SPRING 2024

THE OZ LITERARY MAGAZINE

DRIFT ADRI

DRIFT ADRIFT ADRIF

The Oz Magazine Spring 2024: "Adrift"

The Oz Magazine is Occidental College's oldest literary magazine, created by and for students. Special thanks to the Occidental English department for providing funding and support.

Editors-in-Chief: Eran Karmon, Hanna Lou Rathouz

Editors: Averylin Huang Cummins, Sidney Millen, Gabi Pinto, Isa Ramos, Emaline Ricketts, Quinn Sidor, Grace Gonsalves, Nisha Siedler, Sam Willard-Van Sistine, Penelope Jia, Ruby Gower, Sebastian Lechner, Joaquin Martinez, Liz Darahdgian, Reyan Nguy

Social Media Managers: Isa Ramos, Emaline Ricketts, Penelope Jia, Reyan Nguy

Advertising Leaders: Sam Willard-Van Sistine, Grace Gonsalves

Lead Poetry Editors: Averylin Huang Cummins, Liz Darahdgian

Lead Prose Editors: Grace Gonsalves, Isa Ramos

Note from the EICs:

This semester has been an absolute whirlwind at *The Oz*. Last semester we introduced a new format to the magazine—this semester expiramentation was at the forefront of *The Oz*. The tight-knit community of our editorial team reinvigorated Occidental's creative writing competiton, developed writing workshops, hosted an open mic, and most importantly provided a forum for all the wonderful voices of Occidental's literary scene.

It has truly been an honor to feature your writing and art this issue, and work with such an amazing team. We are so thankful for everyone who has come to a meeting, submitted work, or got invovled in some way. We hope you enjoy Spring 2024: "Adrift"!

–Eran & Hanna Lou

The Oz: "Adrift" Table of Contents

Abby Panzica – **i am not here now** | 4
Alex Romanov – **From the Beginning to the End** | 5
Alexa Richman – **Clodagh** | 6
Ari Flores – **The Arsonist Is Dead** | 9
Audrey Shuler – **A list of medications** | 11
Boo, R – **La noche en la Isla** | 12 (art)
Averylin Hunag Cummins – **Empty Meaning Waltz** | 13
Bella Dominguez – **Poetry doesn't move fast enough.** | 14
Cor Jacobs – **Jacobs // Chen** | 15
Eran Karmon – **Fixed** | 18
F. G. G – **"Plants for Dummies in the Discount Bin"** | 19
Gabi Pinto – **Heat Exhaustion** | 22
Gianna Nguyen – **ice** | 24
Deja Ebrahim – **Watching** | 26 (art)
Deja Ebrahim – **Birth, Body, and Death** | 27 (art)
Grace Andres – **Eating.** | 28
Grace Gonsalves - **"The Blaze"** | 29
Hanna Lou Rathouz – **Vampires** | 31
Hannah Lieberman - **Near the Mouth of the River Ghost** | 34
Isabel Friedl – **A Prayer for Collective Conciousness** | 35
Jai English – **ohio** | 36
Raina Pahade – **I Can't Be the Only One** | 38 (art)
Raina Pahade – **My Body is Mine** | 39 (art)
Jane Brinkley – **Dreams** | 40
Jiana Scipione – **Working (title)** | 41
Joaquin Martinez – **Fontana** | 42
Jonah de Forest – **State Fair, or, The Ballad of Mabel** | 44
Kate Bown – **Epitomize** | 47
Lee Chaloemtiarana – **banana** | 48
Ruby Vogel – **An Overview of Orange Cats** | 49 (art)
Madeleine Hladky – **The Life-Fruit** | 50
Melissa LoCicero – **Can You Take the Heat?** | 52
Boo, R – **Avalanches** | 58 (art)
Nora Youngelson – **Jacob Riis Beach** | 59
Pierre Cozic – **From a page clinging to a storm drain** | 60
Quinn Sidor – **A Sonnet, Poorly Received** | 61
Reyan Nguy – **Endlessly** | 63
Sebastian Lechner – **A love poem** | 64
T Luyen – **Meeting God** | 65
Sky Simon-Thomas – **Murmuration** | 73 (art)

i am not here now

Abby Panzica

there are police sirens to the north, maybe south or west, it's always hard
to tell from up here.
the city parts in two to reveal the sun exploding in red orange yellow, its
light caving in on itself.

the mosquitoes are invading los angeles, and no one really knows why.
just that they bite your ankles until they bleed but never seem to bleed
themselves.

maybe it was because i didn't drink any water today, and haven't eaten a
real meal since last week,
but i kind of felt like i was rotting from the outside in, right down to my
cells.

you know every death on the titanic was caused by a simple
miscalculation?
if they had 18 more lifeboats 1,517 more people could have saved
themselves.

i want to hug my mom when she was a kid, braid her hair down her
back, put a ribbon on the end,
sit her down and tell her it will all turn out fine myself.

From the Beginning to the End

Alex Romanov

It was tucked away
I reached back
In that second between life and death
No warmth
The infinite in-between existence
No feelings
My hand slipped
The frightening night took it all back
It was everywhere
Even in the daylight
I could lose my mind
The repetition
Another second
It came closer
That thought
Nothing behind the mirror
When you are
On that other side
I will find a way to love you.

Clodagh

Alexa Richman

My daughter is Clodagh C-L-O-D-A-G-H because its letters loop and linger on the page like I imagined my needle might loop and linger on human skin. C-L-O-D-A-G-H.

I was seven years old when Mister Markey sliced his knee. He was plowing Mister Anderson's field to cover some expense, like he always did on weekends. I don't think Mister Anderson should have let Mister Markey plow his field, because everyone knows Mister Markey faints when he's dehydrated. But Mister Anderson wouldn't listen to seven year old me, and Mister Markey sliced his knee when he fainted and fell off that plow. Serves them both right, I say.

Mrs. Anderson found Mister Markey in the field, while he dressed the crops in blood, and she drove him to the hospital in the town's third communal car. Mrs. Anderson took the third communal car because Mister Klyde had got the first and Linda Mueller had wrecked the second.

I should have known that God had sliced Mister Markey's knee just for me because the third communal car was silver which is the color of a sewing needle. The first car was red and the second was black, so it was God's will that Mister Markey ride in the sewing needle car.

Mister Markey came to our house a week after the accident for some treats and some dinner. Mama made him iced tea and told him, prop ya leg up there, Mister. It's the best stool we got. Just for you, mmhmm, that's right. She held her cold ice tea with one arm while the other wrapped itself around her bosom.

He said I sure do thank ya, and he shifted his weight and he put his knee on the stool, right next to my face, just as Mama told him to do.

And I had never seen knee flesh like that before.

His leg was hairy and his skin was fine, but it looked as though God had ripped his knee apart, and some kindly human stitched it back together. Black thread criss crossed his flesh, hugging a jagged scar, and I thought to myself who knew that they needed seamstresses for the skin.

All through dinner-time I stared at Mister Markey's knee, tracing the lines and the squiggles with my eyes.

I pictured the pretty young seamstresses hearing the lucky news that they were to be employed in the *hospital*, rather than in Aunt Mitsky's humid little living room, and my heart leapt for joy. I imagined they wore white frocks and clean white shoes.

I pictured them holding their sewing needles with delicate fingers; pressing it in, lifting it out. In, and out. In, and out.

My fingers could hardly wait to press a needle in and lift it out, and I did not know I was imaginary-sewing the air until Mama said Georgia, what are you doing with your fingers, girl? Stop that. Eat your dinner.
I blushed and pressed them into my skirts and continued to sew that flesh in my mind.
The next day I walked to Aunt Mitsky's house and I said teach me to sew please.
She led me in and pushed me into a hard wooden chair. She thrust a needle into my hands.
After that day, I went to Aunt Mitsky's humid living room to sew every day of my life until the day I turned seventeen.
That's the day I got pregnant, on my seventeenth birthday.
I would like to work at a hospital now, I told Aunt Mitsky. To provide for my family. What do I gotta do?
What you wanna do at a hospital? She asked.
Sew, of course.
Sew what? She asked.
Sew people, I said.
She flashed me a look that said you're crazy and so I drove myself in the town's third communal car to the hospital so I could ask them myself.
Do you got any jobs for flesh seamstresses?
Any what, girl?
Flesh seamstress. I want to stitch up skin.
Oh. You gotta get trained for that.
Oh, yes. I'm trained, I said earnestly.
You got a medical degree?
No, ma'am. But my Aunt Mitsky is our town's best seamstress and she can tell you that I'm the next best we've got.
That's all well, girl, but you can't work here unless you got a medical degree.
Not even as a seamstress?
We don't got any of those, girl.
"Oh"
But I wanted to sew flesh so badly, and it was all I worked for for ten whole years, so when I returned to Aunt Mitsky's house, she just said It's all the same, Georgia. She thrust a sewing needle into my hand and said think of all those swooping letters you like to embroider. You like those C's, don't you? And those G's? Make some of those. That'll make you feel nice. She walked away.
I looked at my hands, at my needle, at my string.
And my hands went: C-G-C-G-C-G.

When I sewed my C's and G's, I imagined I was sewing them onto someone's knee.
C-G-C-G-C-G.
And when my daughter was born I said C-G-C-G-C-G, and my daughter's father said okay. Clodagh it is.
And now my daughter is eleven and I love her because I wasn't able to embroider thread in flesh, but I got to embroider flesh into history. And when I sew her name Clodagh on pillows and handkerchiefs I imagine I'm sewing them into something better, something juicier, something warmer.
And when my daughter says what are you doing Mama?
I say I'm sewing Clodagh.

The Arsonist Is Dead

Ari Flores

What happened?
To the brightest and most exciting thing
that drew me out?
The things I took for granted
Don't come easy now.
I can't hold my hand steady;
The match snaps in my fingers.
I don't know what this is.
I don't know what closeness means
When there's so much distance.
The flame's life depends on his dance
But I've forgotten the steps
And I have to stop because
What the Hell am I doing?
So much I can't bring myself to do
And no time at all.
When I was alone in the dark,
I clung to that painful light
With the shining of fingertips
The hiss of ignition
The foam of bile
The raging of veins
The gnashing of sulfur
The tear of aorta
but it just got

smaller.

I just got

weaker.

The see-saw was burning.
Wobbling apart
Tipping back and forth
Over the dark.
Spirits rise in plastic fumes
Melted faces
Siamese mouths
bubbling eyes and limp lips
they tell me I'm home!
Cling to the wire!
Hang by the vein!
Ah! I'd forgotten the steps
but my feet are dancing on their own!

