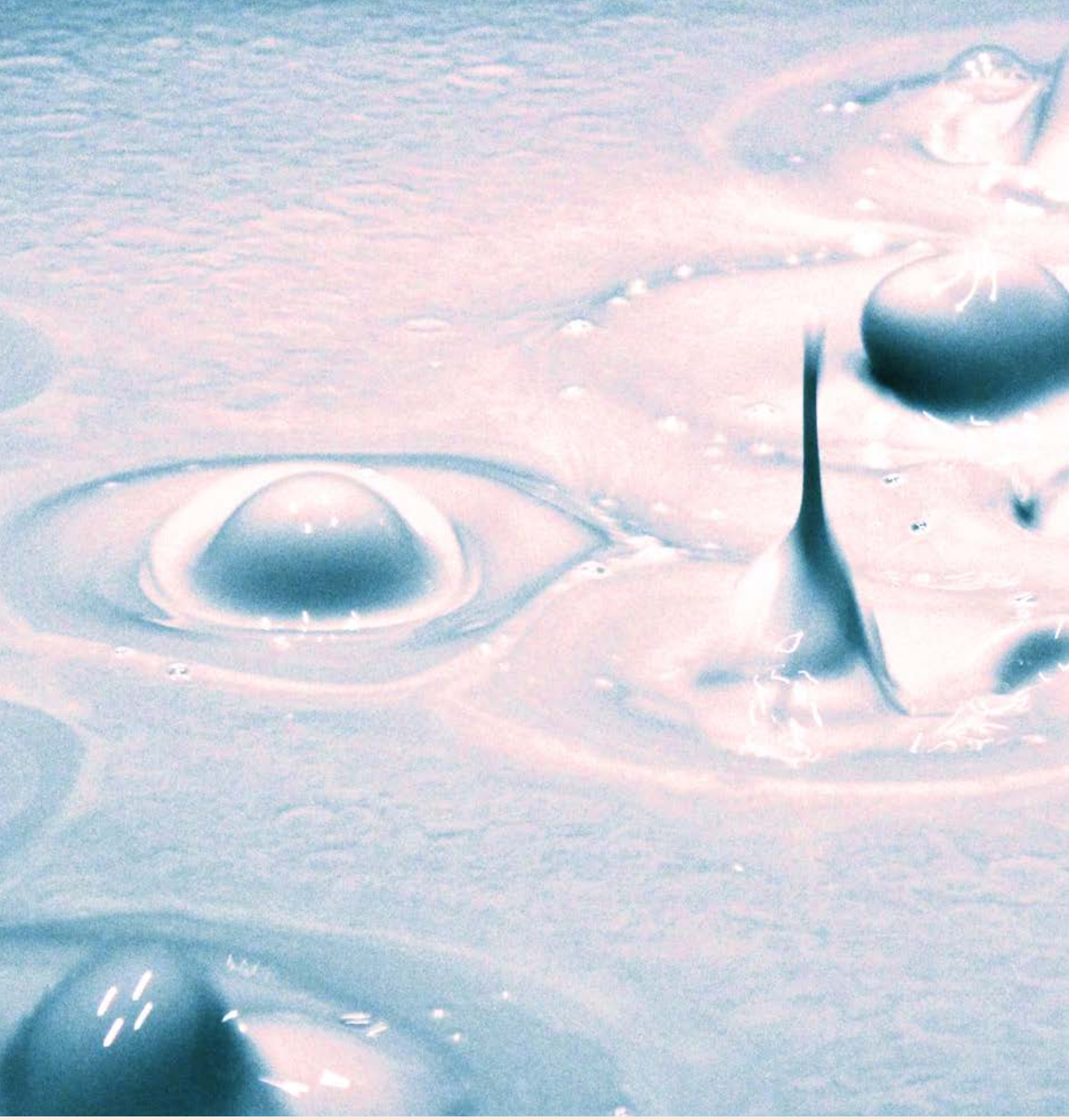

WILDER VOICE

WINTER 2017 : VOLUME 13, ISSUE 24

Founded in 2005, *Wilder Voice* is Oberlin's publication of creative nonfiction and long-form journalism. We also publish chapbooks, produce artist's books, and plan events.

We welcome questions, comments, criticisms, curio, postcards, etc. You can reach *Wilder Voice* by email at wvoice@oberlin.edu or by snail mail to Wilder Box 43, 135 West Lorain Street, Oberlin, OH 44074.

The Senior Staff would like to apologize to Hannah Cook for neglecting to print her name on the back cover of the Spring 2017 issue.

WILDER VOICE

WINTER 2017 : VOLUME 13, ISSUE 24

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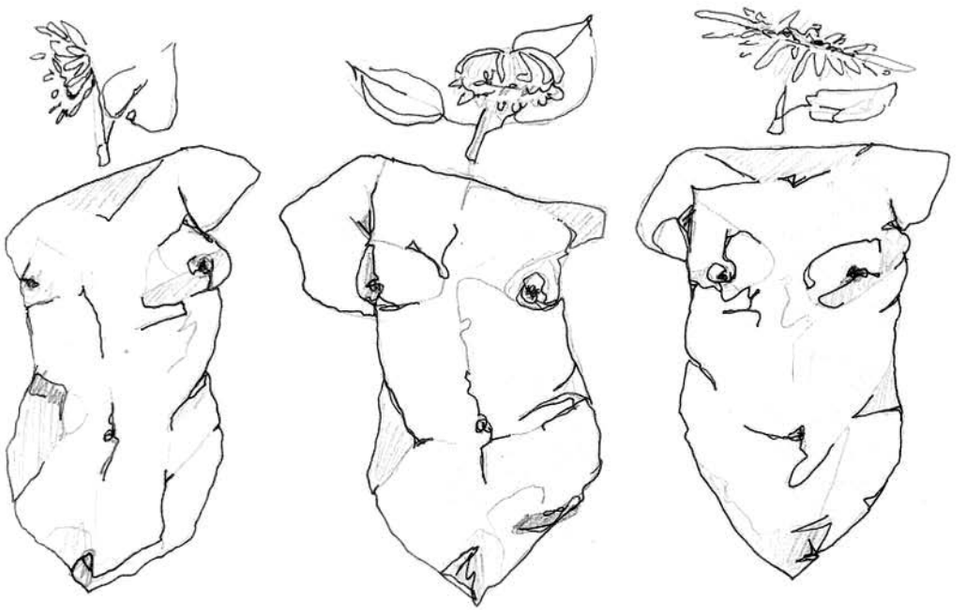
AT THEIR MERCY

OLIVIA FOUNTAIN



When I self-diagnosed my first UTI in July of 2014, I drank the requisite cranberry juice, felt better, and moved on. It was the summer between my sophomore and junior year, and I was living in Oberlin, working as a research assistant for the Classics Department. About a week after the first signs of my UTI, I realized that it had not been eradicated—I experienced extreme stomach pain, and made the decision to go to Mercy Allen Hospital for pain medication and antibiotics. It was after 8:00 PM and I knew I couldn't spend the night like that, so I went to the emergency room. I took a selfie in the waiting room to send to my parents, and in it I look pale, but okay.

As I ricocheted from the front desk to the admitting nurse to the doctor who eventually saw me, I said the same things: That I hurt but I knew why and that I was pale but okay. After collecting a urine sample but before informing me of my results, my doctor told me that he was worried that I had kidney stones and that he wanted to give me a CT scan. I was scared and in pain so I consented. I didn't have kidney stones. They're rare, though becoming more common in nineteen-year-olds. A few weeks later, my family received a bill for nearly $1,000 of what my insurance refused to pay for, citing an unnecessary procedure. According to Mercy's website, CT scans for outpatients cost between $1,418 and $1,954; urine samples are covered with the cost of an emergency room visit.

I felt like Mercy had taken advantage of my pain by implying that I had kidney stones and pushing an expensive procedure. I felt like my doctor had violated my trust by not believing me when I told him what I thought was wrong. In the aftermath of my emergency room visit, I talked to many Oberlin students, and it seemed like everyone had a story about Mercy. Most of them were negative. Why were so many of my peers feeling unsatisfied and underserved when they found themselves needing to receive medical attention? That question prompted this article. I wanted to learn more about Mercy and its relationship with Oberlin College and Oberlin students. To be honest, I wanted to find a smoking gun—to be able to conclude my piece with a definitive statement saying "Mercy is a predatory institution for these reasons."

Spoiler: I found no smoking gun. What I did find, after talking with representatives from Mercy and Student Health, interviewing students, and combing through the Oberlin archives, is complicated, nebulous, and inconclusive. Everyone that I've spoken to has been kind and accommodating. I struggled—am still struggling—with how to square the stories of inadequate treatment with the earnestness of Student Health and Mercy. However, I did find some alarming information about Mercy Lorain, as well as disturbing statistics on emergency rooms in health facilities nationwide. What I hope that I've done here is lay out some of this information in a way that may not be conclusive but is at least coherent.

I'll start with the history.

The city of Oberlin has 8,300 permanent residents, with the population swelling to around 11,000 during the academic year. It's unusual for a community of this size to have a hospital, and yet Oberlin is home to Mercy Allen—a sprawling one-story health facility close to the center of town. Mercy is run by Mercy Health, a private, non-profit organization affiliated with the Catholic Church that operates in Ohio and Kentucky. Though there is no current official affiliation between Oberlin College and Mercy, the two institutions have long, intertwined histories.

The earliest iteration of the hospital opened its doors in 1907, after years of concern from the community over lack of available healthcare in the immediate area. It was also in the College's best interest to have a hospital nearby, with Oberlin President John Barrows pointing out that college kids were highly susceptible to pneumonia, typhoid, and scarlet fever. The money to build the Oberlin Hospital came in 1906, when a group of Oberlin residents organized a campaign asking everyone to donate 5 dollars (approximately 125 dollars today) and successfully generated the funds for the facilities that the college and community both desired. In 1914, Dudley Peter Allen (Class of 1875), a doctor in Oberlin, donated $100,000 to upgrade the facilities. His wife, Elisabeth Severance Prentiss Allen, gave another $50,000 to finish the project after he passed away the following year. Their joint contribution funded the Allen Memorial Hospital, which was owned by the college and opened in 1925. The hospital passed back into the city's hands in 1954 and stayed that way until the end of the 20th century, but Oberlin College continued to nominate and appoint members to the Board of Trustees until the late nineties, when a major shift took place.

In 2000, the hospital had lost $6 million and was prepared to declare bankruptcy, but an eleventh-hour deal between Allen Memorial, the city of Oberlin, and Oberlin College kept the doors open. The city, which owned the land on which the hospital is located, donated it to the hospital. The hospital sold the land to Oberlin College for $2 million, and the College then leased it back to the hospital at a rate of 1 dollar per year until 2075. The deal provided the hospital with the cash it needed to remain functional, and came with some important stipulations. First, the hospital needed to bring in an outside contractor to manage operations—enter Community Health Partners (CHP), then-parent company of (now merged with) Mercy Health. CHP guaranteed a credit line of an additional $2 million, and in turn it was agreed that CHP would ultimately merge with Allen Memorial Hospital

after a trial period of management (the second stipulation). Oberlin College would no longer have any presence on the Board of Trustees. The official merger came in 2003. Articles in both the Oberlin Review and the Oberlin News Tribune indicate that the larger Oberlin community was suspicious of the merger, which lacked transparency because of a series of secret board meetings, and a closed-door meeting between hospital president Ed Oley and then-president of Oberlin College, Nancy Dye. Though the college still owns the land, all official ties between the school and the hospital were severed in 2000. But as the meeting with Dye in 2003 shows, the College was still invested in the wellbeing of the hospital.

The 2000 transfer of power resulted in nearly 70 layoffs and the elimination of the birthing unit that had been operating in the hospital since its inception. Under CHP's leadership, however, the hospital was once again financially solvent. In a 2001 Ideastream article titled "Hospital Crisis Profile: Saving the Oberlin Medical Center" (Allen Memorial was renamed in 2000, before the budgeting drama), reporter Karen Schaefer describes the hoped-for trajectory for the newly operational facilities: "The plan is to expand some revenue-generating services—like surgery, CTs and CAT scans—while at the same time offering more insurance provider options to physicians and patients." That plan is perhaps, in part, why I found myself ushered into a wheelchair and rushed to a CT scan to check for kidney stones. My story is not the only one I have heard about the allegations of unnecessary CT scans during emergency room visits. Jordan Ecker '17 told me about a time during his freshman year when his doctor recommended a scan after administering a muscle relaxant and a sedative to stop him from vomiting. He felt like he was too sedated to understand what was being offered.

"They gave me a muscle relaxant to stop the vomiting and a shot of something else," he said. "The net effect of the drugs was to relax my muscles, and it did—the nausea went away right away but I also felt super sleepy. So, I was sleepy and in a bed and they left me alone for I don't know how long… and at some point they come back, it's a guy with a chart, he asks me a bunch of questions, I don't really understand, and he's like, 'We think you should get a CAT scan.' And at that point I was pretty much just drugged up beyond belief and really exhausted and hardly awake, so I said 'Okay.' And I got a CAT scan while I was coming in and out of sleep and then they wheeled me back."

When I spoke to Sue Bowers, the president of Mercy Allen from 2006 to 2011, she also brought up the CT scan machine. Bowers has worked at different iterations of the Allen Memorial since the seventies, and was the head of nursing at Allen Memorial during the 2000-2001 transition. After her reign as president, she now serves as Mercy's chief quality officer. I asked her about the transition—she told me to call it a "transition," not a "takeover" during our phone interview.

"We closed the maternity unit and then also closed what was our skilled nursing unit at the time," said Bowers. "And then Ed Oley [hospital president] and myself [sic] and a lot of the people at Community Health Partners worked to restore the services that the community needed. We put in a new CT scan machine, and the emergency department was woefully undersized, so we constructed a new emergency department that brought a lot of physicians and surgeons." CHP was able to bring the nearly bankrupt hospital, which plays such a crucial role in the community, back from the brink—which is undeniably a good thing. However, the influx of revenue that Oley was able to bring to the hospital came in part from expensive new procedures and the elimination of departments that were not as financially viable.

On the other end of the spectrum, I also received complaints of mis-diagnoses or under-diagnoses during visits to Mercy. After going to the emergency room with severe back pain, Kellianne Doyle '19 told

me that her doctor "just prescribed me two different types of drugs, had me [lie] in the bed for an hour, and then dismissed me. He said it was just a muscle spasm, and said I didn't need an X-ray or anything. The pain persisted for the rest of the semester, and when I talked to my doctor at home he had me get an MRI, and we found out I had two split discs in my back."

Maya Elany '17 also received a very serious misdiagnosis after she got hit by a car while biking in the fall of her freshman year. The accident occurred right before she was scheduled to travel home for Fall Break, and the paramedics who arrived on the scene recommended that she go to the emergency room immediately—flying with a broken bone can lead to blood clots and other complications. In the ER, she sat for some X-rays and was released soon after with a prescription for pain medication. "They told me that it was going to hurt a lot today and even more the next day, but by the third day it was going to feel better." She didn't feel better. "I flew home that day, walked on it—they didn't give me any crutches—walked on it for three days, on the third day I went to see a specialist in Boston and they told me that I was going to need to get surgery pretty immediately. Six days later I got surgery on my knee. My femur had crashed down onto my tibia and depressed it seven millimeters and also tore my meniscus. They put a plate and five screws in there and I was on crutches for four months, but I couldn't really do anything for over a year afterwards." Elany told me that she was happy that she had seen a specialist, not only because they were able to perform the surgery she needed, but also because she hadn't taken her pain seriously before getting a second opinion. She had doubted what her own body was telling her because she trusted what the doctors at Mercy told her.

On the phone, Bowers was brisk and professional. I had emailed her in advance to give her an idea of the questions I wanted to ask, and she told me she would not answer anything related to the hospital's revenue or specific services. She told me that people from Mercy and people from Oberlin College meet periodically about "issues." When I pressed her on what she meant by "issues" she clarified that there were "periodic concerns for an emerging health issue," such as flu outbreaks or potentially rowdy college events. "We had concerns after an event had occurred at the College where there was quite a bit of alcohol consumption, and a number of people ended up at the ER," she said. "So we talked with College representatives after that to see how a similar incident could be avoided in the future."

When I sat down with head of Student Health and Counseling John Harshbarger and Student Health Coordinator Marilyn Hamel, they confirmed the occasional meeting between College and hospital representatives. They happen at least once a year, Harshbarger said, and are a time for College administrators—including the Dean of Students—to relay student feedback to the hospital. He said Mercy has "been receptive" to student complaints, but that College representatives rarely have much information to pass on. Hamel echoed Harshbarger's positive sentiment: "They actually have a very good rating in the hospital grading system, and the students are a part of that." She was not wrong—according to data compiled by Medicare, Mercy Allen Hospital has four to five stars and is performing at or above the national average in eleven categories of customer satisfaction. So what am I missing? Hamel and Harshbarger have been happy and satisfied with their interactions with Mercy, but discussions with my peers have revealed something else.

Through my conversation with Hamel and Harshbarger, I learned that Mercy has a special relationship with Academic Health Plans (AHP), the Oberlin-provided health insurance. Copays on STI tests and other labs frequently requested by Student Health are covered entirely with no deductible. Student Health refers students to Mercy for blood tests, X-rays, and IV services, but

doesn't keep statistics on how many students are sent to Mercy for inpatient treatment. Hamel hazarded a guess that an ambulance is called for a student at a maximum of once or twice a month. Most of the interactions that students have, it seems, are through the emergency room facilities at the hospital. I'll return to emergency room trends later, but Sue Bowers summed it up when she frankly told me that "emergency rooms are an expensive place to receive care."

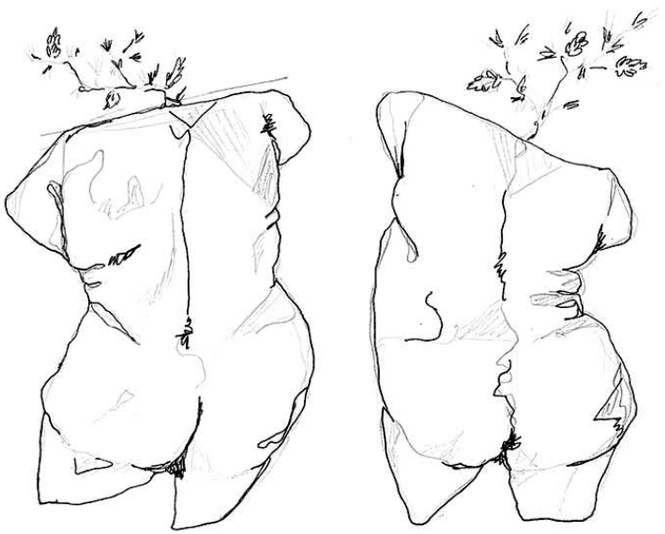
In April 2017, patient safety watchdog The Leapfrog Group released results of a survey of 112 hospitals in Ohio. Mercy Regional Medical Center of Lorain was the only hospital included that received an "F." The safety grade was awarded based on five different categories—infections, problems with surgery, practices to prevent errors, safety problems, and care providers—each divided into subcategories. Of the five, Mercy Lorain scored the lowest in the subcategories grouped under "doctors, nurses, and hospital staff," where it performed below average in every single area. The survey found that there were not enough qualified nurses on the premises, that specially trained doctors were not caring for ICU patients, and that patients consistently perceived that their nurses, doctors, and the rest of the hospital staff were not communicating well or responding quickly enough to them. In the "Practices to Prevent Errors" category, Mercy Lorain performed below average in hand washing—scoring a nine out of thirty—and accurately recording patient medications. Four other hospitals run by Mercy Health across Ohio received a "C."

It is worth noting that Mercy Allen Memorial Hospital is not the same as Mercy Regional Medical Center—the two hospitals together are part of the Mercy system in Lorain county. Leapfrog did not collect data on Mercy Allen because it is a Critical Access Hospital, meaning it is not required to publicly report its safety record. But the two hospitals are closely affiliated, and while scheduling my interview with Sue Bowers, my contact at Mercy Allen referred to Mercy Lorain as the "Lorain headquarters." Mercy Lorain's low grade is not only unacceptable, but likely indicative of the quality of care offered at Mercy Allen as well. Furthermore, an article published in the Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law in 2010 by Duke University Press titled "Inefficiency Differences between Critical Access Hospitals and Prospectively Paid Rural Hospitals" shows that CAHs had higher expenses per admission and were generally more cost inefficient. Based on these sources, Mercy Allen is not only providing below-average care, but by virtue of its CAH status, it is providing it at an unnecessarily expensive rate. This is especially concerning in the context of complaints about Mercy Allen's emergency room—in general, emergency room prices are erratic and unnecessarily high, but there is extra cause for concern in an emergency room connected to a hospital such as Mercy Allen.

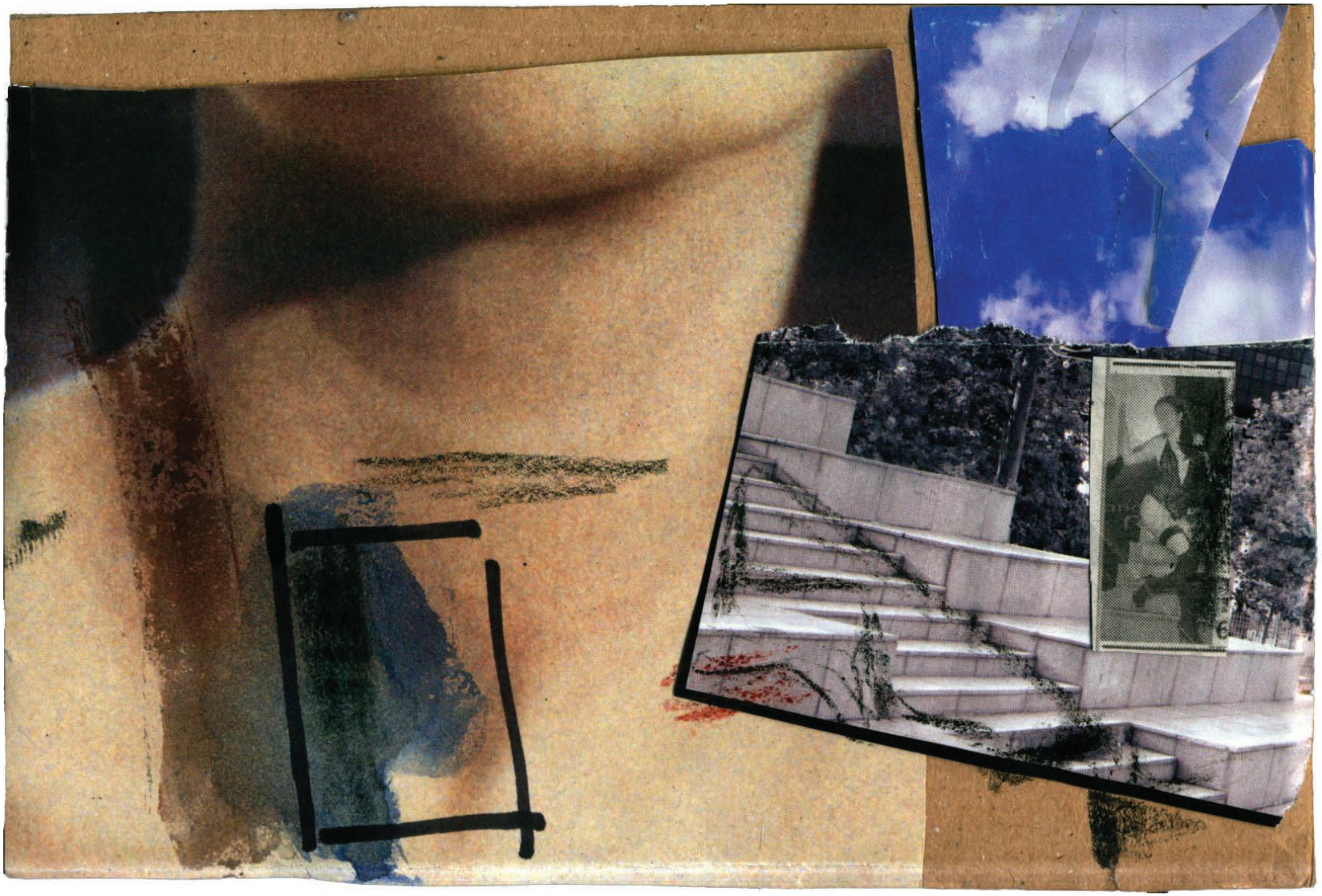
A Kaiser Family Foundation and The New York Times 2016 survey of medical bills showed that for people who struggled to pay their medical bills, the biggest portion of those bills were from ER fees. A 2013 PLOS One study showed that prices for the same treatment in different emergency rooms can vary wildly—a UTI, for example, can cost anywhere between $50 and $73,002 at different facilities across the country. This huge range demonstrates the lack of transparency on how much treatments actually cost, making it easy for emergency rooms to overcharge and difficult for patients to know when they are being asked to pay more than they would pay at other ERs. When I first started writing this article, I hoped to uncover something concrete about the wrongs that myself and my peers had experienced at our local hospital. While I still know that those complaints and frustrations are valid, I am beginning to see that Mercy's track record is a symptom of a larger, very broken system of inadequate, expensive, and inconclusive emergency room care.

But there are things that can be done. A workshop should be offered during orientation to lead freshmen through the ins and outs of emergency room visits. For instance: how a deductible works, how much certain procedures cost, and how to identify when a procedure (like my CT scan) may be unnecessary and costly. A channel should be maintained by Student Health for students to submit comments about their experiences at the hospital. This was something that Harshbarger kept returning to during our conversation. He was shocked when I told him about my own experience, and alluded to some of the anecdotes I had encountered in researching this story. He insisted that Mercy was always open to student feedback, but they rarely had any to pass along. If Student Health has Mercy's ear like Hamel and Harshbarger suggested, creating a space for students to share stories as a way to affect productive change—or at least get some answers—should be a priority.

As my conversation at Student Health came to an end, Hamel handed me a flyer for the new Mercy Ready Care clinic. The clinic, on West Lorain, is meant for non-emergencies that require quick attention. It's a way to divert patients away from the costly emergency room to a walk-in care center that's open later than most doctors' offices and has weekend hours. I haven't been to the clinic yet (thankfully I haven't needed it), but it seems like an important step away from students feeling overcharged and improperly cared for. It also seems like something Oberlin should be shouting from the rooftops about, so students know about this alternative resource that they can take advantage of. The flyer lists "common conditions," such as allergies, colds and coughs, minor skin infections, sore throats… and urinary tract infections. If a urinary tract infection is a "common condition" that can be treated at a walk-in clinic, why did my doctor insist on an expensive scan to check for kidney stones? This, I suppose, was the root question that started this investigation and the question that I've failed to answer. But I have gained some valuable insight into a medical system obfuscated by rumors that, when researched, turned out to be largely founded and symptomatic of a national crisis of emergency room care. My advice? Stick to the clinic—or the Cleveland Clinic. •



Drawings by Anna Johnson



TRANSGENDER CARTOGRAPHY

MAXWELL VAN COOPER

"I just don't understand why you have to box yourself into these categories. I mean, aren't we all just human? Why do you have to label yourself like that?"
A family member at dinner, Christmas Eve, 2016.
Lasts approximately three hours.

Maxwell is a family name. My uncle has it, my grandmother has it, her father… I don't know its origin story. My mother wanted to give it to me as a middle name, as tradition, but also so that if I ever wanted to be a writer, I would have a pen name at hand. Its origin story for me really began at age sixteen, when I went by Max for the first time. I wore baggy clothes until my then-boyfriend informed me tight clothes were sexier. I stopped immediately. I never thought I wanted to be a boy. I knew my favorite characters were Alanna from Tamora Pierce's novels and Viola from *She's the Man*. But I loved dresses, so none of this meant anything, of course.

I tried Sophie again in college because I felt so detached from and alienated by this mysterious concept of womanhood. I desperately wanted to be a girl. I had always been feminine, so it was fine. It was totally fine—and then it wasn't. Dysphoria is like a slow burn, or a month-long itch that you can't scratch—it's there in your most vulnerable moment, constantly teetering at the periphery of your brain. But that's not what made me trans. The queer and trans culture at Oberlin that I so desperately needed, that so openly embraced me and said *it's okay*: That's not what made me trans. I actually rejected the word transgender for the first two years after I came out as non-binary. Maybe it was too foreign, too assertive. Maybe because I still liked dresses, which I still connected with womanness. But it was also because in my head, I saw transgenderism as something painful, something that was etched into history with violence and oppression. It didn't feel like my place, as a white upper-middle-class queer gallivanting around Oberlin calling themself a twink, to hold the weight of that word—or maybe I didn't want it.

And yet there is something about the word transgender that is so enticing in its mysteriousness, so embracing and transgressive. I found myself questioning what the word meant, and what it meant for my own gender-straying. I found myself interpolated in the word by my own standards, my community, and institutions of cis/heteronormativity. A word bent on defiance.

But the limits of the word seemed to elude me and many people within my community. We all knew what it *meant*, and yet some people were using it as an umbrella term for anything outside of cisgender, whereas some of my non-binary and trans friends were saying that it made them uncomfortable to see it used in such broad definition, for people whose experiences they couldn't relate to. Then there were people like me, who were scared to recognize the potential of the word.

It wasn't that we were all confused. The word's definition is elusive through its history. But through its conception, we can trace why radically different people are adopting the word transgender, and how this miscommunication occurs.

"So you want to be a man?"
"No, not quite."
"So you want to be a woman?"
"No, not exactly."
"So you're trying to become a man?"
"Um."
Encounter with Planned Parenthood doctor while trying to get T, August 18, 2017.
Lasts approximately fifteen minutes.

The Transgender Dilemma

Transgender as a word and concept has swiftly ascended into contemporary popular terminology. As early as the sixties, trans people coined the word to counter the medicalized term transsexual, and by the early nineties, trans activists such as Leslie Feinberg helped popularize the word to describe people who did not identify as transsexual, but were not cisgender either. Transgender became an umbrella term for gender nonconforming individuals. Yet as the word transsexual became obsolete due to its problematic context and history, transgender came to replace transsexual in the everyday American's vocabulary. For the general public, transgender individuals resided within a traditional binary of gender. Transgenderism was still considered to be a "crossing of borders," from one end of the binary to the other: FTM or MTF.

Jack Halberstam writes in his essay, "Transgender Butch," "A common metaphor for transsexualism is a crossing of national borders from one place to another, from one state to another, from one gender to another." Halberstam is able to situate the polemic of the border-crossing mythology, but he also points to the dangers of using border-crossing as a metaphor, since immigration is a real and lived experience for many people. He cautions "against detaching the metaphors of travel and home and migration from the actual experience of immigration in a world full of borders."

Especially in the age of "Deporter-In-Chief" Obama, and then Trump's America, we have begun to normalize a world in which ICE unlawfully barges into homes, families are separated, and children are kept in detention centers. Now more than ever we must be wary of the idea of border-crossing as a metaphor for transgenderism, because the transitory nature of transgenderism does not parallel the reality of the dangers of crossing borders and immigration.

Furthermore, using the border-crossing analogy for transgender folk situates them on one side or the other, and neglects the people caught in between: "If the borderlands are uninhabitable for some transsexuals who imagine that home is just across the border, imagine what a challenge they present to those subjects who do not believe that such a home exists, either metaphorically or literally… Some bodies are never at home, some bodies cannot simply cross from A to B, some bodies recognize and live with the inherent instability of identity."

The transgressive non-conforming people did find words specifically for these shared experiences caught in the borderlands. As words such as 'gender-queer' and 'non-binary' became prevalent in the early naughts, many queer individuals came to consider other words to describe the experience of gender outside a binary, and transgender became more and more equated with the border-crossing ideology. However, many trans and non-binary people still use transgender as a general term for gender deviance.

When I was writing "Dialogues on Gender" for *Wilder Voice* in 2015, I found a number of people with startlingly different conceptions of the word trans. But each use was so emotional, and so personal to their own experience, that they were difficult to reconcile. Because I didn't identify as trans at the time, they were not mine to question. But I did start asking more trans friends if the umbrella term bothered them. The feedback I received, like our trans history, is controversial.

What isn't controversial is a shared commonality in the formulation of gender identities that lay outside the norm. These genders are actualized first through self-recognition. However, in performing and identifying through non-conforming genders, some people are privileged with safety (through cis-passing), and others are not. Some experience body dysphoria, some will have to take on extensive financial burdens for hormones and surgeries, and others will not. The visibility of transness creates a hierarchy of whose voices we listen to, who we deem desirable, and who is accepted in cis or trans culture. We try to be critical of this, to consider which voices we privilege above others. But ultimately that hierarchy

often shifts to white, ableist, and cis-normative standards and voices to take the *space* to be recognized, to be heard. Cis people are all aware of Caitlyn Jenner or Ruby Rose, but have never heard of Sylvia Rivera, Miss Major, Leslie Feinberg, Carlett Brown, Paul Preciado, or Marsha P. Johnson—all activists and theorists who fought for trans rights and recognition. Without these trans icons, many of us wouldn't be able to live our truth today, and yet still, many trans people even do not know their names.

This problem of visibility, acceptance, and recognition has dominated the politics and ideology of the word trans. Ironically, Oberlin students reside within an epistemological binary of the word transgender. We remain divided between a structuralist binary (I am and you aren't) or the invalidation of different experiences through hegemonic universalism (we are all the same by virtue of being transgressive). I aim to complicate these conceptions of the word transgender with a new framework, one of *transgender cartography*. By thinking of transgenderism as a fluid state of migration, we not only trouble the concept of border crossing, but also conceptualize how non-binary and transgender identities hold different places in challenging cis-normativity, while there is no real disunion between them.

