be here, well-fed and well-clothed.

Don't you go pitying him! All the subjects were affluent and well-educated. The scientists spent weeks explaining the proposed experiment to them: everything they knew, and hypothesized, and feared. All 100 gave their informed consent.

Alban is inching towards the ironing board, his eyes fixed on the iron with its bottom glowing red, his feet close together, his hands clasped, a conciliatory smile hovering around his lips. For he does remember all the times I've warned him away from the fireplace, the front door, the iron.

I readjust my bracelet, switching off my speaker. After all these years, is anyone still listening? But you can never be too careful. I know I whine a lot, but I need this job.

I look up and catch him sneaking. He stops short with a foolish grin. "You're curious about this, aren't you, Alban?" I smile, as if he were my son, my eldest son when I hoped against hope that my children would fix me, before I broke them too. I glance all around. Outside the front windows the prairie stretches endlessly. The speaker from the garden buzzes softly with the wind: the other ten have gone to dress for lunch.

"I know it's fire," Alban replies. "I just want to know how it feels." His voice whines and my heart hurts. I never could tell my children no.

"Come, Alban. Just this once, I'll show you."

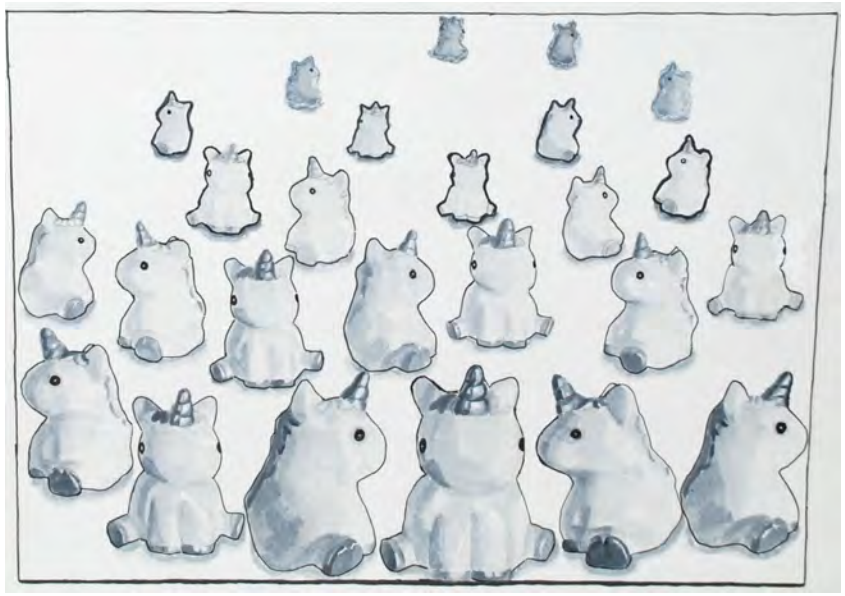
He perks up, eyes shining, face happy, simply happy like a lab dog when you pick up the stick after you told him you'd never play Fetch again.

"Roll up your sleeve, darling."

He rolls up his sleeve and looks curiously at the scars, shaped like curved Vs, running from his wrist towards his elbow. The ones near the wrist are fainter and smoother, but all of them have healed and scarred over. I'm not a monster: I just do this once a month. He cocks his head with interest, and rubs at the scars with his forefinger. His face remains blank and his eyes wide. He looks up at me. I'm holding the iron up. His smile is like your long-lost dog wagging his tail when you weep with joy to see him and say, 'Come!'

He walks around my ironing board, his arm bare, his child's face squirming with joy that he will finally discover how fire feels.

Don't go judging me. He won't remember a thing. I'm the fool: I wish I were him.



Who am i

Albert Lopez

Who am i
A cosmic speck within the universe
Existing in a sense of simultaneous sensory overload.
Days flash by as a burning reel of film
My travels taking me far from home

Who am i
A backpack child
From house to apartment to condo.
Making friends as fast as I would lose them
Becoming numb to the words “come on, go”

Who am i
The drift of the morning dew on grass
That dim, flickering light in the room
A neighborhood I thought I called home shrinking in the rear view mirror
Scattered assortments of memories, pieces I can’t move

Who am i
I’m a center puzzle piece with no place until the end
I’m the child that had to grow up fast
Hoping bad days would pass
My manner of speech sounding crass
Missing out on a childhood that everybody else got
And eventually not caring what anybody else thought.

Who am i
I am the valiant victor that got tired of being the victim
And moved on to accept playing the villain.
An animal with such ferocity that speeds towards goals with velocity
To develop a skill just for thrill so I won’t be that kid watching from the window sill.

Who am i
I am that backpack child
But I am confidence.
I am that only child with no memory of childhood,
But now my gaze is forward in excitement
No longer looking back.

I’m that same cosmic speck free floating throughout the universe
And I’m just here for the ride.

Lovers Blues

Jae Nichelle

yes I've got the change in my pocket, the whole world in my hands
I done bought it for my baby, cause she deserves the whole land

we don't have a lot of money, so oh the things I done did
people will tell you I'm plumb crazy, so I don't let them tell it

I've got my love in my pocket, the whole world in my hands
about to bring it to my baby, not many get this here chance

we don't have a lot of money, so oh the things I done did
vowed to never want another, deleted my contact list

I've got my blood in my pocket, the whole world in my hands
when my baby sees me coming, it might put her in a trance

we don't have a lot of money, so oh the things I done did cut
out my stomach, drowned my liver, washed old men off my lips

I've got my words in my pocket, the whole world in my hands
when my baby takes it from me, she gives it to her new man

I don't have no more money, so oh the things I can't do now
my house and pockets empty, & I see the world is, too

PART TWO

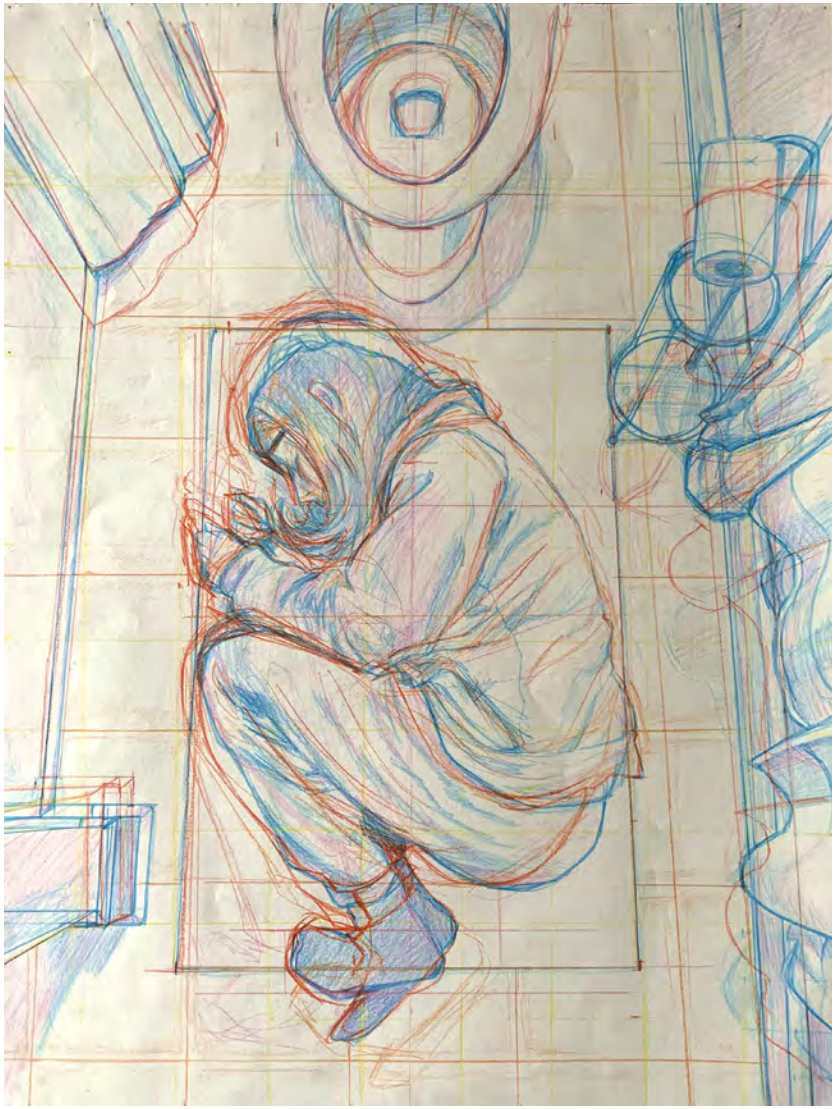
yes, You wants to say along with a host of other words: thrilling, unbelievable, courageous. unable to breathe. this is not like TV. the moments are small and missable. there's the time she puts her legs on Your legs while laying on the couch, that one soft pull of Your hair, moments like eyelashes You pulls from her cheeks then blows, watches, then gone.

let's try again

You is worthy of watching her favorite movies. love is not windswept & wild, it is arguing over an actress' name on a tuesday—***you're saying this isn't the same girl who was in that other thing?*** now, apparently, You is missing the point & you're arguing about something new, how You never pays attention & You still isn't, is googling the actress' name and You was right, though that isn't the point & now she's

gone. every route ends

somehow this is a lot like TV—all little things become something bigger. the moments are small and collectible, and You stores them carefully, backs them up in onedrive for annual reminders. there's the time the movie ended well. there's the time it didn't. there's the time she pulled an eyelash from Your cheek, disappeared it before You knew it was a tear.



Scattered

Gigi Giangiobbe

For citations. see the bibliography at the end of the issue.

One afternoon, my grandmother told me, "We're going to make cookies." Excitedly, I followed her to the kitchen and waited for her to get out the chocolate chips, frosting, cookie cutters and sprinkles. Instead, what she pulled out was a small torture device and a bowl of strange orange-ish peaches. No—Apples? No, definitely tomatoes. "Are those tomatoes?!" I asked Nana, unaware of how completely uncultured I was. "These are persimmons," she replied with patience, a smile in her eyes.

We proceeded to mix flour, a modest amount of sugar, and other standard cookie ingredients into a big bowl. We added the friendliest, warmest spices—cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves. It turns out the small torture device was called a food mill. She took a persimmon—the whole fruit—and put it into the mill. Then, she turned the handle, *crank crank, crank*, and the persimmon was pulverized by a metal plate as it was smashed through a hundred tiny holes. The end result was a beautiful, saturated orange mush. She let me crush the rest of the persimmons one after the other, until the carrot-colored pulp had accumulated in a deep bowl.

The name *persimmon* derives from the Algonquian word *pessemin*, not to be confused with the Latin word *pessimus*, meaning "the worst." Though people who have eaten under-ripe persimmons would strongly disagree, persimmons are in fact, not the worst. The Algonquian people have been eating these fruits raw and drying the fruits for winter consumption for centuries. These persimmons are *Diospyros virginiana*, native to Turtle Island, like the Algonquian people. Like many Indigenous

diets, the Alqonquin's is based on seasonal availability. They harvest when the time is right. This knowledge has been passed down from their elders and ancestors before, and theirs before; they know what foods are ready to eat, and they don't take more than they need. *Pessemin* are not harsh when raw like some varieties native to Asia, which require the application of heat or drying to truly enjoy the fruit.

In the Buddhist religion, persimmons are a symbol of transformation. When one cuts a persimmon in half, an eight-pointed star is revealed. This eight-pointed star is a symbol of cosmic order. The belief of cosmic order is also known as manifesting good things: turning good thoughts into even better realities. This star-like shape changes from fruit to fruit; no two persimmons are the same.

In China, persimmons are an auspicious gift to newlyweds to celebrate eternal love. The fruit can be very astringent and bitter if not ripe and ready. So can humans. Conversation can turn acrimonious, spouses can become resentful, and mothers and daughters can drift apart. Relationships can become intense and leave a lifelong bad taste in your mouth if not treated with respect. If both parties are not ready to open up, how will their seeds germinate into a fruitful tree? If the tree bears fruit, who's to say it will be delicious if no care went into growing it? If the tree is not supported by healthy roots?

My mom and her mother, my Nana, were not close. Part of it was generational differences—my grandmother was a nurse in the second World War, my mom was a teenager during the *Summer of Love*, in the epicenter no less, a bus ride away from San Francisco. My mom was one of four girls, and her mother's attention was split five different ways. Two of my mom's sisters, the oldest and the second-youngest, seemed to have everything figured out. The three of them enjoyed singing, enjoyed reading the same literature; they were three seeds of a persimmon. Their youngest sister marched to the beat of her own drum and could care less what others thought of her. She wasn't a persimmon but she was still a fruit, and that was good enough for her. My mom cared what people thought of her; she cared very much, and yet—painfully—she was always a bit different. She felt awkward and increasingly frustrated. She was a black sheep, neither fruit nor vegetable. She lacked confidence and common bonds that could link her and her mother together, and so she began to resent her. They both grew bitter.

A persimmon tastes similar to a date when ripe, but not exact—nothing tastes *exactly* like the sweet orange-colored fruit. No texture is quite the same. Before they are ready for harvest, the flesh of persimmons contains many tannins, which is what gives the underripe fruit its bitter, astringent flavor and gives the poor souls who eat it a cotton-mouth to reckon with.

Drying persimmons is a long, labor-intensive process. In Japan, persimmons are commonly dried, so they can be enjoyed months after harvest. *Hoshigaki* (from *hoshi*: dried, and *kaki*: persimmon) are prepared using a technique that dates back centuries. Each individual persimmon must be peeled, tied with twine or other string, hung to ensure it is not touching another persimmon (or anything else), and then gently massaged *every day for up to six weeks.*

What I would give to be a Japanese persimmon.

After a minimum of four weeks of this luxurious treatment, the persimmons are dried-out yet still malleable, darker in color, and quite literally smelling of sugar and spice and everything nice. While these divine fruits are drying, they must be hung somewhere dry and warm, with constant air circulation. They are happiest in direct sunlight.

My grandmother was the only person I knew who drank the sun. She lived with my grandfather in a two-bedroom apartment—at a fairly affluent retirement community—until he passed away. Then, being the practical woman that she was, she downsized to a one bedroom.

No matter the time of year, the community grounds were beautiful, but summertime was by far my favorite. There was a pool in the middle of the complex. I would swim for hours, and Nana would do crossword puzzles or read a novel. She would position herself on her lounge chair, half in the shade, her legs and toes always out in the sun. She would always drink out of a cup adorned with a seashell decal, filled to the brim with ice and sun-tea—no sugar. Nana told me, *"the only ingredients you need are tea, water, and sunshine!"*

Swimming around that pool, I was an extension of my Nana, her once-young self reflected back at her, hamming it up for her friends while they gushed to her about how well-spoken or pretty or funny or creative I was. When I was at my grandparents' apartment filled with nice things, I was compelled to be on my best behavior. At home, where instability was the norm, I felt no such thing. Nana and Papa got the best of me, so they saw the best in me, and I received the best parts of them. At my grandparents house I could breathe and relax. With my mom, I hid things, I recoiled, I cried, I screamed, I became both defensive and jaded. I began to grow bitter.

During the process of *Hoshigaki*, the persimmons' sucrose crystallizes into a white powder, coating its surface with a kiss of sugar. This is not your mass-produced dried fruit. Though *Hoshigaki* is neither a quick nor easy process, drying the persimmons intensifies their sweetness and minimizes their puckering astringency.

Persimmons have a thin and fragile skin, and must be handled with care.

My Nana, Cynthia, was not a delicate woman. She was a force, and she didn't have time for nonsense. She was not a vain or even a fashionable woman. She had always dressed for comfort, much more so as she got older. She was well-traveled, well-read and could carry out a conversation in several different languages. She did not

believe in being soft—though she had some of the kindest eyes you'd ever see, and would smile with them. Above all, she was a very practical woman.