A list of medications

Audrey Shuler

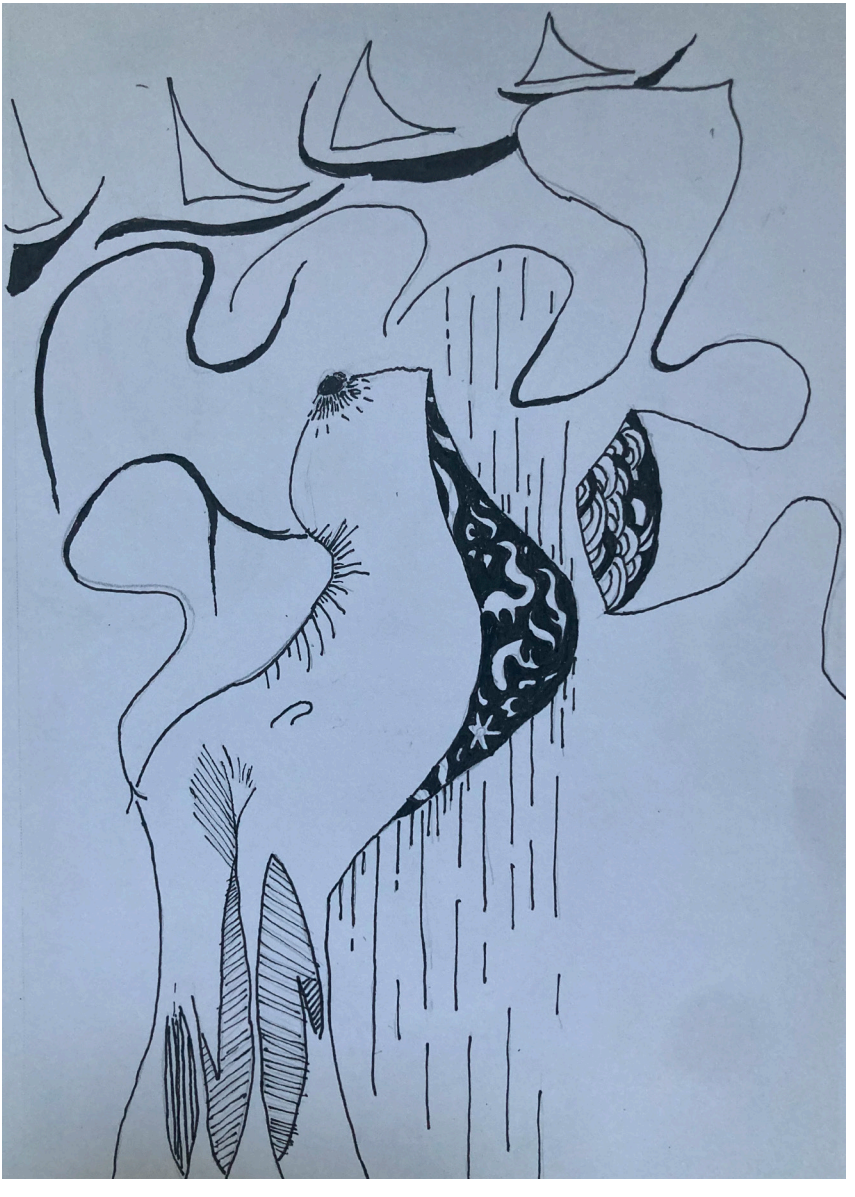
i grew up in cold winters, burrowing in the ground to hibernate, thinking i don't like myself very much. Then i moved to the city of angels and i thought maybe they would save me. And the ground didn't break when i tried to bury myself there, so now i take prozac and weed. And sometimes when i take a hit off my joint and feel the world slow down around me, the smoke billowing in lacy lazy circles above my head, I think i'm going to lose myself in this world. Or maybe i already have because i don't know who i am. I look in the mirror and there's someone, but i'm not sure she's me. But she has my name and my clothes and my dads eyes and my moms sharp nose. But now her eyes are laced with red and her smile is loopy, and she doesn't think love can save all. Why does growing up feel so wrong? I watch the time on my clock tick. Slowly.

The tick.

The tick.

A month gone. A year gone. A childhood gone. A teenhood gone.

Time feels infinite, but it is not. I remember that in you—in feeling i had forever to watch you, but you slipped away into the sunset I watch every evening to see the light of your smile—the one that reached the corners of your eyes and showed your crooked teeth. Would I do it all the same—I'm not sure? Will i think the same when i look back to now. Will i read this and wish i had been smarter—wish i had known to live because i had it *good*. i walk on a thin line between regret and sentiment. At the end of the day, i'm not even sure i really believe in love. i think this fantasy i've been building in the bookshelves of my mind are just that—a good story. Something i want to believe. God, maybe i need more prozac and less weed.



La noche en la Isla By Boo, R

Empty Meaning Waltz

Averylin Huang Cummins

Six blades of grass
fell from a sky
that was California-cloudless,

And just too small
for all
the air.

The muscles
in my chest
called corporate,

Claimed they were
tired of holding
my ribs in place.

So I used my sternum as a spade
to dig through fresh-old dirt for the
thoughts I'd lost in the laundry.

I laughed,
and I hated the sound
so I did it again.

I let my soul rest
against the purple earth
and pushed off again.

And the tallest card on the tower
called "I'll race you
to the floor."

Poetry doesn't move fast enough.

Bella Dominguez

You left me alone too long, and my Thoughts Expired.
Me n my homies on:
(feeling of ennui),
Drag on to the dark side.

Die on the new moon,
Magnet empty center,
Sign of leprechaun,
Angel number DEVIL SPAWN.

Soviet supergraphics,
Alone at my heart :3
Diary of missing classes,
Infinite apocalypse, stolen art.

Writing on edges,
Fringes at (impressions),
New moon, empty center,
Writing from the aperture.

Lil Peep bunny, at my therapist's office.
Albuquerque is so irks-core.
I'm just a:
Harp-playing-hyper-chords.

Jacobs // Chen

Cor Jacobs

At times, I find it difficult to reconstruct the past.
This is, in some sense, my aim.

If I could go and read this to Oma, which I could,
I fear that the past might find its way back to her.
So I will not.

In other words—

At some point since you left, the past crumbled
behind her eyes. I believe this was the first moment
she was happy. At the very least,
happy in a way that she had not felt before.

Your daughter felt it too. It was a warm, unfamiliar
kind of happiness deep in a mother's eye that only her
child could see.

She saw it in Oma's eyes. I saw it in hers.

I noticed it when she told us a story that never
happened. Over the years, she had told me so many
stories that *had* happened, and I almost believed that
this story had as well.

She told me of how she met the Queen of the World
years and years ago in Jakarta. In reality, she had met
her six months ago in Apple Valley, California.

I didn't care.
All I saw was that happiness in my mother's eyes,

as she saw it in Oma's.

Because of that, I think it would be wrong for me to
reconstruct the past for her. I think it's time she
forgets the stories that actually happened
and all the blood that they left behind

I only want her to remember you,
but I don't think she could ever forget.

She talks about you every time I visit.

//

What is it to share a name, but not blood?
To share blood, but not a name?

The answer is buried somewhere in Santa Barbara.

A house with a rusted steel meridian,
choked & withering lawn;
the grandfather clock still ringing
in the back of my skull.

I wonder if we, strangers with the same
saltwater in our veins, ever crossed paths.
Maybe somewhere along that walkway by the beach,
or at *Sushi Go-Go* or *Yogurtland*.

How long was it

before you stopped being her father?

before she stopped being your daughter?

before I stopped being your grandchild?

Those titles fell away in some derelict time
like victim leaves taken by zephyr.

Your name reigns, invictus,

unconsumed, unmoved,

& eternally starved.

The answer is buried somewhere in Santa Barbara,

unspoken by mothers' lips,

unchewed by fathers' teeth,

known only in the language of the child's heartbeat

Fixed

Eran Karmon

The bread had been stale a long time,
The wood on the table had just been fixed.

He is remembering whether or not he believes in prevailing good—
It is not directly important to the task at hand.

Because of the cold breeze that comes every few minutes
He has put on a jacket that everybody loves.

Life does not pass this way,
Though it goes on.

“When you said that about my hair,” he said,
“It kind of hurt my feelings,”

“It wasn’t my intention,” she said,
And she turned to the other side of her,

“I liked your hair that day,” their friend said,
And the three of them nodded.

The window was wide open,
And the room was small.

Even colors felt, or perhaps were, small.
He did not want to close the door, he needed it like this.

“Plants for Dummies in the Discount Bin”

F.G.G.

I am one big stocky cut of film, as I move softly the beautiful world shines non stop through a tiny sensory pinhole and I become increasingly superimposed.

You must buy a potted plant and place it on your bedside stand. You must tell the plant goodnight before you go to sleep after a long day. It could be a Fiddle Leaf Fig or a Heartleaf Philodendron, both good for locations with partial sunlight.

I ardently gulp down the oily fat of moving shapes and colors until I can’t stomach them anymore and have to purge.

Of course this is not all, you must buy another potted plant and place it on your windowsill.

I take scenes of awe as gold coins into my coin slot heart, but I am not saving up the gold, only sustaining myself by it until I hack repeatedly and spit up the half digested clumpy melt that remains onto the side of the highway, where its glint will annoy people taking piss breaks until someone thinks it is cool enough to put in the pocket of their cargo shorts.

You must fill your entire windowsill with plants and when you have run out of space you must start removing the family pictures from your dresser and place the plants there.

I want to nurture everything around me and console everyone I meet, I want everyone who reads anything I write to know that I wear olive green pants sometimes, and I want to have afternoons of rest even if they are elusive because of all the great art.

There is so much great art.

Including

Guys touching fingers on ceilings, bananas taped to walls.

Knee high boots made of bulky synthetic material worn with tight dress

shorts and a mesh long sleeve under a leather vest, thrown together on a dime and twice repeated on the gram.

Nighttime sunglasses floating above a pink crop top that says
They don't build statues of critics
An image eternalized by a Canon EOS R5 C, now destined to outlast any statue.

Cosmic voyagers, faces painted, donning spectacular robes with complex patterns made entirely from fine silk, constructed so meticulously and tastefully as to invoke royalty, wielding electric guitars and handheld keyboards, taking over NYC with the funkiest of movements.

You must have tall plants in the corners of your room and medium sized ones lining the walls in between.

I see art everywhere.

Wearing a Grade 70 12" padlock bike chain made of real carbon steel to accessorize an awkwardly fitting leather trench coat is similar to folding against the grain of the cotton fibers in an Arches® Aquarelle watercolor paper in order to make a leaflet for a poem, they are two vessels in the same vein.

You must buy LED grow lights and an insulated glass case that comes with a customized moisture sprayer to grow plants from different environments.

I see art everywhere, only some of it is important to me.

K-SWISS, letters on top of blue and red stripes descending diagonally within a crest-like outline, printed into the plastic foam spanning the outer arch of some sneakers which had been creeping into retro gradually while they sat in a closet until they were passed two generations down, where they were worn frequently with olive pants for two months until an X-Acto knife saved the crest-like logo by carving it out of the shoes before they were thrown away. Maybe I'll use it in a collage.

You must fill all the space on your bedroom floor with plants and have plants hanging from the ceiling.

I see art everywhere and only some of it is important to me although I am important to all of it so I scoff at most of it.

I am amused by an inky drawing in the margin of my notebook, it comforts me because it is stowed soundly away. It is the idea of observable creative action which frightens me so much I scoff. The concept of vulnerable, exposed, expressive steps out into bellowing gusts of universal intertextuality does little to entice me, so for now I crouch behind my moderately sized boulder of verbosely rationalized discretion. Maybe the gusts would blow my hair just right and it would look like I was in a cologne ad. Or maybe it would just feel like wind.

You must have to step delicately around all the plants in order to get to your bed, and you should have little bugs crawling across the pages of your book during your bedtime reading.

There is art everywhere and in me and that is why I am important to all of it and all of it is important to me.

zig-zag-pretty-to-look-at
sculptures of sticks and leaves and ice get washed away or melt into
a million dollar painting that is only worth a million dollars once bestowed upon the right eyes,
once laid before the right throne,
and the most powerful throne of all time
was forged from discarded scraps collected by a janitor
who turned out turned out to be
Director, Special Projects of Infinity
and would probably tell you that only now,
only now that you are completely surrounded by plants, wind blowing through the window as you say goodnight to each one individually and mean it,
only now will the plants watch caringly over you as you rest up for your big day at the gallery.

Heat Exhaustion

Gabi Pinto

Miriam liked to say that she lived in a state of constant freedom. She had been restricted for most of her childhood, just as any preacher's daughter is. So when she realized she no longer had to let the world restrict her from anything, she began to do everything. She was now a doer, not a thinker, the consequences of her actions no longer of much concern to her. So, she became a hurricane, taking for herself all that she could, ravaging lands until there was nothing left.

It wasn't until the day she found out she was pregnant that she began to think first. On that day, after taking the test, she sat in a diner in middle of nowhere, New Mexico. As she sat in the vinyl booth, her legs sticking to the plastic seat, she asked the waitress for a coffee, then changed her mind and asked for orange juice, for once, thinking of the consequences of her actions. All she could think about was finding a way out of this mess that would consume her life. If she did have this baby, she would've had to stay in the middle of this godforsaken town in this godforsaken desert, trapped in a scalding hot prison for the rest of her life.