"So you're all lesbians?"
"Actually I'm transgender."
"So you identify as… what?"
"A trans dude. Not a man exactly."
"But what do you identify as?"
"What?"
Conversation with friendly TERF butch at the International Gay Rodeo, October 21, 2017. Lasts approximately twenty minutes.

Subverting the homeland

Poetry, tea packaging, and yoga studios all like to tell us our body is our home. For transgender and non-binary individuals, this idea of the body as the center of the home is problematic. Both transgender and non-binary people share a similar origin story: They were born into a world with assigned genders that marked them as XX or XY. These centers of origin politically informed them with forms of habitus: cultural habits that inform our language, our posture, the way we sit, dress, interact with each other—all forms of gender embodiment we can find stem from this false origin story. For some people this narrative will always snugly fit, or they will find their own subtle subversions and defiances: the tomboy, the twink, etc. Others take a more direct approach in which they either subvert their origin story in its entirety or migrate away from the homeland.

Home must be problematized. Halberstam writes, "If home has represented the comfort of place and the politics of location and the stability of belonging within such a dialectic, the border has stood for the politics of displacement, the hybridity of identity, and the economics of undocumented labor. There is little to be gained theoretically or materially from identifying either home or border as the true place of resistance. […] Home is a mythic site, a place to anchor some racial and ethnic identities even as those identities are wrenched out of context or pressured into assimilation."

Before we depart from home, as a non-binary trans person I hope to make clear that this does not negate a shared experience or the multitude of ways that trans and non-binary people develop their identities. We're not in the business of working within binaries. However, distinctions and clarity within language are crucial to our ability to describe those intersections and gaps in their full weight and complexity.

The transgender individual migrates away from their falsely proclaimed "home." But the non-binary individual, rather than engage in this performative spatial transit, subverts their origin story. It does not matter if they do not change their performance from their assigned gender through clothing, body language, or other codes of gender. To the cis eye, they may not externally be recognizable as trans: incognito transgressors. For non-binary people, the subversion of the home does not appear through external values, but internally. By defying the binary they are able to make "masculine" and "feminine" bodies, styles, and definitions meaningless.

For the transgender individual, a migration emerges when the subject begins transitioning and challenging their former home to conflate with new queer and trans habitus, language, and culture that they create or discover. They embark on a migration across space, ascending nationality and heteronormativity, to discover a new corporeal site that locates their gender embodiment. They reconstitute their subjecthood by reconstructing the first words they hear, *Congratulations, it's a…*

The transgender corporeal site is always moving, always transitioning, always humming. It is neither static nor structured, but a fluid evolving landscape that the trans subject roams through, in between spaces and nations, uninterrupted but for the heteronormative interference of American society. This new site's impermanence is significant. While some transgender people may consider their gender static, many express movement and queerness as a dynamic destabilized ontology. Furthermore, this new site may incorporate many cultural phenomena of the former "home:" Trans people may operate or use many heteronormative behaviors or beliefs, and that doesn't challenge their transness, because it is appropriated and subverted to fit their new ontological site of being.

"Why do you need to box yourself in? Why do you have to announce yourself like that to the world?"
"For the same reason you do."
Friendly TERF butch at the International Gay Rodeo, October 21, 2017. Lasts approximately twenty minutes.

Transgender Cartography

The prefix trans means across, beyond, on the far side of, on the other side of, or on the outside of. Even linguistically we see migration and movement. Transgender subjects move away from their origin or home to a new ontological site that is not mapped by traditional conceptions of gender or established borders and nationality. Transgender individuals leave their citizenship of XX and XY, and live beyond the confines of heteronormative society. Citizenship in America is constituted in a capitalist framework, the primary unit of capitalism being (re)production, which queer and many trans people inherently fail successfully participate in. Neoliberal philosophy in particular is centered to focus on the individual and around the nuclear family—crafted heteronormative roles and hierarchies that trans and queer individuals likewise subvert or reside outside of. If citizenship is constituted in heteronormative, nationalist, legally binding terms, then the transgender subject resides as an outlaw to the state and nationalism—that is to say, trans people are not confined by nationality or borders in their creation of cartography. By not recognizing colonial arbitrary lines in maps that act as violent borders in their own cartography, transgender people are able to attempt to subvert neocolonialism.

Furthermore, a fundamental aspect of colonialism was the exportation of Western gender roles to colonized countries. Even the word "transsexual" was imported to countries through the DSM, and constituted a form of gender deviance that erased many peaceful gender variances in non-Western countries. The weight of colonialist gender norms has

informed our conceptions of the nuclear family and contemporary heteronormativity. Transness becomes an active, subversive departure: It is inherently anti-colonial to resist these gender norms, to resist colonial artifacts of borders and maps, to move through uncharted territory without claiming ownership.

Through their transitioning (which never really starts or ends in a linear sense, but rather erupts and shifts throughout their lives) transgender individuals go beyond figurative and literal borders to find their new corporeal sites. This may lead them physically to different countries, such as Thailand (the most popular destination for gender affirming surgeries). It may physically mean traveling across countries and states to access hormones, to find community, to find their own subjecthood. It also may mean staying physically exactly where they already are, but transcending figurative heteronormative and colonialist structures and borders. Shifting and twisting, reaching and growing, the transgender subject transitions to create their own melding of gendered habitus, externally or internally. In this way, each transgender person is their own cartographer, creating maps that do not rely on arbitrary violent lines of colonialism but travel across new networks and ontological sites.

In terms of navigation, we can use the work of two foundational queer theorists, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's framework of striated and smooth space, to consider the bordered land of nations and heteronormativity compared to the fluid space the transgender individual inhabits. Striated muscle presents tissue in semi-parallel lines, each with a clear and strict pathway and uninhabited spaces in between. Striated space can be seen as state-held space, formed through fixed landmarks and centers; it is marked with homogeneity through industrialization and globalization. Smooth space, on the other hand, is fluid, open, and allows

for nomadic movement, organic pathways like those seen in nature. Cities and borders could be considered striated space, spaces that designate the area that people are able to pass through, spaces only accessible by state-sanctioned entry points, while smooth space is uninterrupted and fluctuating, such as a plain or a desert. There is no origin or point of entry allotted—it is open-ended and extensive. This methodology is useful for understanding the smooth space the transgender subject occupies, and the striated space that the state and heteronormativity represent as interference that transgender subjects must navigate around.

The terrain of transgender topography may have ridges, valleys, and mountain ranges that create challenges in a transgender subject's migration, but it is also marked with the smooth land, with no pathways in sight, no highways or intersections to be seen. The transgender subject moves through space in queer time, not marked linearly by birth, puberty, marriage, children, and death, but through rebirth, second puberties, finding communities, gender disruption and variance. Transgender people move through their own Foucaultian genealogical time framework—events disrupting linear time, repetition without origin, movement against a teleological narrative.

We don't see our own cartography from the perspective of a person surveying a map; we are living, fucking, breathing, and shitting our own cartography, marking the map through the various realizations and performances of gender, etching our way through the intersections of our identities. Our cartography may overlap, we may share similar roads, but all diverge into their own locales. The geography of these maps is not broken up by borders but by natural pathways, and in this way transgender cartography subverts colonial barriers and arbitrary borders. Transgender individuals live in a diaspora of gender, having left their homeland and engaging in new and alien terrain, passing through striated space that they cannot assimilate into. They are dispelled by their place of origin and many cannot return, but transfer cultural identity codes to their ontological sites, and in this way, keep moving, keep growing.

Another way to think of these pathways is as a rhizome. A rhizome is a bulbous root plant, but Deleuze and Guattari use the rhizome as a metaphor with multiple chains, entrances, and branches connected to a center. It is the multiplicity of the rhizome's branches that is key: "There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines." The smaller lines branching off can be seen as "lines of flight" that signify ruptures in multiplicity, "[extending] the line of flight to the point it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency."

If we think of transgender space through cartography, we see pathways or rhizomatic branches and intersections emerge. The multiplicity of rhizomes lends itself to the various assemblages of trans movement across space. The rhizome is the rhythm that leaves etchings across the map as trans people journey and create their transgender cartography. While some branches or pathways may appear from a distance as highways, or shared experiences of performing transness, others digress into lines of flight, or their own individual paths. A trans person may meet another trans person and see the commonalities in their journey—perhaps two people begin taking estrogen at the same time—but ultimately individuals recognize one another. They move onward in their own voyage, finding unfamiliar landscapes that constitute their gender.

It is too simplistic to say transgender people cross borders. It also is a disservice to the stories of cis and trans people who must literally cross over these real and violent borders, who embark to new nations.

The border-crossing analogy echoes colonial exploration—who has the privilege to leave home and to return, versus those who remain trapped in the borderlands. Transgender people do not cross over borders; their gender resides outside of these borders, beyond colonial maps.

Transgender people are their own cartographers, mapping their journey through lines of flight, weaving new smooth spaces in gendered terrain unseen to the cis eye.

am I hard
enough (???)
am I curved
or jagged am I
woman
enough (???)
will you burn me at the stake (???)
interjection
have you heard about the diaspora (???)

-Kai Joy, "diaspora (Have you heard ::: (???))"

Neither language nor space is apolitical. There is always the "who" at play: Who dictates what is correct or proper language? Who is anointed with the power to define others? Who creates lines across land and calls them borders? Who is allowed to cross these lines, and who is not? In both language and space, there are positions of power to be held, and privileged voices that attempt to segregate space and classify language. As the theorist Costica Bradatan says, "The power to give names to things, as those crushed by it know only too well, is among the greatest powers that there are: What you do, what you've been doing all your life—even the name of your calling—is something others who have that power can decide."

The naming of the self is a crucial part of transgender and non-binary identities. It is recognition of the self as other that separates us from cisgender identities. We name our individual selves the moment we recognize this discursive identity. It is this power that we—the transgender community—hold, and must hold, for cisgender people will try to disparage and dismiss this power. They have attempted to strip us of it. They have used medicalized frameworks to tell us we are sick, they have used vulgar language to belittle and harm us. It is not up to cisgender people to name us.

The power of language coexists with space. Geography may inform our "mother" tongue, neocolonialism may force imperial languages down others' throats. We have seen the resistance though, through multilingual diasporas, through the recordings and teaching of vanishing languages. Space and language are not isolated from one another, and I hope to challenge the institutionalized frameworks of neocolonialism through a new conception of what language can mean and what abolishing borders can look like.

This essay is not to designate the "right" framework of how to think of transgenderism versus non-binary identities, but rather to provide an alternative to the messy and confusing history of transgender language. We need to own our linguistic history, because it defines our contemporary reality. "All awareness is a linguistic affair" is a pragmatist slogan used by Wilfrid Sellars. If language constructs our awareness and augments our reality, then it is imperative that we understand the historical and political context of the word transgender, and that we are thoughtful about the hierarchical nature of whose voices are upheld as trans. We need to acknowledge our own hierarchies, of whose voice we privilege, of who we give the space to speak. We need to acknowledge that transgenderism is only one facet of identity our community members hold, and that race, class, nationality, citizenship, and disabilities also constitute how we interact with our gender and with others'. Most of all, we must be critical of the language we use, of the naming we give each other.

THE BAWDY POLITIC / VAN COOPER

If history cannot define transgenderism for us, it is up to us, gender outlaws and incognito transgressors, to define it. •

Images by Brad Boboc

Drawing by Martina Hildreth

A MANIFESTO ON RIGOR AND PLAY

JUDY JACKSON

Any artist today has heard the claim: *There are no rules in art anymore*. In 1913, Marcel Duchamp premiered *Bicycle Wheel*, now known as his first "readymade" sculpture. The readymades were existing objects (often commonplace items, like bicycle wheels and urinals) that the artist signed, thereby making them "art." The American composer John Cage followed in a similar vein with his piece *4'33"* (1952), a solo piano piece where the pianist plays not a single note. Instead, the audience hears the sounds of the concert hall: people coughing, the creaks of the heating vents, nervous shuffling in the audience. These two events mark the artistic revolution that occurred in the twentieth century. If a completely "silent" piece (an appraisal that Cage refuted, as there was sound involved) is music, then anything can be music. If a signed urinal can be art, then anything can be art. Needless to say, Duchamp and Cage were not the only artists engaging in this type of practice: there were also the *White Paintings* of Rauschenberg, the text pieces of Yoko Ono and Pauline Oliveros, and the "noise" symphonies of Luigi Russolo, among others. However, these pieces often act as flash points when discussing the upending of the artistic establishment in the twentieth century. This shift abolished the relevance of any established "rules" in music and art—one need not be concerned with eighteenth-century counterpoint or figure drawing if they do not feel so obliged. However, this deconstruction has left us with a climate of uncertainty and passiveness: If anything can be art, how do we judge the quality of our work and the work of others?

One response to this problem has been to treat the arts, specifically music, as a type of science. The New Complexity movement in acoustic composition and the Acousmatic genre of electronic music both advocate for a sort of musical objectivity. In these genres, composers may manipulate series of notes representing the atomic density of various gasses, produce pieces structured by mathematical functions, and trigger sounds at the tempo of a certain country's birth rate. Every musical decision must be supported by something factual and leave little room for any type of subjective critique: *It doesn't matter that the piece doesn't sound interesting—here are all of my mathematical calculations that back up its validity*, the composer would respond. In electronic music, the technology used to produce the musical object often supersedes the object itself. In fact, the piece tends to act almost solely as a "proof of concept," or a demonstration of the capabilities of the technology; think of a trade show, where the salesperson shows you all the sounds you can make by pressing different buttons on a device. One can quickly see that this type of rigor does nothing to further the creation of quality work. Art is not a science: One cannot force objectivity onto something inherently subjective. Rather, art should be treated as its own distinct field with a unique system of rigor reflecting this subjective nature.

Another response to the problem of rigor in art is to act as if it is impossible to produce poor quality work. If everything is art, then there can be no bad art. This, again, is a weak solution. Under these constraints, artists find themselves becoming lazy and apathetic: If there is no way to do art badly, why put in the effort to make it good?

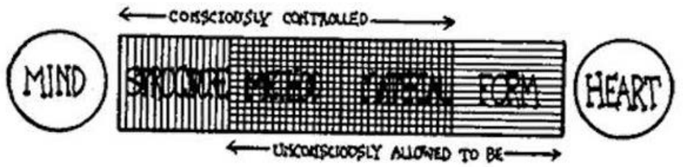
None of this is to say that the events of the twentieth century have doomed contemporary artists to obsolescence. Rather, they have freed us from various rules based in systemic oppression. Most "classical music" rules are based on the practices of white, European men, and are often used to invalidate the works of composers not fitting these specifications. Ridding the music world of these constraints benefits marginalized artists and forces diversification in the art world. Now, without institutional rules dictating what constitutes "good art," we can create systems of quality that reflect us, our positionalities, and our metrics of quality.

What would a new system of rigor look like? It certainly must rely on self-determined metrics of quality—our art should reflect what we believe quality art to be—rather than universally defined ones. Here, Cage can provide us with a basic framework on which to build. He defines music as consisting of four components: *structure*, *method*, *material*, and *form*. These components are defined as follows:

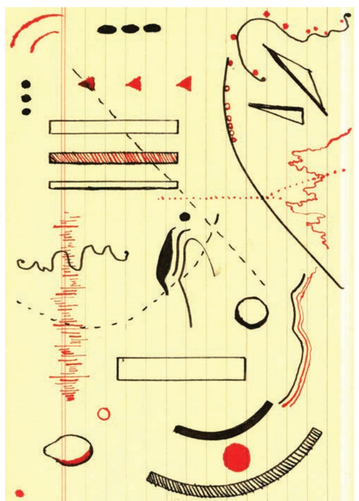
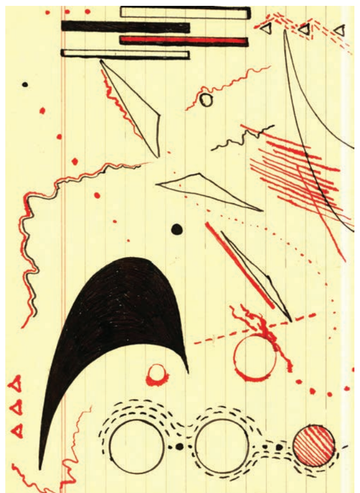
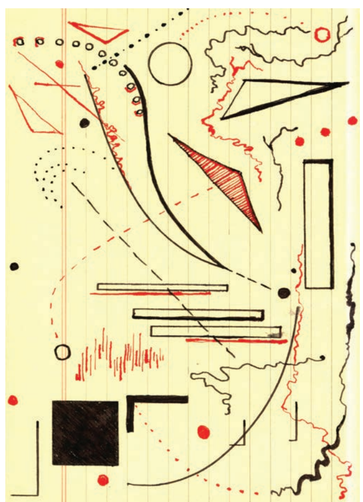
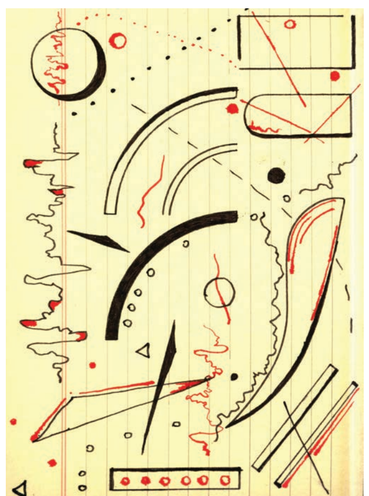
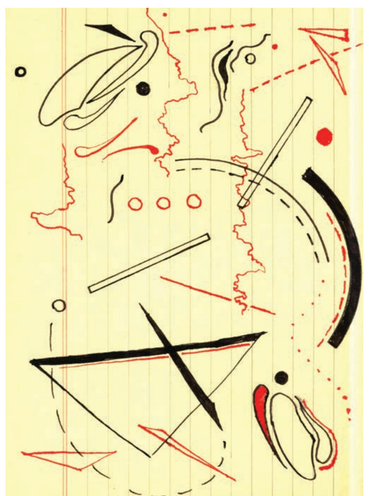
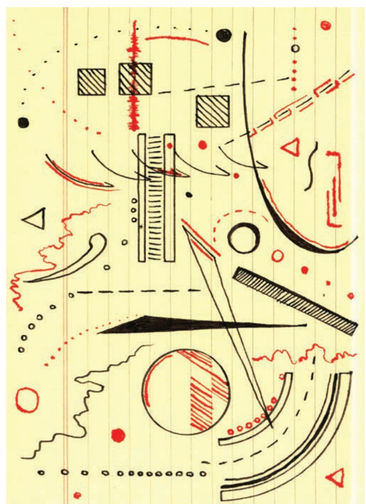
Structure: the division of music into parts, from phrases to long sections
Method: the movement from note to note
Material: sound or silence
Form: the continuity from start to finish

Cage's definitions reside in the music sphere, but they can be abstracted easily and applied to other art forms. In writing, structure can be viewed as the division of text into sentences and paragraphs, method as the syntax of the sentence, material as the words and punctuation, and form as the narrative arc. Likewise, in visual art, structure can be the groupings of figures; method, the connection between these; material, pigment or negative space; and form, the overall layout of the piece.

Cage places these components on a spectrum between mind (head) and heart, and it is this spectrum that provides the foundation for a newly defined rigorous art.



Any creation of art consists of a series of decisions: What note should be played by which instrument and when? How loud should it be? Where should the artist place a line on a canvas? How long and bold should it be, and what color? Which words should a sentence contain? Which synonym should be used to best communicate the author's intent? Each of these decisions tend to originate from either an analytical (head-based) place, or an intuitive (heart-based) one. Art requires both technical proficiency of some sort (can you program the computer to make the sound you want?) and creative proficiency (do you like how your music sounds?). Thus, each compositional decision must satisfy both these requirements–if a decision stems from the head, does it please the heart? If the decision is intuitive, does it make sense within the analytic structure of the piece? This is our system of rigor: Each decision must be considered and judged as to its quality from both an analytic and intuitive perspective.

Images by Judy Jackson

While such a system of rigor may prove more viable than the existing ones, its execution can be exhausting. Constantly checking and double-checking your work can lead to a place of artistic paralysis: What if one small decision isn't good enough? This is where play enters the process. Art is an inherently human act, a fact that the artist cannot forget. Cage captures this sentiment when he defines the purpose of music: "Music is edifying, for from time to time it sets the soul in operation. The soul is the gatherer-together of the disparate elements (Meister Eckhart), and its work fills one with peace and love." (Cage, *Forerunners of Modern Music*)

This concept is exemplified best by the works of Yoko Ono. Her text pieces, such as the one found in *Grapefruit* (below), prompt performers to reorient their mindsets and play with the material presented by their surroundings.

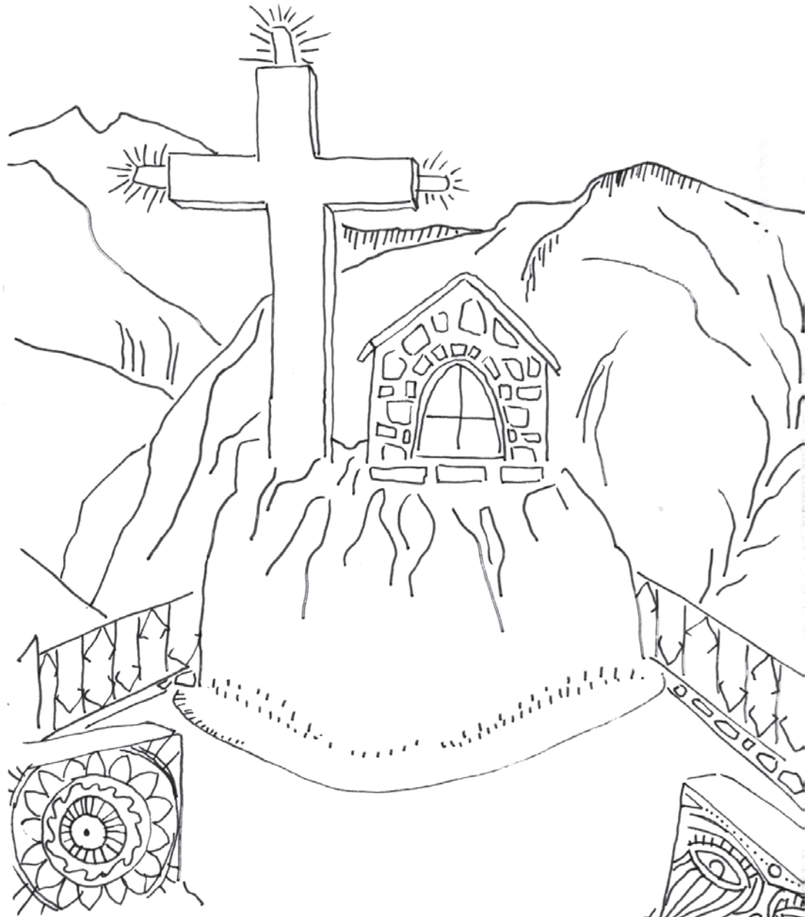
Tunafish Sandwich Piece

Imagine one thousand suns in the sky at the same time.
Let them shine for one hour.
Then, let them gradually melt into the sky.
Make one tunafish sandwich and eat.

1964 Spring

It is critical to play with your material, to fuss with it and tease out delightful deviations and mutations. Remembering this aspect isn't only for the artist's health; joy has a strange way of manifesting in your work, and its absence is perceptible.

However, the mind cannot simultaneously exist in a state of rigor and a state of play. It is hard to both edit and write at the same time. As artists in an academic environment, we often feel pressure to perform our practices in line with institutional and class requirements. Yet in order to produce effective work, we must remember to keep our own definitions of quality in mind and resist the urge to academicize our output instead of playing with our material. We must exist in a constant state of flux, oscillating between reckless experimentation and elegant, level-headed analysis. It is only then that we can capture those intangible subconscious whispers and force them into exquisite earthly manifestations. •



RADIO ACTIVITY

HISTORICAL MEMORY IN COLOMBIA

JACK ROCKWELL

I'm standing on a roof in Tolima, Colombia, talking to a man in a red shirt named Juan Bermudez. We have both just attended a meeting with members of the *Zona de Reserva Campesina Planadas*, an organization that helps farmers secure titles to land that they've already been working for years. Their work is important, but the meeting room was hot, and the roof we are on has a cool breeze and a view that overlooks the city. Juan, who had mostly been observing in the meeting, has quick eyes and hands that move ever so slightly to the rhythm of his words.

Radio, he says to me, *is the key. So many Colombians—especially out in the campo—get their news exclusively from the radio.* Juan works for *Marcha Patriotica*, an organization dedicated to uniting pro-labor and human rights groups all over Colombia. He's been developing a national framework to help collect and spread the stories of victims of state and military violence. Right now, he's trying to convince me of the importance of the radio, and the power that it has to influence how millions of Colombians understand their nation's history.

This past July, I spent ten days in Colombia travelling with an organization called the Alliance for Global Justice (AfGJ), which—among other things—organizes delegations that facilitate networking between humanitarian and social justice groups throughout the Americas. From June 30 to July 10, we met with dozens of representatives from all sorts of groups. I learned about their work, which included advocating for the peace process, assisting labor organizations, supporting victims of political violence, advocating for political prisoners, providing legal support for the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo (*FARC-EP), and more.

Juan, like so many left-leaning political and human rights activists in Colombia, operates at a delicate intersection of personal secrecy and political broadcasting. He wants his ideas to reach as many people as possible, but would fear for his life if the wrong people were to learn his name. Political violence has been the *modus operandi* for powerful Colombian operatives since long before the formation of the nation as it exists today. During the Cold War, the U.S. provided funding, training, and weapons to the current Colombian government to exterminate communists. In response to a particularly brutal set of killings of unarmed left-wing populists from 1948 to 1958, the FARC-EP formed as the armed wing of the Colombian Communist party. For more than 50 years they waged guerrilla warfare from the mountains, in a conflict estimated by Al Jazeera and the Washington Post to have left more than 200,000 dead and seven million displaced.

On November 30, 2016, the Congress of the Colombian government unanimously ratified a peace treaty with the FARC-EP, officially ending the conflict. Surprisingly, the treaty that would end the war was rejected by the Colombian people in a popular plebiscite on October 2, with 50.2 percent voting against its ratification to 49.8 percent voting in favor. Though this rejection was overruled and the modified treaty passed a month later, it raises certain questions to those unfamiliar with the conflict: Why would so many Colombians vote against ending such a destructive war?

The answer lies within the deep divisions between how various Colombian actors and groups understand the history of their country, divisions that Juan is trying to cross with his radio campaign. Luis Fernando Lugo explained this discord to me. Luis, who is the Secretary of International Relations for the *Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios* (FEU) at the National University of Colombia's Bógota campus, spoke to us clearly, with a confident smile, and he seemed optimistic, even if the content of his speech is grimly pragmatic. He told us, *During the war, guerrilleros were not widely considered real people with dreams and aspirations. The only thing on people's minds was killing them and winning the war.*

Luis and others believe a significant number of Colombians hold this opinion, including members of the agrarian working class for whom the FARC-EP was specifically fighting for. It's worth noting that, for the most part, I was exposed to only one side of the conversation—I was so busy meeting with left-leaning groups that I barely had time to talk to anyone else. However, on the very last day of my visit, members of the AfGJ and I staged a protest outside of the U.S. embassy in Bogotá. We were demanding that Simón Trinidad be allowed to return to Colombia. Trinidad, a once-commander in the FARC-EP, was extradited to the U.S. in 2004 and has been serving a 60-year sentence in solitary confinement in Colorado ever since. A friend and I left the protest directly in a taxi to the airport, and our driver, a middle-aged man, asked us what we had been doing outside of the embassy. Almost before we could finish telling him, he told us that our protest was unjust, and that Trinidad was a dangerous criminal who deserved to be killed. *This peace is no peace,* he said to us. *Peace will be when those guerrilleros pay for their crimes.*

As a journalist, I'd like to be impartial, but it's impossible to talk about Colombian politics without taking a side. And yet, who am I, an outsider, to say that this man's opinion is invalid? I've grappled with this question constantly since I began thinking about this article. The United Nations estimates that the FARC-EP are responsible for twelve percent of violent deaths during the conflict. Many of those who died were innocent victims, with families and friends whose anger is valid. My role as an outsider is to bring the stories of victims of violence to the U.S. I hope that by influencing people here I'll make an impact, however indirect, on the lives of the victims in Colombia.

But how do I know that I'm representing the right victims? I've found that the best answer I have comes from scale. By the same UN estimates as above, right-wing paramilitary groups were responsible for 80 percent of the killings. Violence experienced at the hands of the FARC-EP is not less valid, but perhaps less significant.

The history of political violence in Colombia is as long as the history of Colombia itself. My understanding of it was greatly informed by two people that I spoke to: Alirio García, the Human Rights Director for *la Federación Nacional Sindical Unitaria Agropecuaria* (FENSUAGRO) and Imelda Daza Cotes, who is a Vocera in the Colombian House of Representatives. In Spanish, *vocera* literally means "speaker." In the Colombian congress, Voceras are spokespeople from outside organizations, and do not have a vote. Both Alirio and Imelda trace the political violence back to the issue of land rights, which Alirio says began when Spaniards arrived in 1498.

We sat down with Alirio on a rainy Sunday morning to learn about his organization, FENSUAGRO, in our hotel's meeting room. Alirio is much older than Luis or Juan, and the perspective conferred by his years encouraged him to deliver a lengthy oral history of Colombia, placing the country's current struggles in the context of those past. He explained that the establishment of the Spanish colonies, and the corresponding massacres and displacement of indigenous peoples, were the beginnings of a long tradition of violence employed as a tool to control land and the wealth that arose from it. Though the names of the governments, people, and corporations that controlled Colombia's land have changed with time, the regular pattern is the few wealthy and powefrful own, at least in title, vast tracts of land worked by *campesinos*, who control almost none of the wealth that the land produces.

Revolutionary movements in Colombia across centuries have frequently promised a redistribution of land ownership. Alirio told us that Simón Bolívar, the leader of the armies that liberated what is now Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Panama, wanted to give back land to the campesinos and indigenous peoples, but upon his

death in 1830, all laws protecting *el pueblo* were destroyed. One hundred years later, after the proliferation of Marxism and a smattering of communist revolutions around the world, political actors began to rise within Colombia, who promised a redistribution of land along the lines of these new ideologies. The violence employed to silence these actors led to their militarization and the creation of the FARC-EP.

Decades after the rise of the FARC-EP, popular leftist movements continued to appear in Colombia, attempting to address systemic inequality legally and from within. One of these movements was the *Unión Patriótica* (UP), of which Imelda Daza Cotes was a founding member in the early eighties. It too was suppressed with violence. Imelda told us that when the assassinations began, members of the UP met and considered their options. Some fled the country; others joined the FARC-EP in the mountains. According to Imelda, every single member who remained as a civilian was killed.

We're sitting around a plastic table under a tarp at a *Zona Veredal*, one of the transition zones built for demilitarized FARC-EP to live in before making the full return to civilian life. The camp is in full motion around us: Men and women are washing, building, cooking, digging, and performing various labors side by side. Imelda is a gifted speaker, with a rich voice and bright eyes. She manages to sound brave while telling us that she was not. *I left because I was afraid. I'm not afraid to say that I'm afraid—I suffer from none of that masculine crap. When my kid was five months old, the paramilitaries started to threaten me. I knew they didn't threaten idly, but followed up on their threats with death.*

Imelda fled Colombia in 1988 and was granted political asylum in Switzerland, where she lived for twenty-six years before it was deemed safe for her to return. *Switzerland is a marvelous country, and they treated me wonderfully. Nonetheless, it was dark, cold and very different over there. I'm from Valledupar, a city on the Caribbean—we are a people of warmth, of laughter and of dance! I hated that I was so far away, and it was very, very difficult. For twenty-six years, I dreamed every day of coming home.*

With Colombia under close watch from the United Nations after the peace treaty's signing, Imelda and other members of the UP are appearing from the shadows. One of the stipulations rewarded to the FARC-EP was the right to form a political party, around which many of their old allies who had been forced into hiding will most likely appear. This is a new era in Colombian politics: Agrarian reform and left-leaning populism are being given another chance, this time with an involved international community watching.