Persimmons are a fall and winter fruit. This means their fruit is ready to gather starting in autumn and lasting into the winter. Persimmon trees are easy to grow in milder climates, and once established they are very low-maintenance. They are drought-tolerant and disease-resistant. On average, persimmon plants are small trees, but in rich soil, they can grow up to 100 feet tall. Their canopies spread and their branches hang loosely and openly, like the tree is reaching out to hand you its fruit.

Diospyros will keep you guessing. Unripe fruit can range from a glossy jade-green color, to chartreuse, to a pale yellow-orange. Ripe fruit, depending on the species and variety, ranges from pale peach, light orange-yellow, pumpkin-orange, dark rust, fire truck red, or dark brown in color. The persimmon's size also varies, ranging from only a half inch in diameter to over three inches. The fruit's shape varies too. Some persimmons are acorn-shaped, like another beloved staple gathered by the Algonquin people. Some persimmons are sphere-shaped, like apples or oranges. Some are more squat, like pumpkins or heirloom tomatoes. It is likely that if you were to come upon a persimmon tree in the wild, even when the branches are pendulous with fruit, it would take you several seconds to identify the tree. Even then, it will keep you on your toes.

Diospyros sounds similar to *Diaspora*. The term "diaspora" is derived from the Greek verb diaspeirō meaning "I scatter." The term *διασπορά* (diaspora), therefore, means **scattering**.

I wonder if Nana wanted to be a mother. Her own mother died when she was three or four years old. She was raised by her father, with help from her Aunt Nina. She wasn't a particularly tender woman, and she wasn't the most outwardly emotional or nurturing mother—this is not to

say she wasn't a great mom, or a great woman, because she was. If some people wore their heart on their sleeve, she kept hers tucked inside her sweater, after it had been washed, dried, and ironed.

The persimmon tree's flowers are yellow and shaped like small bells. Mature, egg-shaped leaves turn a bright yellow-green in the fall. When you see this color, that means harvest time is imminent. Harvest season consists of a short window of opportunity. Persimmon growers must understand this window, this fleeting moment when the fruit reaches its ideal maturity, when growers can experience its sweetest, most comforting flavors and textures. As the persimmons ripen, notes of warm spices and honey become more present.

Nana's persimmon cookies tasted different from cookies I'd made before, more like a banana bread or a carrot cake. They were like guilt free sweets—not quite dessert—they certainly were not decadent, but they were soft, with a pillowy mouthfeel, neither dense nor light, and sweet with spice. They weren't fancy, delicate, or beautiful. They weren't the best cookies I had ever had, and I would go on to eat far more delicious things, and yet—they were one of the best things I'd ever helped create. I am not a patient person. Baking is not my thing. It requires too much measuring, waiting, breath-holding and hoping. I had always done enough of that outside of the kitchen. But these persimmon cookies—they were nearly impossible to screw up. Around Nana, I was not a screw-up.

Some species of persimmon don't always fall off the tree when ripe, often leading growers to feel uncertain and hesitant. It can be hard to know when the right time to pick the fruit is. Understanding how to care for each tree takes patience and wisdom, but it is vitally important to know what techniques make them grow best—to know what will stunt their growth, and what will produce the strongest roots, the sturdiest branches, and the sweetest food. You never want to harvest too early or wait too long, missing a window of opportunity or risking heartache.

Contrary to popular belief, fruit isn't *supposed* to be sweet and delicious. The primary function of fruit is to spread a plant's seeds, allowing the plant to reproduce and continue a new generation. All flowering plants bear fruit, regardless of whether the fruit is edible, poisonous, prickly, sweet, or soft.

The major difference between a human embryo and a plant embryo is that the plant is contained within a seed while it develops, while a human embryo grows within a uterus. In a way, a human mom is the soil, the water, the nutrients, and the sunshine that a baby needs to grow, and all the baby has to do is come out crying and blinking, confused as all hell, screaming into their big new world.

When women are pregnant with daughters, their daughters' fetuses contain eggs, the eggs of their future daughters. Millions of my eggs were in my grandmother while she was pregnant with my mother, and my grandmother herself was formed in the womb of her grandmother, and she in hers, and she in hers. In my grandmother's womb my cellular life began—0.1 millimeters in diameter, suspended in amniotic fluid for several months until the fetus became my mom, her tiny limbs forming as she hugged her dreams close.

A persimmon plant's bark is thick, scaly, broken and almost black on older trees.

I'm not sure my mom has ever felt truly comfortable in her skin. Growing up, she never felt like she quite fit in. She could never shake this feeling, and it has stayed with her. And the nail in the coffin—she really, really cares. My mom constantly compared herself to the rest of her brood, allowing herself to feel pulverized by the imbalance of life, like she had just been pushed through a hundred tiny holes, left in a bowl like cold wet pulp.

My mom never figured out how to grow tall and strong, with thick, unbroken bark, shiny leaves and fragrant flowers. How would she ensure her little seed grew big and strong? Somehow, I persisted. Storms would shake her little tree, snapping branches and threatening to take the whole thing down. I came close many, many times. I eventually grew into a mature tree, thin but sturdy, tall enough to cast shade and smile up at the sun.

I'm sure my mom wanted to do it differently, when she raised me. I'm sure she saw the ever-growing rift between herself and her mother, and swore up and down that no such thing would happen to us. But the seeds were already planted, and the bitterness persisted. The older I got, the more my mom and I pushed each other away. There were no open arms, no open conversations; there were tight lips, slamming doors, and a growing confusion in both of us. The roots were rotting, the window during each harvest season grew impossibly short, the fruit tasted harsh and biting.

Scattering seeds on bare ground, or simply throwing them and hoping for the best, is technically the easiest way to sow seeds, but just because something is easy doesn't mean it will yield good results. Even if the results are fully grown plants, they may not have the strongest roots or stems.

We cannot cut people in half to see their centers—their eight-pointed stars. We can only guess, ask questions, and try to not destroy everything we have built and tended. Some of us have a God we pray to, others do not, but we almost all believe in love, hate, good, and bad. Sometimes we open our arms to the sun, begging for warmth. Other times we shrink away, wanting only darkness and solitude. We are humans, just trying our best, tending to our plants, sometimes over-eager—giving our babies too much water and drowning them—sometimes not giving them enough water, slowly depriving them of life. We scatter our seeds. We hold our breaths. We wait to see what will grow.

CRABGRASS AND STONE

Kirby Wright

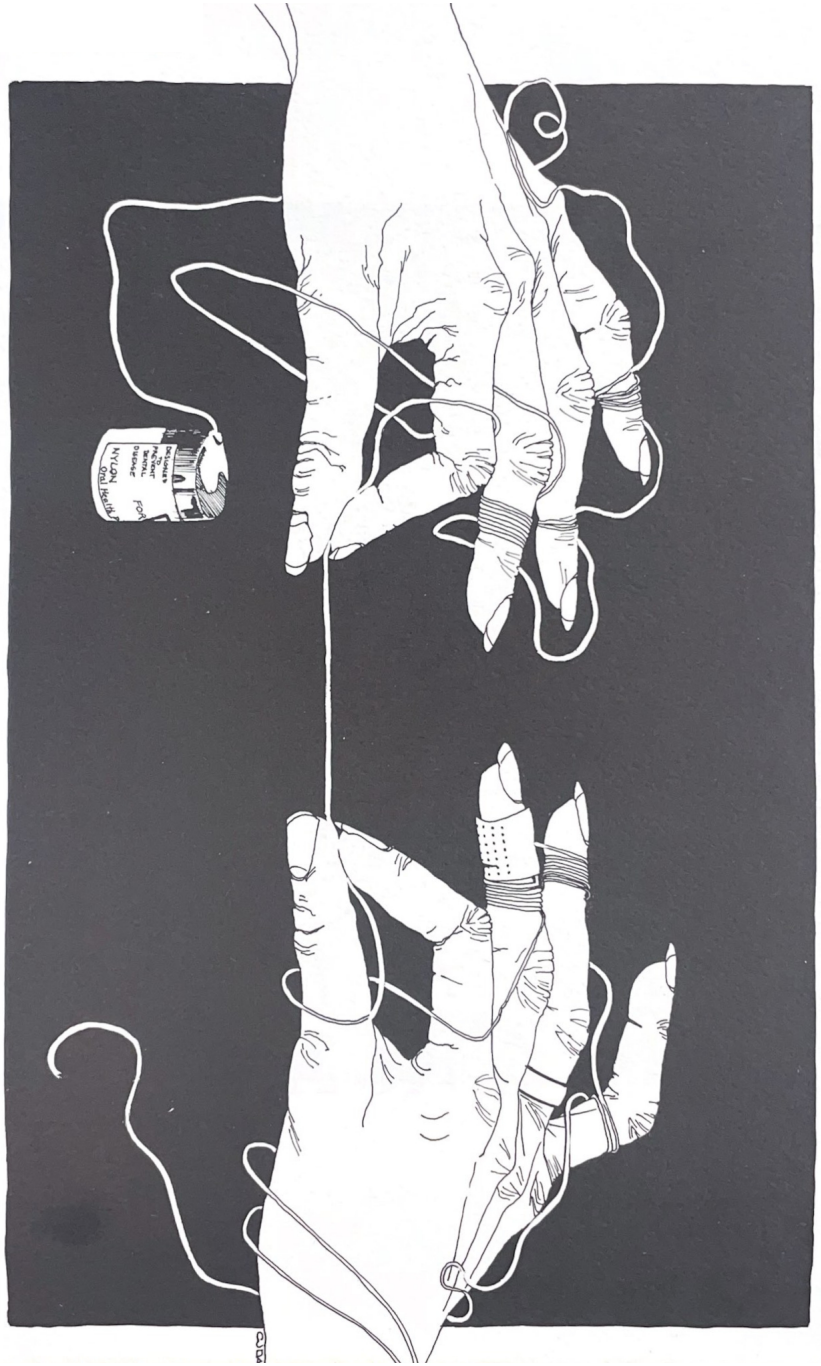
I don't see
The way it used to be.

Our '*āina* belongs to someone else,
Haoles without memories

Of the crabgrass and stone entrance
And a coral road flanked by oleanders,

Shivering pink blossoms
In the ocean breeze.

'*āina*: land; that which feeds
haole: newcomer; white person



String Games

Lara Messersmith-Glavin

For citations. see the bibliography at the end of the issue.

Growing up on a fishing boat off Kodiak Island, I was alone much of the time. Granted, being alone is hard to do when the living quarters for five people are roughly the size of a small bathroom on land. But when the grownups were on deck working, I was often by myself in the cabin, finding ways to entertain my hands and mind. Once I had read every book, drawn every picture I could think of, and solved every puzzle on every page, I spent many hours staring at the inscrutable photographs in *Cat's Cradles and Other String Figures*, by Joost Elffers and Michael Schuyt, getting frustrated with a piece of string.

The string was a rainbow loop that cooled from red to yellow then green and back again. It was formed by melting the two red ends of the cord together, so there was no knot and almost no detectable seam at all. I would sometimes run it through my fingers in an endless circle, letting my child-mind play with the idea of infinity—something about the circle in motion made it bound but limitless. It has always fascinated me how similar infinity is to the concept of one, how vastness and singularity are twin terrors, how feeling endless and feeling lonely are sometimes the same.

Hook the thumb and pinky of one hand on the outside of the loop, then do the same with the other hand. Scoop the part that hangs across the palm with the opposite index finger and repeat with the other hand. This was the standard opening for so many string games, though I preferred to use my middle finger for the sensation of balance. Opening A, this is called in

the book, though I learned that it probably has as many names as there are languages, as string games seem to be one of the universals of the world, with variations and overlapping patterns found in every culture. The shape the Osage call "Two Diamonds" is known in Igbo as "Big Piece of Yam," but it's produced with the same set of loops and moves. Wherever humans go, they fidget and play—and the physics of knots and our shared hand structures have resulted in a string vocabulary held partly in common.

Something about this collectivity comforted me as I sat in the galley, listening to the rumble of the engine and the whirr and clank of the gear outside—it meant I was part of something essentially human, pursuing something countless others had pursued, countless other young girls sitting alone and glaring at their hands, wadding up the string and then detangling it and beginning again, repeating the patterns as they softened from difficult to automatic. Some I learned quickly and could demonstrate for an audience of a stuffed animal and several imaginary friends, as if performing a magic trick. Others remained elusive, overly complex or with hidden moves. I struggled to create the more elaborate figures, like the Kiwi, which is a traditional Māori shape, or The Ribcage, which is a form that is native to Alaska, where I was, yet there was no one around to show me how.

In Alutiiq culture, children—and especially girls—are tasked with the songs and string figures that will tangle the legs of the sun and keep it around for as long as possible as the year tilts toward winter. In the spring, they play a sunrise game with a bead on the string, to coax the light to return. These are small but powerful magics: using children's games to know and mark the cycles around us, to give young people a sense of place and control in the otherwise unknowable world, which, as we all know, can be full of strangeness and potential disaster.

String games gave me no sense of control. If anything, they were like tests. I would study a photograph and then the next like a Spot-the-Differences game, looking for which loop had dropped or switched fingers, trying to map the awkward shapes on my cramped, too-small hands to the images on the pages of the book, which would sometimes flip closed in the swell. I stacked the open halves with bottles of steak sauce and vinegar from the condiment rack made from a salmon roe box, held it flat with my elbows while my hands remained entangled in string that in no way resembled the neat pictures of the book.

Imagine learning to sew web from text alone. It is not an explanatory task—it's a watching task, a following-along. Flat pictures can demonstrate the principle of how the knots are built, but they do little to explain the dynamism of web, the way it falls and warps, the difference between mending a tear in a net that is hanging from a hook versus one that is held by another's hands. The images become overly rounded to demonstrate motion, overly stiff to show direction and form. They cannot make a picture of tension, of transition and release. Of the click of the needle when you turn it in that unconscious way.

Anthropologists have sought to save ancestral string games from cultures where the pastime is disappearing due to colonial pressures and technological change. This is true in parts of Nigeria, for instance, or in Yirrkala, Australia, where string games were once an essential component of Aboriginal storytelling and play. They were largely lost when the children were forced to attend settler schools and punished for speaking their language or engaging in cultural traditions. But often these attempts only capture parts of the process in words, describing what the researchers observe rather than saving the stories or physical memory of the people producing them, which leaves enormous gaps in the why as well as the how.

To record the different figures for posterity, the finished creations are sometimes laid flat on a board and stuck there with tape, or printed with light-reactive paper, but these forms look lifeless and strange without hands to hold them. This is because it is not about the shape itself. It is an artform of motion and tension, an interplay, often between two sets of hands. Even in the finished shape, people shift their fingers and pull to display it, keeping the form dynamic in order to reveal its beauty.

This was the other element that I lacked—another set of hands, another person to share the story. Cat's Cradle can continue indefinitely if the two players have enough creativity and the vocabulary of transitions. In some places, string games between two people carried stories inside them, the string acting as a reminder of the story, and the story helping the players remember how to work the string. In this way, the games themselves become vessels for memory, just as the partners in the game act as memory for one another.

For many Navajo, string games are taught by children to other children—and only in the winter, as that is when spiders were dormant (to make a web when they are active is to show disrespect to a holy creature). In Yirrkala, when they sought to recapture old string games and their stories, many of the people were at first frustrated or saddened, trying to retrieve what they had lost as children, but it was the collectivity that brought it back. As Robyn McKenzie, an archivist of the Yirrkala string project, said, "Maintenance of a string figure repertoire requires a form of socially distributed or collective memory—learning from others."

As an only child sitting in the galley of a fishing boat as the grownups laid the net out and hauled it in, time and again, I had the opportunity to practice intense concentration and patience, to decode diagrams and texts. I learned to read deeply and with great speed. I developed the ability to entertain myself with the most meager of resources. But I was alone in these pursuits, and I lacked the interaction that builds a shared story from the game. I had neither teacher nor reminder, and so I sat in the echo chamber of my own thoughts and told my own stories, becoming a society unto myself, a culture of one. Feeling endless and feeling lonely.