She'd always hated the heat, that sticky feeling of constant sweat on her arms and legs and the back of her neck. She dreamed of snow and the seasons and orange and yellow leaves falling off trees. A place where the progression of time could actually be seen and felt and tasted, where death didn't feel so present. The desert had a way of making death seem as if it was in the very air you breathed. It seeped into your hair and skin and even into the buildings, giving them an acrid, rotting smell, which one never really got used to, but eventually just learned to ignore.

Yes, the cold killed, but it seemed to get rid of all the bad, all the bacteria, leaving behind a freshness. It cleansed. Things weren't dead all around but instead frozen in time, waiting to wake up again, like a long sleep where you could have many different dreams. The cold came with the promise of new life. Nothing could live in the desert. It was never fresh or pure, it was heavy and thick and overpowering.

The heat gave the image of a mother, constantly giving all of itself, too much of itself, while somehow doing it all over again the next day. The complete opposite of Miriam. The concept of it was so intrinsically opposed to who she was. She was ever-taking thing, constantly sucking up as much love and attention as she could, leaving things dry and bare in her wake. Motherhood was a forever-giving thing. Was this even something she was capable of?

The biggest presence in her family had never been love, it had been God. Her father had been a preacher, so his mind was only ever on the church, his sermons, and God, leaving no space for anything or anyone else. Her father's undying love and unquestioning devotion was only ever directed into the heavens above, never reaching the ground on which we lived. Of course, we were all disappointments in his eyes, we were mere mortals. In comparison with the object of all his affections, the perfect being, we were all failures. No one stood a chance against Him and when her mother finally figured that out, she ran as far as she could, leaving it all behind, forgetting she had been loved unconditionally by one person, her daughter.

Everyone in her life had eventually run out of love for her and just like the smell of the desert, she'd learnt to ignore it. But maybe a baby could be different. This was a creature who would constantly need her for its survival, who would be unconditionally devoted to her from the beginning, who could be her possibility for undying love. It would be a love, pure and cleansing, just like snow. That future, that new possibility for love was what convinced her to have the baby. A chance for winter.

Yet by the time next winter came, what she saw in that baby's face was not her future, but her past. What she held in her arms was a heavy, warm, and overwhelming thing. The desert had seeped so far into her that it claimed her child. She could never escape it now, it was a smell so putrid that it would always linger, no matter how much she tried to cover it up.

ice

Gianna Nguyen

an overfilled cup spilling down the sides
dribbling like drool from the sewn-shut seam of your lips—
my lips, sorry

wrenched from my throat, my voice, my words
“i love you”
i love you
i love

the surprising tanginess of fruit that twists expressions
laughter on late nights that dissipates when i turn around
pears, even though they are just sad soggy apples
the way i used to hold my love inside

(like a pressure cooker
full of steam with nowhere to go
until i let it all bleed out

turns out, love looks like—
nothing

well,)

bandages on scabs that are too big to be covered
trying to clean stains that don’t come off
laundry rooms
unintentional exposure therapy for allergies
the trunk of a car
sunlight dripping from between where the clouds part, hanging over the ocean
towels and sweaters

the mounting seconds between the last time you were everything to me & now
that i get to peer into your glass for minutes at a time
ripples overlapping

i love you (times infinity)
until the words no longer contain

any meaning. until love is less about
how much you mean to me &
how much you think of me
and more about
melting

Watching By Deja Ebrahim

Birth, Body, and Death By Deja Ebrahim

Eating.

Grace Andres

FEED ME
FEED ME YOUR HEARTS
LET ME DEVOUR YOUR SELF PROCLAIMED GOOD SOULS
HAVE ME JUDGE YOU THROUGH MY TEETH
LET ME OPEN MY JAWS SO THAT YOU MAY CLIMB IN AND SEE FOR YOURSELF,
YOUR OWN REFLECTION
HAVE ME CHEW ON YOUR LIMBS UNTIL NOTHING BUT A BILE BALL OF FLESH REMAINS
FEED ME YOUR BRAIN SO THAT I MIGHT UNDERSTAND
FEED ME

EAT ME
EAT ME SO THAT I MIGHT BE TORN LIGAMENT BY LIMB
I MUST BE RIPPED SO THAT I MAY BE FREE OF MY ROTTING SKIN
END MY SUFFERING INHALE MY BREATH AND BURN MY ALREADY SCORCHED MIND
I CANNOT BE UNDERSTOOD SO I MUST BE DESTROYED
GORGE YOURSELF ON MY EXISTENCE SO THAT I MIGHT LIVE FOREVER
EAT ME FOR I AM DESERVING OF NO SUCH GLORY
EAT ME

"The Blaze"

Grace Gonsalves

"How was it from the front?"

It was an insignificant day. *Mad Max: Fury Road* had just finished and a family sat alone at the back of the theater. They were usually loud people. Together they were quiet. Quiet was easier.

"Oh?" A couple sat in the front row, a wife and her husband. The credits rolled, but no one else had stayed for them. It was just the couple and the family that was left behind.

"Had you seen it before?" The wife addressed all three in the family. There used to be four but now the daughter was single and the parents were back to having one child. They didn't know how to talk with her so they didn't.

The daughter felt ablaze. Anger tended to make her sad, which the boy had known.

The wife interrupted the girl's thoughts. "We like theater eight better," she said. "Theater six is just terrible. This one isn't too bad though."

A burning sensation took over the girl from deep within. She watched her parents share an amused glance. They stood up and she stood alone.

The wife continued. "I just hate theater six. It's a joke! It's so small!" There was a smirk in her voice.

The daughter's brain was always busy. Right now she couldn't comprehend it. The boy had loved that family. Maybe he still did. She didn't know. She stood and watched the dust fall on the screen. She wished it all away.

Watching the couple, her brain started slowing.

The husband wore a toothy grin. He was a curious one. A couple of his teeth were missing and he held a bath towel.

The wife faced her husband. They unrolled the bath towel there in the front row of the theater and they started shaking. They shook and popcorn fell. They were methodical about it. It was a routine.

The family shared funny glances. They shared the same question now. Talking was easier when it was with others and so they each pushed the conversation on through the wildness.

The wife spoke over her shoulder. She was helping her husband. “That movie? It won’t play here. He’s so good in it too!” She stashed the towel. The family stood together now as they watched.

The speech continued. “Walnut Creek should have played it.” The family agreed.

The man chuckled. He grabbed a bag. She grabbed their trash. They moved slowly. They cleaned quietly. They would do it again. They would come back.

The daughter’s chest burned. She felt her pain. Four minus one.

She watched them a little longer. She thought of hope and of the movie’s end. She thought of the couple and her brain found calm. The screen went black and the blaze was gone.

Vampires

Hanna Lou Rathouz

Sand slips through my toes. Sunscreen covers my face. The waves crest and then recede when they almost reach my feet. I watch them wash back and forth.

"Lana! Someone's on the phone for you." My head whips back to look Georgia in the eyes. She's a tall woman, aged by the sun and her years. She holds the landline phone against her ear.

"Coming!" I'm up in a second sauntering across the beach and brushing my sandy hands off on the back of my jeans. I reach the back of the house and step into the mud room, my feet sticking to the linoleum floor. "Thanks," I give a quick smile to Georgia and take the phone from her hands. "Hello."

"Jesus. Lana, were you ever going to tell me?" I shiver, Caleb's voice is rough and angry over the line.

"Yes. I. Yes, I was."

"No, you weren't. You said you wanted to keep trying. You said–" I hear him sob over the phone, the slight wheezing of plastic as he clenches our old landline.

"I know. I know what I said. But I was lying. Caleb, you don't understand what this has been like."

"Where the fuck are you?"

"Away."

"You have to tell me where you are. I need to find you before I get a lawyer. Before this really happens."

"I'm not going to change my mind. I want a divorce."

"Then I'm not going to sign the papers."

"Please. Please. Caleb, you have to. Please, you don't understand. Please." My hands are shaking as they hold the phone, blood rushing to my face. The world begins to warp. The walls stretch above me, the floor melting into one big white sea. I'm so hungry. The feeling starts low in my ankles and curls like smoke up my legs into my stomach where it settles. I could eat everything and still feel starving. Ever since I left I have been like this, riddled with the constant need to fill myself with something.

"Lana. I can't. I just love–"

"Don't"

"Fuck." I hang up. I know that there was no way that conversation was going anywhere. I peek into the kitchen, pull open the freezer drawer, and eat two cherry popsicles. A red drop of popsicle juice drips down onto the floor. It looks like blood, starkly vibrant against the white

ceramic squares. It looks so real, I lean closer, and then closer. I can see the white and red blood cells. They look like buttons. I lick the drop off the floor on my hands and knees. Something about this instinctive action, drives me to stumble into the bathroom and throw both popsicles up. Everything is red. That's where Georgia finds me, curled up by the side of the toilet, my mouth stained bright fuschia.

Lying in the grass face down offers the possibility of suffocation. I could inhale the dirt until my lungs are filled, or bury my face so completely in the ground that I can't breathe. I flip over onto my back. If I squint I can just make out a scrawny figure high up in a tree. He's barefoot wearing a pair of coral swim shorts and a flannel shirt on top. I hate it when he is up there. I hate the arrogant slant of his hips, his lips forming a lopsided smile.

"Caleb!" he ducks his head down at me, smirking. "Can you get the fuck down here?"

"Yeah, one sec." I bite my nails sucking at the blood creeping out of my cuticles. It tastes sweet. I'm annoyed. So I leave dragging my bare feet around the grass, feeling the prickles. Inside the house it's dark and empty. A sense of dread pulls me down onto the couch. I can hear everything; I sense every movement. I'm waiting for something or someone. So I sit. I stall. Eventually, like I'm being moved by a current, I shift, turning until I'm staring out the big picture window into our yard. I see him fall. I track his path as he stumbles, the skin of his foot ripping open on a rough patch of bark. He squirms in pain and loses his balance, howling through the air, hair whipping in the wind. The crack of his back echoes through the empty house. A bit of air rushes out of my lungs, a huff that is timed perfectly with the break. On the ground, Caleb wiggles, his body contorted into a figure of agony. When I stumble out into the yard the sharp scent of fresh blood is already filling my nostrils.

Caleb's eyes are heavy-lidded, blinking dumbly as he tries to configure his surroundings. When I approach his hand twitches, reaching up towards me. For a moment I just stand over him and watch his eyes. Confusion. Grief. Pain. I lean down and brush his cheek, feeling the clammy skin. I observe his hand, wet with sticky red blood. I bring it to my lips, kissing his palm, tasting it. He shudders, his eyes watering fighting to stay awake. I stand up again and pull my cell phone out of my pocket. Crackles riddle my phone screen and little drops of blood drip crawl in between them. 911. I type it in and press call. Blood smears my phone and I can't sense what I am pressing. 911. Again. Again. 911. I can't type out the number. My fingers are numb and slippery. I wipe my hands down the front of my t-shirt. 911. Panic finally settles in my heart. It's the first thing I've felt since he fell. I raise the phone to my

ear, and when I am finished talking I throw it on the grass. I lay down on my front next to Caleb. He's breathing, but unconscious. I bury my face into the earth feeling the ground become loose and then like sand. I bury myself until I can't breathe.

I know when I hang up the phone that I have to leave. Caleb knows where I am, I'm sure of that now. I know he will follow me. I don't want him to find me. I don't like Santa Monica. The ocean is too salty, and the people are too high class. Eventually, the charm rubs off. Georgia's an old friend from high school but we didn't know each other too well. All I offer her is a quick explanation and then I pack up the car and drive off. I roll down the windows and the ocean mist disperses through the front seat. I taste brine on my tongue.