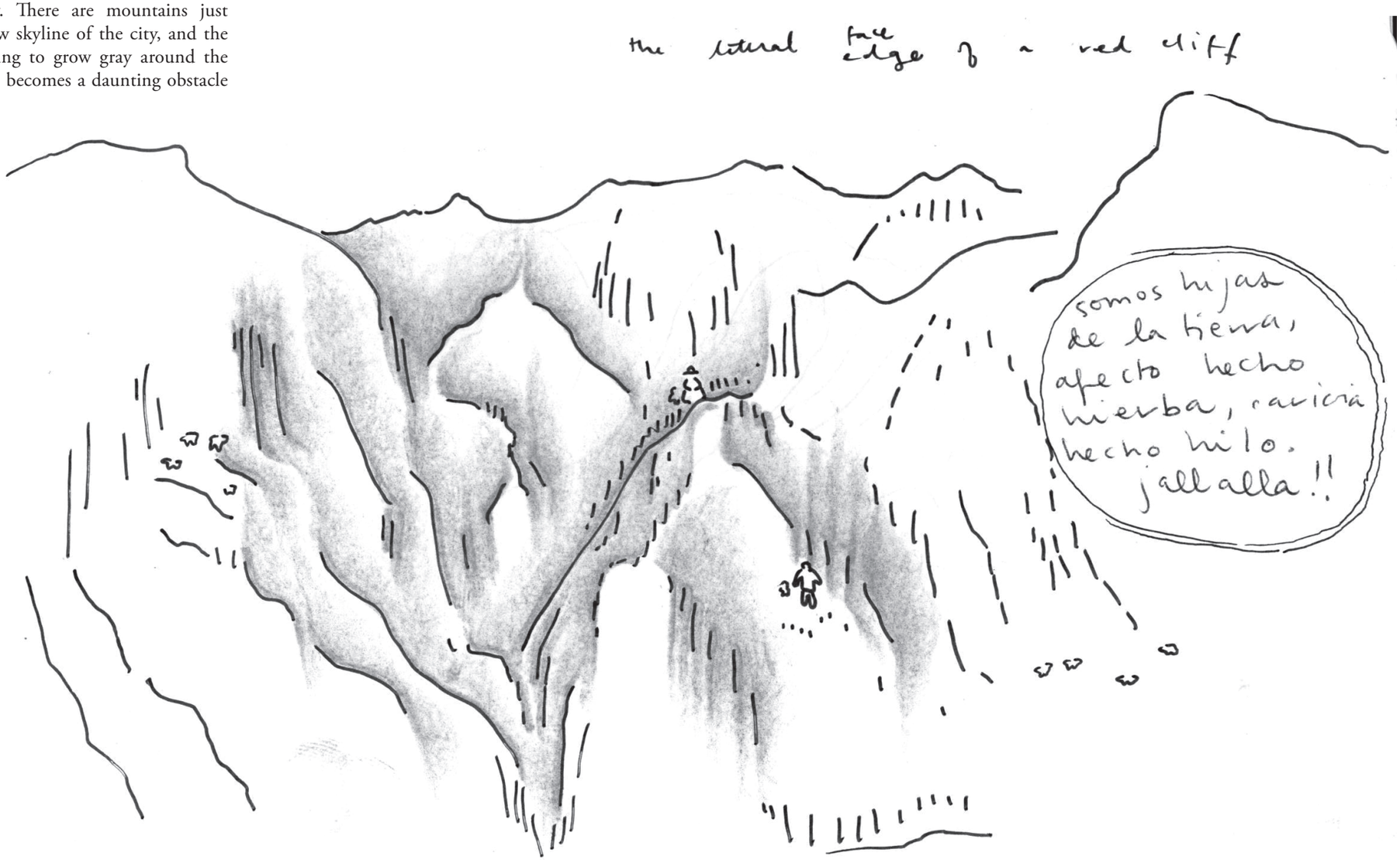
Will this be enough to make peace last? The greatest problems Colombia faces must be decided by the Colombian people alone. As Fernando said, *Reintegrating the FARC is not only done by the state. We must make space for them culturally, and change the minds of so many people who grew up believing the FARC are monsters.*

To that end, many of the activists we spoke to—especially students—are starting up alternative media corporations. These are mostly created on social media and the internet, and have been generally successful in communicating with the younger generation. However, there are millions of Colombians, especially in the *campo,* who do not have computers. They get their news from the radio and along with it, their political opinions about the entire outside world. Who and what they vote for will be decided by a form of media that has existed for decades. What makes things tricky for Juan is that radio has been controlled by many of the same people and groups for so long—people and groups who don't necessarily share Juan's passion for peace and justice based in agrarian reform.

With such stark divisions, it's no wonder that many question whether the FARC-EP can be successfully reintegrated into mainstream

Colombian society at all. Outsiders like myself can afford to ask this question from a distance, but Juan, Fernando, Imelda, Alirio, and many other Colombians cannot. For them, it's a matter of life and death, of economic justice for their people, of honoring the memory of lost loved ones.

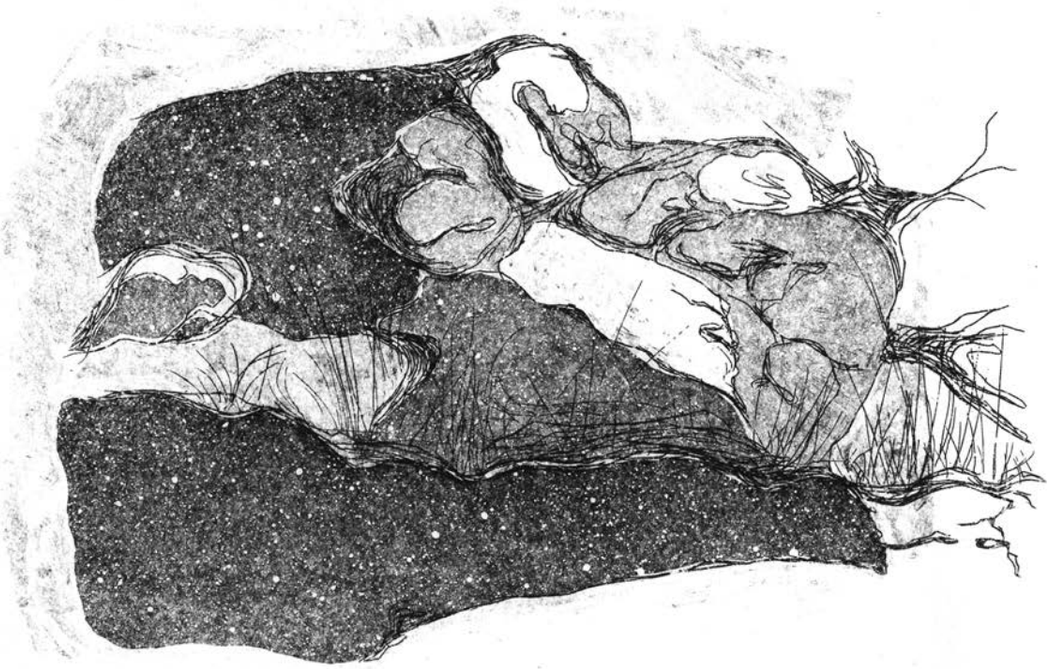
I put my hands on the railings, looking alternately back at Juan and out at the avenue below. There are mountains just behind the low skyline of the city, and the sky is beginning to grow gray around the corners. Space becomes a daunting obstacle in this moment: space soaked with history and the blood of generations imprinted on every mountain and street corner. There's great space between Juan and the people he's trying to reach. That's why it's so important for Juan to get his hands on the radio, so he can work toward reshaping the collective memory of his nation's history, and pave the way for a more just and less violent future. •



Drawings by Martina Hildreth

NORTH OF NOWHERE

LYDIA MORAN



I have this very distinct memory from when I was thirteen. It lasts about ten seconds—the first ten seconds after waking up one morning. I am exhausted, but my body wakes itself up with the sun as it has done for the past three days. The first thing I see is the patterned red and orange fabric of someone else's sleeping bag. I feel a cool breeze sift its way through the thin nylon of the tent wall and brush against my cheek. I hear… I hear the sound of something howling in the distance. I think for a brief moment that it is the highway, and that the sound I hear is cars speeding past one another. I think of the highways that I pass by back home in the suburbs of Minneapolis—the subdued brown of the noise barriers that flank them on either side, the way rain or snow amplifies the sound tires make against pavement.

But a couple seconds later, I blink and become aware of the fact that what I am hearing is not the highway: It is the wind howling over a lake. I am not in the suburbs or anywhere remotely near a road—I am on an island inside a tent. The island has no name.

When I think back on this moment, the feelings attached to it are muddled. First is the panic one feels waking up in a strange place. On top of that is a layer of shock produced by the realization that this unfamiliar place contains familiar stimuli—the howling noise—but these stimuli are caused by a different phenomenon—the wind. Realizing this in a brief instant jolts me back, all at once, to where I am without the ease of context. I can point precisely to where I am on a map, but beyond that I have no idea what surrounds this area. I have no idea how to leave this place if I wanted to. I am at the mercy of it. The wind howling. *Wilderness.*

I grew up near Minneapolis, Minnesota. I like to think I'm more Minnesotan than most, though, because no member of my extended family on either side has ever lived outside the state for more than a couple years, and they've always come back.

My mother's family lives north of us in Duluth and some small towns outside of it. The journey north to see them is guided by a slowly shifting landscape on either side of the highway. Prairie and wetland give way to dense boreal forest. The air saturates with a cool sweetness blown off the enormous lake we hurtle towards and, driving at night, stars twinkle and slowly become more visible overhead.

Perhaps because of this I've always felt that my life is oriented north. It's a strange and deep longing. Especially when I was younger, I felt a sense of calm knowing we were driving north, even if it was just for a quick errand. I used to crane my neck in my car seat to observe the compass on the dashboard. On the occasions that we'd visit a cabin belonging to my aunt's father-in-law on a lake somewhere near Isabella, Minnesota, I exclaimed with glee: *This is the farthest north I have ever been!*

Maybe there's a sort of magnet inside of me like those inside of compasses. Maybe I was in need of a point of origin. I've heard of people who have never been to the desert before longing for that landscape with a kind of pre-nostalgia. When we're young I think we long to return to places we've never experienced. For me, that place existed in the Northwoods. There seemed a sort of clarity unique to that area. Somewhere up there, humming softly, an ancient calm permeates everything in hues of deep green, misted white, and the bright purple of lupine in summer.

When I was thirteen, I went to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) Wilderness for the first time with a camp my next-door-neighbor had introduced me to. We spent the first two days at base-camp preparing for our voyages: packing food, planning a route, choosing canoes, getting to know one another. After that short time was up, we embarked on a five-day journey through the 'back-country,' carrying our packs and canoes on our backs on the paths between lakes.

The Boundary Waters is a 1.1 million-acre region of protected forest that straddles the Minnesota-Ontario border just west of Lake Superior. It is located in the northern portion of a state that is eight percent water and has a combined shoreline of 45,000 miles—more than the sum of both the inland and ocean coasts of California. The BWCA is an interconnected series of waterways that is littered with boreal forest. Looking at a map, you can see what little green is visible there. Most of the surface is bespeckled in blue. Look closer and you realize that not all of the dots have been charted for depth, leaving a portion a deeper and smoother blue—elegantly and mysteriously free of topographical lines.

The BWCA occupies a smaller portion of this protected wilderness, for which camping licenses may be bought. The area makes up the northern third of the Superior National Forest and contains over 1,200 canoe routes, twelve hiking trails, and more than 2,000 Department of Natural Resources (DNR)-maintained campsites. The area was set aside initially in 1926 to preserve its "primitive" character, and in 1964 it became part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

In the tent again, I am at the mercy of the wilderness, but not entirely. I am here for the first time with four other young girls and two tough, older women—our guides. As I'm looking back on it now, I realize these women must not have been in their twenties yet, but to me they were ancient, and stronger than I ever imagined I would be. Technically we are at a summer camp, but the actual base camp is far away from us. Now we are "on trail"—in the woods surrounded by an impossible vastness. There are no roads or motors anywhere near the island. There are no houses and there is nowhere to purchase firewood or food. Everything we have, including our five canoes, we've carried and paddled with for miles.

We find firewood near our campsite that is "dead and down" and no wider than our wrists. We burn it only in the designated fire grate. Food scraps must be carried out in our packs and not tossed down the latrine or burned. We wash our dishes at least 150 feet from the water's edge. When we brush our teeth, we spray out the paste in little droplets. If we were to see a group of more than four more people—and we never do—we would not congregate on a portage, campsite, or lake.

While the Boundary Waters isn't in another class of wilderness, perhaps it should be. In comparison to my experiences in various other wild places throughout the country, I've found the BWCA has a certain unmarked quality to it. In other protected areas, the paths are somehow more *well worn*: There are signs, and the trails on the maps are named. In the Boundary Waters there are no signs. There are no rangers gliding by on motorboats, there is no evidence of human life outside of your own and even that becomes somehow strange and alien, reduced to periods of intense movement and absolute stillness.

I kept a diligent and water-stained diary during this trip in 2009. The first entry reads:

We cook with lake water, we drink lake water, we swim in lake water. We can't taste it but we know it's there. The way the water moves, ripples and sways creates an intricate pattern. Decorating where the dense forest breaks sloping down to the bay.

Paddles break the surface creating whirlpools, disturbing the quiet peace. Then restored again. The wind paints the water and the moon pulls it towards the bays.

The canoe's rhythm is a lullaby. No noise, wind slowly gliding over the water dancing on the waves. The whole arrangement is low haunting melody, playing harmonious with the cheerful singing of birds.

One night on that trip as we are nestled in our line of sleeping bags, thunder intensely reverberates around the lake and a few seconds later lightning strikes. We exit the tent in the pouring rain and retrieve the life vests we've stashed under the canoes. All seven of us, counselors included, then sit scattered throughout the forest on the vests. The logic behind lightning drills is quite simple: we scatter to lessen the likelihood that we are struck at once. If one of us is hit by lighting or crushed by a falling tree, the loss is numerically lesser than if all of us are struck huddled together in the tent.

We have adorned ourselves with protective layers of rain gear, but this barely helps. The wind howls and rain pours down into my lap, slicks my pants to my skin. I can hear my fellow campers around me loudly singing to distract themselves above the noise of the thunder and wind. I imagine what it would be like to get struck by lightning. The flash and the sharpness. I crane my head to watch the trees wobble ominously over my head.

At the age of thirteen, the self is a particularly nebulous concept. So sitting there in the forest absolutely vulnerable to the forces of the natural world I experienced a kind of fear that was so refreshing in its absolutism and rawness that I almost forgot who I was. To that storm, I was no different than any one of the boulders or stumps that surrounded our campsite. I was equally disposable and equally organic.

On trail we aren't allowed to have watches. We move through the environment in the daylight hours and retreat at dusk. We eat when we are hungry, and sleep when the light fades. I lose track of the days, too. Dates are meaningless and years are equally irrelevant—July 12, 2009 becomes "Day Three." I feel ancient and dirty. I no longer remember what I look like without access to mirrors, and this adds to my bodiless sensation. At first this is disorienting to me and I find myself trying to steal peeks at the highly guarded watches of the counselors. But eventually I lose interest and my body begins to merge with the surrounding elements. I am entirely alone with my mind and the minds of those around me. I find myself returning to my body as a kind of shelter unto itself.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture proclaims that the Boundary Waters "allows visitors to canoe, portage, and camp in the spirit of the French Voyageurs of 200 years ago." But when I am in the Boundary Waters I don't feel like I am hearkening back to any point in human history. When I am in the Boundary Waters, I feel as though the place I have immersed myself in has less to do with humanity than it does with eternity.

There is a difference between being humbled by wilderness and interpreting its emptiness as simply emptiness, or that which is capable of being conquered. Words like *emptiness* and *nowhere* connote a kind of hierarchy. If something is *empty*, then it is empty of *something* and can or should be filled. Nowhere implies a similar theme; if a place is *nowhere* then it must be outside of *somewhere*.

As I explained earlier, the Boundary Waters is a vast and interconnected series of waterways. No motorboats, no planes below 4,000 feet, even, are allowed to infiltrate its protected bubble. But something that I've been forced to come to terms with recently is that nothing, not even a wilderness as pristine and seemingly limitless as the Boundary Waters, is disconnected from outside influences. The earth resists our attempts to delineate it.

While mining within the BWCA is illegal due to its protected status, mining directly outside of it is not. Twin Metals, a mining corporation with offices in St. Paul and Ely, Minnesota, proposed a Sulfide-ore copper mine located a few miles from the BWCA in the Kawishiwi River watershed. In the frantic final days of his administration, Obama refused the renewal of mining leases owned by Twin Metals, Minnesota (a mining company owned by Antofagasta, the multi-billion dollar Chilean mining conglomerate). Before this can come into effect, though, the area must undergo (and is currently undergoing) a two-year environmental review to assess the economic, social and, of course, environmental impacts of this proposed mine.

But since Trump's election, two Minnesotan senators, Tom Emmer and Rick No-

lan, have been attempting to end the environmental review and reinstate the leases to Twin Metals. They drafted a bill, H.R. 3905, that is currently making its way through a series of votes. If it passes, it could have devastating environmental implications in the region as it would immediately end the environmental review, and reinstate Twin Metal's leases, allowing them to mine in the region.

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Waterways do not taper off where the U.S. government has drawn lines on a map. They continue onward and are connected with less protected areas outside of the preserve. I spoke with Scott Beauchamp for about an hour on the phone one evening as the days were beginning to shorten in late October. Beauchamp is the Director of Media Relations at Save the Boundary Waters, a national campaign that works to influence legislature and spread general awareness of environmental threats to the region. He told me, "The issue with this type of mining [is] it's a very water-heavy area, and all the water of the Boundary Waters is very interconnected, and these proposed mines are on the Kawishiwi—which directly flows into the Boundary Waters—so the pollution from those mines would flow right into the Boundary Waters. Because [it] is so clean right now and so interconnected, it would cause devastating pollution throughout the wilderness."

So the chemicals will more than likely flow from the *somewhere*, the outside world, into *nowhere*, and potentially destroy it. The earth shows us, through its infinite connection to itself, that you cannot protect a portion of it; you must protect it all.

One lake is entirely covered in yellow and orange lily pads. We stretch out our hands to feel their leathery surface. The bottoms are coated in a kind of green slime that we rub between our fingers. The canoe slowly glides forward, making the sound of an exhale: *shhhhh*…

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Toxic pollutants will affect aquatic ecosystems, and infiltrate the waterways, result-

Prrint by Lya Finston

ing in a decrease in biodiversity on land, too. Mercury levels in fish will rise, putting human health at risk.

Minnesota Democratic–Farmer–Labor Party (DFL) Congresswoman Betty McCollum pointed out in a statement condemning the mines that 92 percent of sulfide mines in the U.S. have experienced failures and directly impacted the water quality of surrounding areas.

The Forest Service cited the potential environmental impacts of sulfide-ore mining as rationale for their decision to deny the leases under Obama. "We're concerned about the impacts of copper-nickel mining in sulfide deposits, because there is extensive research that shows that should impacts occur, it would be virtually impossible to mitigate those impacts," said Kathleen Atkinson, a forester with the U.S. forest service who specializes in the region. Moreover, sulfide-ore mining is generally more toxic than taconite mining, which is more common in Minnesota.

Not to mention that Antofagasta, Twin Metals' parent company, is no stranger to environmental violations. In 2009, a sulfide deposit site in Chile called Los Pelambres dumped 13,000 liters of copper contaminate into the Choapa River. In 2014, the Chilean Supreme Court found Antofagasta guilty of cutting off water to the village of Caimanes as a result of its waste dam upstream.

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On trail we are constantly moving through different environments, and I come to realize that each lake has its own personality. Some are narrow and shallow with reeds and an abundance of dragonflies. Some are wide and twisting, surrounded by rocky outcroppings. The angle of the sun also affects how I perceive each new lake. In early afternoon, the water sparkles and becomes daunting as I struggle to force my arms into another paddle stroke. At dawn, the lakes are more serene. I come to find my physical and mental states reflected by the world around me. When I struggle with a canoe on my back, the sun reaches its highest point in the sky and the world is lit with a garish intensity. When we slide into a campsite in early evening, I feel calmer—nurtured by the deep purples and blue streaks of the clouds above.

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In press releases, Twin Metals spokespeople framed the denial of their leases as a direct assault on hardworking Minnesotans, denying them of a mine that could provide 850 jobs and sustain itself for thirty years. Executive director of Mining Minnesota Frank Ongaro called the move "nothing but political B.S. All this does is chase investment away from the U.S., and makes us more dependent on foreign governments for our metals," he said.

Up North Jobs, based in Ely, Minnesota, is one of the leading dissenters to the environmental review. It makes its position quite obvious: Denying mining companies the opportunity to develop federal land is akin to stealing jobs and resources from Minnesotans. In an open letter "To Repeal Federal Land Withdrawal," Chairman Gerald Tyler writes: "The decision by the Obama administration and the USFS/BLM [United States Forest Service/Bureau of Land Management] to conduct a study and complete an environmental impact statement… is a shameless attempt by the anti-mining activists and their federal agency 'friends' to preemptively quash the development of Twin Metals Minnesota's proposed project by delaying exploration until at least 2019, and perhaps for an additional twenty years if a moratorium on prospecting is imposed."

Ely Mayor Chuck Novak is in support of mining as well. Ely, a town with historical and geographic ties to the BWCA, is no stranger to mining controversy nor, for that matter, wilderness conservation controversy. "It takes the hope out from all the people who looked for a brighter future with great paying jobs, family, living wages, a boost to the economy," he said.

However, Beauchamp makes the case that, while mining would provide a certain number of jobs for northeastern Minnesotans, these jobs are ultimately temporary and the loss of the Boundary Waters would result in deeper economic loss. "Our position is, if you look at the size of this, it's very, very, very likely that it will pollute the boundary waters. So you're kind of forced into a bargain, or not necessarily a bargain, but a decision," he says. "You know, is it going to be these mining jobs for twenty to thirty years? Or do we want to try to work with the clean, sustainable Boundary Waters that we have right now? Because you can't have both. … There's over 17,000 jobs that depend on the boundary waters… why would we throw away that economy for a few hundred mining jobs?"

He adds, "We need to be focusing on the Boundary Waters as a resource. As long as we protect it, it'll be around forever. How do we use that to create an economy that helps everyone become employed and not endanger the wilderness?"

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One of the only people I see besides the members of my group on trail is an older man resting at the head of one of our portages. It is late morning, the sun dapples his face. As we unload our canoes I hear him softly explain to one of our guides that he's been out here for months paddling his way around the area in a grand loop. He sports a rugged grey beard and smiles at us good-naturedly. Before we embark on the trail, he is off with a pack and canoe on his back, the veins in his calves bulge and he disappears around a bend.

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I wonder if wanting to save the Boundary Waters is a stance taken mainly by people who have the economic resources to make a visit to the wilderness. I asked Scott, "I'm just thinking about mining supporters who are pro-jobs up there… Do you think that they have access to the Boundary Waters in the same way that people who are pro-Boundary Waters? Does that somehow have an impact on their stance on it? Do you have to experience it in order to want to protect it?"

He answers, "It's really difficult for me to say whether or not people have been there, because I think it really just depends on the specific person. But, you know, I think that a lot of people are looking at [mining] as a way for them to support their family, which is something… you know, it's not like we're *against* mining, we're just against mining in *this place*. We don't think we should sacrifice the Boundary Waters for it."

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On my last foray into the BWCA, as a camper at age fifteen, our group ran into some trouble. The route we had chosen appeared to have been abandoned for a number of years, and the portages were heavily overgrown and almost impossible to navigate. On top of that, many people in the group experienced injuries and we had to back-paddle an entire day's distance to our drop-point after one member twisted her ankle on a tree root.

At one point, we mistook a dried-up waterfall for a portage and found ourselves on a small, unnamed lake with no connecting routes. *How long has it been since someone experienced this lake?* I thought as we aimlessly floated and our guide panicked with the map. Eventually we were forced to bushwhack our way out down the side of a cliff. Later that day, I got a concussion during a portage, and another member slipped on some wet rocks at our campsite, injuring her spine. No one had a phone and we were a day behind. We needed an ambulance, but were down three paddlers.

On the morning we were set to evacuate for the second time, our guide woke us up when it was still dark out. Our campsite was on a peninsula surrounded by hollow and barren trees—ravaged in a forest fire. We were tired and dirty. We hadn't seen anyone outside of our group for five days. Suddenly, in the distance, a fleet of canoes emerged and we flagged them down. They were gracious—a troop of Boy Scouts from South Carolina—and helped us radio a nearby hospital while we ate their trail mix.

It is not so much the exhaustion or fear that I remember most clearly. Upon entering the ambulance I noticed among the bright

DISPATCHES / MORAN

white lights and oxygen tubes, an analog clock hung near the back door. This was so jarring to me that I began to cry with a mixture of relief and regret. For the first time in a week, I knew what time it was. Suddenly, all at once without the ease of context, I am jolted back into a space where time is meaningful. Yet now it feels unnatural in the same way the whiteness of the interior of the ambulance feels unnatural. In that moment, the only thing that felt real—*natural*—was the dirt ground deeply into my skin.

This is how I'd rather exit the Boundary Waters: through its rivers and lakes and bogs. Paddling silently from mid-morning until dusk. Meandering slowly until houses start to become visible and the low murmur of voices again is audible. Paddling some more until the hum of cars cannot be mistaken for the wind.

In November of 2017, I received an email from Save the Boundary Waters with the subject line: BREAKING. My stomach dropped as I opened it and read that H.R. 3905 had passed "in a close vote" by the House Natural Resource Committee on November 8, 2017. The bill is now cleared for a vote by the full U.S. House of Representatives. *The Boundary Waters Need Your Help More Than Ever*, it warned.

So this is how I fear I'll only be able to enter the Boundary Waters from now on: in the first few moments after waking, hearing the sound of the highway, and mistaking it for the wind.

After the longest and hardest portage of my first trip through a place called "Howl Swamp," we emerged at dusk to our surprise on a sandy beach. The portage was brutal, through mud and dense forest and the most mosquitoes I'd ever seen in my life. My arms shook with exhaustion as I attempted to keep my concentration away from the swarm of insects that had entered the hood of the canoe to bite my arms and face. The portage seemed to go on for miles, but all of a sudden my boots touched water and I flung the canoe off of my shoulders to see the expanse of a large, sparkling lake. We spent the next twenty minutes splashing in the shallows and rubbing sand on our muddy skin in the waning light.

Of course, this lake wasn't our own discovery. Of course, hundreds, or even thousands, of people before us had come upon this very lake and paddled its water before us. Of course, long before the Boundary Waters was even categorized by the U.S. government, people had called this place home. Of course we knew this. But there is a difference between being awed and humbled by emptiness and wanting to conquer it.

When I threw off that canoe and witnessed the scene before me, my first thought wasn't that this was all mine. My first thought was how big the clouds were and how their pink reflected off the water. My first thought was how clear it was, and how peacefully it lapped at the shore—the stillness and vastness of the scene before me. My first thought was, *This is the farthest north I have ever been*. •

DISPATCHES / MORAN

Prrints by Julia Schrecengost


NOT LONG AGO
JRRL

Brad Segro and the Great Information Virus

ABSTRACT

In this three-part history, I propose a re-writing of how we understand the decline of our predecessors based on the remarkable findings within the recently excavated journals of Brad Segro, the progenitor of the virus that wiped out information technology in the third century Before Descendance. Selections of the thirteen volumes discovered pertain to Brad's involvement in The Event, as it is commonly dubbed, that so dramatically changed the course of human history. Much of that information has been distilled into a coherent narrative in the first section. The second will consider the difficulties of working with Brad's journals, and begin to juxtapose what they don't tell us with what they do. The third and final will finish discussing the journals' limits, and in their context propose questions to guide our research moving forward.

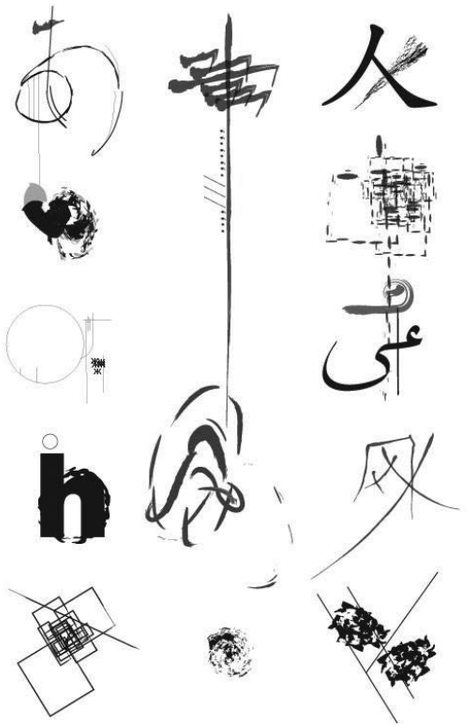
At the turn of the last century, there was an undergrad student named Brad Segro, who studied literature and computer science, among other things. Brad read a lot of interesting articles about so-called "deep learning" computer programs that were tackling problems of natural language processing—predicting an author based on a sample of text, for example, or translating from one written language to another. There were even some programs that could generate text or images after reading a great deal of examples.

Brad was excited by the possibilities of this technology, but he was always disappointed to read the texts produced. He saw them as poor imitations of the human art of writing and came to believe the machines generating them were far from capable of telling meaningful stories. He did a little reading and decided that since machine learning algorithms generally improve with larger samples, he could address the problem of meaningful creation by building an artificial neural network that would read every single text, ever.

That's not exactly what he accomplished, of course. He exclusively considered texts presented in language, ignoring texts with other forms such as images or audio. Brad also limited himself to such texts as available on the internet; he figured there was enough material uploaded already and recognized that whatever small number texts he might upload individually would fail to have an impact in such a large pool. He did not exclude any languages, however, resulting in a sample of over 40 languages majorly represented.

Of course, with billions of pages and exabytes of data, Brad's learning program toiled for weeks. In the interim, Brad's term of studies ended. He left his computer running and went outside for a while. When he came back one day, he was surprised to find that his program had output some text. The following symbols had been printed to Brad's terminal:

Image by Julia Friend



Brad looked it over briefly. He was not a linguist. Even if he was, this small output would not be enough to derive meaning from the symbols. Brad adjusted the parameters and instructed the program to output some more, an amount that would have printed to nearly 100 pages. He wrote a little note explaining what it was and sent it to his university's linguistics department.

At this point, the information in Brad's journals begins to intersect with what we've compiled from our predecessors' public records. Interestingly, little of what Brad documented during this period actually concerns his machine. He took quite a lot of notes—40 pages in the week following the completion of his program—but the vast majority of those concern a romantic relationship he was having at the time. When he does mention his machine, it is very much within the emotional modality in which he had been writing—he expresses curiosity as to its products, anxiety that they won't be of value, and a rich pride engendered by the faint hope that his program would be a success. He speculates wildly as to the fame and wealth that it would bring him, even while acknowledging to himself that it was too early to tell.

What Brad did mention is that he got a little note back from the department chair right away, saying, "Thanks for the email," and that they would take a look at it. On the same day that the Springfield *Chronicler* reported that the bodies of the missing linguistics department members had been found, Brad writes the final entry in the last volume of the journals:

Illustration by Ramzy Lakos

"March 17th

Did he really not think that dude was flirting with him? Is he really that naive? Or is he just defensive because of the way I accused him?

"Entre las formas que van hacia la sierpe
[…]
dejaré crecer mis cabellos"
— FGL

"The wackness is spreading like a plague"
— Guru

The scents are maddeningly bland. I pull air from my hand and smell the sweat
Its musk grows and I veer towards sanity

"n k'aba'a a'an Yack. xik kue sa' kuakax nin chal tz'ibitz patux", right?
I return to her letters and it's all unraveled.

if only... It isn't nearly real enough. It's not that simple. But maybe I will get out of town for a while"

It's tempting to try to read some sort of meaning into these messages that could connect them to his program, which was beginning its catastrophic work even as he was writing this, but the reality is that they don't tell us much at all. Reading this single page is representative of what it was like working with his journals as a whole—parsing masses of irrelevant personal content for slight clues, trying to calculate the truth from the probabilities of many unreliable statements. It's possible that Brad did get out of town, which might explain why he suddenly stopped journaling, but there are many other plausible reasons for this phenomenon, and none can be ruled out without further evidence. It was only a few days later that the last issue of the Springfield *Chronicler* was printed, and other media organizations began reporting the destruction of Brad's university, followed by many others. Brad does not appear again in any of these records, so we have no idea what happened to him after this date. Nor do we know the extent to which he was affected by his own creation, or if he or any of his contemporaries ever discovered his role.

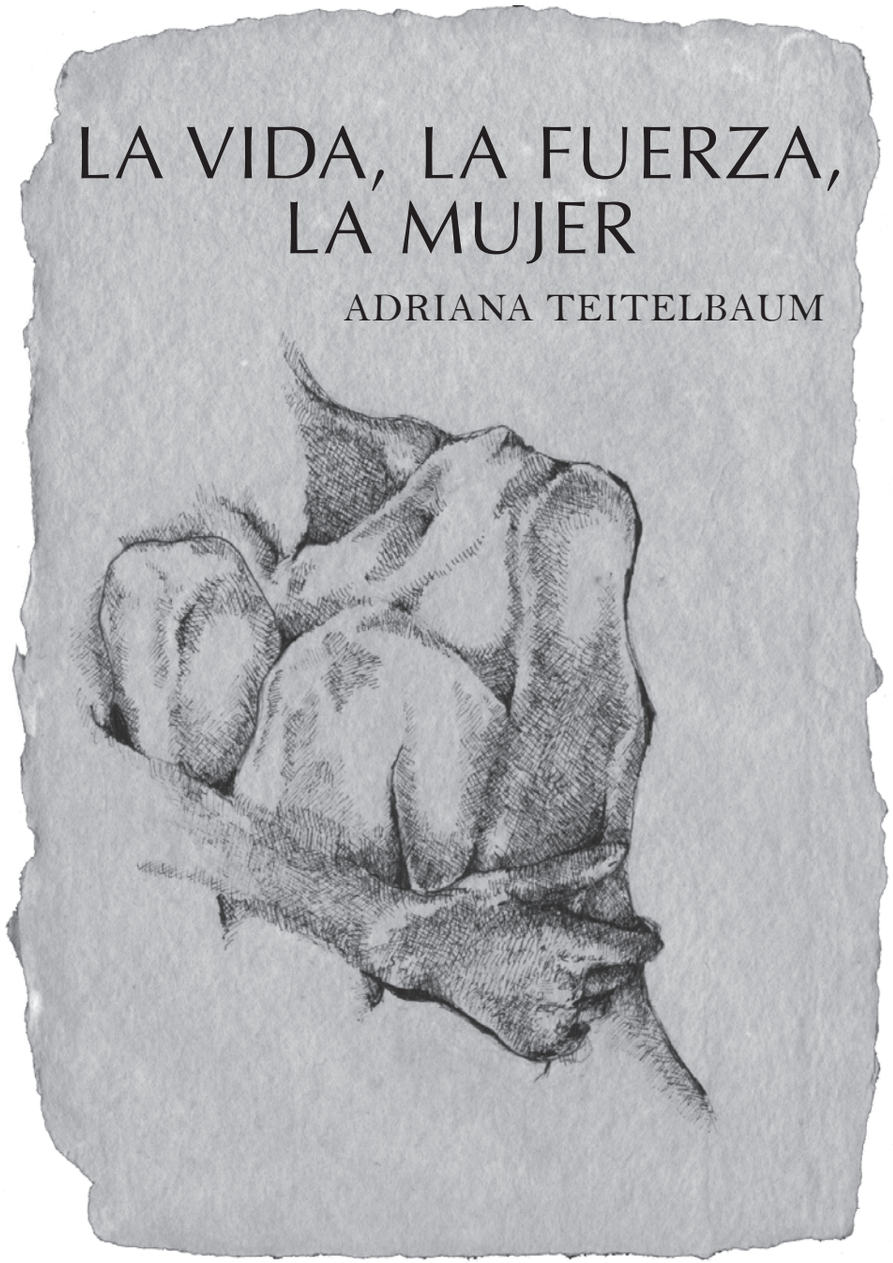
If we imagine the spread of the virus across a network of institutions responsible for the production of knowledge, then most of what we know about it comes from nodes in the network *just outside* of the portion of the network already affected. Unfortunately, some elements of the virus spread faster than the system's own ability to recognize it—for, as we all know, institutions of storytelling showed signs of the madness even as they reported on other institutions suffering from it. What's so frustrating about Brad's journals is that they're so close to the absolute center, and might be the first documents we've discovered related to the virus that were unaffected by it, but they don't show so much as an awareness that the virus existed. Their position in relation to our historical problem is a great tease, and although what we *have* been able to draw from them about his program is critically illuminating, they are ultimately a disappointment.