Some things can only be taught by sharing, by watching, by being hand to hand or eye to eye. Some practices live in time and cannot be pinned to a page. This is one of the things that ties us together as people—our need to touch and to be with others, for health and heart but also for our minds and for the building and sharing of history.

I think of this now, anytime I am learning–we are each other's memory. Like string figures, we shape our world, what is important, what is valued, what must be protected and saved for the future in exchange with one another, and I cannot grow or transform, cannot build the shapes without you. We pass the string back and forth, and if one of us forgets, the other is there—if you forget too, we can work it out together. Endlessness is loneliness, but we are here, together, now. We remind one another of what has been, of what comes next.

Wrapped

Ember West

Threads
pass over and under, warp and woof,
whispering softly. Like a mountain stream it
flows through my dishwater worn fingers.
Wrapped,
over and under, attached and separate,
my baby is bound to me like
the stream is bound to the mountain.

Water
wraps around the arms of the mountain,
spills over her shoulders in crushing cascades.
What is water but a community of droplets bound
together,
forced by gravity to flow ever downwards,
conforming to the shape of the mountain and
shaping the mountain it passes over.

Breath
presses against these bonds that entwine me.
The weight of my baby hangs from my shoulders,
a sheer mass of responsibility.
Breath
flutters against my neck once the squirms
resisting sleep finally melt into stillness.
I am the one that is formed.

Motherhood
wraps itself around me.

ALCHEMY

Archive

Selections

Before and After Gladbags

Gloria Bird

Early morning: five and knee-deep in
a California ocean of garbage
& wearing a straw hat.
Earth-rotting smells blew in on heatwaves
up and around pecking sea gulls,
broken toys, wet boxes, molding fruit —
I picked a fluff of blue net,
pretending ballerina tutu
on a Sunday outing.

Later, along reservation roads
the government erected new green signs
designating Sanitary Landfill
to replace old ones that just said Dump.
We are known by what we throw away
in the old homesite of it
wild kittens face rusting rains
from abandoned cars
they live in.

These city outskirts,
yet another site for garbage —
Mt. St. Helen's backdrop
dangles above the pit
& payment collection gate.
Flyers, newspapers, & old letters
beat themselves against cyclone fence.
Bulldozers drown out
the civilized wren calling.

It's big business — you pay
to dump brown-stained mattress,
buy broken lawnmowers for eight bucks,
what isn't bio-degradable, recycle.
Refuse Technicians of the highest order
can sell the whole plot at one quick turning over
for housing developing of pre-fab
& acres of lawn unrolled in strips.
So much garbage to consider.

For a Meeting of Concerned Citizens

7 August 1982

William Stafford

Grass is our flag. It whispers, “Asia,
Asia,” “Dakota,” “prairie,” “steppe”;
leans over rivers, Ganges, Volga,
Amazon, a grass like wheat and its friend
the wind carrying civilization
from leaf to leaf.

Grass is our flag. But there are others
crowding together all around us:
they rely on Beowulf their dependable
satellite that orbits the world. Loaded
with warheads Beowulf patrols, scanning
its laser, a pendulum sheathed but ready
against intruders.

Sometimes, glancing from their high place
at the fields below, those others feel pity
for the quelled millions out there, but it’s
best not to think that way. It does no good;
and Beowulf’s watchful representatives
do not take kindly to waverers.

But grass is our flag. In a song one time
my brother heard something falling,
a breath and a pause and a breath again
like wind in the grass, he said, like our baby
sister who died holding her doll
in her cradle and breathing away in the song
everything sang to her while she suffered.

Some people listen all their lives
and whisper across the years to each other.
Whatever happens, they are faithful. While wind
excites young leaves, or snow begins
to talk softly at night about life
and how far it goes, nobody ever
finds where it leads. We are in it.
And we whisper, “Grass is our flag.”

Original Editorial Note:

In the late summer of 1982, I attended a gathering at the Northwest Service Center called “Facing It: The Human Condition in the Nuclear Age.” Bill Stafford, among others, was there. He read a poem or just talked; at this point I’m not sure which. Hoping to write an article on the meeting I asked him for a copy of his comments. Within days, he sent me “For a Meeting of Concerned Citizens.” It is not what he said at the convocation, but his quick and rich response is characteristic of him. For reasons I will not disclose, the poem spent years in my files, lost. In the memory of William Stafford, *Alchemy* declares it found.

–Tim Barnes, ***Alchemy*** advisor

Carrying Water

Kesha Ajose-Fisher

One day, when I am ten years, and Wale is the same years, curiosity disease catch him. We all of us watch him run cross the river. He enter the bush and disappear. I pray for his safe return. We all of us pray, but the fear he leave behind, ah, is too much to bear. His own mama cry and cry and beg God day and night until God's hand come down snatch the sound from her chest. My own mama say it is good the woman die.

I ask her, Why mama?

She tell me never leave her to carry that kind of pain. She say I should kill her first before I leave her inside life without her child. She say because she love me too much. I ask my mama, if you love me, why you beat me? She say daughters suppose come make life easy for their mama. She say sorry; her shame is too much big on that day. She say shame is worse than death. Death, you finish, you go. Shame, you carry. Maybe because she carry shame for boring me, her only child, with soft bone is why she allow river carry her go, finish– maybe. I beg God, please, make my life simple with no shame.

My thirteen years in that village feeling like two lifetime come and gone. After my mama die and now I am alone with the witches, my work never finish. From when sun enter sky to when night come swallow it away, I go to river, fetch water, come back, cook, wash clothes, wash children, clean compound. Then I walk, walk, walk all the way back to river, carry more water, come back home. My life is so full with water, even in my dream I am drowning. All of them witches laugh at me when I sometimes fall down because of soft bones. I know inside my bones growing strong, so I do the work. I don't say nothing I want to say, I say only yes mah.

I bring one bucket, they beat me. Two bucket, they beat me. Two bucket inside each hand and one on top of my head, still, they beat me. I beg the river take me away. I pray to God, take me to the other side of the forest like Wale. Every day, I go to the river, and I hope I fight the water until my heart tired and death finish me go like my mama. I hope. I ask God, is there a place better past this? That is where I want to be.

Mt. St. Helens (10/17/80)

Steve G. McLeod

the stars testify of earth below
the souls who now tread its crust to those beneath
decaying bodies
but living souls
the atoms that make up the dust
complete as universal wholes.
an explosion!
-their reaction to the tide
for confusion and deceitful lies
and spirits who cannot be still
to injustices they cannot abide
if men won't praise the Lord of the skies
the mountains will....

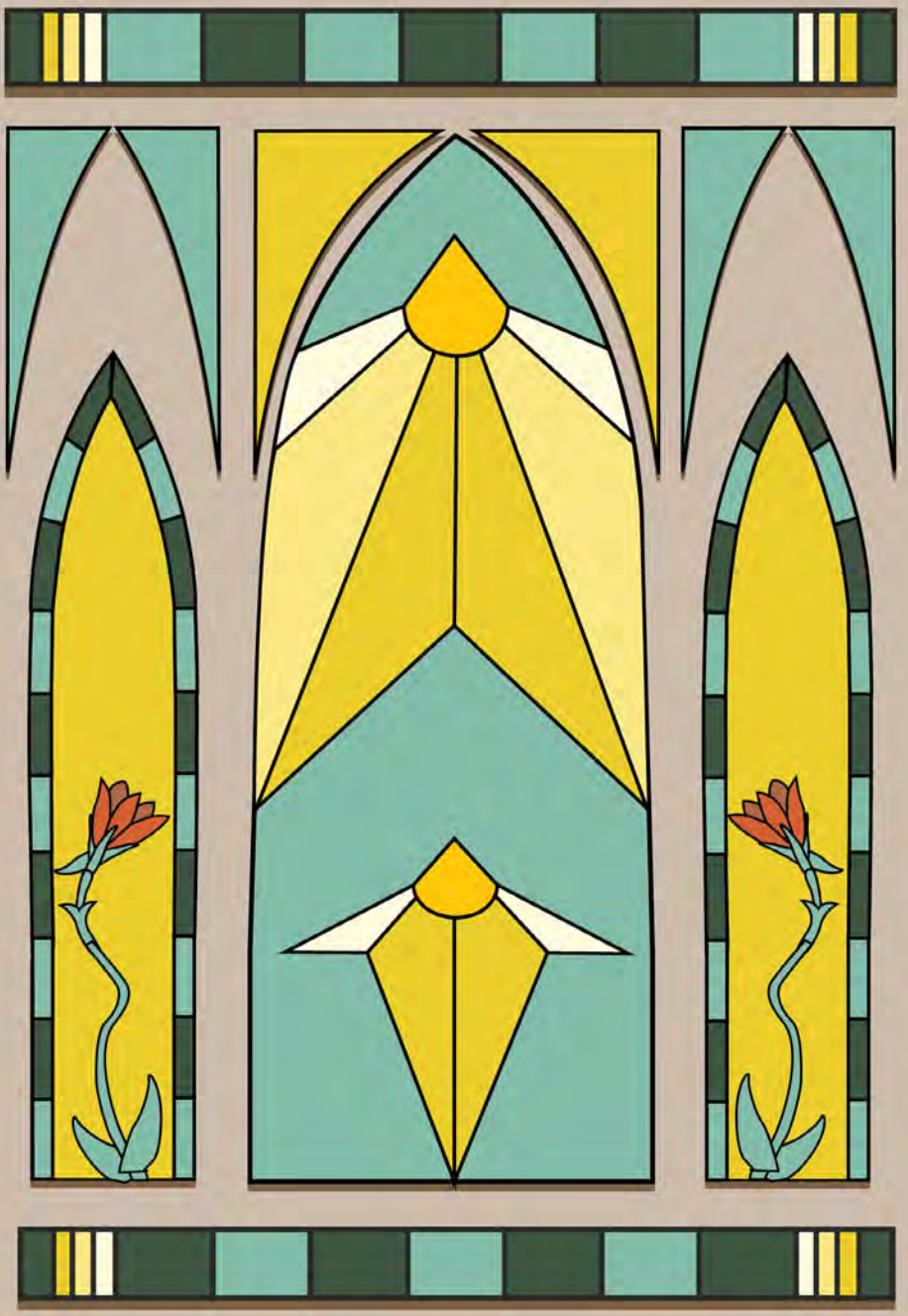
Ode to the Valley Girls Not Quite Born in the Valley

Laila Hajdari

Educated, strong women of the world, we
like, totally educated and literally so strong
women
are like totally bitchin'.
We who cut through bullshit
as we chop up our sentences
With like, and um, and literally, and
you know? I always hated how I ended
each sentence as a question?
You know, we valley girls have,
like, never been quite sure of ourselves,
told we could never move mountains.

Men are mountains.
We, the valley below them.
We drown in their seas of consciousness.
We learn to swim, learn to cut
through the current
with like, and um, and literally,
and you know?

Maybe we don't have to, like, move
mountains? Maybe our likes, and um's
can, like, crack mountains?
Literally turn boulders into rocks.
Rocks into, like, pebbles,
pebbles into sand,
'til we valley girls have a beach:
of our own seas of consciousnesses.



The Colston Dichotomy

J.B. Polk

For citations. see the bibliography at the end of the issue.

Edward Colston was probably unknown to those who had never visited Bristol, United Kingdom. Or perhaps he was just an obscure historical figure to those who had. That is, until Sunday, June 7, 2020, when the paint-smeared monument of the 17th-century slave trader, businessman, and philanthropist toppled into the Avon. Slave trader and philanthropist printed in the same line? Yes, your eyes are not playing tricks on you.

Colston has long been a subject of contention and debate within Bristol. His figure has consistently sparked controversy and divided opinions among the city's residents for a number of years. And while some would have given the sculpture the hammer treatment long ago, others found inspiration in his philanthropic efforts. One of the reasons why Colston's actions have been defended is because he used his ill-gotten gains to provide financial assistance to hospitals, orphanages, schools, and churches. This aspect of his generosity has been highlighted as a counterargument to the criticism surrounding the origin of his wealth.

The eminent man was honored by more than just the statue, and his name may be seen on numerous Bristol landmarks: Colston Avenue, Colston Music Hall, and the famous Colston bun - an enjoyable treat made with dried fruit, candied peel, and spices. And the creator, unsurprisingly, was none other than Mr. Colston himself. In Bristol, children continue to receive the bun on Colston Day, while in the past, it was given to those in need in the Colston schools. The bun was marked with eight wedges, allowing individual portions to be torn off and shared

within families. Additionally, there was a piece called "Staver" that was meant to be eaten right away to "stave off" hunger. Not to mention the generous gift of 2 shillings that accompanied the bun, also financed by the fine man.

When he died in 1721, Colston left his entire fortune to various charitable foundations. The problem is that the money that still supports some of these trusts came from the proceeds of the Royal African Company, which moved some 84,000 men, women, and children from Africa to the Americas—shackled and sold as slaves.

When the statue of Colston was initially defaced and subsequently brought down, photographs captured by local photographers depicted a protester kneeling on the "victim's" neck, very much like the image we know so well from the George Floyd video. The bronze figure was later paraded through the streets of Bristol and unceremoniously tossed into the harbor—where some argued that it rightfully belonged from the start. Others, including Priti Patel, Britain's first female Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic Cabinet Minister, expressed strong disapproval of the action, deeming it "utterly disgraceful."

So, is it possible to separate Colston, the human trafficker, from Colston, the philanthropist? Let's examine a few other examples.

Pablo Neruda was a mid-20th-century Chilean Nobel laureate whose poetry and life symbolized resistance to one of the world's bloodiest dictatorships. Quotes from his *One Hundred Love Sonnets* still grace upmarket Valentine's Day cards, and his *Twenty Love Poems and A Desperate Song* sold over 20 million copies worldwide.

In 2019, the Chilean Parliament voted to rename the country's principal international airport after the poet. Those who voted in favor said that his name should be the first thing tourists saw when arriving in Santiago "because he made all Chileans proud." But after a string of protests from local feminists, the idea was scrapped. The decision was based on the discovery of a page from Neruda's memoir, where he described raping a woman when he was a diplomat in Ceylon.

"I took a strong grip on her wrist and led her to the bedroom. The encounter was like that of a man and a statue. She kept her eyes wide open all the while, completely unresponsive," he wrote.

Although the book was published some 50 years before, the quote resurfaced during the #MeToo movement, right on time to block his nomination.

It is undeniable that Neruda was a literary genius, widely recognized as one of the most influential poets of the 20th century. In the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, he also bravely assisted thousands of Republican refugees in escaping to Chile. However, hidden within his personal history were dark secrets, including his heartless disregard for Malva Marina, his daughter who tragically passed away at the age of 8 in Nazi-occupied Holland. Surprisingly, she was never mentioned even once in his extensive 400-page memoir. And in the months following the girl's death in 1942, he did nothing to help her mother and his first wife, Marietje Hagenaar, to escape to Chile. Marietje ended up in a Nazi transit camp but fortunately survived.

Was Pablo Neruda a monster or a genius, then? He was likely both, much like Colston, who was known for being a family man, a philanthropist, as well as a slave trader. These two entities are inseparable, intricately intertwined.

The issue arises when we have to determine whether we should name streets and theatres after such individuals. It is worth noting that Alfred Nobel, the founder of the Nobel Prize, had a background as an arms merchant. The funds that currently support the prize, which has been awarded to notable individuals such as Malala Yousafzai and organizations like the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, originate from the invention of dynamite. Alfred Nobel's creation has literally and figuratively blown millions of lives to shreds.