When I was younger my dad used to take me fishing. There was a pond nearby where we lived and we would take out a little row boat. We used worms. My dad would open the package, the worms all squirming together like a brain, competing to get to the bottom. I wondered if they knew that we needed them to die. Did they know that to be chosen was to die? When we caught fish I wondered if they suffered. If the worm was enough to give them some joy before they passed away. Once, when my dad's back was turned I took a worm, watched it twitch wildly in the air, and ate it. It wiggled all the way down my esophagus, curling and uncurling. It tasted dirty, but briney. Like the ocean.

My life right now feels like it did then. I'm too curious. The worm is my freedom. I want the taste of it so badly, but when I swallow it wiggles in my throat. It won't go down right. The thought makes me sick. I pull over and throw up on the side of the highway. After I'm finished I gargle water, get in the car, and keep driving. The world washes by, blurred, one still image of beige.

Near the Mouth of the River Ghost

Hannah Lieberman

Wanaawna, river ghost
i waited and you did not come.

i sprouted, gossamer and pointed against a bird's breast
he knew how to pick at the asphalt the garbage behind inland strip malls, for a sip
migrated west with his growing thirst only to find
the salty surf and recoil

i fell to the ground, heavy from the trip
into the groping, gasping mouths of dandelion stalks, and young grasses
learning to turn their necks from the sun
and become parched compasses to your banks

nearly a century eaten away in search
Wanaawna, river ghost
there is a rumor you will not return
but the rains come and flirt with our hope
gather wildflowers in great bundles by the roadside
the rains left us drunk and the earth is bright again
but only when the seasons of dry grass fuel and fire will time tell
whether the blossoms mean rich harvest or lament.

A Prayer for Collective Conciousness

Isabel Friedl

May we for a moment not speak of the war
For it will wage on with or without our blood
With false coats shed, let clouds at injustice thunder

May we do deep listening and deepest knowing
Reach out to our wildest selves and hold precious the wild in others
Find her, free her, love her

May we keep this intention present during changes
For the river rushes on, but there is only present for it
Living the questions now, for we have arrived

May we embody the world we want to create
Let us dare to dream, write, and speak
In otherwiseness, and in impossibility

ohio

Jai English

2.14.2024

One of those summer days where you step out in the sticky humid heat and your arms turn golden, and your face starts dripping, and you race down the street on the bike your dad fixed up yesterday, keeping up with the neighborhood boys. Dad says you can only go in loops around the cul-de-sac, slow sad fishbowl loops, but who cares about no dinner before bed when the neighborhood boys are speeding off towards greener pastures. You follow them down streets you've never seen before, past beige colored houses and HOA-gray doors. They look back at you, sometimes. They're laughing. Probably at you. Look at you—struggling, sweating over your bright pink handlebars. There used to be a basket too, strapped up front, woven plastic white with flowers, but that, you'd decided, was just too much. You took scissors to it yesterday, cut yourself loose. Cut off the pink and purple tassels, too. Maybe Dad'll let you spray paint the purple frame black. Or blue. Or green. Your little legs are burning, and up front they're standing on the pedals and leaning forward and going faster, faster. Some of them pop the front wheels and sit back half in the air, make it look easy. Too easy. Easy enough you get it in your head you could do it too. You lean back, shorts riding up sunburnt thighs, and flick your hands up, just like you've seen them do it and—

The sky looks liquid beneath your feet, and for a split second you think you're flying, and the pavement sinks gravel teeth into your palms. Bites until you bleed. And bleed and bleed and bleed, toppled on the ground, legs tangled with spinning wheels. Your palms are rough red but your knee's got the worst of it, chewed up open skin, hot to the touch. And the neighborhood boys laugh too loud, biking off and leaving you to choke on the dust. The sun beats down, and the cicadas hiss like nothing even happened, and you just sit there catching your breath.

"Shit, kid."

Maybe it's your head still spinning from the fall but you could swear it's an angel leaning over you, a haloed shiny angel reaching out to you and pulling you back up on your tender feet.

"That was one crazy fall, huh?" she says, like you're something little and cute and easy to spook. "Let's get you cleaned up."

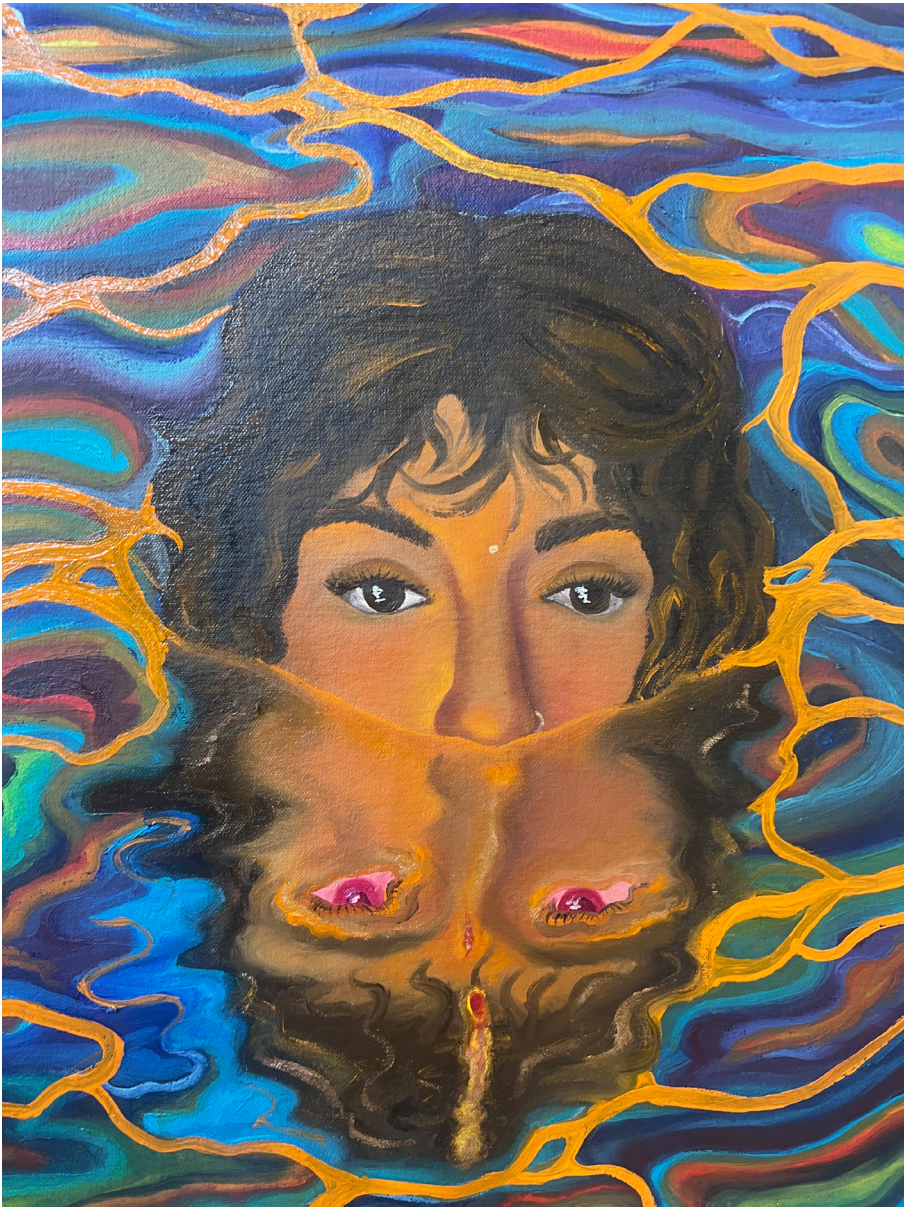
She guides you to her porch, has you sit on the stoop and wait while she heads back inside. You're poking at your knee. Trying not to, but around you is nothing but twin houses and bright green lawns and far too many American flags. It's 2009 and your pink blood and open skin is the most interesting thing you've ever seen, except for the stretch of her

legs when she comes back out to kneel beside you in her cutoff shorts and tank top. She's got tattoos and a farmer's tan and sharp collarbones your eyes can't seem to move on from, and she leans down over you to wipe your leg clean. Nothing hurts, suddenly, not even the alcohol she presses over your knee. All you can think about is the sweat beading on her upper lip, the damp curls pressed to her forehead.

"Alright," she says, pats your shoulder, stands up. You look up at her. From way down here, she looks like a dream. "You want a juice box?"

She sends you back out there with a "be careful" and a Capri Sun, and you suck down fruit punch while your mind's still on those collarbones. You don't know what that means.

You pick up the bike from the empty street. It's rickety, bent in odd places and clicking with each turn of the wheels. The world around you is still and quiet, like your blood's not crusting into the pavement, curdling black in the shimmering heat. It's just as well. It's almost lunch-time and you've got floors to sweep. You limp your way on home.



I Can't Be the Only One By Raina Pahade

My Body is Mine By Raina Pahade

Dreams

Jane Brinkley

When the time is right
Purple Rain will sparkle through
the Midnight sky
When the time is right
Fairy tales will become reality
When time is right
Whales will fly into the sky
When the time is right
I will be a figment of your mind

Working (title)

Jiana Scipione

Eighteen-nineties leather bindings
Filed under letter F
Galavant through the tight hallways
Handled, carried, re-shelved, "Yes!"

Lists and lists have been discussed
Jackets coated by new dust
Keen to noting circulation
Issues after issues waiting

Mistakes are made but rarely caught
No one reads the stacks like us

Ode to our forgotten novels
Quiet questions have been answered
Realizations of thereof

Searching for the missing pieces
They still lie within our walls
Understanding the strained system
Visitors can't find withdrawals

Wonder where I lost the puzzle
Xerox printers drone default
Yesterday's books were forgotten
Zealous workers have their faults
Amateur mistake!

Fontana

Joaquin Martinez

Daybreak.

The sunlight shines through a few cracks in the roof. Piercing the skin, a morning chill takes hold of every limb. The field is flat and level like a calm, lush ocean. Belly on earth, the cool, firm mud underneath makes staying down a tempting prospect, but routine is routine, and the rounds must be run.

There is no noise inside the house.

The eye catches green on green as the sun yawns and rises between the webbed gray towers. Their sagging varicose veins emit a faint crackle. Now, the endless pink skies and rivers of clouds are retreating.

Muscles flex and extend, finally breaking their meditation. While the eye watches and waits, surveying, the legs are ready to play in the field.

Grass and weed whip at the legs. Each leap takes minimal effort, melting into the stride. A tang of fertile earth, grass, and flora kicks up and becomes stronger as the fields fly by faster and faster, passing through time and out the other end into a purity of motion. Round the lemon tree, round the apple tree, up to the concrete road at the south side of the field.

Everything is in order. There is still no noise from inside the house.

As the noon sun bears down, the strong gust withers into a small breeze. On normal afternoons, the sunlight would have seared anything walking above ground. Today, the clouds cover everything in the valley, like foamy soap on a sponge.

The route cuts through the forest, past the large scarred trunk at the edge. While the honest field lays all intentions bare, jagged bark and slivers of light peering through the canopy make daggers of the forest. The breeze picks up for a moment, stirring the vivid, red bulbs hanging off from each bushel and kicking up some of the leaves. Cicadas harmonize, loud and haughty. That dry summer wind passing through makes the searing sunbeams more bearable.

Among the smell of leaf and gravel, a whiff, something drooling, something with fangs. The smell dares not approach in the daytime.

The afternoon sun descends. Underneath each digit, dry earth gives way to farmland as the house emerges from that shining verdant formation. The painted roof, pure as the snow-capped mountains, were

set out to be washed in light. The wind bristles and arches, but the acrid threat remains faint. The scents are stalking nearby, taking their time; there is no tactical advantage to seeking them out.

The porch wood creaks underfoot with the rhythm of impatient pacing. But there is still no noise from inside the house.

An ultrablack curtain covers the whole plot of land. A sunset gust delivers summons to war. Hanging over the door, a lamp flickers on, illuminating the familiar, faded paint of the front wall and the worn screen door. Darkness makes them bolder, colder, and hungrier. Sleep is never an option when the odor is so strong and close.