The monumental significance of the discovery of Brad's notebooks is matched only by the challenge of actually making sense of it. Most importantly, we now know for sure that The Event was caused by the work of a single human being. Folklore and popular fantasy will no doubt draw great meaning from this realization. But I am a historian—*we* are historians—and we must resist the temptation of speculation and sensationalism. Brad's importance is that he documented his life in a manner that survived the Great Information Destruction, and perhaps more miraculously, that the paper on which he wrote survived for over three hundred years.

Not long ago, human society reached a level of informational complexity that is daunting to conceive of. The proliferation of computers and the "Internet" that connected them enabled a vast production and sharing of knowledge, which at its onset was theoretically democratic in that almost any individual with a computer could produce information and share it with anybody. In the span of a few years, however, the sheer volume of information produced and shared made it impossible for the consumer of information to navigate it in any meaningful way. Thus arose institutions of several classes to assist the consumer in finding relevant information: one was the search engine, which directed the consumer to sites containing information it deemed useful based on a query by the user; another was the sites themselves, often maintained by the same groups of people that had controlled the distribution of printed knowledge before the computer era. These two classes worked in tandem to empower certain information and disempower the rest by its placement in highly trafficked sites.

It's interesting to consider what we can glean about Brad's program from his journals in the context of the informational structure he inhabited. His program read *everything*, including the information his society had sought to marginalize and effectively destroy. Perhaps humanity was not ready for the iterative power of the machine to deliver unto it everything it had tried to throw away. This would have fascinating implications for the nature of the relationship between dominant and oppressed literatures, implications I'm sure will be seized upon by socio-information theorists. I caution against this for now, for we can't confirm these ideas until we better understand the mechanism by which the virus worked.

Oral tradition tells us that our ancestors destroyed everything the victims of the virus ever wrote, or even touched—we thought we'd never see the symbols until we found Brad's journals. As far as we can tell, the small printout he kept wasn't enough to affect us, and we assume that it didn't affect him, so hopefully our institutions of knowledge will still be around when the next piece of the puzzle is unearthed. If not, I apologize for sharing this paper with you. Let us hope that our predecessors fully paid their debts, and that we may survive to continue the pursuit of our past and of the truth. •



The first book I remember my mother giving me was *The Secret Footprints* by Julia Alvarez. It was about Dominican folkloric creatures called *ciguapas*, mythical women who lived in underwater caves. They were said to look like ordinary women, except for their feet, which were turned backwards so that if humans found their footprints in the sand, they would not be able to follow their tracks. This simple triumph of evolution protected the *ciguapas* from what they feared most: people. The story follows a young *ciguapa* girl who becomes curious about these strangers, and eventually travels ashore to observe them up close. She is discovered by a boy and his family, who in turn surprise her with their kindness. However, when she parts from these people, she vows to never again come that close to their kind. In the end, she returns to the safety of living with her fellow *ciguapas* and to the serenity of her ocean home. As a child, I took this book everywhere with me, and every trip to the beach I would make sure to walk facing away from the water, in order to leave behind a trail of backwards footprints.

Julia Alvarez and her work followed me into my adolescence with her novel *In the Name of Salomé*, a biography about Salomé Ureña and her daughter Camila. Ureña was a Dominican poet who began publishing her work at seventeen in the late 1860s under the pseudonym Herminia. She was a bold activist who used her words and her voice as means of revolution. I first read this book, given to me by my mother, at seventeen years old during the week I was hospitalized for depression. I spent my time in Newark Beth Israel Hospital pouring over the pages, trying to remind myself of better women who had gotten through harder situations. Though Ureña had lived in a different place at a much different time, I still found I could understand her pain and her sadness. I found comfort not only in her accomplishments, but also in the way the world had shaped her ideals, her personality, and her overall identity. Her poetry fueled a fire of revolution against Spanish imperialism in the 1860s by preaching for social and political change. But beyond her historical significance, the legacy of her words continues to thrive with generations of Latinas who hold onto them.

Throughout history, women have repeatedly turned to writing as an act for social change. Fighting against patriarchal power structures, countless women have produced essays, poems, novels, and other forms of written revolution to make their voices and opinions heard. Specifically in Latin America, under a particular brand of sexist social codes commonly referred to as *machismo*, women have marked their place within the ever-present legacy of revolution. Not only have their words helped inspire meaningful progress, but they have also left a foundation from which future generations of women can grow, both personally and politically. Julia de Burgos, a twentieth-century Puerto Rican poet, was one of these trailblazers. Like Ureña, de Burgos' life in the Caribbean was marred by U.S. imperialism. They both witnessed the pain and injustice that spread rampantly across their homelands, fueled by economic and racial conflict, much of which was a direct result of *norteamericano* political intervention. Because of this, de Burgos was a fierce advocate for Puerto Rican independence. She was also a feminist, speaking out not only for women's rights, but also against rigid social expectations that women were told to follow to be considered *mujeres buenas*, and fit for marriage.

> *Yo soy la vida, la fuerza, la mujer…*
> I am life, strength, woman…

In her poem, "A Julia de Burgos," de Burgos writes about a personal dichotomy—being torn between the person she is and the woman she is expected to be. De Burgos confronts the two Julias that exist, and makes the brave claim that she is life, she is strength, and she can be these things *because* she is a woman, rather than in spite of it. With this statement, she makes it

clear that it is not her womanhood that is a setback, but rather the way the world treats women. *Yo soy la vida, la fuerza, la mujer.* I first read these words in passing at the age of fifteen, sitting in the back of an almost exclusively *gringo* classroom, eyes glued to the clock. In the moment, I thought of nothing more than waiting for the bell to ring. But later on, I found myself constantly returning to her words. *Yo soy la vida, la fuerza, la mujer.* And it wasn't just the words themselves I thought of. I found myself obsessing over the moment she wrote them—what time of day it was, where she was, what she was thinking. Y*o soy la vida, la fuerza, la mujer.* Was it in the dry heat of early summer or the wet humidity of a fall hurricane season? Could she hear the sound of *coquis* chirping in the trees, could she see the mountains of San Lorenzo where my mom had grown up? Trying to get myself through the cold New Jersey winter, I couldn't help but repeat the words *la vida, la fuerza, la mujer,* finding comfort in the mere fact that they existed, and that they came from a place I felt so connected to.

In the late forties, Julia de Burgos moved to New York. Historically, the city has served as a hub for Puerto Rican migrants searching for economic opportunity. In 1917—nineteen years after the U.S. annexed Puerto Rico—its people were granted U.S. citizenship, which allowed them to move to the continental U.S. without the legal obstacles that had previously existed. This began a wave of migration that has resulted in a population of Puerto Ricans in the States that is larger than the one on the island. In the eighties, at the age of eighteen, my mother was one of these migrants, leaving San Lorenzo and coming to New York to get her degree. Working as a secretary in order to pay for school, she fought against racism, sexism, and classism on a day-to-day basis. Nonetheless, by the mid-nineties, she had earned both a Bachelor's and Master's degree on the same streets where Julia de Burgos had died alone in 1953. My mother, in turn, had two daughters, and raised us on the stories and legacies of great Latinas who came before us.

Yo mis cantares lancé a los vientos,
yo di a las brisas mi inspiración;
tu amor grandeza dio a mis acentos:
fine fueron tuyos mis pensamientos
en esos himnos del corazón.

I sang my songs to the winds,
I gave the breeze my inspiration;
your great love gave to my accents:
fine were my thoughts
in those hymns of the heart.

In this poem, Salomé Ureña professes her unconditional love and gratitude for her mother. Among her poems of freedom and revolution, she writes of this crucial relationship not as an outlier, but rather as an important part of her literary and political career. All of the lessons, experiences, and wisdom she learned and inherited from her mother became the foundation of who she was. And although the impact of maternal relationships is something that transcends cultural boundaries, the legacy of oppression that Latinas have historically faced creates a unique kinship among Latina women, which is first experienced for many in their relationships with their mothers.

This phenomenon also transcends familial ties. I have found these relationships in academia, in professional settings, and among strangers and familiar faces alike. I found it with the nurse who would sneak *tostones* into my hospital room, and with the kind old woman in Port Authority asking me, *"¿Sí pasa el camión 66 por aquí?"* These types of relationships are precisely where political and personal revolution meet. The passing of information, inspiration,

LITERARY FARE / TEITELBAUM

Images by Anya Katz

or a simple gesture on a real, observable level is the intersection between social progress and individual growth. Growing up in the U.S., reconciling one's own *latinidad* against the reality of *estadounidense* surroundings is a lifelong battle. But being able to turn to other women who have come from similar backgrounds, who have experienced similar paths and understand where you're coming from is more than helpful: It is crucial as a means for survival.

Nonetheless, these connections are not always so easy to find. In certain circumstances, they may seem almost impossible to come across. It is in these situations where I have turned to the written word to try to overcome that seemingly insurmountable loneliness, and it is in these poems and narratives that I have found a feeling of home. This is what makes *latinidad* so inherently transnational—the act of looking for connections to your identity that come from miles away. I understood the term transnational before I had ever heard of it. Growing up as a Latinx person in white America is a manifestation of the concept. By this I mean that if you identify as Latinx, one of the first things you will remember is feeling different. You'll come to realize that there are things in your life that, despite seeming so normal, don't match up with the world around you.

The concept of transnationalism goes hand in hand with Latinx identity. Since the beginning of European colonization, what is now known as Latin America has been abused by foreign powers. Ingrained in its past is the slaughter of natives and the enslavement of African people. Through the rest of Latin America's existence and to this day, Europe and the United States have economically and politically oppressed Latin American land. Its transnational history begins with the genocide and forced migration of people of color, and continues with the interference of Western powers. This complex history has connected a wide variety of people and cultures, resulting in an ethno-racial identity that spans across nations. And this identity, which is interwoven with a plethora of different languages and histories, is impossible to pinpoint to a singular place or time. While there are overlapping themes and trends that follow *latinidad,* age, gender identity, race, and place of residence also impact the way it has manifested in different people's lives.

This is why music, literature, and other cultural phenomena are so important in the exploration of identity for Latinx people and communities—especially for women. Literature has long been an essential tool in the spreading of revolutionary ideas; it is only natural that Latina women have found their voices through their writing. While part of this is in service of larger political movements, there is also a deeper level to their words. Their literature serves as a basis for different generations of Latinas, a structure from which we can continue to build and grow—whether they help inspire political figures like Sonia Sotomayor or allow teenage girls growing up in white America to find a place for themselves.

Even now, I find that I am constantly searching for myself in the words of others. In the middle of writing this piece while back home for fall break, I trudged through the mess of my attic and stumbled upon a book of poems by Lorna Dee Cervantes titled Emplumada. Cervantes is a Chicana feminist and poet who writes about her childhood and femininity growing up as a Latina in the United States. Sitting in the Newark airport, I read her poem "Freeway 280," where she writes,

> Maybe it's here
> *en los campos extraños de esta ciudad*
> where I'll find it, that part of me
> mown under
> like a corpse
> or a loose seed.

While going through Cervantes' work and reading her words about feeling out of place, misunderstanding her own identity, and searching for a part of herself that had been "mown under like a corpse," I was reminded that I have not reached some grand conclusion about myself and my identity. That despite all of my searching, I would never shake off the feeling "that this is not my land and this is my land," and that I would be constantly reading, listening, and watching for things that represent who I am and where I come from. Like the young *ciguapa* girl I read about as a child, I would always find comfort in people and spaces I understood, and that understood me in return.

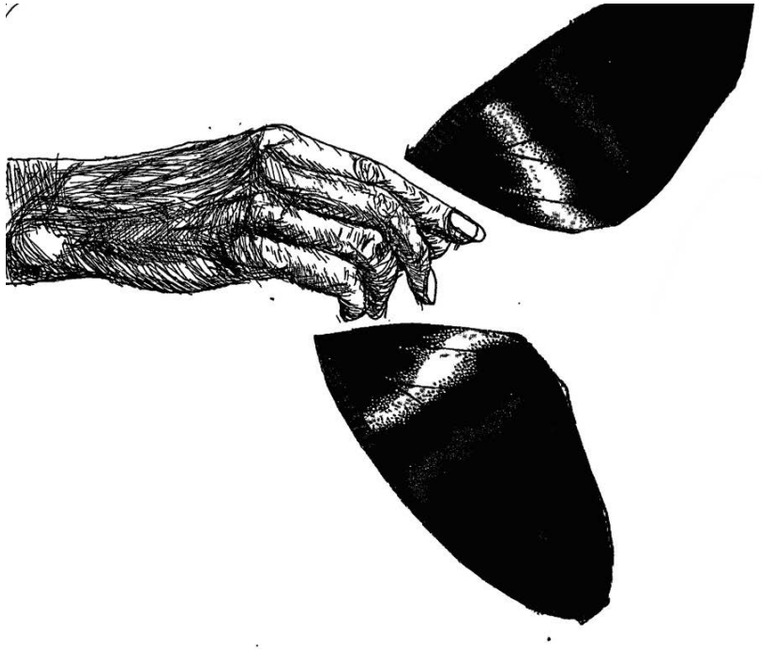
Today, I am sitting in the back of the library, finding myself caught in a moment of deja vu, as I am in another academic setting surrounded by (mostly) white peers. Only instead of reading Julia de Burgos, I am armed with my copy of Emplumada. I am stuck on a line of a piece titled, "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, An Intelligent, Well-Read Person, Could Believe in the War Between the Races." It's on the second page of the poem, highlighted by a previous owner, perhaps my mother, or whoever had it before her.

> Let me show you my wounds: my stumbling mind, my
> "excuse me" tongue, and this
> nagging preoccupation
> with the feeling of not being good enough.

It's the *"excuse me" tongue* and that *feeling of not being good enough* that I can't seem to move past, the always apologizing for one's own inability to live up to perceived expectations. That feeling of being too Latina, and yet not Latina enough. The feeling of growing up in a place that does not feel like home. It's not just the relatability of this line that draws me in, but the fact that sometime in the mid-seventies, in San Jose, California, a place I've never been, Lorna Dee Cervantes expressed emotion so akin to my own experience 40 years later. And there is something about that fact that feels revolutionary. It's the type of revolution that manifests not in strikes or protests, but in connections between people of a similar background. The type that, to me, is a fundamental characteristic of *latinidad*:

> We were a woman family:
> Grandma, our innocent Queen;
> Mama, the Swift Knight, Fearless Warrior. …
> Myself: I could never decide.
> So I turned to books, those staunch, upright men.
> I became Scribe…

As a child I loved to read. When my family and I visited my grandparents in Puerto Rico, my sister and I would spend hours outside, our noses buried in books. My *abuela* would step out of the house in a long linen dress and her *chanclas* and watch as we sat beneath the trees and on the patio, absorbed in our reading. She'd smile and feed us *pastelillos and piraguas*, and say something about the *orgullo* she felt for her *nietas inteligentes*. My memories of this are dreamlike: the symphony of smell in the air and the sounds of the wind and my *abuela's* voice in harmony among them. •



Print by Julia Deen

CHLOE LIKED OLIVIA

LITERARY MUSES IN FEMALE FRIENDSHIP

LEAH COHEN

Act I: In which I sit in various places and write about Virginia Woolf and Margaret Atwood and think about my friend Thea. Mostly in my carrel in the library, on the second floor.

In *A Room of One's Own*, during Virginia Woolf's fictional speech on the subject of "women and literature" for the graduation ceremony of a women's college in 1929, her narrator tells her audience about her surprise at reading the debut novel of a woman named Mary Carmichael. It read to her as a fairly standard novel until she encountered the sentence: "Chloe liked Olivia." The sentence stopped her in her tracks, because "it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature."

When women are depicted in novels, Woolf's narrator reasons, it's in their relation to men. For an author to so boldly and plainly admit that one woman likes another is to shatter the structure of the marriage-plotted novel, which insists that male-female interdependence is everything. "If Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it," she urges, "she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody yet has been"—the territory of female friendships.

In the last seven years or so, there has been a flood of novels about dyadic female friendship. Most fabulously, there is Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels*, a four-volume epic about two women, Elena and Lila, who grow up together in a ghetto in Naples, competing and collaborating in their efforts to escape the limitations of their circumstances and make their lives meaningful. Ferrante's books are the most ambitious, soaring, and internationally acclaimed of these literary female friendship novels, but beyond them there's a long list of books published just since 2010. *How Should a Person Be?* by Sheila Heti is an experimental "novel from life" that interjects letters and play-scripts to tell the story of Sheila and Margaux, two middle-class artists living in Toronto, embedded in friendship and struggling with the meaning of art and life. Then there's Zadie Smith's most recent novel, *Swing Time*, in which the unnamed narrator tracks several of her relationships, including the one with her childhood best friend, Tracey, whose seemingly inborn ability to dance inflames the narrator in envy. And just this summer, two books came out about teenage-girl friends, *Marlena* by Julie Buntin and *The Burning Girl* by Claire Messud. There are also novels by Sally Rooney, Dana Spionotta, Emily Gould, and others, but you can't read everything, and I haven't.

This isn't the first time that female friendship has been in literary vogue. In 1986, Margaret Atwood declared that, "Despite their late blooming, women's friendships are now firmly on the literary map as valid and multidimensional novelistic material." But this recent flare-up of the subject in the literary zeitgeist has its unique qualities, most obviously that many of the books feel umbilically linked to Ferrante. Or at least, critics see the link—every review of a female-friendship novel seems anxious to pull it into conversation with Ferrante's monolith. It makes sense to make these connections, and I think that if, like good critics, we look at what these books have in common with each other, we might learn a few things.

Act II: In which I don't know how to write the essay. Takes place a little bit in the library, while walking between classes, but mostly in a single night in my bedroom.

Take the sentence: *If we look at what these books have in common with each other, we might learn a few things.* It's deceivingly straightforward, and yet I don't know what kind of sentence should follow it. If we line these books up next to each other and point out their similarities and differences, we might learn a few things. But what kind of things? We might learn something about the structure and properties of female friendship. But the friendships represented in these novels can't be typical of the kind of friendships

most women experience; they must have to be extraordinarily dramatic or interesting, in order to make it into fiction. These have nothing to do with the day-to-day banality of actual friendship between real women, or between anyone (including between myself and Thea: Remember that, Leah).

We might learn a few things about why female friendship lends itself to drama, or the conveying of a certain kind of emotion—love, investment, anger. Or maybe, we might learn about what element, when alchemically combined with female friendship, produces a good story, a story worth reading, and writing about. Now we're getting somewhere.

So what are the elements? Art is one; a lot of these friendships are mediated by it—writing, animation, dancing, painting. Elena's a writer, Sheila's a playwright, Tracey dances. The centrality of art in these narratives is important, because it signals the ascendency of the character of the 'female artist,' and adds layers of psychic complexity to these stories.

Another consistent element in these novels is their reliance on the frame of the narrator-as-writer. In Ferrante's first book, *My Brilliant Friend*, Elena sits down to write the story of her friendship with Lila after her friend disappears without a trace in her sixties. Opening her computer, Elena tells us: "We'll see who wins this time… I turned on the computer and began to write—all the details of our story, everything that still remained in my memory."

The story the fictional Elena (who shares a name with the author) "writes" will go on to span four volumes, over 1200 pages, and 60-some years, and will include a narration of Elena writing another novel (much slimmer than these, only 80 pages) about the friendship in question.

And *How Should a Person Be?* plays a similar trick—near the end of the book, Sheila reports that after she went into her studio to throw around all the "trash and shit" inside of her, "slowly the castle began to emerge;" the castle being the book we're reading. It isn't the first time the book turns in on itself—throughout the novel, Sheila's been recording her conversations with Margaux and transcribing some of them for the reader. Sheila has a huge, climactic fight with her friend after she writes their conversations into a short story—an aestheticization of Margaux's private life that drives her friend into a self-conscious rage. And there's the fact that the novel itself blurs the line between fact and fiction—the main character, Sheila, shares the first name of the author, who really does have a friend named Margaux, and many of the conversations in the novel are transcriptions from real conversations (Heti's calling it "a novel from life" prompts the genuine question, what other place do novels come from?)

In *Swing Time*, too, the unnamed narrator consistently refers to the fact that she's writing—the second chapter begins with the resolute, "I want to describe the church now, and Miss Isabel," which she does. Similarly to Elena's admission that the story isn't "true" as such, but just made of "everything that still remained in my memory," Smith's narrator motions to her own unreliability. In one snowy scene, she meets her half siblings, and ends the chapter by recounting her telling of the story to her mother, years later: "Maybe I never got out of this habit of elaboration. Twenty years later over a difficult lunch I revisited the story of my ghostly siblings with my mother, who sighed, lit a cigarette and said: 'Trust you to add snow.'"

Trust you to add snow, along with a Chekhovian gun—as his narrative logic goes, if a gun appears in the first act, by the third it will go off. The first time Cat meets Marlena, her own version of Lila/Tracey in *Marlena*, her friend's drug addiction appears in the form of a pillbox around her neck. By the end of the novel, because of the pills, she's dead. But the story isn't about her death, it's about Cat telling the story of it: When Cat goes to college after the fact, she learns about principles of storytelling, and grafts them onto her mission to make sense of her past. "In a college English course, I learned Aristotle's rule for story endings… How had I tricked myself into thinking that the murderer chasing us from the opening paragraph wouldn't wind up killing someone at the end?" she wonders, referring to

Marlena's drug addiction. This is the intelligence of *Marlena:* Cat knows how to tell a good story, and she could have told it straight, without flashing forward to her present and without weighing in from the sidelines, but she doesn't, because the story is about Cat's processing of her own trauma, which she's doing the way she's been taught—by examining her life as a story, searching for the promised catharsis. She's interested in how storytelling is supposed to work because she thinks it will help her heal, and live her life more wisely (a doomed mission, ultimately; Elena Ferrante's character tells us wisely that, "unlike stories, real life, when passed, tends towards obscurity, not clarity.")

This fascination with dramatic principles is also present in *The Burning Girl*, which is a slog to read—it's written mostly in summary and the voice is gratingly self-serious, immaturely epiphanic—but thematically kind of interesting. The simple story is that Julia and Cassie are friends, and in high school Cassie's home life becomes increasingly hostile, to the point where she runs away and spends a night sleeping in an abandoned asylum outside of town. It's an asylum the girls found as children and used to play in, and it's Julia who eventually finds Cassie there, so sensitive is she to the foreshadowing in their intertwined life story. Julia is mystified by her almost psychic connection to Cassie and her ability to sense where she's hiding, and near the end of the book she protests that she's not just some teacher whose friend got really depressed, but a girl with an ability to "know stories, how they unfold, and people, how they are."

There's a lot of attention paid in the end of the novel to how and why stories are told, and Julia has what's essentially a twenty-page revelation about how bad storytelling simplifies reality and keeps us stupid. She's interested in how other people tell the story of Cassie, and everything they miss. She's interested in how she and her boyfriend begin to speak and behave like TV characters, saying and doing the things they think people are supposed to in relationships. And while all of this teenage-voiced scrutiny gets exhausting, there is something really interesting about what Claire Messud's doing with Julia's sense of how stories are supposed to unfold, especially in the context of other contemporary novels about female friendship. Unlike *Marlena's* narrator, who's caught unprepared because she fails to understand how stories work and gets run over by the juggernaut of narrative motion, Julia in *The Burning Girl* escapes this fate by naming her world for what it is: A story. She's not writing it, as are Ferrante and Heti and Smith's narrators, but in a *Stranger-Than-Fiction* way she knows it's being written, and in a sprint to beat the house (the house in this case being Messud, her author-creator), she outpaces the narrative momentum of the story, where her friend is supposed to die in the very asylum where they secured their friendship, and at the last minute, saves her.

Novels that turn in on themselves, novels that turn themselves inside out… what does all of this have to do with the organizing principle, which is friendship between women? These novels do channel each other in an endless chain of repetitions, so there's a hall-of mirrors effect when you read them in quick succession, as I did. In *Swing Time*, Smith's narrator even has a *Burning-Girl* moment, lamenting the dramatic principle-infused way that people around her talk about her friend: "The way they began to speak of Tracey took on a tragic dimension, or isn't it only tragic heroes who have no choices before them, no alternative routes, only unavoidable fates?" I don't think these similarities are a coincidence. I think it has something to do with postmodernism, sure, and the self-conscious way that we're conditioned to tell stories, but I think it also has something to do with what it means to write about women right now—the considerations that have to be made when you want to turn a woman you're intimately connected to, existentially entangled with, into art; especially when she's no longer around to ask for permission.

Act III: In which I argue with my roommate about how to write this essay. Takes place in Wilder Bowl, but also in some small part of my mind reserved for intense, dramatic, and self-pitying memories of my friendship with Thea.

Me [noticing Claire is in shorts]: Claire! Aren't you cold?

Claire: Hey! Not really, not if I keep moving. [Moves to keep moving.]

Me: Claire, wait. Can I get your advice? I'm having some problems with this essay.

Claire: What essay?

Me: This essay about female friendship in literature.

Claire: Oh right. The one you mentioned last week and then got really quiet about when I asked you more questions about it and then told me I wasn't allowed to talk to you about it ever again.

Me: Exactly. I've been interested in it for two years, since I first read Elena Ferrante. I'm obsessed with it. But now that I try to write about it, I'm having all these methodological problems. I don't know what to say about these books. How do I know they could be important to other people? They're important to me. That's all I know.

Claire: So say that, maybe?

Me: No, no. That's boring. What would I say, when I was in high school I met this girl Thea and I was obsessed with her and the obsession ruined my life until I read Elena Ferrante's books and finally could see my own experience reflected and was comforted by the recognition and also eased by reading them, because I was able to watch Elena's reverence of Lila gradually diminish to the point where the premise of her total sublimity is abandoned by the end of the last book and I could recognize that Elena was an unreliable narrator and that helped me feel much better in the end about everything because it showed me that I wouldn't gain access to some sort of transcendence by holding onto my idealization of my old friend?

Claire: I don't think that's boring at all. That's auto-theory. I love reading that.

Me: I'm sick of auto-theory! Everyone wants to write it. I just want this piece to be about ideas, not my life. Auto-theory can be so narcissistic!

Claire: But look, now you're really animated. What if you made this, like, part of it? Like, figuring out how to write the essay, what you did and didn't want it to be?

Me: But the problem with this is that it's so about my feelings. And are my feelings really interesting to anyone besides me? Would anyone care if I just said, look, Elena Ferrante is my favorite author because she made me feel better. Because everyone always asks me if I was in love with Thea, romantic love, and I used to just say no, it wasn't like that, but then the Ferrante books came out and I could point them and say, in fact, it was like *this*. You follow me?

Act IV: In which the castle emerges.

How about this for a conclusion: I don't think it's a coincidence that so many of these explicitly self-reflexive novels take female friendship as their terrain. In this way, the books play with the autobiographical imperative for women artists—the expectation that they will make art about their own lives, and the conflating of their characters with their actual persons. Interestingly, Elena Ferrante's books were often discussed alongside Karl Ove Knausgaard's six-volume autobiography, based on the assumption that Ferrante's series was autobiographical. (Elena Ferrante is a pen name, and at the time that she was writing the series, nobody knew who she was; her identity has since been rudely revealed, and her life has little to do with the novels. She's not even from Naples.) But in some cases, the expectation is fulfilled: Sheila Heti's book takes much of its content from her personal life, and Julie Buntin really did have a friend who died from an overdose as a teenager.

Not all of the books are inspired by true events, but to the extent that they mimic autobiography, they comment on a prejudice that women write out of emotional need, to soothe their own feelings, that their writing is somehow vindictively subjective. Is this, then, a way of getting ahead of the perception of women by creating a Russian nesting doll of narrative—which layer am I hidden in? Or is it an obsession with the act of narrative construction, an obsession so deep that the story wouldn't feel complete without its inclusion—maybe these books are just typically postmodern. After all, there's a Woolfian element in them. In *A Room Of One's Own*, Chloe and Olivia are fictionalized twice over—they're characters who live inside a story that Woolf's narrator read in Woolf's story. And there's a distance that this layering creates, almost a privacy; I come away knowing very little about Chloe and Olivia, and having no access to the story, because Woolf's narrator has only excerpted it for me (really, excerpted it for her audience—here I am almost a century later, overhearing).

This distance, this shielding, is also present in these contemporary novels. We never see what Sheila makes of her conversations with Margaux in *How Should a Person Be?*—the text that makes Margaux so angry and confused that she paints a self-immolating picture of herself and hangs it in a gallery for Sheila to see. We never see the slim novel that Elena writes about Lila against Lila's wishes in *The Neapolitan Novels*. She outlines it, but we never find out how she condenses the 1200-page story of their friendship into 80 pages: what she leaves out; what details and characterizations she finds most important; how she bends the obscurity of real life back towards clarity. We don't get to see the actual fruits of these women's aestheticization of their friends, and so we're shut out of a vital part of the relationship. Why is that?

Maybe it's as simple as when Julia says in *The Burning Girl* that she's going to grant Cassie some privacy by not sharing the story with anyone in their town: "I thought it was the one gift of friendship I could give Cassie… to keep to myself the story I knew, or thought I knew." It's paradoxical that within the layers of soul-searching and confession that some secrets might remain hidden, some boxes unopened, but there it is: In all of these stories, the intimacy of a friendship between women is represented by the self-conscious crafting of a story, and then the deliberate frittering away of information.

It must be tempting for these narrators to show everything, especially when they see themselves in a saviour position to their friend, a dynamic especially present in Ferrante and Smith. After 50 years of anticipating a final, conclusive competition with her best friend in *The Neapolitan Novels,* Elena says, "I took it for granted that there was not and never would be a manuscript of Lila's… something that reassured me and yet truly upset me. I loved Lila. I wanted her to last. But I wanted it to be I who made her last. I thought it was my task. I was convinced that she herself, as a girl, had assigned it to me." Smith's narrator in *Swing Time* has

a similar reflection when she visits Tracey in her apartment, after her old friend has given up dancing: "There is no case I can make to change the fact that I was her only witness, the only person who knows all that she has in her, all that's been ignored and wasted, and yet I still left her back there, in the ranks of the unwitnessed, where you have to scream to get heard." In both of these situations, the narrator feels a duty, perhaps irrationally, to amplify her friend, even after she's spent the length of the novel competing with her. And in both of these cases, there's a sense of ownership that emerges: *This wonderful woman should be known to the world, but I'm the one who should announce her.*

In these novels about female friendship, the drama is as much in the contemporary telling as it was in the past-experiencing, and maybe this tension is implicitly involved in writing about friendship between creative women. An ethical narrator doesn't want to exoticize or fetishize their friend, expose them to the light in a way that will burn them, and yet they want to tell a good story. Women know what it feels like to have their images exploited, and yet exploiting the images of their friends to make good art is tempting, especially when within the art world, it's permitted.

So in the context of a long tradition of male artists exploiting women in order to make art, a tradition of a scale that we're really just beginning to get a handle on, I can't help but think about these books as representations of women looking at women, in mostly platonic, though sometimes sexually tinged situations, and taking into account ethical as well as aesthetic concerns involved in using their images for artistic production. So while all of these narrators are telling their stories ultimately for themselves, for their own ability to understand the past and heal from it, they have some sense that you have to get there without over-simplifying your friend, or demonizing her, or idealizing her—that has to be part of the conversation. But that's not to say these models demonstrate ethical behavior in the end—all of these books (with the exception of *The Burning Girl)* are stories of the narrator somehow betraying her friend. In a review of *Marlena* for *The Atlantic*, Sophie Gilbert calls many of these female friendship novels "Bildungsromans where one young woman comes of age, but at a profound cost to another."

In a dazzling paragraph in *Marlena* about how incredible it is to go on a friend-date with a woman (the only paragraph, honestly, that you need to read from the book), Cat explains that "I begin to see the outline of the best friend, the girl she shaped herself around, according to. For so many women, the process of becoming requires two." But what if that becoming is parasitic? In her 1986 essay, Atwood noticed a similar theme of competitive flare-ups between women friends, pointing out that "the treatment runs the gamut, from selfless idealism to pointy-toothed ego-devouring." The literary moment she drew attention to in the eighties helped establish the problematics of female friendship—the selfless as well as selfish behavior that takes place within its parameters. And while the ends may remain the same—coming of age at profound cost to another, that is, or in some cases being selfless—the means seem to have changed. Now that these novels are narrated by women artists, who are devoted to aesthetic questions, the process of tearing down or building up their friend is accomplished through storytelling. These existential entanglements are ultimately facilitated by a mutual love of storytelling and language, elements which, when mixed with female friendship, produce a story aimed towards transcendence. In one elegantly simple passage in the *Neapolitan Novels*, Elena remembers, "Those moments lighted my heart and my head: she and I and all those well-crafted words."