With the information we now have, it is doubtful that anyone would consider honoring Jeffrey Epstein by naming a music hall or a street after him. However, many people say that the disgraced financier was a generous

supporter of hospitals, universities, and film festivals. Yet his philanthropic empire was constructed through deceit. Throughout his life, he displayed a pattern of predatory behavior while contributing generously to arts and scientific Scholarships.

In essence, a dichotomy refers to a clear separation between two entities that are entirely different or even contradictory, like Colston, Neruda, or Nobel. Marvin Rees, the Mayor of Bristol and the first directly elected black mayor in the UK, eloquently expressed a sentiment that may finally bring an end to the divisive Colston debate. He highlighted the importance of acknowledging the complexity of history while also looking towards a more inclusive future:

> "The education of our history has often been flawed. More accurate knowledge of our city's history, which is accessible to all, will help us understand each other, our differences, our contradictions, and our complexities."

By promoting a more accurate understanding of history, communities can move forward in a more united and empathetic manner. If we are aware of and accept human beings' composite nature, we can better appreciate the diverse perspectives and experiences that shape our society. This will ultimately lead to a more respectful dialogue surrounding controversial historical figures like Colston.

Kingdom Come

Kynna Louin

Let's not talk
about the pink of my uterus and who it belongs to

about what qualifies as human enough
to have rights—

these topics sit like lead in the gut.
Unpleasant. Bad for digestion.

Let's not talk about how red hot
it got in May, or our need

to bleach the world clean and white.
Or about the fires left burning orange

in the chambers of hearts and on the ends
of tiki torches, that lit our path to here, like a runway.

We could talk ourselves blue over law and order—
I miss that Jerry Orbach, and I'll admit

I get a wine-dark thrill when they take
down those sickos on SVU, I get a thrill

trusting justice will be done
on screen, as it is in America. No,

us talking now
would only ruin this beautiful sunset.

Homeowners Oppression Association

Kyle Lauderman

I woke up to the sound of a fist pounding on my front door. In the pitch dark, I crept upright in bed, wiping the sleep from my eyes and adjusting my nightgown. I collected my glasses from the side table, slid my house slippers on, stretched my arms outright, grabbed my cane, and wrapped my robe around me.

I shuffled across my condo over to the door. I twisted the lock, and with its "click," the banging stopped. I slowly opened the door, just a smidge, enough to pop my head out and evaluate my guest.

I could only make out a silhouette. The sky behind him glowed a deep purple, sunrise having barely begun to take over for the night sky. His demeanor, hands on his hips, right foot tapping on my front porch, gave his identity away.

Lou.

High and mighty Lou, president of the Homeowners' Association, retired high school dean of discipline, and overall pain in my ass. Of course he'd pay me a visit at this hour. Lou preferred visiting this way, catching his prey off guard. The thrill of authority intoxicated him.

"Ms. Maryann," Lou started, "do you know what these are?"

He held out the palm of his hand, proudly displaying several pellets – little black, chalky, porous cylinders. I observed them for a moment.

"I haven't the foggiest clue, dear."

As I started to close my front door, Lou stepped forward, extended his leg, and propped the door open with

his foot.

"They're poison peanuts. And they're against HOA regulations. You know, these things can be pretty deadly to wildlife."

"You don't say. Well, if they're against regulations, that would explain why I've never seen them."

"Ms. Maryann."

"Yes?"

"These are from your garden."

I gasped, placing one hand over my ajar mouth and clutching my heart with the other, "What are you suggesting here, sir?"

"I'm suggesting that if whoever planted them doesn't want to be fined, they'll stop planting them immediately."

"Well, if I ever find out who, I'll be sure to let them know."

I held my cane out to swat Lou's foot away and shut the door. Yawning, I shuffled back over to my bedroom, plopping onto my bed with a sigh.

I'll admit the "poison peanuts" were mine. Those little chemical guardians kept my strawberries alive. My garden took up residence in the grass just off the concrete of my back patio, overlooking the neighborhood pond. Out of every inch of my property, the sun focused its attention most at that plot of land. After thirty spring seasons of gardening here, I knew this. I studied this.

The geese that infested the neighborhood pond also knew this. The back patios of every single condo in the complex outlined the perimeter of the pond, yet those godforsaken birds decided to spend their leisure hours near mine. A decade ago, when Lou first proposed turning the barren field into a swampy pond, I tried warning the neighborhood about the geese. But no one listened to geriatric Ms. Maryann. They only ever saw me as senile, just an old woman hovering with one foot over her grave, pitied by all around her until she fell in. And, just like I predicted, these geese have enjoyed lying on the patch of grass right next to my garden – napping, sunbathing, occasionally snacking on some nearby strawberries. My garden, once vibrant with the rosy color of budding strawberries, became a landfill of drooping, decaying stems and goose feces. My poison peanuts kept greedy snackers from coming back, a one way ticket to goose hell.

If Lou knew I had poison peanuts, he'd be coming back. He'd inspect that garden every day if it meant the possibility of fining me. If the poison peanuts had to go, so did the geese. As I drifted back to sleep, I put together a plan to force Lou's hand into eradicating these winged parasites.

It started with the library.

I arrived at the library five minutes before opening. At exactly 8 A.M., Carrie—the only teenager I like and the only librarian to not treat me like I've gone braindead—unlocked the front door. She worked here in the summers, just to make a little something while she's out of school. I won't accept help from anyone else here.

She smiled, "G'morning, Ms. Maryann."

"Morning, hun," I replied as we walked in together, "do you think you could help me out with the computers today?"

Carrie nodded. She headed over to the closest computer screen and powered it on. I froze. Anyone who walked in could have seen that screen, everything on display. Carrie noticed my hesitation and gave me a puzzled look.

I pointed to the computer hiding back in the furthest corner, "Would it be okay if we sat over there?"

"Oh. Yeah, sure."

We situated ourselves into that back corner, Carrie sitting in front of the computer screen and I sitting next to her, leaning over her shoulder.

Carrie asked, "Do we know what we're looking for today?"

I pretended to think for a moment, "I think I might need it to tell me how many children have died by geese attacks."

Carrie took a moment.

"Okay," she said, "let's try searching Google."

She began clicking and clacking away on the World Wide Web. We searched far and wide but found nothing.

No numbers on how many children that geese have slaughtered in the last year, no numbers on deaths by geese regardless of age, no reported death by goose attack ever. A big, devastating, poison peanut-shaped zero.

I knew that simply couldn't be true. I remembered just last week, trying to walk through my neighborhood when a goose waddled on over, flapping its wings, hissing, snarling. Those things could attack.

I asked, "Can you make it say a different number?"

Carrie thought for a moment, staring up at the ceiling, tapping her middle finger on the desk.

"I could try to create a table on Microsoft Word and stylize it like one of the government web pages we were just on," she offered, "if that's what you're looking for."

"Yes, exactly that!"

I had no idea what she was suggesting, but I appreciated her assuming I did.

As Carrie worked, she tried to explain what she was doing. I nodded along. After about ten minutes, Carrie finished our masterpiece. Our report declared, "207 children died in physical altercations with geese last year in the United States alone." It was statistical poetry.

"Could we get this on print paper?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

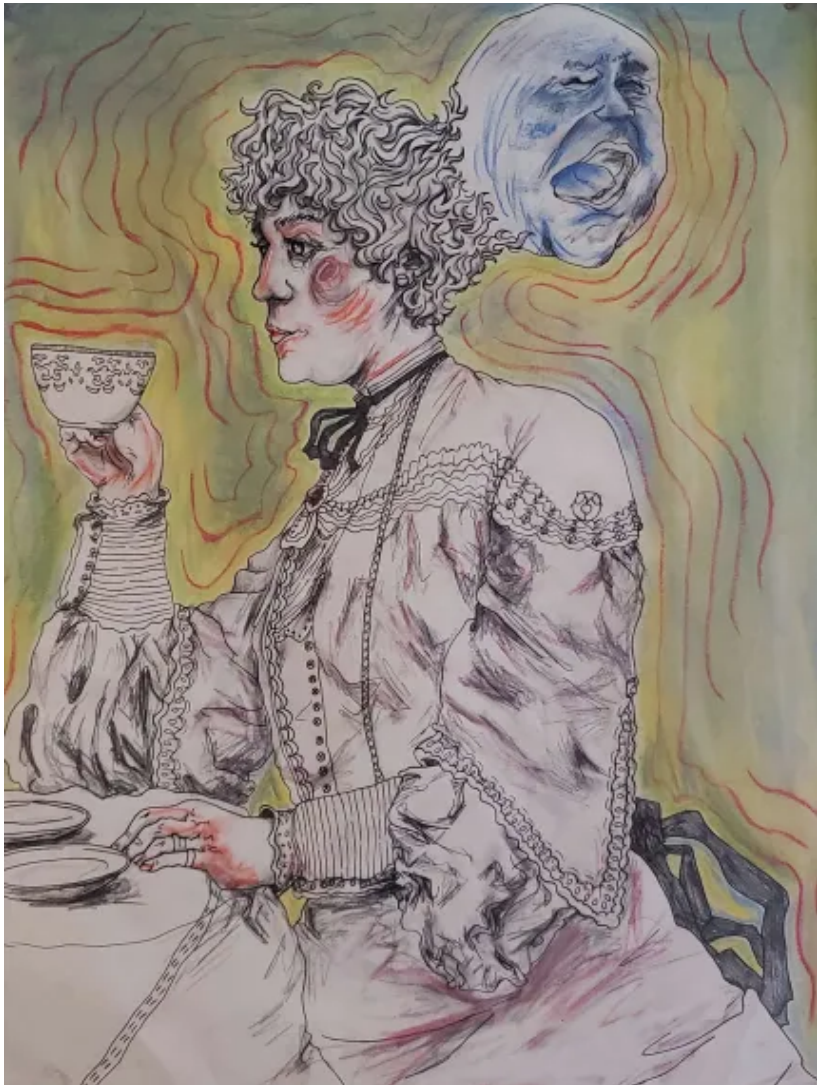
After clicking a few buttons, Carrie sprung up out of her chair and made her way to the printer.When she returned, she handed me our document. I reached into my coin purse and pulled out a crinkled up twenty-dollar bill. Carrie shook her head at my offer.

She assured me, "I'm just here to help. We really don't do tips."

"You do now," I winked and slid the twenty closer to her.

Carrie giggled, "You have a nice day now, Ms. Maryann."

When I arrived home, I hurried straight into the kitchen. I opened a drawer and—amidst loose coins, dying pens, and spare keys—I uncovered the lavender envelopes I bought twenty years ago and had saved for a special occasion. My forged document slid in with ease. I folded the envelope and placed it in my pocket.



Duality - Ed Vassilenko

I walked four condos down, straight to Kelly Grant's mailbox, like I was on my own James Bond mission. I glanced around. No one. The mailbox creaked as I opened it—not as covert as I would've preferred. I slid the envelope in and shut it back. I walked home like nothing had happened.

Every morning—at approximately 10 A.M.—Kelly Grant went on her neighborhood jog, and every morning upon her return, she checked her mailbox. This morning would be no different. Sweaty, out of breath, she'd flip through the stack of papers. Junk, junk, bills, junk, oh —an unmarked letter? She'd open the lavender envelope, glance at the words on the page, gasp at some pretty unbelievable and concerning statistics. With four children of her own, she'd do anything to keep those horrible geese away from her precious angels. It'd become her civic duty to make sure those feathered hellspawns were dealt with.

The best part, Kelly's husband stood as Lou's only competition for president of the HOA—that is, if her husband ever decided to officially run. So when she would undoubtedly dial up Lou later that very same night, you bet Lou'd answer and try kissing ass, praying to calm her nerves before she would suggest her husband might campaign against him. Kelly would demand to know what action he'll be taking to deal with the "geese-stapo" problem, as she'll surely put it. Lou would assure her he's on it; anything to avoid her husband usurping the only position of power Lou had left in this world.

Three days later, I received a community letter in the mail from the HOA, justifying the cost of a proposed plan of action against the geese. The letter highlighted the danger these birds brought to our community, citing the very same report Carrie painstaking helped me bring into fruition. At the bottom of the letter, Lou left his signature in blue ink, a clear intentional contrast to the black ink of the letter to emphasize his involvement in the geese extermination, like he was the president of the United States signing off on a foreign trade deal.

I had Lou backed into a corner, tail between his legs. All I had to do now was wait.

The following Tuesday morning started out the same as any old morning. I sat out on my back porch, rocking back and forth in my chair, sipping my first coffee, taking in the smell of wet grass from the morning dew. It felt so peaceful that I almost dozed off, that is until I spotted Lou's golf cart as it pulled up across the pond a few hundred feet away. He clocked me immediately, half-heartedly waving. My eyes darting down to my coffee cup, I pretended not to notice him.

A battered pickup truck backed up right next to Lou's golf cart. The truck's front grill was held up with duct tape, and a crate sat in the bed of the truck. I perked up in my chair to try sneaking a better view. A man hopped out of the driver's side, and when he waved to Lou, the bottom of his shirt lifted, exposing his beer belly. Lou smiled at the man, but I noticed how Lou's spine straightened. He was tensing up.

The truck's owner marched to the back of his truck and began to wiggle the crate loose. He pulled the crate down and off the bed of his truck, struggling to balance its weight. He dropped it, unlatched the front, and leapt back, far as he could from the crate.

Out from the crate waddled the ugliest bird I had ever seen, like a swan that had been beaten, shaken, and rolled around in dirt. Ruffled feathers coated its body. Around its head, the feathers were patchy, and there appeared to be a pink bald spot right on the top of its head. As it waddled, its long neck pulsated with the slithering motion of a serpent.

The bird scanned its surroundings. Its beady eyes locked onto the truck owner, recognizing him as its former captor. It coiled its long neck backward and, lunging his head forward, let out a deep, malicious hiss. The truck owner shook his head, and without so much as acknowledging Lou, jumped back into his truck and drove off.

This new bird towered over the geese. Several geese noticed the new arrival and swam over to get a closer look. The geese gazed at the new bird. The bird stared back. Beady eyes looked into beady eyes, but no bird made a first

move. Had Lou planned to out-bully the bird bullies?

Lou turned into a statue, daring not to breathe. After a few moments, the geese lost interest in the new bird, returning back to floating around the pond. The ugly new addition waddled down after them. Jumping into the pond, it flapped its wings and began to wade. The geese slowly congregated on one side of the pond—the side closest to me—while the new bird stayed on the other.

Lou walked back to his golf cart, started it up, and drove off. This was it. This was his whole plan. Of course.

I couldn't watch this peaceful coalition between birds any longer. I shuffled into the kitchen, placed my coffee cup into the sink and paused. I took a deep breath. I couldn't handle this anymore.

Of course it wouldn't work. Of course no matter how many times I batted my eyes, pushed people in the right direction, and tried to passively control the situation, I always lost. I was a loser, sitting back, never taking action for myself. Despite my age, the only thing I had to my name was a graveyard of a garden. I clutched the countertop and let the tears swelling in my eyes wet the floor.

I looked up to the counter, and—vision blurred by tears—my eyes locked onto a loaf of bread. Maybe I could do something on my own. I grabbed the bread and, out of my gardening supplies, some poison peanuts. I stuffed one of the bread slices full of them, the pellets sticking out like oversized sesame seeds. Laying the "sesame" slice with the other plain pieces of bread in a basket, I decided to go for a walk around the pond.

Strolling along the perimeter of the pond, I passed out bread crumbs to the geese. I felt the eyes of neighborhood onlookers watching as I fed them, admiring sweet little old Ms. Maryann feeding the geese. Facing forward, my eyes were on the birds, pretending not to notice their stares. I was not a sight, not a pity. I was a person, a person on a mission.

I saved the last bread slice, the one flavored with chemicals, for the neighborhood's new guest. By the time

I neared the new bird, it had already cocked its head back, ready to strike. I tossed the bread slice in its direction. It examined the slice and, considering it edible, picked it up and waddled off. I returned to my condo.