From the cover of night, from behind the bushes planted closest to the house, shapes slink into the open. Some break through the tilled soil like the risen dead, appearing one by one around the house. Every individual stepped, stepped, stepped towards the house with haunches in complete control.

Instantly, a flood of claws and matted flanks overwhelm the field's quiet domain. Only the sound of blood and sight of whimpers illuminate the gory scene. Keratin blades wring pain like no warrior ever so ferociously dealt, tearing at shoulder and thigh.

Home was home.

Weaving in between the invaders, the forearms retaliate with firm blows, crushing the dissenters with mere thoughts. Scratch, tear. Gouge, gash. Red blinded the eyes.

The stars stood still. As suddenly as it began, that gray, howling troop dissolves into pathetic stragglers with yaps and howls. The house holds its piece in bearable silence.

The cold inky night begins to creep into the root of each hair, followed by the pain. It's only harder to stave off the urge to sleep than to acknowledge the ache that sits, cross-legged, at the end of each bone.

Thump. The field is sideways. Green and metal alike hang off the side of the world like a horde of climbers scaling a cliff. Particles of dirt and dust float without a care. Leafy vegetables, the pumpkins, and even the earth itself begins to roll downhill, taking off from the ground, falling into that impossibly bright, all-swallowing well of light towards which all life must return.

Inside the house, the stairs creak. Someone calls for breakfast from the kitchen.

Daylight.

Daybreak.

State Fair, or, The Ballad of Mabel
(In the style of country-western)

Jonah de Forest

When Mabel cocked her head a certain way—caught in a moment of concern or confusion—she had the look of a painted saint: steeley and prophetic; attuned to some otherworldly voice. Mostly, though, she looked rather plain. Her pale, straw-like hair fell limply past her neck, tucked away from curved eyes and lips drawn into a straight line. One would have trouble identifying Mabel in a crowd if it were not for a thin birthmark that stretched from the bridge of her nose to her temple. If she felt any discontent about the trajectory of her life, one that had kept her in the fold of her immediate family and away from any adventure, she didn't make it known. She was pragmatic, even-tempered; just the opposite of her sister, Ann.

Ann rode in cars with boys and bit her lips to give them color and crept out windows in the dead of night, searching for something, anything. When Mabel looked at Ann, she could tell her sister pitied her. As such, she tended not to look Ann in the eye.

Mabel had been named after her mother's sister, who had died in infancy. She too would go on to die prematurely, rendered comatose after being struck by a streetcar and passing three days later at the age of thirty-six.

The one genuinely erotic moment in her life happened at the Texas state fair. It was the fall of '34, a year before the family moved out to Burbank. She had gone with her friend Hannah, a tense school teacher with a habit of blinking excessively (Mabel often wondered if there was something permanently lodged in her cornea). Hannah's fiancé, Herman, drove them from Waco to Dallas, barely uttering a word, except to occasionally comment on the heat.

When Hannah ran out of things to complain about – without fail, Hannah always found something to complain about – Mabel would drift into daydreams, thinking of the exotic places she had seen in travel books from the library. Life still seemed malleable then – the days brimmed with possibility, her future a shape she couldn't quite make out. She pictured herself standing atop Mount Kita in the Southern Alps of Japan, reaching out to touch the heavens and taking in all that earth. Or perhaps she might visit the Taj Mahal, with its marble barings and colossal arches, a mausoleum for the wife of a grieving emperor. Mabel was stirred by the thought of harboring such passion.

Mabel had felt pretty that day: dressed in a soft yellow blouse and a cotton skirt. The sky was full of biblical clouds, the terrain of amusement rides dizzying in its assortment of colors and mechanical wonders. There was something in the air that afternoon, something about the smoke and the dust and the way the trees swayed in the warm wind. It was as if everyone within the fairground harbored a heightened awareness of each other's bodies; enlivened by this strange, man-made Eden.

Around noon, she and Hannah were separated. Truthfully, she was glad to be rid of her — if only for a moment. Hannah had bitched all throughout the swing boat and the tilt-a-whirl, which made Mabel feel like she was being punished for deigning to feel pleasure. The two had met in church as teenagers and bonded over a shared bookishness, trading dog-eared copies of *My Ántonia* and *Wuthering Heights*. As the years passed, though, Mabel grew tired of Hannah's easy irritation and holier-than-thou attitude. So-and-so was too talkative or dressed inappropriately or was cast off as cold and off-putting by merit of a singular comment. She cast judgment with the pious condescension of a preacher's daughter, which, in fact, she was. Mabel was merely the daughter of a railroad worker.

After about twenty minutes of wandering around, Mabel sat in front of a tent that advertised "elegant portraiture" for fifty cents. She removed her shoes. Relishing the release from their tight clutches (*why had she decided to wear her Sunday service shoes?*), she wandered inside.

The interior of the tent was composed of billowing purple fabric, the air a sweet aroma she couldn't quite place (*was it jasmine?*). A woman with dark hair stood before a boxy camera.

"What's your name?"

"Mabel."

"That's a sweet name. I have a cousin named Mabel, she's in Chicago now. I'm Irma," she said, flashing a jagged smile. She was wearing dungarees and a men's work shirt, an unusually long cigarette dangling from her right hand. Mabel had never seen a woman dressed like that.

"Are you from around here?"

"Nah, I'm from Missouri. Parkville born and raised. But I'm sure that means nothing to you. Means nothing to anyone, really. Barely anyone there."

"I guess not," said Mabel, suddenly overcome with shyness. There was something about Irma that made her stomach twist like rope. Something about her broad shoulders and pock-marked face and the way she dragged her cigarette.

"Stand over there," said Irma, motioning to a cardboard crescent moon. Mabel shifted her weight from foot to foot, trying to determine what position made her appear taller. "Tilt your head up. A little more to the left. Perfect." They were both silent for a moment.

"Take off your clothes," said Irma, not looking up from the camera stand she was adjusting. Mabel was so caught off guard she couldn't formulate a response. Irma looked up at her and nodded. Mabel's heart pounded so rapidly she could see its movement against her chest. She felt hot. Not Texas September hot, but something else, like the cells in her body were trying to escape the skin that lodged them.

As if under a spell, Mabel removed her blouse
Her skirt
Her slip
Her ill-fitting bra (borrowed from Aunt Leigh)
Her underwear

And then, Flash! Magnesium and sulfide bathed her bare body in powdered light.

In the remaining years of her life, Mabel would never forget the intricacies of Irma: inky eyes, a pattern of moles dotting across her forearm, dark red fingernails like talons.

Years after she died, the family's house in Burbank went into foreclosure and Mabel's nieces were tasked with clearing out its contents. They found the state fair picture in a jewelry box under her bed, buried beneath postcards from places she would never visit and poorly-written love poems addressed to no one in particular. She was gazing at the camera with that elusive, saint-like expression, her angular frame cast in sepia tones. Looking something like desire.

Epitomize

Kate Bown

Scrolling through cringe, I try to epitomize
They forage through cobblestone as a pry to epitomize.

Gardenia kept a fragrant permanence around
The fluid promise broke mine too; epitomize.

Flabbergasting curves ebb and flow
Before they release a beguiling sigh to epitomize.

Sparkling citrine dressed in juice
Wet exacerbated dry to epitomize.

Unearthing papaya slides through
Fidgeting seeds fly to epitomize.

Quartz glossing over lazy intention
Shortcut your lies to epitomize.

Succulent drapery for the reclusive
Gently attaching thighs *do* epitomize.

This dilemma, absorbing peculiar embodiment
We navigate the cozy; we cry to the pit in my eyes.

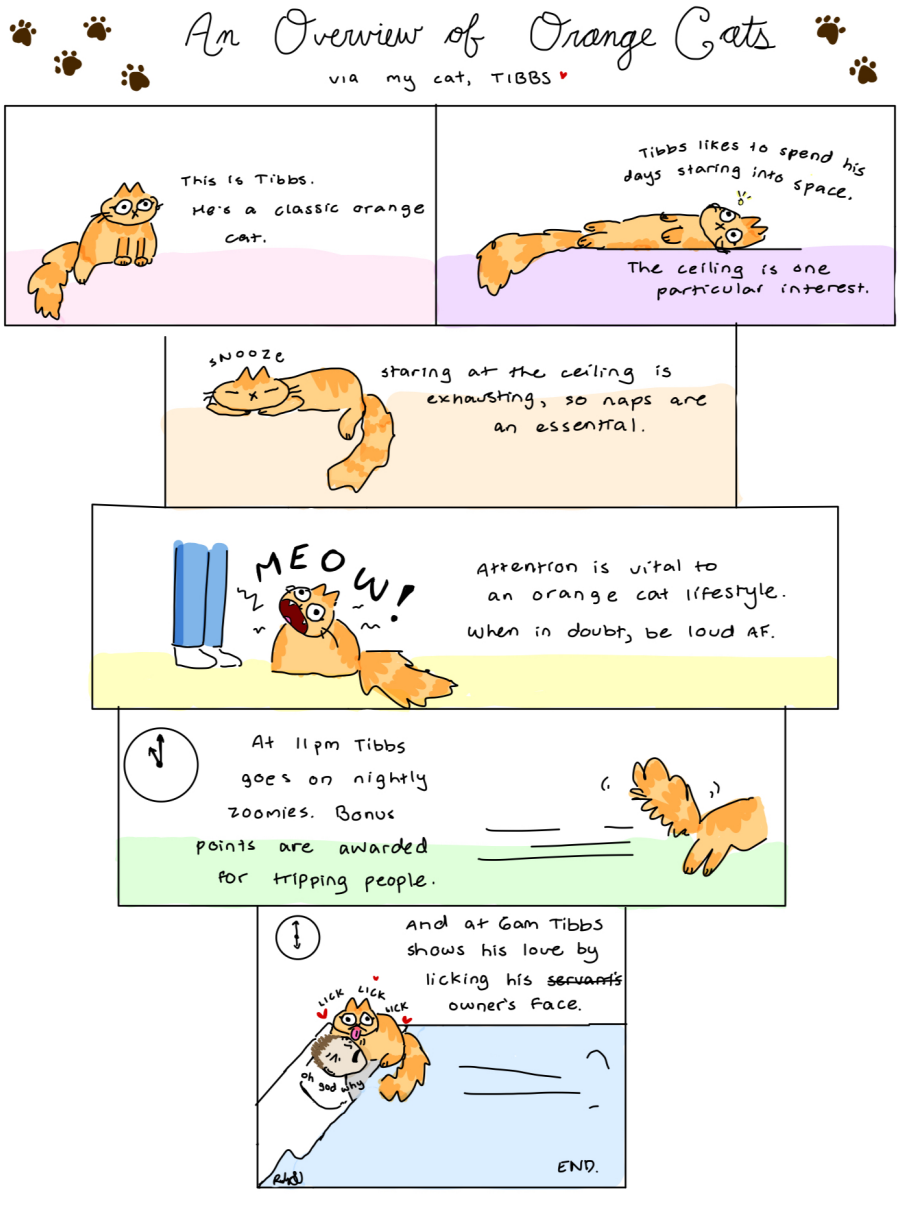
Scraping by to be so wise
See clearly Kate, through those eyes you epitomize.

banana

Lee Chaloemtiarana

1.2.24

when you first handed me a banana
i peeled it and stared at the soft, bruised flesh.
stubbornly, i claimed i could not eat it
and you took it from me
examined it
and said very slowly and with a small smile that it tastes all the same
and ate it for me
and as i sit in an unfamiliar bed
alone
across the world from you
i peeled a banana, staring at the soft bruised flesh.
i very cautiously took a bite
and found it tasted all the same