At what cost to Thea have I come of age through her image? She was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. I was platonically infatuated, addicted to her way of being, her way of speaking. I was devoted to her mind, convinced that if I hitched mine to hers that we could fly together, that it was the only way I could hope to touch off the earth. I thought it could be just me and her. She and I and all those well-crafted words, I must have been thinking. All of this allowed me to ignore or glamorize the fact that she was and is very sick, and in need of help and healing. All of this meant that I encouraged her incoherence, aestheticized it, worshipped it. "My thoughts are like rocks and I want them to be water!" She once exclaimed to me. This is poetry, I thought, without stopping to think about, to hold, the pain that she was in.

What I wanted to say to Thea the first time she left me to go back to her country was, "You saved me." I'm not sure what exactly I thought was the problem before I met her—most likely, boredom. But when our friendship started going badly, when big silence moved in and I thought she no longer loved me, it was Elena Ferrante's books that saved me, or at least stabilized me. But now it's been too long and I miss her. Now it's time to go looking for her again, my brilliant friend Thea. •

Photographs by Annie Fidoten

Images by Emily Rogers

VISU AL PROCESSES

Image by Maxwell Van Cooper

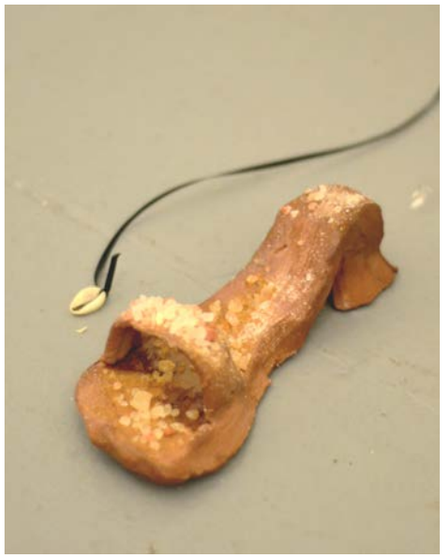
ZENOBIA MARDER

Bridget Conway: Can you give a statement of your work—what you're trying to achieve this semester? How has your work shifted in the past few years to get to the point it is at now?

Zenobia Marder: At this point, I'm a mixed media artist who began with a focus on film photography. My work took a radical shift after spending a semester abroad in South Africa, where my school shut down due to student protest action. I had an internship at a gallery, where I curated performance art pieces and worked with a lot of people in fashion photography in South Africa. I was also really inspired by the work I saw that was being produced in South Africa, and the way people were aesthetically presenting themselves. Then when I got back last semester, I was in a mixed media class taught by Pipo [Nguyen-Duy] and we had a project on identity. I had been really obsessed with these plastic bags that I saw a lot in South Africa. They're called Ghana Must Go bags [seen left], and they're basically used in communities of color all around the world, primarily in Africa and China (they can also be called China bags) as utilitarian storage. In Nigeria [during] the eighties, there was a huge forced migration of Ghanaian immigrants, and they all had to leave the country almost immediately. There's this famous photo of them all waiting for boats at the border of Nigeria with hundreds of these plastic bags, because they were the easiest, weirdly stylish, utilitarian way to store all their belongings quickly. I'm Chinese and Jamaican of African descent, so this material tied into the project. So, that's where my obsession with specific materials began, and I shifted toward exploring my work through mixed media, rather than just what I see in my surroundings or a narrative I could come up with through a photo.

BC: What goes through your mind when choosing the materials you use for your mixed media pieces? What are some examples of materials that mean a lot to you and your work?

ZM: I realized that crafting with specific materials based on what they mean to me, as well as the meaning embedded in the material, could transform and really elevate my work. When we had a piece on identity [in Pipo's class],



I made this cape that hung all the way from the ceiling to the floor all made out of these Ghana Must Go bags. It also had other items related to my identity, like a yam coated in resin, covered with a root that's used to cure alcoholism in China, and stuff like that. I also started making quilts: I got really into sewing and its process. I've always been really interested in fashion and specifically the way Black fashion is realized in both the Americas and in Africa; so this semester, I'm working on the larger project of examining garments as an object of resistance and a kind of weapon in the diaspora. In using certain materials, I'm thinking about aesthetics as a weapon and Black aesthetics as a weapon, and Black performance of wealth—and what that means in a colonial perspective. In addition to my quilts and fabric pieces, I'm working on things like sculptures in materials that are important to me, like terra cotta [seen above]. I'm using a lot of salt—putting salt on clay, soaking objects in salt, putting salt on garments—because of its healing properties, but also because of a Jamaican saying, "sucking salt," which functions as a way to signify pacifying oppression. I'm also using a lot of synthetic hair: One of the pieces I have up in the Fischer Gallery right now is a corset shirt made out of synthetic hair, as well as some other objects that go along with it [seen right]. Fashion, sculpture, mixed media pieces, installation—specifically the way I place objects in a room and a few found objects are really important. I'm obsessed with extracting meanings out of materials, and complicating those meanings in my work.

BC: How do you want viewers of your work to feel, especially in these large, immersive installations?

ZM: I want viewers of my work to be attracted by a certain beauty, but I also want my work to make viewers uncomfortable. Fascinated—but confused. For example, when people see this collage of cowry shells and denim [seen right] finished, it will be scary. It's so overwhelming: the amount of shells on the piece, and the monotonous pattern, and the way it will look like a seascape in the end. This is another piece where materials are really important—the cowry shells I'm attaching to the collage were used for European traders to buy slaves in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It was this luxury item that was used as African currency that the European traders thought was completely ridiculous, but exchanged for human lives. Cowry shells also grow on organic matter in the ocean: including dead human flesh. If

the Europeans killed one of their slaves or one of their slaves died, they would cut up their limbs, toss them in the ocean, and shells would grow on the bodies, and the Europeans would buy more slaves. If I'm using these objects that are so encoded with meanings, I have to be aware that not all my viewers are going to associate these meanings with the materials; so how do I incorporate encoding or text into my work, to draw my viewers to the experience of the work I want them to have?

BC: You've written before about your work containing juxtapositions between organic and artificial materials. How is that present in the work you've been making this semester?

ZM: That was one of the things I was focused on in my earlier work, and since then I've really sharpened my focus and become finalized in my approach, but I am [still] interested in that. For instance, I'm [currently] making pieces out of synthetic hair. At first that hair appears to be organic, but if you go closer, you might realize it's not, or you might think it's totally organic and I'm making this piece out of organic material. In reality, it's actually synthetic Kanekalon hair, which I, and many other African American, Caribbean, or African women, wear on their hair to cover up their actual hair to look nice and presentable—and still, to a certain extent, [to] have these long, straight tresses that adhere to European standards of beauty. If I'm going to use these juxtapositions between the organic and the artificial, I want it to be subtle. I'm creating these shorts, and the fringe on them is inner tubes from bikes, and the big piece of material on the side looks like skin, but is actually plastic latex. I also want to create a cape made out of the same latex, where it looks like it's made out of flesh… Even this quilt is more performative. In making this quilt [seen above], I chose that color of the red mulch because I really loved how organic it looked, kind of like blood, but it's actually just plastic. Then I printed the image onto plastic, which I etched onto this quilt, which is made out of leather, a more organic material. I feel like I might not always be aware [of] when I'm approaching these juxtapositions, but they still exist in the work and push my argument forward. •

Drawing by Martina Hildreth

CAMILLE KLEIN

Julia Friend: So what have you been working on?

Camille Klein: Right now, I've been working on painting a lot as a conscious move into that medium. I haven't done a lot of painting in the past, but these two pieces are definitely me getting into the headspace of using paint, whereas normally, I use a lot of different materials.

JF: [Your past work is] very three-dimensional, so why the move towards two-dimensional?

CK: I don't know—these two, I like them lying next to the other and viewed as a textile piece—I have ideas that aren't just flat. This one [car] is actually a sculpture—it has this rounded belly here… So it's two-sided, and I want it to stand as a show piece on the ground rather than a wall so it can be [seen in] 360 [degrees]. So this is really more of a sculpture. It's filled with salt, actually. I don't know how to predict this, but it's starting to oxidize.

JF: How did you come up with that?

CK: Well, I made the canvas first, and it was honestly just because I had too much canvas… so it doubled over [and I thought] well, I'll just make a bag. And then I was interested in experimenting with the bag thing, and I didn't know whether to fill it first, and then have the paint be in conversation with the texture, or add texture to this more established narrative going on. Which is what I preferred. So as I was painting it, I liked the idea of salt. It has campy connotations, like salting—like salting the road. But also salt is a preservative, which I was interested in when thinking about trying to preserve that object.

JF: So it has a lot of valences to it. How does that fit into your other painting or what else you're working on?

CK: The approach is the same in its surface quality and cartoony aspects. That I do more in sketchbooks—I haven't actually painted with such recognizable symbols [before]. They're connected because I'm doing this exploration through shapes—that's kind of the way my practice works: starting from one shape, and building that outward, and once I have this one idea, so many more come. […] But all these things realize ideas of protection, and weaponry, and this idea of time which I've been thinking about a lot more lately.

JF: You've made comments about [producing work that is more engaged with material than personal identity.] What does this mean for you when you're creating?

CK: That's something that's been shifting back and forth. But definitely when I first started making art in high school, I [created] from a very personal place, and it was sort of like a diary process—where I was exploring, but it always had to come back to me and trying to represent an experience of mine. Then that became really hard, and I also thought that it [was] pretty stupid. I started thinking more about material—and like, everyone is interested in material so that's not a new thing. But it just kind of freed me to think about what was happening in this blank territory where I'm just using my own body and the things I have at hand to build a narrative separate from myself. That helped a lot, and then when I have been interested in using more personal meanings or symbols, I'm weaving that into a general approach.

JF: So these are very narrative pieces, too?

CK: Yeah. I think they're kind of soupy though. […] It sucks because I have a clipboard, and I'm like, hiding it and watching people try to figure it out, and I don't want to do that. But I also do like having a secret, and it's interesting for me to have the audience make their own interpretation. But I am interested in merging those two more. I think that one of my issues right now is trying to

be less esoteric. There's a value in creating all these [unsolved meanings] but then you get buried too deep. […] It's a process of keeping my clipboard, but opening it a little bit. And that's in form, too—I'm trying to create more open forms, and have more trailing ideas.

JF: Trailing ideas?

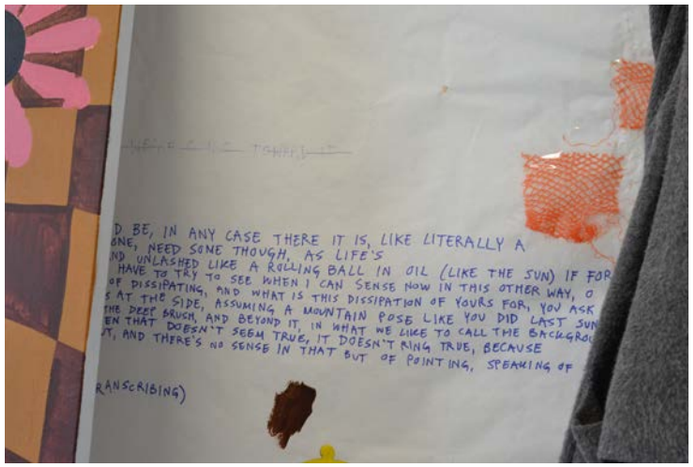
CK: Yeah—maybe not having a solution, not necessarily striving for a finished body of work. But I do think of these things as from collections; they definitely are made with the other one in mind. A year ago, I started a lot with notions of protection and the body as an agent of the world, and how to arm yourself against whatever [is] external. So that's when I got into weapon imagery, and I also got into the literal idea of covering, covering materials in other materials, and I made a sleeping bag and other tents—forms of protection. Then that moved into spaces with protection, and last semester i talked about enclosed space a lot—not necessarily in-body space, but physical space. And then, that was really proven with a cross symbol, definitely as an origin of foundation; it became what everything was built upon. And then the cross symbol mutates into this axis on a circle, and then I got into spirals this summer, and so that shape took a spiral shape. Now I'm interested in time, and armor and… it all comes together.

JF: Sounds very fluid.

CK: Yeah. It's definitely fluid, but it's also aggravating that […] I can't capture these feelings necessarily [because] they're relying on the abstract.

JF: [With all of these different elements], do you have a sense of how they're pieced together?

CK: That's the most intuitive part for me I'd say. That's like… the best part. •



AVA FIELD

Julia Friend: How has the work you've done at the Pottery Co-Op changed over your four years?

Ava Field: When I was a freshman, I was really just learning how to throw. […] Coming here and practicing everyday was so important. I'm the Exco instructor for the beginning class, and that's one of the things I tell them all the time is that you have to practice. A lot of what I do now is just making functional things like bowls, cups, mugs… but I'm trying to expand and make more sculptural things.

JF: How do you think about functionality as you're making your pieces?

AF: That's a big thing in ceramics in general. I think there's a certain level of craft [to] making a lot of the same functional piece, reproducing the same shape as a set or as something someone can use… But then it's really interesting when you can alter that and get more of an art form that you just have to look at.

JF: What form are your more sculptural pieces taking?

AF: I don't really know yet. Here… this is my cactus.

JF: I was admiring it on the shelf.

AF: I was passing a garden, and I saw some cactuses, and I thought they looked really interesting, and I liked their organic shapes so I wanted to try and make one. And there's also cactuses by the facilities building—I walk past them every time I come here, and I just want to make cactuses! This is my second attempt. My first attempt—well, it's a sad story. All this stuff over here is raku. So, raku is a special form of pottery firing where you have a strong clay body—meaning the piece you fire can withstand rapid temp changes—so the whole process is that you take your pot that you have glazed and fire it until its gets to temperature, and you transfer it to a bin that won't melt and will close tightly, and you fill it with combustible things—and it gets really smokey, and

when it's done, everywhere that didn't have glaze on it turns matte, deep black. The glazes can come out really shiny. The sad thing about these is that one of our co-opers accidentally fired them in the [normal] kiln. So that's why [this attempt] looks weird.

JF: It's a process where you don't know what you're going to get—there's some surprise to it.

AF: Yeah.

JF: This [pottery] is very interesting to me as a painter because I put so much time into one [piece]. So what it's like to make the same form over and over? Does it change over time?

AF: It's probably one of the harder things—to try to make something the same over and over. I think it's really fun, and it's really hard [because] you sit down and you have all these pieces of clay [that you're trying to make into] the same thing. And at some point you don't really think about it anymore, and it's okay if every one is a little different; it's nice for each one to [be unique]. Because I can't make everything perfect. […] I just came in with the same idea for all of them; They all have these ridges, and they all have a dimple, but they're all kind of different heights and widths. Something that is really important that I talk to my students about—because when you're in a beginning pottery class, I think the main thing you want to be making is something you can use. So, when I talk to them about mugs, I ask them what they really want it to feel like in your hand. Because that literally makes all of the difference. When you make something, and it's finally done, and you look at it, and you're like, *Oh wow, beautiful, I love it*, and then you pick it up, and it doesn't feel right in your hand… it's so shitty. Because then you don't like it!

JF: So it's very sensory, too.

AF: Yeah, it is. I mean, especially when you're making mugs because you have the handle. I mean you want to figure out what's the best way to make this handle—how do I want my hand to fit in this cup?

JF: You're also interested in photography. Are you able to find ways to intersect that and pottery?

AF: There's this place called Great Gull island, and it's an island that the [American] Museum of Natural History [in New York] owns. I've worked there for two summers in a row. It's like an ecological reserve for these birds… It was the craziest experience of my life. On the island there were all these blinds, and for some reason [I] was really interested in them…They have these blinds for watching birds and looking out and hiding so the birds can go about their business without being threatened by you, and I was really interested in that shape [of the blinds.] So the following summer, I was doing raku, and I made these [ceramic versions.]. But there's also this method I've really been meaning to try—cyanotypes, which [uses] this photosensitive chemical that you paint onto paper or fabric and expose it to the sun. The sunlight would basically make a photo of my negative on the cyanotype paper and you wash it away with water and then it comes out blue. You can do that on pottery. It's something that I really wanna figure out… It's gonna happen. •

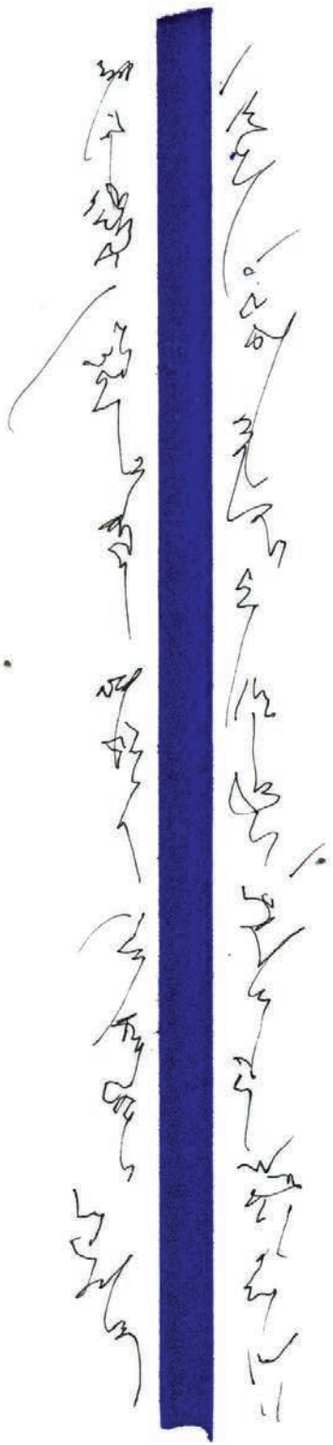
TWO POEMS

UBER DREAM

JULIAN MELTZER

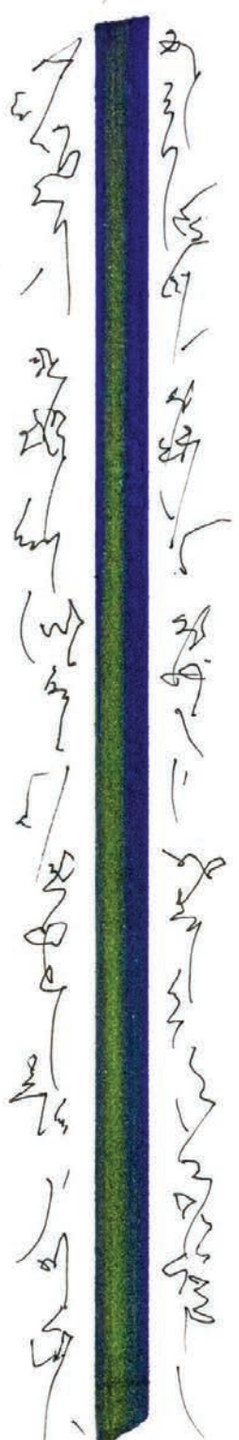
I have this dream,
mom, where I'm
your Uber driver,
after your legs are
too weak for the subway,
I don't know you,
of course, but
you are beautiful,
in the way middle-
aged, fashion-conscious
women can be, as
you walk deliberately
from the doorstep of
your apartment I barely
notice the way you
favor your right leg, not
knowing how long it's taken
you to walk unaided.
I call, Elizabeth?
out the window, you nod,
smiling as you climb
into the backseat.

We make small talk; I'm
surprised—you're every inch
Upper East Side in your black
woolen shawl and your

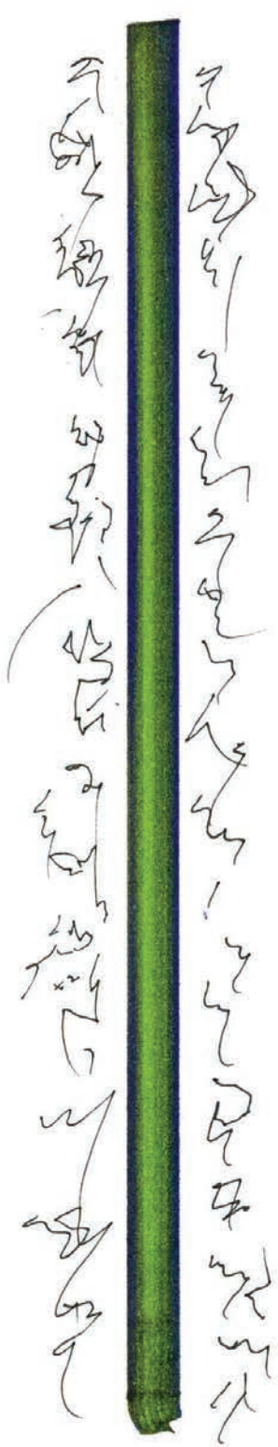


Marc Jacobs bag but
friendlier, you thank me
for the Poland Springs
bottle I've left in the backseat
but decline my offer of
a mint. We chat all the way
to your acupuncture
appointment and, because
you've won me over,
I idle outside, a half-hour maybe.
You don't seem surprised that I've
waited when you return, but smaller
somehow, there's the limp again, I'm
certain, and an extra wrinkle or
two, have I imagined them? I drive
you to the apothecary, your therapist, a
Reiki practitioner—you shrinking
all the while, aging, your eyes sinking,
your walk to and from
each building becoming
more obviously laborious. You ask
about my family and we share
a smile through the rearview mirror over
my beautiful baby niece, Anita. On the way
out from the Homeopath's office
you stagger, barely catch yourself,
I rush to take your purse
and your arm, guide you to my car and
tuck you in. Now our chatter dances
around cancer, as I drive you to your
appointment with the famous
Doctor Nicholas and, by silent
agreement, accompany you inside.

When we emerge
I'm livid, as I tuck
you into the back-
seat, I want to beg
you to go to a real
oncologist, that man
is clearly a quack, peddling
false-hope, hippie Chemo
and sure it makes your
hair fall out, all over
the backseat, but with one
look at his tasteful waiting
room, the quiet music, his dead



smile and syrupy drawl, I wanted to
rush you over to Sloan Kettering
or even Bellevue, anywhere
else. But of course I'm just your
Uber driver, so I put on the CD of
Healing Tibetan Chanting the doctor
sold you and we head to
the Aromatherapist's, the
Chiropractor's, the Wig-
maker's, the Kombucha
Shop, the Toxin Masseur,
the NAET Practitioner, the
Cancer Coach, the Hot
Stone Masseur, the Cupping
Masseur, the Foot Masseur,
the Dietitian, the Juice Bar, the
Kimchi Shop, the Spiritual
Healer, the Acupressurist, the
Astrologist, the Yogi—you aging
all the while, shriveling everywhere but
your midsection, which begins
ballooning, and there are no smiles
from either of us and where's
your Marc Jacobs bag? Where's
your wig now? Your black shawl is
gone, replaced by something paper-
thin, polka-dotted, split down
the back, and you're wearing
just fuzzy gray socks
with those sticky, grip-
dots on the bottom
and you're not sitting
but stretched out,
seatbeltless, across the
backseat like a
shitty cot, so I
drive slowly with
my hazards on until
we pull up to the Hospice
on Eastchester and Bassett
and I have to carry you,
your lightness terrifies me,
as we pass through
the automatic doors
you loll up to me
and whisper,
Where are we? •



Calligraphy by Ramzy Lakos

THREE WEEK OLD ADULT

CAMILLE PASS

There is loneliness in subdivided headings and columns but there is also a space with frozen margaritas and hands rubbing your back. Many love languages later you decide what's best on the yellow quilt. Many love languages later, it's the little things that get you, the lights being put up in your apartment or an offering of soup. When the little things are given they are gone and so are the little parts of you. There is so much time left and elapsed that it holds to your pinky toes that you suddenly become very aware of in damp boots. Kissing is pretty gross but so is asking to be loved. Especially when you try speaking to the lakes that come rushing by minutes apart on the highway out the passenger window. Socked feet in the sunny spot on the dashboard we keep throttling a dead chicken with these questions.

These days night dreams get scarier and scarier and you have to walk around for a bit in the apartment to remind interlocking limbs where things are and that she is dead now. She died in your mother's arms in the house you grew up in. Not the house in the neighborhood that they once dubbed, "Jew Town," but the one that still technically you belong to. Her legs crumpled on the gravel—it is our fault. She loved to sleep and sleep

she did in my mother's arms because that's what you do when you are ready to go. "We didn't want to ruin your Friday night" because that's all I live for here in the tundras of Ohio, another beer in the same bar. Childhood ends with the death of your childhood pet, and I am a fresh three week-ed adult.

Resistant to change and the weather my mother decided that grass wasn't fit for Southern California and though this was met with applause by the neighbors the short limbs on her daughter's long terriered body would no longer find support in the lawn holes burned by her piss. I memorized the view of a second story window in my teen years believing in the foreverness of moments and the witch's house next door—no one in or out except family and loud children on Sundays to use the pool. Immortalizing the gnarled tree in the front yard splitting into two still self-sustaining lives. I painted and I sang songs out the window collecting the parts of myself to give to others thinking they were important, thinking I was bigger than my twin sized bed.

They chopped the limbs off last year when the witch died and the corner property was finally up for sale. We walked by dusk purple in bare feet, I never put her on a leash especially when there was nowhere to go. She acknowledged her freedom by taking her time with each tree and turning around occasionally to see that my body was still there. We raced for the last stretch of block around the corner to the peeling grey back gate every time, even when she shouldn't have been running.

Rituals persist in the life of a household dog, hours at a time outside spread on her belly with her snout poking out through the crack in the fence and the concrete. My father, the most emotionally insulated or stunted member of the family shed a tear the morning after when he turned on the kitchen lights and made coffee without her. In her old age she never wanted to be touched. In a way I believe that it was because she didn't want us to feel the bones coming through. Very far away, I settle into my bed knowing she left us at home. I think about how my home will probably be the next corner lot to go after the witch's house.

I told a fortune teller my problems at the bar the next night. Choosing to write on an intricate questionnaire form in capital letters rather than checking off boxes for what I thought was wrong with me: LOVE HURTS. She thought I was probably referring to the numbskull boy to my left and the current running between our fingers, but that couldn't have been farther from the truth. I had been talking about the kind of love that starts on your sixth birthday and dies after your twenty-first. She made me pull out a card from her tarot deck and laughed as she read the word "success" out loud. Almost scoffing she told me, "Y'know maybe I'm reading it wrong" and sipped her third mixed drink. She asked me how old I was and I told her three weeks since my childhood dog died. Then she adjusted her wig pulling it higher over her scalp and giggled a little scratching words onto a faded prescription pad. I walked away and read it to myself. She just wrote: "Chill the fuck out," and she's probably right. •

Image by Emily Rogers

BESA

JONA BELIU

The stories in this piece come from a private realm of my family's history. They show the difficulties we've faced as Albanian immigrants and highlight the faults within our own culture. History affects everyone, but immigrants especially must interact with both the history of our own country and our adopted one. In both instances, we experience loss: the loss of our homeland, and the feeling of being lost in integrating ourselves into our new country. Albania is on the Mediterranean Sea, north of Greece, and is one of the very few Muslim-majority nations in the European continent. My story centers around a recurring pattern I've seen in my own Albanian immigrant community—incredibly welcoming, warm, and generous, until American racism creeps in. We show our limited perspective through the phrases we sometimes say and how we view other marginalized groups in this country. The United States has equated 'Muslim' with 'foreigner,' with 'immigrant,' and, most importantly, with 'person of color.' This false assumption that all Muslims are people of color has permeated our worldview. It creates a monolith for what Muslims "should" look like and has aided in the persecution of both the religion and its people. This story isn't as simple as the oppressed becoming the oppressor. This story is far more complicated. It's a testament to how powerful whiteness is in America. How white assimilation—especially because Albanians are not considered "white" in Europe—can corrupt a person to the point where they love their own executioner because they refuse to see themselves as the target.

I am of the Albanian diaspora and have grown up simultaneously immersed in both my history and the culture of the United States. Albania is obscured by the giants that surround it—Greece, Italy, Bulgaria—and my people are relegated to brief mentions within European history. For many decades, my nation's history and existence have been silenced, erased, and ignored by the rest of the continent. As more of us leave the country, we create a global diaspora. We begin to carve out our own livelihoods and share our experiences, and

we garner an international political power that has been actively taken away from us. In many ways, this piece is political action against the continued erasure of my country within the modern-day discourse of the European continent. This is also an analysis of how our history of persecution in Europe has manifested in the United States and expresses itself in insidious and racial ways. Western culture has filtered into Albania; I can see the vast changes happening every year to Tirana, the capital, and to the rest of the nation. With an introduction to the Western lifestyle, we were offered access to an enticing linguistic platform. The English language has a power that creates a monumental opportunity, allowing English-speaking Albanians to begin to translate our own experiences for the global audience. By using English, Albanians can subvert Western dominance and make our stories heard.

I was born in Tirana, Albania to a Cham mother and a Tironce father. We are an ancient and isolated country—these cultural groups are long-established and create particular identities. To be clear, most of my immediate family, with a few exceptions, aren't practicing Muslims. That was washed away by years of Ottoman rule and communism, but much of our culture, language, and ontological and theological understandings of the world come from Islam. One of the few practicing Muslims in my family is my uncle on my father's side. He goes to mosque almost every day, observes Ramadan, and lives very much within the Muslim community. If you were to ask my extended family what religion they are, without fail they would say, "We are Muslim."

For much of my life I have been taught fragments of my family's history. Albanians are proud people; this pride has taught me the benefits of patriotism. In just the last 50 years, over half of my country has been taken by the Greek, Serbian, and Montenegrin governments. Without a strong sense of identity and pride, my land, language, and people would have dissolved long ago. This isn't to say that Albania is devoid of internal tension. My mother is from Chameria and my father from Tirana, which are only 220 miles from each other and share the same language, yet each have distinctive communities. These divergent cultural groups, while still Albanian, created familial tension when my parents first started dating. My grandmother on my father's side said her son shouldn't date my mother because Cham people are "dirty and of a lower class than us." Albania has a long history of ethnic tension, which has bred an "us versus them" mentality. In some ways this has been beneficial: Arguably it is what fueled Kosovo's success in separating from Serbia in 2008 with hopes of achieving its own quasi-statehood and own separate identity as Albanian people. More than 80 percent of Kosovars are Albanian. However, that kind of mentality is also what creates blinders for most Albanian immigrants when they come to the United States.

We are a persecuted people. During the London Conference of 1912, a summit of six world powers held in the aftermath of the First Balkan War, the treaty signed took about half of Albanian land, giving Kosovo to Serbia and Chameria to Greece. We've had our land, our family, and our history stolen, and therefore (in the minds of some Albanians) our perpetuation of American racism and nationalism is justified. Racism allows us to enhance our own social standing as white Americans and feel more included in this country, perhaps more so than we've ever felt in Europe. We see this pattern continuously in the history of European immigration to United States: People migrate from States because of cultural, religious, or ethnic tension, and are eventually granted the opportunity to assimilate into whiteness. This assimilation creates a social comfort that leads us to believe that ethnic tension, racism, and classism are not prevalent in the United States because we do not experience it here.

Albania is uniquely ositioned when it comes to our relationship with the United States. Unlike most other Eastern Europeans, most Albanians feel favorably to-

ward the United States. We have statues of Woodrow Wilson scattered around our capital, and continue to revere the Clintons for assisting Albanian Kosovars during the Kosovo war in 1999. In that conflict, Serbian military action caused the displacement of 1,500,000 Albanian Kosovars and the murder of over 10,000. Our love for the United States began after the First World War, during the deliberations between the Allied powers at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. The Allies wanted to divide control of Albania piecemeal among our neighbors—Greece, Italy, Serbia, and others—removing our country from the map and erasing our national identity. Wilson spoke out in our favor, stating that we were a true nation and deserved to be protected. The delegates found his arguments persuasive: Albania was not split among the countries of Eastern Europe. We were independent for twenty years, but by the start of World War Two, Italy had invaded. We went from Italian to German control in 1943, and from the Germans to our very own Communist Party, led by Enver Hoxha. Hoxha's reign was authoritarian. He followed in the footsteps of other communist leaders by eliminating all freedom, religion, and hope. Hoxha created prison camps, much like Stalin's gulags. An estimated one in every fifteen people was sent to prison camp and that one in three was contacted or intimidated by the Sigurimi, state police who were sent to monitor the ideological correctness of the country. Enver Hoxha created and maintained a "state atheism" by shutting down and destroying mosques, and punishing those who partook in Ramadan and Lent. During Hoxha's au-

thoritarian rule between 1944 to 1992, people were confined within the Albanian borders. Immigration and travel were relegated to a small minority. Most of our exposure to other cultures has come from a limited amount of travel into and out of Albania, most significantly from Turkey, Italy, Western Europe, and northern Africa. With the death of Hoxha, the communist regime slowly started to fall, and in 1991 we transitioned into democracy.

During the presidential campaign, my mother and I were talking at home in Albanian. I said "inshallah"—a word meaning "god willing," a word directly from the Quran, a word imbedded Albanian colloquialism, culture, and life. She paused the conversation and told me not to say that word and other "Muslim words" when we're on the MTA or walking around the city because "we don't need to bring that kind of attention to ourselves." Very rarely during my life in the States has my mother been so direct in her erasure of our culture and country.