The ungodly bird died by lunchtime.

Lou found its lifeless mass washed up on the side of the pond. Shaking in defeat, he fell to his knees, dug his fingers into the dirt, and screamed until his voice went hoarse.

At least, that's how Kelly Grant told me the story of the bird's death at her house party celebrating her husband's decision to officially run for president of the HOA. Kelly Grant's husband ran on the platform of full, proper geese extermination. It really was a shame Lou spent so much of the HOA funds on a bird that croaked so quickly.

Uncaged Heart #3

Ron Ross

We've finger-skimmed ocean waves,
our pockets filled with stones, our past's
unease with water, fear of actual flight.
We're not wingless birds exactly,
simply humans alone in solo canoes.
Our compasses often inexact,
we squint into the distance—
wind, wings, pulleys, and waves.

It's all about perspective, drowning
that is, or what it means to float, to fly,
to be alive. One moment you're surfing
Kanagawa's great wave and the next
your canoe's filling with water.
Of course, Icarus drowned but
what if his heart survived? Somehow
sprouted wings, chewed through the rope
that'd kept it caged?

Let's accept that hearts have wings,
that only ribs inhibit these fists
full of blood from flying away.
We've all felt the flutter,
the tremble sensed inside our flesh,
moments of unrest each time
our fingers traced the landscape
of a stranger's new skin.

Ekphrastic poem in response to Gene Flores's "Uncaged Heart."

seacloud

Ellipses Griffin

there should be more rocks
i say to my ten-years-older brother
my hands against the mossfilled fence
chilly—not freezing—ocean breath
whispering on our faces. pelicans
swooping overhead, white foamy
waternoise crashing against the
there should be more rocks
for the ocean to crash into
i say to my ten-years-older brother
the toil and turmoil of the white waves
spilling and seeking dark cragged stone
jutting from the surf, the surf pushing
and pulling the seemingly endless
cliffside we stand atop
the ocean doesn't think so
he says back

The Big Fat Joke

Josiah Webster

Content warning: self harm.

She picked me up at half past noon. We chatted about the food, comparing it to that of other hospitals we knew. It was a gloom-lit day, air sulfur-sweet with petrichor and smog. I asked her how my stepdad's birthday had gone. She looked at me with lips a thin white line, "You know..." And it's true. How else could it have gone?

Already, I had wandered in too close, the innocuous question lashing itself by way of relation to the other, sticky subject. Neither of us said so, but the car felt somehow smaller, somehow swollen with us and our unaired thoughts that, in their captive forms, cried out far louder than a voice could make them do. It started to rain again, and I began to explain myself.

"Look. I'd just like to say, to alleviate any concerns you might be having–and to get out ahead of this thing–because I don't want you to worry about me. The fact is I'm okay, this all is just–" my hands floundered as if searching for the proper words, "–just a big fat joke."

She listened, might have responded. Time passed with the city and the runnels of rain on my window.

I found myself muttering, "Lot of good they did. I can't believe they made me fight to get out of there, when I told them I'm fine, when they're charging, what, maybe $3000 a day? Thank god for OHP. Do they think the world is made of money? And anyway, even if I was, which I'm not," referring again to the sticky white clog in the brain. "But even if I was, that hellhole would have only made it worse. It was an anti-therapeutic environment. Armed guards. People yelling all day long. I had to shit with the door open. And when I asked for a book, you know what they gave me? *The Devil Wears Prada*."

She giggled. I did too, though it sounded fake from beneath the clouds.

Sometime later, as we floated down streets, watching vague sections of town transform into stomping grounds, I started to blather about all that I'm grateful for. It began, I think, out of guilt about not seeming happy to be here. The idea of her perceiving a hole that could not be filled, only filled me up further with shame. But it became, I think, an act of co-hypnosis, as if my unfelt sentiments had been reflected by the calm benevolence she wore so naturally, imbued with some of her sanguinity before they drifted back to me. My heart ached when those delicate seedlings of hope got swept up in the tempest of my fear and milled upon the rocks. In the aftermath, their sodden dust revealed them to be blighted, too, by the big fat joke.

I began to apologize, desperately sorry for everything done, not done, the way it was done, and for not yet being done. And yet, shibari bound to my performance of being okay, these apologies came out as nothing but self-deprecating jokes. She didn't laugh, of course, except for maybe out of pity.

But pity made me angry. Made me want to just say fuck it all. To be in this kind of mood was unusual to me. I'd grown used to the slow yawn of loneliness, the razzle-dazzle of anxious thoughts on endless loops. I knew all about the anhedonia of waking life and the recurrent bleary episode of dull drunken joy, night after night. These moods I was familiar with, but always veiled behind the placid face, the affectless voice. "I am forlorn," I would say in a tone that would tell you I'm joking–but I meant it. Or, "I feel sullen and unreasonable." These statements said with the same zeal as your smartphone's map narrator, were the most I could ever emote. So it was strange to feel anger, legitimate anger, misdirected as it was, like being back in adolescence, when messy emotions came to me as easily as bad ideas.

Inside the house, I hugged my younger siblings. My mother said to me, "They don't know. They wouldn't

understand." Thus, their hugs were not particularly tender. Strange how their rightful lack of knowing, how their pleas to do an escape room made me feel so insignificant. It was nothing to do with them, but it made me think: the world will never slow down for you, no matter how tired you get.

I told my stepdad, "Sorry for ruining your birthday."

"It's okay," he said. "My birthday doesn't matter." He exuded a sarcasm so thick it must have come from the marrow.

"Now that Josiah's here, we can celebrate it again," my mother said in earnest.

I told them I would stay the night, but when everyone slept, I bought more beer, made my way home, and dropped acid in the backyard. I didn't want to speak to anyone, or do anything.

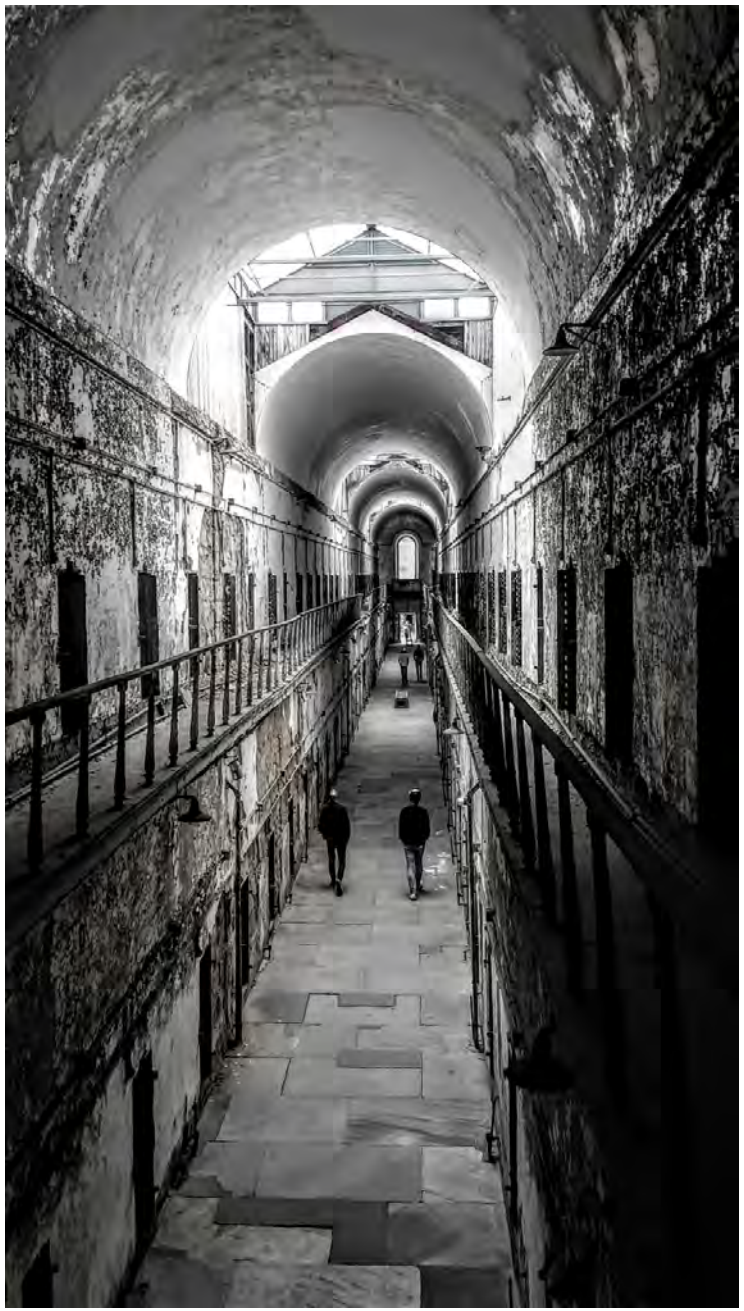
A song came on my earbuds, called Hell, and I began to get ideas. The big fat joke was staring at me, everywhere I looked. I couldn't help but laugh. That hedge looks like it, the snap of the can sounds like it, the non-taste of smoke in my lungs... the egg on my face.

At dawn, my mother called me, concerned. "What are you up to?" by which she really meant, "Tell me you're safe."

"About to go to sleep," I lied. "Thanks for last night. I feel a lot better."

Half-convinced, she let me be. I silenced my phone.

Hours left, I thought. Eternity. This day again and again, in this place where nothing ever changes. I turned up the music until it hurt my ears. Then I began to laugh. But it didn't sound like laughter.



Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, a once-prison, now stands as an educational museum of a punitive system long dissolved. Also known for its incredibly-furnished cell of the notorious Al Capone, the prison is now in monitored disrepair. The halls that once held many in contempt are now eroding away.

Worms

Linsey Anderson

My friend, when I had hair
Short and scratchy
Had smooth nitless stuff to spare

My world, if you can think back
to the safeguard of girlish acts
Sleeping over was tonally
Gray squeaking

Hear my barking nicely,
Understand it in this way only

Our bodies were tongue twisted
Death came in patchy
From back home.
From our clock the day smushed
Everything mealy
Mean

Selfish, Silly.

Worms entangled in the digging
Under a medium rock
Light enough to lift sockless
Ewww!
There we were,
Gross and debtless

You said
Our clock doesn't tick
It rings
It is a bell, a
Loud let-out
Lazy line, if looped might have sounded
Crazy to you, with your mouth
like a flute cracking
Anyhow I was stuck, no
Sticky.

Ewww
We mashed our thin lips together until tongues squished out
After chasing me to a place
I'd been - I go
Through a veil I could not yet stuff
The bin with, so
There we stole space
Agape aglow

Rainbow Bubble - Alexandra Hawley

Elegy for Justin

Analis Rivasplata-Newton

Be Kind and Do Epic Shit

Carve my name into your heart
No, really, take my pocket knife,
No, really, keep it.

My mother says I don't play fair
I climb to the top of dead trees
I climb to the top of electrical towers
I climb into a sleeping bag in spring,

Watch me sit on my throne,
String up my flag,
Sip from my chalice,
Throw my arms to the sky
I'm King of the World, kid

I'll wager you've never had drugs like these
They'll open your ribs and give you a shock,

I swear there's nothing better in life
Than a thinly sliced piece of cheese,
Eating the fruit right off the branch

Ripening into a man.

Trust

Analis Rivasplata-Newton

Church pews empty and waiting, candles extinguished, in the center a bouquet of white lilies. Baby sister — knees full of rocks, stunned and bleeding, neighbor boy scooping her up like water in a trough. Hairdresser washing my hair, warm, wriggling, suds slapping sinkside. Stranger on a cobblestone street, backpack full of silent prayers. Singing last lines to a teapot before becoming a fool of a cup, leaping off a cliff. Starlit coyotes long howling for frosted morning sleeping bag sermons. Winter sheets, tracing pelvic bone with pointer finger, whisper-sighs unfurling knots and laces. Rare coin baptism from a plastic water bottle on the interstate at sunrise. Broken alarm clock, broken tennis shoes, broken-heart-smiling. Sizzling jazz, stovetop cooking caramelized onions and cream sauce. Dog barking, barefoot romping on the rug. Dirt road sandals, breathing in dust bunnies, sharing chocolate with a child in another language. Sticky summer peach sweating over kitchen sinks, rivulets, runnels, tributaries. Heavy lidded lashes licking fleece, slow tickling tufts turning, hush puppy —

baby sleeping.

A Brief History of Capris

Elyse Kamibayashi

For citations. see the bibliography at the end of the issue.

On the first day of choir practice, I chose my outfit carefully. First impressions are everything, especially when the choir you're joining is comprised entirely of conservative Christian homeschoolers and has a strict dress code. The choir was called the Sola Gratia Musicians—a loving tribute to the Protestant Reformation. Sola gratia means "by grace alone." The Sola Gratia Musicians existed by grace, but also by rules. Unsurprisingly, these rules applied mostly to girls. They stated that we were not allowed to wear pants that hit above the knee, nor were we allowed to wear pants that were tight-fitting. Jeans were permitted, but frowned upon. "Unnatural hair colors" were not allowed. Piercings were limited to "earrings for girls."

SGM's dress code put the fear of God in me. Or it would've, if I hadn't already been sufficiently afraid. So, on the first day of practice, I took no chances. I selected a pair of voluminous khaki capris and a polo shirt that I buttoned to my thyroid. I did not feel attractive, but I still felt strangely good. Movies and TV shows tend to glorify the act of defying dress codes—the exhilaration of rocking pink hair and a septum piercing against a backdrop of braids and button-downs. As an adult, I wish I could say that was my story. But as a teenager, I would not have been caught dead in dyed hair. Sure, rebellion is fun, but have you ever been *affirmed*? Have you ever followed the rules so successfully that a grown-up *praises* you for it? It is a rush. It makes you feel alive (and superior to everyone else). It is addictive to a certain type of person, and unfortunately I was that person.

Plus, there were other benefits to capris. I liked the way my body felt in them. I was a skinny, anxious, neurodivergent kid, and capris made me feel covered and safe—like a little cotton biosphere. Even more importantly, they let me blend in. When you're a teenage girl in a highly religious community, you spend a lot of time wondering what your body is doing to the men around you. You worry that an errant kneecap could result in spontaneous combustion or that the outline of a hip could cause poor Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John to stumble. It is exhausting. Capris were good camouflage. I wore them to disappear, and I think I succeeded.

Capris were invented in 1948 for the sole purpose of making the women wearing them feel sexy. Their inventor was a Prussian fashion designer named Sonja de Lennart. She told the story of their creation in 2015 at the opening of an exhibition on capris at a small textile and industry museum in Germany. The 93-year-old de Lennart arrived at the museum dressed from head to toe in a loudly flowing red garment with giant gold earrings and a jaunty hat. She was flamboyant and sharp and thrilled to share the story of capris. As she tells it, she was vacationing on the island of Capri when one day she decided to go for a walk on the beach. She accidentally stepped too close to the water, soaking the hem of her pants. The pants clung to her leg, and she was immediately drawn to the way they looked. In that moment, she says, she was inspired to create a "beautiful and sexy" pant for women that was fitted and shorter.

Prior to 1948, pants for women generally came in the form of wide-legged trousers, sported by cultural mavericks like Katherine Hepburn and Marlene Dietrich. These pants were assertive and dramatic. They had a "masculine" quality, which suited Hepburn and Dietrich perfectly—and made many people deeply uncomfortable. In a 1934 article in *Hollywood* magazine, Jerry Lane writes: "Revolution

has hit the Hollywood ranks! Revolution of a startling new order. And Katy Hepburn did it with her little overalls and hatchet." He goes on to characterize Hepburn's trousers as the first step towards female perversion, producing "proud unpainted princesses with flaring nostrils and dungarees."