An Overview of Orange Cats By Ruby Vogel

The Life-Fruit

Madeleine Hladky

It was 7:09 p.m.. I remember this because the sun hadn't set yet. And in the summertime, I liked to savor the days. I would take June in slices, digesting moments in morsels: viridescent beetles, sour blueberries, wilting lilacs, the scent of earth upturned by rain. I wanted the green gap of summer to lodge itself between the membranes of my brain, in preparation for a wide gray winter with no berries or bugs or browning flowers. So I remember that it was 7:09 p.m., and my mother and I walked. Summerwalks are something we can do together to this day—sometimes our only shared thing is that we both like to watch sprawling streets settle into the summer night. But on this walk, it was 7:09 pm, and I was much younger, and there were many things my mother and I could do together, but the summerwalks were our favorite. My mother still saw me as special; she still treated me like a just-birthed thing. She had that reverence for me as humans do for fresh life, reveling in its newness—an awe for things that haven't yet become. "I think you treat life like a fruit," she said, breaking the silence as we walked. "What do you mean?" I asked, while observing the way my shadow stretched and softened in the yellow light. "I mean you want to savor everything," she explained, "you seem to want to suck out all the juice." I studied the pink that burned at the borders of the sky, "I don't know," I responded absent-mindedly. We remained in silence for the rest of the walk—careful not to disturb the sleepy day. The things people said to me were something I filed away to analyze later. My mother's observation remained in the back of my mind; the life fruit had become wedged between the meticulously-memorized summers. I began to worry. Was I truly savoring life, and could my mother be wrong, and had I already polluted her bubbling reservoir of hope for me? As I grew, it seemed to stagnate and drain—becoming shallower by the day. I was no longer new; I had proved to be capable of disappointing my mother. The amorphous dream-daughter haunted me. She wavered in my mind, shimmering in the golden light of the summerwalk; she was a new thing that never lost its newness. Life had become risky: with the possibility of being anything came the fear of being nothing at all. In school, we studied fossils. We looked at phylogenetic trees; the scientific creation story was hidden in their branches. In the black lines, I saw myself: a single node with a million possible embranchements. Each branch had its own life-fruit, as my mother called it—and each life-fruit was quivering—waiting to be drained or to rot. 360 million years ago—we learned in school—a tetrapod hauled itself out of the water and stumbled along the beach. Its

walk sprouted thousands of branches—billions of walking things on a once-vacant earth. Surely this tetrapod had gotten all it could out of life; it had so few ways to go and so few possibilities for error. This tetrapod had only to walk. The bacteria that divided within the primordial oceans had only to divide. Early humans, who painted their lives on cave walls, had only to survive. I felt uncomfortably evolved; there were too many things I could become. Human life had evolved into something innately complex and wearying; simple existence was no longer enough. I worried about the life-fruit. I worried that I'd let the years go by; my possible branches would turn brittle and sparse and the life-fruit would wrinkle and spoil. I felt fear at every choice I made; I was caught between wishing to be as unformed as I used to be and as fully-formed as I could be. But many worried years later, in another early June, it was warm enough for my mother and I to start summerwalking again. It was our sacred shared thing again. And again we did not speak but walked silently through streets that poured forth like dark rivers. "It is getting late," she said. "One more street?" "One more street," I agreed. As we walked the last street, I thought of the tetrapod and the life-fruit. This single animal, through its unsteady stride, had led to this summerwalk at sunset in early June. The cells that divided in prehistoric oceans sprouted into rich green grass and fireflies. The humans that drew in the caves became black silhouettes in the yellow windows of the houses we passed. I thought about how this tetrapod hadn't known all this, hadn't known anything beyond the labor of walking, and the feeling of the warm sand, and maybe, it saw an empty earth for miles and miles and a vast blue ocean, its surface spangled with pieces of sunlight. It had used up its life-fruit without knowing—without worrying at all. We walked on, pointing out the houses we liked and the gardens that spilled over fences. At the end of a street was a farm stand. "Let's get something," my mother said. "I think they're closing," I told her, pointing to the vacant booth. "No, I've got cash, we'll leave money" my mother insisted. "Peaches are in-season." She grabbed the two biggest, leaving a pile of cash on the counter. She bit into hers, juice dribbling, and handed me mine.
We ate in silence,
wiped our sticky hands on the grass,
tossed the dry pits into the woods,
and walked home,
as the sun sunk
and the lamps came on
and the night came out in its summer blues.

Can You Take the Heat?

Melissa LoCicero

Before 2023, 2016 was the hottest year recorded by humans on Planet Earth. A remarkable thing at the time, though it might seem mild in retrospect. It was the unprecedented summer of 2016 that my family (my mother, her lesbian lover Julie whom I begrudgingly came to accept as another parent, and my sister) took a three-week odyssey to the desert southwest in our blue Subaru Forester, and hiked to the bottom of the Grand Canyon.

Another thing that happened that fateful summer 2016: the trans-canyon pipeline, the system responsible for routing potable water to outposts along trails and spigots at campsites, was broken. In some of the hottest weeks of the hottest year of humanity's hot-mess existence, this was an unwelcome development. Apparently, this happens frequently; perhaps we could take some comfort in that.

We would hike to the bottom and stay there, reliable water access be damned. There's a river down there; we could filter if we have to. Boil it, iodine, whatever. My ever-adventurous mother had chosen the South Kaibab trail for our descent, a strenuous series of switchbacks that follows the wall of the canyon 7.1 miles down to the frigid Colorado river. There are no refill stations on that route.

That precious water we had, we carried it on our backs, in bladders and bottles, along with packets and tablets of electrolyte powder, which we acquired from a friendly waiter at the El Tovar Hotel's restaurant the night before. Mom and Julie marveled at the lodging's historical significance, apparently a place Theodore Roosevelt liked to stay when he came out West. It's a fancy place, so we thought to enjoy one night of decadence before spending four days in the dust and dirt. We slurped on french onion soup and gushed about the woody, glowy ambiance, and my mom started chatting up the waiter. He asked about our plans. She enthused. He lauded our foresight–taking one full day to go down and one full day to go up is the way to do it. People who try to do both ways in one day are crazy, and they put themselves in a lot of danger. That's what rangers are for, he added, but unwise hikers put a lot of unnecessary strain on the system.

By the end of the meal, my mom and him were talking like friends, and by extension, it felt like family. He handed off the check for my mom to sign and hurried off, saying he had something for us. When he came back to collect the receipt, he pulled a bulging ziploc bag of various brands of hydration powder from his jacket. "You need way more of this stuff than you think you do," he said, "it's everywhere

around here. Take it!"

At four-o'clock the next morning, we divvied up those powders and packed them into our hefty bags. I remember feeling silly clipping the chest strap and the hip strap of my red backpack as we unloaded from the trail shuttle. More clearly I remember a distinct buzz of excitement as we started off down the trail. I had never done a hike this long, in a place so magnificent. Though my 14-year-old brain worried about all this unfiltered family time, and part of me was dreading being hot and dirty and unconnected to cellular signals, mostly I was happy to be there. Even in a silly outfit.

We saw the sunrise at Ooh-Aah point, where you can see hundreds of millions of years spread out as a layer cake of rock that's been partially served. I didn't realize I should've savored the cool morning air. By midday, it was 103 degrees. We took frequent snack breaks but there was little shade, save for the dorky wide-brimmed hats we wore on our heads. It wasn't so bad, though, because we were walking down, down, down, and didn't have to worry about over-exerting ourselves, or so I thought. I thought, as a young teen with perfect knees. I didn't give as much thought to my middle-aged mother, who was hearty and strong but not super aerobically fit, due in part to bodily changes from medication she was prescribed to treat her bipolar disorder. The trip had actually been postponed by two years, because at the time of our original reservations, my mom didn't feel physically fit enough to undertake the challenge of going rim-to-rim. But we had spent two years training regularly, going on more hikes and walks as a family, including trips to the Brighton recreation area 40 minutes north of our house in Ypsilanti, Michigan, where we'd cruise the shady hills ten miles a day. This trip was earned and carefully planned.

We expected extreme heat, but turned out to not quite understand it. The climate in Michigan is very different from that of Arizona. Especially three or four miles down *into* Arizona. I didn't know this at the time, or at least it wasn't intuitive to me, but the temperature climbs as you go into the canyon.

I thought the canyon walls would provide shade, and since we're kind of going 'under' ground, it won't be as hot. Alas, the canyon traps heat between those walls, and it's wide enough that it receives solar energy for most of the day. So really, we were walking down into an oven, and though we had water, it was getting warmer every minute, punishingly so.

Julie noticed my mom getting red. Mom noticed herself feeling faint. Remembering a time that she had to help her father recover from heat stroke, she recognized the signs in herself: she found a place to sit

in the shade and try to cool down. We were all a little worried, but kept our heads cool, because we knew that fear would not help the situation.

I didn't think the heat would be that big of a deal, because according to every magnet and postcard in every mini-mart once we got past Kansas, "*It's a Dry Heat*," which has got to make it better than the humid summers I know, right? We mixed some of that free gatorade powder into my mom's lukewarm water bottle but it didn't seem to provide her much relief. She was drinking fluids and sitting in the shade but her face was splotchy red and she didn't feel right.

Though I'm not sure there was cell service available to us at this point, several miles down the trail, Julie still reached for her cell phone to call for some assistance. Despite our efforts to be responsible hikers, the elements still prevailed. Just as the problem began to amount to panic, footsteps crunching down the path averted our attention.

"You folks doing okay?" The ranger was a woman in her 40s or 50s or 60s with desert-dried skin and kind eyes. The question was rhetorical; she could see we had a problem. My mom and Julie explained anyway, and she listened with patience.

She pulled her backpack off and opened it, pulling out a frosty purple Gatorade, which glowed in the sunlight as if it were an alien potion. "Take this," she gave the frozen bottle to my mom, "hold it against your neck and face and let it melt a bit. Take little sips and pour some water on your shirt."

Part of the problem was that her skin was too hot. In an extremely dry and hot environment like Arizona, it can be hard to tell when you're becoming dehydrated because your sweat evaporates so quickly. This allows you to feel cooler than if it were humid outside, but you're still losing fluids. A good way to keep cool and stay hydrated is to soak your shirt, hat or bandana–really anything you're wearing–in water if you can find it. The fabric lowers your temperature as the water evaporates. If you can't get into some cool water, wearing something wet is your best bet. It might sound uncomfortable, but it dries fast. Pro tip.

The ranger's name was Della and it was obvious she'd done this before. She'd been a ranger for nearly two decades and knew the canyon like her backyard. She'd seen it all; people falling from the rim, people getting swept away in the river. Those were rare emergencies. Mostly she dealt with small emergencies, like ours, which could be remedied by a frozen gatorade, some light snacks, and a reassuring, grounded presence with decades of wilderness experience. She had been especially vigilant these past few weeks, as scores of tourists unprepared for the local climate came through in the July 4 travel rush. She encountered tour buses full of foreigners taking their patrons on hikes down and

back, with only one flimsy plastic water bottle for each traveler. She warned scantily clad college students that if they planned to be out until nightfall, they should find some layers, because it gets cold fast. She told us that once we felt ready to keep hiking, she would come with us the rest of the way, and that she knew a place where we could cool down in the river without worrying about getting pulled into the flow and never being seen or heard from again.

Guided by our shepherd, we reached Phantom Ranch, the summer-camp-style accommodation run by the National Parks Service, before dark.

Remember I mentioned the water pipeline was not operational during our trip? For two days we enjoyed the rustic experience, flushing the toilets with water we hauled from the stream in buckets. It was communal living at its finest, a bunch of strangers with the same reservation slot sharing family-style meals and milling about the campsite, finding shade beneath stubby mesquite trees, sitting with their feet in the creek, reading books, playing cards, looking up at the sky from the root of a giant gash in the earth. It was 117° in the shade. We poured water over our heads and pretended that we were in a sauna.

Educated by the experience on the trail going down, my mom and Julie devised a plan for all of us to make it back out safely without needing to rely on the rangers for help. We would take the most-popular, mostly-paved Bright Angel trail back to the top, and stop at the hottest part of the day at Indian Gardens, a ranger station and picnic area in a green desert oasis. The peak temperatures occurred 10am-4pm, so we ended up leaving Phantom Ranch even earlier than we had set off to get there, starting on the trail at about 3:30 in the morning. The prospect of hiking up did not have me feeling so rosy as before.