I wear the symbol of my country's flag around my neck, and my parents have ensured that both my sister and I know our language, culture, and history. They refuse to let America erase our nationality. For my mother to distance herself from a core aspect of our identity is terrifying. It's the compartmentalization of Albanian identity, the ability to cherry-pick and erase certain aspects in order to become palatable. My mother wanted to ensure we weren't targeted on the streets, but that is already incredibly unlikely since we have few visible identifiers for which other Americans and immigrants are targeted. We do not wear the hijab and we are white-passing. The only thing that distinguishes us is my parents' slight Eastern European accent—our language is the one thing that could give us away.

Albanians trace our ethnic history back thousands of years to the Illyrian tribe, one of the very first peoples to live on the European continent. My family can trace its history back 300 years through every name and town. We keep our ancient tradition and history alive. A significant part of my cultural identity is a strong belief in unity: We are a Muslim-majority nation, but we pride ourselves on living in peace with Christians, Jews, and Eastern Orthodox people. Our flag, a two-headed eagle, is indicative of this commitment. It was originally used as a symbol to unite the North and South of Albania against the Ottomans and is an intentional sign of our solidarity against the political forces that attempted to divide us.

Unity and respect have a legacy in Albania. One of the most notable aspects of Albanian culture is an ancient law we hold and abide by to this day: *besa*. This is a fifteenth-century law originally created to govern the northern tribes of Albania. The word can be used and translated in many ways. At its core, it means trust or a promise. Besa is a moral testimony, a law inherited from distant ancestors, a law that is brought up in our daily lives. There are many citations and sayings that express the meaning of besa. One of the most notable is "Shpija para se me qenë e Shqiptarit, eshte e Zotit dhe e mikut," which translates to "a house, before it belongs to the Albanian, belongs to God and the guest."

There are many Albanians and Eastern Europeans alike who say that the law of besa is what sustained Albania through the ages, quelling disputes and providing safety for travellers through our country. Besa was the force that allowed my country to welcome the Jewish population during World War Two. Besa is an idealist law, and like all laws there is a circumstantial limit to our generosity. The limitations on our empathy are exposed in the U.S., where our history is unknown, our race is white, and our identity is European. Whiteness in America is founded upon the sanitization of internal difference in favor of a neutral white unit which can be separated from "others." A caveat in American whiteness is that contemporary white foreignness is attractive and something to be proud of. That idea is enticing for Albanian

Drawing by Bridget Conway

Photographs by Anna Stearn

immigrants. It allows for an assimilation unlike that which we face in Italy and Greece, where most Albanians refuse to acknowledge their nationality or speak a word of our language in fear of being found out.

I immigrated to the United States in the winter of 2000. My parents and I moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan, a predominately white area with practically no Muslim population. By definition I am an immigrant, by culture I am called "first-generation." This duality is a foundational aspect of many child immigrant stories. We live in a time where immigrants (more specifically, non-white immigrants) are targeted. Now more than ever, immigrant narratives are flooding our Facebook newsfeeds. The United States is again at a point in time where it is publicly fighting against the very people that it prides itself on attracting. The demonization of Black Lives Matter and Trump's Muslim bans are vain attempts to scapegoat this country's economic and political failings: A dwindling blue collar working class, a populist president, rising distrust in the federal government. It was during the 2016 presidential elections that I felt closest to my Muslim identity, the most confused about my positionality, and the most frightened by what white American culture had done to most Albanians in the States and to my family.

My family came to this country just a few months before September 11, 2001. After the attacks, my grandparents called us right away and said, "Come back home, America isn't safe." My dad calmly replied, "We're hundreds of miles away from New York City—we'll be fine." Aside from the distance separating my family from New York City, he was also implying that we are not seen as Muslims here. My mother's retellings always point to the fact that we came from Albania, known to be predominantly Muslim. The United States is still seen as the best destination for emigrating Albanians: It is full of opportunity, it is wealthy, and there are plenty of other Albanians, but most importantly, we do not have to hide our culture or nationality. Washing away our Muslim heritage has been the norm for my family for three generations, and has only strengthened by my parents' defensive reactions to the attacks on 9/11. This fact has dramatically shaped my parents' immigration experience. Our history in the U.S. has been significantly shaped by our religion and culture, as well as by years of European ethnic tensions and our fighting to gain the right to exist as a people on our own continent. The privilege to immigrate to the United States and assimilate by virtue of our skin, while still retaining our national pride, has put blinders on many Albanian Americans. These privileges obscure our ability to understand how our actions are perpetuating a system we have been able to escape.

Since the World Trade Center attacks, my parents have been attempting to distance themselves from any aspect of our identity linked to Islam. This has become one of the largest contradictions within my household—fierce pride of our nationality combined with fear and aversion. What's difficult to explain to my parents is that by distancing themselves from our Muslim heritage, they are aiding in the erasure and dilution of Albanian identity.

Dinners at my house means a table encircled by immigrants from around the world: India, Sri Lanka, Guatemala, Korea, Australia, Mexico, Greece, and Albania. At dinner, my parents rarely ever drink more than a couple of glasses of wine, but this time it's different. My dad gets tipsy. The quiet, shy, paunchy, 40-year-old man opens up and begins talking about the election cycle: Hillary, Trump, Obama, nationalism, race. I've known about his right-leaning opinions for years now, but since Trump took the stage to announce his candidacy, my father has careened to the right. Until now, I haven't been able to quite figure out his ideology. During dinner, he holds forth in front of immigrants who would be directly affected if his words became actions. In front of the very people he considers his closest friends, in front of people who have given him a community he so desperately needed since moving to the United States, he says that Trump is right, that we need to curb immigration from Mexico and from Muslim-majority countries. He goes on to state how our national economic problems are caused by the laziness of racial minorities, and how a degree of racial homogeneity is best for a country.

I sit there for an hour, two hours, chiming in when he steps out of line—which is often—in defense of the older adults around me who are obviously getting uncomfortable with him. Then my dad says, "Trump is the best thing to happen to this country. What he stands for is the only way."

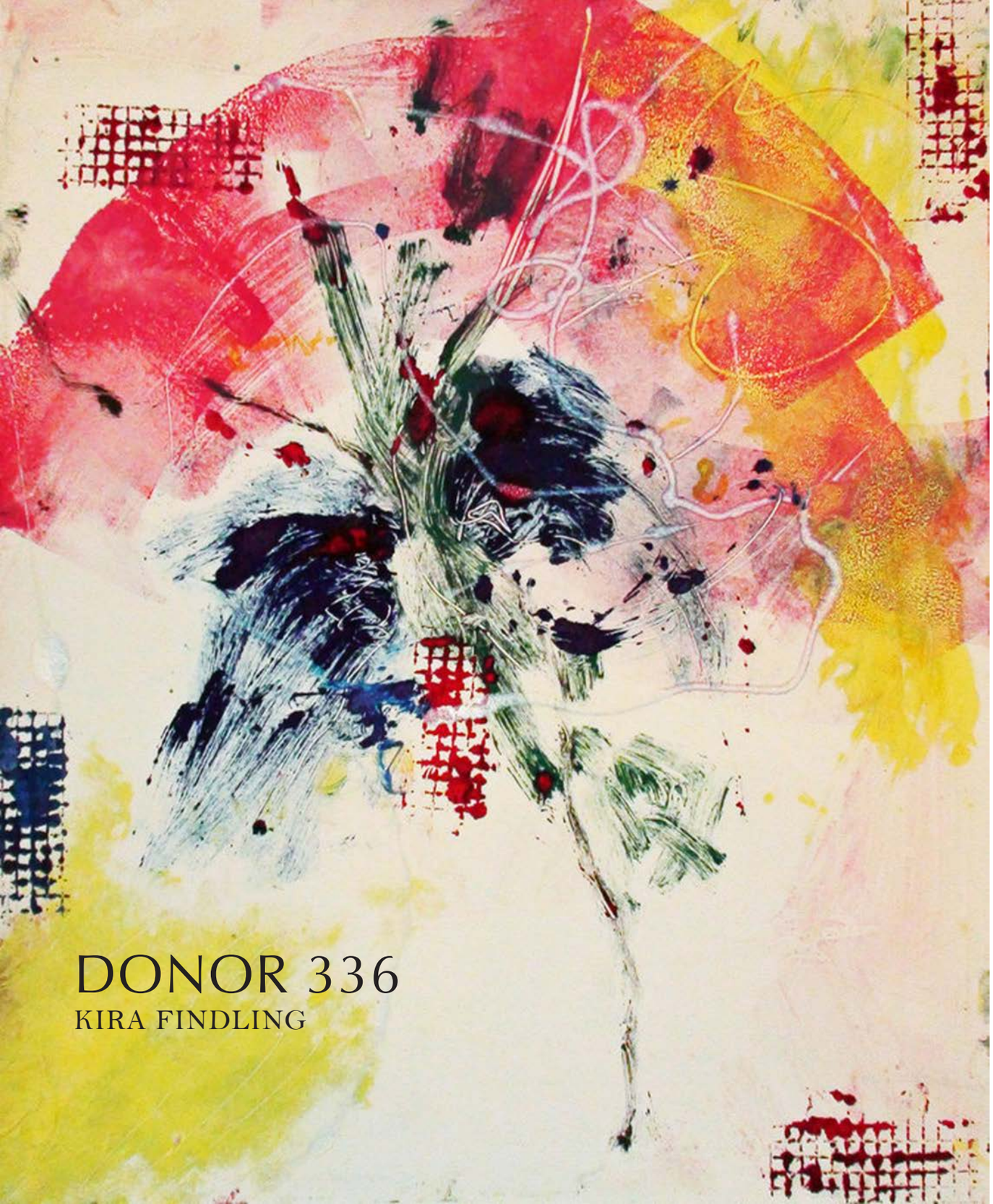
That's where I lose it. The first thing that comes to my mouth is, "How dare you, after everything we have gone through." I tell him the only thing that makes sense to me at that time: "Look at who is sitting around you, and think about your words. Our family would be embarrassed to hear you speak like this."

I have three and a half years of Oberlin rhetoric and higher education under my belt, but I knew the only thing that would get through to him would be to see his friends around him as they are: all of different nationalities, just as proud of their identities as we are. He did not need any help to see their humanity—we've been close family friends for years—but he needed to see their race, their history, and how our society has discriminated against them. What my father wasn't able to understand, and what many Albanian Americans who are not practicing Muslims refuse to accept, is that we have fallen into the racial hierarchy within the United States. Here we have been given a social power, an equality that was routinely taken away in Europe. We have forgotten what discrimination feels like and because of that, we have fallen into the trap of believing that, in America, everyone is free.

Since my father's dinner speech, he has slowly unclenched his far-right ideology. This isn't entirely thanks to the subsequent conversations I've had with him about his political logic. A good portion of the credit should go to Trump, whose actions and speech highlight his hypocrisy.

My mother, father, and I had the privilege of selecting our identities when we immigrated to the United States. We were shielded from much of the harm that is falling on the shoulders of other immigrants—especially Muslims and people of color—and yet my parents hide from this fact. This destroys their own narratives, and they see it as an undermining of their individual success in the United States. We, the Albanian Americans who are not practicing Muslims, cannot assist in the destruction of anti-Islamic sentiments if we do not admit our own. We cannot help Albanians and other persecuted people until we come to criticize our own racism and xenophobia. For a people who have experienced the pain of stolen land, destruction of family, communism, socialism, civil unrest, and persecution all within the last 50 years, we must do better. Our pain cannot resonate so far inward that we are unable to criticize our own actions. •

VOICES / BELIU



On a summer day in 1992, my moms, Heidi and Rhonda, went on their first date. That afternoon of canoeing—encouraged by mutual friends—led to many more adventures. They soon moved in together and met each other's families. After a few years and many discussions, they decided to have kids. There were two options open to them: adoption or donor insemination. Heidi had always known that she wanted to be pregnant, so they chose donor insemination. That decision led to the growth of our family in a way my moms never could have predicted.

Donor insemination—also known as artificial insemination—refers to the insertion of a sperm sample into the uterus by methods other than sexual intercourse. The process is used by couples and individuals of all sexual orientations and backgrounds in situations in which viable sperm isn't present or available. A sperm donor can be a parent's friend or sibling, or can be an anonymous individual from a sperm bank. Insemination often takes place in a doctor's office, though it can also be done at home. Many families get their sperm from the same donor, producing biological half-siblings.

When my mothers decided to have a child over twenty years ago, donor insemination was just starting to be normalized in the medical field. In his book *Radical Relations,* Daniel Winuwe Rivers writes that some lesbian couples, as members of grassroots networks of support, began having children through donors in the mid-seventies. Many used friends who were willing to have relationships with the children, but some found men who preferred to donate anonymously.

The eighties saw the beginning of the LGBTQ baby boom, which led to my birth in 1997. Though more lesbians were getting pregnant through insemination, they faced constant discrimination. Rivers writes that sperm banks and doctors often refused to help single women or lesbians, leaving women with few options but to inseminate

Image by Patrice DiChristina

independently at home using friends' sperm. By the nineties, lesbians were meeting with less resistance from medical professionals, yet continued to lack full institutional support. The process was expensive, making donor insemination (like adoption) accessible only to those with financial privilege. My parents believe that using donor insemination to conceive me—including sperm, medical appointments, storage, and intake fees—cost them about $2,500. But they believed that the financial strain was worth it in order to have a baby together.

My parents knew a few people who had used donor insemination, including Rhonda's sister, but it was far from common. They had to navigate the process without much outside help or advice. For example, Heidi needed to track her ovulation to ensure that the insemination was effective, and was largely uninformed about how to do so. Though my moms inseminated both at the sperm bank and at home while trying to conceive me, they went to a local hospital to conceive my sister, Sonia, a few years later. There, they could tell that the technicians hadn't done inseminations too many times before. Heidi told me, "The fertility thing—gay, straight, whatever—has taken off since then." My parents were part of a new frontier in assisted reproduction.

Finding a donor from a sperm bank wasn't their first choice. The initial plan was to have a child that biologically represented both my mothers. Rhonda has two brothers, both of whom donated sperm to my moms at different times. I often wonder who I would be and how our extended family dynamics would change if one of my uncles was also my biological father. But that didn't happen: Heidi didn't get pregnant from either of my uncles' sperm, so she and Rhonda turned to Pacific Reproductive Services, a lesbian-founded sperm bank in San Francisco about an hour south of our home in Sebastopol, California.

Picking a donor is kind of like online dating. In 1996, potential customers could send away for packets of information about various donors across the country. These days, a quick search on Pacific Reproductive Services' website shows you quite a bit more: For a few bucks, you can be seeing a baby photo or video interview of the donor in a couple of days. But back then, all my moms could go on was a few handwritten sheets of paper.

The pages of my donor's profile are thin and worn after two decades, but I have all the information memorized. Like me, Donor 336 has brown hair and brown eyes. One of his goals in life is to fall in love. Until I was eighteen, I knew his favorite foods, his medical history, and his hobbies, but I couldn't picture his face. My sister and I used to wonder if he was famous, and would find ourselves in the faces of male celebrities on magazine covers, wondering if any were Donor 336.

Some people try to pick a donor that shares physical characteristics with the nonbiological mother, but my parents didn't focus on that. They liked lots of things about Donor 336: he played violin and was very musical, he liked to write, and he was half-Sephardic and half-Ashkenazi (two different Jewish ethnic groups). The most important factor for them was that he was Jewish, not necessarily in terms of his religion, but rather his ancestral background, because being culturally and ethnically Jewish is an essential part of Rhonda's identity. His one downfall was his athletic ability, which he called "negligible." Rhonda is an avid athlete, so that was unfortunate. But what could they do? Heidi remembered, laughing, "He seemed like a good guy… and he was Jewish! So I was like, 'Sure, what the hell? Okay!'"

My moms didn't hesitate in their decision to use a known donor, meaning a donor that agrees to have contact with offspring once they become adults. Pacific Reproductive Services makes its commitment to known donors a cornerstone of its mission, but can't legally require our donor to meet us. They do, however, promise to release

identifying information about the donor to offspring once they reach legal adulthood. Since turning eighteen, I have learned my donor's name and seen photographs of him. His face is familiar, sharing characteristics with mine. It feels right to be able to picture him, to have a better sense of the way he moves through the world. I learned that he won a Pulitzer Prize for journalism, which was a striking discovery, considering that I want to be a journalist. After a quick search online, I was happy about how much he fit my imagined version of him, though it remains to be seen what he's like in person.

A lot of people think of donor insemination as the Wild West of genetics, with a single donor having hundreds of children, all of whom want something from him as soon as they turn eighteen. Hollywood contributes to this myth. *Delivery Man* (2013) centers around a clueless donor with over 500 needy offspring, and completely ignores the people who raised them. *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) features a donor who has an affair with a woman who conceived using his sperm, wreaking havoc on her family in the process. My experience doesn't mirror any of these media representations—being a donor kid has been much more joyful and normal than those movies make it out to be.

There are few common conventions about the language of donor insemination, but as a donor-conceived person, the words I use are incredibly personal and carefully chosen. For example, rather than using the word "offspring" to describe myself, I prefer "donor-conceived person" or, like my sister says, "donor kid." Additionally, while some people refer to their sperm donors as their "fathers," not all donors are cisgender men. Anyone who produces sperm can donate it. I feel uncomfortable calling Donor 336 my father, since I have little connection to him beyond genetics and don't consider him one of my parents. Whenever possible, I call him "the donor," only using "biological father" when people don't understand the situation.

My sister and I always knew that we had a donor; my parents never hid our history. Sometimes as a little kid, frustrated at my parents for making me go to bed or refusing my request for a new toy, I'd grumble, "I'm going to live with the donor!" My parents would chuckle as I'd stomp my feet, whining, "*He* wouldn't make me go to bed so early!"

That being said, I have two loving and attentive parents. Though I have a strong desire to meet the donor, I never felt that there was anything missing in my life. As important as the donor has been in creating us, he isn't a daily concern for the donor siblings. Sonia summed it up well when she said, "It's just part of my life."

Each of the donor's offspring gets one chance to contact him; I haven't used mine yet, having heard from others that he isn't interested in a relationship with us right now. Rhonda feels deeply disappointed by this news, and emphasizes how important it is to her that we get a chance to meet him. But right now, for me, it's enough to see photographs and recognize my face in his. Sonia told me, "I definitely would like to meet him at some point, but I only want to if he wants to too. I don't want it to be

forced." I agree. I feel lucky to have found a family in my donor siblings, who fill my desire to connect with the donor side of my history.

No laws or rules exist that restrict contact between donor siblings, but until recently, there were few ways to find each other. My donor sibling story begins with a stroke of luck.

The Bay Area lesbian community is tight-knit. Everyone's an ex or a friend of a friend. When I was six months old, my parents' friends ran into a couple at Rainbow Grocery in San Francisco who had used a donor to conceive their son. After a discussion about their sperm bank and the donor's characteristics, my parents' friends were certain that the couple—two Jewish lawyers from Berkeley—had used the same donor as my moms.

Two weeks later, my moms went to visit my grandparents. They showed me off to a fawning neighbor, an older woman they had known for years. The conversation turned to adoption, a lengthy and stressful process for lesbian parents like Rhonda, who had to adopt me in order to become my legal guardian.

When I was born, Heidi was my sole legal parent. Rhonda applied for an independent adoption in order to become my other guardian. Since my parents couldn't marry, Rhonda had to undergo the adoption process as if she were adopting as a stranger to Heidi and me. It was crucial to get it done quickly after my birth. Heidi knew that until I was adopted by Rhonda, her parents would get custody of me if something happened to her. "In the eyes of the law, [Rhonda] was not in this picture," she said. "It felt like us against the world. We needed to get this together and make sure this all worked. You had to be very careful." Because I had no legal father, Rhonda could become my second parent if she was approved for adoption. A few weeks after my birth, a social worker came to our house to observe Rhonda, who also had to submit four letters of recommendation and significant personal information. She said that the process felt like an expensive "rip-off" with very high stakes, and an invasion into her personal life. Her lesbian friends who were already parents—a chosen family of sorts—were instrumental in helping her through the process and giving her hope that it would work out.

After the entire process, the social worker recommended against the adoption because my parents weren't a married heterosexual couple. My parents still have a copy of her letter, which states that though Rhonda appeared to be a suitable parent, "the California Department of Social Services does not believe that this adoption is in the best interest of the child and recommends denial of the petition because the prospective adoptive parent and birth mother are not married to each other." My mothers went to court, where a judge overturned the social worker's ruling, allowing Rhonda to adopt me. In our liberal pocket of California, this was a common occurrence, but in other parts of the country, judges often held up the denial of parental rights. In my baby book, there's a picture of us with the judge. My parents, nervous but relieved, clutch me tightly. I'm oblivious, never doubting for a second that these are my moms.

At the time, the Department of Social Services didn't allow for second-parent adoption, a simpler administrative process in which Rhonda could pay a sum and become my legal guardian. That procedure was not affirmed by the California courts until 2003, long after my sister and I were born. Without their educational and financial privilege, my mothers may not have been able to complete the independent adoption in 1997, or even conceive me through donor insemination in the first place.

One of the most important effects of the legalization of gay marriage in the US has been on LGBTQ families who want to adopt children. Heidi sees marriage as having "legitimized our role as parents with kids," because it has institutionalized and simplified second-parent adoption. While

being married does not mean that someone automatically gets custody of their spouse's kids, marriage makes it easier to adopt a kid through the second-parent adoption process.

At my grandparents' house, my moms explained to the neighbor that they were going through the adoption process without legal help. The neighbor exclaimed that her niece and her partner were lawyers in Berkeley and could help with the process. Her curiosity piqued, Rhonda asked whether her nieces had used a sperm donor—they had. Within a few minutes, they were calling the woman's nieces, almost certain that they were the women from Rainbow Grocery. When they picked up, Rhonda asked, "Does the number 336 mean anything to you?" We had found my first donor sibling, Kobi. After my moms had Sonia in 2000, they sold the extra frozen sperm for cheap to Kobi's moms so that they could have his sibling, Tris.

But since these happy accidents don't happen to everyone, an online community was created to facilitate relationships between donor siblings. Wendy Kramer and her son Ryan founded the Donor-Sibling Registry (DSR) in September 2000 in order to meet others who had been conceived using donor insemination. Starting as a small Yahoo! group, the DSR had its own website by 2003, and has grown to serve over 50,000 individuals today, from donors to parents to offspring. Individuals can post on a message board linked to their donor number, which can be found by other offspring and their families.

When someone told our family about the registry, we made an account right away. It was 2009: I was eleven years old and Sonia was nine. My family gathered around the computer, entered the donor number, and let out a collective shriek. In addition to Kobi and Tris, Sonia and I had a half-brother, Jakob, who lived in Germany. We then connected with Lou, who lived in Rhode Island and was just six months older than me.

Rhonda remembered, "I was at work when Gina [Lou's mom] sent me a picture of Lou with a horse. And I fell out of my chair. I showed it to a co-worker and she was like, 'Oh, that's Kira,' and I was like, 'No, that's her half-sibling!'" In the first email they sent me, Lou told me they loved acting and hated their middle school classmates' obsession with popularity. I was a nerdy sixth-grader in love with Broadway, so I knew we would hit it off. Since Lou lived across the country, G-Chat became our primary mode of communication. We sent each other chain emails and gossip about our crushes, never going more than a few days without talking. Though we had met through our mothers, our friendship soon became ours alone. Finally there was someone my age I could trust with my full self. When I traveled to Rhode Island for their bat mitzvah in 2010, their classmates called us half-twins, since we looked so similar. It did feel a bit like finding a long-lost twin.

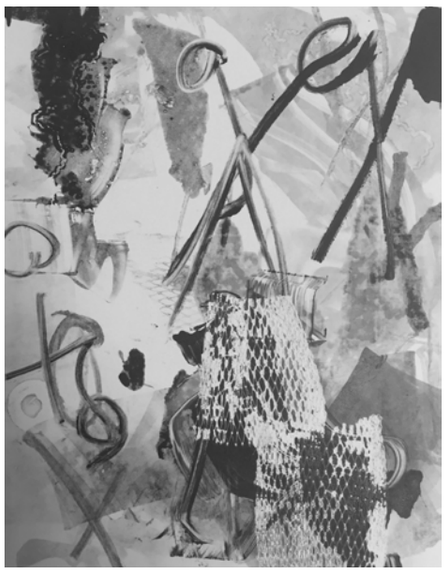
In the following years, we met Marc from New Hampshire and Sam from Marin County, California, bringing the total number of donor siblings to eight. At the time of my conception, Pacific Reproductive Services allowed each donor's sperm to be used by ten families, each of which can have multiple children (it now allows for fifteen families). So far, we know of six families—including my own—that used Donor 336, leaving open the possibility that there are several more half-siblings to be found.

To describe this part of my family, I choose to use the terms half-siblings and donor siblings interchangeably. My donor siblings share half of my genetics, and though my relationship with them is very different than my relationship with the fully biological sister I grew up with, I like to use a word that represents our genetic connection. There's a wide range of relationship dynamics between us—some of my donor siblings have never met each other, while others keep in touch regularly. But regardless of our individual relationships, there's an understanding that we're family, even if we don't see each other very often.

Because some of my donor siblings' families are Jewish, we get to see each other at bar and bat mitzvahs. At Sonia's bat mitzvah in 2013, six of the eight donor siblings reunited and took a group photo, which has been examined time and time again for evidence of the visual similarities between us. Everyone has a different opinion on who looks alike. Rhonda always comments on our "infamous chins," as Sonia likes to call them, and our dimples. Some of us look very similar, while others share just a little resemblance. Like Tris said, "It's always cool and weird to see parts of your face on someone else."

But we're alike in more than just our looks. For example, none of us are very athletic except for Sam. Instead, we share a connection to the performing arts and a deep curiosity about the world. I've found my donor siblings to be intelligent, thoughtful, and inquisitive without exception.

My donor siblings were all raised by queer women and our relationships have been enriched by our similar upbringings. Though I was born at a time when more youth than ever had sperm donors and openly LGBTQ parents, I didn't know many other kids with similar experiences when I was young. My moms read me Lesleá Newman's *Heather Has Two Mommies,* a children's book about donor insemination, over and over, but it was the only one on that topic. I felt different from my peers at school, very few of whom had openly LGBTQ parents.



Though we live in a fairly progressive area of Northern California, my family faces discrimination for being different. Heidi is still in the closet at the elementary school where she works and has to choose her words carefully when talking about her family. She told me, "We walk around the world totally conscious of this all the time. There's not a day that goes by where I don't think about it." From their experiences with assisted reproduction to adoption to raising their children, LGBTQ parents are regulated in a way that heterosexual parents aren't. Since my birth, the idea of homosexuality has become less foreign to people in the United States, but my moms' lived experiences haven't changed much. They rarely feel comfortable holding hands as they walk down the street. Many people are hesitant to engage with LGBTQ families and don't understand how a two-mom family works. Even today, I rarely meet people who can relate to my experience as the child of lesbian parents.

Thankfully, my mothers have found LGBTQ spaces and communities for our family. Throughout my childhood, I was surrounded by incredible queer women who weren't able to express themselves fully growing up, and therefore built a community as adults in which they felt free and understood. LGBTQ people often surround themselves with chosen families in this way. Sometimes in these situations, friends become family when a person is rejected by their relatives based on their gender identity or sexuality. But even when LGBTQ people are accepted by their families, chosen family can offer a community in which they don't have to hide anything or be less vibrant versions of themselves. Personally, since coming to college, I have found a queer chosen family where I can express my identity fully and without fear.

But my donor siblings are perhaps the most important chosen family in my life. I spent years searching and hoping to find them. Like Lou said, "It felt like nobody understood how it felt to be me and be in my kind of family as completely and precisely as my donor siblings." While our genetic relationships matter, what has been most poignant is having peers who understand what it's like to inhabit the world through my identities as a donor kid and the child of lesbian parents. My donor siblings and I don't have an obligation to each other, but I choose to prioritize them. We choose each other as family by continually making each other important in our lives.

My half-siblings connect me to the donor, making it less urgent for me to meet him. They give me more opportunities to see myself biologically in others, especially since I don't have any genetic first cousins. As Heidi said, "It's a way for you guys to make [something] physically real that's inside of you, that you couldn't otherwise see." Knowing my donor siblings doesn't take away from my connection with my nonbiological mother and extended family; it simply gives me more of a community.

In a new young-adult novel about donor siblings, Natasha Friend's *The Other F-Word*, the main character imagines her donor siblings beside her when she feels alone at school. They're a group of people her age who love her and will look out for her. She imagines them "walking down the hall with her—all in a row […] taking up all the space in the world." Thinking of my donor siblings by my side comforts me too. Knowing that they're only a call or text away brings me peace.

In using donor insemination to conceive me, my mothers created a family that they never could have imagined. Kobi said that the experience has made him realize that "life isn't always going to be exactly what you expect it to be. […] I could have a sibling I don't know in Rhode Island and a brother I don't know in Germany." Finding new donor siblings doesn't seem as outlandish as it once did, yet it will never stop surprising me. It will always feel magical, because these are relationships that, until recently, were impossible. Regardless of whether strangers and the law consider us legitimate, my donor siblings and I know that we are family. We are part of a new generation of people who understand family to be limitless and constantly evolving. •

Art by Rachel Weinstein

MEMORIES OF PENANG

ADRIENNE ROZELLS

I remember saying it over and over again: *Three-quarters German and a quarter Malaysian.* It was easily said, and always with pride. Now I use those words and feel a bit strange. As an adult, it's hard to lay claim to a piece of heritage that my family doesn't often look back on. I've always felt culturally both German and Malaysian, but identified as white. No one would look at me and see anything other than that. In trying to further my understanding of my heritage and deepen my connection to Malaysia, I don't want to claim to be anything other than who I am. As I write about my family's history I am also attempting to grasp onto it. There is still so much I've yet to discover, but I've found one concrete path into the past through my grandfather's life experiences. Like any family's past, that which can be told comes from many different lenses, including lived experience, family narratives, and research.

My grandfather was born in Malaysia on November 3, 1935. His name is Noel Adrian Rozells. He marks the first generation of Rozells who immigrated to the United States. He grew up in a musical home on the island of Penang, where his parents threw parties that revolved around their piano, and often invited friends and extended family to stay over. He skipped school to go to the beach or fly kites with his friends. His family attended The Church of the Assumption regularly, and always spent the day at the beach after Sunday service. Church records trace my family back to Eurasian roots, starting with a woman named Martina Rozells in the eighteenth century. When I was little, my grandparents traveled to Malaysia. They came back talking about a statue depicting a Malaysian princess who we were related to. I spent years pulling that story out for Two Truths and a Lie. It wasn't until middle school that I did my own research and realized Martina wasn't actually a princess. Some people on the internet called her a concubine. Most said she was the First Lady of Penang and the common-law wife of British colonizer Francis Light.

Captain Francis Light established the island of Penang as a colony for the East India Company in 1786, which led to the British occupation of most of Malaysia. Malaysia's capital, Georgetown, is still the site of a statue of Light, along with a small dedication to Martina. Martina and Light never married. Marriage between the two was forbidden, as Martina was not only Roman Catholic, but also Eurasian. From what I understand, the term 'Eurasian' is used in Malaysia to refer to an ethnic community of mixed Asian and European ancestry. Martina was definitely of Portuguese descent. There is speculation about whether she was also Thai. Either way, Light's English associates swindled Martina out of the inheritance Light left behind. Her children lived to see all of her inheritance taken by the British and her story smothered until only islanders seemed to know it. There are plenty of sources that talk about Francis Light, but few on Martina Rozells—she most often appears in a sentence attached to description of Light. Despite that, the Rozells line persisted and still lives on in Penang today.

By the time my grandfather was born, the Eurasian community had become influential in Penang as civil servants and educators. These administrative roles were comfortable positions on the island; in order to be hired for such jobs, one had to speak English well. In the thirties my grandfather grew up speaking English at home as well as learning it in school. He also picked up Chinese, Hindi, and Malay. Being multilingual was necessary to live in Penang and still is. Eurasians were influential but a tiny community in comparison to the Chinese, Malay,

Photograph by Jeannine M. Owens

and Indian communities on the island. Among the thirty million citizens living in Malaysia today, only 30,000 of those citizens are Eurasian, making the group a minority on the island. Even within this small group there are differentiations: A majority are of Portuguese descent, some were known as Dutch Burghers, and others as Anglo-Indians. Under British colonial rule being Eurasian did offer some advantages, because Eurasian folks shared the English language and were given British passports, which allowed for travel in a time period when Britain controlled much of the surrounding world. Aside from that, the Eurasian community was not treated as separate from others on the island and didn't see themselves as such either. People of all different ethnicities lived on my grandpa's street and shared the languages that existed on the island, but most families sent their children to the English-speaking school. It seems worth noting that since gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia has been examining race differences more in a push to define its own identity. In fact, the name 'Malaysia' has only existed since 1963. The country used to be known as 'Malaya.' My grandpa says that the change in name reflects an attempt by citizens to reclaim their Southeast Asian identity. I feel almost parallel to the country as I attempt to reclaim my own Southeast Asian history.

The British occupation of Malaysia was interrupted when my grandpa was seven years old: World War II broke out and the Japanese took Malaysia, hoping to harness the land's production of rubber and tin for their war effort. My grandpa often tells me stories about growing up under Japanese military occupation. I recall sitting next to him on the couch as he chuckled about being excited when school let out early, which I later learned happened during air raids. Only once I was old enough to ask did he describe shortages of food, electricity, clothing, medicine, and jobs. His face became solemn, smoothing out the laugh lines that usually appear during his stories. He spoke about his family growing their own vegetable garden, because they saw almost no meat for four years. Sometimes soldiers raided their homes. He mentioned a fear of being sent to internment camps if accused of being rebellious, hummed, and said, "I guess those would be considered hard times."