Capris were not like their predecessors. If capris were revolutionary, then they were the type of revolution that created change from the inside. They were not associated with renegades, but with beauty queens. In the early 1950s, Oscar-winning costume designer Edith Head found them in de Lennart's atelier in Munich. At the time, Head had just finished working on *Roman Holiday* and was continuing to work with Audrey Hepburn on *Sabrina*. For a publicity photoshoot, she dressed Hepburn in black capris, a black top, and black ballet flats—in an image that has now become iconic. Those pants, on *that* Hepburn, had a very different feel. They were new and different, but they stayed true to the principles assigned to femininity at the time. They hugged curves without being scandalous. The waistline rose above the hips, which accentuated the waist, and created a slimming effect. These pants did not rewrite the rules for women's fashion. They simply reinterpreted them. They were for women who wanted to wear pants without causing a ruckus. But they succeeded in doing what Sonja de Lennart envisioned during that soggy stroll on Capri—they made women feel a little more visible, a little more sexy, a little more free.

When Mary Tyler Moore was cast on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, she was told that her character, Laura Petrie, would be "a wife, a television wife…that really had its classic parameters and dimensions." Other popular TV shows in the early 1960s included *Leave it to Beaver, The Donna Reed Show,* and *Father Knows Best.* All three featured a mom in a dress, heels, and (often) pearls. They cooked in dresses, cleaned in dresses, doled out motherly advice in dresses, and didn't do much else. Their characters felt starched and frilled—pretty to look at but uncomfortable to experience.

Laura Petrie, however, was different. As Moore recalled on an episode of Fresh Air:

> Laura actually had opinions of her own. And while she was asserting herself, she also didn't make Dick Van Dyke look like a dummy… I mean, society's expectations at that point still said, hey, wait a minute, lady. You only go so far here. But I think we broke new ground.

Laura Petrie was smart and feisty and she wore capris a lot. They weren't just an alternative to dresses—they were her garment of choice. She wore capris while cooking and cleaning, but also while hosting dinner parties. Sponsors were scandalized. They cracked down on the capris, telling show creator Carl Reiner that Moore could only wear capris in one scene per episode and that there was to be "as little cupping under as possible"—referring to the way the capris were tailored to fit Moore's backside. CBS's executive team reasoned that women might be annoyed that Moore looked so good in pants. But Moore was skeptical. She believed that, far from being jealous, women would be relieved to have their reality reflected back to them. In her words:

> I've seen all the other actresses, and they're always running the vacuum in these little flowered frocks with high heels on. And I don't do that. And I don't know any of my friends who do that. So why don't we try to make this real, and I'll dress on the show the way I do in real life?

She began wearing capris more frequently in each episode, until slowly and steadily they became the norm for the majority of her scenes.

Mary Tyler Moore contributed to a pivotal moment in women's fashion. Not only were capris now an option—they were a *mainstream* option. And yet, to hear Moore talk about it, her motivation for wearing them had less to

do with disrupting the status quo, and more to do with authenticity. She wanted women to be able to relate to her character—to see themselves on screen. As she tells Terry Gross: "Women liked me…they were also able to identify with me as a friend, as a girlfriend. There was no resentment, no fear." While Moore's capris might not have been intentionally rebellious, her act of owning her experience is empowering in its own way. She exemplified a radical kind of authenticity—a commitment to reflecting the truth of her experience. She wanted the ability to choose how she presented herself and women like her. And she got it.

I didn't know anything about Mary Tyler Moore's quiet rebellion when I watched *The Dick Van Dyke Show* as a teenager. But I noticed her capris. In season 1, episode 8, Laura and Rob host a dinner party where Rob, Buddy, and Sally (the showbiz veterans) take turns entertaining the guests. When it's Laura's turn, she launches into a spicy little dance number that shows what she and the capris were capable of. It made me feel things. Confusing things. Things I thought only Marlon Brando in a white t-shirt could make me feel. I wouldn't be able to name what the scene made me feel for another 10 years, but it was enough to make me wonder whether capris were as safe as I had thought. Mary Tyler Moore's were not that sexy by today's standards. But it was something about the way she wore them—the freedom and energy with which she moved. She seemed completely unconcerned with how she was perceived. She wore them happily and matter-of-factly. She didn't seem to want to disappear—she didn't seem interested in being anything other than who she was.

I wish I could say that Mary Tyler Moore and her pants pushed me into teenage rebellion, but they didn't. I was getting too much good feedback about being good to care about anything else I was feeling. What they gave me was an alternative—another way of wearing the clothes that I wore. They introduced the notion that I didn't have to radically change the way I presented myself to *feel* a little different. It was the kind of small, safe step that I needed—

the kind of small, safe step so many kids who grow up in intensely structured environments need. I realized I didn't have to choose my clothes based on safety. I didn't have to be invisible. I could, perhaps, be myself.

A few months ago, I found myself browsing through a thrift store, on the hunt for a fun pair of pants. I have spent all of my 20s squeezing myself into uncomfortably tight skinny jeans, partly because they used to be fashionable, and partly because it's fun to wear things you weren't allowed to wear growing up. I was at the thrift store with my partner, who quickly found a few pairs that they thought might suit me. Once in the dressing room, I eyed myself warily. The pants were wide and shorter. It had been a long time since I hadn't been able to see the outline of my legs. There was a notable lack of "cupping under." It was a nasty shock—realizing that the kind of clothing that was approved by the Sola Gratia Musicians was now cute to everyone else. I was annoyed, but I had to admit that the pants did look nice. Maybe it was because they weren't from Lands' End. Maybe it was because I wasn't wearing them with a boxy polo shirt. Maybe it was because the person in the mirror looked happier than the one who stared back at me on the first day of choir practice. And maybe *that* was because this time, I got to choose who I wanted to be.

I may never wear actual capris again, but I will always feel indebted to them. They taught me something about what change can really look like—how it's not always driven by a single, revolutionary event, but by years (sometimes decades) of glimpsing what the alternative could be. The road from being a purity culture poster child to being an out queer person is long and strange. I'm grateful to Kate in her dungarees, and Sonja on the beach, and Mary in her living room, for showing me the alternatives, and looking fabulous while doing so. And I'm grateful to my baggy, khaki friends for giving me what I needed to change into something better.

Ladybug in the Sun

L. Lois

who knew a ladybug
could look so damn
resplendent
glossy shimmer dazzling her back
as she traverses
the grey gravel stubble
at my feet
sitting on the bench
in my cherry-red skirt
with my Mary Jane flats
sunshine streaming across us
as we wander about, looking so chic

His Smile - Kimberleigh Olivas

Star

Jessica Doe Mehta

I am no Truth
emerging, disrobed,
disgraced—*Watch me*,
watch me, like a child,
like the birds, you ibis
moon,
god of reckoning. I have
no shame, no place to tuck
and hide in ruches
or ruffles & for that,

I am beautiful. Ma made me[1]

with dust and disruption,
one thousand thousand splintered
supernova gone
to glitter. I do not chase
for lies, wicked
deceit draped in my drip-
ping linens. From Spain
to Mesopotamia, Λέγουσιν,
They say:

what they like. Let them

say it, I don't care. Go on,
love me—

it does you good.[2]

[1]"Ma" is a common shortening of megaannum (one million years).

[2]The last 5 lines were inscribed on gemstones and were common graffiti in 2nd century CE. It was a popular refrain in the eastern Roman Empire. The full Greek verses read: "Λέγουσιν (They say) / ἃ θέλουσιν (What they like) / λεγέτωσαν (Let them say it) / οὐ μέλι μοι (I don't care) / σὺ φίλι με (Go on, love me) / συνφέρι σοι (It does you good)."

The Fool

Jessica Doe Mehta

My mother said leaving
my first marriage
was the worst of mistakes,
as if a slow
suffocation was somehow
subpar—below the quick

and nasty

implosion she clawed
and gnawed her own
way out of, yappy
wee white thing. But I,
I turned my face skyward,
drinking detonation in, the heat
unnervingly warm—the sun ...

the sun ...

—keloids coiling so lover-
close, I almost knew their name.

Boleros (Excerpt)

Oscar Nieves Lira

After a month and a half of daily practice, Federico and I would linger at the gym, well after Coach was gone, under the pretext that he saw potential in me to compete. We both knew, however, that my skills were adequate at best when compared to monsters like himself. And we did train, just until one of us did or said something ridiculous enough to perturb the echoes of our hits and let our exhausted laughs emerge. I inherited the thundering laughter of my father's side of the family, and Federico Palazuleos preserved intact his own robust and unapologetic Andalusian laugh, so even when our comedic sensibilities differed due to our age and origins, when we laughed simultaneously, a post-colonial communion harmonized between the two. We would let those very human melodies defeat our martial cacophony. Sit and rest our sweaty backs against the wall mats to catch our breaths and contemplate the small warehouse that was our gym and his home. Unbearably hot in the summer and impossible to keep warm in the winter. Physical exertion has a disinhibiting property, similar to that of alcohol, but differs in that the former unveils the obscure and unpleasant, while the later reveals the essential and honest.

During one of those moments of induced lucidity, I asked Federico a long overdue question. "Federico, why do you talk to me?" The soapy and sour smell of the gym calmly sailed back into our noses as our breaths simmered down. "Eh Poeta" Federico always referred to me by profession, even now, no one else at the gym remembers my real name. "I honestly thought my eyes would have betrayed me to you by now." We kept looking straight ahead so I was forced to pull them from memory — the affirmation sincerity was ever-present, still neither blue nor green; the paleness of his skin darkened even more his beard, and several wrinkles now settled across his forehead — yet I had grown accustomed to the silent gaze of indifference he wore while fighting, a danger-inducing look only experienced fighters possess. Federico called this look a presence that swallows the fighting spirit of your opponents. Being on the receiving end of it made me worried that one day I would acquire that same look myself and gaze at the world with it, regarding others as mere objects to be pieced apart. It unsettled me, that at times, I too embraced a genuine desire to harm.

I could not find an answer in my memory of his eyes. Anticipating that my thoughts were coming to an end he said, "Those eyes of yours have not shined at all since you came in." I turned to face him. I had also noticed the absence of their shine in front of the mirror but adopted precautions to wear my usual joyful expression to my immediate world. "All who walk through that door have their own motives to accept and cause pain to others, but I must admit that I have affinity for your kind." Concealment was of no use anymore. "When did you realize it?" I asked. "Mexicans like to fight," he replied. "But I figured you were here to mourn the loss of a love that never was, when I shook your hand." I tightened my shin guards, readying for one last round. "The Bolero singer is the first cousin of the poet," Federico said as he got the timer ready. I looked into his eyes once more and I saw it. Reflected at me — irises of a different color — was the wounded expression I had worn since I came to this gym. I asked him, with five seconds before our physical conversation began, "Where is your guitar and what's her name?" The bell went off, we touched gloves.

Lead teep. A mute guitar ages in my room, with the name Matilde Aranda carved in its strings. A lead teep of his own. Catch, pull. He knew the combo and defended with a clinch. My twenties, scarce in prudency, began with

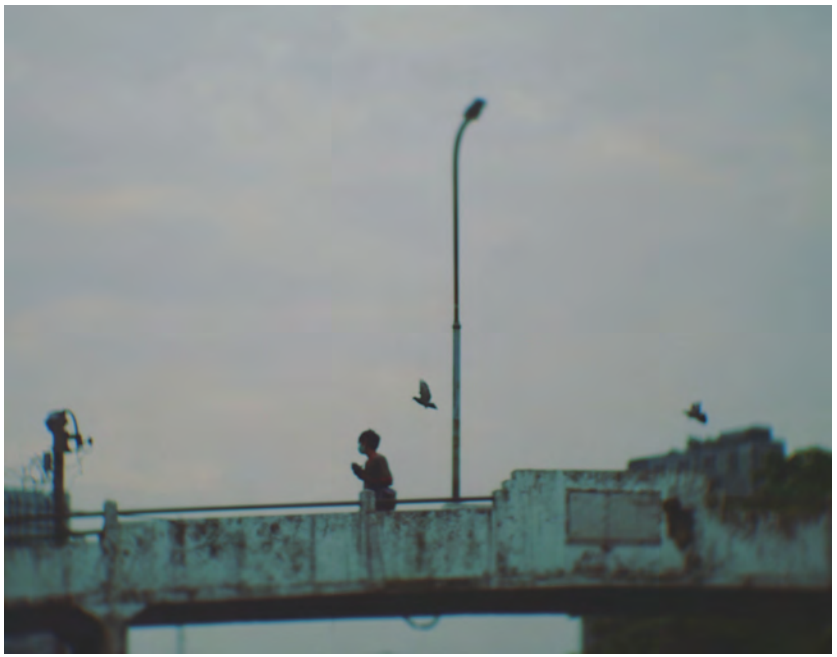
guitar in hand one afternoon at the Maria Luisa Park, while I sang the Boleros of my father and his father. Fight for control of the clinch. Knee to the body. Knee to the body. He went for a sweep. Defended. Second sweep. I was down on the mat.

My rendition of voices long gone, that only asked for a small monetary retribution, met a hazelnut syrup gaze that silenced the melody of the plaza. Federico telegraphed nothing. Back to my feet. Jab, cross, hook to the body, rear leg kick. He parried everything but took the kick. My hand was down. Lead hook to my face.

I did not know then that this public serenade was the beginning of our long game, so I played for her, but heard nothing besides her attentive glance. Followed by a low kick of his own. Pain. I returned the kick and circled out. Federico came forward, light on his feet. Relax. Deep breath and think. Long guard. Jab, rear kick. First Hip Feint. Second Hip Feint. Switch feint into an overhand. Landed.

Yesterday and today, I, in waking life and dreamful night, remain a loyal servant of her stare. I have renounced myself to her memory until the time I can write her the most beautiful song ever written. No, he slipped the punch and pivoted to throw a hard rear kick. I managed to somewhat block, it still hurt through the shin guard. I returned the kick, but before it could reach his body, Federico teeped me off balance. I went down again.

That is my challenge, Poeta, the reason behind my exile, stranded and broken, waiting for the brief glimpses of lucidity that this monastic-martial life grants me, to find the missing pieces of my song before I can return to Matilde Aranda. The bell went off. “Did you understand, Poeta?” Federico asked. I nodded, slowly getting back up while — very much like you are at this moment my dear reader — trying to make sense of our wordless bout.



Winter Birds

Haley Johnson

I hear the ceaseless communal caw of the birds above me and I am thankful that I didn't park under a tree. It's eerie, yet comfortable–like Halloween–to see their shadowy forms perched against the fading dark blue sky. They take their post on empty branches scattered like leaves, keeping a vigilant watch on the city below. I imagine they take their jobs very seriously; I've never seen them miss a shift. I also imagine the sort of things they see every day: people walking their pets along the river, boats drifting under the draw bridges, carjackings and drug deals, most likely. Their presence feels like a fresh October rather than the unfriendly February I'm stuck in – a reminder of better times, ahead and behind. Unlike me, crows are winter birds. They don't wish for whispers of sunlight in the dragging gloomy days. When the sun sets at 4:00 p.m. and it feels like the days had been stolen from me. I don't know where they go in the summer, or if they stay. Maybe they have lazy river days or picnics in the parks like me. One day I will ask.

Hometown Blues

Kaela Morrow

It's funny how you end up back
In that little ritzy city
You ran away from
All those years ago.

Where your dad disappointed you,
And your grandma loved the meatball subs
At the green-rimmed Italian shop on the corner,
And you struggled through adolescence
Like an ant stuck in honey.

Where you were dropped off down the road
So no one saw that ugly little house,
And your clothes were all second-hand, and you
Stood out like a puzzle piece that

Doesn't
Quite
Fit.

But now, it is just a town,
Like a million others,
A mundane suburban entity
No longer interesting enough
For my hatred.

The Culvert

Julie Rose

As she walked down the snow-smothered embankment, her gentle breath fogged up her glasses, which hung loosely down her nose. She had given up on wiping them clear. All she could see against the pure and dreadful white were the ragged tops of twigs, which poked out of the cold, dead ground like sad wooden stubs of incense that had burned long, long ago.