The nature I had been so keen to enjoy and immerse myself in suddenly seemed much less friendly. I feared running into something that might bite me or take residence in my shoe while I kicked them off to rest. My fear was piqued in the wee hours of the morning because many desert creatures are nocturnal. Rattlesnakes, scorpions, and tarantulas are most active at night, dawn, and dusk. Like them, we too fastidiously avoided the sun, which caused us such trouble on the way up.

The first animal I came across was a black widow spider hanging in its web in a crook in the rock wall. When I looked at it my instincts lit on fire, and in my mind I was rifling through all the knowledge I had about black widow spiders, arguably some of the most famous and scary spiders in the collective consciousness. I thought about its bite and what the resulting sore would look like.

Making sure not to get too close, I kept on walking. We hiked

through the sunrise and a bit through the morning, and when we made it to Indian Garden, I was glad for a break. There was water on reserve there so we could fill up our bottles. We sat in the shade of a picnic structure and played euchre for hours. I watched these dusty brown squirrels dig away at the top layer of dirt and then flatten themselves into their wallows, legs splayed behind them, rodent arms extended outwards, chins pressed to the ground. It was their way of keeping cool. This tickled me. Nature has a way of making you feel seen.

We all got our start back up the trail maybe ten minutes before four o'clock. By then we had spent a lot of time together, in the sun, and the dirt, and were all excited to get back to the top, where a hotel room awaited us. My mom and Julie hung behind, being older and slower, with worse knees and eyes, and more of a plodding, methodical approach to the outdoors. They assured my sister and I that we could go ahead and check in to the hotel, that they would be just a little behind us. So Sis and I went our own way, faster, with less appreciation for the nature that surrounded us.

The Grand Canyon is really easy to go into and much harder to get out of. This is intuitive, and yet, it surprised me. I did not expect to be tasting metal and feeling as though my legs turned to rubber as I made my ascent. It was close to sunset when my sister tripped and rolled her ankle.

I was unreasonably angry that she hurt herself. How could she be so bad at walking?! Since I didn't want anything to slow us down, I decided it would be best to encourage her to push through the pain and keep up our pace. My sister knows herself, however, and we ended up slowing down, taking more breaks, while the sun went down.

I suppose I was just overtired, after having been up so early that day. Spending the day out of the sun didn't entirely spare me from the heat, and there was still a long way to go. I feared the fatigue in my own body, the exposure to the outside, the threat of chilly air. I wanted to skip right to taking off my shoes, getting into a hot shower, collapsing in a soft bed. I probably started complaining at some point, being all too spoiled in my human experience and not at all aware of it.

Sis was walking slowly. It was getting late. We put on our headlamps and stopped chatting.

Whether or not I actually saw a large spider crawling across the path remains a mystery. It had been god-knows-how-long and something in me snapped. One spider became several spiders, then a hundred spiders became thousands of spiders, and I was convinced that venomous spiders lined the wall of the canyon that I was walking along. I became so terrified that I began to cry and insisted on walking on the right side

of the trail, away from the wall, on the side that dropped off into the mile-deep gorge. I raced ahead of her, giving no heed to her injury, not thinking about the fact I was leaving her behind.

"Slow down!" She shouted at me. Even though I was being a brat to my sister, she still didn't want me falling to my death. "Don't walk over there. There's no spiders." But I was inconsolable, and eventually we stopped altogether, to catch our breaths, to calm down, to confirm that there was no army of spiders surrounding us, with their strange spiny legs and fat bottom halves and big biting mouthparts.

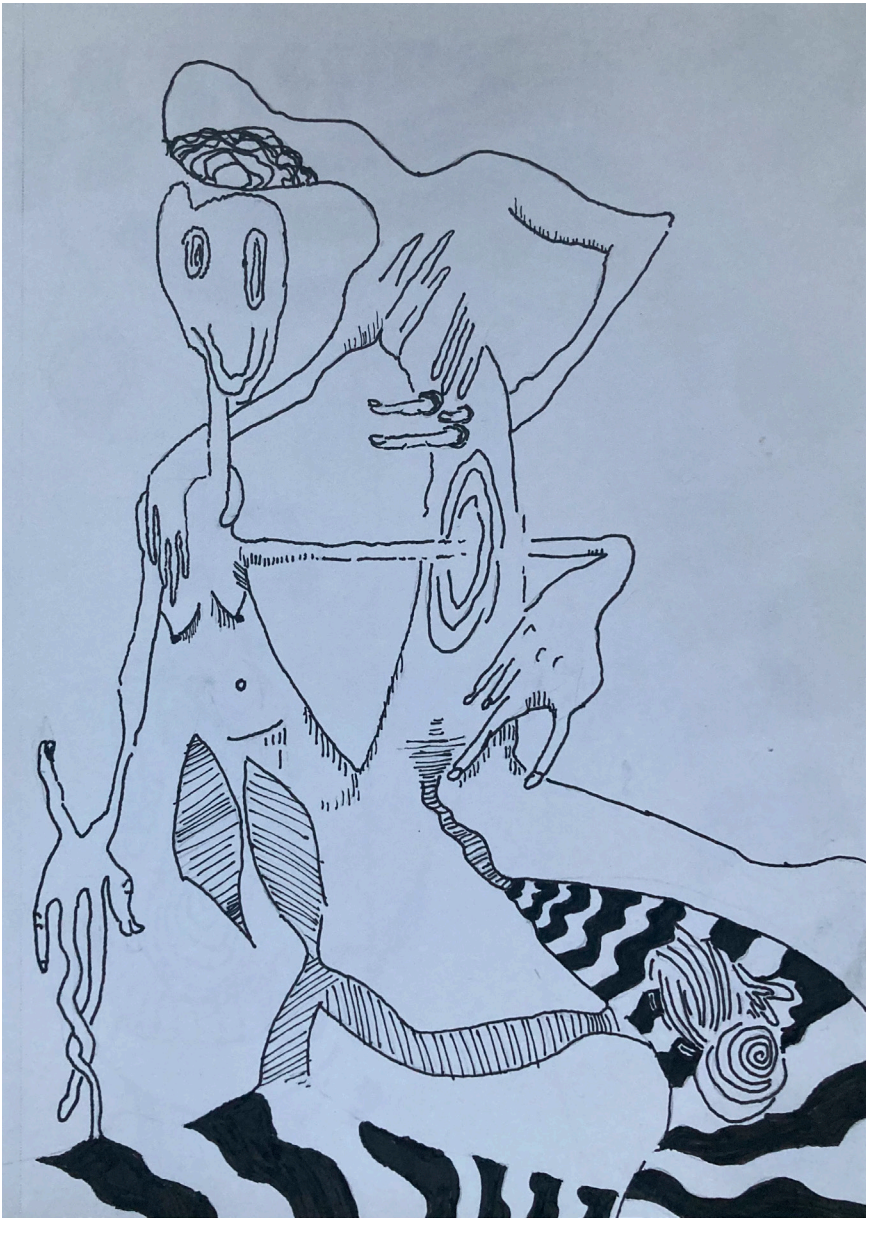
As we sat on a couple of rocks beside the trail, bitterly snacking on Clif bars, we heard the shuffle of many footsteps. Red light from their headlamps bounced on the ground, and eventually we were face-to-face with four retired-age men, with backpacks and boots and poles and flannels and feathers in their hats.

For two young women, running into four men on a wilderness trail in the dark does not seem like the makings for a comfortable experience, but I feel more thankful for these four old guys than almost any group of strangers I've ever come across. They asked if we needed help and we admitted that, yes, we did. They assured us it wasn't too far to the top now; we could all hike together. While we walked together, we discovered these men were all friends from college, who have made a tradition of going on an adventure together every summer since they left school. This was a particularly special trip, because they had always talked about going to the Grand Canyon, but it hadn't happened, not once in four decades. They felt lucky to be there.

"Look up," one of them said, and all of us did. The sky was a thick field of stars, like I had never seen before. They twinkled and twisted in a way that banished the anxiety from my body, replacing it with awe.

Within half an hour we made it up to the trailhead, with its parking lot and streetlamp. The hike was over. We said goodbye to our rescuers, wishing one another safe travels and a restful sleep. I looked up at the sky once more to try and witness the stars again. Their brilliance was subdued from where I stood now, on the rim, back in the world of artificial light.

Mom and Julie ended up making it back a couple hours after Sis and me. They found us passed out in the hotel bed, dead to the world. Our sweaty hiking clothes were heaped on the floor and our hair was still wet from the shower. The experience gave me faith in the kindness of everyday humanity. The world often seems scary and it truly can be, but we overcome fear by working together, and move past challenges by asking for help and offering it up ourselves.



Avalanches By Boo, R

Jacob Riis Beach

Nora Youngelson

Endless clouds broke, rolling waves across the sky, and
below we breathed out, our scarred knees, yours & mine.
On my back, I whispered beliefs that God was dead.
And yet, between my legs, a castle is built.
Wading deeper, you admired my ability to believe in something.

Retrospectively, I was in love, although I should have been young.
On topic, do you believe the sea is tired too? I ask on the drive back.
Sand circles the drain, and I hope to live this day again, again.
Everything has already happened before. This helps, I think.
The waves break above, constant and deafening.

From a page found clinging to a storm drain

Pierre Cozic

this is where the clouds rest their heads,
where their raindrop children are free to
leap down and down again from their homes,
where they flood one riverbed after another,
where they stain windshields and stomp upon
our heads. where they leave all this ink, running.

A Sonnet, Poorly Recieved

Quinn Sidor

"And there she lulled me asleep
And there I dream'd—"
- Keats

i.
I want to buy you flowers.
Let me prove that your love is worth more to me
Than sixteen dollars and a twenty minute walk
Each way.

Every second with you is precious–
The rate of your love is inflated.
The supply of your gaze is given too much
To newspapers and sidewalk cracks.

Demand is this longing that begs to meet your eyes.
Our economic problem needs a fast solution-
My ballooned heart threatens to pop
And lower my feet to the ground.

I, who have lived, seen, and suffered so little
Want to offer myself to you.

ii.
"be honest—
(you look with your look
that could launch a thousand ships—
how can i be honest with that look looking?)
that poem was a lie
wasn't it"

i crush and grasp
my words crumble and crunch
like broken leaves
(i imagine myself as a carmelite
using only words that others have deemed sacred
how easy that would be)

yes
(the dream has run its course)
it was a lie

iii.
under her door i slip
some lines of donne:
“I am two fools, I know
For loving, and for saying so
in whining poetry.”
let her doubt that!
i mutter and slip away
to find another life to inhabit.

Endlessly

Reyan Nguy

I float atop

Endlessly

Petals of lotus flowers dance on my skin

Moondrops trickle down my face

I hear the land's epiphanies echo in my brain

The night's song resonating on my tongue

I close my eyes to bask in the jade stars' glow

And let myself float atop

Endlessly

A love poem

Sebastian Lechner

I think you're metonym for myself
so when I write about you I guess
I'm writing to myself. But that's no fun.
I wanted to see you yesterday and
today and I brought my Polaroid
so we could take a photo together
and maybe you'd let me wear that
dress you have and you could wear
a suit and tie and the Polaroid photo
is a tangible thing with edges and
and edges are limits, and there's
nothing here between us. Lilacs.

Meeting God

T Luyen

Are you religious?

Well..that depends on what you mean by "religious".

★

I grew up in a religious family. But unlike most American religious families, mine was Buddhist. Buddhism was pervasive, but not limiting. My dad was born in Dharamsala, India. *His* dad fled Tibet in 1959 when the Chinese government suppressed a mass Tibetan revolt. The Indian government offered thousands of Tibetans refuge and gave the community undeveloped land in Northern India. Most of this land was managed by the religious and aristocratic class, so most Tibetans were extremely poor. After my dad finished kindergarten, he was sent to a monastery to become a monk because my grandfather couldn't afford to continue his education. Three decades later, he's a monk at a Buddhist temple in Sacramento, where he met my mom.