One of my grandfather's stories in particular has always stuck with me. It occured during a raid. It was nighttime and soldiers were searching the neighborhood, so my great-grandparents sent my grandfather and his two older sisters to hide in the attic. They were meant to be sleeping, but instead stayed awake praying to the Virgin Mary. In the middle of their prayers, a soldier came stomping up the stairs, carrying a flashlight. The children stopped praying and huddled together, staring at him. The soldier saw them, took a step forward, and then paused. He took a biscuit out of his pack and gave it to my grandfather. Without a word, he left. Grandpa thinks the soldier must have been Catholic.

My grandpa continues to pray in the evenings at 5:00 PM services every Saturday. He took me a few times when I was little. He even let me bring my favorite stuffed animals along as I considered the faith that has played such a huge role in his life. Mostly I looked forward to holy water being flicked into the crowd. I thought it was funny when the drops landed on my grandpa's glasses—he had to stifle his laughter so it wouldn't echo through the big church. Grandma was always bribing me with candy to stay home with her instead of going to church with Gramps.

In Malaysia, my grandpa attended St. Xavier's Institution, a Catholic school that was established by Francis Light and Martina Rozells. During wartime, the Japanese took over St. Xavier's. Every day at 8:00 AM, children—including my grandpa—arrived on the school grounds to sing and bow to the Japanese flag. My grandfather's early "schooling" consisted of learning to speak and write Japanese. The teachers were locals brought in by the Japanese military. They often decided to go against the lesson plans they'd been given, and instead of Japanese lessons, the kids received unstructured storytelling. Some teachers only instructed in

Japanese if a soldier was near the room. From time to time, the U.S. and Britain bombed the island. My grandfather says that when bombings occurred, they either hid under the stairs or in the muddy trench in the backyard as a family. After he told me this, I didn't know what to say. We were speaking on the phone. I let the line stay quiet for a while, then settled for, "Gramps, you've led an interesting life."

"Oh yeah, it's been long enough to include a few crazy things," he responded.

At some point, St. Xavier's was bombed and destroyed. When the war came to an end, Jesuit brothers set up a new school in the school's bombed-out remains, a series of patios covered by palm leaves. Meanwhile, reparations and rebuilding processes began throughout huge swaths of Europe and Asia. As the Cold War began, the U.S. began offering scholarships to bring foreign students affected by the fighting to be educated in the U.S. In 1953, my grandfather was awarded one of four scholarships offered in Southeast Asia by U.S. International Aid.

Church members came together to send him off with money, a turtleneck, and two sets of long pants. He set off from Singapore to Long Beach, CA, working on a barge. The trip took 36 days. His ideas of what to expect from the U.S. were based entirely on what he'd seen in movies; besides reading, his favorite pastime in Malaysia was going to the movie theater, where he'd sit in the cheapest seats, right up close to the screen. Film continued to be a theme in his life, from his years spent putting himself through college by cleaning a theater in San Diego to the love of film he still has today. His favorite films are Westerns.

In another life, maybe my grandfather would've studied film. In this one, he decided to get his Bachelor's in Economics, then pay for his Master's and become a citizen at the same time by joining the military. After growing up during World War II, he joined the Cold War as a soldier of a country that had dropped bombs on his childhood home. He was trained in Texas and stationed in Germany, in a unit that consisted of one other immigrant and white Americans, including Elvis Presley. As all his friends wrote letters back to family in the States, my grandpa didn't have any idea what he would be heading back to. He met my grandmother in the army base library. My mom was born on the base in 1960. Grandpa was discharged from the army in New Jersey the following year. The family came back to the U.S., bought a car for 250 dollars, and drove cross-country to San Diego for a job in the army sector. Maybe I should find his time in the military strange. I can't imagine what war meant to him after growing up in the midst of World War II. But the way my grandpa talks about his army days is bright and hilarious, filled with friends that became family and chance meetings that led to the creation of our family.

Grandpa was the only person who could get me to sleep as a baby. I slept over at his house and began to hear stories of Malaysia. He's continued to share them with me, in more and more detail, as I've learned to ask questions. As I wrote this article, I spent hours on the phone with Gramps. Sometimes I held back my questions, only to call back a few days later, apologizing for bringing up potentially painful memories. He said the war was much easier on him as a five-year-old than it had been on his older sisters and his parents. He said, "memories are distant, and fade with time." Some of the stories he's given me have been buried under 80 years' worth of important moments. He hasn't been hiding the stories and he doesn't seem to mind sharing them. He says it's just that no one ever asked.

My mom never considered asking when she was growing up. According to her, grandpa was not the open "teddy bear that he is today." Whenever I relay Grandpa's stories my mom exclaims, "He never told me about that!" Unlike my mom, I grew up with a Malaysian influence alongside the German. By the time I was born, Grandpa had reconnected with cousins in Penang. He talked about them when he drove me home from school and taught me to speak Malay: *Ada baik? Baik!* (Are you well? I'm well!) His days in Penang are far-removed

from our drives through suburban San Diego, but are also some of the most vibrant stories he tells. My grandpa tells me that when he was raising his kids, he never thought to talk about Malaysia. I think it was something of a survival tactic, a way to keep moving forward without missing the place he'd left behind.

Since I've known him, my grandfather has grown increasingly interested in our family's past. I like to think that the burgeoning curiosity my grandpa has shown in Malaysia is a product of my own. Some of the most warm and calm moments of my life have been spent curled up next to my grandfather, listening to his quiet voice roll out a childhood in Penang. By now he has spent hours on Google and Facebook searching out distant cousins, some still on the island and others scattered around the world. My uncle tells me that he tried to get Grandpa to go back to Malaysia multiple times over the years but, he wouldn't hear it. He said Malaysia was in the past and that he had no intention of going back. Maybe he didn't think there was anything to go back to. It wasn't until he was in his sixties and had reconnected with people who knew him when he lived in Penang that he agreed to visit. It was the first time he'd seen the island since he left at sixteen. Now he's been back twice, and our Malaysian relatives come to visit San Diego as well, livening up family barbecues with music and dancing.

Despite having lifelong knowledge that I am partially Malaysian, and meeting that side of the family multiple times, it was not until last year that I realized I am not entirely white. The question has floated around the back of my mind since I was young, and even now I'm not quite sure what it means to be just a quarter of an ethnicity. As I write this article, I grapple with the idea, hoping to find concrete history to hold onto. I think I've found it in my grandpa's story. My grandfather recently hunted down a Malaysian family tree to guide me through our past; alongside what he had given me, I have done my own research, and learned how our history intertwines with that of Malaysia.

After World War II, Malaysia returned to British occupation until 1957. Since then, Malaysia has changed its name and established its own Parliament. Martina Rozells was officially honored as the First Lady of Penang for the first time in 2013. She passed on that title to Joanna Rozells, who also appears on my family tree and was also involved with an Englishman. Joanna was legally allowed to marry Francis Light's successor, becoming the second First Lady of Penang. From there, the family tree branches out across the island and across the ocean. From Portugal to Malaysia to the United States, my name has migrated and been passed down. From Rosales, to Rozels, to the Rozells we are today.

Over the years, Grandpa has given me a lot of advice. Ask any of his grandkids and we can tell you his most common catchphrase: *Don't sweat the small stuff.* He once elaborated, *Live in the present. If you live in the past, you either think of the bad times and want to change them, or think of good times and want to go back to them. You can't do either.* Grandpa worked hard to bring our family to the place we are today, and part of that work involved a gaze held steady on the present. It may have meant that not much attention was paid to where we came from, but I carry that history with me, in all my own memories as well as those he has shared. He's right when he says not to live in the past. But as I am moving forward, I must be able to look back at the roots that have given me life. •

TRANSLATION: LES COLCHIQUES

GUILLAUME APOLLIANAIRE
TRANSLATED BY EMMA MARCH

The first time I heard Apollinaire, my sister was reciting "Les Colchiques" from memory at the dinner table. When she finished I leaned forward and asked her, *Who wrote that?* Later that night, I found Guillaume Apollinaire's calligrammes, his war poetry, and his life story scattered throughout various websites. Born in 1880 in Rome, Apollinaire was raised trilingual, which later allowed him to gain popularity in the Parisian circle of artists forming at the time. He fought in World War I, and was severely injured. He died shortly thereafter in 1918. "Les Colchiques" was published in his 1913 book Alcools.

Most of Apollinaire's poetry, infused with linguistic, formal, and visual distortions, does not lend itself generously to the process of translation. In fact, I was first drawn to the task of translating this poem after reading renditions from other artists. No one sought to preserve the poem's beauty, but rather attempted literal translations of the French. The difficulties of translation are magnified within Apollinaire's work because he uses language as a form. In "Les Colchiques," for example, he inverts sentences to confuse the images of eyes with the images of flowers in a way that leaves the reader unsure whether the flowers are blooming in the subject's eyes or in the meadow.

Apollinaire so masters his ambiguous language that by the end of the poem, the reader is not convinced they have read a love poem. Rather, they are left in Apollinaire's poisonous meadow, grazing with the cows and unsure what the metaphor was to begin with. Where Apollinaire does allow for solid ground is in the sonic beauty of his poem, how the words compliment one another and create cyclical waves of tones and rhymes. It is precisely that aspect of his poetry that gave me the confidence to stray from a literal translation and try to find a similar, albeit inferior, language in English.

Image by Rachel Weinstein

Les Colchiques

Le pré est vénéneux mais joli en automne
Les vaches y paissant
Lentement s'empoisonnent
Le colchique couleur de cerne et de lilas
Y fleurit tes yeux sont comme cette fleur-la
Violâtres comme leur cerne et comme cet automne
Et ma vie pour tes yeux lentement s'empoisonne.

Les enfants de l'école viennent avec fracas
Vêtus de hoquetons et jouant de l'harmonica
Ils cueillent les colchiques qui sont comme des mères
Filles de leurs filles et sont couleur de tes paupières
Qui battent comme les fleurs battent au vent dement

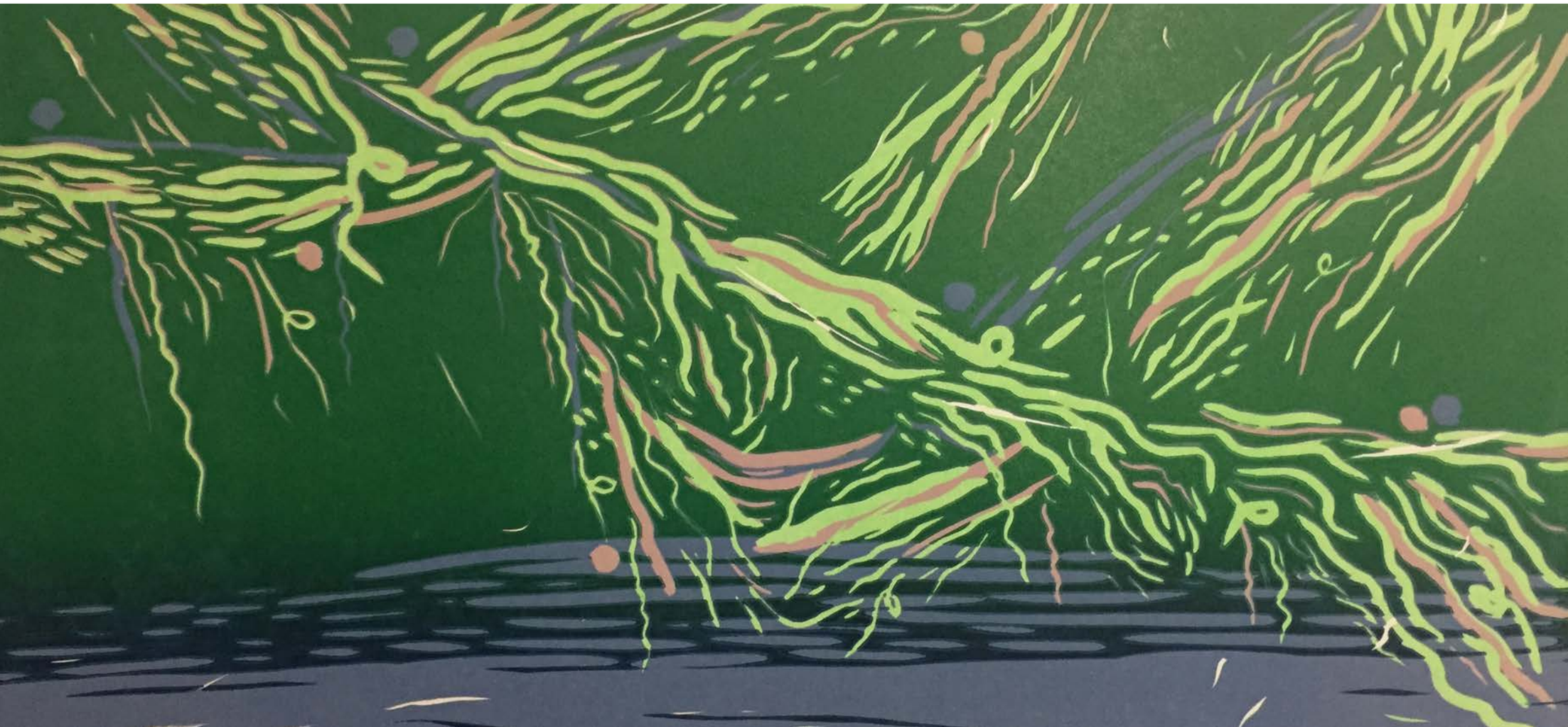
Le gardien du troupeau chante tout doucement
Tandis que lentes et meuglant les vaches abandonnent
Pour toujours ce grand pré mal fleuri par l'automne.

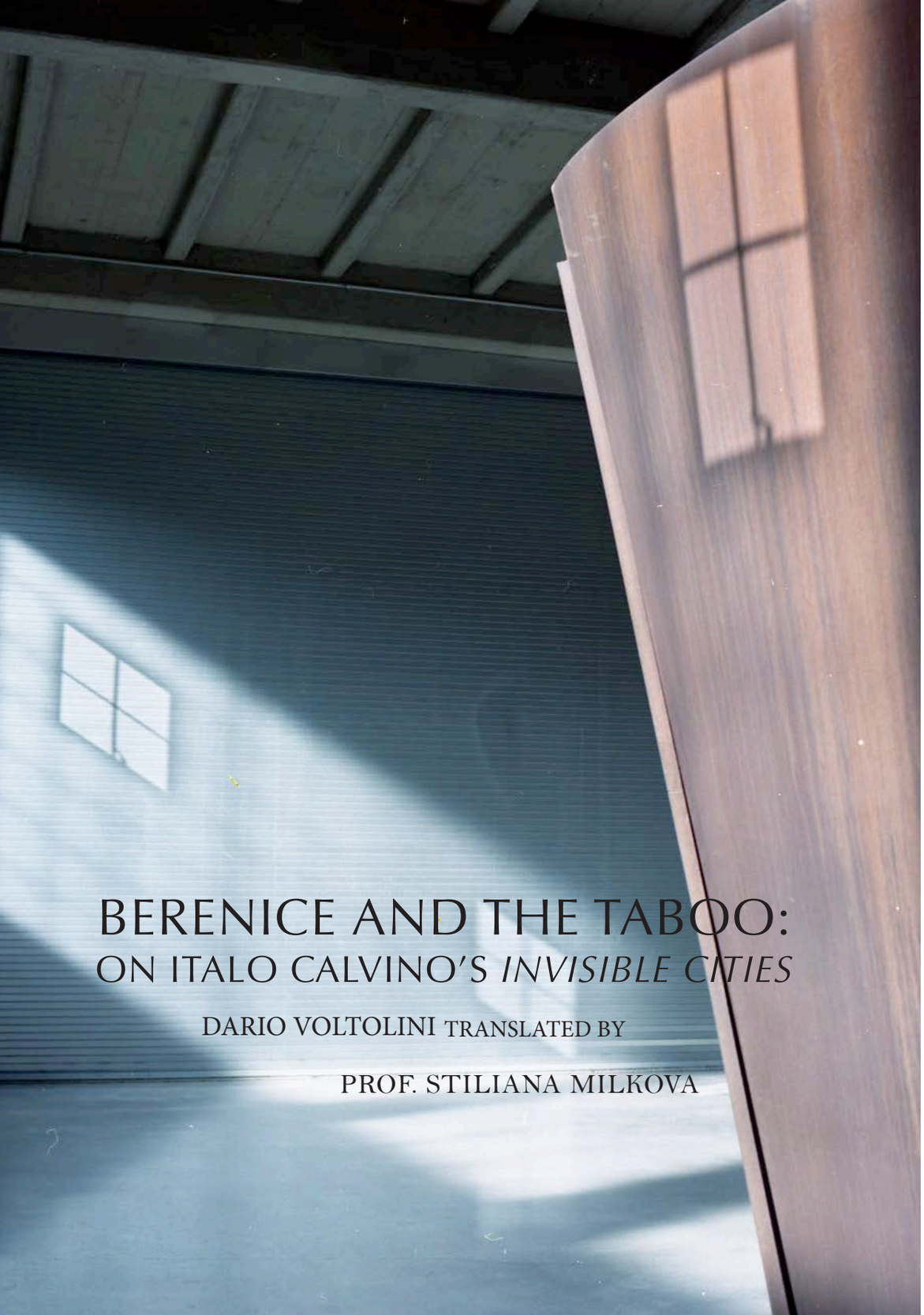
The Crocuses

The meadow holds its poison in the autumn
The grazing cows there
slowly dying
The crocus shaded lilac color
flowers where your eyes are tired
Violet like their shadows and this autumn
And for your eyes I feed my life this poison.

Schoolchildren in the meadow making noise
dressed in uniforms and playing flutes
They gather crocuses—their mothers
daughters of their daughters and the color of your eyelids
shivering like flowers in the delirious wind

The cowherd sings gently
While the lowing cows slowly abandon
forever this meadow fed poisonously by autumn. •





BERENICE AND THE TABOO:
ON ITALO CALVINO'S *INVISIBLE CITIES*

DARIO VOLTOLINI TRANSLATED BY

PROF. STILIANA MILKOVA

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Dario Voltolini is a contemporary Italian writer, the author of novels, short story collections, radio plays, travel narratives, and a range of non-fiction texts. His literary works often dwell on human relationships in an urban, post-industrial world to find profound meaning underneath the most prosaic occurrences. The theme of the writer's task in a global, overpopulated world emerges in "Berenice and the Taboo: on Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities." In this essay Voltolini reflects on Calvino's famous novel taking the last city, the "hidden city" of Berenice, as his starting point. Voltolini discusses the question of Time (and its manifestations) as Calvino's Other, and taming—or representing—that otherness as the writer's task. When I read this essay in Italian I was captivated by its ideas, by its close reading of Calvino's text and its broader implications for literature and society in general. Translating it into English posed a single challenge: capturing Voltolini's thought, rendering it legible, while also preserving his original language, his own "agile, incisive, sparkling" imagery.

In this essay I examine a particular aspect of Calvino's poetics—his self-representation as a writer—that I have always deemed problematic. What I have in mind is a certain unresolved tension which afflicts me as a writer too, and perhaps for this reason I tend to notice it in the work of others. This tension arises from the general problem underlying the relationship between the writer and the Other, or better yet, to put it more abstractly, the writer's relationship with otherness.

Berenice, the last city in *Invisible Cities*, exemplifies this tension: Highlighting specific themes elaborated in Calvino's characteristic style, themes still resonant today with the depth and complexity of their implications. Berenice has much to give and to reveal to those of us who deal with meaning—that is, those of us who *write*. In Berenice, Calvino explores the relationship between the city of the just and the city of the unjust. He depicts it as the progressive nesting of the city of the just within the city of the unjust, but within the nested city the seed of injustice already germinates, and inside the city of the unjust, in turn, germinates the seed of justice, and so it continues in an infinite game of mirrors. It seems to be an idea borrowed from the mathematical theory of recursion. Here is a brief quote from Berenice to illustrate this process:

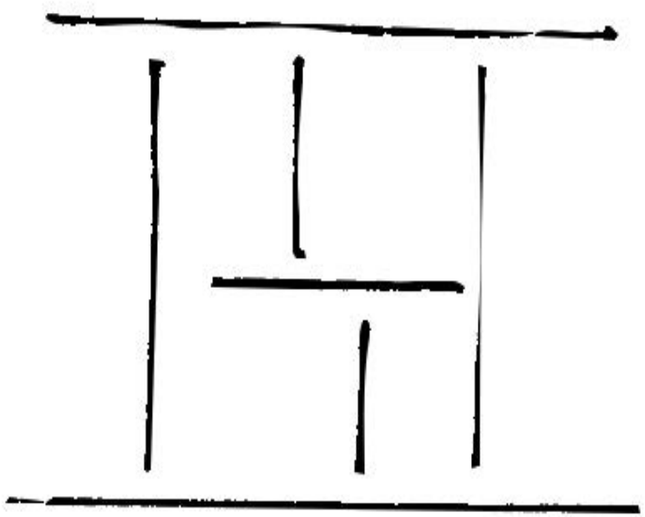
> [I]n the seed of the city of the just, a malignant seed is hidden, in its turn: the certainty and pride of being in the right—and of being more just than many others who call themselves more just than the just. This seed ferments in rancor, rivalry, resentment; the natural desire of revenge on the unjust is colored by a yearning to be in their place and to act as they do. Another unjust city, though different from the first, is digging out its space within the double sheath of the unjust and just Berenices.
>
> Having said this, I do not wish your eyes to catch a distorted image, so I must draw your attention to an intrinsic quality of this unjust city germinating secretly inside the secret just city: and this is the possible awakening—as if in an excited opening of the windows—of a later love for justice, not yet subjected to rules, capable of reassembling a city still more just than it was before it became the vessel of injustice. But if you peer deeper into this new germ of justice you can discern a tiny spot that is spreading like the

growing tendency to impose what is just through what is unjust, and perhaps this is the germ of an immense metropolis.

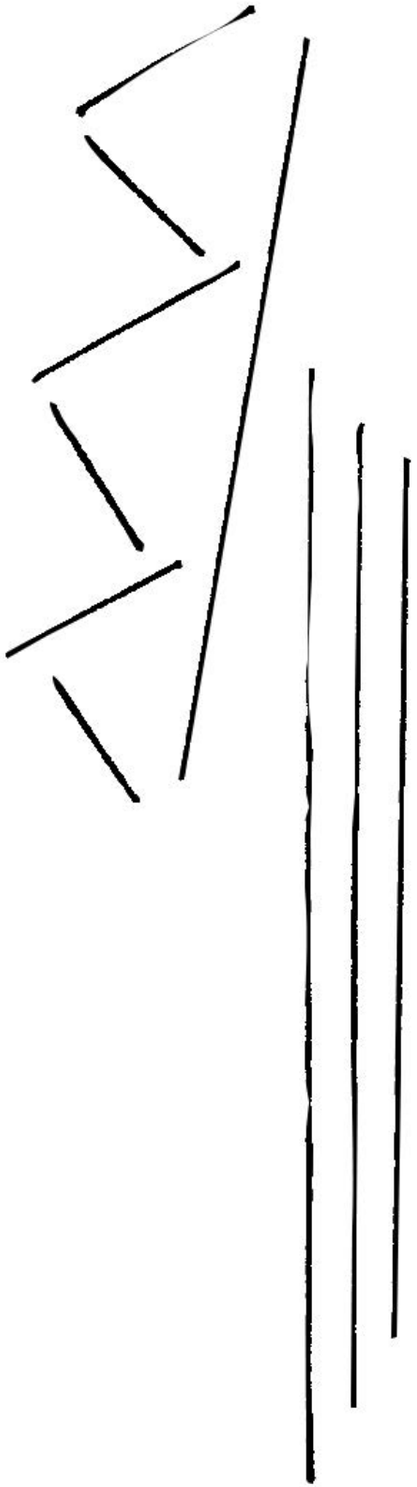
Besides the fascinating image of a city nesting successively in itself its own opposites, I am always struck by something else. I am not a Calvino scholar, but as a writer I hear a call which in my own writing I have repeatedly tried to ignore or avoid so as to be able to do my work—because when you come this close to a planet as large as Calvino's you risk being pulled away from your own course by its gravitational force. But in the end, I must confront this call, and I can begin doing it here.

So let me first discuss what disturbs me: Calvino's unresolved tension, his persistent stumbling block. The telltale move which always takes me by surprise is when Marco Polo concludes his narrative: "From my words you will have reached the conclusion that the real Berenice is a temporal succession of different cities, alternately just and unjust. But what I wanted to warn you about is something else: All the future Berenices are already present in this instant, wrapped one within the other, confined, crammed, inextricable."

Calvino's double construction is curious. On the one hand, a remarkable recursive progression over time; on the other, the complete negation of time itself as suggested by the coexistence of all future Berenices within an undifferentiated present moment devoid of temporal movement. This is not merely a question of rhetoric—there is something else. Here, in my opinion, is Calvino's taboo subject, the blind spot of his otherwise astute and penetrating eye. Why construct this sequence unfolding in time only to invalidate it in the end? What kind of operation is Calvino performing? What kind of logic underlies his discourse? Marco Polo is right to suspect that Kublai Khan "has reached the conclusion that the real Berenice is a temporal succession of different cities." In fact, Marco Polo has just stated it! Not only has he told Kublai Khan precisely that, he has already conveyed this idea through the dynamic images used to describe Berenice: wheels *will jam*, a new mechanism *will arrive*, a cuisine evoking an *ancient* golden age, *fermenting* rancors, a city *digging out* its space, the *awakening* of a love for justice, a city more just that it was *before it became* unjust, a tiny spot *spreading*, a *growing* tendency— and from these data it is possible to deduce the *future* Berenice. The outcome of these dynamic transformations is even more striking: Calvino's vision of an immense



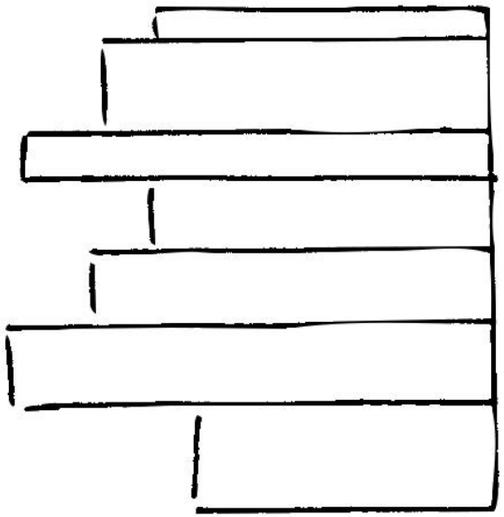
Photograph by Clio Schwartz



metropolis as the rhetorical and narrative realization of the germinating Berenices. An initial tension already inhabits the text here. Berenice's game of mirrors is infinite, but the city's *realization* as an immense metropolis stands in direct contradiction to it. Calvino seems to hypothesize a qualitative discontinuity. The nesting of the just city within the unjust one does not proceed in a straight line (or even in a half line, from the golden age onward), but rather leads to a discontinuity (the metropolis), an entirely *different* formation.

This initial tension is subservient to the real, central tension in Calvino: the tension between a process occurring gradually over time (the recursion of the just and the unjust Berenices) and a condition of complete immobility—the city Marco Polo reveals to Kublai Khan at the end. The figure of the metropolis bridges these two opposite visions. The figure of the metropolis works as a rhetorical linchpin allowing Marco Polo (Calvino) to negotiate the vertiginous slippage between the premise of Berenice's existence and the text's conclusion which *invalidates* this very premise. This is Calvino battling his own taboo: time. The irrational course of Marco Polo's narrative already underscores this ongoing battle. Calvino cannot fight fairly either. The match evolves in three phases: 1) a city reverses into its opposite and vice versa, in a progression that is temporal, but otherwise flat and infinitely identical to itself; 2) even if that were not so, even if this progression did not unfold as infinitely identical to itself, but instead culminated in a qualitative change such as an immense (infinite) metropolis, then all of its reversals would occur simultaneously; 3) Berenice indeed is a point devoid of time where nothing can ever unfold and yet everything unfolds all at once, inextricably so, without any movement, as in a photograph.

It is both curious and symptomatic that to reach this conclusion Calvino invents the striking image of "yes" and "no" wrapped one within the other. First, he offers us an infinite game of mirrors over time, then he tells us that it is not so, that in fact everything happens all at once. What is he actually negating? The negation seems to imply an overt, ongoing dispute between Calvino and time. And for any narrator, time is not a trifle; for any narrator, time is the *most important matter*.



Now, I'd like to take a step to the side, to move the knight, as it were. I'd like to revisit the first of his *American Lectures*, the cross on which, in my opinion, Calvino crucified himself, exploring the familiar concept of lightness. By now, citing Calvino on lightness has become a routine, almost Pavlovian practice. At the beginning of the lecture, Calvino claims, as I recall, to feel a strong tension between the opacity, weight, brevity, and rigidity of the world and the language, the literature he wanted to create—picaresque, lively, agile, incisive, versatile, sparkling, polished like silver. He claims to perceive an already irremediable difference between what should have been his literary material (the world, everyday life) and his own writing. He claims he does not want to peer inside this heavy, inert mass, because it would be like staring at the Medusa's eyes—he would turn to stone. And thus he invents, following the myth's logic, the possibility of looking at this world indirectly, by way of mirrors, reflections, and triangulations.

Not as a critic or scholar, but personally, I believe that *Invisible Cities* provides the most convincing example of Calvino's game of mirrors. This game enables him to attain what cannot be looked at directly. What cannot be looked at directly Calvino renders in the image of the weight of the world, and this weight is what I referred to earlier as otherness. Calvino knows he is not free from the obligation to deal with this otherness—no writer ever is—but he deals with it indirectly. He weaves webs, sets traps to get the better of it; always in search of solutions as incomplete, uncertain, or variable as they may be. He turns to already existing literary and scientific discourses, that is, to already established representations of otherness. Here in a nutshell is the metaliterary Calvino, while in his confrontation with temporality—which is the most petrifying aspect of otherness—we find the metanarrative Calvino.

For Calvino, contingency, mortality, limitation, uniqueness, and nothingness constitute total otherness—our private human Medusa—which he holds captive through his game of infinite possibilities, or at least he tries to. And in *Invisible Cities* he is more successful than anywhere else. In *If on a Winter's Night A Traveler*, Calvino again plays the game of possibilities but he takes it to the extreme, to the point where the game itself reveals its limits. His attempt to create a collection of cities, as if arranged on a chessboard of his own invention, is also the attempt to tell, to narrate, to inscribe *all possible cities*. In the logic of set theory, all the real cities—past, present, and future—exist within the set of all possible cities. Any given real city is one of all possible cities. But the game does not work if we substitute "imaginable" for "possible."

If we could imagine by way of literary creation, by way of the genius of invention, all the possible cities, then we would be able to imagine all the real cities, past, present, and future (and perhaps this is Calvino's insight). It doesn't work this way, however. There exist cities that were not imaginable before. The set of all imaginable things and the set of all the real things do not coincide completely but rather overlap in increasingly disturbing ways. There are unimaginable things that do occur. And therefore, if we could have full and total visibility of time and space,

Drawings by Bridget Conway

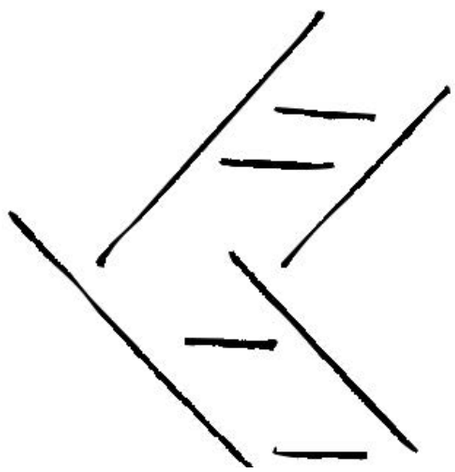
backward and forward, present, past, and future; if we could describe everything that exists, even by means of chessboard combinations, then we would *really* fence in everything that exists. We would deliver a blow to the Medusa; she would be the one afraid to look. Everything would be reflecting surfaces. We would have put the Medusa in check.

But this is impossible to do. And the sign of its impossibility lies in the question of time: Time as the site of otherness and not as quantity. Destructive time, time that gives birth and inflicts death, time that allows or rather brings about transformation. Time as the site of discontinuity and catastrophe, of the new and the unforeseeable, of our infinite ignorance and epistemic myopia.

Let me give a banal example. I don't have the exact number but I know that today, for the first time in human history, 60 percent of the global population lives in cities. It used to be that city dwellers were a minority and now the reverse is true. So will this new condition produce qualitative change? We cannot foresee this even within the progression of all possible Berenices containing "yes" and "no" always within the same plane. Does the immense metropolis presuppose immobility or exactly the opposite? We cannot know, but we can dread it. We use literary combinatorics to pursue facts, but to no avail. This is a dramatically real yet exquisitely theoretical game of chess which appeals to anyone harboring the illusion that it is possible to impose immobility on the multiform and thus harness it once and for all. In a book someone gave me just this morning, Calvino says: "We raise our eyes from the page only to peer into darkness."

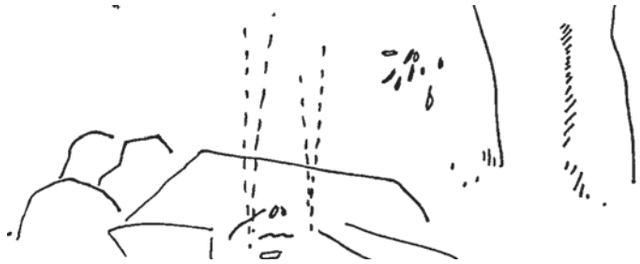
What is the main point then? How do we come to grips with Calvino's call? What are the vertiginous dynamics still facing us today, especially us writers, all those riddles not resolved but *posed* by Calvino? The main point is that when faced with the irreducibility, illegibility, and otherness of facts or reality, we respond in different ways. Calvino's way is to turn elsewhere in search of notions of otherness already established, made familiar, and therefore acting as a shield (weapon) against the Medusa. This is the game of mirrors I was referring to earlier.