Uphill, resting along a disused stretch of road in Tohoku, just as white as the snow it was spilled into, her van lay motionless. It had been about seven months since she'd spoken to her family. She wondered whether she could even bear to call them, if her phone had any signal. Her fingers grew cold within her gloves, and as she held them up to her mouth to warm them, she considered whispering into them a weak, quiet nembutsu.

At the bottom of the hill was a lake, bare as the sunset sky above, wound between the road and the woods beyond. On the opposite bank slept the remains of a shrine gate, sunken into the frigid earth. She stared into the cold, white abyss, and felt a peculiar mixture of anxiety and emptiness.

I should have just stayed home. He wouldn't—he would never…

She pulled a cigarette out of her coat pocket, then the rose gold lighter she had received from him on her twenty-fifth birthday. But she couldn't bring herself to light it.

I don't deserve it, she thought, brushing away warm tears.

As she turned back towards the road, she noticed smoke billowing from somewhere further down the embankment, through the frost-hardened thicket. As she approached, she found herself overlooking a deep pit, where a shallow stream still trickled with life. What appeared to be a stovepipe poked out from a small round culvert buried in the rocks, hidden behind a thick green blanket. The whole thing barely reached up to her stomach. She reached for the edge of it and—

A hand suddenly reached through the other side, pulling open the blanket to reveal a man's face, covered in a thick gray beard.

"Ah, sorry!" she yelped and backed away.

"Wait!" she heard the man yell as she turned and stumbled her way back up the embankment, fumbling her fingers through her pockets, clambering uphill across the beaten snow, back to the familiar road.

She shut the back door of the van, pulled a thick comforter over her legs, and reclined on the futon in silence. She lit a cigarette. Her hands shook, her heart raced, and from time to time she climbed over to the front and looked out the window, expecting the man in the culvert to show up.

But he never did.

And despite burying herself in her parka, rolled up in her blanket, breathing in warm smoke, she found herself growing colder and colder.

What am I afraid of? She mulled over the idea of walking back down to the culvert, wondering whether she was more afraid of talking to him than she was of death. She put her cigarette out in the ashtray beside her, watching the white and black ashes mix together as the light dimmed. Perhaps she would rather just freeze all alone.

She heard a gentle knock.

But…

And then a muffled cough.

I... don't…

And then the universe inside the van began to dissolve from its edges, and the faces of her parents, her older sister, her lover—all turned in her head.

He…

And then it all faded to black.

She found herself alone in a cramped space, warm yet unfamiliar, wrapped up in a thick cloth sheet, atop a futon laid across worn wooden boards, all suspended above snowmelt trickling below. Wood faintly cracked within a small metal stove, set against the wall which curved above her, meticulously dressed with sheets of mylar. A lantern lay at her feet, illuminating the chamber with its incandescent glow, and everywhere she looked, she could see her gaunt face frowning back at her.

On the stove, a donabe pot and a shallow pan steamed away silently. Resting neatly on a plank before it were two tepid cups of tea, left untouched for some time. Behind her, further down the narrow tunnel, she saw what appeared to be a stack of books—a precarious blur of black and white stripes.

She heard rhythmic splashes in quiet crescendo, followed by a pained cough.

"I'm back."

At her feet, she saw the man's head poking through the blanket yet again.

"Oh, you're awake; uh—good evening," he said, trying his best to bow. He looked about five years older than her, but his hair and his roughly trimmed beard was speckled with white, resolving to a modest gray, like a wise, distinguished veteran from some other time.

"G–good evening, mister," she replied. Her chest tightened. She had no real idea of how to deal with her predicament other than politeness. "What a…nice home you have."

"Oh, it's nothing. It was a lot of work, and it's not so clean, but I tried my best." He looked around. "Would it be okay if I were to come in?"

She gave a reluctant nod. Can't deny a man entry to his own home, I suppose.

He clambered into the metal tube, setting a plastic bag and a small log down next to the stove. After a momentary struggle, he unzipped his parka and pushed it off to the side. He sat down, removed his boots, and hung them above the stove pipe to dry.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"A little bit," she said, realizing that she hadn't eaten earlier, "but…"

"Shall we eat together, then? I brought some rice, fish, everything with me when I set up here. Thinking about it, I may have brought too much," he said, massaging his beard. "I could cook something up on the stove for you, if you'd like."

"Uh–yes, that would be good." As she sat up to give him space, she bumped her head against the corrugated metal ceiling above her. "Ow, what the—"

"Oh! My apologies," he said. He rubbed the back of his neck, running his thick fingers through his ashy hair. "It's a tight fit in here."

"It's okay," she replied with a pained smile, "just a light bump."

"Well, if you say so," he said with a light bow. He then shuffled around to face the stove and reached down to grab something from the bag. Fresh cuts of mackerel, it looked like. As he placed them onto the hot pan, the aroma instantly filled the whole tube. She wasn't sure if it smelt delicious or obnoxious. Maybe it was both. Meanwhile, the donabe pot continued to steam away.

She found her coat resting on the floor behind her. Reaching into the left pocket, she rolled a loose cigarette around between her fingers, but she only felt further on edge. She loosened her grip and let it fall to the bottom. The faint scent of teriyaki sauce overtook the room with a gentle sizzle as it splashed into the pan.

"Oh, excuse me," he said, "would it be okay if I crouched past you?"

"Uh, sure." She laid against the wall of the pipe as tightly as she could and watched as he retrieved a small wooden bed tray.

"You can use this," he said, "if you'd like."

They ate in a near-mournful silence. He sat composed beside the stove, shoulders relaxed, legs gently crossed. She sat seiza before her tray, nervous, craving, clumsily picking up slices of mackerel from her bowl, which lay limp over rice porridge. It was a meal that felt oddly familiar to her, but she couldn't quite remember why, and before she could give it any further consideration, they had finished. He collected the bowls and placed them in a bin outside, and a curiosity, long overdue, had finally come over them.

"My apologies," she said, "but may I ask you a question?"

"It would be no problem," he replied, "ask me anything."

"Just out of curiosity," she said, rubbing the back of her neck, "what brings you out here?"

"Nowhere else I would like to be."

She offered him a concerned glance. "Nowhere?"

"Yes, and I suppose there isn't much reason not to tell. I often used to go camping around here. In fact, everything I brought down here is in that sled. Uh–it's over on the other side of the blanket there behind you."

"I see," she said, "but why?"

"Truth is, I've been a long-time smoker. Been smoking since before I was even twenty," he said, pinching his goatee. "Well, I received a lung cancer diagnosis about a month ago. Terminal."

"Oh, I see," she said, thumbing her lighter nervously. "That's unfortunate."

The embers in the stove cast a soft amber glow.

"Indeed." He said. "I figured I would rather spend my time here than in a hospital, but I don't feel sorry for myself."

"Why not? I mean, wouldn't most people?"

He sighed. "Well, you see, for the first few weeks, it was awful. But then I remembered something I had read, by that German philosopher—Nietzsche was his name."

"Ah."

"He had come up with this idea. Perhaps you know of it. 'Endless Recurrence', he called it. 'What if you, upon death, you had to relive your life over and over again forever.' The idea being, that you would want to make your life worth living again and again. And I made a decision. My life had been good enough, and maybe even my misfortunes were worth visiting again. But here and now, perhaps I could have one last camping trip before, well…"

She looked down at her knees. "I see." If only–

"However," he said, "I do not have any regrets, I must say."

"But—is there nobody you would want to see? Before–"

"No." He said. "There's nobody left for me. Except for you, I suppose." He scratched his beard. "Speaking of, what may have brought you here?"

"Well, it's a bit difficult to say." She looked aside and exhaled a nervous giggle. "You did, I suppose."

"Oh, excuse me. I mean, where were you headed? Before you ended up here, that is."

She paused, resting her chin across her knuckles. It was a painful thing to speak of, but also painful not to speak of. And in any case, speaking it to him is no worse than if she spoke it into the hollow of a tree. It would disappear just the same. She took a deep breath.

"Some time ago, someone very dear to me passed away," she said.

"I see." He brushed his finger across his mustache. "Were they family?"

"No. It's difficult to say why, but my family doesn't approve of me." She sighed. "No, it was a man who I loved very much. But, I…"

He scratched his beard. "It's okay," he said, "if it is too painful…"

"No, it's okay," she said. "This may seem a bit strange, but he also had an illness."

"An illness?"

"Yes. Pancreatitis. He had been a heavy drinker while we were together, which I didn't mind much at the time, but–" She looked down at her knees again. "I had no idea he was sick. We had been separated for some time, so I only learned afterward."

"Ah," he said, "my condolences."

"But, I–" She looked at him and felt her eyes well up. "He had tried to call me, while he was in the hospital. But I didn't answer. I was busy. I thought–I thought maybe he would just call me back, or that I would call him back. But I forgot. It was only through social media that I learned. That I learned that he…"

"How unfortunate," he said, "but he's with Buddha now, yes?"

"But he wanted to talk to me one last time, and I wasn't there for him. I wasn't there. If only I had picked up the phone right there and then, if only I–" She trailed off into a muffled, wretched sob.

"I'm sorry," she said, her tears glistening in the glow of the stove. "I shouldn't burden you with all of this."

"It's no problem," he said. "There's nothing left that can burden me."

They slept side by side, though facing opposite directions. When the morning came, they stepped out of the culvert together to gather more wood for the stove. Clouds returned to the sky, and an uncanny fog swept through the wood. Snow fell and blanketed the earth in fresh new layers, but the stream continued to trickle.

She watched him as he anchored his boots into the snow, delivering swift cuts to a dead, hollowed tree, until it fell gracefully onto a blanket of soft white. "So," she asked, folding her arms against her chest, "where might the stream go after it leaves the culvert?"

He smirked. "To the other side, of course."

"Obviously," she said, "but why is it still flowing, when everything else is frozen?"

He paused and set his axe against the fallen tree. "It's simple," he said, "there is energy in flowing water. It takes a bit more to freeze a lively stream than it does to freeze a pool that is already still, that already aspires to become solid ice."

As he worked twigs into tinder and branches into kindling, she looked out across the ice and found herself stricken with unease. "But so much is frozen, still."

"Everything frozen can flow again," he said, "when the warmth returns. When all of the snow and ice melts, the rivers and lakes come back to life. Even though it all inevitably flows to the sea, it returns once again to nourish all of those touched by it."

As he returned to his work, she quietly pondered. I've heard something like this before. Memories, like woodlice, worked their way out of some old forgotten plank deep within her mind. She could almost see the temple her family used to go to in Kyoto, lining up to offer incense, listening to the priest speak of Amida's Primal Vow, of the troubled Shinran, who despite his faith in Buddha, considered himself always to be wretched and defiled. *But not as much as me*, she thought. *My body a mistake, my life a mistake. Too selfish, too flawed. To where do my tears flow?*

Day by day, they followed the same routine. They woke to gather wood for the stove, then ate more fish and porridge, with the occasional treat of rice crackers or chocolate. After a week of midday tea drinking sessions, her heart eased. She began to feel a peace that she had been missing for so long. They spoke casually, they sang, they played mahjong.

But in time, his strikes weakened, and his gait slowed as he exhausted his energy through increasingly long coughs. She took up his axe when his body faltered, first in turns, and then alone as he rested in the warmth of the culvert. As the weeks passed, the snow no longer fell, and the sun shined once again, but it was of little comfort to her. One evening, as they lay together, wrapped up in the same warm blanket, he whispered.

"Chizue," he said. "Chizue." He looked into her eyes. "I told you before, that I had no regrets, nothing to burden me. But that's not true. I regret not having loved like I had before, so many years ago."

She looked at his weary face, his hair unkempt and

beard frazzled, and saw something familiar in it. Like something she had always known. “But, you love me, right?”

“Do you?” A tear ran down his cheek. “Could someone love me in such a state?”

She smiled softly and sadly, “I do. But how could you love me?”

“You have a warm heart, like the stove, like the sun. You’ve taken good care of me up to this point. Even if we had never met, you are still more than worthy of someone’s heart. You are so kind, so beautiful.”

“I don’t feel so beautiful. Besides, I’m different. We can’t–”

“We can.”

“But–” she said, choking back her tears, “I still haven’t had the–”

“That doesn’t matter to me—it never did,” he said with a smile. “You know that.”

“I suppose so, but–”

Exerting an ounce of his remaining strength, he kissed her. They wrapped their arms around each other, their tears mixing in their embrace. She pulled down his pants, but then she hesitated.

“But my–it’s not–”

“It can be,” he said, “just imagine it. This is our moment to relive again.”

She mounted him softly, without pain. As she writhed, she could feel the ice melt around her heart as it beat faster and faster. In some delirious ecstasy, she liked to think she was passing some of her energy, her life to him.

“Chizue,” he moaned. “I love you, don’t forget that I love you.”

She could feel herself getting closer and closer to the other side. “Goro,” she yelled, “Goro!” She closed her eyes, and she could see him just as he was all those years ago, younger, healthier, smiling back at her, and a tearful smile took hold of her as well, accompanied by tidal waves of pleasure.

As she climaxed, her eyes opened, tired and crusted over. “Goro,” she whispered, “I’m sorry. I should have been there.” She sat and cried for a long while, as the dim light outside the van grew brighter and brighter. As her tears gave out, she pulled out the last remaining cigarette from her pack, looked at the lighter he had given her, and then she put them away.

She opened the door and saw that the snow had begun to melt, but she’d still have to get the van moving again. Faint memories of the stream, and the culvert, and Goro flowed through her mind, and she wondered what she had seen. She put on her glasses and made her way down the embankment yet again, passing between the trees, down to the pit where the culvert was. The stream was flowing more vigorously than it was last night, but all she saw was a piece of green tarp that had fallen from the road, stuck on a broken branch that hung across the top of the inlet.

A strange, unintelligible voice pierced the mist, and she turned around to see some creature barking at her—a gray and white fox. As their eyes met, it fell silent and peaceful, before dashing its way upstream, fading into the woods beyond, towards the morning sun.

When You Return to Me (Cuando regreses a mi)

Zoë Slivkoff

Cuando regreses a mi
Y estemos en el aparta
mento
Después de una noche de fiesta
Will you take my makeup off
Sweetly como los dulces en mi cajón?
Porque me enamoré

Cuando regresees a mi
Tu cabello más gris
Will you take the pins out of my hair?
Will we watch them drop to the floor?

Red-colored walls as I melt into you.

Voy a estar esperando con suave paciencia
Cada día
Y siempre
En este lugar familiar

Deciduous

Jessie Carver

I am no one's mother. I once was, but not anymore. Motherhood: an identity lost, a former life receding into the shadows. At night, I dream of the quivering billows of sea-foam lining the edge where the water meets the sand, of seagulls screaming, of a little girl crying.

These days, I inhabit my skin unfamiliarly, like trying on an outfit that doesn't suit me and that I plan to abandon as soon as I find something more comfortable. I wonder what it's like to occupy someone else's body, their mind. It's lonely to only know my own thoughts, to be the sole guardian of my memories trailing behind me like sinewy ropes of kelp strewn on the beach.

Every January on that day, I make myself a mug of raspberry tea and enter the empty bedroom, open the closet still populated with petite dresses, and reach to the back of the highest shelf for the tiny box tucked inside another like nesting dolls. The tiny one is wooden and hinged and slightly larger than a matchbox. Inside it is a square of red cotton fabric, and concealed in its folds is a constellation of small white teeth. I run my fingers along their enamel curves and jagged roots, pressing them into the cradle of my hand one by one.

"Deciduous" refers to trees that shed leaves seasonally—an oak tree, for example, whose lifespan can be hundreds of years. Human baby teeth are also called "deciduous teeth." A child typically sheds theirs between ages six and twelve, losing around twenty baby teeth in all. We only made it to seven.