My mom likes to call herself a Buddhist. In the sense that she probably just inherited the identity from simply growing up in Vietnam, where over fifty percent of Vietnam considers themselves Buddhist. Her religion only extends as far as death, platitudes, and the little shrine—buddha statues, flags, lights, and fake lotus flowers—near the front door. Whether or not it offers a means of facilitating moral progress, is questionable. However, in addition to culture, it also gives her a convenient moral high ground against me and my siblings. Don't want to finish your food? Wasting food is a "sin". Upset that you couldn't buy that new toy? Attachment to material objects is a "sin". Pushing your little sister because she's trying to throw a chair at you? You better toughen up, because violence is a "sin". Angry? "Sin".

Unlike my mom, my dad thought more about his religion. Most of what I learned about Buddhism came from him. As a kid I didn't really ask, but he likes to talk, and what he knew best was Buddhism. His English wasn't great, so he spoke in Tibetan, and so I learned Tibetan. His "teachings" happened in the car. On the way to school he talked about the importance of compassion. Driving back from swim practice we listened to him talk about the origins of Buddhism. Before we got dropped off at piano lessons, he told us about the concept of karma and "sin". In Buddhism there are morally good and morally evil deeds, but the con-

cept cannot be understood as "sin" as is understood in other religions. *Karma*, according to my dad, is the sum of the good and evil you have committed, which determines your *sonam*—the luck that shapes one's life.

More often than not, these lessons were spoken into the void. Even so, he kept at it for 20 years. The teachings were like the radio, except this one we couldn't change or turn off.

"Imagine the evil deeds as dirt on your soul," he'd say in Tibetan. "Good deeds are like water. When you commit good deeds it cleans off the dirt. The more good you do in this life the better your *next* life will be."

"Well who determines what's good or evil?" I said in Tibetan.
"Just think about it: killing is evil and helping people is good, right?" He says, putting the minivan into park.

"Yeah but who tells you that?"

I grab my bag and roll open the side door. Before I step out, I look down at my feet and see my white socks against the dirty minivan carpet.

"Appa… I forgot my shoes."

"What? You're 16 years old and you can't remember your shoes?!"

I step out of the car and wave, thanking him for his shoes even though I had outgrown them. I dragged my feet into school and thought of ways to get through the day without anyone noticing the back half of my feet sticking out of my shoes.

Maybe I'll just sit down the whole day. If I undo the laces I might actually be able to get my feet all the way in. These are the shoes I wore in middle school, I'm surprised they fit Appa.

★

For my dad, you didn't just hear about his religion. You could see it.

Like my mom, my dad told us not to waste food. But the difference between a trite platitude and an effective teaching is principled action: a demonstrated embodiment of the lesson. My dad not only cooked most of the food we ate, he also managed what we didn't eat. He ate our left-

overs and noted our changing tastes to reduce the food that rotted in the fridge or collected dust in the pantry. Many times his dinners were odd amalgamations of whatever leftovers or near-expiring odds-and-ends had accumulated in the fridge (most of which belonged to my mom). When we were younger, my siblings and I never failed to make our opinions on his leftover-dinners known.

"Ewwww!" One of us would say. "What are you eating! Why did you put [blank] in your bowl with the [blank]! Ew, you put the fish too!"

Sometimes he'd reply with a simple "It's going to waste." But usually he couldn't be bothered to entertain our goading.

It wasn't just the leftovers. As long as I can remember, my dad never intentionally killed a bug in the house. The worst offense one could commit, my dad would say, is *sokjou* (killing). He was always careful to catch flies and spiders around the house and gently release them outside. He hated finding ants in the house. Because even one ant could lead to an infestation, and in that case, he would individually catch the ants to remove them from harm's way. His technique was to lick his finger and lightly scoop each ant in a brushing motion. The saliva made the ant stick when he touched them with his finger. He'd then blow them into a cup that he would empty outside after catching most of them. For the rest, he'd dust the area with baby power. "They don't like the smell," he'd say. In the (likely) event that he accidentally hurt or killed the ant, he would grimace and whisper "*Om mani padme hum*," carefully blowing the prayer to the one he hurt.

Despite being deeply religious, he never told us what to believe. "Buddhist teachings are not absolute," he'd say, "We don't have a god. Instead, you need to think for yourself about what is right."

I used to call myself a Buddhist. But this was only by default. I'd tell myself, *My parents are Buddhist, so maybe that means I am too*. I didn't actively commit myself to being a Buddhist, nor did I think much about it. I certainly had values and practices that could be seen as Buddhist. But when I stopped calling myself a Buddhist, I realized my values, although inspired by my dad's religion, were held in spite of it.

★

"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."

- Karl Marx

Both of my parents are from places where they've had to "flee communism." In our household, it was understood that the Chinese are cheap, greedy, unscrupulous bastards, and communists are sociopathic murderers who are so intellectually molested that they want to live under totalitarian, authoritarian, fascist dictators. Besides that, my parents didn't talk much about politics. They voted democrat; they watched the Late Show and Chris Cuomo; they complained about Trump when he got into politics.

I can only imagine how they felt when they learned I became a communist.

My entry into leftist politics was very intuitive. The first step was understanding the myth of the meritocracy. People's circumstances are mostly determined, not by their individual actions, but as a result of external factors outside their control. Next was to think about how to create a more equitable society. Why do some people have so much, while others have so little?

"America is literally not the best country," I said.

"It is," my mom said. "Look, you were just criticizing the government earlier. Try to do that in Vietnam or China."

"People criticize their governments all the time, even in Vietnam and China." "Nope. The communist government will put them in jail."

"At least their healthcare system is better than ours. People are dying in the 'greatest country' in the world because of how fucking ex—"

"Don't cuss at me!" she spat. "Anyway, I don't want to pay for other people's healthcare."

My mom exalted reason, intellect, and logic. She's also a hypocrite. Without a doubt, my mom's anti-intellectual, pseudo-intellectual virtue signaling was a driving force in my search for knowledge. This "enlightenment era" of mine drove me away from organized religion.

I'm not sorry to all the dogmatic Tibetans who would call me a "fake Tibetan" or "race traitor" for not hanging a framed, three-foot by four-foot portrait of the religious leader of Tibet (yes people really do that). I could no longer stand the geriatric Dali Lama's unoriginal teachings about "mindfulness" every time a wide-eyed social-justice-kid or white liberal asks him *how can we achieve world peace*? Or *what do we do about climate change*? Mindfulness and preaching empathy can only go so far; people are hungry. I won't claim to have any answers. But, I'm certain that the solution to ending climate change or racism or colonialism or LA traffic is *not* to get everyone to meditate for 15 *fucking* minutes a day.

★

So you're not religious? He said.

It's hard to say just yet whether or not I'm religious;

Are you a follower of a faith?

I can definitely say that I don't subscribe to a capital "R" Religion.
Lately I have been feeling deeply spiritual.
I can't articulate my religion just yet.
At least not in any comprehensive way.

Well, do you believe in God?

★

"May 6th. I met a wild bunny girl. This was the beginning."
- Sakuta Azusagawa

Rascal Does Not Dream of Bunny Girl Senpai (Seishun buta yaro wa Bunny Girl-senpai no yume wo minai) is an anime about high school student Sakuta Azusagawa who encounters Mai Sakurajima, a teen actress, who's dressed in a bunny girl costume and wandering through a library. Sakuta learns that he is the only one who can see Mai, and that Mai is disappearing from people's consciousness. This affliction of disappearing, termed "Adolescence Syndrome", then presents itself in other characters. On the surface, it's a mediocre anime where the male protagonist builds a harem of cute girls by helping solve their case of "Adolescence Syndrome". However, a closer analysis of the show reveals its

Hegalian themes.

For Hegel, self-determination is inherently social and subjective. As we try to understand who we are in the world, we desire to be recognized in certain ways. When other people recognize us in the way we desire, they confirm our sense of self. This confirmation, in a sense, concretizes our subjective understanding of self: universal intersubjectivity makes our "self" objective. When we meet a new person, the need for recognition reoccurs. To achieve full understanding of ourselves (objectivity), we must be universally recognized (intersubjectivity).

The opposite happens in Mai's case. Disillusioned by her acting career, she wanted to be recognized as a normal student. But because of her popularity, people did not recognize her in the way she wanted. So under Hegel's conception of consciousness, Mai couldn't be sure if her own sense of *self* was real. She became despondent to the problem, thus, her uncertainty of *self* coupled with non-recognition by others was reflected in her empirical existence as she disappeared from people's consciousness'.

Hegel theorizes a conception of god based on the idea of becoming a *full self*. As Robert Wallace, professor of philosophy, summarizes, "God is the fullest reality, achieved through the self-determination of everything that's capable of any kind or degree of self-determination. Thus God emerges out of beings of limited reality, including ourselves."

★

"A snail is a snail is a snail."

- Unknown

I used to play with the snails.

I'd go to the edge of the playground and pick through the bushes and vines. I plucked the little creatures from the dark, damp hiding spots. I put them down on the asphalt, and began building an enclosure of sticks, leaves, and rocks. I would squat down and watch them. Some lingered in their shells, and I'd wait for them to come out. To be honest, they weren't very entertaining. I certainly had other things I could do. Sometimes people would come watch.

"What are you doing?" Maddie said, running up behind me.

"Nothing." I said, without looking up.

"Ew," she said. "It's just snails."

★

Have you heard about the Immortal Snail?

Immortal Snail?

It's a thought experiment that goes something like this:
you are offered 10 million dollars, however,
upon accepting, an immortal snail will chase you.
If the snail touches you, you die.
Will you accept the money?

Can other people touch the snail?

Hmm…well that depends.

Depends on what?

Depends on… the person asking you the question, I guess.
You see, sometimes, they'll say the snail is hyperintellegent.
Some will make it so that the snail is only real for you.
I've even seen it where the snail also gets the money.

So you can essentially add any caveat to make it harder?

Yep.

What would the snail even do with the money?

★

"The second most powerful thing in the universe is the stories we tell other people."

- Dust

There are people who have audaciously claimed to have met God. Or more commonly, felt "his presence". Tales of glorious awakenings and revelation are awe-inspiring. But after you've gone around a bit, the stories become cliche. I've heard it all: feelings of community, epipha-

nies from meditation, the loss of a loved one, a near death experience, psychedelic mushrooms, existential contemplation, etc. These people usually join a church (or a cult). Maybe they'll devote themselves to recruiting new members to their faith. Some reject society; they retreat into the woods (perhaps start a cult), they retire to Thailand, or sell everything to live in a van and smoke weed all day (doesn't sound too bad). I have tried to learn from their stories, but I couldn't relate to any of their experiences. *How can I meet God?*

A couple years after I moved out of my parents house, I was living in Oakland. I commuted on my bike, and on the way to work I would pass by an art studio on the corner of my street. The building itself was unassuming. It was a single story, rectangular, red-brick building, covered in graffiti. The rusty roll-up garage door was usually closed. When it was open, I would try to see inside as I rode past on my bike but it mostly just seemed like scraps of wood.
One night, on my way home from work the garage was open and light quietly streamed out onto the street. As usual, I peered inside as I rode by, hoping to see something interesting: there was a man sanding a large, flat wooden arch. It was almost midnight. "I'll check it out another time." I thought as I passed.

I didn't get far. I stopped in the middle of the road, under the first street light after I turned the corner. (I can't tell you exactly why I stopped or why I decided to turn around, but only that I knew I should.) I went inside the studio and introduced myself. The man called himself Dust.

★

So what's the first? I asked.

The first?

You just told me what the second most powerful thing in the universe is.
What's the first?

Ah, right.
The most powerful thing in the universe,
is the stories we tell ourselves.

Murmuration By Sky Simon-Thomas