For the author of *Invisible Cities*, the ideal city is the *legible* city. I remember reading that for Calvino, Paris was the champion among all cities. Paris was to him a legible city—he would walk around reading whatever interested him directly from the walls, from the streets. Paris for Calvino was a city enmeshed in writing, a cultural city, a *text*. Of course, it is obvious that the legibility of Paris derives from the fact that it is a much perused (written) city.



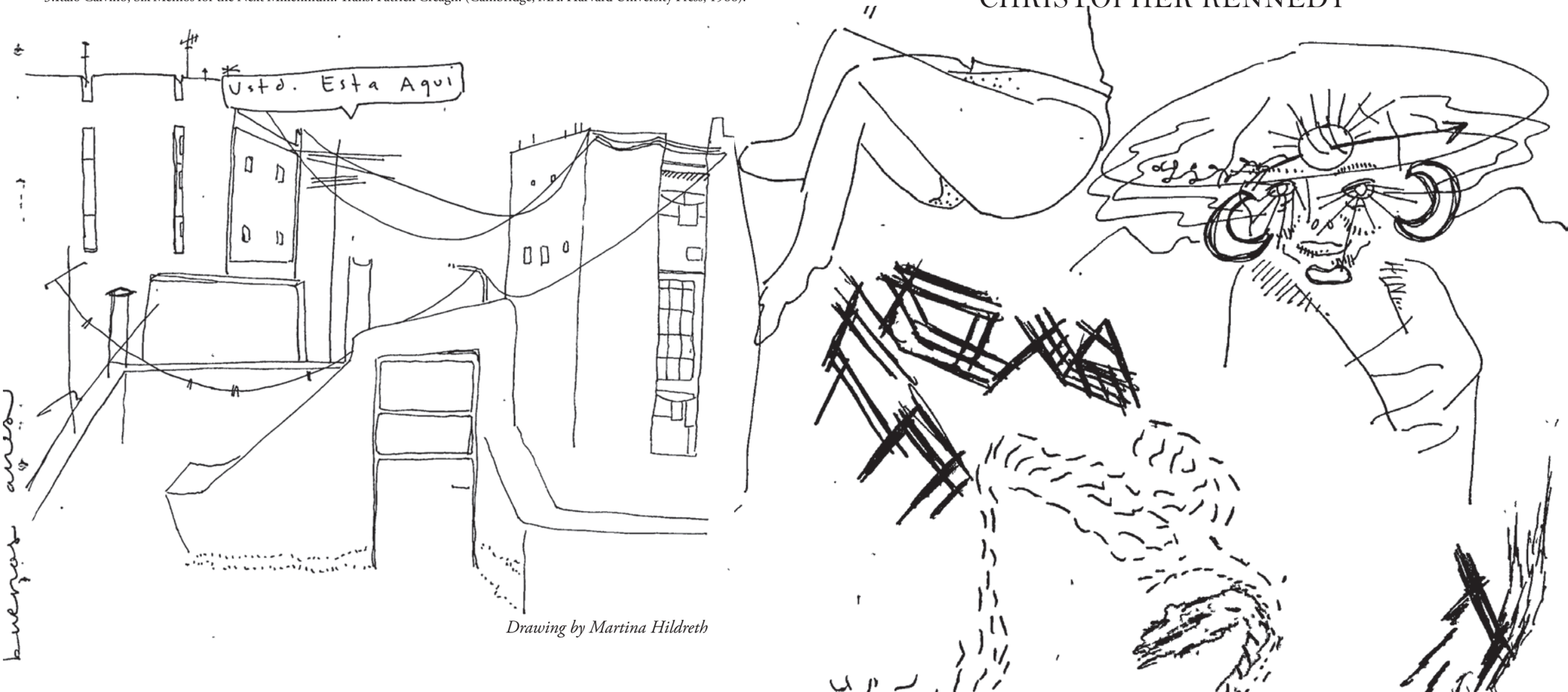
But the task of the writer, or one of the tasks in any case, is to confront total illegibility and otherness, to commit to rendering them more legible. To write is to make legible. The line, the threshold Calvino stood on (it will always remain a threshold since death stopped him when he was about to cross over and announce his new direction, for it is clear Calvino was on the verge of a new direction) is the demarcation line between otherness reduced to legibility (familiarity) and the reconfiguration of the already legible into further legibility. Calvino often intentionally thematized this very line, debating it and problematizing it. And this problem of (il)legibility, already founded on a tension, is grafted onto the question of temporality, which I suggest is Calvino's own taboo, and thus opens space for new inquiries into his narrative. As a writer, Calvino was rent by infinite tensions, by unexpected fissures. Nonetheless, he did his best to offer us, in addition to his works and life, his interpretations and his biography. And yet, he still remains one of the most mysterious writers of the twentieth century. Although in his various essays, Calvino time and again battles with obscurity, illegibility, opacity, and otherness, it is in his clearest crystals that the darkest abyss opens. Perhaps because displaced, negated, or left behind. And *Invisible Cities* is his diamond. •

1.Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities. Trans. William Weaver. (Harcourt, 1974), 162-3. English translation modified slightly to reflect better the original wording.
2.Ibid., 163.
3.Italo Calvino, Six Memos for the Next Millennium. Trans. Patrick Creagh. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).



CRITTER AND THE DRAGONFLY
SAGA OF SONG, WITCHES, AND SWEET POTATO

CHRISTOPHER KENNEDY



Drawing by Martina Hildreth

That thick fat summer sweet smell of the ball field, tan clouds rising up off the dirt like smoky hippos. The *thwack* and *smack* and back-to-back delicious screams as the pea soars into the raw freely-bleeding palm of a leaping boy. The crows screaming "Yah!" and the spit. The mean, sweat-drippin' snakey eyes of the pitcher from the hill before he throws you a yakker, then the symphonic crack like a broken bone as you hit that wilson right on the screws. No Lord, there is nothing like it.

I'm Catfish. I'm the best goddamn batter in the goddamn Ash Lands. I'm the second oldest and the third tallest of all of us. They call me Catfish because once down by Dog River after a pale shadow caught my eye I plunged my left paw into the spicy black chemical water and yanked out a dead catfish, the king of catfish—my hand searing and crimson from the evil river. Stomach tight and numb from weeks of protein squares and canned corn, I bit its head right off and spit out the spongy bones. I gave everyone else a bite, too. Most delicious meal we'd had in months, even though our bellies and chests stung for hours afterward from the chemicals in the fish and we couldn't play baseball that day on account of our thunderous headaches. But it was worth it. Before that I was just Lefty.

Critter was crouching behind my legs—he's permanent catcher. He's a shaggy little kid from Tennessee who doesn't talk much—just murmurs and growls like a pup most the time. He's the only one who'll ever play catcher.

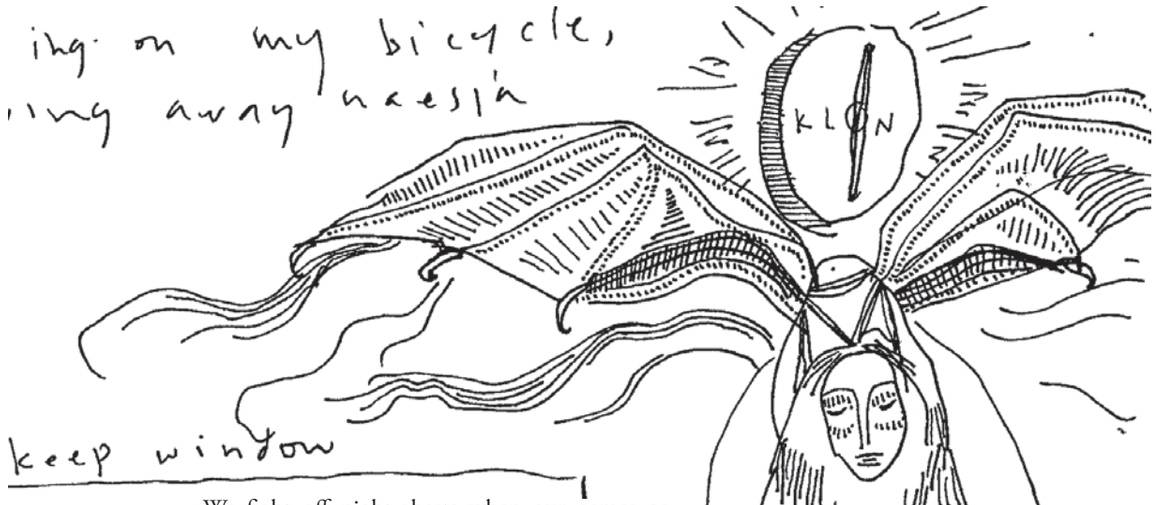
Over on second, I can see Smokey Pete. He's bald as a fruit bat. "Heybattabatta, heybattabattaaa… " He's already starting.

Way behind him, I spot Gizmo, our goggled outfielder, who we've always gotta holler at during games because she's fiddling with radio parts and floppy disks and old eye-phones instead of catching fly balls. Jelly's also outfielder, poised probably too close to Gizmo. We call him Jelly because he wears a dirty old jellyfish hat he got from who-knows-where. Windmill Wendy can read and told us the label says "Sea World." When you try to take off his jellyfish hat, he screams.

So anyhow I've named Critter, Gizmo, and Jelly. Then there's Goliath, Baby, Windmill, Cyclone, Wild Joe, Dynamite, Worm-o, and Drone. (None of us even remembers why we call him Drone, but every time a drone flies over up in the clouds we whistle at him and he does The Monkey.) I won't say much more about any of them now except that Worm-o is my brother.

Then of course there's the King. The King calls the shots. Her eyes are angry and black like a Great White Shark's, and she's got a long scar running down her chin and throat. Says a specter did it to her when she was a kid—tells the story sometimes and we all listen to it with wide white eyes and are silent for once. We ain't afraid of specters or nothing but the ways she tells it you gotta shut up and listen. Once Jelly hollered out "BullSHIT!" while she was telling us about killing the witch with a stick. The King went quiet, jaw twitching, then clocked Jelly on the mouth, knocking him down. She leaped on top of him and clamped her hand hard on Jelly's tiny Adam's apple and whispered in his ear for a while things we couldn't hear. You don't cross the King. She hammers on her chest and when she does that we hammer our chests too. When you look in her eyes she threatens to eat you. You don't cross the King. She's taller and older than all of us, with ropy muscles and long chin hairs. Don't. Cross. The King.

We stick together. We stay up late in the hot nights, racing around the scorched ground of the Ash Lands, galloping around in the warm, dead breeze, and then stand at Heaven Cliff and howl up at the big yellow moon. We hurl ancient bottles and plastic pieces into the Void. We howl and whistle and moan, together with all the starved hounds in Ohio.



We fight off night-ghasts when our games go past dusk and the foul stringy things come loping around our field with their veils and long fingers. We share protein squares and gamble with spider parts and sometimes even find squirrels to cook. We fight and knock each other down and bite and scratch; we sing, we talk dirt, we spit, we mash tongues. I'm telling you it for hell sure gets real hard in the unholy breathless industrial landscape of the Ash Lands, this godforsaken depopulated city ridden with witches and parasites and vultures and ghasts. There's even a Cyclops that lives in the I-K-E-A. We poke around warehouses sometimes looking for food cans and wilsons and such and one time Windmill Wendy went to I-K-E-A wanting some wood and saw it through the shelves by the toilets. She said it was eleven foot tall at least, head was all wrapped up in soggy bandages but she caught a bit of its bleary red eye glaring through. You can bet she ran faster than a jet plane away from that thing.

But anyhow, we got baseball. Jesus God we got baseball. And when we're playing rough and wild under the angel-pink pollution sky, wilsons snapped and cracked and caught searing hot in our calloused hands, kids whooping and screaming and hurling their bodies in a gleeful dance, we're made electric by the Cuyahoga Holy Ghost, the sore and lovely spirit of the crying Today, the heat, the hunger. The Floods. The craziness everywhere in the streets and skies and shadows, the craziness in our bones. When we play baseball, mighty and burnt on the cracked-dry diamond, we're gods, baby. Even though we're skinny, even though we're kids, even though Smokey Pete has worms.

The King just sent me two mean curve balls. One strike CRUD. Two strikes DOUBLE CRUD.

Third pitch, I smack that wilson right where it hurts and it goes hollering for its mama as it zooms toward outer space—it goes past Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, the Sun! That was what's called a homer, good folks. A tape measure blast. I go jogging to first base backwards, a wide smile on my face.

"That's a tater!" murmurs Baby.

"A real moon shot!" says Windmill. She leans back and whistles long and slow.

Finally I arrive still trotting backwards onto home plate and do a little dance, singing "Yippee who-oo! Yippee yoo!"

It's not easy to remove the poison from things
we found them their leg was broken shivering
in the humid dusk The air around them stung
and all around them we could see their spirit
stinging sprawled out on the forest floor we
carried them to camp and our medics set their
leg the poor kid shook and growled and yelled
their leg bound we washed them with rosewater
and rosemary amaranth and thyme We burned
rosemary as well prayed and Dan played her guitar
We massaged the kid's arms and neck and gave
them teas and stew their eyes were salmon colored
one time they woke up and said are you witches

So here's what's going on: Nobody's seen Critter in three days.

We've never gone so long without seeing one of the boys. And so we've been without a catcher. Wild Joe's been substitute, but he never catches the wilsons, just lays on his side and eats dirt most of the time. After our game at noon we went over to sit down in the Taco Pete parking lot and mull things over.

"Maybe it's the witches that got him," said Baby.

We shuddered, all having heard some pretty awful stories about the witches and what they do—capturing kids and melting them, turning them to trees, takin' out their eyes, even turning the suckers to witches themselves. Maybe they were all just tales but that's what we've heard.

"What if he's lying in a ditch somewhere? What if he's dead and he's got mice in his arms and crickets laying eggs in his noggin?" Drone piped up. "What if—"

"Quiet, Drone!"

"Shut up, Drone."

Wild Joe was praying. Worm-o, my kid brother, was real still, looking at his hands. He was scared and pale. I decided to speak up.

"Y'all quit talking like that. Critter's fine. Probably just constipated and hiding by the river 'til he feels better," I said.

"You're constipated, Catfish!" called Cyclone. I leaned over and yanked on his hair. He cried out then shut up.

"Critter's fine," I said.

"No, he's not," the King murmured, and we all looked at her. "The Government took him, and now they're using him in experiments." She looked stern and serious, laying on her

back with her hands under her head, cobalt blue sunglasses. I wanted to tell her it was a lie, mostly for Worm-o's sake, but the King would clock me.

Then a drone flew overhead. We whistled, and Drone hopped up and down like a flea, waving his hands around and kicking. He did The Monkey. We hollered and snapped, and when he landed, he turned his eyelids inside out with his fingers.

Today we gave them sweet potato they turned
it around in their mouth and said are you witches
or is this heaven We laughed and said what's your
name they said CRITTER and my legs hurts we gave
them root to chew on How did you hurt your leg I
was climbing a tree We said you were trying to catch
a dragonfly they looked scared were you watching
me No but we can see the past sometimes they said
you're witches all right get me out of here KING
CATFISH WINDMILL HELP we said are those your
friends they said they'll come rescue me we said we'll
let you go as soon as we can but your leg is healing and
you would not be able to run from the night ghasts

We went into town and knocked on Jaden and Louisa's door to ask them about Critter because sometimes he sleeps on their living room floor. They have a big store with shelves and shelves of cans and water and firewood and hooch. Always have guns strapped about them but love us kids—one time even slipped us a packet of jerky I'm telling you that was the closest we ever came to having Christmas.

Louisa answered the door, "How can we help you, little roaches?"

Louisa always wore these blue dangly earrings and has a gold tooth. Today she had a cut above her eye—we asked her about it, but she shook her head. Jaden came down too.

"We can't find Critter. Have you seen him?"

"He hasn't been by here for a while. Did you look by the creek?"

Yes.

"Did you check the Mall?"

Yes.

"Is he at his mom's?"

No way.

"Have you asked Rod?"

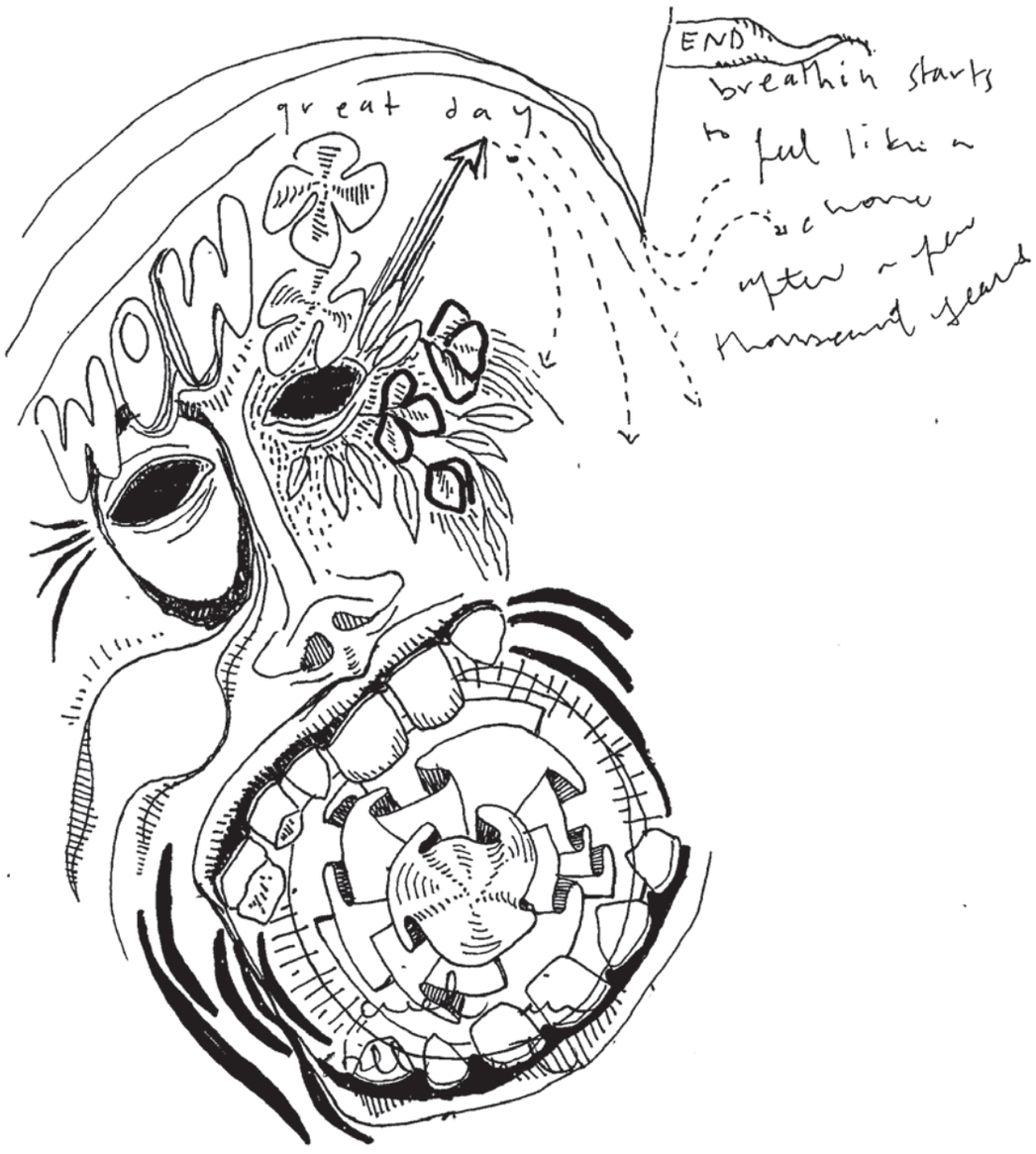
We went over on Rugby Street to Rodney's shop. Rodney does haircuts and exorcisms in his shop, styling and snipping during the day and in the after hours casting out demons and elves from people's souls. A lot of them are on powder or glue. Sometimes we hang around outside his place to listen to the screams as he purifies. He's a public figure and gets around, so we figured he might have heard some news about Critter.

We swung open the screen door of his shop and filed in. Rodney was cutting his nails in a wheely chair, his feet on the counter. The King got straight to the point.

"Rodney! You seen Critter?"

Rodney eyed us for a moment.

"That boy with the scab nose hardly ever says a word? Dog boy?"



We nodded.

"Nah I haven't seen him. Not in a while. He could use a haircut. Doesn't look like he's ever gotten one. You bring him in when you find him. I'm handing out coupons. Twenty-five percent off on shaves. Can't beat that deal." He held out the coupons.

Baby took one.

"You keep an eye out, Rod. We need our catcher."

Rodney looked at each of us in turn and ran his hands over his hair. He leaned back in his chair then continued cutting his nails.

"Try the Bird," he said.

The Bird Man always seems to be popping up everywhere, to be everywhere at once. He's a wild old man all dressed up like a huge black bird with dark rags, feathers, trash bags, and oil drawn out in spooky designs on his skin. He doesn't speak human words unless you give him potato bread. Thankfully, Baby still had a sack from the last distribution.

Anyhow we found old Bird Man way far up in a tree. He was rubbing his feet and was rather still, looking off. His knitting hung from the branches around him like Spanish moss, long scrolls of twine and straw.

Baby tossed up the sack of potato bread and yelled, "Cover up your ding-a-ling, pervo-birdo! We wanna talk!"

The sack went up, up, and fell back down. The Bird did not move to grab it. Just moved his head a little toward us then back at the sky. He looked like a gargoyle, half erasered, a smudge in the nest of tree capillaries.

"What's eatin' ya Bird Man?"

"Bird Man have you seen Critter?"

"Did the angels get him Bird Man?"

"Bird Man, speak!"

He seemed sorrowful today. We looked at each other.

"Anyway just tell us if you see him."

5:40 PM Dear diary the witches gave you to me said
you're a tape recorder and showed me how to speak
into you and tell my story so here's my story I was
climbing a tree and saw a green wasp and then
my leg hurt my head hurt and I was saved by the
witches they let me listen to their CD player and I
heard the song johnny b goode the witches are not
like we thought they shine they sing they paint
themselves decorate their tents with drawings
and herbs One of them has a gun and another has
no legs so they carry him I don't know how many
there are my favorite one is Isabela she says she is
from Down South too and calls me holy one

We slept all together tonight. Have not played ball for days, just been looking for our compatriot. Usually we spread out into our favorite nooks and crannies all over the Ash Lands, two of us maybe under the overpass, three or four up in the trees by the river maybe, one or two in somebody's apartment here or there. But tonight we were all huddled together in the

old Dairy Queen on Main, cheered up just a little, giggling and spooning on the grimy floor as the moonlight streamed in and the moths high-fived the windows. Gizmo brought an old battery lamp and put it in the center of us all, and we cheered up even more—sprinkling dirt in the ears of the little ones when they fell asleep, Jelly and Joe kept yanking up each other's shirts and purple nurpling one another to kingdom come. The King was off to the side in her old hammock she'd tied up between the beams, smoking her clumsy cigarillos. Smokey Pete told the story about the time he kissed tongues with his cousin Angela. We hooted and yapped.

When Gizmo flipped off the light, though, we were all thinking about Critter. And about witches, and angels, creek goblins, ghasts, dogs, tuna people, mosquito clouds, and cannibals. Just to name a few of the night mares trotting around behind our eyes. We had barred the doors shut and hung garlic from the windows outside, but every once and awhile you'd still hear a night-ghast thumping up against a window in the darkness.

After an hour or so, Windmill and I caught one another's eyes and knew neither of us could sleep. We crept out and headed for Heaven Cliff, not saying much. We raced to the old familiar spot and leaned against the Void and groaned, exhausted by all the being-afraid. We gazed up at the thick dark sky and I thought about how Louisa said once there used to be many more stars you could see. Tonight I counted seven. Then we screamed. Damn hell, we screamed until our throats burned and the tears flowed free down our cheeks like fresh hot blood from a wound. Where once we had howled and sung and beat our chests, we now screeched and wept like blind baby animals, scared for Critter. We leaned on each other as the darkness stared at us, unblinking and dense. Poison pulsed in the earth, and our stomachs seized up, and our hearts rang like hand bells, looking into the giant stunned face of the world.

"Damn you, Critter!" Windmill yelled. "Damn you!"

Today we told Critter some about who we are we
said Critter we are a people trying to become whole
we are Insects doing quiet repair Critter we're
learning to pray to the day and ask for things from
the ground and battle together The world has not been
killed yet we are growing and may even save ourselves
We see bits of the future going by like comets but are
not very good yet at reading it we told Critter about the
god Sun the god Now the god Ground we stay hidden here
because you people kill witches you kill angels that is
why we stay here with our gardens and fire and lipstick
our crosses our dances love and rage If you want you can stay
with us here there's plenty of sweet potato and planning to do

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Days had passed and we figured Critter was dead. We had a funeral for him and buried a dog leg we found in the gutter. Nobody said much—we just buried the dog leg and the King socked anyone who cried too much. We placed a glittery rock over Critter's grave, and Windmill Wendy wrote "Critter" in the dirt. That was the end of it.

Today's the first time we've played in what feels like a long long while now. The Sun is up in the sky frowning like a huge mean baby dumping down white light and heat. We're playing slow motion and dumb, throats dry and noggins aching—there hasn't been much water. A drone flies over us way high up in the sky. We stop to watch.

Everyone's been striking out more often than not, but finally Cyclone hits one and the wilson shoots off like a furious bird. We watch, panting, from the ground as it streams away from the world.

"Look!"

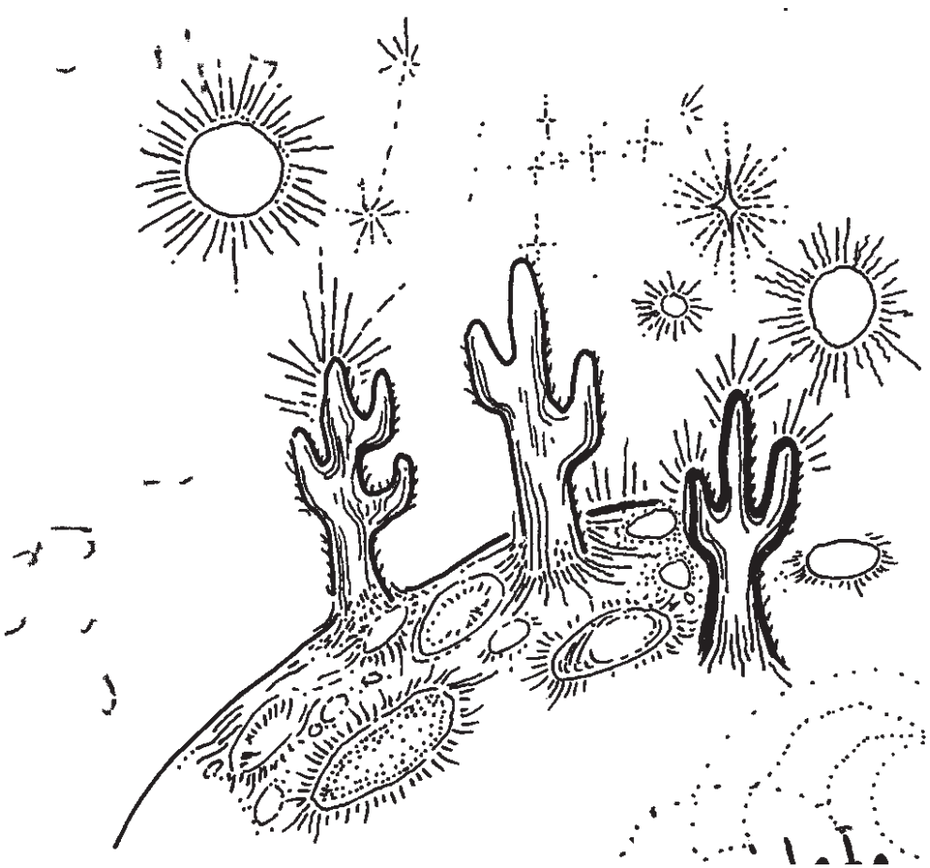
I turn, tired and stupid, to where Gizmo is pointing. There, shimmering through the heat, is Critter.

"Holy moly…"

There are antlers twisting out from Critter's shaggy head. His skin seems to shine and sparkle, and he's wearing clothes I've never seen before. Critter walks toward us, then breaks into a run, smiling and weeping, stirring up clouds of dirt. The wilson lands somewhere behind him and we barely notice it.

He stops, bends back, and unleashes a howl. Slowly, we begin to whoop and race toward him, surround him, hug and grab him, sweep him up, clobber him, shake him.

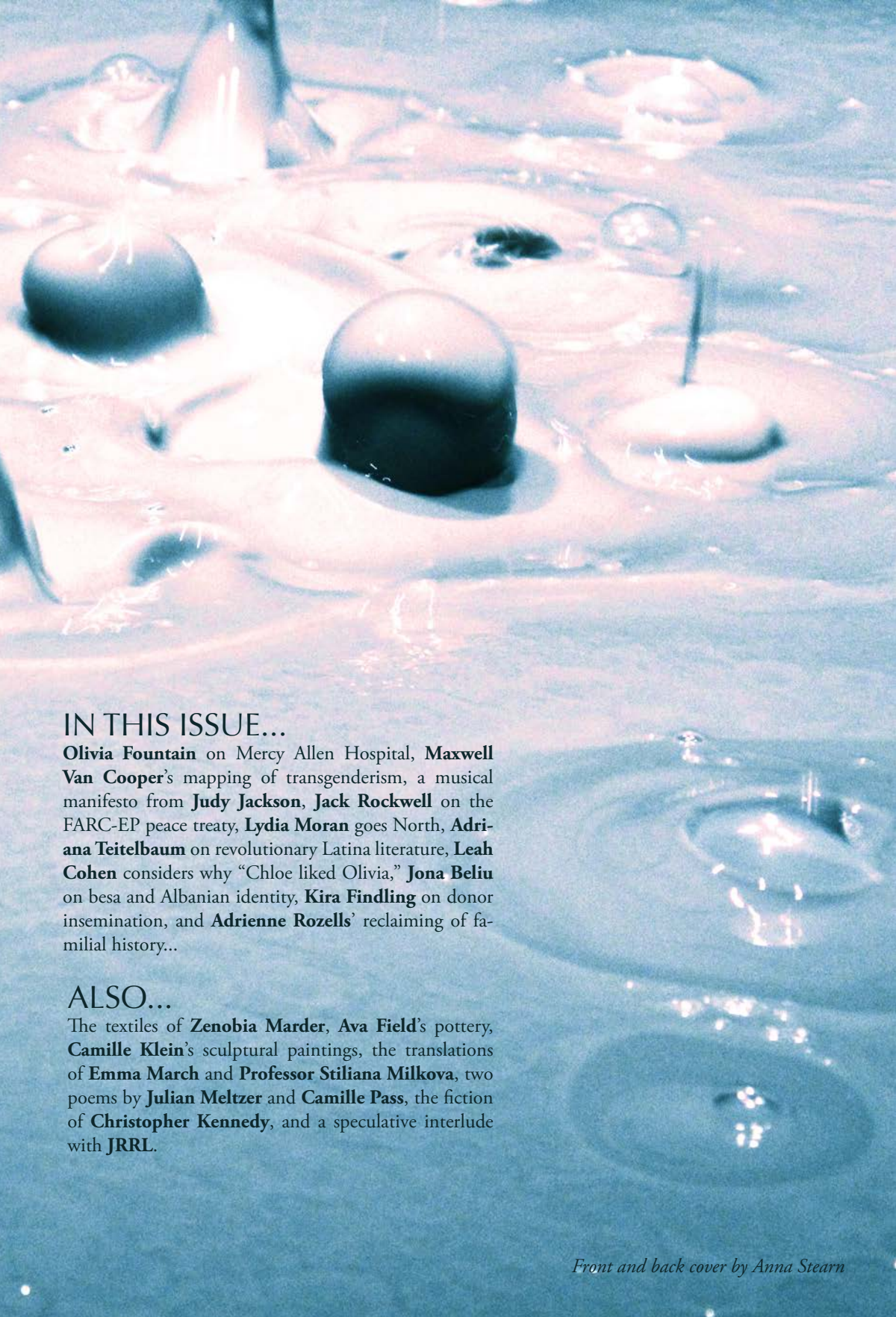
Jesus, Critter!
Where'd you get those antlers?
We thought you were dead, Critter!
We had a funeral for you!
Well, spit it out, Critter! Where you been? •



Drawings by Martina Hildreth

THANKS FOR READING

Print by Lya Finston



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Olivia Fountain on Mercy Allen Hospital, **Maxwell Van Cooper**'s mapping of transgenderism, a musical manifesto from **Judy Jackson**, **Jack Rockwell** on the FARC-EP peace treaty, **Lydia Moran** goes North, **Adriana Teitelbaum** on revolutionary Latina literature, **Leah Cohen** considers why "Chloe liked Olivia," **Jona Beliu** on besa and Albanian identity, **Kira Findling** on donor insemination, and **Adrienne Rozells**' reclaiming of familial history...

ALSO...

The textiles of **Zenobia Marder**, **Ava Field**'s pottery, **Camille Klein**'s sculptural paintings, the translations of **Emma March** and **Professor Stiliana Milkova**, two poems by **Julian Meltzer** and **Camille Pass**, the fiction of **Christopher Kennedy**, and a speculative interlude with **JRRL**.

Front and back cover by Anna Stearn