This is a print featuring the Palestinian Sunbird, and is inspired by the proverb: "The bird does not sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song."

The Burning Man

Charlotte Burnett

Up on a hill, in a lonely forgotten part of this strange place, there stands a man. He is not a good man, nor a particularly bad one, but he is a tall man; so tall his shadow stretches to the boundary of this strange history park. He's stood here before, many times in fact. He's stood here in the rain and the sun, with the biting chill of the winter wind against his cold cheeks. He's stood here looking down at them: the people in coats and warm scarves; the women and children with their faces painted blue, yellow and red; and the men in such peculiar armour. It's an odd sight to look at, this show they perform for him….this spectacle of human audacity.

They do it for him – each year they come in the hundreds, carrying their baskets of food and warm drinks for when the night's frost starts to creep in. Every year the soldiers come down from their encampment – their armour is strange and metallic; their tunics are made of red thread and if one were to lift up the faces of these strange actors, one might notice a uniform scar under each chin. As if the straps of their helmets were not formed to keep a human skull from harm at all. There are others down on the field, men and women in bright coloured cloths of yellow, and blue, and brown. The only metal these phantoms wear is around their arms, huge bands of gold that loop like dragons around their too-pale flesh. The man remembers them all as he looks back down onto that empty field before him: he remembers how their clothes flailed in the wind as they faced each other. Romans… Romans and Celts, they named themselves as they rattled their spears and their shields, and screamed at one another. And all the while the man looked on, unafraid because none of this was real – it was all just a play. These were not real soldiers, these were not real Romans or Celts, these were dolls in a game before him. The other people knew it too, the people in chairs off to the side – it's all a game, no one dies in this battle today. A brief show for the onlookers while they wait for night to come.

This is how it's always been, all this time the man has stood here under the stars, this has always been his role in their game. He has stood here before, in many different bodies: sometimes he's tall and shapely like a woman, sometimes he is short, his body square and as unnatural as this whole night must look. It's always this hill he stands on when it happens, when the crowd gathers, and they come. They come with their torches and their lighters, and they gather at his feet… at his large wicker-made feet.

'All right,' cries the false Roman. 'Who wants to see him burn?'

Every year the crowd screams back to him, and every year it's always the same answer.

'Burn him! Burn him! Burn him!'

He hates this part, hates the heat of the flames as they rise up his legs, and his torso, until they cover his entire body. There are red sparks everywhere he looks, and the fire inside him is brighter than the stars. But he doesn't scream, for they have not made him a mouth to do so. He is burning, and his whole world is that pain, that searing crackle as the paper and the straw in his belly catch light. This is his life – to watch and to burn, and then when it is all over his memory will stand here until next year, when the cycle begins again. Except it doesn't because this year there's no new body for him, and no Roman to burn it, for there's no park anymore. It's empty and as silent as he is now, and on his hill, made flat from his many different bodies, he stands and watches that silent park. It will soon be winter, he can feel the ice on his phantom cheeks, he's so very cold, and he thinks how fine it would be to be a fire.

Still he remembers their laughter, and their battles and their flames. He remembers them all, for there is nothing else left. Only memories like him stay here now, and even they will fade when there is nothing else left to burn.

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50th Issue

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Contributor Notes

Kesha Ajose Fisher was born in Chicago and raised in Lagos, Nigeria. After attending PCC, she won the Oregon Book Awards' 2020 Ken Kesey Prize for her debut collection, *No God Like the Mother.* She is also an Oregon Literary Fellow and a relentless student of the human condition.

Matthew D Albertson is a student at PSU. In the time since going back to school, he has picked up artistic tendencies and is compelled to follow those impulses as he pursues a major in Political Science.

Linsey Anderson is 23 and grew up in Portland.

Amita Basu is a Pushcart-nominated writer with fiction in over sixty magazines and anthologies including *The Penn Review, Phoebe,* and *Funicular*. She's a reader at *The Metaworker,* sustainability columnist and editor at *Mean Pepper Vine*, and editor at *Fairfield Scribes Microfiction*. She lives in Bangalore, uses her cognitive science PhD to work on sustainable behavior, and blogs at amitabasu.com.

Gloria Bird, a member of the Spokane Tribe of Washington State, and founding member of the Northwest Native American Writers Association, was born in 1951 and grew up on the Colville and Spoke Reservations. After PCC, she earned her BA and MA; authored award-winning books of poetry; and, with Joy Harjo, coedited R*einventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America.*

Denver Boxleitner is a college student whose poetry and fiction have been published.

Charlotte Burnett is dyslexic and high-functioning autistic. She lives in Scotland, and has had short stories published in literary journals such as *The Write Launch* and *Coffin Bell*. She also has a Bachelor's in Science from the Open University, focusing on Psychology and Sociology.

Jessie Carver is a queer writer and editor who lives in Portland, Oregon, but grew up on a farm in the borderlands of New Mexico. Jessie's short stories and poems have appeared in various literary journals and the anthology *Love Is the Drug & Other Dark Poems*, and she co-authored the nonfiction book *Rethinking Paper & Ink: The Sustainable Publishing Revolution*. She won the 2024 Phyllis Grant Zellmer Prize for Fiction. You can find her online at jessiecarver.com.

Manit Chaotragoongit was born in 1983 in Bangkok, Thailand. He works in public enterprise. His photography has been published in magazines and awarded by the Globalhunt Foundation, India and the Burggrun Institute, USA. He journeys to streets and alleys and takes photos from his inspiration and passion. Although he has Age-Related Macular Degeneration Disease, he still creates art.

Min Chia is a student from PCC in Oregon. She loves making miniatures and crafting. When she is not spending time on her homework, she will spend all her time on making miniatures. You can find her work on instagram: @koemin_min

Connie Colter was raised in the Cascade mountains and homesteaded in Canada. She began sculpting in 2012 and painting in 2021 at Portland Community College. She bears witness to the strength and dignity of individuals who define themselves, adding richness and meaning to the world. See www.constancecolter.com

C.J. Davis was a PCC student in 1976.

Rose Ora Edwards is a soon to be graduate of the graphic design program based in Portland, OR. Screen and risograph printing are two of their favorite mediums. When they're not doing professional design work they like to paint or print images as a meditative practice. They hope their work can transport you to a different world, if only for a moment.

Gene Flores has been working with all aspects of printmaking for over 33 years. His works are greatly influenced by literature, music, politics, religion and everyday activities. Gene continues to exhibit his works nationally and internationally. He is currently PCC's Pathway Dean for Arts, Humanities, Communication and Design.

Gigi Giangiobbe-Rodriguez is a writer based in Oregon and raised in Oakland, California. She loves propagating plants and drinking tea. When she's not amassing books faster than she can read them, she's writing, snacking, or scream-singing karaoke at a dive bar with her husband and their friends.

Goldie Goldberg Oakland, CA ~> Portland, OR The Dude Abides @eff.stop. fitzgerald

Ellipses Griffin is a nonbinary Oregon poet and bookseller who has been telling stories since they learned to communicate. They are currently pursuing their BA in English from Southern Oregon University. You can find their work in previous editions of *Alchemy* and *Main Squeeze*.

In 2018, **Laila Hajdari** was a first year PCC student majoring in Business Marketing. In her free time she enjoyed writing poetry and music.

Esabeau (Esa) Harrington is a senior creative writing major at Rocky Mountain College in Billings Montana. Her poetry and nonfiction work often discusses challenges with mental health, it also often revolves around the relationships in her life.

Devan Hawkins is a freelance writer from Massachusetts. His fiction has appeared in the *Penn Review, Litro*, and *In Shades* magazine and his writing about travel, books, and politics has appeared in a number of places including *The Guardian, The Los Angeles Times, The Islamic Monthly, CounterPunch*, and *Matador Network*.

Alexandra Hawley (she/her) is a NeuroQueer single momma to 3 kids, who is going to school full time. This is the first time she has had any work published. She was born and raised in Oregon and is finally starting to learn about her heritage and be herself as an artist.

Deangel Hernandez is an Oregon-based artist who discovered a new passion for capturing moments in time through the art of photography. He combined his talent of Flow Arts and imagery to produce surreal images for everyone to appreciate. Deangel has always been fascinated with lights, colors and geometry that help shape the world around him.

Eric Hernandez Born and raised Oregonian. Graphic Designer who loves to find old clothes and bike around.

Haley Johnson is an *Alchemy* editor, a PCC student, a prose writer, and a poetry dabbler.

Elyse Kamibayashi is a queer, fourth-generation Japanese American living in Portland.

Kyle Lauderman is an author of prose writing from Cincinnati, Ohio. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in English from Eastern Kentucky University.

Daymon Lively is a 24 year-old currently-enrolled PCC student who also works at a local liquor store. He enjoys writing and photography with a macabre style, flourishing in the decrepit, the creepy, and everything eerie.

L. Lois lives in an urban hermitage where trauma-informed themes flow during walks by the ocean. She is pivoting through her grandmother-era, figuring out why her bevy of adult children don't have babies. Her essays have appeared in the Globe and Mail, her recent poetry In *Parentheses* and *Woodland Pattern*.

Albert Lopez is an undergraduate student attending the Rock Creek campus – quite honestly, a student that has never found joy in writing, not until attending Creative Writing, Winter 2024 with Dr. Veronica Sandoval, who taught her students how to fall back in love with writing and expressing their identities. I still don't call myself a poet, but I'm learning to consider the idea, thanks to Dr. Sandoval.

Kynna Lovin is a writer from Portland, Oregon. She served as the 2021-2022 Editor-in-Chief of *Portland Review*, and recently completed her MFA in Poetry at Portland State University. She is currently working on her first collection.

Carly Mazzone is a second year graphic design student at Portland Community College. When she is not designing, she enjoys hiking around the beautiful PacNW, taking her fluffy dog on walks through the equally beautiful neighborhoods of Portland, and fulfilling a personal quest to find the best dive bars.

Steve G. McLeod was a PCC student in 1980.

Raven Moon is a long time student working towards a licensure in teaching visual arts. She aspires to encourage the accessibility that art holds and gives space to everyday life.

Jessica Doe Mehta is an Aniyunwiya (Cherokee Nation) poet, artist, and scholar. Forthcoming releases include *sp[RED]*, a poetry collection that Indigenizes the tarot deck, and a monograph of her research that examines the intersection of female poetics and eating disorders. Learn more at thischerokeerose.com.

Lara Messersmith-Glavin writes essays and speculative fiction in Portland, Oregon, where she also serves as faculty in the English department at Portland Community College. She is the author of *Spirit Things* (2022) and *Ruiner* (2025), as well as dozens of shorter works. Find her at queenofpirates.net.

Kaela Morrow is a college student, writer, and lover of the arts. Poetry is her emotional sanctuary, allowing her to express her feelings with no bounds. She hopes her work resonates with readers and facilitates a connection through words.

Louisiana-born **Jae Nichelle** (she/her) is the author of *God Themselves* (Andrews McMeel, 2023) and the chapbook *The Porch (As Sanctuary)* (YesYes Books, 2019). She believes in all of our collective ability to contribute to radical change.

Oscar Nieves Lira is a promising Mexican short fiction writer, poet, and freestyle rapper. Born and raised in the magic village of Tequisquiapan, Querétaro, he is currently based in the Pacific Northwest. Oscar is a student at PCC seeking to earn a degree in Literature and Philosophy.

Kymberleigh Olivas As a mixed woman I see a lack of people of color being the subjects of paintings and general art all together. I want to not only highlight but make it a norm for more people of color to be seen as the main subjects, in this case the subject in the painting is of my little brother, Micheal.

J.B. Polk is Polish by birth, a citizen of the world by choice. Her first story was short-listed for the Irish Independent/Hennessy Awards, Ireland, 1996. Since she went back to writing fiction in 2020, more than 80 of her stories, flash fiction and non-fiction, have been accepted for publication. She has recently won 1st prize in the International Human Rights Arts Movement literary contest.

Gray René is an illustrator, painter and printmaker from Portland. Their goal is to become an art therapist, and she hopes to be able to use her art to advocate for social justice and connect with their community. Their work often features themes of empowerment, justice and tenderness.

Analis Rivasplata-Newton (she/they) is originally from Tacoma, Washington. In the winter of 2019, they moved to Portland, eventually nesting in Southwest Portland with their partner and cat. Growing up in an abusive environment, they've been writing practically since birth. They specialize in free-form and prose abstract poetry.

Julie Rose is a PCC student who moved to Beaverton at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. When not distracted by YouTube or Balatro, she explores identity, loneliness, and trauma through her writing. During the course of her study she has found a passion for editing, and enjoys helping others develop their work and get published.

Teresa Rosen was a PCC student in 1985.

Ron Ross has taught writing and literature at PCC since 1999.

Mary Rymer is a single Mom living on Long Island, NY who, in addition to writing and sometimes painting, is a narrator and producer of audiobooks.

Zoë Slivkoff is a student at Portland Community College who will be transferring to Portland State University to pursue a dual major in Russian and Spanish; she would be happy to become a translator one day.

William Stafford is among the best-known 20th century American poets, having published more than sixty-five books. Among Stafford's honors were Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, and a Western States Lifetime Achievement Award. From 1970-1971, he was the consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress (U.S. poet laureate) and from 1975-1990 he was Oregon's fourth poet laureate. Stafford died at his home in Lake Oswego, Oregon, on August 28, 1993. *Alchemy* published this poem three years later.

Forest Svendgard-Lang (they/them) is an Indigiqueer artist working out of Portland, Oregon. Forest's work explores their intersections of identity, of what it means to be queer, trans, and a young Indigenous person growing up away from their homeland.

In 1996, **Brenda Utley** was a thirty-eight-year-old science major and mother of Chloë. She was originally from Sevier, Utah, and yes, it was very severe there.

Ed Vassilenko is a fella from Hillsboro, Oregon who likes to make stuff. He likes plays, mixed media artwork, comics, and paintings. He wants to start his own summer camp one day.

Quinn Webb is a genderfluid artist born and raised in Oregon. Their art covers a wide range of topics, from exploring their life and experiences as an autistic person to celebrating their many interests and hobbies.

Josiah Webster is relatable. He lives in Portland with a rogue's gallery of roommates and their many cats. His work has previously been published in *Ergot, Figwort Literary Journal*, and *The Bellwether Review*. You can find him on Instagram @byzantine_dream or via his website, websterware.neocities.org.

Ember West grew up in a cult, escaped from an arranged marriage, has six children, and is making her childhood dreams come true by studying creative writing. She enjoys philosophical discussions with her partner, hiking the Oregon Coast, and befriends birds.

Makenna Wood was born and raised in Portland, OR. She is a mother, student, and art lover. She works with special needs students preparing for adult life. In her spare time, she loves to hang with her kids, hike, photograph, and travel.

Kirby Michael Wright was born and raised in Hawaii, on the remote island of Moloka'i. Wright's latest book is *AMERICAN DREAMLAND*, a poetry collection published by Bottlecap Press. He takes a battle ax to the standard American Dream perception that living in the suburbs is nirvana, or at least a safe zone inhabited by dwellers sharing their color, class, and political leanings.

Colophon

To harmonize with our historic cover art—which uses letters carfully recreated from the first seven issues of *Alchemy*—and to lean towards the future-making we are all a part of in this monumental 50th year of *Alchemy,* this publication is set in the following typefaces:

Myriad Pro Bold, etc.
(Headers, Masthead, Colophon)

Collier Bold; Extra Thin
(Contributors' Notes & Bibliography)

Anona Medium Italic
(Subtitles)

Plantin MT Pro Regular, Italic
(Body - Prose)

Collier
(Body - Poetry)

Myriad Pro Bold Semiextended; Italic
(Calfs & Shoulders)

***Alchemy* Archives Section**

Book Antiqua Bold
(Headers)

Anona Medium Italic
(Subtitles)


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